

Themes Of Ruth (Part Two): God's Providence

Providence

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If you will recall from my last sermon, I opened by explaining what we have come to understand about the significance of the seven week or fifty day count to Pentecost. Today is the sixth of those seven weeks, or day forty-two if you want to put it that way. It is just a little bit over a week until we have the day of Pentecost.

I told you, using the day-for-a-year principle—this lengthy period of days, these fifty days—represents an even lengthier period of years. So the fifty days are like fifty years. And because this period begins with the wavesheaf offering and ends with the waving of the loaves before God on Pentecost, it seems justifiable to believe that the period that we are talking about here symbolizes a Christian's lifetime of conversion. That is what I am basing a lot of this on that I am speaking about in these sermons.

I continued in that sermon by explaining that I think that each year God wants us to remind ourselves and take stock of our conversion. (By the way, John Reiss reminded me that today is my 34th anniversary of my baptism. It happens to fall within this fifty days count to Pentecost every year so I guess it means something special to me.) But I think we need to sit down during this time and think about all the things that have happened to us and to our families since the time we were baptized. Not only what has happened, but especially what we have overcome, how we have grown in God's way.

But especially I think we need to focus on what God has provided, what God has given, what God has done to move our conversion along. When we get in a relationship with God, things are not supposed to be stagnant and He does His best to make sure that it is *not* stagnant and that we move toward the image of His Son. So we need to think about things like how He corrected our path when we were starting to wander away, how He intervened to avoid disaster.

And I do not mean just physical disaster, like you are barreling down the highway and your car is about to rear end somebody who stopped suddenly in front of you. I am talking about the times when somebody has whispered into your ear things that are not right, and you are inclined to go that way. But God suddenly intervenes with some wisdom or whatever it happens to be. Or maybe it is somebody else who whispers in the other ear and says, "Hey, that's not right. I think you should think about this," and you know, that is God being sovereign and providential in your life to move you along the right way.

In addition to that, how many times has He given us just the right answer that we needed at the right time? That often happens to us. Unfortunately, we often ignore those just-at-the-right-time-answers and go our own way. But if we have our antenna out to be sensitive to the things of God, we recognize those things more and more as we grow. There is a lot of things like that that we should be thinking of, but mostly I want to get us to focus on what God has done, not necessarily what we have done.

Obviously, those sorts of things that we have done will come into the thinking about all this because we have to react to what God does and so our actions are going to be in there, too. But we need to think that He is the first cause of all of these things and praise Him for those things, praise Him for all of His actions, and thank Him from the bottom of our heart for being involved in our conversion and making us acceptable to Him as His firstfruits by the time we get to the fulfillment of that wave offering on the day of Pentecost

What I am trying to say is that instead of being focused on ourselves as we tend to do before Passover because we are thinking about whether we are in the faith and that sort of thing and how much we have ourselves grown and overcome, I think our focus after Pentecost, in this period from the wavesheaf offering to the wave loaf offering, should be focused on God predominantly. Because He is the one that is the Captain of our salvation. He is the one who is working even harder than we are to bring us to where we should be.

From there, we launched into the book of Ruth. As I mentioned, it is one of the Megilloth, that is, the festival scrolls. And because the book of Ruth

takes place during the time of the harvest, from the barley harvest around the time of Passover to the wheat harvest which occurs right around Pentecost, this book focuses on this time and has a lot of spiritual ideas and themes in there that we can use in our Christian lives as we come to harvest. And so the book is thematically appropriate for this time of year.

In that sermon last time, we further narrowed our focus to Naomi, and I said maybe she is a forgotten character in the book because we tend to focus a lot on Ruth and Boaz and the redemption that happens there. But Naomi is a major character there, and I think of all of those characters she most represents the Christian in his or her journey of sanctification to the Kingdom of God. She is the one who is "in the church," and she is watching all these things happening, and she has had experiences that have gone badly for her, and she needs to look at things in a different way and see God as He approaches the harvest there.

To get a running start into what I have for today in terms of Naomi, I want to review a little bit of what we saw last time, and then after that we are going to switch over to another theme.

So after setting the scene with the first few verses in Ruth, we went through verses 6-18, which gives us immediate insight into Naomi's character. This is where she has decided to leave Moab and return to Bethlehem, and she is headed away from wherever she was living there, and her two daughters-in-law are clinging to her. They do not want to let her out of their sight and they want to go with her and she convinces them through this passage that they should go back. Well, she convinces Orpah to go back, and she does. But of course, Ruth says that she never wants to leave Naomi, and she wants her people to be Ruth's people—her own people—and she wants to live and die among them. And her God, Naomi's God, will be her God. So this is the whole of that passage there.

Most of what we found in that passage was that Naomi's character is quite good. She is a good woman, but we found that she could be a pessimist at times, especially from the fact that she says that God has become her enemy. She is saying, "Woe is me. All has gone wrong. Nothing has gone right so

this must be proof that God is against me." She even goes so far as to say that He has testified against her and judged her, and it has all gone badly for her.

