

Decisions, Decisions

Book of Ruth

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Ruth, Ruth 1. I began last week the exposition of this Old Testament book in kind of an overview, an introduction and overview. Today we start into the first chapter and really it's the first scene of the first act. You see the Lord as he recounts for us the real events, historical realities that happened at the time that it happened, he tells us in a dramatic and compelling fashion and you see it in a sense, it reads like a compelling drama, a play, and so really there are four acts. Each chapter is kind of like a separate movement in the drama and the first chapter we look at today, the first act we look at today. Entitling the message, I'm just going to call it, "Decisions, Decisions," because I think there are two pivotal decisions in these first six verses which is our text this morning, Ruth 1:1-6, and what we're going to see are the decisions were the decisions of Naomi, our main character. I shared with you last week that I believe she is the main character and I think you'll see that as we begin to unpack this book, that she has a way, the author is always looking to her. It's kind of like you're watching a movie or something and something happens and you know how they'll cut away from the action to a key person to see their response to the action, and you can kind of tell this is a main character because it's not just what's happening, it is how it is impacting this person. This is what happens again and again in the book of Ruth. It's as if the spotlight shifts from the action to Naomi, how does this impact her, and so she really is the central main character. There are three main characters in Boaz and Ruth, I'm talking humanly, of course the main character is God that is governing all of these things and working them to fulfill his ultimate plans, but humanly speaking, the three main characters, Ruth, Naomi and Boaz, Naomi is the central character. So decisions, decisions. There are two decisions that Naomi makes or two decisions that have radical impact upon her life and so we're going to read the first six verses together and begin looking at that this morning. Ruth 1:1.

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. 3 Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. 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. 5 Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband. 6 Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for your precious word and we ask now that your Holy Spirit would work through your word in our hearts that you would accomplish the purpose for which you sent this word in each and every one of us. And we pray this for the glory of your Son. Amen.

Now, what we're going to do in following the action is really the first scene of the first act. Verses 1:1 to 6 are really the first scene of the first act. The first act basically covers the movement of our main character from Bethlehem to Moab and then back. That's essentially what happens in chapter 1, all of chapter 1, and the first scene really takes us from Bethlehem to Moab, the first half of that movement, and takes place essentially in the land of Moab. So what I want us to do as we follow the action is to consider, gather our thoughts around five points. There is a "D" in each one to try to help us in remembering that.

The first is: the days in which she lived. You know, to observe the passage, we want to observe carefully how the Lord lays this out for us and we want to look, first of all, at the days in which she lived. It's the first thing that we are told in the passage. "Now, it came about in the days when the judges governed." The days in which Naomi lived were the days in which the judges governed. That was a loaded phrase for any faithful Israelite who had been reading the Scriptures. "The days when the judges governed," in fact in the Hebrew, it's even a little more emphatic because in the Hebrew, the same word is used for "judges" as "govern," so really it's shophat, shophatim, and so the idea is, a better translation to kind of capture that nuance would be, "In the days when the judges judged." That's really how it sounds in the Hebrew. The verb and the noun are the same root. So in the days when the judges judged, so it even emphasizes that sense of the days of the judges even more. I said it's a loaded term. It has so much connotation, connotative baggage comes with that phrase. "In the days of the judges or in the days when the judges judged."

Remember we talked of this last time, that the book of Judges describes a dark time in the history of the nation of Israel. I mean, spiritual darkness, apostasy, idolatry. In fact, the book of Judges pictures the cycles of sin, apostasy, idolatry. The people will depart from the Lord into sin and idolatry and apostasy, God will then send judgment in one way or another upon them, usually in the book of Judges, it starts out always as the oppression of one of their neighbors, you know, the neighbor to the east, the Philistines, or the West, the Philistines will come, or the neighbor to the north, the Ammonites, or etc. All around

