

God's Purpose in the Details of Our Lives

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Date: 02 June 2024

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[0 : 00] Life is full of details. Details. Details make all the difference between life and death.

Our lives as a whole are made up of a thousand million details. Our date of birth, our national insurance number, our addresses, these are details which make a big difference. The color of our eyes, the size of our feet, the cut of our hair, these are also little differences, little details that make a big difference. Chance encounters, opportunities taken or missed, random conversations, all these are details which can change our lives for good or for ill. And God is interested in the details of our lives. Because more often than not, He works not just in the big things, but in the little things. Added to that, because He's working in the little things of our lives, we often don't see what He's doing. We just put these things down to chance. But as we've seen in our study of Ruth so far from chapters 1 and 2, there is no such thing as coincidence. God has a purpose for everything that happens to us, even the details. Okay, I'm going to tell you a little story. I'm going off piece. Tell a little story. So, you've seen me with a little hop this week. The folk from the 2.30 prayer meeting will have heard this story. You've seen me with a little limp this week. That's because last Saturday morning, I was running the Stornoway half marathon. And I pulled my Achilles, and it's quite sore. And, well, before the race, I prayed, as I always do, that God would help me to speak to someone about the gospel on my way around the 23 kilometers. And about after five kilometers, my Achilles went. I was going quite fast. So, I had to slow down, slow down quite a lot. And as we got into Lewis Castle Grounds, I caught up with a girl who was really struggling, really struggling. And running uphill, Lewis Castle Grounds, and she's almost crying, this girl. And I laid my hand on her shoulder. Maybe that's not what you should do these days. And I said, come on, keep going. We'll manage this hill together. You run with me, and we'll do it together. And just as we were running up the hill, or how do you call it, running, we were going up the hill, and we started speaking to each other. And she said, do you come from Glasgow? I said, no, but I work in Glasgow. I'm a free church minister. And she said to me, oh, a free church minister? You'll know my cousin. He's a certain free church minister from the north. Oh, I know him very well. I said, I had him when he was a boy at camp. And, well, we did some more blethering. I asked her, do you go to church? And she said, well, not really, not really. So, that was our encounter. And I managed to pick up a bit of pace and went off and finish the half marathon. I didn't really see it again.

[3 : 27] Later on, I got a text from this minister from the north. And listen to what the text says. I don't have my phone with me. But he said, I believe you met my cousin today. She was running the stormy half marathon. She wanted me to tell you that she was really struggling as she entered Lewis Castle grounds. And she prayed that someone would come along and put their hand on her shoulder and tell her to keep going. And at that very moment, you put your hand on her shoulder. And she kept going.

Who knows that tiny little detail of a pulled Achilles after five kilometers on the braai in Stornoway? God did that so I'd have the opportunity to speak to her about the Lord.

God's interested in the tiny little details of our lives. Well, Ruth chapter 3 is a theatrical play, like a theatrical play, with three scenes, each of which reinforce the truth that God has a purpose in all the details of our lives. First, from verses 1 to 5, we have good ends, but bad means, where Naomi has an idea which seems good to her, but which could easily go sour. Secondly, from verse 6 to 13, questionable actions and certain results, where Ruth acts out Naomi's idea and takes a huge risk. And thirdly, empty hands and full rewards, where God shows that He is in ultimate control, as He always is. If God is interested in the little things, then surely the details of our lives are where we are mainly to live out our Christianity, our homes, our work, our church. We are to pray through the details, recognizing that if we can't be trusted to be faithful to God in the small things, we can't be trusted to be faithful to God in the big things either. So, first of all, good ends, bad means. Good

ends, bad means, verses 1 through 5. You know, for the life of me, I've been trying hard. Maybe someone afterwards can tell me what kind of person Naomi was, because I can't work it out. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth, has been slaving away for months, gleaning barley and wheat in the fields of Boaz. Naomi says to her, should I not seek rest for you that it may go well with you? Her motive seems good. She wants Ruth to be safe, secure, to be provided for, not to have to act like a beggar.

Naomi also knew Jewish law and that a close relative of her deceased son, Ruth's late husband, has a right to take his place and claim Ruth as his wife. It's Jewish law, it's Jewish custom, that the relative has the right to marry the widow of his deceased relative, to pay a redemption price, more on that later, and to marry her, thus providing her with safety and security and continuing the line of his deceased relative. So, Naomi's motives seem to be really good.

