

Kindness and Risk

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[0:00] Well friends, let's pray together. Our Father and gracious God, please open our eyes that we can behold great things from your word.

Please soften our hearts that we might receive it and transform our wills that we might do it and loose our tongues that we might proclaim it and work in our hearts that we might embrace it.

And we ask this for the glory of your son in whose name we pray. Amen. Friends, I know it's autumn and I know it's the footy season, so it's with a little hesitation that I do what I'm about to do.

That is, I want to introduce you to a cricketer and not a footballer. And he's not even a live cricketer, what's even worse. He's been long dead and his name is C.T. Studd.

Now let me tell you a little bit about C.T. Studd. C.T. Studd was born in 1860 into a wealthy family who had made their fortune in India. In 1877, his father was converted to Christ at a Moody Sankey mission.

[1:12] And by this stage, C.T. Studd was already a very gifted cricketer. He tells the story of how his father had invited a young preacher to their home and C.T.

was going out to play cricket. And the preacher asked him straight out, are you a Christian? And C.T.'s answer was not convincing enough. So the preacher pushed him a little and C.T. listened.

And he tells of his conversion with these words. I got down on my knees and I did say thank you to God. And right then and there, joy and peace came into my soul.

And I knew then what it was to be born again. And the Bible, which had been so dry to me before, became everything to me. Now, C.T.'s two brothers were converted the very same day.

It's not bad for this preacher, I reckon. And the three of them went on to Cambridge where they achieved remarkable success in cricket and a remarkable record together. They each captained the university team in successive seasons from 1882 to 1884.

[2:16] The exceptional skills by C.T. gained him a place in the England team. It was that team that lost the famous test that gave birth to the Ashes. However, the following year, as some of you will know, C.T. and his brother George were part of the team that toured Australia.

They were part of the team that regained those Ashes. And the contest has been on ever since. You see, he and six other... Sorry, C.T. Studd, however, is famous not so much for cricket, but for something else.

You see, he and six other Cambridge men offered themselves to Hudson Taylor for missionary service in China. Like Hudson Taylor, they were characterised, their missionary service was characterised by identifying with the nationals through wearing Chinese clothing and eating with them and eating their food and living their life.

At 25 years old, C.T. was contacted in China and told that his father's will had left him a very large sum of money. So C.T. did the right thing.

He prayed about it and he searched the scriptures and he decided he would give his entire fortune to Christ and his service. Shortly after that, he married a young Irish missionary named Priscilla.

[3 : 32] And after 10 years in China, they were forced by ill health to return to England. And once there, they turned their inherited property over to the China Inland Mission.

Later, C.T. went to India where he became a pastor of a church. And then they offered to go to Africa, you know, three continents. However, doctors, committees and supporters expressed great reticence about them doing it.

So penniless and without financial backers, C.T. left without his wife and his four daughters for 20 years of pioneering ministry in the heart of Africa.

Prince C.T. Studd was a remarkable man. And today, when we look at the book of Ruth, I want you to ask, what is it that makes such people as this?

What is it that makes such people as this? What drives such people to such devotion to Jesus? What is it that motivates them? What is it that would cause them to give their life like that?

[4 : 36] With that in mind, let's turn to Ruth chapter three. Now, so open your Bibles, follow it with me. And let's remember where we are. Remember, Ruth chapter one told us that we're in the time of the judges.

That is, we're in a time of great anarchy in the in the promised land. We're introduced in chapter one to a man called Elimelech. He has a wife called Naomi and two sons.

Pam and strikes in the land of Israel and Elimelech flees to the land of Moab. His sons take Moabite wise. He dies. His sons die. Naomi's left with two daughters in law and then God acts and sends famine.

Sorry, to end the famine in Judah. And Naomi decides she'll return back to her land. And only one of her Moabite daughters in law decides to go with her. That daughter in law is Ruth.

