

God's Loving Kindness

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[0 : 00] Well, please take a seat. It would be great if you could open your Bibles to Ruth chapter 3. There's also an outline in the bulletin that you might find helpful as well.

Why don't I pray for us before we begin? Heavenly Father, we do thank you again for this beautiful story, this true story in your word. Father, we thank you that it teaches us of your kindness to us, of your sovereign hand at work to provide for us.

Father, we pray again this morning that as we see these shadows of your greatness, that you would help us to understand what it is you are teaching us.

But more than that, to live in light of it, we pray. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, there are all sorts of marriage proposals, aren't there?

For one young man whose girlfriend was from the country, he decided to pop the question using bails of hay. So I've got a slide. Here it is. It's very cute, isn't it?

[1 : 18] It even came complete with a tick the box option. So on the next slide. Notice where the spray can is.

Very wise man. Okay. So he blinded his girlfriend, drove out to the field, and then took the blindfold off as she sat on the back of the ute. Here she is.

Here's her surprise. And of course, she ticked the right box. And here they are coming back on the next slide with the tick in the background. It's a lovely proposal.

Well, as we come to Ruth chapter 3 today, we see another rather unusual marriage proposal. But before we get to that, I need to do two things. First, let me just briefly recap in case you've been away.

In chapter 1, there's a famine in Israel, and a man named Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons move to Moab, away from Israel and away from God.

[2 : 18] This move may have seemed like a good idea at the time, but it was disastrous, as we saw in chapter 1. And Elimelech dies, and then instead of returning home, the sons stay and marry to Moabite women, even though God had said not to intermarry, for they will lead you astray to other foreign gods and so on.

And then the sons die, and Naomi is left with her two daughters-in-law, one of whom is Ruth, who returns with Naomi to Israel and to God herself. And at the end of chapter 1, verse 21, Naomi exclaims, I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.

And so she's consumed with bitterness, you might remember. Then the next day, at the start of chapter 2, Naomi still seems bitter, because it's Ruth who takes all the initiative at this stage. Ruth asks if she can get some food.

And in the rest of chapter 2, we see God's sovereign hand at work to provide for both Naomi and Ruth. For example, Ruth just so happens to turn up in Boaz's field. And Boaz just so happens to turn up and see Ruth.

And when Boaz finds out who Ruth is, then he shows her extravagant kindness because of her noble character. In fact, there are hints of some sort of innocent attraction, even at that stage in chapter 2.

[3 : 34] For example, Boaz actually asks Ruth out on a date, did you realise? That is, he says, come and sit with me at my table and have lunch with me. And then he showers her with gifts, which sounds very familiar on a date.

Boaz, it seems, is certainly attracted to her noble character, at least. And when Ruth tells Naomi about all this, Naomi realises that God has not actually stopped showing kindness to her, even though it had felt like it.

God had been working for their good all along, not only providing food, but also providing a redeemer. And it's at this point that Naomi stops her pity party and says in chapter 2, verse 20, that he, that is the Lord, has not stopped showing kindness to the living and the dead.

And then she added in chapter 2, verse 20, that man, Boaz, is our close relative. He's one of our guardian redeemers. That's the recap. And the second thing I need to do is to give you some background information about the redeemer.

Now, there's two obligations on close relatives in Israel. One has to do with land, which we'll look at next week. And the other has to do with marriage and continuing the family name.

[4 : 45] And so on the slide is a passage from Deuteronomy chapter 5. Just have a look at that first slide. It says, if brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family.

No, her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

So this is how it works. If there are unmarried brothers, then they are to marry their brother's wife, the widow, so that they can carry on the family name. So if you're marrying into a family, if you're marrying some man, you'd actually have to check out his brothers as well, I wonder.

But the unmarried brother does not have to technically fulfill his duty, though he ought to. And if he doesn't, he will be shamed.

So in the next slide and the rest of Deuteronomy chapter 25, we read this. However, if a man does not want to marry his brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, my husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel.

[5 : 51] He will not fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to me. Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, I do not want to marry her, his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, this is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line.

And that man's line shall be known in Israel as the family of the unsandaled. There you go. And our sandals will come up again in chapter four. But the point here is that this was the custom for unmarried brother-in-law to marry the widow of their brother.

Notice, though, it's brothers-in-law that it's talking about here, not necessarily cousins and so on. And even then, the brothers didn't have to. They could get out of it, though they'd suffer quite a bit of shame in the process.

