

Banking on God's Kindness

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[0 : 0 0] How about I pray for us before Christian comes to speak to us. Let's pray. Gracious Father, we do thank you for your word. And we do pray, Father, that you would help us to focus on your word now, to put out of mind various distractions.

Please help us to have ears to hear and minds to understand. But more than that, that we would have hearts that would seek to apply your word to our lives. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, good morning. 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 us may have mixed feelings about masks being optional, but it actually makes things up here a bit easier. I think before when masks were compulsory, all I could see were your eyebrows.

So when people raised their eyebrows, I didn't know whether they were smiling, laughing, yawning, or confused. So it's great to be able to see your full faces here today.

[1 : 0 3] 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. Maybe we 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 progression. But have you ever taken a risk for the sake of another person?

My former church was a cross-culture Church of Christ on Swanston Street in the CBD. 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.

Now, 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. Now, 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.

[2 : 1 3] 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 in need who came through the church.

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 have to do with Ruth 3? Well, today we'll see Ruth 3 is a magnificent display of risk-taking for the sake of others. 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. So she rightly returns to Israel, but wrongly says that she returns empty.

Her bitterness blinded her to God's kindness through Ruth. Because in that chapter, Ruth binds herself to Naomi, a widow. Her famous line was, Where you go, I will go.

[3 : 21] And where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people. And your God, my God. Now, in chapter 2, we see Naomi change.

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

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

So now we're in chapter 3. And by now, 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.

[4 : 23] 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 in verse 1, there's actually an echo of Ruth 1 verse 9, where Naomi encourages her daughters-in-laws to leave her.

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

And this may seem strange to us today in modernity, but it wasn't strange 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 a source of protection.

[5 : 32] And Naomi may have her husband's land for now, but as an old widow, she'll eventually need to sell it. And the money will last only for so long. It may provide for her, but definitely not for the younger Ruth.

So this means Ruth doesn't have long-term security or protection. And as we saw at the end of chapter 2, the harvest eventually ends.

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

Winnowing barley on the threshing floor at night. She asks Ruth to wash, put on perfume, and get dressed. Now, we may think from this line 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's the main thing Naomi is doing. We have to remember here, Ruth is a widow. And back in those days, widows in mourning would signal that they're still grieving their husband by wearing clothings of widowhood.

[6 : 49] For us, it would be like wearing black to a funeral. But they would keep wearing it for many days until they finished grieving. So here, Ruth is probably still wearing her widow clothes.

And this also explains why Boaz hasn't talked to Ruth about marriage. He probably saw from what she was wearing that she's still grieving her husband and wanted to give her 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.

I wonder if you guys raised your eyebrows when you read this. I know I definitely did. What in the world is Naomi trying 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 to help your daughter find a husband? Of course not.

[7 : 58] And this is because this plan can easily be misconstrued as seduction, not a marriage proposal. Going to the threshing floor at night was something prostitutes would often do to approach men in ancient Israel.

And waiting until after Boaz eats and drinks, well, that could be misunderstood as Naomi wanting Boaz to be drunk so that he would lie with Ruth. In fact, this kind of tactic is how Lot's daughters got Lot to lay with them.

And do you guys know which nation actually came from Lot's daughters? It's the nation of Moab. Ruth's ancestors used this very tactic.

So one could think, Naomi wants Ruth to repeat her ancestors' actions. And then there's uncovering Boaz's feet, which actually has a double meaning in Hebrew.

It's a euphemism for genitalia. So from a cursory reading of this paragraph, you may easily think Naomi is training Ruth on how to seduce Boaz and trap him to marrying her.

[9 : 06] But I don't think this is what Naomi's intentions are because it seems so inconsistent with the portrayal of Ruth and Boaz throughout the first two chapters. And Boaz later on calls Ruth a woman of noble character, which is a weird thing to say if he thought that she 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 say. 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 any witnesses to any humiliation that Ruth may suffer. Why wait until after Boaz eats and drinks?

Well, the text actually says later on that Boaz was in good spirits. So Naomi probably wants Ruth to wait to catch Boaz in a good mood. So he responds favorably to Ruth's big request.

And why uncover his feet? Well, since this is at night, this is probably how Naomi wants Ruth to wake Boaz up. You know what a Melbourne winter is like.

[10 : 16] 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, right? You're cold. That's probably what Naomi wants to do here.

It's probably the most polite way someone with a low standing like Ruth can wake up a noble like Boaz. Now, if that was Naomi's plan, why did the author write it in such a way that we could misunderstand this as something dodgy like seduction?

Well, I think he wrote it that way to point out how risky this plan is. 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 either being abused or humiliated. So Naomi's asking Ruth to take a big risk here.

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

[11 : 23] She probably 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 here.

God's kindness that was revealed to her through Ruth in chapter 1 when she binds herself to Naomi. Naomi. And God's kindness that was revealed in Boaz in chapter 2 when he generously provides for Ruth and Naomi.

