

Banking on God's Kindness

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. If we haven't met, my name is Christian and I'm a student minister here at HTT. It's great to finally have an opportunity to share God's Word with you face-to-face today, especially with the easing of restrictions.

I know some of you may have mixed feelings about masks being optional, but I personally love it. Before, from up here, all I could see were your eyebrows because everyone was wearing masks. So I could never tell with your eyebrows raised whether you were smiling, laughing, yawning, or confused.

So it's great to see your faces clear as day now. Now, I'll begin by asking, what's the greatest risk you've taken? For some of us, maybe we've taken risks by moving countries.

We may know what it's like in Chapter 1 where Ruth ups and moves to a completely different place to live, be it for family or work. And for others, it may be a career change or going back to school for better long-term career progression.

But have you ever taken a risk for the sake of another person? My former church was Cross Culture Church of Christ on Swanston Street in the CBD.

[1 : 09] And I'm still good friends with the people there. So I was really excited to hear about an initiative they started at the beginning of this pandemic. Since they're in the CBD, they were aware of the plight of people experiencing homelessness, international students, and immigrants who don't have access to government welfare during lockdowns.

So they decided to set up their own food bank for these people. So in a time where people in Woolies and Coles were fighting over toilet paper and ransacking counters for supplies, they freely gave up their groceries for others.

And in a time where people were staying home to stay safe from COVID, volunteers came in every week and risked exposing themselves to the virus to help those who came through the church in need.

So they gave up their resources, time, and exposed themselves to the virus to express God's kindness to the world around them. And they even got noticed by Channel 9 who did a story on them.

Now what does this all have to do with Ruth 3? Well, today we'll see in Ruth 3 a magnificent display of risk-taking for the sake of others.

[2 : 19] To refresh our memories, let's quickly recap what we learned in the first two chapters of Ruth. In chapter 1, we saw Naomi's suffering make her bitter. She tragically lost her husband and two sons in Moab.

She then rightly returns to Israel, but wrongly says that she returns empty-handed. Her bitterness blinded her to God's kindness through Ruth. Ruth who banded herself to Naomi, a widow.

Ruth's famous line was, Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. But in chapters 2, we see Naomi change.

Ruth takes the initiative to get food, and God works sovereignly behind the scenes to place Ruth in Boaz's field. And then God works through Boaz's kindness to provide for both Ruth and Naomi.

So Naomi then sees Boaz's gesture as God's kindness, and by the end of the chapter, she's no longer bitter, but praises God, saying, God indeed has not stopped showing kindness to the living and the dead.

[3 : 27] So now we're in chapter 3. And now that Naomi is no longer bitter, we see her take the initiative to show kindness to Ruth. Let's see how it goes. Verses 1 to 6.

One day, Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours.

Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking.

When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do. I will do whatever you say, Ruth answered.

So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do. Now here in verse 1, there's actually an echo of Ruth 1 verse 9, where Naomi encourages her daughters-in-laws to leave her.

[4 : 29] She says, May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband. Well now, Naomi wants to help Ruth find that rest by finding a husband for her.

Now it may seem strange in this modern time that a husband is equivalent to rest, but not in the context of ancient Israel. Back then, if a widow loses her husband, she not only loses a partner, but she loses her means of livelihood and protection.

Naomi may have her husband's land now, but as a widow, she'll eventually need to sell it, and the money will only last so long. It may provide for Naomi, but not for the younger Ruth.

And this means that Ruth doesn't have long-term security or protection. As we saw at the end of chapter 2, harvests eventually end.

So Naomi wants Ruth to find a husband, and Boaz is the perfect person. And because of this, Naomi hatches a plan. Now like any good stalker, she knows exactly where Boaz will be and when.

[5 : 41] We know in barley on the threshing floor at night. And she asks Ruth to wash, put on perfume, and get dressed. Now from this line, we may think that Naomi is asking Ruth to do the equivalent of putting on makeup and making herself look nice to attract Boaz.

And while there might be a sense of this, I actually don't think that this is what Naomi is trying to do here. I think we have to remember that Ruth is a widow. And back in those days, widows in mourning would signal that they are still grieving their husband by wearing clothings of widowhood. For us, it would be like wearing black to a funeral. But then they would keep wearing it for many days until they finished grieving their husband. So here, Ruth is probably still wearing her widow's clothes.