[6 : 54] But it's what comes next that confuses us, because for all the world, it would seem that she's urging her daughter to try and seduce Boaz. She is to wash, anoint herself with perfume, put on her best clothes, and after Boaz has gone to sleep, creep into his bed. Now, there's motives and there's methods, and while Naomi's motives seem to be good, her methods are very far from good. Perhaps she thinks that the end justifies the means, and that if Ruth is successful in seducing Boaz, Boaz will feel obligated to marry Ruth. Now, the author of Ruth, who we think was Samuel, isn't making any judgment calls here. He's leaving us to make our own judgments on how Naomi approaches the situation. In my view, motives good means not so good. Breaking God's law in order to pursue what we conceive to be in our own best interests is not good, even if what we think of as being in our own best interest is part and parcel of God's law. Naomi knew that there was provision in the law of God for Boaz to marry Ruth, to continue the family line, but the means she uses to get there?

Remember, the book of Ruth is situated during the troubling times of the days of the judges of Israel, people like Gideon and Samson. In these days, Israel was virtually indistinguishable in its moral actions from the surrounding nations. Samson was a man with many foreign lovers. Jephthah sacrificed his own daughter. And although the end that they achieved was the deliverance of Israel from their enemies, the means they used were entirely as pagan as that of the foreign nations around them.

And here in these verses, it seems to me Naomi is acting in the same way. She is following in the prevailing unfaithfulness of Israel. She's going with the flow. She's arguing that good ends justify bad means. She's demonstrating that though she has experienced much of God's goodness, she is still filled with unfaithfulness. She may have left Moab behind, but there's still a fair bit of Moab in Naomi. Now, this, it seems to me, is a double warning for us as Christians. In the first instance, let's be ultra careful that we never use Naomi's argument that a good end justifies bad means. So, we want to grow as a church. We want to fill this church with worshipping people. But we must be careful not to use bad, deceitful, or unscriptural means to pursue that noble end. Bribing people to join us, or preaching a gospel of cheap grace or easy believism, using worldly methods to draw people in. Oh, it might fill our church to overflowing, but are they good means? Now, as we'll see, God is sovereign, so He can use bad means. But we surely would rather good means be used to achieve good ends. A good end never justifies bad means either in the church nor in our own personal lives. Remember how in the account of Jesus' temptations, Satan offers Jesus the worship of the whole world, that every man shall bow before Him. He offers Jesus a good end, but then comes the means, if you will but bow down and worship Me. So, Satan's argument, good ends justify bad means.

But Jesus knows that the end never justifies the means. So, having resisted Satan, He walks the path of the cross. He chooses good means to achieve good ends, however much that costs Him. So, warning to us as a church and as individual Christians, let's be careful of the means that we are using to achieve good ends. But the second warning here for us is to remember that though we have been saved by Christ, and in Him we are new creations, there's still an awful lot of the old self within us. God may have taken us out of the world, but there's still a lot of the world within us in the way we think, in the way we speak, in the way we act. Just because other Christians are doing something doesn't make it right. We've got to be really careful about going with the flow. Rather, our eyes must be fixed on what pleases God and is faithful to the Word of God. Ruth 3 verses 1 through 5 records the details of a personal conversation between Naomi and Ruth, a troubling conversation which contains both good and bad. And we're so thankful that God is interested in the details of this

conversation. And that whereas Naomi is trying to take things into her own hands, God has a better plan for Ruth and Boaz.

And it's all in the details. So, we have good ends, bad means. Second, verses 6 to 13, risky actions and certain results. Risky actions and certain results. Well, Ruth does, as she's told by her mother-in-law. We all obey our mother-in-law, don't we? She washes, she puts on her perfume, she dresses in bright clothes, she goes down to the threshing floor, and when Boaz has fallen asleep, she uncovers the corner of his blanket and she lies down.

[13:14] When Boaz wakes up, he's rather shocked, wouldn't you be? When he comes to his senses, he says, who are you? Now, I've got no doubt he recognized her. So, the question is more to be understood in terms of, Ruth, what are you doing here? She answers, I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer, verse 9. What is she doing? What's Ruth doing? Is she playing the part of a seductress? Is she getting all dressed up and made up so she can excite Boaz's carnal lusts? There's more going on here than seems to meet the eye. Remember, Ruth was a widow, and as a widow, she was expected in that culture to wear a certain kind of clothing to show that she was in mourning. As long as she wore these certain mourning clothes, prospective suitors, boyfriends, knew that she was unavailable. It's like one of those cladda rings the Irish wear. You know, if turned inward on a girl's finger, it shows she's got a boyfriend and therefore is unavailable, but if turned outward, it shows that she's unattached and is available. By changing her clothing,

Ruth is demonstrating to Boaz that she is no longer in mourning for her deceased husband and is therefore available for marriage. So, if we understand what she did this way, what we're seeing here in Ruth chapter 3 in verses 6 to 13 is Ruth declaring to Boaz, I am now free to marry. And by acting in the way she did by uncovering Boaz's feet, she's declaring, I want to marry you. There's a tradition in Scotland that it's not decent for a woman to ask a man to marry her unless it's the 29th of February. Here is Ruth acting out the 29th of February. She is proposing marriage to Boaz. I am now free to marry, and I want to marry you.