them one of the nations around them would come and oppress them and this judgment that has come upon them from the Lord, they cry out to God, this is discipline that has come upon them from the Lord, and they cry out to God, then he raises up a judge, a deliverer to deliver them and what you see is these cycles. It's like the first departing from the Lord and God sends in a nation to oppress them, they cry out, he raises up the first judge. Then things go well for a while, then they depart from the Lord and he sends judgment, oppressors upon them, they call out to the Lord, another judge. And there is this repetitive cycle and there is this downward movement where the judges themselves are ambivalent characters at best. You see sin and righteousness mixed in the judges, how is God using these guys. Samson, the end of that progression downward where he basically continues to dishonor the Lord in his vow, his Nazirite vow, doing thing after thing after thing that a Nazirite is not supposed to do and yet God is still using him and blessing him.

So this is the days in which they lived. This is the day in which Naomi was born. If you could look at the timeline and choose the time of your birth, you would not want to choose that period. These were not easy days to follow Yahweh, to follow the Lord. And so the reader of the text, the Israelites who knew their Bibles well and Christians throughout history who have known their Bibles too, especially because as we know that from last time the placement in the Canon, Ruth follows right after Judges in the Canon. When you hear that, it's a loaded term. Wow, that was a hard time to be faithful to God.

In fact, I think there is something more going on here in the infinite wisdom of God and his inspiration and the work of his Spirit in inspiring these words, the phrase that's repeated, now it's very germane to the subject but it's the phrase "Bethlehem in Judah." It occurs twice in our passage, verse 1, "and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah." He doesn't tell us the name first; he tells us first of all where the guy was from. Now, we're going to see that's because it's going to relate to David later because we know the end of the story, but I would suggest to you that there is another resonance going on, there is something that God wants us to feel a resonance. Even if it's not completely fully, we're not completely fully cognizant of it, there is an association here that creates this sense of foreboding, it intensifies it, that even the phrase "in the days in which the judges judged" started. Wow, these are difficult times and the phrase "Bethlehem in Judah" really ties together with the period of the judges in a surprising way. It's repeated in verse 1 and verse 2. We are told again and here you have it kind of in an unnecessary repetition that shows you the Lord is emphasizing it. "The names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah." Well, we know they're from Bethlehem in Judah, you just told us that, but he's emphasizing it.

And look at the phrase, "Bethlehem in Judah." I mentioned last time that the judges and as I was just describing again, the cycles of good and bad in Judges goes from chapters 1 to 16 and then after that, the last five chapters, 17 to 21 is just basically things are just in the gutter, in the sewer spiritually and morally in Judges. There are two events that happen in those last five chapters, two predominant events that dominate those last five chapters. Chapters 17 and 18, you have this unimaginable idolatry happening and it is told that a man, Micah, who it starts off his mother has lost 1,100 pieces of silver, Micah

comes to her and says, "I stole the silver." She pronounced a curse on the person. "I stole the silver." Then you have this weird thing, she like blesses him for coming clean with it. Like, she's not even concerned with the fact that he sinned and he needs to repent, well, he did come back but she's more excited about the money and you know that because what she tells him to do is, "Because I'm so happy that you have come back, what I would like you to do is take the silver, a good portion of the silver, and go and have a cast idol made and we will worship and honor Yahweh with an idol." No comment in the text about it. The discerning reader is supposed to be appalled even at the way it is recounted. "What? What are they thinking?" Well, then after that, Micah makes this idol. He's now making a place to worship that's not the one place that you can worship, the tabernacle. He's making his own place of worship. It's all about convenience.

Look, turn back to chapter 17 and verse 6. I basically told you what happened in verses 1 to 5, verse 6, here's the refrain throughout the last five chapters of the book of Judges, "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." There was no king. People were not living under the Lordship of Yahweh underneath his appointed king, everyone therefore did what was right in their own eyes. That is a recipe for disaster when people do what is right in their own eyes. That's how the book ends. The last verse of the book of Judges, the last verse right before you start reading Ruth 1, 21:25, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

Now, back to chapter 17, verse 6. The first occurrence of that that really brackets our section here that shows just this time in the sewer spiritually and morally, the time in the life of the people of God, those who were supposed to be the people of God. "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." Verse 7, "Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite; and he was staying there. Then the man departed from the city," where? "From Bethlehem in Judah, to stay wherever he might find a place; and as he made his journey, he came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah. Micah said to him, 'Where do you come from?' And he said to him, 'I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to stay wherever I may find a place.'" He basically says, "Hey, you're a Levite. I want you to be my priest." And the guy, we're told three times is from Bethlehem in Judah.