The other thing is that because of her thinking this way, that God is against her, it shows that she has a very limited view of what God's character is like. She sees him as kind of a demanding God or a God who is out flinging curses from heaven on people who do not toe the line. She also has a limited view of God's purpose for her and for humanity. You can see that all she is thinking about is the way that it is affecting her in her physical life and she does not see any further than that. That He is trying to produce something spiritual with her so that she is ready for harvest, obviously, and she does not seem to see that God has a purpose for all humanity. Certainly for Israel and what He is doing with with the Israelites.

But He has something greater that He is trying to produce, and she is not aware at all that she is part of it, especially that most wonderful, most important thing of producing the line of David and, of course, producing the Messiah 1,000 years later. She does not understand that God had chosen Abraham, and then He had chosen Isaac, and then Jacob, and then Judah and Judah's line through Perez for that particular thing, and came down to the family of Elimelech, and she did not seem to be aware that she was part of that greater purpose of God.

Remember we saw four things in Naomi's character that I wanted to highlight, and if you have got notes, you could just review them right now. 1) we saw that Naomi has a very attractive personality and that personality engenders loyalty in those she meets. You see that in her daughters-in-law, they did not want to leave her. They thought she was wonderful, and they wanted to be with her forever. So we should understand that her name, Naomi, means pleasant. And that is the way it was. She was a pleasant woman, and people wanted to be around her. We can see that over time that Naomi had probably been a pretty good witness of God's way of life. She was the kind of woman who was a joy to be around, a pleasant gem of a woman, and it was the kind of good witness or good example that we all should be. We also saw her first words in verses 8-9.

Ruth 1:8-9 Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house. The Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband."

These words tell us a lot about Naomi. First thing is, she invokes the Lord in a blessing. The first thing out of her mouth was God, and then she blesses these young women asking that He give them two gifts and those are kindness, as it is in the New King James here. It is often translated as lovingkindness or covenant loyalty, the Hebrew word *hesed*. And then she also asked God to bless them with rest. As I mentioned last time, this is the Hebrew word *manuka*, which comes from *nuach*, which is a different kind of rest than Sabbath rest—the kind of rest that is peace and security and well being, the kind of rest God is going to give us in the Millennium and in the Kingdom of God.

So from this we can get two major traits about Naomi. 2) She put others before herself. She practices a kind of agape love and wishes all people this love and rest. 3) The other thing is that God was real to her. She saw Him at work in her life, even though at this point she was seeing Him in a negative light. She was still seeing Him, and she believed that even though He was the God of Israel and these girls were of Moab and of Moab's gods, that He was willing to work with them.

She saw further than a lot of people down through the ages have seen. She is very much different from the Jews of Christ's and Paul's time when they thought He was totally against working with anybody else, essentially. That they had to be a Jew before they could be accepted rather than as it appears here that Naomi was saying that He would accept them outside of being a Jew. So she believed that despite their being outside of the covenant that He would bless them and work with them and give them rest. Give them the thing that we are working for, that rest in the Kingdom of God.

And 4) We see in her argument to them about going back to Moab, is that she was a woman who had pretty good sense. She was rational. She was reasonable. She saw what would work out the best for them, and added to

this is her concern for them. So this brings in her love for them as well. She thought she was giving them a good option going back to Moab, living in their fathers' house again, and getting remarried. That would be the best thing.

And from a physical standpoint, if you do not put God into the equation, it was a reasonable, common sense thing for them to do rather than go into Judah—in a place they did not know, people they did not know, when they might be abused or misused or at least looked down upon because of their being foreigners and strangers—sending them back was the right thing. But God was involved and so Ruth, of course, did not want to do that and stayed with her.

Then we see her shortcomings in these same verses. I will read the last sentence in verse 13.

Ruth 1:13 "No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me."

Now drop to verse 19.

Ruth 1:19-21 Now, the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

This shows her pessimism and her short-sightedness and I think this is where we can tend to see more of ourselves than in maybe the more positive attributes, because we all tend to have glaring weaknesses and problems. It just pops up here in Naomi, and I think we can take a lot from it.

After all her goodness and her kindness to her daughters-in-law, she looks at her own situation and concludes that God is her enemy. She calls him the Almighty, as I mentioned last time, Shaddai, the bountiful one, the one who

is powerful in supplying, and she says right after that, even though she uses that word, that He has dealt bitterly with her. It is almost like she is contradicting herself. That this bountiful one, this one who is powerful in supplying her needs, has actually given her the raw end of the deal and has been bitter against her. And so she changes her name to Mara, which means bitter.

So her attitude, especially in terms of how she thinks about God, has gone from pleasant to bitter, and that is not a good way to be. As I mentioned before, she believes that God has both testified against her and already judged her as guilty and is just waiting to sentence her to some sort of hard labor. That is how she thinks of her life.