And the question for us is this, what's going to happen next? If you were Boaz, how would you feel about all this? Well, it's in Boaz's answer we get to the heart of the book of Ruth, and we see into the heart of a true man of God. It would seem that by this stage, Boaz was a man of maturer years, so a good bit older than Ruth. And he said to her, may you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. Verse 10, you have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. As the Lord lives, I will redeem you. So, in Boaz's eyes, rather than him doing Ruth a favor by allowing her to glean in his fields, as he's done, she's doing him a favor by offering to marry her, but marry him.

And whereas Naomi's motives may have been good, but her means bad, Boaz is good all the way through, motive and method. He is impeccably pure toward Ruth, both in the ends and in the means.

But there's even more going on here beneath the surface for Boaz and Ruth. Back in Ruth chapter 2 and verse 20, Naomi, having heard of Boaz's generosity to them by allowing Ruth to glean in his fields and giving her more than her fair share of grain, says, may he be blessed by the Lord whose kindness has not forgiven the living or the dead. Now, the word translated kindness in our English Bibles is an incredibly important Hebrew word. Does anyone know this word?

[17:27] I heard that chesed. Chesed is otherwise translated as steadfast love, covenant love, or in the words of the famous hymn, O love that wilt not let me go. And it's used most often in the Old Testament to describe the way in which God loves us, His steadfast, unchangeable covenant love for His people.

If there's such a thing in the Old Testament as a meme, it's this, give thanks to the Lord for His chesed endures forever. His love endures forever. Chesed love is the distinctive of the God of Israel.

His unchangeable, passionate love for His people. A love which He showed their father Abraham. A love that led Him to save them from Egypt. A love that's protected them and provided for them. It's a love of promise and a love of passion. Back to Ruth 2 verse 20. It's difficult from the verse to work out whether the kindness being shown to Ruth here is being shown by the Lord or by Boaz. It seems to need that both may be in view. God has loved Ruth and Naomi by protecting and providing for them, but so is Boaz. In other words, Boaz as a mirror of God has shown steadfast covenant kindness to Ruth and Naomi. But now we go to chapter 3 in verse 10, where Boaz says to

Ruth, may you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter, you have made this last kindness greater than the first.

You have made this last kindness chesed greater than the first. Both the Lord and Boaz have shown chesed love to Naomi and Ruth, chapter 2 verse 20. But what's surprising about chapter 3 verse 10 is that it's not the Lord or Boaz who are spoken of as showing chesed love, that love distinctive to the God of Israel.

[19 : 39] It is Ruth, a foreigner. She's not of the blood. She doesn't have the history or tradition of Israel's faith, and yet she is showing the distinctive mark of faith in the God of Israel. She is showing chesed love, kindness to Boaz. She is showing the kind of love reserved for the God of Israel. She is demonstrating that she really has left Moab behind, and she has embraced faith in God.

Now, there's two brief applications we can make of how Ruth shows this chesed love to Boaz. In the first place, notice how Boaz speaks to her in verse 10, You have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you've not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. As I said, by this stage, Boaz was probably an older man.

There were many men in Israel who were far more eligible than him. Ruth was, after all, a young woman. She was a worthy woman. She could have proposed marriage to someone closer her age, someone more virile, someone more handsome than Boaz. But she chose a man who, humanly speaking, was not the best catch.

She set her chesed love on Boaz, someone who, humanly speaking, was not the best. Now, let's think of the story of the Old Testament, especially of God's chesed commitment and love to Israel as a nation. Why did God choose to love them?

In Deuteronomy 7, verses 6 through 8, we learn the reason. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His treasured possession out of all the peoples who are in the face of the earth.

[21 : 33] It was not because you're more in number than any other people that the Lord set His love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. It is because the Lord loves you.

Humanly speaking, there was nothing about the Jews which commended God's chesed love and steadfast commitment to them. They were not the strongest nor the most attractive nation on earth, just like Boaz wasn't the youngest or more attractive male in Bethlehem.

God loved Israel because He chose to love Israel, and that's that. Ruth is the hero of the story in chapter 3 because she is never more like the God of Israel than when she sets her chesed love upon Boaz, not just in showing that love unique to the God of Israel, but in showing that love to a less than desirable object, an old man.

And we ask the question, why did God choose the foolish things of this world? Why did God choose me and not someone eminently more talented than I to be a Christian?

He did it because in His sovereign grace, He chose to. It's not because we were more gifted than others, more vigorous than others, stronger than others, cleverer than others, richer than others. It was because of His sovereign mercy, He chose to shower His chesed love upon us. And that is truly remarkable and a matter for our everlasting praise.

