

**The Book of Ruth**  
**The Far Country**  
**Ruth 1:1-5**  
**March 22, 2015, PM**  
*Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher*  
*Countryside Bible Church*

Well I do invite you to take your Bibles and turn with me tonight to the Book of Ruth. The Book of Ruth. I have enjoyed over the last few months studying this book for myself; not in the depth that I hope to as we walk through this, but it's been a great journey already for my own soul, and I hope it will be for yours as we begin tonight.

The Book of Ruth has been called the perfect story. Alexander Schröder wrote, "No poet in the world has written a more beautiful short story." Daniel Block described it as "One of the most delightful literary compositions of the ancient world." Goethe described Ruth as "The loveliest complete work on a small scale." It is truly remarkable. It's remarkable to find a story that is 3,000 years old that still meets the standard for a good story today.

In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Bible of the first-century) and in our modern translations, the Book of Ruth follows Judges, because it is so closely attached in its theme and its events to the period of the judges. But in the Hebrew versions, it is placed, typically, at the end of the Old Testament with the five books that were read at the feast times. Ruth was and is read at the Feast of Weeks, or as we sometimes call it, Pentecost (celebrating the grain harvest), because most of the story in this little book occurs during that season.

I want to begin with just giving you some general introduction to the book. And first of all, just in terms of the events described pretty clearly according to chapter 1, verse 1, the events occurred during the days of the judges. That's a period, by the way, that began with the death of Joshua in 1390 BC, and it ended with the coronation of Saul as king, the first king in Israel, in 1051 BC. So it was period of roughly 340 years. But, without question, it was the darkest period of Israel's history. We'll talk more about why that's true later, but it was during this period of time that the story of Ruth unfolds.

Now although the events recorded here occurred during the time of the judges, the time of the writing has to be later than the events themselves. Quite a bit later for a couple of reasons. First of all, the writer finds himself having to explain the social customs that were once in place but no longer are, as in chapter 3, verse 7, and in other places as well. And so there is an explanation required. David was already known and clearly famous in Israel. He's mentioned in the end in the genealogies as obviously an important personage. And so, at the same, time there's no mention of Solomon. And typically, if Solomon was already alive—his kingship, his monarchy,

was the high point of the monarchy and so he's usually mentioned. And since he's not mentioned, it's likely that this little book was written during David's reign as king sometime around 1000 B.C. Its events happened more than 100 years before that.

Who's the author of this little book? Well, the Talmud, the Jewish Talmud identifies the author as Samuel. But that is simply a guess and conjecture. That's not a bad guess. It's possible that Samuel wrote this little book after he anointed David as king in 1 Samuel 16 and before Samuel's death, obviously, but we can't be sure. The truth is, everything is a conjecture; the author is simply unknown.

Now that brings us to the key issue, and that is, what is the purpose of this little book? Surprisingly, there is much disagreement on this issue. Maybe you've struggled with that as you've read it. You know, don't you love the books in the Bible where the writer tells you why he's writing it? You know, John ends his Gospel by saying there are many things Jesus did, but these are written so that you might know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life in His name. You're never left wondering why John wrote. Ruth, on the other hand, doesn't mention any sort of purpose. I think the reason there is such disagreement on the issue of the purpose of Ruth is that the author didn't have a single purpose, but rather a number of purposes in mind at different levels. Not all of the purposes are equally important, but nevertheless, I think there were a number of purposes involved. What I'm going to do is just sort of give you a catalog of them, and then we will see them unfold as we work our way through this book. So here are the purposes of Ruth as I see it, and I think we'll see it as we walk through the text.

First of all, Ruth provides a personal portrait of the cycle of sin and deliverance that occurred during the period of the judges. You remember the cycle (as we've seen in Judges, as the other men have taught) was one of disobedience of God by the people, followed by God's judgment, followed by the repentance of the people, and then God raised up a deliverer, He brought deliverance to His people. That cycle, that national cycle is repeated again and again and again. But here, it's recorded for us, that same cycle, in the life of just one family.