We went to a couple scriptures last time. We went to Exodus 5:22 and saw there how Moses, after he had gone to Pharaoh and been rejected, thought that God was afflicting him for some reason. He could not see that there was something else building in God's work with Pharaoh through Moses.

In Numbers 11:11 there is a very similar situation where Moses complains to God about how He has afflicted Moses with these people, the Israelites, because all they were doing were complaining. You know, "How can I deal with these people?" He could not see the greater purpose. And it is hard. I am not saying this as a criticism because it is hard to see what God is doing while you are in the midst of something and so Moses takes his problem before God and complains that God is dealing with him harshly.

I do not know if did we go to the one in I Kings 17. This is Elijah doing the same thing. I will go ahead and go to that one.

I Kings 17:17-20 [This is during the time when he is with the widow there.] Now, it happened after these things that the son of the woman who owned the house became sick. And his sickness was so serious that there was no breath left in him. So she said to Elijah, "What have I to do with you, O man of God? Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to kill my son?" And he said to her, "Give me your son." So he took him out of her arms and carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his own bed. Then he cried out to the Lord and said, "O

Lord my God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge by killing her son?"

In this case, he was not complaining about things that were happening to himself. But he was not seeing the larger picture of what God was doing. He was not even contemplating the fact that this boy, even though he was dead, could be resurrected. He was not seeing God's power, and he was not seeing the purpose for which God had brought him through these particular circumstances. So here we see with Elijah, just like Moses, that it is common for God's servants to misunderstand God's affliction of His people.

We do not see affliction in the same way that God does. And as I mentioned, they have trouble, like we do, seeing God's larger purposes because we tend, as human beings, it is just the way it is, to be focused on ourselves. We tend to be focused on what is right in front of our faces. And we either ignore God or forget about God or are just so busy that we just fail to think about anything else. So because we do not have all the right information we conclude that our circumstances of the moment are an end of God's process of judgment, when in fact the present situation is only a step in a much larger plan of God to bring blessings and progress, or development, to us and to others who are around us.

These major figures, Moses and Elijah, had the same weaknesses as we do. They did not see what God was doing totally. Even though they had pretty good information about what He was intending, they were humans, and that went out of their minds or just the stresses of the situation made them forget and their attitudes changed. So it is with Naomi. She did the same thing. She was thinking only about the death of her husband and her sons and the fact that she was coming back to Bethlehem destitute. And she was not thinking that God could be working something even greater than what she had before.

So when we do this, when we tend to think that God is giving us a sentence or punishment and that is the end and there is nothing further beyond that, this is called *jumping the gun on God*. This is where we prejudge Him about His motives and His designs for us when we need to actually take a step back and think about what God is, and how He has plans within plans within plans that He is working out, and that He has the long term in mind. His goal is to make us His sons and daughters in His Kingdom, and everything else that He

does along the way with us is all designed to get us to that point. None of the things that He does with us are designed to stop us from getting to that point.

We need to learn to look at what God is doing with us—even if it is something that seems like an affliction, a punishment—as something designed to do good to us or for us. We cannot afford to slip into this kind of short-sightedness, believing that our current troubles preclude God from bringing something wonderful out of it. He is all-powerful. He does make lemonade out of lemons, even if we cannot. He can take the worst situation imaginable and turn it to good because He is God. He could make all the right things happen. So we need to have a better understanding of affliction, better than what Naomi had, so that we can maybe be more cooperative with God when some of these bad things happen to us.

I went to Psalm 119 last time, verses 67, 71, and 75. I will just mention them again. But I do want to go to Hebrews 12, because a similar thing was said there in a New Testament situation. This is after Hebrews 11 when we saw all the examples of faith and how these people did wonderful things for God, but it ends saying that these have not gotten their reward yet. They are still asleep and they are waiting for us.

Chapter 12 then opens up with talking about these great cloud of witnesses are around us. They are the ones that have shown us a lot about the way of God. But we see Jesus, and He is the one who is the author and finisher of our faith. We see what He did in enduring the cross and despising the shame, as it says here, and that He is sitting there at the right hand of the Father in heaven and He is working on our sanctification. He is working on our salvation. So the next section talks about how God works with us. He works with us as sons and daughters, as children. I want to read verses 10 and 11. He is talking about our physical parents.

Hebrews 12:10 For they indeed, for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, . . .

Remember, they are carnal individuals. Maybe they were in the church but they still had physical ways of doing things. They still had bad attitudes and the wrong approaches and whatnot. So we have to consider all that. Maybe they did it well, and that is good. But let us go on.

Hebrews 12:10 . . . but He [that is, God] for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness.

That is another one of His goals that is tied in with our being brought into the Kingdom of God. He is doing all of this so that we can be holy as He is holy. That we can have the character image of God, that we could have true eternal life like Him. Those are just different ways of saying very much the same thing.

Hebrews 12:11 Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful [And does it! We know that when something goes wrong, we feel it and we do not want it to be around. We want to get rid of it.], nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

So here we see in this New Testament context how we are supposed to look on discipline or affliction or bad things happening. They do not happen to a Christian by coincidence. God is working these things in order to develop holiness and righteousness in us. He is not doing it to spite us or to punish us or to in any way just make us cry.

