

Pursuing a Dark Providence

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Last week we met Ruth and now we'll begin to study the contents of this book more closely and having read the first five verses, let me just take you back to the first two verses as we begin the message proper, as it were, in order to kind of set the stage and to unpack what is going on here. Verses of Ruth 1 and 2 of Ruth 1,

1 Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there.

Those verses set the stage for everything else that happens in the book of Ruth. You remember from last time that Ruth is a magnificent story of the providence of God in the lives of two women and then the man Boaz, and God working through incredible providence and incredible circumstances, working in a way to bring about the genealogical line that would bring David into the world and through David the line which would one day bring our Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, into the world. So it is a remarkable story. It is historically significant. The consequences of what we read here are mammoth. They are massive biblically speaking, and yet when you step back and read the book for what it's about, you see that God is working in a way that brings about these magnificent consequences in the ordinary, day to day activities of ordinary people. That in itself, is magnificent, that God is able to do things of eternal consequence through the things that we do in ordinary day to day life and that's the way it works. God's primary means of working amongst his people is working through the ordinary details that are otherwise missed in day to day life.

What's interesting and why I want to spend tonight just looking at these five verses is that when you peel back beyond that aspect of it and how Ruth met Boaz and all of that, when you peel back behind that, there is something even more profound about the nature of God's providence in this in that it wasn't just through the ordinary actions of ordinary people that this happened, but that this occurred and what set the stage for this was a very dark providence; that this was a scene in these first five verses that is dripping with judgment and disobedience amongst the people who open up the stage here at the

beginning of the book and you wouldn't know that, really, by just reading the book standing on its own. You wouldn't read that, in fact, when we read it in the 21st century and we read about a famine and a man taking his family off to a foreign land looking for food and then they die, we are prompted to, our initial reaction is to feel sympathy for the characters and say, "Oh, what a sad situation it is." Well, it's sad but it's not for the reasons that you initially think. It's sad because there is so much sin and disobedience that is setting the whole context for this and that's what I want to show you tonight and we'll try to draw some lessons out of it at the end. We want to see the unfaithfulness with which this book opens and then see the grace of God against that black backdrop.

Now, Elimelech, is a name of the opening man and his name means "God is King," or perhaps, "my God is King," but his name sets a tone about the Kingship and the Lordship of God by its very meaning. Naomi is a name that means "pleasant or lovely," and so we open up and we see this man and this woman and the names and what they mean. And they are from Bethlehem in Judah, a town that is about 5 miles southwest of Jerusalem where Jesus would be born, where David kept his sheep, and so there are a lot of biblically significant things that are going on here. The town of Bethlehem, where the Messiah would be born, God is King and there is just a lot there that is speaking to and testifying to the Lordship of God over his people as you open up. But as you look a little more deeply at the context of these verses, these verses are standing as a warning about the consequences of unfaithfulness to God and what we see from these five verses is a principle that is very vital for you to take to heart and to let it guide you and warn you away from sin and unfaithfulness to God. What you see in these five verses is a principal that a life of disobeying Scripture leads to a dark providence. Unfaithfulness to God bears bitter fruit, in other words, and you will only grasp the overall message of the book of Ruth if you understand the infidelity with which it begins.

I want to just highlight four aspects of the infidelity of this family in their historical context as we begin here our study of the book of Ruth. First of all, as we said last time and I won't spend much time here, but you see in verse 1, "It came about in the days when the judges governed." That's a clue. That's setting an awful lot of context just right there. The author is setting the historical framework for this book. You remember from last time, you remember from your Bible reading, you remember from the survey of Judges that we did a few months ago at the period of Judges itself was a very dark period in the nation of Israel. It was a bad time in their history. They would call out to God and God would raise up these administrative judges to deliver them but it was a cycle of decline that went on for centuries. So right from the beginning, it's as if the stage were being set and you're seeing the props that are being set up on the stage and it's props with dark tones, with a blackness about it. Days of judges, that was not a good time in the history of Israel.