And in chapter four of Ruth, we read that Naomi is going to sell her land. But the money will only last so long. Perhaps it will be long enough to provide for Naomi, but certainly not long enough to provide for Ruth, who will outlive Naomi.

And what's more, in the ancient world, it was not safe, and not a very safe place for a young unmarried widow. And so Ruth really needs a husband to provide for her and to protect her.

[7:14] And Naomi knows this. And so she comes up with a plan. Point one, verse one. 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, 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 when we read these verses here, this plan of Naomi's, it can sound like quite a negative kind of thing.

I mean, it can sound like the plans of a scheming mother-in-law, can't it? Training her daughter-in-law in how to seduce a man. It sounds like, you know, Naomi finds out, for example, perhaps from one of her sources, that Boaz will be on the threshing floor tonight.

[8:28] And then she tells Ruth to have a bath, get cleaned up, make sure you put on some of that nice smelling perfume, perhaps something, you know, called Moabite Madness, or whatever it is. Then put on your best clothes, which perhaps was just get out of your work clothes.

I mean, they were poor. They wouldn't have had a best set, so to speak. Or more likely, it refers to a large shawl or head covering, because that's what the Hebrew word can mean there. And it actually makes better sense, because Naomi tells Ruth to make sure she's concealed.

Don't let Boaz know you're there yet. Either way, she is to go down to the threshing floor, all doled up, and wait until Boaz has lots to eat and drink. And then she is to watch, or literally to know, the place he lies down.

And the Hebrew word for know can actually mean to sleep with them. And what's more, she is to uncover his feet, which was an invitation for sex, and hence marriage.

In fact, the Hebrew word for feet is sometimes used in the Bible as a euphemism for the private parts. It's pretty raunchy. And then Ruth is to lie down with him, which is quite suggestive as well.

[9:38] I mean, the whole way the narrator writes this, we could be easily forgiven for thinking that these are indeed the plans of a scheming mother-in-law, training Ruth in the art of seduction.

But I don't think so. You see, Naomi is not doing this for herself, as she is doing it for Ruth. See verse 1 again? It says, My daughter, I must find a home for you.

And next to the word home is a footnote. And down the bottom, the Hebrew says, find rest. Rest. Naomi's doing this to find rest for her daughter-in-law, Ruth.

And in verse 18, we also have the word rest. Boaz will not rest until the matter is settled. You see, the narrator starts and ends this episode, this chapter, with the idea of rest.

That's what Naomi's trying to provide for Ruth, rest. What's more, Naomi now knows God has been at work providing Boaz, who happens to be a close relative. And she also knows of this law in Deuteronomy about redeeming a widow and so on.

[10:41] And so rather than kind of sitting back and doing nothing, a kind of let go and let God mentality, rather Ruth, sorry, Naomi acts, knowing that God has been at work and knowing God's word establishes this law to provide.

In other words, God's acting and God's word actually give Naomi confidence to make this plan. But it is a risky plan. The very fact that the narrator writes with all this double meaning in the Hebrew, this double entendre, is the narrator's way of highlighting how risky this is, how it could be misinterpreted, even by us.

I mean, if Ruth is discovered all dressed up on the threshing floor, her actions could be misinterpreted, could they? She might be labelled as a prostitute or someone who seduces men of standing like Boaz.

After all, that's what the Moabite women were known for back in Numbers 25. It's a risky plan. I have two daughters myself, one of whom told me the other day about three boys she'd like to marry one day.

One of them was me, which I thought was kind of cute. But anyway, I tell you what, when it does come time for them to marry, I'll tell you what, I'm not going to be giving my daughters this kind of advice.

[11:55] But Ruth does, sorry, Naomi does. But it's in order to provide for Ruth and it's on the basis of seeing God's hand at work in chapter 2, verse 20 and knowing God's word about this law, about this redeemer.

You see, it's an informed risk, not a foolish one. And so Ruth obeys, which brings us to the proposal, point to verse 7. See if you can pick up which part is the proposal as I read.

Verse 7. When Boaz had finished eating and drinking, he was in good spirits. He went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down.

In the middle of the night, someone 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.

And you notice the proposal there? We'll come to that in a moment. But I need to say, verse 7 could again be misinterpreted to say that Boaz actually had too much to drink, got drunk.