He is not that kind of God. He is a *loving* God. He does these things to *help* us and if He has to put us in dire straits in order to teach us something that we really need to learn because we need that as part of the righteousness and the holiness that has got to be in one of His children in the Kingdom of God, then He is going to take us through that valley of the shadow of death, whatever it happens to be. But we can have faith that He is walking beside us and He is going to bring us through to the other side, *improved* by it, *bettered* by it, more *righteous* because of it.

This is what Naomi was lacking. She was looking just at the trial, seeing no joy in it at all, as James would say, "see joy in your trials" because it produces patience. She was not seeing any of that. She was just seeing that she was having a pretty bad go of it and she did not like it and she wanted to be out of it, but she did not see any way to do so because God was against her. She had actually shut all the doors around her so that God could not get in and help her—in her own mind, I am saying, if you understand the

metaphor. God wanted to rush in and help her, but she would not allow Him because she was not changing her attitude.

I think we tend to be this way ourselves many times. This is why I say we can learn more maybe from Naomi's bad qualities than her good ones because we can relate. Something bad happens, and we think, "Oh, no! This is the end of the world. Everything that I've been working for is down the drain." And it is not, because maybe what you have been working for is down the drain because God did not want you to go that way. He wanted you to go another way that was better in terms of your growth toward His Kingdom.

And as we will see as we go on here, even though Naomi saw all her avenues cut off and she never thought she would get to where she needed to be or wanted to be, by the end God turns it around and gives her way more than she would ever have gotten if she had followed her own path. That is the way God works. He always gives more than what we ourselves desire. And when we get to that point, we say, "Yeah, this is far better than what I could have ever gotten on my own." If we are only honest with ourselves.

This is where we ended last time. So here I have gotten half a hour in and we are just a end of the review.

I want to finish from this point on Naomi's character, then move on to an interesting part of Ruth, a theme of Ruth on God's providence. I think this is important to notice, because just as He does not appear to us to solve our problems, meaning He does not come down and manifest Himself and say, "This is the way, walk you in it," He does not appear to Ruth or to Naomi or to Boaz and tell them the way. But when we are reading the story, we can see that He is definitely present but He is working behind the scenes. He is pulling the strings in a way that is invisible to most people. But all the while He is at work to bring His will and His purpose to pass and He helps us in the same way.

He is not going to manifest Himself in your bedroom one night as you are praying and say, "This is the way I want you to go. Do this, do that." If that happens, you know I am wrong. But normally this is not the way He works. Normally, He works through little things that we see if we are looking

carefully, things that are behind the scenes, little words in the ear of somebody who gives you some advice or whatnot, and that moves you along in the way that He wants you to go. The same thing happens there in Ruth. You do not see any epiphany of God in the book of Ruth except through the things that He brings along by these little bits of moving here and there. A little tug here, a little bit there, a little push and a shove here to get the people in the places He wants them to be. And then things happen.

We are going on to Ruth the second chapter at the very end, verses 17-20.

Ruth 2:17-20 [This is Ruth.] She gleaned in the field until evening, and beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. Then she took it up and went into the city, and her mother-in-law [Naomi] saw what she had gleaned. So she brought out and gave to her what she had kept back after she had been satisfied. [This is a bit of barley that Boaz had given to Ruth and she had eaten some of it and saved some for Naomi.] And her mother-in-law said to her, "Where have you gleaned today? And where did you work? Blessed be the one who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz." Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law [Now this is the important part. Her reaction. Naomi's reaction once she heard the story.], "Blessed be he of the Lord, who has not forsaken His kindness to the living and the dead!" And Naomi said to her, "The man is a relation of ours, one of our close relatives."

This is the first thing we see from Naomi, except for a brief mention early in the same chapter after her speech about God having afflicted her. So something has to happen in the meantime and it is Ruth going out to the field of Boaz and Boaz's reaction to her and his blessing of her and then Ruth bringing the story back to Naomi. And once she hears what had gone on that day between Boaz and Ruth, Naomi quickly changes her tune about God and the reason she does is that she is astute enough to have figured out that He is working something out. She sees Him at work at solving her unfortunate situation.

This is all it takes, and this is why I say Naomi is a wonderful character because she has an insight into God that is pretty rare. All it took was a few words of Ruth, and Naomi immediately came to the conclusion that God was doing something great here. God was working, and her bitterness seems to disappear. She does not seem bitter at all in the rest of the book, all of her subsequent things that she says are very positive.

This is Naomi's great strength. She sees God in her life, and she allows His revelation to change her. And it does not take much. She is very humble. She is very malleable, as it were, by God. She is not hardened in any way. She is not stubborn. She is not going to stick to her bitterness. She sees God at work and says, "Hey, He's really wonderful to me." She is the one, it seems, if I could read between the lines, who takes her own attitude to be in the wrong and she changes. She repents, if you want to put it in more spiritual language.

