

Selfless Integrity!

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[0 : 0 0] Gracious Father, as we come now to this passage from Scripture, Ruth chapter 3, I may the words I prepare in advance, Lord, the words that you have anointed in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, it was some time ago when I started in the book of Ruth here. Of course, I'm not here that often, but it was last year, and we looked at Ruth chapter 1. And then earlier on this year in spring, we looked at Ruth chapter 2.

So every time I come to her, we have to do a bit of a recap, because it's kind of big times, big gaps, isn't it, between these chapters. Ruth is a harvest story. So in that sense, it's an appropriate story for this time of year, this season, isn't it? So we're going to cover Ruth chapter 3 today, and then I'm here next week, so we'll finish off with Ruth chapter 4. It's a lovely story. It's a redemption story.

We have these characters of Naomi, the widowed mother-in-law. Ruth, who is the Moabite S, she's from Moab. She's also widowed and daughter-in-law of Naomi, and she has no children.

And then Boaz, the Israelite man who owns land and in whose field Ruth has been gleaning. These women were destitute. They had no inheritance. And so Naomi chooses to return to Israel from Moab to her hometown of Bethlehem. Now, you might recall from chapter 1, if I read these words out, you might remember Ruth's famous words, where she insists on returning from Moab, which was her homeland, to Israel with Naomi, even though Ruth, as I say, wasn't an Israelite. Chapter 1, verses 16 and 17.

[2 : 1 2] Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die. And there I will be buried.

May the Lord deal with me, be ever so severely. If even death separates you and me. Wow. Powerful and emotional words of commitment by Ruth. Words of love, really, aren't they?

And so we have these two destitute women, Naomi and Ruth, who return back to Israel, back to Bethlehem. Now, enshrined in Mosaic law, in Leviticus and in Deuteronomy, was a kind of welfare system for the poor, for the alien, and the widow, and so on. These laws were specific to harvest time.

And it just so happened that when Naomi and Ruth returned back to Bethlehem, it was harvest time. It was the barley harvest, which had been followed by the wheat harvest. And these ancient laws were instituted to remind the Israelites of their humble beginnings. That at one time, they were slaves in Egypt under Pharaoh. And it was God who rescued them. And so they mustn't forget that. And consequently, they mustn't ignore those who've fallen on hard times. And so this law, or these laws, made provision during harvest to leave a little for those who were living on the edges, those who were living on the edges of survival. People just like Naomi and Ruth. And again, you might recall from chapter one, that Naomi, on return to Bethlehem from Moab, she was very low in spirits. And you can understand that.

And so she deliberately called herself Mara, which translates to bitter. Because Naomi had lost everything. She lost her husband. She lost her two sons. There were no grandchildren. There was no land to return to. There was no inheritance. There was nothing to show for this time of struggle. And so she feels naturally bitter. She feels really low. But not so Ruth. Ruth has a resolve and an integrity that shines through in the story. She never complains. She just wants to dedicate her life to Naomi and to follow the God of the Israelites. So Ruth takes up the mantle of caring for the two of them, these two women. And she heads off to glean in the fields. Well, for no other reason given in this account, other than by sheer chance, Ruth gleans in a field owned by a man called Boaz. Of course, we know there's no such thing as chance, is there? Not where God's concerned. And I know that. I've experienced that personally from my own journey into mission and then into ministry. Occasions of coincidence where God's hand is so clearly at work. And this is not some exclusive thing because I'm special, because I'm certainly not special. As Marianne will confirm to you, I'm not special. Unlike everybody else with all my foibles and failings. This is the way God is for everyone. Everyone who commit to doing the will of God, to seeking to follow and to serve him. Jesus told us the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your hearts and with all your soul, with all your mind. Matthew chapter 22 at verse 37. And when we do that, albeit imperfectly, God reveals himself to us through the course of our lives.

[6 : 12] When we look back, we can see where God has led us, how God has blessed us, how God has grown us. Now remember, Ruth's desire, Ruth's desire is to make Israel's God, her God. And God is now honoring her desire and her integrity. Ruth epitomizes, doesn't she, selflessness. She came to Bethlehem to support, comfort, and love her mother-in-law, Naomi. So now she's the one who wants to go out and get them help. She goes out into the fields as a stranger in a foreign land. And there are risks involved. She's a single woman from out with the community. But regardless of the risks, she does this as an act of selfless love. And God in his sovereignty and his faithfulness guides her to the field of Boaz. Well, it's not long before Boaz arrives in that field and Ruth is brought to his attention. And before we know it, something is happening between these two people. As she's invited in the first day to eat lunch with him. And Boaz goes out of his way to bless her with extra rations and grains to take back to Naomi. And it's on her return to Naomi, as Ruth explains the amazing day she's had and now how she's been blessed, that Naomi recognizes that Boaz is what we call a kinsman redeemer, a relative of a late husband. As I say, no coincidences. Maybe that sheds some light on your own experiences in life, key moments, things that you've experienced. And you've looked back and said, wow, how did that happen?