So as we read these five verses and as we continue on, we're mindful of something that we are so engrossed in our own times that we forget this principle but men, generally speaking, are going to be a product of their times; that people are going to be colored by the spiritual atmosphere in which they live and when a spiritual atmosphere, generally speaking, is dark, you're going to see darkness coming out of a lot of the lives of the

people that are involved in it, even here as we see in the book of Ruth. So Elimelech and his family are already starting from behind. They're already behind in the sense that they are living in a dark period of time, the days of judges, and so what happens from that? Where do we go from there? Well, the theme of judgment and the theme of the darkness of the times that surround this book is more than just the setting of the days of judges, it's also the time of famine. The days of judges and the time of famine and here's what we want to see: the spiritual troubles of that time period led to material famine in the lives of the people and in the land of Israel.

Look at verse 1 with me again and when you see what we're going to see the next several minutes, you're going to see why these things all fit together so naturally. "Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land." As I said earlier, when you read that in the 21st century, we are inclined toward sympathy. We are inclined to feel compassion upon the situation but if we do that, we're going to misread and misinterpret the entire focus of the book if we start that way. We have to read this opening verse with biblical eyes, not with our carnal eyes, not from the perspective, "Oh, I wouldn't want to go through a famine and I feel bad for those who would go through a famine." No, we need to think about this biblically and remember that Ruth comes in the course of biblical revelation after the first five books of Moses were established and so God had already given a lot of revelation to his people. He had told them what to expect as his covenant people and he had taught them and warned them and encouraged them with a sense that, "If you obey my laws, there will be blessing that comes to you. If you disobey my laws, there will be painful consequences as a result." So from the beginning of the birth of Israel as a nation, God warned them about the consequences of disobedience and in part he told them that national sin would lead to famine in the land.

I want you to turn back to Leviticus. We want to go through a few passages here to take our time and to let this sink in and take the time and effort to set the context because here's the thing, if you were reading this in the days of Israel prior to the coming of Christ, all of the things that we are about to see would be presupposed. The people would understand these things. They would recognize it on the surface. We are not in that same position and so we need to take a little bit of time to walk through this so that we will be in greater awe of what actually happens as the book unfolds.

Leviticus 26:18 and 20. God in warning the people that they must obey him says, "If also after these things you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. I will also break down your pride of power; I will also make your sky like iron and your earth like bronze. Your strength will be spent uselessly, for your land will not yield its produce and the trees of the land will not yield their fruit." Now, that's not the only time that God said something like that to them as he is giving his law through Moses. Look at Deuteronomy, a couple of books further to the right, in Deuteronomy 11. And if you think about the series that we had last month about "Understanding Scripture," you'll understand and you'll recognize what we're doing here. We're simply letting Scripture interpret Scripture. We're looking at other passages of the Bible that would shed light on the passage that we want to study here in the book of Ruth and so Scripture is informing

us about the significance of what we're reading in the first chapter of Ruth. Deuteronomy 11:16-17, God warning them about idolatry says, "Beware that your hearts are not deceived, and that you do not turn away and serve other gods and worship them. Or the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit; and you will perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you." It is a direct warning that famine will be the consequence of idolatry in turning away from the Lord.

Deuteronomy 28:23-24, if you would turn there with me. Deuteronomy 28:23-24, re-emphasizing the point, actually look at verse 15. It's kind of a capstone verse for everything that follows in the rest of 28. It says, "It shall come about, if you do not obey the LORD your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you." Then there are these strings of curses in what follows and we'll just pick it up at verse 23, "The heaven which is over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you, iron. The LORD will make the rain of your land powder and dust; from heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed." Then in verses 38 through 40, this is the last passage that we'll look at on this particular point as we consider what the famine in the book of Ruth is actually signifying. Verse 38, "You shall bring out much seed to the field but you will gather in little, for the locust will consume it. You shall plant and cultivate vineyards, but you will neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm will devour them. You shall have olive trees throughout your territory but you will not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives will drop off."

Now, in times past and in times future, we have preached on the fear of God. God is holy and as a result of that, God's holiness must be feared. He must be respected. He must be obeyed. And what God is establishing in these early books of Moses and in these chapters and in these warnings is that he is warning his people to fear him and to obey him and he tells them in advance that, "If you stray from this into idolatry, if you stray from me as your God and you walk in your own ways and in the ways of your own stubborn heart, understand that you are going to hunger, you are going to suffer." There will be famine in the land and God can guarantee that famine because he is in control of all things. He is in control of the elements. He controls and gives fruit or withholds it as he sees fit. So he's talking to his people, warning them, cajoling them saying, "Follow me. Be faithful to me and if you don't, there will be consequences."