[13:01] But I don't think so. We need to remember that after 10 years of famine, there is now finally a bumper harvest. It's payday. There was plenty of food. God had come to their aid, the aid of Israel. And so there was something worth celebrating.

So Boaz did. He and his servants ate, drank, and celebrated God's goodness to them. And after celebrating, Boaz sleeps near the pile of grain to protect his investment when he is startled.

He wakes to see a woman at his feet and asks, who are you, understandably? And notice Ruth's reply shows a sense of intimacy. She says, I am your servant. And then Ruth goes further than Naomi instructed and actually proposes to Boaz by saying, put the corner of your garment over me.

See, when a man put his garment or coat around someone in those days, it was a symbol that they were taking them under their wing, that you would marry them. By putting your garment around them was like a proposal.

And so strictly speaking, Ruth actually asked Boaz to propose to her. Some guys are just too slow off the mark. The girl has to make the first move. As is the case here.

[14:05] But there's actually more going on than that. The word garment literally means wing. Ruth asked Boaz to spread your wing over me. And this word was used back in chapter 2, verse 12.

Have a look there in your Bibles at chapter 2, verse 12 on the left-hand side of the page. Here, Boaz is speaking to Ruth. And he says, May the Lord repay you for what you have done.

May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wing you have come to take refuge. The same word there.

You see, Boaz does what God does for his people by taking the corner of his garment and spreading it over Ruth. He acts like God. And in chapter 2, he prays that Ruth will be richly rewarded for taking refuge under God's wing.

And then he answers his own prayer in part, as we saw. Well, now Ruth is calling on Boaz to answer that prayer in full. She's calling on Boaz to be the means by which God gives her full blessing.

[15:06] She's calling on Boaz to be her redeemer who marries her and continues Elimelech's family name, as we saw from Deuteronomy. But remember, Boaz is not Ruth's brother-in-law.

He does not have to marry her. If he had to marry her, wouldn't this man of standing, and integrity done so already? So how will he respond to Ruth's proposal?

Well, point 3, verse 10. 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. That's lovely, isn't it?

Boaz is blown away. He can't believe it. He can't believe that this beautiful lady of noble character would want him. It's quite romantic, really, isn't it? You can just imagine his eyes lighting up as he exclaims, this is greater kindness than what you showed your mother-in-law, Naomi.

[16:10] And the word for kindness here is again our word hesed, which speaks of God's extravagant, loving kindness. You see, Ruth could have chased after younger, presumably better-looking men, but she went for faithful old Boaz, and he is over the moon.

And so he says, I will do for you all you ask, and adds, everyone in town knows your noble character, Ruth. In fact, the phrase here that talks about Ruth's noble character is similar to the phrase in chapter 2, verse 1, which speaks of Boaz's noble character or worthy standing.

Same phrase. See, both Boaz and Ruth are people of standing, people of worth. But with love in the air, Boaz drops a bombshell. Have a look at verse 12.

Verse number 12. Although it is true that I am a guardian and 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 and redeemer, good.

Let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives, I will do it. He says, 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.

[17:26] You see the problem? The problem is that there is another kinsman redeemer who is a closer relative, who has priority, who needs to be asked first. Notice again that although it is described as a duty, it doesn't seem to be one they are bound to because neither are Ruth's brother-in-laws.

And so Ruth stays till morning. Some commentators think that funny business went on, but they're both people of noble character, so that's unlikely. But before Ruth returns home, look at what Boaz does in verse 15.

Verse 15, he also said, bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out. When she did so, he poured into six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her.

Then he went back to town. When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, how did it go, my daughter? Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her and added, he gave me these six measures of barley saying, don't go back to your mother-in-law empty handed.

Then Naomi said, wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens, for the man will not rest until the matter is settled today. We come to the end of the chapter. Before I asked Michelle to marry me, I actually took her parents out for dinner.

[18:41] We went to a favorite restaurant of theirs, even bought them a bottle of wine to butter them up. So they'd say yes, and they did, which was nice. Now is that what Boaz is doing here?

You know, loading up Ruth with grain for her mother-in-law to butter her up? I doubt it. I mean, Ruth has already kind of proposed to Boaz, hasn't she? And so presumably Boaz knows that Naomi has given permission.

But either way, Boaz again demonstrates his kindness, doesn't he? By giving food to Naomi. But there's more than that happening. You see, God is again showing through Boaz that he will provide for Naomi.