A second purpose is that Ruth illustrates that, while the times of the judges were dark indeed, there was still a remnant that God had redeemed and would redeem and who were righteous before Him. We see this in Naomi. Frankly, there's a question and I'll deal with this when we get there; whether Naomi was already a true believer in the true God of Israel before she returns to Israel or before all of the bad things in Moab happened, or whether she comes to genuine faith after that. But regardless, we see it in Naomi. We see it in Ruth after her conversion. And we see it in Boaz from the very first time we meet him. These are the remnant that God, in dark times, redeemed to Himself.

Thirdly, Ruth provides an example for us to follow, to imitate. In Ruth 3:11, Ruth is described as the virtuous woman, a woman of virtue, “a woman of excellence.” The same word that’s used in Proverbs 31. There are things about Ruth that are worthy of imitation. Same thing is true of Boaz. In Ruth 2:1, Boaz is described using the same Hebrew word: a man of excellence, a man of virtue, a man of worth. Although learning from and copying their example is not the main point of the Book of Ruth, it is, as with all of the Old Testament, a minor point of the Book of Ruth.

You know, let me just stop here a moment and say that today there is a trend in biblical interpretation, particularly when it come to the Old Testament, to say that learning from the examples, following and imitating the examples of people in Scripture, is missing the point. It’s making them the hero; it’s moralizing the Bible; it’s missing the story of redemption. I’m willing to agree that there are many who mishandle the stories of the Old Testament (or the New Testament, for that matter) and make people the hero rather than God. That’s wrong. That should never happen. I agree that many miss the main point of the story. But their abuse doesn’t justify the current overreaction. I’m always reminded of 1 Corinthians 10:6. After telling a story from the Old Testament, says this, “Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved.” We can learn and follow their examples—both what they did positively that we ought to imitate, and what they did negatively that we ought to avoid. And that’s true in this story as well.

There’s a fourth purpose that we’ll see as it unfolds, and that is, Ruth is a picture of redemption. In this book we are introduced to an Old Testament concept called the “kinsman redeemer.” The Hebrew word for that occurs in one of its forms 23 different times in this brief book. In this way, and we will note as we get there, that Boaz is a type of Christ.

A fifth purpose is, Ruth demonstrates that, even in the Old Testament, women are coheirs with men of God’s saving grace. You know that wonderful verse in 1 Peter chapter 3 that speaks of our wives, men, as being our coheirs, our fellow heirs of the grace of life? That wasn’t just a New Testament concept. We learn from the Book of Ruth that is an Old Testament concept as well.

Number six. We will see that Ruth shows that God’s plan of redemption includes more than the Jews. It even includes Gentiles when they repent and believe in Yahweh. In fact, look at Ruth 2:12; I think, in some ways, this verse may be the key verse of the entire book. Ruth 2:12. Here you have Boaz talking to Ruth. And he says this: “May Yahweh reward your work, and your wages be full from Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.” The story of Ruth is a story of grace and redemption—even for pagan Gentiles. In fact, you can see this point brought out in Matthew’s genealogy of Christ. Because in his genealogy in Matthew 1, Ruth joins Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba as the only women mentioned. You

know what makes that list remarkable? First of all that there were women included at all. But secondly, that all four of those women are non-Israelites: two were Canaanites, one was likely a Hittite, like her husband, and Ruth was a Moabite. Ruth shows us that God's redemptive plan always included the nations. She's the most unlikely person to find herself in the line of the Messiah. Eugene Merrill writes, "Ruth exemplifies the principle of the sovereign grace of God, who not only is able to use the foreign to accomplish His eternal purposes, but even seems to delight in doing so. No one illustrates this better than Ruth."