Well, you know the story. You know how this unfolds. The people had hearts of stone. They were not regenerate. They were not born again. They were walking according to their own stony, sinful, fleshly desires, fleshly hearts, and they disobeyed God and as God said would happen, famine came, and that's what we're seeing in the book of Ruth. Now here's what I want you to see, a very simple point. That's a lot of spade work to plant one important seed here tonight but the thing that you need to see is this: the time of national famine that opens the book of Ruth is an expression that the nation was under divine discipline as this story begins. God was punishing his people for their disobedience and what should have happened, in one sense, what should have happened is the people would say, "Oh, we're suffering. We need to turn away from our sins. We need to return

to the Lord God and repent and come to him and ask him for grace and mercy and walk again as the people of God as he called us to be." But that's not what they did. This famine did not provoke repentance in their hearts, rather what we see in the family of Elimelech is something completely different.

There is a third mark of unfaithfulness that is present in this text and it is this: it is the land of Moab. It is the land of Moab and so we're seeing three marks so far. You've got the days of judges which was a time of darkness and divine discipline. You have a time of famine which biblically understood is in itself a mark of divine discipline. And here's the question as we enter in to try to understand these characters that we're going to be following over the next few weeks: what is it, how did Elimelech respond? How did Elimelech lead his family as a result of this famine? What did he do? Well, the text tells us that he fled the famine with his family.

Look at Ruth 1:2 again. The name of the man was Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, Chilion, and look at the end of the verse here, "Now, they entered the land of Moab and remained there." Have you ever looked into what Moab signifies in Scripture? Have you ever followed or traced it? It's very interesting. Moab geographically speaking was a land to the east of Israel. There was a high plateau that had fields that were suitable for farming and for agriculture and so there was often food there and, again, you and I might sympathize with a man who wants to provide for his family and takes them to another place. That sounds perfectly reasonable at one level, but it is the thinking of a carnal man. It is wrong for him to do this because Moab was a place of darkness. It was a place of sin in itself. It was a place of judgment. There was no business for a man of God, a man of the nation of Israel, to be going to Moab for deliverance. That was an expression of his own sinful heart and his lack of trust and obedience to Yahweh.

Now, Moab the country and you can trace this all the way back, Moab originated, the seminal line, the seminal start of Moab came from an act of incest between Lot and his daughter and I want you to see this. Look at Genesis 19. Again, all of this helps us understand how unthinkable to a godly man, what Elimelech did with his family was. It should have been out of the question. Moab, finding its root in Genesis 19:35 and 37. Lot had two daughters. They had him drink so that he was intoxicated and they lay with their father. Verse 35, "they made their father drink wine that night also, and the younger arose and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father." This is really bad and what, for our purposes tonight, here's what we want you to see, verse 37, "The firstborn bore a son, and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moabites to this day." So when we read about Moab, you go back and you trace it back and you say, "This land, this country, these people, they were messed up from the very beginning." Their origin was despicable and as time goes on and as history unfolds, God marked out the Moabites for judgment and for separation.

Go back to Deuteronomy now in chapter 23. I realize I'm throwing a lot at you here. Deuteronomy 23:3 and 4 where God says, again, all of this should have been informing what Elimelech did with his family and the more that you dig into this, the more that you

realize how unthinkable his actions were as the book of Ruth opens. "No Ammonite or Moabite," Deuteronomy 23:3-4, "No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the LORD, because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you." So the Moabites did not help Israel when they were going through their wilderness journey. When the king of Moab felt threatened by them, he tried to hire the prophet Balaam in order to curse them. They had been foes of Israel. They had opposed and hindered the development of the people of God. What is a Jew doing going to Moab for deliverance? What is the point of that? And later on in the course of the unfolding of biblical history, Moab was an instrument of judgment against the nation in their time of sinning.

Go to Judges 3. We're going to pull all of this together here in just a moment so thank you for staying with me here. Judges 3:12 through 14, "Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the LORD. And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek; and he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees. The sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years." One of the things that was especially despicable about the Moabites was that they worshiped a false God called Chemosh with child sacrifices so they would offer their children as sacrifices to their false god.

