

Responding to a Dark Providence

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Last week as we began our study of the book of Ruth, we saw a picture in the first five verses of carnal men, unfaithful to Yahweh. Elimelech when the chips were down and life was difficult and famine hit the land, abandoned the land that God had promised to his people, abandoned the promises of God that, "Here is where I would bless you." Abandoned the people of God for the sake of a little bit of earthly prosperity and entered into Moab, a land where a false God who people worshiped with child sacrifice were in charge. It's hard to imagine a man walking away from the Promised Land; it's hard to imagine a family abandoning the good promises of God, but that's how the book of Ruth opens. They pursued a dark providence and they ended up dying in a foreign land and Naomi, as we saw last time as we closed, Naomi paid the price for her husband's carnality. By the time he was dead and 10 years later the sons were dead, Naomi was alone in Moab, a childless widow with two foreign daughters-in-law at her side. It could not have been a more bleak, earthly picture.

And what we said last time, those of you that were with us will recall, we said that disobedience brings God's discipline and that we need to fear God enough to be motivated to avoid sin, to avoid faithlessness, to avoid mediocrity, because there are consequences to that. God is not a cosmic Santa Claus who is just indifferent to the holiness of his people. Scripture says that he disciplines and scourges every son that he receives and those that take Scripture lightly and are loose with their living and irrelevant in the way that they think about the serious demands of God on Christian living, they eventually pay a price for it and you and I should avoid that error. You and I should avoid that mocking of the holiness of God and fear sin and repent and endeavor to walk in holiness and obedience to our God. That's just the way it is and that's the way that Christians should be, you know, to love God and to honor him and to fear him enough to let it affect the way that we live. That's the only right thing to do in response to a Savior who left the glories of heaven to come to earth to offer his life, his sinless, perfect, precious, lovely life as a sacrifice for our sins, for us to be delivered from eternal condemnation because a loving, gracious Savior intervened on our behalf. How could it be any other way than the fact that we would devote our entire lives to seeking to obey, to seek to be like him, and not being indifferent to what Scripture says about our lives. So that's just the way it is. We have no time for the foolishness of those who would justify any other approach.

As we also saw as we ended it last time, we saw at the end of our message last time that God gives grace even in the midst of the disobedience of his people, and even when people are dealing with the leftover consequences of sin as Naomi was, God is gracious, God is merciful to us in that and aren't you glad that he is? Aren't you glad that God has been merciful to you after all of your sin and indifference to him over the course of your life? Isn't it good to know that God is gracious? And isn't it good to have a book like Ruth that illustrates it in real lives in a narrative that we can all love and identify with? Praise God for his word. Praise God for his grace.

And what the rest of the book of Ruth does now that we introduced those first five verses, is that the rest of the book of Ruth shows God's grace to Naomi and to Ruth and his power in redemptive history and this evening we're going to see that unfold in just what is an astonishing display of God's power and his providence. This is one magnificent passage of Scripture and chances are you have never seen the depth of the greatness of what's on display here when we're used to, if we haven't studied Ruth closely, we are used to thinking about it in terms of Ruth's devotion and her love to Naomi, and that's certainly true and that's certainly there and it is a most endearing aspect of the story, but what we must see and what we must understand is that far greater than the loyalty of Ruth to Naomi is the display of the power and grace of God that transcends human history. This is one magnificent passage of Scripture and it is a great privilege for us to be blessed by God to gather together tonight to be able to study it together and to have the Spirit of God instruct our hearts in a way that I know is going to be edifying and encouraging to you.

So let's get started. I'm going to structure this message around three points that just kind of help unfold the narrative at one level, and then at the end we will draw out some practical application; that's kind of the way I'm trying to approach these Old Testament narratives as we teach them, kind of tell the story and then bring out a couple of points of application that are supported by other parts of Scripture so that we do our best not to read into the Scriptures something that isn't there. Well, first of all, what I want you to see and in everything that we're going to see tonight, I want you to understand this, there is just a lot in my heart that I have to say to you tonight and so I'm going to try to keep it all coherent in the best way that I know how. What I want you to see is that the things that come out of this narrative are things that are immensely practical to your personal life. These are things that should have a defining structuring affect in the way that you think about the totality of the rest of your life and the way they you interpret everything that has ever happened in your past. Whether it's good or bad, difficult or easy, joyful or sorrowful, everything can be brought under the umbrella of the principles that we see here this evening.