Number seven. Ruth puts on display the amazing work of God's providence. I think this is one of the major themes of the Book of Ruth. We see worked out in the life of a family, both negatively as God brings the weight of His punishing hand to bear, and positively as He brings blessing, you see God's amazing providence. As Daniel Block points out,

You see it in natural events like the famine. You see God's providence in seemingly chance events like Ruth landing in Boaz' field. You see it in daring plans like the one Naomi constructs in chapter 3. And you even see God's providence, amazingly, in legal processes in chapter 4. This is our God working out His plans.

Leon Morris writes, "The implication throughout this book is that God is watching over His people, and He brings to pass what is good. The book is a book about God. He rules over all and brings blessing to those who trust Him." Hals writes, "With virtually his every word, the author is endeavoring to present the providence of God." With almost every word. John MacArthur writes, "Ruth describes God's sovereign and providential care of seemingly unimportant people at apparently insignificant times which later proved to be monumentally crucial to accomplishing God's will." Providence.

Just two more.

Ruth serves as an apologetic of David's right to be king. In Ruth 4:18-22, David's ancestry is traced back to Judah through Perez. Why is that even important? Because Jacob, when he was on his death bed, prophesied under the Lord's instruction that the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah. This is what he said in Genesis 49:10: "The scepter [the right to rule] shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes (literally, until the one whose right it is comes), and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." The Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah. And so this little book gives us the lineage of David. It's interesting, in 1 Samuel, there's no genealogy for David; we simply meet him. Ruth gives us the defense for why David is fit to be king.

And then finally, number nine. Ruth ultimately points to Messiah, David's greater son, our Lord

Jesus Christ. You understand, I hope, that it is Jesus, it is the Messiah who is the real hero of the tribe of Judah; it's not Boaz, and it's not even David. The story of Ruth is ultimately Messianic. And that's illustrated by the fact that the only other mention of Ruth in, the only mention of Ruth in the New Testament, is her name listed in the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

So those are the purposes for the Book of Ruth. And again, we'll see them unfold. And we'll see the key ones stand out as we work our way through, but I wanted to give you the big picture of where we're headed.

Now, one other thing to do before we leave the general introduction, and that is just to give you the time frame of the events of Ruth. It's just over 10 years. Chapter 1, verses 1 to 18, is 10 years in Moab. Chapter 1, verse 19, through chapter 2, verse 22, is the barley harvest. That's from mid-April to mid-June; one barely harvest. And then in chapter 3, verses 1 to 18, you just have one day in Bethlehem and one night at the threshing floor. And then in chapter 4, you have about one year. It includes the day of the legal hearing when he redeems Ruth and the property; their marriage; the birth of their son, Obed, a little over nine months later. So, a little over 10 years.

Tonight, I want us to begin with just the first five verses of this little book. Let me read it for you. 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. 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. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. 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. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.

These verses describe for us the sinful path of disobedience that takes a person away from God, and the tragic circumstances that often lie at the end of that path. Elimelech and his family violate the covenant that they had made as part of the nation of Israel with God. They pursue a path of disobedience. And, as a result of that, they experience the promised consequences of their choices. And that becomes the platform for the grace of God. Let's look at it together.

First of all, in these verses we see the desperate circumstances of the nation. In verse 1, "Now it came about in the days when the judges governed." Now, those words provide us with three

important pieces of information. First of all, they tell us when the book was written. The way it's worded implies that the time of the judges had already passed. We're now in the monarchy is clearly implied by that expression.

Secondly, informs us of the time frame of the book's events. Boaz and Ruth, as we'll learn, were the great grandparents of David. I won't take you through all the math, but let me give you the short version. Since David was 30 when he became king in 1011 BC, we know he was born in 1041. He was the youngest of eight sons, so his father, Jesse, was probably born about 40 years earlier to Obed, the son of Ruth. Now when you complete all the math, then it's reasonable that this story unfolded in early 1100s BC. So it likely occurred during the judgeship of either Gideon, which many commentators believe, or possibly of Jair. That's the time frame of the book's events.