Now, let's step back and kind of pull all of this together and get it all into one place. You have the days of judges being a time of darkness and spiritual disobedience. You have as you continue on, there is a time of famine going on which Scripture explicitly says in multiple places is a time of divine discipline upon the people of Israel. You read further and you see that Elimelech is going to the land of Moab for deliverance, a land that God has said it shall have no part with the people of God, that was a place of judgment traced back to a most sinful union, all the way back to their foremost forefather and it was a place of judgment. They were consistently opposed to the people of God. What on earth is a Jewish man doing leading his family into that country? Why is that family going to Moab for relief?

Turn back to Ruth now. There is an odd verb, odd in English that gives us a sense of what his purpose was when he went. "A certain man of Bethlehem and Judah," verse 1, "went to sojourn in the land of Moab." Now, that's a word that maybe we use, maybe we don't, but it has a little more precise meaning than what the English word suggests. The idea of sojourning in the Hebrew word means "to live for a while." It means that Elimelech intended to go there and to be there for a while, maybe just until the famine passed. One resource says this and listen to what this signifies, listen to what this verb signifies about the actions and the intent of the one who does it and I quote, "The sojourner has settled in the land for some time and is recognized as having a special status. As individuals or a group, they have abandoned their homeland for political or economic reasons and sought refuge in another community." Wow, what that verb is saying is that Elimelech had turned his back on the Promised Land. He had abandoned it and had gone to Moab in

order to live there and to seek to provide for his family. That puts a whole different spin on the way that you read it, doesn't it? That changes your whole perspective on it. Rather than seeing in this a man who is a poor victim of his circumstances and was just doing his best to scrape by with his family, you see a man who biblically interpreted was turning his back on the very God that his name says was his King.

Matthew Henry says that Elimelech's care for his family was in one sense commendable, he wants to provide for them, but he goes on with a perspective that I share in evaluating Elimelech. Matthew Henry says and I quote, "I do not see how his removal into the country of Moab on this occasion could be justified. The seed of Israel ought not to remove into the territories of the heathen. If he could not live in hope that there would come years of plenty again in due time or could not with patience wait for those years, it was his fault and by it he dishonored God in the good land he had given them. He also weakened the hands of his brethren with whom he should have been willing to take his lot. He set an ill example to others."

Now, Elimelech set out on a course of disobedience and what happens when a man does that? What happens when a man sets his life and turns his back on the revelation of God, the provisions and gifts of God and goes his own way? He doesn't see it this way at the time but what he is doing is he is pursuing a dark providence. To walk away from the provision and the appointed means of God is to walk away from his blessing and enter into the realm of divine discipline and suffering and sorrow and that is exactly what happened to Elimelech and it is still the same today for us. Elimelech was a carnal man leading a carnal family into a land that was devoid of the presence of God.

There is one other thing that shows the carnal state of this family as they entered in. I'll say a little bit about Naomi in just a bit, but there is another aspect of this that helps us understand what is going on and the spiritually parched, dry condition of this family as they entered into Moab. The fourth thing that I want you to see here is: the marriage with the Moabite women. The marriage with the Moabite women. Look at verses 3 and 4.

3 Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons.

Now, just a side point there, that verse is kind of a subtle criticism of Elimelech because rather than Naomi being identified by her husband, her husband is being identified by the woman that he is married to, "Elimelech, Naomi's husband," and so he has forfeited his position as the lead of the family and now he is identified in reference to his wife rather than vice versa and he died and she was left with her two sons. What did they do? Verse 4,

4 They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years.

What do we think about that? Well, you say, "Well, a man has got to have a family and they're in Moab, what's the problem?" Well, the problem is that they had no business marrying Moabite women. This intermarriage was something that they should not have done.

Look at Deuteronomy 7:3. Again, we're letting Scripture interpret Scripture. We're letting the Bible help us understand the Bible. That's all we're doing here this evening. Deuteronomy 7:3 and actually we should start in first 1, "When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them. Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons." So there is a strict prohibition against marrying into foreign nations. This particular passage doesn't mention Moabite women by that particular ancestry, but if you read in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 13, we won't take the time to turn there, there the people of Israel 1,000 years later, or more actually about 600 years later, are criticizing their fellow countrymen because they had married Moabite women and it was viewed as something that was utterly unacceptable.