And this may also explain why Boaz hasn't talked to Ruth about marriage. He probably saw from her clothing that she's still grieving and wanted to give her the time and space.

So the first part of Naomi's plan is for Ruth to end her mourning period and resume normal life. But it's the next part of her plan that's really interesting.

[6 : 59] I wonder if you raised your eyebrows when you read this. I know I did. What in the world is Naomi wanting to do here? Go to a man in the middle of the night.

Wait until after he drinks. Take off his shoes and lie next to him. Sounds a bit dodgy, doesn't it? For those of you who have daughters or granddaughters, does this sound like something you'd like to do for your daughter to find a husband?

Of course not. And you wouldn't want this to happen because this plan can be easily misconstrued as seduction, not a marriage proposal.

See, going to the threshing floor at night was something prostitutes would often do in ancient Israel to approach men. And waiting until after Boaz eats and drinks, this could be misunderstood as Naomi wanting Boaz to be drunk so that he would lie with Ruth.

In fact, that kind of strategy is how Lot's daughters got him to lay with them. And do you know which country actually came from Lot's daughter?

[8 : 09] It's the country of Moab. Ruth's ancestors used this very tactic. So you could probably think that Naomi wants to repeat Ruth's ancestors' actions.

And then uncovering Boaz's feet has a double meaning in Hebrew. It's actually a euphemism for genitalia. So from a cursory reading of this paragraph, you may easily think Naomi is actually training Ruth on how to seduce Boaz and trap him into marrying her.

But I actually don't think this is what Naomi's intentions are at all because this seems so inconsistent with the betrayal of Ruth and Boaz throughout the first two chapters. And later on, we'll hear Boaz call Ruth a woman of noble character.

And that would be strange if he thought that Ruth was trying to seduce him. So how then would we explain Naomi's plan here? Well, when it comes to why at night, the text doesn't tell us.

But my guess is this is because Ruth is going to make a very forward gesture about marriage to Boaz. So maybe Naomi wanted it to be done at night to avoid witnesses to any humiliation that Ruth may suffer.

[9 : 23] Then why wait until after Boaz eats and drinks? Well, the text says later on that Boaz was in good spirits. So Naomi probably wants Ruth to wait to catch Boaz in a good mood for the request that Ruth is going to make of him.

Then the last question is, why uncover his feet? Well, since this was at night, this is probably how Naomi wants Ruth to wake Boaz up.

You know what a Melbourne winter night is like. If you kick off your covers or if your spouse pulls the quilt to their side of the bed, suddenly your feet are uncovered and you wake up cold.

And that's probably what Naomi wants to do here. This may be the most polite way someone with a low standing in that culture like Ruth could wake up someone with a high standing like Boaz.

Now, if that was Naomi's plan, why did the author write it in such a way that we could misunderstand it as something dodgy like seduction?

[10 : 25] Well, I think he wrote it that way to point out how risky the plan was. Naomi's plan is prone to be misunderstood as a proposal for sex, not marriage.

And if Boaz misunderstands Ruth's actions, well, Ruth is in danger of being either abused or humiliated. Naomi is asking Ruth to take a big risk here.

But the question is, is this risk reckless? I think what we see here is Naomi taking a gamble on Boaz's character, as revealed in chapter 2.

She actually believes that Boaz, as a righteous man, would not harm Ruth, even in this kind of vulnerable situation. However, in an even greater sense, Naomi is banking on God's kindness. God's kindness that was revealed through Ruth in chapter 1 when she binds herself to her, and God's kindness that was revealed in Boaz in chapter 2 when he generously provides for Ruth and Naomi.

[11 : 33] See, Naomi's risk isn't reckless at all. She's actually not trusting in any odd bloke or stranger. She's trusting in a man who has proven to reflect the image of God's kindness to her.

Now, does it pay off? Does this risk pay off? Let's see. Verses 7 to 9. When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached him quietly, uncovered his feet, and lay down. In the middle of the night, something startled the man. He turned, and there was a woman lying at his feet.