Thirdly, this verse gives to us, the first line informs us of the zeitgeist, the spirit of the age in which these events take place. Because it's the time of the judges, we know certain things are true. We know politically, it was a time of great confusion. There was no central government in Israel. Again and again in the Book of Judges we read, "There was no king in Israel." There was no centralized government; instead, there were tribal governments across the land. And, therefore, every man did that which was right in his own eyes. Religiously, it was a time of idolatry, as becomes very clear in the Book of Judges. And morally, it is equally clear that it was a time of great corruption and immorality. Those are the times. That's the spirit of the age in which this story unfolds.

Now notice verse 1 goes on to say, "Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land." "In the land" here implies (in the Hebrew text, in the way this expression is used) that this wasn't a localized famine just in the area of Bethlehem or even in the tribal lands of Judah; rather, this famine covered much of Canaan. Now the question is, why was there a famine? Why was there a famine in the land? Although not all famines were or are judgment from God, in the Old Testament, and especially in the time of the judges, God frequently expressed His judgment on the sins of the people, Israel, in these ways.

Go back to Leviticus 26. Leviticus 26. When God gave the Law and the people of Israel put themselves under covenant with God, this is what God said to them. Leviticus 26:3:

If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, then I shall give you rains in their season, so that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit.

There's the positive side. But notice verse 19. Go back to verse 14.

But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant, [This is what I'll do. And one of them in verse 19 is] I will break down your pride of power; I will also make your sky like iron and your earth like bronze.

God says, if you obey Me, if you keep the covenant you've made with Me, then I will bring blessing on your land. There will be rain. If you instead rebel against Me and break the covenant I've made with you, then, instead, you will experience drought.

Look at Deuteronomy chapter 28. Same point is made here by God. Deuteronomy 28, and notice verse 23. Go back to verse 15: "But 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, [then] all these curses will come upon you and overtake you." And there's a series of curses. And notice 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.

This was God's promise to the nation. That is the theological context in which we should read Ruth 1:1: "Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land." By the way, we can see this, too, from verse 6, because in verse 6, Naomi hears "that the Lord had visited His people in giving them food." The implication is that He is the one who had withheld the rain and, therefore, withheld the food, and then He removed the famine just as He had caused it. So because of Israel's rebellion and idolatry, God brought not only the man-made disaster of foreign armies invading and oppressing them as we see in the Book of Judges, but He brought natural disasters like the disaster of famine as well. The rains that were so important for the survival of Israel had not come, apparently, for several years. So our story then begins in the time of the judges when the people had sinned against God and were experiencing His heavy hand of judgment for their sin. In this case, in the form of famine. Those were the desperate circumstances of the nation.

The book next introduces us to the disastrous choice of one family. The disastrous choice of one family. Verse 1 goes on to say, "And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah." Bethlehem, as you probably know, is just about six miles south of Jerusalem at over 2,300 feet above sea level. The name simply means "house of bread," reflecting how fertile that area typically is. Of course, it's best known for being the birthplace of David, and even more so of his greater son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's amazing how central this little town Bethlehem was in the period of the judges. Judges 1 to 16, as we're learning, covers a survey of the judges in Israel, but Judges 17 to 21 and the Book of Ruth tell us about the spirit of the times. They form together what's been called the Bethlehem Trilogy. There are three stories (at the end of Judges, two of them, and then the Book of Ruth) about the spirit of the times of the judges in which the town of Bethlehem figures prominently. It's pretty remarkable. Let me just remind you of them.

First of all in Judges 17 and 18, there's the story of Micah and the Danites. It's a story of religious idolatry and spiritual apostasy. At the center of the story is a young priest, young Levite, who becomes an apostate, and hires himself out to the highest bidder, and ends up, actually with the tribe of Dan in the north of Israel, establishing an alternate place of idolatrous worship that would remain in place for more than 600 years. There are two interesting facts about that young, apostate priest. One of them is (in Judges 18:30), we learn his name was Jonathan, and according to a number of ancient manuscripts, he was the grandson of Moses. The other thing we learn in Judges 17:7, is he was from the town of Bethlehem.