So what do you have here? After their father dies, his carnal influence is living on in his sons and they choose to marry Moabite women. They marry from the land in which they find themselves rather than looking for an Israelite woman to marry. Their actions all speak to a total disregard for the authority of the word of God in their lives. They had turned their back on him and the sad consequence of their faithlessness ultimately manifests itself.

Go back to Ruth, if you would, and having set all of this context now, we'll try to draw some principles here in just a moment that will give us some perspective on life here in the 21st century. So look at what happens here, "they lived there for about ten years," there at the end of verse 4.

5 Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.

A couple of things there that are further evidence of divine displeasure upon them. 1. They died there. They died childless there and they left behind Naomi who had no family, no blood relatives with her any longer, only here two daughter-in-laws were left. So the composite picture of all of these factors, the days of the judges that set the context of the book, the time of famine and the marriage with the Moabite women, all of this drawing a picture of a family that was not in submission to the word of God, that was not seeking God, that was not obeying God and certainly was not glorifying him with their life. The composite picture is one of carnal men who were unfaithful to Yahweh and with their disobedience, they pursued a dark providence and do you know what? They found

it. They died in a foreign land. They died childless with no one to carry on their line and in pursuing their own rationalization, you can hear them rationalizing, "Well, there is no food here and we've got to eat and so let's go." You can hear them rationalizing it, but every warning of the word of God, they had to go through many barriers of the word of God to end up in Moab and it did not turn out well for them.

But do you know what? Notice this and as you think about how you're going to orient your own life maybe as a young person, young adult, notice that they didn't immediately feel the consequences of their disobedience. They lived there for about ten years, the Scripture says, and so God didn't strike them immediately with the consequences, it went on over a period of time. Mark it that the fact that God does not judge and discipline our sin immediately is not a mark that he never will. They lived in a false sense of security that they could get away with this disobedience, but God had the final word with it.

Notice how it unfolds there in verse 1, they went to sojourn, to live for a little while there. Verse 2, they entered the land and then they remained there and then they lived there for about ten years. You kind of get the picture that they said, "Well, we'll do this for a little while. We'll trifle with sin. We'll trifle with this disobedience for a while just until it gets better. Just until the pressure is off and then maybe we'll come back." It doesn't work that way. Your assumption should be when you start to pursue a life of sin, a life of disregarding God's word, when you start to make decisions that you know are violating biblical principles, you should know, you should assume that you are going to taste bitter fruit as a result of those decisions eventually and not be deluded by the fact that God doesn't bring those harsh consequences to you immediately. In the context of speaking about marriage, a Christian person should understand and have it settled in their mind, "I have no business pursuing a serious relationship with someone who is not a Christian." God will not bless that and don't be misled by stories, "So-and-so came to Christ later on." Don't do that. Don't think that. Don't rationalize that. Don't presume on the grace of God like that. Make it your goal, make it your understanding that, "I'm going to honor Scripture first and foremost and that there are certain things that I will not compromise on." Don't do that.

Now, we've kind of been focusing on Elimelech and his two sons here in our time together so far, who is left holding the bag here? It's Naomi, isn't it? Ultimately it was Naomi paying the consequences. She found herself without a husband, without her sons. She's alone with her two daughters-in-law. She is a Jew in a foreign land. At that time, widows were vulnerable. So she's in a horrible mess of a situation. I want to say a word to the men here tonight to be mindful of. The men who most need to hear, I suppose, I guess are not here in the room with us, but this needs to be said anyway. This is often how it happens. Spiritually weak men, whether through their indifference or their arrogance or just their spiritually indifferent approach to life, separate themselves from the people of God and what so often happens, I've seen it so many times in ministry, it's the women who suffer as a result. The unfaithfulness of the head of the household and the consequences fall on the woman to bear. Men, we shouldn't be that way. We need to lead in a way that will lead to those who are under our care into the blessing of God to the best of our ability. We should lead in a way that manifests trust in God even in hard times,

that stays the course of spiritual obedience and fidelity to Christ no matter what the consequences are, rather than setting a pattern, setting a course, setting a trajectory that takes our families away from Scripture, away from the people of God, away from the realm of blessing that God has appointed. Was Elimelech planning to do that? Is that what his intention was? Did he intend to isolate and cause his wife to suffer? No, he was going there looking for food but his carnal desire to fill the bellies before he was concerned about being obedient to the law of God, positioned them for ultimate calamity. He put them in the position. He insured for them a dark providence by turning his back on the law of God.