And at the end of chapter one, Naomi is returns bitterly to Judah. Her heart is full of bitterness. She feels that God has dealt harshly with her. He has brought her back empty instead of full.

[5 : 37] And in chapter two, we're introduced to a wealthy landowner. That was last week, Boaz. And Ruth takes the initiative. You might remember she goes to his field and just to glean some grain. That is, take some of the edges of the grain, the bits that are left over by the harvesters.

As it turns out, Boaz has heard of the remarkable kindness to Naomi by Ruth and is overwhelmingly kind and generous to her.

In fact, he shows her, we're told you might remember this from last week, God's kindness. And that brings us to chapter three. Now, let's take a quick run through the story and then we'll pick up some of the really tricky bits of it.

And I'll explain what I think is going on. So where Ruth had taken the initiative in chapter two. Now, now Naomi has been strengthened. Perhaps she's observed what has happened with Ruth, that Ruth's initiative has paid off.

And she takes some initiative. She seeks some longer term security for her daughter in law. So what she does is she cooks up this scheme whereby Ruth might visit Boaz at the threshing floor in the middle of the night.

[6 : 39] Now, that is as risky as it sounds. Ruth agrees to do what Naomi suggests. Threshing, you see, is a great time for, well, for the men, good eating and good drinking.

And so Boaz has a good feed. He has a good drink. And he's in a happy mood. And then Ruth quietly sneaks in when he's after he's retired for the night.

And with without him waking, she uncovers his feet and lies down. And Boaz, well, he awakes with a start in the middle of the night. And he demands who this intruder is and that this intruder identify herself.

And he poses the direct question. He says, who are you? And for the first time in this book, someone identifies themselves by name. Ruth gives a very clear and decisive answer. I am Ruth, your servant.

Then she boldly proposes marriage. Not really done in the ancient world like this. But anyway, she does. Using the very language of wings that Boaz has used in the previous chapter.

[7:45] So she's even using his language. It's it. You think it might be a winner anyway, don't you? Anyway, the new revised standard version has Ruth asking that Boaz spread his cloak over her.

But a literal translation is that Ruth is asking Boaz to spread his wings over her using the same words as the previous chapter. After all, you see, he is her next of kin.

And then Boaz, one of her next of kin. And then Boaz responds. And he's very frank with Ruth. He acknowledges that he may be a near kinsman. However, he says, I'm not the nearest kinsman. There is another who is closer.

And he urges her to stay the night, promises that he'll do what he can in the morning. And in the morning, he dishes out this substantial amount of barley and sends her home.

And she reports back to Naomi. And together they wait to see how things sort themselves out. Now, the thing I need to say, if you didn't hear it when we read the text, is that this text is littered with ambiguities.

[8:47] Littered with it. And the ambiguities are there in the English. And they are there in the original language as well. In fact, perhaps the term ambiguities is a little tame for these plays on words.

Perhaps I should say that the passage is full of phrases that have double meaning. And they have the same double meaning for us as they probably had to the originals.

Let me point out some to you. First of all, there's what Naomi tells Ruth to do in verse 3. She is to have a look at it, wash, put on some perfume, dress herself in non-working clothes.

Now, one way to read this is she's to get ready to seduce him. I'm putting it out there. Okay. You guys probably didn't think of that, did you? But however, it's not the only way to read the text.

After all, David does exactly the same actions after he gets up after learning the loss of his firstborn son to Bathsheba. So it can be read a different way. And then there's the talk of uncovering legs, feet and wings.

[9:52] Now, elsewhere in the Old Testament, let me tell you that nearly some of those terms are used in relation to intercourse. What is more legs or feet is linked to the word that's often used as a standard euphemism for genitals.

The Hebrew term to lie down is just like our word to sleep or to sleep. Well, we often add with, don't we?

So it has all those. It's the same word. It's used for sleeping and for intercourse, just like the word sleep is in English. That is, it can have sexual or non-sexual overtones, particularly when you add the proposition with and it becomes to lie down with or to sleep with.