The second part of the Bethlehem Trilogy is Judges 19 to 21. This is the story, the sordid story of the Levite's concubine and the resulting civil war that occurred. The gang rape and murder of the Levite's concubine in the city of Gibeah in Benjamin shows just how bad the immorality of the nation had actually become. It was very much like the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis. What we learn in Judges 19:1-2, that Bethlehem was the home of the Levite's concubine, and much of that story unfolds there in the town of Bethlehem.

The third part of the Bethlehem Trilogy is this: the story of Ruth. And, of course, eventually, we will find a far more encouraging picture of Bethlehem in the period of the judges. But it's fascinating that the writers of Scripture chose, in the inspiration of the Spirit, to show us the spirit of the times by tying these stories to Bethlehem.

Verse 1 says, "And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons." You know, there's a great irony here in that a family who lived in Bethlehem, "the house of bread," doesn't have enough bread to eat. The Hebrew word translated "sojourn" specifically refers, not to permanent residency, but rather, to being a resident alien in another country. So they weren't moving permanently as they saw it. They were simply going to relocate for a time. They were going to become, for a time, resident aliens. Elimelech, rather than choosing to humble himself in repentance and to trust God to restore the rain and the crops that the people's sin had brought, decides to uproot his family from the land God had given him and his ancestors and from his neighbors and his extended family, and amazingly, he decides to move to Moab.

Now to interpret this move to Moab properly, you have to put it into the history of Moab. Moab

figures prominently in the Scripture, but not in a good way. It began, you remember, out of the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter in Genesis 19. The Moabites were the community that refused to allow the Israelites to pass through their territory when they returned from Egypt, and that becomes a big part of their story through the rest of the Old Testament. In Numbers 25, women from Moab seduced the Israelites into sin and invited God's judgment. Deuteronomy tells us, in Deuteronomy 23:3-6, that the Law actually excluded Moabites from the assembly of Israel. In fact, Deuteronomy 23:6 says this: "You shall never seek their peace or their prosperity all your days." That was God's Law of His people toward the Moabites because of how they had treated His people on the way out of Egypt. And just within a short time before this, during the period of the judges, Eglon, king of Moab, had oppressed the Israelites, as is recorded in Judges chapter 3. So the choice of Moab was a shocking choice for any orthodox, Jewish mind. But this is where Elimelech went. In fact, the story is told in such a way as to leave us thinking that Elimelech and his family were likely the only Jews from Israel that went to Moab during this famine. But that's where he decided to go.

Let me show you where it is. First of all, you know that Bethlehem is in the region of Judah, just to the east of Dead Sea, just to the south of Jerusalem. Moab, the region of Moab was to the east of the Dead Sea. Bethlehem's to the west. Moab's to the east of the Dead Sea and toward the south side. It's on a major plateau. In fact, this is what it looks like looking at Moab. It is a huge plateau, but on the top of that plateau there are, in fact, great farmlands. This is likely where Elimelech relocated his family. The expression the writer uses in verse 1 is literally "the fields of Moab." Apparently, he moved his family to the fertile farmlands on the top of the 25-mile-long plateau on the eastern side of the Dead Sea.

Now, what are to think about this move? Was it sinful for him to leave Israel and settle in Moab during the time of famine? Let me say that it's not necessarily sinful for a believer in Old Testament Israel to decide to leave his homeland because of famine. It happens, for example, in Genesis 47:4. Jacob and his family relocate to Egypt because of the severe famine in the land of Canaan. But there are clues in the context here that lead us to believe that Elimelech's decision was, in fact, a sinful one, as we will see. As Alfred Edersheim, the great Jewish commentator, writes, "We have only to mark the progress of the story to read the judgment of God."