Now, this story goes from bad to worse. It's an ugly picture of idolatry and it dominates chapter 17, chapter 18. Then chapter 19, idolatry of 17 and 18 is replaced by unspeakable, indescribable immorality in 19 to 21. Basically one event defines that and that is a man who is married, has a concubine that is taken into his house as his wife, one of his wives, she goes away and plays the harlot. He goes and finds her in her home, takes her back. On his way back to their home, stops in the tribal region of Benjamin. This is one of the 12 tribes of Israel in the holy land, in Canaan. They are in Canaan. They stop there and what happens is basically eerily reminiscent of Genesis 19, unbelievably reminiscent, where the men of the city surround the house and say they want to have sex with the man who came in and the man who has taken them into his house says, "No, please don't do that." So they are threatening to come in to break the door down so the man puts his concubine outside. They violate her all through the night.

She dies at the threshold with her hand on the threshold in the morning. This incredible act of wickedness committed by the people of God. So distraught is this man he does something that he shouldn't do, he cuts her body into 12 pieces like a butcher and sends the 12 pieces to the 12 tribes of Israel and there is a civil war to destroy the Benjamites. The rest of the nation is so appalled at what happens, they come and they almost eradicate, it's almost an annihilation of the entire people but there are a few left.

Now turn to chapter 19. We're not going to read all of it. I want you to see again the connection. "Now it came about in those days," 19:1, "when there was no king in Israel," you see, there's the refrain again, "that there was a certain Levite staying in the remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, who took a concubine for himself from," where is this lady from? This same little small town that's so insignificant in Israel's history, "Bethlehem in Judah. But his concubine played the harlot against him, and she went away from him to her father's house in Bethlehem in Judah, and was there for a period of four months." Look at verse 18. He has gotten her back. They've gone into the land of Benjamin. They're in the town of Gibeah where it's about to happen, what's going to happen that night, and a man has come into the square and said, "Please come with me." He is asked, "Where are you going? Where are you from?" Verse 18, the Levite said, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, for I am from there, and I went to Bethlehem in Judah." Seven times in those last five chapters one place is mentioned over and over again, Bethlehem in Judah, and I think the Lord has put that in his word, he sovereignly governed that, so that this connection would even be made as you read Ruth 1.

A certain man of Bethlehem in Judah, in the days in which the judges governed. The days in which she lived, Naomi lived, were dark days. Wickedness. There was no king. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. It was a difficult time to live and follow God. It was a time of spiritual darkness, unprecedented idolatry and unimaginable immorality. It's not the kind of time you'd want to live. There is good news in that because God's providence is governing all. Acts 17:26, the Apostle Paul in preaching to the pagans in Athens, he says that the Lord, "He made from one man all the people of the earth," from one man, and he, the Lord, "determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation." What is he saying? God has determined when every single person, when they would live and where they would live.

You and I had nothing to do with choosing our time, did we? "I want to go into the 1960s. I want to be born in the 1960s in America. Georgia, that sounds good." Actually, I'm pretty happy with that. You know, there's fried chicken. There are all kinds of blessings that we have here. No, but seriously, actually in thinking back on it now, the 1960s were a lot better than the 2016 days, weren't they? The 60s were kind of bad in a lot of ways but comparatively. When we are tempted to think, "These times are just too difficult, just too dark. I don't want to be in these days, in this place," we can stop and bow our knee to God and say, "Lord, thank you that you placed me here."