So with all that we have seen here from the book of Moses is now when you read these five verses and you read those, especially the opening first two verses from the context of Moab and famine and the days of judges, as you're reading this from a biblical perspective, you immediately start to recognize, "This can't turn out well at all. In famine, go into Moab? This has disaster written all over it." And the truth of the matter is that for Elimelech, he should have known that that had disaster written all over it because God had made it known to his people in advance.

What can we glean from all of this? What can you and I glean from these five verses and to think about that would give us something to grow from? To think on? It's very simple, really, because I want you to see that we're talking about something more than, something bigger than just what happened in the life of one family 3,000 years ago. It's not my primary desire to stand up here and throw darts at Elimelech 3,000 years after the fact, but rather to say some things and to give you some perspective that would build you up and further your own sanctification and your own convictions. We need to have our convictions formed by Scripture and, first of all, I would say this: what we see from these opening verses of Ruth is that disobedience brings discipline. God is a God to be feared. God is a God to be respected and what he says in his word we must take seriously and not treat lightly. He warns us as New Testament believers in Galatians 6 and he says, "Do not be deceived. God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap for the one who sows to his own from the flesh reap corruption." That's Galatians 6:7-8 for those of you that are taking notes. I like seeing people take notes. That's cool.

God tells us that there is a cause and effect that operates and that those who disobey him will feel the effects of it and that you and I here in this room, those of you listening on the live stream, you and I should have it settled in our minds, our first thought about disobedience should be connected with the fact that, "If I walk away from God, I am going to feel the consequences of that and they are going to be sure and they are going to be painful." That's the way that we should think about it so that a man has no business taking the first step toward any kind of emotional relationship with a woman that is not his wife. Don't even go in that first step. Don't say like Elimelech, "You know, I'll just go and I'll sojourn there for a little while and then I'll come back." Your working assumption is that sin is going to work in your life like a powerful vacuum and suck you in far more than you ever expected and once it has done that, that you are going to feel the consequences of things that you never dreamt before and that they are going to be

painful. That's the way that you should frame your thinking about life and your obedience to God.

Ruth reminds us that disobedience brings discipline and we need to fear God enough to say, "Look, Lord, I respect you. I respect the fact that your hand is in providential control of my life and that I as a professing believer in Christ, if I drift into sin, if I turn my back on your word, if I turn my back on your people, I am going to feel the consequences of that and they are going to be painful." And let that motivate you to holiness. We should fear sin and repent while there is still time. I often think about that. I have often prayed over the years saying, "God, if I start to drift into sin, if I start to pursue a point of pursuing that which would disqualify me from ministry, which would dishonor Christ, which would bring harm to the people of God, kill me first." I would rather die than do that and I would rather die than do that for all of those consequences. I would rather die than feel the inevitable consequences that it would surely bring upon my own head. We fear God. We respect his holiness. We are grateful for Christ but we don't presume upon the goodness and the holiness of God. We operate from the principle that says, "Disobedience brings discipline, painful discipline, and I just don't want to feel the pain." So it shapes and channels your life in the right direction.

Secondly, what can we say about this in light of the rest of the book of Ruth now. Those first five verses are pretty dark but we read those first five verses in the context of the rest of the entire book of Ruth and we know how it turns out because we surveyed it last week. We know where this book is ultimately going and here's what I want to say to you, secondly, is that God gives grace. God gives grace. You know, the book of Ruth is like a meteor that shoots across a moonless night sky. There is nothing but darkness in the backdrop here and yet as a meteor shoots across and shows that there is more to the darkness, even though it just appears for a moment and then it's gone, you say, "There is much more here. There is much more in the heavens on this night than just the darkness because I just saw that meteor flash its light across the sky." The darkness is so real that you can almost touch it but the light streaking across the sky says there is more to it than you would otherwise suspect.