So that's what we're going to look at here and for those of you maybe that are here and I know that there is going to be a substantial number of you that fit into this category, especially those of you over the live stream, is that you're coming in here and you are mindful of the fact as you're under the teaching of the word of God, you're mindful of the fact that your life has strayed a bit and that you have accommodated and compromised with sin in a way that the teaching of God's word brings to bear a conviction upon your

heart and you say, "I don't know where to go. I don't know where to go from here. What do I do? How do I get back to where I was?" Well, this is a passage that's going to help us see that and the first little point that I want to give to you is we want to look at the circle. The circle that is involved in this biblical narrative.

The first thing that I want you to see tonight is how this passage that I just read, Ruth 1:6 through 18, brings us full circle. It brings us back to where the story first began. You'll recall how Elimelech took his family from Bethlehem to Moab. They were established in the land of God. They were married. They had two adult sons and they were in Bethlehem. Look at verse 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." Stop right there. Right there. This story starts out geographically in Bethlehem of Judah, in the city where our Savior was ultimately born. It starts there and yet there was a departure as you finish the sentence, "a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons." Now, we explained the significance of that last time. We won't repeat it here, only to say that this was not a good move on Elimelech's part. This was the mark of an untrusting, carnal man who abandoned the promises of God and abandoned the people of God, for heaven's sake. He left behind the covenant people of God and whatever encouragement and whatever leadership and whatever blessing that he could have been to the people of God, he left them behind in order to seek out his own earthly appetites. This is not an honorable man at all in what happens here.

Now, we said all that last night and you can rehearse that by going to our website and downloading the prior message. All I want you to see here for tonight is this, when you go back to verse 19, is that to see how it has come full circle. "So they both," meaning Naomi and Ruth, "went until they came to Bethlehem." Notice the circle here. Elimelech started in Bethlehem in the land of promise and went down, went out and came to Moab and so they had left and then that's where the story is unfolding now is in the land of Moab. Notice in the narrative that when all of this is said and done in the passage that I read, Naomi and Ruth have gone back to Bethlehem and so geographically they have come full circle. There is a divine symmetry that is present in this passage and, beloved, here's what that means for you here tonight and that's all that I want you to see out of that little excerpt here, is just to see the symmetry because I understand that when you're reading a narrative sometimes it's easy to overlook those kinds of clues and those kinds of tokens in the text. But listen to me: this is instructive for you. Those of you that are here and you have drifted into patterns of sin and you find that your discouraged spiritually and you don't know how you ever got off track, even this little geographic circle is instructive for you because here is what you do, this is the way that you should think about your spiritual life. If you have strayed from faithful Christian living, what you need to do is you need to go back to the point of your departure from obedience and pick up right back there again. You go back and you think through life and rather than just saying, "Okay, I'm going to try harder this time," no, don't do that. Show a little bit of insight to your spiritual life. Give some serious thought to what the work of God is and what he's doing in your life and say, "How did I ever get back here in the first place?" And you go back and say, "Well, I remember I stopped reading my Bible because I got interested in something else or I started cultivating other patterns and I just got away

from reading my Bible. I left off in the book of 2 Kings 18 reading about Elijah." Well, do you know what? Go back to 2 Kings 18 and pick it up right there. Go back to where you departed from and pick it up there.

If there was a point in your life and in your marriage maybe where you can look back and say, "I remember where our marriage went south, it was when I spoke really sharp words to my wife and then I shut down communication. I didn't want to talk to her anymore and it's been going on like that for weeks now." Well, you go back to your spouse, maybe it's the other way, wife to the husband, you go back to your spouse and say, "Look, I remember this conversation. I need to repent. I need to apologize and ask you for your forgiveness. Can we go back and start over and make things right with that aspect of our marriage?" And you go back and maybe for some of you you're going back 20 or 30 years in it. Just wherever that point of departure is, go back, make that your point of repentance and do what you can to restore it from there. Sometimes you can't fix it. People die and you don't have money to repay what you took or whatever, but you can still go back in your mind and start to work through and say, "Okay, this is what I need to do to make this right." And you trust the grace of God to bring you back and you trust the forgiveness that Christ bought for you at Calvary and say, "Okay, this is part of the restoration. This is part of the restitution and now having made this right, now I'm in a position to go forward again." This is the way that you should think and not just blow off what you have done in the past where you departed if you can identify that.