We're just told in verse 1, a certain man with his wife and two sons. In verse 2, we're introduced to this man and his family. "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." The husband, Elimelech. Elimelech means in Hebrew "God is king" or "my God is king." This tells us likely that Elimelech's parents, even in that dark period, were devout worshipers of Yahweh, Israel's God. And if that was true, as it probably was, then undoubtedly, as all godly parents do, they longed for their son to be devoted to Yahweh, and so they named him with a name that attached him to the God of Israel. "God is king" or "my God is king." His

wife's name was Naomi, which means "pleasant" or "delightful." And the couple had two sons, whose names rhyme in Hebrew. If you kind of rhymed your children's names, either at the beginning or the end, then you're following in a long tradition, because this is what Naomi and Elimelech did. The name of the older son was Mahlon, which probably means "sick." The name of the younger son was Chilion, which means "frail" or "pining." Now, it's hard to know whether those are descriptions of the health of the boys, or of their mom or dad when they were born. But regardless, you have two boys, one sick, and the other's frail.

Verse 2 adds that they were "Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah." Bethlehem, obviously the city where they were from. And he says "in Judah" to make sure that it's clear that he's not talking about the Bethlehem in Zebulun, a different tribe, a different Bethlehem. But he's not just saying this. He's already told us that Elimelech was from Bethlehem in Judah in verse 1, so he's adding here in verse 2 more than a GPS location. Early in its history, those who lived in Bethlehem were referred to as "Ephrathites." So this expression they were "Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah" means that this family was one of the old, established families in that community. This family hadn't recently moved to that area, but they had been part of the original, their families had been part of the original, Jewish settlers. They were Bethlehem blue bloods, part of the wealthy aristocracy. We can see this, by the way, as we go through the book in different ways. We can see it from the interests of the entire city when Naomi returns (we'll see later in this first chapter). You can see it from the prominence of their relative, their close relative, Boaz. And you can see it from the fact that in chapter 4, verse 3, Elimelech had owned a large piece of property there in the area. So this was a prominent, Bethlehem family. They were part of the aristocracy. And they were a family, Elimelech was, part of a family with a rich spiritual heritage of devotion to God.

But Elimelech doesn't live up to his name. He decides he's had enough of life in Israel. He wants the prosperity that he can't enjoy in an agricultural society where there's drought. And so he picks up his family, and he leaves the town. He leaves Israel, and he moves, of all places, to Moab. They plan to live there as resident aliens until the conditions in Bethlehem improved. Verse 2 goes on to say, "Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there." I like the way Daniel Block, in his excellent commentary, describes it. He says, "Instead of recognizing the famine to be punishment for the nation's sin and repenting of their spiritual infidelity, they left their people and their land for the unclean land of Moab. Elimelech designed his own solution." That's exactly what's going on, and he's taking his family with him. The decision that Elimelech and this family made, in many ways, parallels that of the prodigal son in the parable of Luke 15. They are, in a very real sense at this point, a prodigal family. They're only moving 50 miles away, but they are certainly moving to the far country.

So in the middle of the desperate circumstances of the nation, one family made an absolutely disastrous choice, and a result they came to experience the divine consequences of rebellion.

The divine consequences of rebellion. Verse 3, “Then Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left with her two sons.” The plan that had seemed like such a good one when they left Bethlehem unfolds now in unthinkable tragedy. Elimelech died and left Naomi a widow in a far land. The Hebrew word “left” here is a word that means “to be left over” or “to remain.” And interestingly, this word often refers to bereavement over the death of someone, and it is used of those who have survived the judgment of God. Moreover, for an Israelite to be buried in an unclean land was the worst of punishments. Amos put it this way in Amos 7:17. When God wants to speak judgment onto His people, “Therefore thus says Yahweh, ‘Your wife will become a harlot in the city, your sons and your daughters will fall by the sword, your land will be parceled up by a measuring line and you yourself will die upon unclean soil.’” This is an act of God’s judgment. So Naomi was left grieving her husband, but at least she still had her two unmarried sons.