[23 : 13] But the second application looks forward into the New Testament. Ruth was a foreigner, and yet no one shows the loving character of God more than her.

She has wholeheartedly embraced the faith of Israel. Remember, at this time, we're passing through the troubled days of the judges, where Israel's unfaithfulness to God is at an all-time low. But a foreigner, Ruth, shows how true faith in God should be lived out by showing chesed love to the undeserving. It reminds us, does it not, of what Jesus said about that Gentile centurion whose servant He healed in Matthew, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.

So Ruth's example here points forward to the age of the church, this age, when Gentiles and foreigners like us shall come from the north and the south and the east and the west and put our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It points forward to how God shall fill His church with people not of ethnic Israel, Gentiles upon whom He has set His chesed covenant love. God's character shall be seen in how they love one another and how they reach out to show God's covenant love to those who do not yet know Him.

[24 : 46] Details like Ruth creeping in by night and uncovering Boaz's feet. Details like a young Moabite woman proposing marriage to an older Jewish man.

They're little things as this world goes. But in these actions, the fate of the world was decided and the gospel of grace established.

This story really is a cameo of God's salvation decision, God's sovereign decision to love His people so faithfully. The story of our salvation through Christ in miniature.

Risky actions and certain results. Well, thirdly and finally, from verse 14 to the end. Empty hands, full rewards. Empty hands and full rewards.

Well, Ruth goes that night to Boaz with empty hands. She's nothing to offer him, nothing to bribe him with. She's a foreigner, hated in the Israel of the day. She's also a widow.

[25 : 50] In the Israel of the day, it was normal for the parents of the bride to pay a dowry to the husband. So, the parents of the bride paid a dowry to the husband.

But between Naomi and Ruth, there's no dowry at all. Nothing except a few half-eaten years of barley. So, she comes to Boaz with nothing to offer him at all.

No dowry, nothing. Empty hands. But for all that, Boaz loves her with the chesed, committed love of which we spoke in the last point.

He's determined to accept her offer of marriage. But to do so, he must go through a legal process called redemption. So, when a man died and left a widow, under Jewish law, that dead man's closest relative had a right to marry her.

But if he didn't wish to marry her, and someone else wanted to who was also a relative, that man had to pay a redemption price for her. He had to pay the closest relative of that deceased husband a sum of money, or to transfer some land to him, or give him something else.

[27 : 04] In essence, he had to pay a redemption price to marry her. That redemption price freed the widow to marry him, rather than her late husband's closest relative.

I hope you've got that. Whenever we read this word redemption, we're to think of this, right? Lodge this one in your mind. Redemption. A price that must be paid to secure freedom.

A price that must be paid to secure freedom. And in this case, the redemption price Boaz is determined to pay is to secure Ruth's freedom from her obligation to marry her late husband's closest relative.

In verse 13, Boaz promises Ruth, saying, As surely as the Lord lives, I will redeem you. And Naomi reassures Ruth, saying, This man will not rest.

He'll settle the matter today. We're going to come back to this matter next week. But in the book of Ruth, Boaz pays the redemption price for Ruth's freedom.

[28 : 17] Remember that definition? A price that must be paid to secure freedom. In the book of Ruth, Boaz pays the redemption price for Ruth's freedom.

In the New Testament, Jesus pays the redemption price for our freedom from sin. Just like Ruth is acting like God in her chesed love for Boaz, Boaz is acting like a type of Christ in paying the redemption price for Ruth's freedom.

Jesus took upon himself the responsibility to pay our redemption price so that we could be freed from sin, freed from the fear of death, and from the dominion of Satan's darkness.

We'll see next week what the price of Ruth's redemption was, but we know from the New Testament what the price of our redemption by Jesus was. It cost him his lifeblood, poured out on the cross for us.

Ruth came to Boaz with empty hands, and he paid the redemption price for her. He did for her what she could not have done for herself, freed herself.

[29 : 36] And we come tonight to God with empty hands, with nothing to offer him except our sin and our shame and our fear and our ruin, we come to him and he pays the redemption price for us by having given his one and only son to death on a cross for us.

We come to him just as we are, and he gives us what we could not give ourselves, freedom from sin, freedom from death, freedom from the domination of Satan.

He gives us the promise of his continual presence with us and of eternal life as we learn from Heidelberg in the glories of the new heavens and the new earth.

Empty hands, full rewards. Life's made up of a thousand details. Ruth reassures us, God has all the details of our lives in His hands.

And most importantly, our Lord Jesus has our salvation in His loving chesed-shaped hands. It's shaped rather like two holes through which they nailed Him to the cross.

[30 : 50] What is our response to all this? Surely it is to trust Him more, to rely on Him more deeply, to give over our worries to Him about all the big things and the small things, knowing that the hands of God are more than enough to carry all our details.

Our expectations. Mouse.