Remember how Naomi describes her return to Bethlehem back in chapter one? She says, I went away full but came back empty. And what does Boaz say to Ruth? Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.

In other words, God is using Boaz to fill Naomi's emptiness and we get a glimpse of it here. We'll see more of it next week though. But the chapter ends with a bit of uncertainty and suspense.

[19:43] Boaz has gone to town to sort the issue out but will he get the girl? Or will the other kingsmen redeem a pool rank and win Ruth for himself? Ruth is left waiting to see and so are we.

Unless, of course, you know the story. So what lessons then are there for us in this chapter which brings us to point four? Well, three things I think. First, we are again reminded of God's kindness through the kindness of the characters.

You see, Naomi shows kindness by trying to provide rest for Ruth. Ruth shows kindness, literally hesed, by seeking out faithful old Boaz. And Boaz shows kindness by spreading the corner of his wing or garment over Ruth, signalling he will redeem her if he can.

Everyone is acting like God. But it's this picture of Boaz spreading his garment over Ruth that Ezekiel actually picks up when he describes what God did for Israel. But there's one big difference.

Israel's character was very different to Ruth's noble character which attracted Boaz. Israel's character is quite the opposite in fact. There's nothing lovely or attractive about it.

[20:48] And at this point I want to do something that you should not really do when you're preaching. I want to show you another passage, a longer passage from Ezekiel chapter 16 but it will come up on the screen.

So have a look there. It says, On that day, God speaking to Israel, you were born, your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths.

No one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field. For on that day you were born, you were despised.

Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood. As you lay there in your blood, I said to you, live. Just pause there for a moment. Here God describes Israel's character as helpless, like a newborn baby but it's also kind of disgusting.

Kicking around in blood, despised, rejected. Yet God has compassion and says live. And then on the next slide we continue to read from verse 8 of Ezekiel 16.

[21:53] Later I passed by and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, notice this phrase, I spread the corner of my garment, the word garment, same word as in Ruth, wing over you and covered your naked body.

I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the sovereign Lord, and you became mine. And he did more than that. He also bathed them with water and washed the blood from them and put ointment on you, he says.

I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put leather sandals on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments. You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen. You see, when we look at Boaz's kindness to Ruth in spreading the corner of his garment over her, it points to a greater act of kindness, the kindness of God to Israel.

And it's a greater act for Israel had nothing attractive about them. Yet God showed them great kindness and love, making them his own people and washing them, bathing them, cleaning them and making them beautiful as his chosen people.

This is what we see here in Ruth chapter 3. You see, Ruth's character was noble. It attracted Boaz to her. But when it comes to Israel, there was nothing attractive about them.

[23:15] Yet God still showed that kindness and we actually are more like Israel than Ruth. And it's here I want us to turn to our second reading from Titus chapter 3.

So if you've got your Bibles there, please turn to page 1201. Titus chapter 3, starting at verse 3, the top right-hand corner of your page there.

Page 1201. Look at how our character is described before Jesus. Paul writes, at one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.

We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. That was our character. There's nothing lovely about us, was there?

We are like Israel, who is kicking around in their own blood, lying in their own blood, it said in Ezekiel. And if that image of blood is a little repulsive, then good.

[24:29] For we were repulsive to God because of our malice and envy and selfishness. We just forget how wretched we once were. But despite our wretched character, look at what God did in verse number four.

Verse number four, but when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, He saved us. And not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

It's very clear, isn't it? God showed us loving kindness. By His Spirit, God washes us clean as He did for Israel. He forgives us our sin. He spread the corner of His garment over us and redeemed us.

And notice it all comes through Jesus, who died for us, it says. And for us who believe in Jesus, then God makes us His precious children, heirs of eternal life, it says.

You see, in Boaz we see but a shadow of God's kindness to us. For Ruth had a noble character to attract Boaz, but we had no such character. Yet God still showered His loving kindness upon us who were unlovely.

[25:51] He gave up His Son for us so that we could be washed clean and given eternal life as an inheritance. And so the first question for us this morning is, what have we done with God's loving kindness?

What have we done with that? What have you done with that kindness that loved even us who are unlovely? Have you accepted it by believing in Jesus? As I said, it all comes through Jesus, and so we must believe in Him to receive it all.