He has determined our appointed times and the place of our habitation and though it was difficult for her, she lived in dark days, the days in which she lived were dark, God is going to show himself gloriously to this woman so that she would say when we talk to

her in heaven, "I'm so glad I lived at the time I lived in the place I lived." And every believer in heaven will say the same thing. Do you know why? Because God knows best. He makes no mistakes. The problem is we just don't have any perspective to see it so we sit here and grumble and complain because we are blind as bats spiritually. If we could see what he sees, we would always say as the Psalmist says, "The Lord has done it and it is marvelous in our eyes." The days in which she lived.

Secondly, the second "D" here: the difficulties that she encountered. The difficulties she encountered. The next clause after, "Now it came about in the days when the judges judged, there was a famine in the land." She not only was born in a time of spiritual darkness but a time of great suffering. A famine in the land. In an agricultural culture where they didn't have refrigeration and food storage the way we do, a famine was actually catastrophic and so she lives in a time with her husband and her two boys wondering how they are going to make it. Real fear of starvation. Something we can't as Americans really can't relate to but throughout history billions of people throughout history have faced those very real challenges of finding enough food.

So it's something that Naomi encountered, the difficulty she encountered, first of all was famine. but you see, even as we continue to read through the text, we have other indications from the author that there are even more difficulties coming. When he says in verse 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," even in the two names, Mahlon and Chilion, you know, I mentioned last time that names meant something in Jewish culture. The name actually was the phrase, it actually had meaning. Most of our names don't. I mentioned, Patti corrected me, she said, "Your name Ty does mean something." Yeah, it does if you go back. You know, you can find a book and read on it and it will tell you, "Okay, it means this or whatever." My actual name is Tyre. I guess it comes from that thing that you drive on your car, right? Our names mean something. Maggie's name means "pearl." Jonathan's name means in Hebrew, "he gave," or actually "Yahweh gave. Yah nathan, nathan" means "he gave. Yah, Yahweh gave. The Lord gave." But we don't think of that when we hear the name Jonathan or when we hear Maggie.

Now, there are some names in English that we have this. We could have named her Pearl. I've known some ladies named Pearl and the name "Pearl" means something, doesn't it? But we don't always think of that first when we hear the name; we don't always think every time we say "Pearl" I'm thinking about a white shiny stone that comes from an oyster. No, you don't always think of that but it is there. There is some sense of resonance when the name has a meaning, even more so in Israelite days, when everyone's name had a meaning. It was more like maybe a closer parallel is American Indians. You know, you hear about the names of Indians, you know, Running Deer, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse. The names meant something. A lot of times it meant, "Don't mess with that guy if you have any sense."

So the names here, the same way. Elimelech's name meant "Eli, my God, melech, king. My God is King." Naomi we find out later in the chapter, we're told by the author explicitly, Naomi doesn't want anybody to call her Naomi because there is some problem

with Naomi because Naomi means "pleasant one." She says, "Call me Mara, call me Mary," basically because Mara or Mary means "bitter, bitter circumstances, bitter one. The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me." But her two sons, now the first two names at the very beginning, Elimelech sounds good. Naomi sounds good. "My God is King." Yes, check, that's good. Naomi, "pleasant one." Wonderful. But the names of her two sons, here we begin to see some increased foreboding. The name Mahlon means "weakling or sickly." The name Chilion means "to come to an end." A sense of waiting until the end.

So why did you name your kids that? Well, we don't know exactly, we can only speculate. Perhaps Mahlon was a very weak baby, barely making it when he was born, and then his life apparently was much the same way, he dies as a young man. Chilion, to come to an end. Isn't it amazingly prophetic, the name here in God's providence that the name itself, Chilion, to come to an end, because Elimelech's line with the death of Chilion and Mahlon is about to come to an end. So the names themselves give this sense of the difficulty she has encountered. She only has two children. That's not good in that day. You'd have a number of sons, a number of daughters so that they could help you do all the work that needed to be done just to maintain a living.