Then in Hebrew, there are high proportion of occurrences of the word to know. And in Hebrew, the verb can do double duty for knowing something or having sex with someone.

Finally, in verses 4, 7 and 14, we're told that Ruth is to go, to come or to go into certain places. Well, these words in Hebrew can, again, you guessed it, refer to someone coming to another person for sex.

[11:00] So one of the things we need to ask is, why on earth the author is doing this? I mean, he knows that we hear these things and all the double entendres are going on in our brains.

He knows. Why is he deliberately placing these ambiguities in the text? Why are the double entendres? What is he trying to achieve by doing this? What's going on here? What's this author up to?

Well, to answer these questions, we need to work out what the passage is about. And as is often in storytelling, one of the ways of working out what the story is about is to see if the author has left any clues.

And one of the best places to look for clues is at the beginning of a story and at its end. So let's have a look at that with this story. I want you to look at verse 1. So verse 1.

Look at what Naomi says to Ruth. She says, My daughter, I need to seek some security for you so that it may be well with you. Now, the word I want to concentrate on is the word security.

[12:00] The literal meaning of this term is a resting place. Naomi is seeking to find a resting place. Some place where Ruth can find shelter.

Some security for Ruth. That's the goal of what is going on here. Now, that in mind, I want to tell you this is not the first time that this word or this idea has occurred within this text.

Flip back in your Bibles to Ruth chapter 1. Well, you don't have to flip. It's on the same page if you're looking at the same Bible as me. Look at verses 8 and 9. And look at what it is that Naomi wishes for her daughters-in-law.

In verse 8, she wishes that the Lord will deal kindly with them or, if you've been here the last few weeks, show chesed to them. We've already seen the Lord do this, haven't we?

In Boaz, he has shown amazing kindness and generosity toward Ruth. And then in verse 9, she wishes that they will find security in the house of your husband.

[13:00] Well, this is what Naomi's on about in this chapter. She's clear. She's about finding rest or security for Ruth in the house of a husband.

What she is doing is selfless. She has Ruth's well-being in mind. She's seen Ruth's kindness to her and she's reciprocating. She wants to show this extraordinary love to her.

Now, with that in mind, look at how the chapter ends. The chapter ends, do you remember it, with Naomi noting that Boaz will not find rest until the matter is sorted out.

The Hebrew word here is different from verse 1, but it shows that Naomi's goals are the same, are on the way to being achieved. She set out with a goal in chapter 1 and toward the end she's saying, we're getting there.

We're getting there. Naomi wants rest and security for her daughter-in-law. And Boaz will not rest until he exhausts the possibility of finding it.

[14:00] That's a great chapter, isn't it? So there's what I think the passage is about. It's about Naomi seeking rest and security for Ruth among God's people, among her people. It's about Naomi seeking rest and security.

With that in mind, let's go back now to the ambiguities and the double entendres. You see, I think the author is deliberately including all of these things. And I think he's doing it to show us the risks that these women are taking.

You see, he's telling us that what Naomi is about is not without very significant risks. When Naomi and Ruth said about this course of action, it is not without risk.

After all, think what might have happened here. Ruth might have been discovered by the Israelites, all dolled up, smelling like a rose, heading off to the threshing floor. She was taking advantage of a drunk man.

That's how it could have been read, couldn't it? Or she was doing what Moabite women have done in the book of Numbers. You read the book of Numbers, that's what they do. And so they'd be saying, oh, true to form, look at this Moabite.

[15:09] That's what she's up to doing what they did back in Numbers. It's a risk what they do. She would have been branded as a prostitute, leading the people of God, Australian, perhaps even died as a result.

That's not all. What if when she got to Boaz, he had misread her? What if he had taken her simply for being a woman out to take advantage of him and his position?

Or what if he had mistreated her intentions and taken advantage of her? What if she'd become pregnant by him as a result of lack of integrity?