Naomi went back to Bethlehem. She did the right thing. After her husband had taken her out, she goes back to Bethlehem and the story starts over again from there in a way that we'll see next time. So there is this divine circle and this symmetry that takes place. You know, let me just say something encouraging to you here: to do that is one of the most refreshing things that you could do in your spiritual life, if you can identify points like that and go back and make what you can right. There is something very refreshing that says, "Okay, I realize where I went wrong. I'm repenting here. I'm trusting Christ to work this out." And just the activity and the effort and the intention to do what is right in the sight of God and to go back and straighten that out is immensely refreshing. So don't be afraid to do that. Don't be afraid to have the hard conversations. It's the right thing for you to do.

Now, we've seen the circle then, let's go to the second point here this evening and let's just take a look at the story, a look at the story that unfolds in verses 6 through 18. We're only going to touch lightly on the story tonight. It's such a wonderful story but we're just going to kind of walk through it fairly quickly, recognizing that time is short. But we want to see how the story unfolds because the biblical writer here is instructing us through a narrative and he's instructing us even through the dialogue that takes place between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. There is just so much that is rich here. So as we pick it up in verse 6, we see that Naomi in Moab somehow heard that the famine had broken. The famine that caused them to depart was now over and the Lord had visited his people with food, meaning that God had brought prosperity back to the land and the people were finding their way again.

Look at verse 6 with me, "Then she," meaning Naomi, "arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab." Going back. Why would she go back? They had left, why would they go back? What's the point of that? Well, she had heard in the land of Moab that the Lord had visited his people in giving them food. Somebody came from Israel and brought a report to Moab and said there is food in Israel again. Maybe it's a traveling merchant. It doesn't tell us how she heard this, but whilst her feet were on the soil of Moab, somebody comes from outside of Moab and brings news that God had returned to his people and there was now food in place of the famine that had existed which caused them to leave at the beginning. So Naomi, it's easy to kind of retrace her mental steps, she was a Jew. She belonged there in the first place, but to go back to her people, go back to the land where she came from, was a far better option for her than being a destitute widow in a foreign land. So if there is food in the land, the reason for their departure was now gone and Naomi says, "I'm going back." So this was the prompting that moved Naomi to enter back into the land and so she set out with her daughters-in-law.

Look at verse 7, "So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah." Now, some men have estimated that to go in those days from Moab where they probably were in the plains to Bethlehem would have been a 7 to 10 day journey; going down from the plateau of Moab maybe 4,000, 4,500 feet and then going back up the hills of Judah. A 75 mile journey is what they estimate and so this was a rigorous trip for them on foot in order to get themselves back to Bethlehem, and you get the idea as you read the narrative, that they had gone part of the way. They were somewhere down the road toward their destination when Naomi turns to her daughters-in-law and tries to convince them to go back.

Look at verses 8 and 9. Naomi said, verse 8, she "said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.' Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept." You get a window into the character of Naomi here that is just precious. You see her expressing her concern for the well-being of her daughters-in-law. She was willing to depart and to go back alone because, as she expresses it to them, there is a better life for them in Moab as Moabite women. "Go back to your people. Go back to the people that have known you. Go back and they will take care of you." She is seeking their earthly welfare of these younger women by pointing them to their own people so that they can find a husband. They're still young enough to marry and Ruth realizes that if they come as Moabite women to Israel, where is the hope for them to ever have a husband? Those days, the career path for women was to be a wife and a widow was destitute and there wasn't any future in that. So Naomi, knowing that it meant that she was trying to send away her own family for their own good, at one level, puts their interests ahead of her own and says, "You guys go back. I'll go on by myself. It's okay. I'll be all right. And may God bless you. May Yahweh care for you as you go back from me."

Well, at first, both Orpah and Ruth refuse this overture from their mother-in-law. Their love is evident as they weep and refuse at first to depart. Look at verse 10, they both said to her in verse 10, "No, but we will surely return with you to your people." They say, "We're not having any of this, Naomi. We love you. You're our mother-in-law. You're like a mother to us and we see the destitute situation. We're not going to abandon you in the midst of this. That's unthinkable. No way." And the magnitude of earthly circumstances coming to the surface here, they have buried their three men and they have been in this together and there are no good options in this display of divine providence that's in front of them at the time. There is no good option but at this first overture, the women, the daughters-in-law say, "No. No, we're staying with you." And the tension continues to develop as the story unfolds.