So Naomi's risk isn't reckless at all. She's not trusting in any odd bloke or any stranger. She's trusting in a man who has proven to reflect the image of God's kindness to her.

Now, 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 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.

[12 : 30] 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. In the Hebrew, the word startled actually can be translated shivered. So he might have shivered awake because Ruth uncovered his feet.

And then 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 like me, as someone who likes to just blindly follow instructions, without really thinking, I would be flustered at this point. I would probably say something like, Naomi didn't tell me what to do if this happens.

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

[13 : 35] In chapter 2, she says she's a foreigner. Now, the phrase your servant is likely a term of respect of a younger woman towards an older man. But it also carries a connotation of intimacy more 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.

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 in the Hebrew is the same word for wing.

So it could be translated, spread the wing of your garment over me. I wonder if this reminds you of something you 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 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.

[15 : 01] And to spread one's wings over someone is actually a euphemism in Hebrew, meaning to marry them. And I actually have that custom too from my ethnic group.

I come from the Batak tribe in northern Sumatra in Indonesia. 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.

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

And perhaps for ancient Israel, there's a similar story. So I can appreciate the meaning of the idiom here, to spread one's garment over the woman. All right.

Back to the story. She tells Boaz he should marry her as a guardian redeemer of her family. And we'll look at the whole practice of redemption next week.

[16:10] But for our purposes, it's enough to know that Ruth is boldly calling on Boaz to marry her. Now we have to imagine Ruth's boldness here. Naomi told Ruth to wait, to wait for Boaz to tell her what to do.

But Ruth ends up telling Boaz what to do. And we have to remember her standing in society. Here is a servant, a foreigner, a widow, making a demand of an upright, wealthy, Israelite nobleman.

Her petition is bold and to ask so unashamedly despite her status is extraordinary for Ruth. But like Naomi, she too knows 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 Gospels Jesus repeatedly responds to sinners, responds to the sick and responds to the unclean who desperately seek healing from him.

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

[17:29] 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 Christian, how bold have you been in your petitions to God? Do you believe in the kindness of his character?

He is an exceedingly kind God. Make your requests known to him. Now let's see how Boaz responds. 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 one who is more closely related than I.

[18:28] 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. And when she did, did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her. Then he went back to town.

So Boaz responds by calling Ruth her daughter, a term of endearment. And then he says, Ruth's proposal is an even greater act of kindness than her act of kindness before to Naomi.

Why is that? Why is Ruth's proposal a greater act of kindness? Well, in the text, we see the first reason is because Ruth is willing to marry an older man.

[19 : 29] Now, humanly speaking, you would look for a spouse around the same age bracket to marry because you'd assume probably with a similar age comes better compatibility, similar lifespan, similar levels of attractiveness maybe.

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

As I mentioned, we'll hear about redemption next week. But another thing that's worth knowing this week is that back then when a man dies without an heir, it's normally the obligation of his brother to take his wife to produce an heir so that his family line doesn't die out.

It's actually outlined in Deuteronomy 25, 5-6. So by Ruth proposing marriage to Boaz because of his position as a guardian redeemer, she's actually also being kind to her deceased husband and Naomi's family.

So this is a greater kindness because through this marriage proposal, she blesses not only an old Boaz, but she blesses her deceased husband and Naomi's family by continuing their line.

[20 : 43] 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 that 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 16-18.

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

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.

[21 : 55] In Ruth 1, Naomi says that 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 reflects God's kindness.

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

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 next week how everything resolves. Now, how is this story relevant to us today? Well, as much as Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz reflect God's kindness to each other, their actions are but a dim shadow when it comes to God's kindness to us in the gospel.

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

[23 : 15] and this plan that God hatched did not merely risk humiliation but guaranteed it for Jesus. Philippians 2 says, Christ being in the very nature of God emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of a human, and humbled himself becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Jesus was humiliated for us. He was mocked, he was abused, he was crucified so that we may be one with God. And in a kindness that transcends Ruth's, God pursues us, sinners.

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, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

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

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

[24 : 39] So if you're not a Christian today, bank on God's kindness. Take this invitation, repent of your sins and believe in Jesus Christ, your Redeemer.

And if you are a Christian, well, the application for today 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, risking, and responding to each other's needs.

Kind of like my first illustration in Cross-Culture Church of Christ. They planned to build this food bank, they risked exposing their health so that they could share their groceries with others, and they responded 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, thank you, Lord, for your kindness revealed to us in the gospel, that you made a plan that ensured humiliation for your son, Jesus Christ, that we may be one with you, that we may be reconciled, that our sins may be forgiven, that Jesus pursued us despite our sins, despite our immorality, despite our rebellion, and loved us anyway, and that you are now our redeemer, and in you we can take refuge from all things, from sin, from death, and from all evil, knowing, O Lord, that you will guard us till you return.

[26 : 18] Help us wait until your return, wait and anticipating with great joy and hope. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.