Any hope of finding security and a resting place among the people of God would have been shattered beyond hope. Can you see what I'm saying?

These women, with all their plans, were at great risk as they did this course of action. They were bold. They were adventurous.

[16:06] They took great risks this night. And as God's sovereignty had it, their risks paid off. Their bold riskiness resulted in a marriage.

And that marriage resulted in the birth of Obed. Which resulted in the birth of Jesse. Which resulted in the birth of David. And which finally resulted in the birth of Jesus the Messiah.

Friends, before I finish up this saying, there are one or two more things. I should say three more things. First, it has to do with what actually happened on the threshing floor. Because that's what you're all asking. What happened on the threshing floor?

Now, please hear what I'm saying. The author of this story did use ambiguities, double entendres. He did use them in order to show us the risks of this venture. However, I do not think that he wanted us to think that anything untoward happened on the threshing floor.

Let me tell you why I think this. I want you to look at verse 13 of chapter 3. So, flip the page and look at verse 13. And it reads, Remain the night, and in the morning, if he will act as the next of kin for you, let him do it.

[17:17] And if he is not willing to act as next of kin for you, then as the Lord lives, I will act as next of kin for you. Lie down until the morning. Now, Boaz says to Ruth, remain.

Spend the night. Stay overnight. That's what it means. It is not a term that is used with double meanings. It is never used in the Bible with sexual connotations. It's the very same term that is used by Ruth in chapter 1, verse 16, where she says to Naomi, Where you stay, I will stay.

Now, this is the author's signal that we have a godly man here, I think. He, like her, is not interested in finding a knight's fling on the threshing floor. After all, he's acting in a godly and right fashion.

He wants what Naomi wants. He wants a godly woman to have a permanent place among the people of God. Now, second footnote to our story is that the Hebrew word, do you remember that Hebrew word we've been tracing for three weeks now, which commentators so often neglect?

Well, it occurs again here. It's the word, do you remember it? Chesed. And that word is used to describe God's character, his nature. It means his surprising, his overwhelming relational love.

[18 : 32] Did you notice it again in the story? Perhaps you picked it up. Look at verse 10. The NRSV offers us a, if I can say this, less than good translation here. It should read like this.

Boaz said, May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. This last instance of your chesed, your generous, overflowing love, is better than the first.

You have not gone after a young man, whether rich or poor. So here is Ruth again, a woman who has shown surprising and overwhelming kindness to Naomi. She's ventured out onto this very risky endeavor at Naomi's insistence.

She's staked much on it, and he knows it. And then there's one more thing to notice. Look at verse 17. Naomi returns home with the abundance of barley.

And she reports what Boaz has said. And he had said, don't go back to your mother empty-handed. And when Naomi had returned from Moab, do you remember in chapter 1? She comes back from Moab.

[19 : 34] She's full of bitterness. She thinks God has treated her roughly. She spoke about returning empty. And now, in her selfless generosity toward her daughter-in-law, she has found fullness for herself.

And that fullness is going to continue. In chapter 4, it's a wonderful picture. And you can only get it if you sort of imagine the scene. In chapter 4, we will see her nursing the child of this union that she orchestrated.

And the women of the village will say to Naomi the Pleasant, they'll say, here is Naomi the Pleasant and no longer the bitter. Naomi has a son.

Do you remember the question? Do you remember back at the beginning when I started this talk, we talked about C.T. Studd's amazing life. We saw him desert a life of fame for the mission field.

We saw him desert a life of wealth for the sake of bringing people to know Jesus. We saw him desert a life of comfort with his family in order to bring the gospel to the Sudan.

[20 : 40] And we saw him leave aside some of the fame of cricketing and so on. Friends, ask yourself, what is it that drives people?

What is it that drives such people to such devotion? What is it that motivates them? Well, the great thing is C.T. Studd tells us. You see, his personal motto for his life was this.

If Jesus Christ is God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.