Look at verse 11. I've told you, this is a masterful piece of literature. "But Naomi said," Naomi wasn't going to have any of that. She wasn't going to have them making a decision based on pure sentimentality. She's being very practical here. She said, "Return, my daughters." This is the second time she's tried to send them away. She says, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me?" And she lays out for them in a very practical way how useless it is for them to follow her back to her own country. She lays out for them the fact that there is no future for them and so she says there in verse 11, "Why would you go with me? Do I have yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?" She's not pregnant. It's not like she's going to bear sons that would raise up and become husbands for these young women of marriageable age.

She goes on in verse 12 and she says, "Return, my daughters! Go back. I'm no good for you. I'm too old to have a husband. Not only am I not pregnant now, I'm too old to have a husband. I can't possibly bear sons that would prove to be a husband for you. And even if I did," verse 12, "even if I said I have hope, if somehow my barren womb could produce sons and I had a husband tonight and bore sons, what good is that going to be? Are you going to wait until they grow up and are of marriageable age? Would you refrain from marrying based on that remote hope?"

Look at verse 13, she says, "No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me." A couple of things that she's saying here. 1. She is recognizing, she's acknowledging that her circumstances come from the hand of God. She has not lost her theology here and it's a very hard life that she has and she recognizes that her circumstances come from the Lord and the hand of the Lord has gone against her in a way that is not the usual form of blessing that he gives to women like her. She says, "There's nothing I can do for you. I'm no good for you." And it's just such a totally selfless approach to her relationship with them. You've got to love Naomi in this. And as she's talking about to our ears here in the 21st century in Western culture, it sounds a little bit odd for her to be talking about having sons and having other sons that they could marry. Why is she talking that way? Well, we'll look at this more closely when we get to a discussion about Boaz later on in the book, but just briefly for now, Naomi is referring to the custom of what's called Levirate marriage. And the idea is that when a man, a married man dies childless, his brother would marry the widow in order to

preserve the family line so that there would be a son to carry on the name of the deceased and this was provided for in Scripture.

Look back at Deuteronomy 25, if you would. We're just touching on this briefly this evening, saving a fuller discussion for when we get to Boaz. But I just want you to have a little bit of insight into the seemingly odd emphasis that Naomi is putting on her own ability to bear children. Deuteronomy 25:5-6, "When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. It shall be that the firstborn whom she bears shall assume the name of his dead brother, so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel." This was a provision made for in Scripture to perpetuate the line of a man in exactly these kinds of situations that we find Naomi and Orpah and Ruth in as we're reading chapter 1. This is only one problem, there aren't any sons left. There is no one to get married to. This is utter desolation for Naomi and for her daughters-in-law. There was no firstborn child to carry on the line of the deceased so his name would not be lost and Naomi says, "There is never going to be. Not only is there not one now, there never will be. And even if it could be, even if I got married tonight and got pregnant tonight, that's not going to do you any good. Are you going to wait 20, 25 years for a man?"

So she's just laying out for them the practical consequences and how unfitting it is for them to follow her and she selflessly is willing to be alone, completely alone for the well-being of Orpah and Ruth. A future with Naomi was destined, destined by everything that she knew at that time to be one of isolation and hardship and so she tells them again and again and a third time, "Go back. Don't come with me. I'm no good for you." Well, the selflessness of that really moves your emotions, doesn't it? It really grips you to see that kind of nobility of character on display; that self-sacrifice that is increasingly a lost virtue in this wicked society in which we live. But, you know, as long as Scripture exists, that kind of nobility will not die. God won't let it die. There will always be people like you gathered in this room who aspire after the noble character that Scripture lies out and won't buy into the lies and the deception and the selfishness of our wicked society. There will be people just like you who rise up and aspire to this kind of noble life, to lay down your life for someone else in the same way that Christ lay down his life for you.

Now, at this point after verse 13 and Naomi has made her third plea with her daughters-in-law, you start to see a distinction taking place. The challenge starts to take root: Orpah goes back home, Ruth and her character starts to shine forth. Look at verse 14 after Naomi has laid it out for them and she is telling them, "Go, it's okay. I'll follow on my own." In verse 14, "They lifted up their voices and wept again." Oh, this is just pregnant with emotion. I realize that's kind of a funny turn of phrase when we're talking about being childless, but you know what I mean. This is pulsating with raw human emotion here. "And they lifted up their voices and wept again," verse 14, "and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her." Then Naomi said to Ruth, verse 15, and there is something that's a little bit unstated in the narrative: Orpah decides to go back. She takes her mother-in-law, as it were, at her word and she goes back and Orpah has exited the scene and now Naomi turns to Ruth and, in a sense, I don't like the way I'm going to put

this, but in a sense turns the screw one more time and challenges Ruth one more time to go back and she brings all of the leverage that she possibly has, seeking what seemed to her at the time to be what was best for Ruth.