Again, this is mosaic law about kinsman redeemer. It makes provision for family members who are without means. It's a legal obligation to ensure that destitute family members are looked after.

Well, Ruth carries on gleaning throughout this harvest season, this two-month season of the barley harvest, which then merges into the wheat harvest. And towards the end of the harvest, it's Naomi who chooses to do something for Ruth. So something's obviously changed in Naomi because Naomi, remember, was very bitter, very low. But all of a sudden now, she sees things a little bit differently.

Remember, Ruth had dedicated herself to caring and supporting Naomi, but now Naomi decides that she wants to help Ruth, her daughter-in-law. Naomi has realized that Boaz's blessing upon them may well be due to this kinsman redeemer or kinsman responsibility. But there may be something else as well. After all, Boaz is an eligible bachelor, a man of some wealth, a man of social standing within the community, and Ruth is a young widow without children. They clearly have a mutual respect for each of her. And so Naomi is speculating that there could even be something else, maybe some chemistry between them, as yet not been realized or spoken of or talked about. And so she instructs Ruth to wash herself, then perfume herself and dress in her best clothes in verse 3. Of course, up until this point,

Ruth has probably been wearing clothes that reflect her status as a widow. So she wouldn't have been wearing perfume or any possible makeup or anything like that. And that was deliberate, wasn't it? That was to signify any possible suitor that she wasn't available for marriage or anything like that.

[10 : 10] But now Naomi tells her to dress in such a way that Boaz will understand that you're no longer in mourning, that you're moving on. You're ready for marriage. Then Naomi gives Ruth these rather bizarre instructions about uncovering Boaz's feet and then lying next to them. That seems a bit odd to us, doesn't it, in this 21st century? We need to be careful, don't we, of not trying to project back onto these things that we read about our own cultural understandings.

This wasn't some contemporary message about her sexual availability. This is a non-verbal message within that culture that Ruth was seeking Boaz's security, seeking his protection.

Notice, Ruth doesn't question Naomi, does she? She simply says, I will do whatever you say in verse 5. And again, there is a risk. This could go terribly wrong. Ruth could be misinterpreted, misinterpreted.

She could be rejected by Boaz. She could be accused of being like a prostitute, really. This could lead to all sorts of accusations and humiliation and ridicule and even the expulsion from the community.

But Naomi understands, doesn't she? She reads the situation and she obviously knows the culture and the community. You see, this wasn't so much, although at one level it is about marriage, it was about something else.

[11 : 48] It was about being redeemed. It was about redemption. It was about security. As this plot unfolds, Naomi is hoping that God is on board, that God will bless this matchmaking venture, that God will bless these plans. I wonder how many times we do that.

We do something, thinking, I hope God's on board us. God will bless our plans. Or could it be the case that God is actually the orchestrator of these circumstances?

That it's God who is sowing thoughts that lead to actions which will result in the right outcome? Well, I believe it is the latter, that it is God, from the point of view that Ruth was guided to Boaz's field before anyone knew about the fact that Boaz was a kinsman redeemer, that relationship was there.

That God was calling Ruth away back in Moab, and that's why she said, Your God will be my God. Ruth was drawn to Yahweh. She was attracted to God because God intentionally wanted to bless Ruth as part of his much bigger narrative of redemption.

And we'll get to know next week just how big a part of redemption Ruth becomes. I wonder, how does that change your perspective or understanding on the plans God has for you?

[13 : 20] Well, we know all of this took place around harvest, and at the end of harvest is a time of realizing the fruit of your labors, of giving thanks and celebrating. Now, I know Simon's here.

Do we have any other farmers here? Well, if we have, I wonder, have you completed your harvest? You've finished your harvest.

Well, I know from my time as a minister over in Buchan, I was surrounded by big farms, and most of the congregation were farmers, that at the end of the harvest, especially the grain harvest, many farmers here in Scotland will crack open a good bottle of malt.

Why not? To celebrate the culmination of all that hard work, all that effort, all those long hours. Rightly so. Well, it would appear that this was also the case for Boaz.

At the end of the harvest, there's some merriment, and verse 7 tells that Boaz is in good spirits. I don't know if it was Dalmore or whatever it was, but it was in good spirits. He goes down to lie besides the grain pile, where he's most likely alone.

[14 : 31] Then after a short while, Ruth diligently executes Naomi's plan, uncovering his feet and lying besides them. As I said a moment ago, this wasn't about her communicating anything sexually.

This was a cultural thing. Ruth was asking Boaz to marry her, to execute his kinsman-redeemer responsibility, to look after her, to take care of her.

In ancient Near East culture, servants would lie at the feet of their masters, would lie kind of perpendicular to their feet. And of course, feet in ancient times were pretty dirty, dusty things, weren't they?