She repents because now she has information that she did not have before, and it makes her understanding and view of God change. He is not actually trying to afflict her. He is not trying to judge her and sentence her to some sort of curse—He is actually helping. It just needed to go through this convoluted, twisty, winding path until it got to Boaz. But it got to Boaz, and she sees, "Ah ha! The wind is changing. Things are getting better. There's hope here." You can see that in the last thing she says to Ruth, "This Boaz is one of our kinsmen. He can help."

She begins to see light at the end of the tunnel, and it changes her disposition. So though she has had trouble reconciling His afflictions on her with His covenant loyalty, with His *hesed*, and despite her bitterness, we can see now she never lost faith. Had she lost faith, she would not have been able to see God working something positive in her life. She was waiting on God even though her attitude was not the best. But she waited. She was patient and God changed the situation. And as soon as God acted, she noticed. It shows you that her mind was fixed on God. Seems like every time she talks, she mentions the Lord. The Lord did this. The Lord did that. The Lord bless you, the Lord, whatever it happens to be so.

She was always thinking about God and when God did something she noticed. So she knows immediately that God is working out a great blessing

on Ruth and on herself and, she says, on Elimelech and Mahlon and Chilion, the dead too. There is good things for everyone. God always works for the good of everyone. That is why we have the word "good." Good comes from God. What is good is godly and He is working out good here not just for the living, but for the dead.

And if you think about the fact that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was in the tomb for three days and three nights and then rose again, what is the good that He was working out for the dead? The resurrection! All the way back then because He was working on the son of Boaz, who would become the father of Jesse, who would become the father of David, and then down the line 1,000 years later, there would be Jesus of Nazareth. But God was actually working for the good of the living and the dead with what He was doing in His interactions with Ruth and Boaz.

Let us go to Ruth 4. This is getting to the end of Naomi's story.

Ruth 4:13-17 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and when he went in to her, the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a close relative; and may his name be famous in Israel! And may he be to you [meaning Obed] a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him." Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom, and she became a nurse to him. Also the neighbor women gave him a name saying, "There is a son born to Naomi!" And they called his name Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

We see here everything works out in the end for Naomi. All that she had lost, she regained. We could say, like Jesus, "pressed down and running over." She got more, like Job, at the end of her trial than she had at the beginning when it started. In Matthew 19:29 Jesus says there that if you have given up homes or father, mother, wife, sister, brother, whatever it is that you have given up for the Kingdom of God, it will be restored to you a hundredfold.

This is what we see in in Naomi's case as well. Her rewards are actually fantastic. It may not seem so in the plain wording of these verses at the end

of Ruth, but there are things there that are just awesome that she has received with the birth of Obed. The Hebrew of verse 14 says it more like this. "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer." That is a little bit different from a near kinsman because the word is *goel*.

The ladies there are probably referring to Boaz. But look at that more long distance or long term. That because of the birth of Obed, she had done her part as it were in ensuring the *true* Redeemer. By all that has happened, now God has blessed her with the next link in the chain to that true Redeemer and because God is who He is and He knows His plan from the beginning and He works everything out into its smallest detail, we know that He is going to bring out that true Redeemer through His sovereign will and all the work that He is going to do.

And there are also other type/anti-type concepts throughout this little section we just read. The child is called a restorer of life. Who in the world is the restorer of life? Another allusion to resurrection there. He is called a sustainer. Our Creator God is our Sustainer. Is that not what is said about Jesus Christ in the first chapter of Hebrews? That He sustains all things now. And finally just another little detail, is that Obed means servant and who is the greatest Servant of all? Who is the suffering servant but Jesus Christ.

There is all kinds of little hints here that what was actually happening in Ruth was fulfilling the prophecy of the Seed who would be born to a woman. We have some of the same imagery here. The Seed born to a woman who would bruise the head of the serpent. We are seeing little bits and pieces of that prophecy be fulfilled here in the book of Ruth. And we see all these little hints that the greater thing is on God's mind. But we see it through this lesser thing, this physical union of Ruth and Boaz, with Naomi's help. So really, some incredible things here.

I think we can see that God is teaching us here through Naomi, that if we remain faithful, that if we keep looking for God's hand at work in our lives, and if we endure to the end like we were commanded to do, that God will ultimately grant us the desires of our heart. Because we see in Naomi that what she really wanted was an heir. She wanted an heir and to be able to

nurse that heir, to be able to be with that heir, and to bring up a son to Elimelech and all that. She got all that and more in Ruth and Boaz, and then Obed.

Now let us focus on this theme of providence in the book of Ruth. Most readers may see it but they do not think about it very much. They kind of tend to miss it, not because it is difficult to see because it is actually right there in our faces, but the other themes of Ruth tend to overshadow the theme of God's providence in Ruth, and I think that is unfortunate because this theme is a major attribute of God. It is one of the biggies, and we should be seeing it about us everywhere. Everywhere we turn we should be seeing God providing something or doing something that is going to move us along toward His Kingdom. That is how sharp our acuity needs to be, or whatever, to what God is doing in our lives. We need to be like Naomi and see Him in everything.