Now based on the age at which most Jewish boys married in those days (usually by their early 20s), these boys were likely only in their late teens or early twenties when their father died. That means that Elimelech died young, probably around 40 years of age.

Now, at this point Naomi has her own choice to make. We’re not told in the story whether she merely went along with her husband’s plan to move to Moab or if she was in full agreement with it. Or frankly, we don’t know but what she was the driving force behind it. We aren’t told. Regardless, after his death, she is free to take her two sons and return to Bethlehem. But Naomi decides, on her own, to stay. She, too, along with Elimelech, is now clearly in the path of disobedience. And a parent’s disobedience to God can have devastating effects on the spiritual health of the family. Notice verse 4. Her two sons “took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth.” Now here we’re not told who married whom, but according to Ruth 4:10, the oldest son, Mahlon, married Ruth, and Chilion married Orpah.

By the way, let me just say here, there’re so many ways we see the trustworthiness of Scripture, and here’s one of them. The writer’s careful selection of the names as he records them shows his concern for historical accuracy, because the four names of the Hebrew family are all common Hebrew names, and the name of the wives are not.

Now what’s interesting in verse 4 is the way the writer of Ruth announces the marriage of these boys. Because in announcing their marriages, the Hebrew text uses a very unusual expression. It was an expression used primarily in the Old Testament of illegitimate marriages, especially marriages with non-Israelites. Now there are commentators and there are people who believe that it really wasn’t a problem for these boys to marry Moabites. They say, you know, the Old Testament Law did not expressly forbid an Israelite man from marrying a woman just because she was a Moabite. They point out in Deuteronomy 7, the prohibition was clearly only for

Canaanites. However, as I will show you in a moment, clearly, the spirit of that law absolutely forbade these boys from marrying these women. Not because they were Moabite, but because they were idolaters.

Turn to Deuteronomy chapter 7. Deuteronomy 7:1:

When the Lord your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you... [and he lists those nations] 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, [verse 3] you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons.

Now, here's where commentators, some of them, say, well, see, it's just the Canaanites that are included in this. But notice the reason. Verse 4: "For [Because, here's why I don't want you to do this] they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you." God's concern in this prohibition was that the children of Israel, sons or daughters, would marry idolaters, and therefore, people in Israel would become idolaters.

This was exactly true in the case of the girls these boys married. Go back to Ruth and look at chapter 1. In verse 15, Naomi said to Ruth, "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law." Clearly, Orpah was an idolater. You know what that means? In Moab, it meant that she worshiped the false god Chemosh, to whom children were offered alive. They were burned alive in sacrifice to the god Chemosh. Ruth will be converted, as we'll see, in a glorious act of divine grace. But before her conversion, she, too, was an idolater

So when Naomi decided to stay in Moab after the death of Elimelech, she knew if she stayed there, her boys would marry local girls. At this point, as the head of the household, she should have forbidden these marriages. Think about what her failure to do so actually means. Along with her daughters-in-law, her sons, and almost certainly her grandchildren (if they survived being offered to Chemosh) would grow up worshiping the Moabite idol. What Naomi should have done after her husband's death was return with her sons to Bethlehem. But she stayed. And as a result of her disobedience, the disobedience of her sons continued and deepened in marrying idolatrous women. But, in reality, even their marriages were simply another act of divine judgment. God had said this in Deuteronomy 28:32: if you don't keep My laws, "Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people."

Verse 4 says, at the end of the verse, “And they lived there about ten years.” This is probably how long the family was in Moab altogether. Likely Elimelech died shortly after they arrived, early in that 10-year period. Not long after that, the boys married. Then, for the balance of those 10 years, Naomi, her two boys, and their idolatrous wives lived there in Moab. Can you see the downward spiral of disobedience? Verse 1 says they “went to sojourn.” Just a short stay until things got better. Verse 2 says they “remained there.” Verse 4, they married idolatrous wives. And verse 4 goes on to say, “They lived there about ten years.” Oh, and by the way, with no indication of ever moving back.