Look at what she says in verse 15, "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; you return after your sister-in-law." Oh my, now let's pivot a bit and step into Ruth's sandals, as it were, and look at this from Ruth's perspective and just realize in one sense humanly speaking in this moment of time, how utterly alone Ruth is in what's going on here. Her mother-in-law has told her three times, going on four, "You need to go back. Don't come with me. I don't want you to come and experience the isolation and the destitution that will surely be your lot if you stay with me." Then she looks back and Orpah is walking down the trail heading back to Moab and Naomi says, "See, there goes Orpah. Don't you see the right thing to do?" So there is nothing in this circumstance to compel Ruth to stay. There is no external inducement whatsoever. Everything was calling Ruth to leave. Her mother-in-law says go; Orpah is already halfway down the road. There is nothing in the future that she could possibly know about at that point in time to make her stay and yet at a human level, it's going to become much deeper in just a few minutes as we see, at a human level you see profound love and loyalty coming from this noble heart of Ruth.

Verse 16. I mean, there must have been mud around their feet for all of the tears that were being shed as this was going on and this lifetime crisis, this crisis of a hopeless future seemingly, comes to bear and Ruth, God bless her and he did, Ruth prefers the prospect of destitution to leaving her mother-in-law. So great is her love for Naomi, so selfless is Ruth in this that look at what she says in verse 16, "But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you. Mom, stop it. You're breaking my heart. I'm not going to leave you so stop telling me to do that.'" And look at these sweet words that she says, precious words often read at wedding ceremonies today, although that's not exactly the context but that's okay. Ruth says, "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you." I'm not going so stop breaking my heart, "for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God." She says, "Naomi, my lot is with you. Whatever comes of it, I prefer utter destitution with you to leaving you."

Verse 17, "Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me." Some commentators suggest that maybe there was some kind of physical motion like maybe she goes like this, "Let the Lord do this to me if anything but death separates us." She calls a curse on her own head to settle the argument and says, "Naomi, I'm going with you." And Naomi with that response from Ruth finally relents and she allows Ruth to accompany her to Bethlehem.

Look at verse 18, "When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her." Naomi had tested and pushed back and again and again had pushed hard and in that refining fire of Naomi's insistence, the pure character of Ruth is on full display. So great, so magnificent, so much a part of the plan of God that here we are talking about it over 3,000 years later. There is a character that stood the test of time.

What a great story! What a great manifestation of human love. What a great display of sterling character found in both Naomi and in Ruth. This is magnificent. You could close in prayer and we'd all go out feeling pretty good and warm and mushy and emotional about it, but what just happened here? What just happened in this story? There is much more than what meets the eye on first reading. Beloved, don't you stop, content only to see Naomi's love or Ruth's loyalty in this narrative because this is much more profound than a passing human relationship. Think about it: if this was only about a human love story, if this was only about one woman's devotion to her mother-in-law, this story would have perished long ago and no one would even care about it. Why is it somehow that this story is still with us 3,000 years later?

Well, to answer that question you have to see God in it. You have to see God in this story and that brings us to our third point for this evening. We've seen the circle, they went from Bethlehem to Moab and back to Bethlehem again. We've seen the story unfold as Naomi heads back to Moab and interacts with her daughters and says, "Go back, go back," and Ruth says, "I ain't going back." That's the story. How are we to interpret it? How are we to understand it? Well, this is like one of the greatest passages in all of the Bible. It brings us to point 3: the salvation. The salvation and, you know, if your Christian background is like mine is and you came to Christ maybe in your adult years without much of a spiritual history behind it, then you should especially love this story about Ruth. If you're a first-generation Christian who never had a godly influence on your life, you didn't have parents that sat you down and taught you the Bible and somehow you came to Christ anyway, God worked in your life and brought you and you said, "There isn't anything in my background to lead to this realm of blessing that I enjoy," then beloved, you ought to love this story of Ruth. I'm telling you.