Most of us probably think we know what God's providence is. This is because part of it is the word "provide." Provide sounds very similar to providence. They are related words, and so we usually think of God's providence as providing for His people, providing what we need. Well, it is, and it is not. There is more to God's providence than just the fact that He provides for us. The English word providence comes from the Latin *providere*. It is almost exactly the same. It looks like provider with an extra "e" on the end, and that means, not "to provide" as we think of it, as meaning to supply, but *providere* means "to foresee" "to have foresight." Pro meaning "before" or "fore" and then *videre* is the word for "to see." You know, *vini, vidi, vici*. But the *vidi* part of it is "to see." "I came. I saw"—*vidi*—"and I conquered." So *providere* means "to foresee."

The Greek had a similar word. It was *pronoia*. And that does not mean foresee. It means to "forethink" or the word "forethought," as we would look at it. Foresight and forethought imply a future, an end, a goal, something that you are seeing that is way out there that other people do not see. And within the idea of foreseeing or forethinking something, there is also a definite purpose or a plan for attaining what it is that is foreseen or forethought.

So this foresight is really what providence is. It is God's foresight, God looking from time immemorial forward to an end that He has in mind and

also doing all the things needed to get to that goal that He has. What we think of when we think of providence, normally, we think of it in terms of the preparation and care and supervision that are necessary for securing that goal rather than the foresight that actually makes all that happen.

I will give you a formal definition of providence here. This is from the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. "Divine providence has reference to that preservation, care, and government which God exercises over all things that He has created in order that they may accomplish the ends for which they were created."

What we see here is that, yes, it does include all of those intermediate steps in God's care and supervision of everything along the way. But it also includes both the idea that He saw this from the beginning, and He is going to take it all the way to the end and accomplish what He sets out to do.

Now, if we are thinking about this, we can understand that this providence of God is a huge subject, and it includes all kinds of different theological subjects, topics that we could go on for weeks trying to explain. Things like sovereignty, foreknowledge, predestination, spiritually gifting, free will, good and evil, blessing and cursing, and many others. These are all parts of God's providence, or could come under the major subject heading of God's providence.

So because I am not here for weeks to speak to you about all these things, I am going to concentrate in the book of Ruth on God's subtle interventions to move His purpose along, the little nudges and turning of the head just a little bit to see something that He does with the people in the book of Ruth to make sure that things happen the way He wants them to. So we can begin to think of His providence not in terms of the big things only, but also the little details. Let us go to the book of Ruth, to the very first verse. I think this is a vivid example of what I mean in the way I am speaking of providence here, the subtle interventions to move His purpose along.

Ruth 1:1 Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.

Did you catch it? It is in the very first words of the verse. We have a hint here of God's providence in the book's opening line. The famine. The famine itself was under God's sovereign rule. "There was a famine in the land." This is the inciting incident in the story. This is what gets things moving. There is a famine in the land, the famine most likely brought on by God because He wanted a man named Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and his two sons to move, to react, let us just say. He wanted them to react and they reacted by going to the land of Moab. This was a cause, and the source was God in His sovereignty. Knowing Elimelech's character in the way he reacts, He uses this famine to get him to move from the Promised Land to Moab.

All the subsequent events and decisions begin right here. He takes his family out of his situation there. He almost cuts all roots and ties to everything that has happened there and picks up and leaves to go into the land of Moab. And, of course, by going to the land of Moab, we have all kinds of things that happened there that probably would not have happened if they had stayed in Bethlehem or if they had, they would have had a different result.

But God needed them to get out of Bethlehem and to get to Moab and all this eventually leads to Naomi returning with Ruth and meeting Boaz and having Obed, and then Obed having Jesse, and Jesse having David, and David having sons, and it comes all the way down to Jesus Christ. And we can say that it points back to this famine. It all goes back to this famine that God caused on the land of Israel that got Elimelech moving.

It was subtle. They probably did not think it was all that subtle when they were going through it. They were not able to grow things in their fields and whatnot. But in the vast scheme of everything that goes on it is not a very big thing, but it was big enough to move Elimelech and to have him make this decision.

So in His foresight, in His providence, God then is managing and shaping events to bring about His purpose. We have got to think about this God here. Our God is not the kind of God that theists imagine. Those who think that He assembled the world like a clock and set the time and wound it up and then kind of went off to have a drink on the veranda for a couple million years, leaving the clock to keep time on its own. That is how theists look at things.

That God, "Oh, yeah, He created everything. But he doesn't care. He's not involved. He's off doing something else." This is not our God. This is some imagination of men.