Well, it's not until sometime in the night that Boaz is stirred or startled, and he's woken up to find a woman lying at his feet. He then asks, Who is it?

Ruth responds with, I am your servant. That's what she says, I am your servant. And the Hebrew word she uses is amar, which communicates her femininity, her vulnerability, and her need of his protection as a man.

[15 : 42] She then asks him to spread his garment over her, which literally means, Please take me under your protection. Please spread your wings over me, and be my husband.

That's what she's saying in this situation. A bit different from what we do here, isn't it? And what happens today here in the UK or in Scotland, in our Western culture.

How we need to raise up the many positives of marriage and family, because it feels like we've raced to the bottom when it comes to human relationships in Scotland today, sadly.

It's as if civil society can't get rid of the idea of traditional marriage fast enough. And I find that very, very sad. I believe we are paying a price, paying a high price, for rejecting what God has instituted for his creation, for humanity.

As generations of children will model what they've seen their parents do. And the only way to change that is with the teaching of God's word.

[16 : 56] The very future stability of our society is only a reflection of today's present domestic stability. Unfortunately, in our media and in our politics, this cry for freedom has repercussions.

We've done an amazing job, haven't we, of undermining something that's very precious. We live in an instant society today, don't we? A society which considers time invested almost as time wasted.

And I'm generalising, okay? But the way popular society and civil society has redefined marriage, or communicated that marriage is irrelevant, is extremely tragic, I believe.

Well, Borset's response to Roof is so gentle and so respectful, isn't it? The Lord bless you, my daughter, he replied.

This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier. You've not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid, he says.

[18 : 05] I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. Boaz could have rejected Roof, but he doesn't.

He shows such valour, such kindness. Roof is dressed to communicate that she's no longer in mourning, and she's asked him to take her literally as his future wife.

Boaz, on the other hand, responds with such kindness. He's clearly an older man, a man of maturity, while Roof is still young. And Boaz clearly has an affection for her, and he sees her choice as being of great kindness to him, he says.

Maybe Boaz, as an older man, had resigned himself to being a bachelor for the rest of his days, and so Roof is as much an answer to his needs as Boaz is to her needs.

But here in the middle of the night, we're in that Ruth's request is not straightforward. That in the line of kinsmen relatives, there is one who is closer.

[19 : 16] And so Boaz, being meticulous in integrity and propriety, tells Ruth that there is one we need to ask and invite first. That puts a span in the works, doesn't it?

And Boaz will not delay. He'll do it first thing in the morning. And that's hardly an action of one who doesn't desire to see this through to its right conclusion.

In the morning, Ruth leaves the threshing floor before anyone else should see her, because that might have led to accusations, and it would have created unnecessary complications and attention for both of them.

But before Ruth leaves, Boaz once again blesses her with these six measures of grain so as not to return empty-handed to Naomi. Six measures was probably all she could just about carry, actually.

What we see here in Ruth is a model of Christian virtue, isn't it? of sacrificial love shown to her mother-in-law of Ruth's faith and hope in the God of Israel and how God is blessing that behavior, that integrity, something which today so often is viewed as being old-fashioned, sadly.

[20 : 33] Or call me old-fashioned, because I just find Ruth's behavior so attractive, as I do also the rightness and integrity of this Bethlehem farmer, Boaz.

We live today, don't we, in an age of immense pressure, an age of budget constraints, where time becomes increasingly precious, and so there's a strong temptation to use methods that will give the best results in the shortest possible time with the lowest overheads.

In such an age, people can become casualties, can't they? Relationships can become casualties. People make idols of things, idols in consumerism, in business, idols in sport or music, idols in politics, and so on.

But as we gain more in years in this world, as we grow older, we begin to realize that relationships are the most important thing. The most precious thing we have are our relationships, often those relationships within family, those love relationships.

The story of Ruth points us to Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God who's orchestrating the events written about here.

[21 : 50] It's a story of restoration because, of course, Yahweh is a God of restoration. He first restores us, doesn't he, through his Son, Jesus Christ.

It's through him that we can have a relationship with the Father. And from that restored relationship flows the opportunity to know many more acts of restoration in our lives.

God is a God who heals the brokenhearted, who binds up our wounds. Ruth is a lovely redemption story, a story that reminds that God wants to redeem our lives too, so that we might come to know the peace, the security, and the joy of fellowship with the living God through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Let's just pray. Heavenly Father, I just thank you for your words, and I pray if those words have spoken to anybody here, somebody who is finding themselves struggling with relationships in their own situation, that, Lord, you'd pour out your love on them in such a way they'd feel the warmth of that love in their hearts and realize that they know that you know everything and you're going before them.

And if they turn to you, they can depend on you. You'll go before them, Lord, and guide them in that sense. Bless them, Lord, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.