Notice hear the word "return" that is used so frequently in this passage. Those of you who stood outside the camp looking into the realm of the redeemed and knowing that you were outside of it and wondering if there could ever be anything for you in the promises of God. Maybe you're like that tonight. You know you're not a Christian and you long for the blessings of God, the blessing of forgiveness, the blessing of a cleansed conscience. You long to belong to Christ and you wonder if it could really be true for you too. Listen, this story about Ruth is the certain guarantee that God offers his grace to you if you will only receive Christ. I love this story. We may be here all night.

Notice the word "return" used so frequently here in verses 6, 7 and 8, for example. I want you to make an observation then I'll hope you see the significance of it. Over and over again, the same Hebrew word for "return" is used. Verse 6: Naomi arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab. Verse 7: they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. Verse 8: Naomi says to her daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to your mother's house." Here's what you're supposed to be doing when you read that in the narrative. When you see that repeated word over and over again, we talked about this a little bit at our series on Understanding Scripture and Interpreting Scripture, when you start to see the same word repeated multiple times in the context, zero in and focus on that because something is going on. Something significant is going on by the theme of this word "return." Verse 10: they said back to her, "No, but

we will surely return with you to your people." Naomi said, "Return my daughters," verse 11. Verse 12: "Return, my daughters." Over and over again this word "return." What is going on here?

Well, in the verses that we've seen so far, "return" is obviously simply just making, in one sense simply, describing the idea of a geographic relocation from Moab back to Bethlehem. But, beloved, that same Hebrew word is also used repeatedly in Scripture to express the idea of repentance; of turning from sin toward God; from turning away from false religion to the true God. English functions the same way, doesn't it? We say that we're going, we're driving in a car and we say, "We're going to turn right at the next light. We're going to turn." Well, we also, if we're preaching a biblical Gospel, we also call on people to turn from sin and to receive Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and so one word both expressing a turning, can have a geographic reference and also have a spiritual significance depending on the context in which it is used. So, "Return, return, return, return," Naomi says.

One Hebrew lexical source says this and I quote, it says, "This term expresses the turning away from evil in the sense of renouncing and disowning sin. There are two sides in understanding conversion: the free sovereign act of God's mercy, and man's going beyond contrition and sorrow to a conscious decision of turning to God. The latter includes a repudiation of all sin and an affirmation of God's total will for one's life." I know, long quotation from a technical source so let me say it again because I don't want you to miss this. What does this word "return" mean in a spiritual significance? And those of you that aren't Christians here tonight, you need to really take this to heart because this is precisely the command of God on your life. If you're not a Christian, this is precisely the one thing that God is calling on you to do tonight in order to find the forgiveness of your sins and if you reject this, you cannot go to heaven. So let me say it again, pretty important. This turning, the human side of it is this: it's man's going beyond contrition and sorrow, "I feel bad about my sins," well, that's not repentance. Repentance goes further. It's going beyond contrition and sorrow to a conscious decision of turning to God. This turning includes a repudiation of all sin and an affirmation of God's total will for one's life. So watch this: the idea of repentance and we're going to see this from New Testament passages too in just a moment, this idea of repentance means there is a total repudiation of your sin. There is a complete abandonment of your prior way of life in order to embrace Christ, in order to submit to him and to give yourself over completely, wholly, unreservedly and without qualification to him. That is repentance and without it no one comes to Christ truly. This goes to the most profound inner part of your heart and completely re-orientes your reason for existence.

Well, with that in mind, knowing that this word is used in this way and seeing the theme of return again and again, now all of a sudden when you read what Ruth says in Ruth 1:15 and 16, all of a sudden there are fireworks going on at the spiritual significance of what's taking place. They are turning away from Moab to go back to Bethlehem. Notice what's going on in Ruth's tender heart in her own life. With these things in mind, let's read Ruth's word with a fresh understanding. Naomi says, "Your sister has gone back. You go back too. Return after your sister-in-law." Look at what Ruth says, "Don't do this

to me. Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from following you. There is not that kind of turning in my heart. There is a different turning in my heart, Naomi. Where you go, I'll go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die. That's where I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me and worse if anything but death parts you and me." What has she done there? She has done exactly what this word expresses in its theological, not its geographic, significance. She has just repudiated her entire past. She has repudiated her homeland. She has repudiated her people. She has repudiated her false gods. And she has thrown herself, in at one level, with Naomi, at another level, with Naomi's people, but don't miss the Godward focus of what she says. She says, "Your God will be my God." And she expresses it, she clinches it by using the covenant name of God which is reserved for his people and is an expression of his covenant loyalty to the people of Israel.