So she encountered profound difficulties. She not only was born in dark days, the days in which she lived, the difficulties she encountered were profound. She would again like to say, "Lord, I would rather have other circumstances. I don't want to live in a time of famine. I don't want to have the difficulty of having children." She said, "I only had two and they are both not thriving and strong." But the Lord's governing providence has a plan. We don't see it but we're going to see it as we go along but put yourself in Naomi's circumstances, it would have been very easy for her to grumble and complain. So the author continues to lead us into her experience.

Now we come to the third point: the decision they made. After the first two clauses, "Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land." The next sentence, "And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab." The text really reads better, "he, his wife and his two sons. He and his wife and his two sons." I said the decision they made. I've been making the focus Naomi because I think she is the focus, but here the emphasis falls a little more on Elimelech because we are told first that, "the certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab. He and his wife and his two sons." The emphasis falls upon Elimelech for making the decision, and it's interesting that even comes way before the names. Before he tells us who makes the decision, he tells us, "a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons." The author, I mentioned last time there is such artistic beauty to the book of Ruth and one of the things that is happening here is he is, as he weaves the story together under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and recounts the details that God wants him to recount to us with the words that the Lord is inspiring him to use, there is some beautiful irony, an artistry that is like John's Gospel. We saw the artistry of the Apostle John and how he weaves together themes that are very elegant, light and darkness throughout his book, we saw.

We see the same thing here because he tells it in such a way. He doesn't first say, "Elimelech went, a man named Elimelech," he just wants us to see, "a man of Bethlehem in Judah." Partly, as I said earlier, to remind us of the judges and those last five chapters but also the early reader would have heard something different than you and I hear because the name "Bethlehem," the town Bethlehem, the name itself meant something. You know, Atlanta, what does Atlanta mean? I don't know. It's close to the Atlantic? I never thought about it. It's Atlanta, right? But we have names that mean something. New Haven, you know, it's a haven, it's the new one. New York, it's a York and it's the new one. We don't do very well with that, do we, but they did better with it. Beth lechem is actually written in two words in the Hebrew. It's not one word in Hebrew, it's two separate words. Beth lechem, house of bread. That's what it means. House of bread.

So he says, "And a certain man of the house of bread in Judah, there is famine in the land and a certain man of the house of bread in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab." He wants us to feel the weight of the movement more than the person at first. You see, he doesn't tell us about Elimelech, he says, "Listen, there was a man, a certain man from the house of bread and he went to sojourn in a time of famine into the land of Moab." And the reader hearing that finds that appalling. "Wait a minute, something is seriously wrong with this picture. A man from the house of bread goes to sojourn in the land of Moab." Now, I said this is the decision they made. She goes along with him and there is no sense of protest. We are not told of anything, anyway. They are facing apparent starvation and so they make a decision to leave Canaan, to leave the land of Israel, to leave the land of their inheritance, to leave the house of bread, Beth lechem, and to go outside of it to the land of Moab.

Now, at first the decision to leave Canaan is itself contemptible. It is sinful. Now, I mentioned last time that, remember I said Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, there were situations in their lives where God used famine. They went out of the land of Canaan and God still did something good in their life, right? But that was before the Lord had given them their official inheritance. They were told that Canaan was going to belong to them but they lived as strangers and aliens in the land. After the exodus, God takes his people and he plants them in the land of Canaan. It is their inheritance. Elimelech is leaving his inheritance to go out and find sustenance. Now, when you look at the Old Testament as it unfolds after Abraham, and in fact I would say even Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in those three instances, all three of them, there is sin going on in pretty significant ways that God works in spite of which is going to happen here. The sin of man makes a backdrop, a black backdrop for the diamond of God's glorious work.