Our God is a God who created all things. Yes, He set laws in motion to handle certain motions and routines and repetitive things and things He wanted to be able to just kind of let go and do. But, like I mentioned Hebrews 1, He still sustains all those things. But once He had done that, He had a goal that He had been working for this whole time and with His mind fixed on that goal, the purpose of having a creation and all those laws and everything, He personally oversees even the tiniest details to make sure that His purpose is accomplished to the level of perfection that He demands. Everything has to go right. It is not something that He can kind of begin and then leave. If He had done that, it would have ever happened because it needed certain little kicks here and pinches there and pushes there and whatever it needed because of human beings and free will and such things like that, to make sure that it got to the point of Jesus Christ, the church, and all the individual little things that occur in our own lives to bring us to His Kingdom.

He is not a God who sits back and just watches. He is a God who is intimately involved and working, and He is especially interested in the details of major steps in His plan of salvation. And what we have in Ruth here was one of those major details. Let us go to verses 3-6 here in Ruth 1. Look a little bit more at some of these things.

Ruth 1:3-6 Then Elimelech [we are in Moab, remember], Naomi's husband, died; and she was left and her two sons. Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other was Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband. Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited His people in giving them bread.

Here we see another series of events that God manages to provoke a reaction. This time it is a reaction in Naomi. God knocks the props out from

under. Everything that had been supporting her is gone. He had done this one-by-one: first her husband dies and then one son and then another, and finally, she has to make a decision about what she is going to do, and she decides to return home. We could also add here that another thing that God had done in bringing them to Moab was that He wanted those sons to marry Moabitesses, women of Moab. He especially wanted Mahlon to marry Ruth.

I could just say that that was an additional provision by God to ensure that His plan succeeded. Because for some reason, we do not know what it is, God really wanted Ruth in Christ's line of descent. There was some reason there that He wanted this Moabite girl in the line. Just like He wanted Tamar. Just like He wanted Bathsheba. Just like He wanted Rahab. Four Gentile women, perhaps. We are not exactly sure about Bathsheba, but she could be another Gentile. But they are all women that are specifically mentioned in the genealogies of Christ. Especially the genealogy there in Matthew the first chapter.

But He wanted her and so He had to get Elimelech to Moab. He had to get Mahlon to marry Ruth. And there are other things too. Like this little bird told Naomi that the famine in Bethlehem was over. Things were what going well there. Notice how it is put there. Naomi "heard that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread." If He could visit them by giving them bread, well, we can pretty much guarantee that He was the one that had intervened to make sure that they did not have bread! So God had provided for them as part of the preservation, care, and government that God exercises to accomplish His purposes.

Let us go down to verses 14-18. This is Naomi and Ruth speaking.

Ruth 1:14-18 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me." When she

saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her. [Stopped trying to persuade her.]

The providential act of God here is a little bit harder to see, but it becomes obvious as we work our way deeper into the book, and that is because we are really here getting an introduction to Ruth. We do not know much about Ruth by this point, and now we get a couple verses of her speech, and we see that this Moabitess is an incredible woman, just by what she says. We see as we go on through the book that Ruth's character is exceptional and she has a willingness, a readiness to follow God's ways, which she has likely learned through Naomi. Naomi tells her what she needs to do, and she immediately does it and says, "I'll do exactly what you want me to do." I do not think this is something that comes naturally. The natural carnal mind does not have this kind of reaction.

What we are seeing here, I believe, is that Ruth had to be prepared for this over the years of her maturity into a young woman. Like I said, surely Naomi had a part to play in what we see here. Because Ruth tried to mimic her mother-in-law in the way she lived her life. I think that is very clear. But just a little bit of thought makes us understand that she had a predisposition toward what we would call godly character. You know how we, before were called, did not have a predisposition for God? Not in the true way at least. And God had to do something to our minds to enable us to believe and then to do—to repent, to grow in character.

Now I think that is what we see in Ruth. Here she was a Gentile, but for some reason, and we know the reason: it would be God in His providence. She was especially prepared for this role. In some way, somehow, God provided for an astoundingly righteous upbringing for Ruth in the midst of a Gentile nation. I do not know if we could call it godliness, but she was at least a person who had been brought up with good, strong, fundamental human character, if I can put it that way, and her Gentile parents were able to do that in preparation, then, for what God would do with her.

This is how He works with us. We can see ourselves in Ruth. God has been looking at the people that He calls for a long time, and He prepares them through His providence for their calling and eventual conversion. And He did the same with Ruth. He has got to have done that. These people, like

Ruth, just do not happen out there where they are so amenable to what God wants them to do. So we see God providing and preparing this woman for the job that she was to do.

Let us go in into chapter 2. There are a couple of providential acts here in the first three verses.

Ruth 2:1-3 There was a relative of Naomi's husband, a man of great wealth of the family of Elimelech. His name was Boaz. So Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Please let me go to the field, and glean heads of grain after him in whose sight I may find favor." And she said to her, "Go my daughter." Then she left, and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers. And she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

I want to go through these fairly quickly. There are several. I have counted four. We just talked about the preparation of Ruth. Now here in these verses we can turn to the preparation of Boaz to be her husband. And here are a few clues about God's providence that I see.

