

Ruth 3

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[0 : 00] Would you turn with me now to the chapter we read, Ruth chapter 3, on page 269, and to the matters that we find here in this chapter.

It's, in some respects, a difficult chapter. In some respects, it's perhaps a sort of paradoxical chapter, but I do want to suggest that there's quite a bit in it, I believe, which is very appropriate to the last Sunday of a year.

Now, as a result of this chapter, Naomi and Ruth have been much maligned. And it's, Naomi, for example, has been criticised for devious planning, and Ruth has been criticised for just plain forwardness or pushiness, perhaps.

And, indeed, it's sometimes used to suggest that, really, Ruth and Boaz have been in some sort of sexual relationship before marriage. But, in actual fact, it's not the case.

And, in particular, I would draw your attention, in that respect, to where, in verse 11, Boaz says to Ruth, all my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character.

[1 : 27] Very significant, that verse, because it explains, really, how it was possible for a pillar of the community, like Boaz, to end up marrying someone who was a Moabite woman.

And remember that Moabites weren't supposed to be accepted into the community for ten generations. But Ruth's reputation was such that even this man, Boaz, very much one of the leading figures in the community, was aware that it would be perfectly all right if he accepted Ruth. There was no stain at all on Ruth's character. But that's really quite marginal and not relevant to what I want to focus on today. I want to look at this chapter and highlight three things.

First of all, the planning of Naomi. Secondly, the faith of Ruth. And thirdly, the theology of this chapter three of the book of Ruth. So, first of all, let's look at the planning of Naomi.

Because what Naomi is proposing here in this chapter is really quite remarkable. It's a strange, strange venture that she's planning here.

[2 : 36] It's risky, it's daring, and it's also absolutely full of theological significance as well. And I want to suggest to you this morning that Naomi is above all, and especially here in chapter three, an example of an active faith.

Naomi is an example of active faith. Naomi is not passive. So many of the Lord's people allow their faith to be passive.

And in over a course of a year, so many of the Lord's people, if they really look back at it objectively and analytically, they would have to admit that they have been people of passive faith.

I say that of myself. In many respects, I've been far too passive. I suspect most of us have. And Naomi, by the way, as well as not being passive, she's not fatalistic either.

Because there are so many people whose faith doesn't necessarily amount to much more than something like what will be, will be. And there are many people in this world, and I think sadly there are many Christians as well, who at the end of the day, their faith in terms of what they've done has led to a sort of description, a nap description, that basically they've been saying, what will be, will be.

[3 : 52] That's God's doing. There's nothing I can do about it. In terms of how they live their lives, that's really pretty much what it's been. And it's the case sometimes that their faith has been a sort of false piety, which has actually been much more than an excuse for laziness and less than a lot of people.

If the Lord doesn't act, then what can I do about it? And they have been people whose faith hasn't been active. So I would suggest to you that Naomi didn't have a passive faith.

She didn't have a fatalistic faith. And she didn't either have a sort of false piety, which justified her or excused her for doing next to nothing. Naomi is an example of what not to be in that respect.

And if we basically have to say, well, my life perhaps hasn't been quite like that, then I think there's an important lesson for us. But I want to suggest, too, that in a much more important way, if you look at this chapter, that Naomi embodies a very important ingredient in what we call guidance. One of the things which puzzles the Lord's people, which many of the Lord's people struggle with, others are very confident and they make very definite statements about this, how does the Lord guide us?

[5 : 06] Well, I want to suggest as well that if we look at Naomi closely, we get insight into how the Lord's people should seek guidance and how they should follow guidance.

The key thing I would suggest to you really is this, that Naomi is a person who took the initiative. But the way in which she took the initiative was in following the direction which she believed God was already pointing out.

Naomi was a woman who took the initiative, but always following in the direction that she believed the Lord was already indicating. And this is a very, very important thing that we should think about. If we're looking for the guidance for the way ahead, we should look backwards as well at this time of year and see where the Lord has been leading us.

What direction has the Lord been revealing to us that our lives should go? And we should seek to follow on, taking the initiative from there on. Naomi, I believe, was a person who discerned God's direction and then followed where he was leading and moving.

[6 : 23] And that's vital, I believe, for the life of the individual Christian, for the lives of congregations, for the lives of God's Church as a whole. We need to seek grace, we need to seek wisdom, to discern the direction which God has been moving in and then to follow in that line.

Important personally, important congregationally, important denominationally, important in the whole of the wider work of the Christian Church.

Because while politicians may have U-turns, God very rarely makes U-turns. And very rarely in the lives of his people does he require them to make U-turns after they have been converted.