Let me read it again. If Jesus Christ is God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him. You see, C.T. Studd knew that God had shown him overwhelming love and kindness.

And he was blown away by it. And he knew that if God had loved him like this, he must respond. It deserves a response.

[21 : 52] It demanded that he show whatever he could, in whatever small measure he could, the same overwhelming love and kindness. It required risk-taking and stepping outside the ordinary.

And it's not just about benevolence and writing checks. No, this man did far more than that. It's about giving of yourself surprisingly and overwhelmingly and freely.

And people like C.T. Studd have been responsible for the gospel spreading throughout this world in generation after generation after generation.

Friends, such self-sacrifice, I think, is strangely missing in our modern world and strangely missing among Christians.

I rarely hear the word sacrifice among Christians these days. Such risk-taking for the cause of the gospel is, I think, often absent.

[22:51] And I'll tell you how I know, because I used to be the national director of an organization. And people would come and want to work for this organization. And I think 40 years ago, the last question you asked is, how much will I get paid?

Often it became the first question I was asked. It's a real change in mindset. And I understand people are caring for their families and so on. But my suspicion, friends, is the reason that sacrifice has disappeared from our vocabulary or is not used as much as it should be, is that we have forgotten God's great grace for us.

We have left our first love. Friends, I want to urge you tonight to be fueled again by God's love. You see, let me urge you.

Let me urge all of us to be driven out of our slumber and our complacency by God's great overwhelming love in Jesus Christ.

And second, let me urge myself and you to be shocked out of our comfortable lives in leafy, secure Doncaster or wherever you live.

[24:04] Friends, our world needs gospel people. It needs people captured by God's overwhelming love in Christ. It needs people captured by God's grace in Christ.

Captured by the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it needs them to give themselves sacrificially for that gospel and its proclamation. Friends, do you know Jesus?

Do you love Jesus? Are you blown away by God's love for you? Are you controlled by that love? Are you compelled by that love?

Then let this love compel you. Listen to Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 verses 14 and 15. I love this verse. Paul says, For the love of Christ urges us on.

Because we are convinced that one has died for all, therefore all have died. Can you hear C.T. Studd? I wonder whether he's reading this verse. And he died for all. So that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

[25:15] It could almost be he could have used that for his motto, couldn't he? Because that's what he was on about. Another version puts it even more strongly. For Christ's love compels us. Drives us out.

Because we are convinced that one died for all, therefore all died. And he died for all. That those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Friends, I'm trying to tell you that in this passage tonight we have seen people compelled by God's love. Overwhelmed by it. And it drove them to do certain things that were at times risky.

What is it that compels you in life? Is it having the latest bit of technology? That's my great problem. I always want the latest bit of technology. But you see, it's not worth giving you life for.

Is it the almighty dollar? Is it the desire for a comfortable life and someone to enjoy it with? Is it a house? Or a car?

[26:18] Or a relationship? Or a degree? Or a job? Or is it the love of Christ? For if you know what?

If you knew what it cost Christ to become human. If you know what it cost Christ to pay for your sin. If you know what it cost the Father to allow him to do it.

Then I want to urge you tonight to let that love urge you on. Let it compel you. Let it thrust you into the world. Let it cause you to put to death your small desires and small ambitions.

Let it drive you to no longer live for yourself. But for him who died for you and was raised for you. Friends, you are bought with a price.

Glorify God with your bodies and with every part of your being. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the constant reminder in this text.

[27 : 31] That just keeps popping up again and again. That here are people. Who have been captured by your great and amazing and spontaneous love for them. And that that has driven them.

To act appropriately in their world. Father, we know. That we have seen your love at its highest. We've seen it in the death of Jesus.

Well, in the incarnation of Jesus. In his putting on flesh. In his living as a human being. In him, the almighty God. Dying on a cross at the hands of human beings.

Father, we have seen your great and amazing love. Please, please take our hearts. Cause us to embrace that love again. And to be driven by it. And we pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.