Who are you? He asked. I am your servant, Ruth, she said. Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian redeemer of our family.

So Ruth executes Naomi's plan. She lies at Boaz's feet, and sure enough, when he awakes, he's startled. Now, in the Hebrew here, the word startled can also be translated as shivered, which is probably because Ruth uncovered his feet and was cold.

[12 : 39] In verse 9, he asks, Who are you? Now, if you remember Naomi's plan, she actually didn't tell Ruth what to do if he asked this.

And if you're someone like me, who likes to just blindly follow instructions and not think too far, I would be flustered at this point. I'd probably say something like, Naomi didn't tell me what to do if this happens.

But not so Ruth. Ruth thinks on her feet. And what she says is astonishing. She says, I am your servant, which is actually a step up from how she identified herself to Boaz in chapter 2.

Because in chapter 2, she said she's a foreigner. So the phrase, I'm your servant, is likely a term of respect of a younger woman towards an older man. But it also carries a closer intimacy than being just a foreigner.

Now, you'd think after introducing herself, there'd be a bit of small talk. But Ruth does not beat around the bush. Her next line is, in effect, a proposal to Boaz.

[13 : 43] In verse 9, she says, spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian redeemer of our family. Now, the word corner here, could be, in the Hebrew, is the same word for wing.

So it could be translated as, spread the wing of your garment over me. Now, I wonder if that reminds you of something you guys heard last week. In Ruth 2, verse 12, Boaz blessed Ruth by saying, May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

So Ruth is actually making a play on words here. Last week, Boaz prayed that the Lord would richly provide for her, having taken refuge under God's wings. Now, this week, Ruth is asking Boaz to fulfill that prayer by taking her under his wings, by providing the protection and provision of a husband.

And to spread wings over someone is actually a Hebrew euphemism for marriage. And this custom is actually still around. I actually have this custom, too, from my ethnic group.

See, I come from the Batak tribe in northern Sumatra. And for weddings, the garment we use is called an ulos. It's a long cloth that covers both the man and wife in a marriage ceremony.

[15:10] It's meant to signify the binding of a husband and wife. And we actually used it in my wedding, in my wedding ceremony, too. It's that red cloth there that's an ulos. Now, legend has it that since my tribe lived on cold mountains, they used the ulos to give warmth to both husband and wife at night.

And perhaps for ancient Israel, there's a similar story. So I can appreciate the meaning of the Hebrew idiom here. All right. Back to the story.

So Ruth tells Boaz he should marry her as a guardian redeemer of her family. And we'll look at the whole picture of redemption next week.

But for our purposes, it's enough to know that Ruth is boldly asking Boaz to marry her. Now, imagine Ruth's boldness here. Naomi actually told her to wait for Boaz to tell her what to do. But Ruth ends up telling Boaz what to do. And let's remember Ruth's position here in society. Here is a servant, a foreigner, and a widow making a demand of an upright, wealthy Israelite noble.

[16:20] Her petition is bold. And to ask so unashamedly, despite her status, is extraordinary for Ruth. But like Naomi, she too is banking on the kindness of Boaz's character.

And you know what? These are the kinds of petitions that God loves. We see it in Jesus' parable about the persistent widow and how in the gospel, Jesus repeatedly responds to sinners, to the sick, to the unclean, who desperately seek healing from him.

They boldly ask Jesus, not trusting in their own standing, not trusting in their own morality, and not trusting in their own cleanliness before God, but banking on the kindness of Christ's character.

This is why the author of Hebrews says, Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Now, my question is then, how bold have you been in your petitions to God, Christian? Do you believe in the kindness of his character? He is an exceedingly kind God.

[17:35] Now, let's see how Boaz responds to Ruth's petition here. Verses 10 to 15. The Lord bless you, my daughter, he replied. This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier.

You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all, you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character.

Although it is true that I am a guardian redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning, if he wants to do his duty as your guardian redeemer, good.

Let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives, I will do it. Lie here until morning. So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized.

And he said, No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor. He also said, Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out. When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her.

[18:39] Then he went back to town. So Boaz begins by calling Ruth her daughter, a term of endearment. Then he says Ruth's proposal is an even greater act of kindness than the one before.