This is how disobedience always runs its course. Be aware of this in your own life. No one wakes up one morning and says, “I want my children to marry idol worshipers.” Instead, there are a series of small, incremental decisions that move you or move you and your family toward the path of disobedience to God. Farther and farther from God. A series of small, seemingly insignificant, incremental decisions.

Verse 5 says, “Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died.” So “sick” and “pining” died. At this point, they couldn’t have been older than their late twenties or their early thirties. This is incredible tragedy to this family. It’s been devastated. I mean, think of the physical and spiritual tragedies that happened within 10 years that struck this family within that 10-year period. They faced a famine in their own country, a sinful decision to move away from their homeland to a pagan land, the unexpected death of Naomi’s young husband, her boys marry women who worship the false god Chemosh, both sons are married for 10 years without children, and then her two sons, still in the prime of life, die suddenly and unexpectedly. Verse 5 says, “Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.” Naomi is now completely alone, completely alone in a foreign land, in the far country. Here is a young widow in a foreign country with no family except two dependents, her pagan daughters-in-law, and no means of income.

How did Naomi interpret this tragic series of events? We’ll get here, but I want you to see a glimpse of it first. Look down in Ruth 20:1. This is after she returns. She says,

Do not call me Naomi [or pleasant]; call me Mara [which means bitter], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, (notice this) but Yahweh has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since Yahweh has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?

This was her own perspective of this series of tragic events. On a human level, all hope is gone for Naomi. Apparently, from the best we can tell from the story, her parents, by this time, were dead. Remarriage is unlikely in light of the fact that she was beyond child bearing years, as she herself mentions. She had no trade. And frankly, even if she did have a trade, women in that age

didn't work and earn a living in that way. She had no children to support her. Robert Hubbard writes, "Driven from her homeland by famine, cruelly robbed of loved ones by death, a lonely widow sits abandoned in a foreign land." There doesn't appear to be any hope, humanly speaking, on the horizon. But there's hope, because she turns back to her God.

Thank God the story doesn't end here. It will become a story of faith and salvation, a story of repentance and forgiveness, a story of return and restoration. Can I just say to you tonight, I don't know where you find yourself? I don't know if you have taken a path of disobedience that's led you incrementally farther and farther away from God? But let me just tell you that your story doesn't have to end with the downward spiral of disobedience. The true and living God is simply one prayer of repentance away.

Daniel Block writes,

Despite the relative secularity of the book as a whole, it must be interpreted as a glorious account of divine providence. The seeds of a great dynasty that would arise in the future are being sown in this private family of Bethlehem. This family consists of the mostly unlikely candidates for divine service: a widow left without husband or sons, an alien in a similar state, and a bachelor from the humble town of Bethlehem.

You see, ultimately, Ruth is a story of God in His providence using even human sin to accomplish His best and grandest plan, the plan of redemption, because out of this story of disobedience and disaster comes ultimately the Savior of the world. Understand that Jesus Christ, our Lord has the blood of Ruth, a former Moabite worshiper of Chemosh, flowing through His veins. Our God is a redeemer. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we worship and praise You for the greatness of Your mind, Your wisdom, Your plan, how You can bring even out of human sinfulness incredible, incredible joy and redemption. Father, thank You for the beginning of this magnificent story. Lord, I pray for those who may be here tonight who have taken a similar path to Elimelech and find themselves even tonight in the far country. Father, remind them from this story that there's a way home, that You are just one prayer of repentance away. Oh Father, bring them to Yourself. And Lord, for those of us who read this story and are by Your grace attempting to walk in the path of righteousness, Lord, encourage us with who You are. Remind us of Your providence in our lives, how You shape and frame everything to accomplish Your own purpose. No detail too small. And in the end, seemingly insignificant events shaped by You turn out for the good of all who love You and are called according to Your calling. Thank You, Father. We bless You. In Jesus name, Amen.