But the reader would be hit with that. The Israelite who first received these words, "A certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab? What? They left the Promise Land? They left the land that Moses was told to tell the people was a land, what? Flowing with milk and honey?" You say, "Well, that was no food there." Yeah, that's right and it must have been a bad famine because Beth lechem, the house of bread, basically the granary, one of the granaries of Israel, if it's bad there, it must be bad everywhere. If they were reading their Bible, the choice they made, the decision that they made was to not listen to Scripture but to follow their own hearts. They are actually,

Elimelech is doing exactly what the judges, the period of judges, he's doing what seems right in his own eyes. God's word is real clear about what to do in this time. He has planted them in the land, that's their inheritance, to leave the land is to commit an act of betrayal to the King and his name says, "my God is King." Isn't that amazingly ironic? My God is King and yet he leaves the kingdom, the realm of the kingdom, and goes outside.

When you look back, Deuteronomy 28:1-6, 15-19, Deuteronomy 28:1-6, 15-19, 23-25, basically what the Lord says is, after he plants them in the land, Deuteronomy is the sermons that Moses preached on the plains of Moab as they were getting ready to cross over into the Promise Land, and he tells them in 27 and 28, "Basically choose which way you're going to go," and he puts before them blessing and curses. And in chapter 28, he basically says in the first six verses, "If you are faithful to me, then I'm going to bless you, the land is going to be fruitful, your womb is going to be fruitful, you're going to be fruitful with children and you're going to have all that you need. I'm going to bless you if you keep my commandments and you seek me." But then he turns the corner in verses 15 to 19 and says, "But if you don't listen to my commandments," and he reverses all of that, "your womb is not going to be blessed, the ground is not going to be blessed. I am going to make the heavens as bronze and the earth as iron. That's what's going to happen if you don't follow me." Now, that's also repeated in Leviticus 26.

So what should Elimelech have done? What should Naomi have done? Well, Deuteronomy 30 tells them after the blessings and curses are laid out in 27 to 29, he says in chapter 30, "If you find yourself under my curse, what should you do? Repent. Return to me with all of your heart and then I will bless you." So the choice they had, the decision they had was to leave Canaan, the place of God's presence, I mean, the only place in the world where you could meet with God at that time in history. This was at that moment in redemptive history, the only place that you could truly meet God was where the tabernacle was and so you could think of it, where the tabernacle was was like the epicenter and then out from that, concentric circles, the tribes of Israel. That's it and that's the boundary, and to go out of that is to go away from God.

So it's surprising that they would leave the house of bread in Judah to go outside but then to add insult to injury, they go to the land of Moab. This, for the Israelite, was profoundly shocking and, in fact, you see how this is emphasized, the land of Moab. It's a phrase that occurs four times in the first six verses. Look with me at it. Verse 1, "he went to sojourn in the land of Moab." Verse 2, the end of verse 2, "now they entered the land of Moab and remained there." Verse 6, "then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab for she had heard in the land of Moab." Do you see that repetition? "That the LORD had visited his people and given them food." The author is going out of his way to emphasize, "Look where they are. They are in the land of Moab."

Now, there are five reasons, at least, that this was contemptible. First of all, Moab is the son of the incestuous relationship of Lot and his daughter. After the destruction of Sodom, remember Lot and his two daughters escaped, the wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. The daughters get their dad drunk, have relations with him and

conceive sons and those two sons are two peoples, the Moabites and the Ammonites. Moab actually means "from father." She named her son "from father." So that association, why would you go to that kind of place that is rooted in immorality?

Then you have Numbers 21 to 25 which recount two terrible moments in the history of Israel related to the people of Moab: Balak and Balaam who basically, Balak asked Balaam to curse the people; and then after that doesn't work because every time Balaam sets out to curse them, God makes him pronounce a blessing on the Israelites, Balaam tells him, "You need to try to seduce them with your daughters." So the Moabite women go over and seduce the sons of Israel into immorality and idolatry. This is the kind of violence that Moab seeks to inflict upon the people of God.