The one that Ruth showed Naomi. Now why is that? Why is this proposal greater than the one before? Well, in the text, we see the first reason is because Ruth is willing to marry an older man.

Now, humanly speaking, you would look for a spouse around the same age bracket to marry, because I think you'd assume with a similar age comes better compatibility, similar lifespan, maybe similar levels of attractiveness.

But this was not an obstacle for Ruth. And this is what Boaz says is a kindness. But the second reason that this is a kindness is actually implied in Boaz's position as a guardian redeemer.

As I mentioned, we'll hear about redemption more next week. But another thing that's worth knowing about this week is that back then, when a man dies without an heir, it is normally the

obligation of his brother to take his wife to produce an heir so that his family line does not die out. [19:52] That's in Deuteronomy 25, 5 to 6 over there. So by Ruth proposing marriage to Boaz due to his position as a guardian redeemer, she's also being kind to her deceased husband and Naomi's family.

This is a greater kindness then, because through this marriage that she's proposing, she blesses not only an old Boaz, but she also blesses her deceased husband and Naomi as well by continuing the family line.

However, there is a problem. Like in any good romance story, there's another guy. There's a relative closer than Boaz that has higher priority of redemption.

So Boaz has to see if this person is willing to redeem her. But Ruth is to stay the night and leave in the morning before anyone sees, and Boaz will sort the rest out. Which brings us to the final part of this passage, verses 16 to 18.

So Ruth returns, and Naomi immediately asks her to spill the beans.

[21:13] What happened? And she tells her everything, and told her that Boaz gave her six measures of barley. Now this mention of barley and empty-handedness actually reveals a progression throughout Ruth.

You see, in Ruth 1, Naomi says, she went away full, but the Lord brought her back empty. But by the end of chapter 2, Naomi has one ephah of barley in her hands because of the kindness of Ruth and Boaz, which she recognizes as God's.

Now here in chapter 3, Naomi is given six measures of barley. So we see God's kindness is progressively filling Ruth's emptiness.

And we'll see how much more God blesses her next week. So we end in verse 18. Naomi's request that Ruth wait. Wait for Boaz to fulfill his promise to settle the matter.

And we'll see how that resolves in Ruth chapter 4 next week. Now how is this story relevant to us? Well, as much as Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz reflected God's kindness to each other, their actions are actually but a dim shadow when it comes to God's kindness to us.

[22:31] In a kindness that transcends Naomi's, God hatched a plan to unite us to Christ, where Jesus was sent not into the darkness of night, but into the darkness of sin.

And this plan did not merely risk his humiliation, but guaranteed it. Philippians 2 says, Jesus was humiliated for us.

He was mocked, He was abused, and He was crucified so that we may be one with God. And in a kindness that transcends Ruth, God pursues us, sinners.

See, Ruth pursued Boaz despite his age, but God pursues us despite our sins. Romans 5.8 says, God demonstrates His own love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

And in a kindness that transcends Boaz, God spreads His wings over us by Christ spreading His arms on the cross, though that we may take refuge from the consequences of sin and death through our guardian redeemer, Christ Jesus our Lord.

[23:56] And friends, by Jesus' death and resurrection, we can be assured that the matter today has indeed been settled. There is no obstacle left to hinder our union with God.

So if you're not a Christian today, bank on God's kindness. Take this invitation and repent of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ. And if you are a Christian today, well, the application is to reflect God's kindness to others.

Like the characters in this chapter, let us show God's kindness to one another by planning, by risking, and by responding to each other's needs. It's like my first illustration with helping hands.

They planned how to start the food bank. They risked their health to make sure people got what they need and they were responding to the needs of the people around them. Philippians 2.4 says, Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, Lord, thank you for your kindness to us, shared, seen in your gospel that you sent Jesus Christ to die on the cross and be humiliated so that your name be exalted, that we may be raised as children of God.

[25:20] And Lord, we thank you for pursuing us despite our sins, despite our failures, despite our uncleanness. and Lord, we thank you for being our refuge as our redeemer.

Lord, we pray that we may reflect your kindness to others and let us point them to your kindness in the gospel. In the name of Lord Jesus Christ, we pray.

Amen.