The rest of this book, chapter 1, verse 6, through chapter 4, verse 22, tells us more to the story. It tells us, as you know, that God exercised his providence to provide grace and favor to Naomi that you never would have predicted if you had simply stopped at the first five verses. And for those of you that are suffering the consequences of past sin, for those of you that perhaps are in the midst of a dark providence, maybe it's not even due to sin, just life has dealt you a difficult set of circumstances and painful at that that you have to respond to, here is really the ultimate message for tonight and for the book of Ruth: the first five verses, dark, judgment, disobedience; difficult to contemplate. The providence was dark and foreboding and Elimelech brought it on himself and on his own family, right? But here's the thing, for those of you that are struggling to keep your nose above water, as it were, who are gasping for air under the suffocating nature of circumstances right now, here's the real thing to take away as you, with your tender heart, try step by step and day by day to just cling and to hang on, still looking to Christ as you go, here's what I want you to take away from that tonight is that as you look at the book of Ruth, we

know from how the book unfolds that the Lord was working even in the midst of that dark providence. He was orchestrating. He was turning what men meant for evil and the disobedience that they had pursued, what they meant for evil God intended for good. And in your heart providence tonight, in the clouds that are pressing in upon you, understand and rest in this, not in your feelings, not in any sense of what might happen in the future, bank your whole confidence in this: that even in the dark providence, our sovereign God is at work motivating, moving forward his purposes, and even in your dark providence he is doing that in your life as well.

One writer said this, "The rest of the book of Ruth amply demonstrates that God's gracious providence is not bound by man's foolishness. It is evidence of his love that such benefits were reaped as a result of such foolish conduct. God's providence covers even our mistakes." Listen, that's really important. We don't know, Scripture doesn't tell us what Naomi thought as they were moving into Moab. Was she a participant in the decision that affirmed it? Or did she realize that this wasn't going to turn out well but she just followed her husband in submission anyway? We don't know. We don't know. All we know is that at the end of ten years she found herself isolated in a foreign land with her men gone and buried. But God's providence met her at that most desperate point and led her into blessing that she never could have calculated beforehand.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I want you to understand something: if you're feeling the consequences of your own past sin and your sin has put you into life's circumstances that you can't get out of and you're just feeling the weight of your own foolishness and your own disobedience, broken relationships maybe, and you can't undo it, what I want you to do is to come to the book of Ruth, see how God ultimately dealt with Naomi, and realize that you can trust him for his providence. The consequences that you feel are not a forfeiture of his love and grace and his future mercy in your life. So if this message comes to you in hard times, take heart because God is at work even in your dark providence. Even in your difficult circumstances, suffering Christian, know for certain that God will lead you out of that in time. The desolation of the present is not the premise of the future because God is able to do that. It wasn't the end for Naomi, it won't be the end for you either. Turn to your God now for favor and give him time to work it out.

Let's bow together in prayer.

Father, when we realize that these circumstances that Naomi found herself in ultimately led to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are amazed at what you are able to do. We thank you for the knowledge that what you took and met Naomi in this time of isolation, of seeming utter abandonment, and brought untold blessing out of her circumstances, we rejoice in that, we trust in that, we are encouraged by it, Father. For those that are with us tonight and the darkness is pressing upon them, Father, may the certainty of the love of Christ and the favorable providence of God give them hope to move forward. Father, a light to look to, a rope to grab hold of to give them hope in the midst of their difficulties.

For the rest of us, Father, help us to see what happened to Elimelech and fear. Father, teach us to respect your holiness to the extent that we are afraid to disobey in part because we don't want to harm our relationship with you; we don't want to dishonor you; we prefer to honor and glorify you with our lives. Help us to that end but, Father, also seal it on the back end with the sense that we just don't want to feel the pain of divine discipline. Rather, Father, we desire to live in your favor in the way that you bless those who are faithful to Christ. So help us to that end. Make us a church like that. And Father, for those here that don't know Christ, we ask you to lead them to that wonderful atoning blood of Jesus shed on the cross for the remission of sins. Father, may they turn to Christ and find salvation and the forgiveness of sins in him. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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