Deuteronomy 23:1-7, they are told that certain people cannot enter the sanctuary of God. Now, this is an Old Testament revelation that, of course, in the light of the Gospel would be the curses like this are erased in Jesus Christ but this is to show us the holiness of God. He tells us in chapter 23 of Deuteronomy that no one born of an incestuous relationship can ever come into the temple. That's Old Testament now. Through Christ it doesn't matter, it's all covered. Jesus became a curse for us so that we are not cursed. Every curse removed in Christ. That's the glory of the Gospel. But to show us the reality and the profound effects of sin, this is revealed to us and it shows us the magnitude of what Jesus experienced for us; to remove those curses he became cursed with all of those curses. We are told there that a person of an incestuous relationship and specifically in Deuteronomy 23, we are told that the Ammonites and the Moabites to the 10th generation cannot come into the temple.

Then beyond that, Judges 3, in the period of the judges, the second judge we're told about is a man named Ehud who delivered the Israelites from the Moabites, an oppression of 18 years under King Eglon. So all of these things resonating, "Moab is not the place to go." Basically what we see here is that Elimelech and Naomi in their suffering, in the difficulty they're facing, in their perplexity, they don't know what to do, they're struggling, what do they do? They make the worst decision possible and the worst decision possible is to turn away and to go to your own resources and turn away from God. Sin is always insanity.

Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way that seems right to a man but the end thereof is the way of death." It seems right. "I've heard there's food in Moab. Let's go there. We'll just go there for a short time. We'll just go there to get some food and we'll come back home." That was probably the intention. In fact, I think you see it in the text if you look carefully at the words the author uses. He says, "a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab." There is a progression that happens in the verses here. "Went to sojourn," the verb means "to visit; to stay a short time as an alien, somebody from the outside." I'm just coming in for a little while. I'm on a green card. Short visa. That's in verse 1, in verse 2 though, "they entered the land of Moab and remained there." Literally they were there. Verse 4, "And they lived there about ten years." The word "lived" in Hebrew means "to inhabit; to dwell." They went from being strangers, to those who were remaining there, overstaying their visa and now being inhabitants of the land.

And then they lived there 10 years. Isn't that the way sin is? We'll just try it for a little while, it's just a one time thing, and yet we become more and more at home walking away from God.

The picture of Psalm 1 is relevant, "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked." Look at the progression here, he doesn't walk in the counsel of the wicked, "nor stand in the way of the ungodly, nor sit in the seat of scoffers." Do you see that? Walking in the counsel of the wicked leads to standing in the way of sinners which leads to sitting in the way of the scoffers, in the seat of the scoffers. That's exactly what's happened to Elimelech and Naomi. They are now dwelling in an ungodly land and then we are going to see that their boys marry Moabite women which, again, though it's not commented on directly, the author expects the reader to put two and two together. Deuteronomy 7 says you can't marry people from other nations who worship other gods. Your children won't be able to enter the tabernacle, we're told, as I mentioned earlier in Deuteronomy 23. So one bad decision leads to another. The decisions they made.

Fourthly, so we talked about the days in which she lived, the difficulties she encountered, the decisions they made, now fourthly, the devastation she experienced. Elimelech dies and I mentioned how Naomi is in the spotlight, look how he even tells us that in verse 3, "Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died." We already know he's Naomi's husband but the author wants us to see Naomi as he dies. And then "she was left with her two sons," not they were left, she was left. They marry and they are married for 10 years before they die and then what are we told? Verse 5, "Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband." Not Ruth was bereft, not Orpah was bereft, Naomi was bereft. Everything has been cut down around her and she's the last one standing. She's the lone remaining one, and the way it's told, the force of it is sudden. We're not told anything about their illness, nothing about their lives there. We are told they go there and they die, and we are told that she is left, in verse 3, and bereft in verse 5, and we sense the despair that comes upon a woman who now has lost her husband and the fruit of her womb and has no future, no hope.

Now, this is teaching us that sin leads to death but sin doesn't always lead to death this way and, in fact, sometimes you find yourself experiencing that and it's not because of sin, because as we know in Scripture, we can't draw $A + B = C$ always in Scripture. That's the sin of Job's friends. "The reason you're suffering, Job, is because you have sinned." In that case, no, it wasn't because Job sinned. Or Jesus' disciples in John 9 when they see the blind man, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus said, "Neither." We can't just draw a conclusion when someone is suffering and say, "Hey, what's your sin?" But we can determine from this because we are told there was sin that led to this.