Look at verse 17, she says, "Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me." You see, beloved, what's going on here? Ruth is not simply identifying with Naomi. She's not simply displaying human love and loyalty. Ruth had turned from the only gods and the only people that she had known in order to follow the one true God. We are witnessing in this text the true spiritual conversion, the true salvation of a foreign woman to the God of the Bible. This is nothing less than a Moabite woman from a dark, idolatrous background, turning to saving faith in the God of Israel. Beloved, this is Old Testament example of repentance. Saving faith displayed and showing its fruit by the repudiation of her past in order to be with the people of God. Incredible.

We're not done. We're not done. Let's understand this from the perspective of progressive revelation and what others in the New Testament said. Let's look at Jesus' words and see if what Ruth manifested and expressed here isn't perfectly consistent with what Jesus said. Look at Mark 8, and we're going to get to apply this too. It's not just about Ruth, it's about you and me. This can't get any better, can it? I don't think so. Mark 8:34 and 35, what did Jesus say? He said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." What did Ruth do? She laid aside her life. She lost her entire life. Everything in her past that had brought her to this point, she turned her back on it in order to receive Naomi's God, who of course, is our God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. She repudiated everything in order to come to Christ. No conditions.

Beloved, don't miss this: no idea of how this is going to come out. Some of us can remember this point in our own conversions where you're giving your life to Christ and you realize you have no idea what all of the implications of that are. All you know is that you're not putting any conditions on your future allegiance to Christ. There is a total handing over of your entire self to him and let him do with it what he may. That is repentance. That's what Jesus called for. That's what Ruth did without the benefit of New Testament revelation.

Let's remember Paul's words, 1 Thessalonians 1. 1 Thessalonians 1 being found in your Bible or on your iPad just prior to 2 Thessalonians. It's okay, we can smile a little bit too. 1 Thessalonians 1:9 and 10, Paul in commending the faith of those at Thessalonica said, "They themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come." You turn to God from idols. What did Ruth do except that she turned from those false gods and said to Naomi, "Your God will now be my God."

Beloved, now we see the grace of God on display while they were in Moab. It wasn't primarily about the fact that the famine had ended and that they could go back and find food. It wasn't primarily about the fact that they had these warm human relations. The grace of God was fully on display, magnificently and powerfully and most explosively, wonderfully manifested in the conversion of Ruth on the road back to Bethlehem. Think about it, think about it with me: she's just like you and me. Born in utter darkness. Born into sin. Born into a land of idolatry where there was no truth to be found and that's all that she knew, being raised up seeing children slaughtered in a sacrifice to their god. Yet God brings Naomi, a woman of the true faith and of the true God, and they make a connection. Ruth marries into this family and now she is exposed to the truth and she wholeheartedly and unreservedly gives herself over to that God. That is grace. Full, undeserved, unmerited favor lavishly bestowed on Ruth.

Well, what can we take away from this? We'll settle for two takeaways from this passage. There are certainly more that could be found but we are already going long as it is. First of all, this is application for you and me here today, remembering how dark the providence was and seeing what happened in the life of Ruth, here's the first thing that I want you to take away from this, directly relevant to your life, first of all, mark it, write it down: God is good in your dark providence. God is good in your dark providence. Humanly speaking, disaster had fallen upon Naomi but, as we see the story now and God pulls back the curtain and lets us see with the benefit of hindsight what was going on far beyond the realm of Naomi's human comprehension, God had not abandoned her. Indeed, his purpose was glorious and, beloved, what that means for you, no matter your hardship and no matter the difficulty of your present human circumstances or your difficult human relationships, you mark this down and drive it into your soul as an unalterable stake upon which you will stake your destiny and all of your hopes. Stake it on this: you cannot assess the ultimate significance of the current providence of your life. You have no idea what God's ultimate purposes are and what's happening in your life. We cannot see that. Naomi didn't. We can't either.

You and I cannot guess at the true significance of our circumstances. We simply have to humble ourselves before our good and sovereign God and trust him to do what is right. Maybe with the passage of time you'll see it displayed and unfold and you'll say, "Oh, I don't see it all but I can see how God brought good out of that. I can see how God has manifested Romans 8:28 to me, that he causes all things to work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose. I can see how in the darkest times of my life when the despair was so black that it was almost tangible, I could almost

touch it, it weighed so heavy on my heart. Now with the passage of time, I can look back and see what God brought out of that. I can see what he was doing all along. His purposes were good." You give him time and you're going to see that quite likely, and even if you don't see it in this life, you're going to go to heaven as a Christian and see Christ face-to-face. That's a pretty good outcome, isn't it? There is no reason for any of us to collapse under despair of difficult circumstances and say there is no hope. What do you mean there is no hope? Of course there's hope. Our great good God is sovereign and working all things together for good for us.