Do you believe in Jesus? Jesus? Or are you still kicking around in your own blood? And for those of us who have trusted in Jesus, do we still appreciate God's loving kindness?

Do we realise what we were once like without Christ? And so see how amazing God's grace still is, that He would love even us. And in light of that, therefore, does that move us to act like God, as Naomi did, as Ruth and Boaz all do in this chapter?

In fact, in Titus chapter 2, which you've got open there, just across the other side of the page, above chapter 3, chapter 2, verse 11, look at what Paul says about responding to God's grace.

[26 : 57] Chapter 2, verse 11, it says, For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people, and it teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions, and instead to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness, and to purify for himself for people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

See, last week we heard that God's kindness ought to motivate us to be kind to one another, but this week we're not just to show kindness, we're not to be motivated just to show kindness, but we're to be motivated to show God's character in general.

His kindness, his love, his mercy, his godliness, we had to be godly, like God, reflecting his upright character.

Just as Ruth and Boaz had upright character, like God, so too are we, and our motivation is to be God's grace. In other words, we're to consider Christ and let God's kindness in Jesus move us to live godly lives for him.

And this may mean even taking risks. And not foolish risks, but faithful risks. Remember Naomi, she saw that God was working to provide for her, she believed it, she trusted that, yet she didn't sit back and do nothing.

[28 : 24] Rather, God's sovereign hand at work encouraged her, gave her confidence. You see, God is sovereign, yes, but he also gives us responsibility to take action as well, and so we are to act, but never without trusting God, and never without looking at God's word and living in light of that as Naomi did.

But sometimes we take risks to provide for the good of others as Naomi sought to provide for Ruth's rest. A friend of mine was studying and was trying to finish an essay at Bible College, this was, and it was due the next day, and when someone knocked on his door in need, there was an issue and they needed to talk with someone.

Now, he could have said, look, I'm really, I don't have time, I've got to get this done, can you come back tomorrow and we'll go out for a coffee, that sort of thing, but he took the risk to help the other person, to show kindness, knowing that his essay might be underdone, which it was in the end, and receive lower marks.

But he knew of God's kindness to him, so he sought to show kindness to others, even when it's risky. It could be as little as that, you see. Of course, in the New Testament, the word rest is not so much talking about rest in this world, but our rest in the next.

In the Bible, the word rest becomes the name for heaven. And so we had to even take risks to help people find eternal rest. For one guy called Rob, it's not his real name, he was studying medicine, doing well, I'm not sure if I've said this before, but he was from an Asian family, and so his parents were particularly pleased, they could boast about their son who was going to be a doctor at all the family events and so on.

[30:00] And then two years in, he gave it up to work for AFES, you know, student ministry work at the universities. And that's risky, because that depends on the generosity of people.

And anyone working AFES will tell you that the income goes up and down and you never know what's going to come in. And it was particularly risky because his father said, look, if you do that, I'm going to disown you.

Yet, for the good of others, for their eternal rest, he went ahead, and his father did not speak to him for two years. But through him, hundreds of students have been encouraged and scores have been converted.

It was a risky plan, but not a foolish one. There is a difference. Rather, he made this plan in light of God's word and by trusting in him. Or take our son, just this past week, he came home Thursday, I think it was, asking if he could get out of doing CRE.

You want to go to CRE? CRE anymore, because none of his friends went, and they thought it was kind of silly. And so we talked about it with him. We talked about why it was good to go to CRE to encourage the teacher, and perhaps you could even invite some of your friends along to hear what the teacher has to say.

[31:08] Now, that's a risky plan, really. It's not even us doing it, it's our own son, and he could be very likely ridiculed or rejected for doing that. It's happened to him before. But as Naomi trusted in God and took a risk, in light of God's word, for the good of others, things, then so too must we, you see, not just for their good, but ultimately for God's glory.

And so consider, please, God's kindness in Christ, that he would spread his wing over us who are thoroughly unattractive. See God's amazing grace afresh, and let that move us to live for him and for his glory.

Let's pray. Our gracious God and Father, we do thank you for this lovely story of Ruth. But we thank you most of all that it is a shadow of your kindness to us, that it points to your greater loving kindness towards us who are so unlovely.

Father, in light of your kindness, in light of your grace, help us, we pray, to live no longer for ourselves, but for Jesus, even if that means taking risks. Father, we pray that you would help us do this for the good of others and for the glory of your name.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.