But even if it's not sin that you experience devastation, what do you do? That's where we come to the fifth point: the decision she faced. The turning point in the book is there in verse 6, "Then she arose with her daughters that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited his people in giving them food." Her decision was to give up, to despair, to realize her failure and just forget it, "The Lord has dealt with me. I have no hope." Or is it to go back and to seek the Lord,

and she determines to return. In fact, the word "return" is a really important word in the book of Ruth. It occurs 12 times in the first chapter. Now, in the NASB, they do a better job of translating it "return." It's the Hebrew word "shub, return." It also means "repent." It's the Hebrew word for repentance. It occurs 12 times in the chapter, nine times the NASB translates it "return." Some other words you'll hear translated, this same Hebrew word translated are "go back; turn back; brought me back."

So that is "turn back." It's a key word in the book. Naomi is turning back from Moab, from going according to her own devices and her own wisdom and she is returning to God. She is repenting. We're going to see that's what Ruth does in the next section. Return, go back. This is essentially the beauty of the book, that no matter how devastating your circumstances, that the God of Israel is a God who is willing for you to return to him. He invites you to come back. In fact, her repentance doesn't start with her even seeing how miserable she is. What did her repentance start with? "She had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited his people in giving them food." In fact, the word "food" there is "bread." Giving them bread, lechem. She heard about the goodness of God and she thinks, "I'm going to go back."

It reminds me of the prodigal son in Luke 15:17, the turning point in his life, remember he is looking at the pigsty and the food there and he is wishing he could fill his own mouth with that food of the pigs and the Bible says, "He came to his senses." And the next thing he says is, "He thought to himself, even my father's servants have more than enough bread. I will then go to my father's house." He thought about his father and the blessing that comes with being with his father and he decided to go and to become like his father's servants, but he remembered that they had even more than enough bread.

For you and me, when we find ourselves in devastating circumstances whether it's through our own sin or through someone else's, what do we need to do? We need to return to God. When life gets dark and difficult, it's not a time to turn away from the Lord, it's not a time as so often we are tempted to do, to numb our pain with sin, to numb our pain with the cares of this world, what do you do when you're hurting? You don't numb your pain, you go to the great Physician. Run to him. Seek him. Remember that he has more than enough bread. And for us, in light of the Gospel, we know that as we saw in John's Gospel, Jesus is the bread of life. So when we are hurting, no matter what we find ourselves in, whether it's our own sin or someone else's, we run back to our Father who has given us more than enough in the bread of life. I am a sinner and we find ourselves saying, "I am a sinner. I'm a great sinner." But we have a Savior who came as a great Savior of sinners. We're to run back to him. He's a God who is merciful and compassionate, abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness. He's faithful to his word. The one who comes to him, he will not turn away.

The decisions that we face in life when times are dark, when times are difficult, what do we need to do? We need to seek the Lord. And when it gets darker and more difficult, what do we need to do then? Seek him harder. We look at our world around us, the immorality, the idolatry, the horrible state even among so many of those that call themselves Christians, what do we need to do? Get discouraged? To despair? Turn on the

TV and forget about it? Numb ourselves to the pain through sin? No, we need to seek Jesus Christ and love him with all our hearts and stay in his word and follow his word and he will make us bloom in the desert.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we thank you for your faithfulness. We thank you for the blood of Jesus Christ which has proved forever your desire to save, your willingness to forgive sinners like us. We pray, Father, that you would help each one of us to determine even now that we will, as we find ourselves in moments where we are tempted to despair, that we will run to you and realize that even in those circumstances, you are orchestrating to show us your glory, to show us your goodness, to show us the beauty and treasure that is Jesus Christ. We pray this in his name. Amen.