And you and I simply cannot allow ourselves to collapse into unutterable despair as if there is no light to show us the way forward. That's not right. If nothing else, if nothing else as we contemplate how good God is in your providence, your dark providence, if nothing else, beloved, let me give you one thing to hang onto to maybe lift you out a little bit of your selfishness that dark circumstances sometimes prompt us to go into: you can be sure, you can know for certain that one of the things that God intends to do in your suffering and the way that he intends to use that, is for you to become a vessel of blessing to someone else.

Look at 2 Corinthians 1:3 and 4, the Apostle Paul said, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." God brings you into suffering for the purpose of bringing comfort to you to alleviate your sorrow and to let you find your hope and joy and peace in him. And he does that not so that you would be an end in and of yourselves but that so you would turn and say, "Oh, I know that comfort." For you to go out and minister it to others who are suffering in like manner. That's the purpose of God in your suffering.

So if you're suffering and you're discouraged and you're overwhelmed by what's happening, you start right here. I mean it, you start right here. You start by asking God to use that suffering in your life so that you would become an effective comfort to others. It doesn't happen overnight. You say, "God, you shape the direction of my life from this dark providence that I have and display your goodness to me so that I can one day go out and declare it to others who are in the dark circumstances of their own." Naomi's sorrow led to blessing for others and ultimately God comforted her as well. Think about this: Naomi's in this dark providence and in the crucible of that refining fire, her life became the vessel through which God reached and saved Ruth. You think that's not important? You bet it is.

So, beloved, in your sorrow and in your difficulty, take heart. There is more to your difficult life than you see and if we saw it, we would rejoice. God withholds the sight so that we would walk by faith and he is worthy of that, isn't he? After Christ laid his life down, hasn't he displayed and settled for all time that he's worthy for us to trust him with whatever he does in our lives? Isn't he worthy of that, beloved? I ask you, look beyond your sorrow and your broken heart and see the undeniable goodness of God and know

that his intention is to bring you through this eventually so that his glory and goodness are on display. He hasn't abandoned you. He would never do that.

Secondly, we've said that God is good in your dark providence, finally for tonight, we see that God is great in his divine purpose. God is great in his divine purpose. This deserves a six month series, I'm going to give it maybe 60 seconds and ask God for mercy as I do. As we said, Ruth grew up in the darkness of idolatry. She had no claim on God's covenant promises, in fact, she belonged to a people that God said should not enter the assembly of Israel, and yet, what did God do? Even in Elimelech's disobedience, God worked through his disobedience to accomplish something. Quick tangent here: this is exactly what God did at the cross as well. Godless men, culpable for their own actions, crucified Christ and the Bible says that they did it according to the preordained plan of God in order to bring about a greater result. They were just being sinful, God, great in his divine purpose, used their sinfulness to accomplish redemption at the cross.

Let's take that and apply it to Ruth. What did God do? Ruth in all of her darkness, not even knowing the name of Yahweh as she was growing up, and yet God brought his people in the form of one family into Moab and somehow connected them to Ruth and then what happened? Why did he do that? God brought his people to Ruth for the greater purpose of bringing his grace to her; for the greater purpose of bringing David into the world; for the greater purpose of bringing Christ into the world; for the greater purpose of bringing salvation to sinners; for the greater purpose of bringing a bride to his Son; for the greater purpose of showing his glory for all eternity. That's what God was doing 3,000 years ago in the life of Ruth.

Beloved, never, never, twice isn't enough, never underestimate the goodness and the greatness of God. Don't ever do that. And understand that he often is carrying out the highest most refined elements of his purpose in dark circumstances that seem hopeless by human evaluation and yet his goodness and his purposes are sure. 3,000 years ago on the road to Bethlehem, a great episode in the advance of redemptive history was taking place and Naomi and Ruth knew nothing about that and yet the purpose of God was great, it was good, and it was sure.

What should you and I say in response to these things? "Oh, the depth," Romans 11:33, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."

Bow with me.

Yes, our Father, from you and through you and to you are all things. We as your people say to you be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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