1) He was a kinsman of Elimelech. So obviously he was in the right position to be the redeemer, the *goel* for Naomi. He had been born in the right line and just close enough to be able to do the job that he was given to do.

2) This may seem to be the same thing, but the text specifically goes on to say twice in these three verses that he was of the family of Elimelech. Now let us take that as it appears in Hebrew, though. That he was of the family of "God is king." And it says that twice because Elimelech means "God is king." So Boaz is being pumped up here to us, to the reader, as being someone who was not only of the right heritage or parentage, but that he was a righteous man. That is, not only was he of the godly line, but that he had some kind of righteous character. He believed God was his king. He was of that family. So not only was he of the physical family, he was of the right mind and character that he was properly prepared for the role spiritually as well.

3) That he is a man of great wealth, adding to the idea that he had been blessed by God and also in a more physical way that he had the wherewithal to be a redeemer, to buy the land and to support Ruth and Naomi.

4) His name Boaz means "in him is strength," implying that not only was he born to the right family and that he seems to be a man of good upbringing, let us say, but that he was a man of strong character—in him is strength. Now we have to remember when we are talking about Boaz that he is a type of Christ in this redemption story, so we can assume, overall, that God had prepared him as a fitting type.

In verse 3 we have another providential act and that is God guiding Ruth to the portion of the common field that belonged to Boaz. Remember there it says, "She left and went gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she *happened* to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz." The Hebrew reads something like "and chance chanced that she came to Boaz's field." It is kind of a literary wink, wink, nod, nod. That there was no coincidence here. It was not chance, chancing, it was God *not* taking a chance, not when His plan is on the line, but guiding her feet to the proper field.

Ruth 2:4 Now behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said to the reapers, "The Lord be with you!" And they answered him, "The Lord bless you!"

Immediately were given a sign of Boaz character. First thing out of his mouth is "the Lord."

Ruth 2:5-6 Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose young woman is this?" So the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered and said, "It is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab."

There is at least two small providential acts here as well. It says very plainly that Boaz came from Bethlehem, and it just kind of goes on from there. That this is unusual is signaled by the word "Behold." It is kind of like "Look! Boaz came from Bethlehem." It is like us saying today, "Why here comes Boaz from Bethlehem. He doesn't need to be here. The supervisor could take

care of things." Obviously, when he talks to the supervisor, the overseer, he has got everything under control. But Boaz just so happens to come to the field that day. He was the wealthy landowner. He did not need to be involved in the harvest. He had plenty of people to do that. But on this particular day, he is there.

Second thing is, as we go into the story a little bit more, Boaz immediately notices Ruth. It is like the first thing he saw and enquires about her. For some reason, she attracted his attention right away. Good looking, maybe, good work ethic. She is a foreigner, maybe dressed a little differently from the rest of them. She was a stranger. I do not know what it is that drew his eye, but whatever it was, he immediately thought of her and nothing else it seems for the rest of the day. They are always having some sort of interaction between each other. Whatever it was, God had prepared both Boaz and Ruth for this "chance" meeting so that Boaz wanted to know about her and help her.

I should mention here that from this point on, Boaz takes on the role of provider for Ruth and Naomi, giving them what they need for days and weeks throughout the harvest period. And since he is a type of Christ, that makes a lot of sense. Boaz now has a goal, whether he realizes or not. His goal is to make Ruth his wife, and we see out of the mouth of Naomi in chapter 3, verse 18 that he will not rest until he has concluded the matter. This is a type of God's providence in our behalf as He works to make the church His bride.

Ruth 4:1 Now Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there; and behold [there is that word again], the near kinsman of whom Boaz had spoken came by. So Boaz said, "Come aside, friend, sit down here." So he came aside and sat down.

All these little junctures in the story. We have things happening that are coincidental or chance, slim chance that they would happen so smoothly. But here, when Boaz goes looking for the near kinsman, he just "happens" to be there at the gate. Another little bit of God's providence making things work out swiftly and surely to the finish that He desires. Even the little details God works out.

Let us conclude in the 13th verse here.

Ruth 4:13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and when he went in to her, the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son.

Now, this is among the most important acts of God's providence in the whole story. Here it comes in one of the last verses of the last chapter. We are told dogmatically here that the *Lord* gave Ruth conception. He was the one that did it. This is another instance, in a long line of instances, of God opening the womb of a barren woman. She had no children by Mahlon, but she had one by Boaz. Like Sarah, who had her womb opened. Rebecca, Rachel. Manoah's wife producing Samson, Hannah producing Samuel, and Elizabeth producing John the Baptist. There might be others. Those are the ones that I just quickly jotted down.

God causing conception is always a primary clue of God's providence in moving His plan along toward the ends that He wants them to get to. It is amazing to see how God works to bring about His purpose.

During this count to Pentecost, we need to be recalling and thinking about all the times that God has intervened in our lives and provided for us just what was needed at the time. And I know that He has done this in your life because He is doing it all the time.