There's a sequence to God's guidance by which our past feeds in to our present and into our future. And I want to suggest that if you look at the life of Naomi, that's what she reveals. That's what she reveals. Way back in chapter 1, you read chapter 1 and she's basically seeking, that the Lord will provide for Ruth and indeed for her other daughter-in-law, Orpah.

[7 : 53] Way back in chapter 1, verse 8, Naomi says to her two daughters-in-law, Go back each of you to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you as you have shown to your dead and to me.

May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband. Orpah goes back to Noah. Ruth stays with Naomi and Naomi perceives that she wants that for Ruth.

She perceives that she has a responsibility for Ruth. She guides Ruth to go to the field to glean. She advises to stay in the field of Boaz. And then she starts to realise that this is where the Lord has been leading.

And so she seeks to advance that. She seeks to take the initiative in this area where the Lord has already revealed, as she perceives, that that's what he is proposing to do.

And I would suggest to you that as we come to the end of this year, that's what we all should be doing. Looking back on our lives in the last year or the last ten years, if you want, however many years you want to go back, and seek to discern prayerfully where the Lord has been leading.

[9 : 07] And then if you want to make New Year resolutions, and they're not necessarily a bad thing at all, and we should try to keep them, then our New Year's resolutions should be aimed, should be geared at advancing us in the ways which the Lord is revealing to us he wants us to go, rather than taking totally new directions.

Unless the Lord has been indicating that we need to take, in some way or other, a totally new direction in our lives. So I want to suggest to you that when we look at chapter 3, we need to think about Naomi's plan.

And we need to adopt the same sort of planning ourselves and our own lives. So that's the first thing. The planning of Naomi. Naomi's not passive. She takes the initiative in line with the guidance that God has already given her.

And there she says, in chapter 3, my daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for, is not Boaz, with whose servant girl should have been, a kinsman of ours.

Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor, and so it goes on. But that brings us then to the faith of Ruth.

[10:21] Ruth is, our response to God's guidance is to act in faith as Ruth determined to do. Ruth is, as well as Naomi, Ruth is a woman of active faith.

But I think there's a way in which, it's the planning that strikes our attention with Naomi, whereas it's Ruth's faith, I think, which is, which is brought to the fore here. It seems to me that Ruth comes over as a woman of faith, whose faith is informed, whose faith is guided, if you like, by her remarkable theological perceptiveness.

And I want to draw your attention in that connection to verse 9. Who are you? Boaz asks Ruth. I am your servant, Ruth, she says. Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman redeemer.

Remember that term, kinsman redeemer? Perhaps the young people don't remember this, don't understand this. Kinsman redeemer in Israel, if I just say a word to the young people for a moment. A kinsman redeemer was a very important person in Old Testament Israel.

Now in those days, you know, life was hard, even in Israel, the land frowns, milk and honey. People didn't live as long, especially men didn't tend to live as long.

[11:39] It was a time of warfare. Warfare. It was a time of general unrest, and there were accidents, and the men had to work physically very, very hard. It was not at all unusual for relatively young women to be left as widows.

Their husbands died. Sometimes, they would have a family to bring up. Now the way things worked, a widow had no means of supporting herself.

She couldn't inherit property. Very difficult for a woman in Old Testament Israel to actually inherit property. So what happened was that the nearest male relative had a responsibility to marry her or to provide for her as best he could to take her into his family and look after them.

And that was what was supposed to happen. So that there wouldn't be anyone, no widow would be left not able to support herself, not able to live. So there'd always be a kinsman redeemer.

And that's what Ruth is reminding Boaz about. Spread the corner of your garment over me since you are a kinsman redeemer. But I want you to go back to chapter 2 and verse 12 in particular.

[12:55] And remember that Boaz has been being very generous to Ruth and giving her extra sheaves of grain to gather so that she and Naomi would be able to live.

And Ruth says to Boaz in verse 10, Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me, a foreigner? Boaz replied, I have been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before.

Then he says this, May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Boaz has said, this is the spiritual significance of what you have been doing. You have come to seek refuge under the God of Israel even though you were originally from Moab, a Moabite woman. And Boaz is saying, May the Lord actually provide for you since you have put your trust in him and you have asked him to spread his wings as it were figuratively over you.

And Ruth in chapter 3 at verse 9 picks up that very thought. Spread the corner of your garment, not the Lord's wings, not the Lord's wings, Boaz's garment, over me since you are a kinsman redeemer.

[14:21] Ruth is being very, shall we say, spiritually sharp here. She's taken Boaz's words, wings of refuge, and transferred them to Boaz's garment.

And when she says, cover me with the corner of your garment, she's asking Boaz really to answer his own prayer. His garment corner will implement the Lord's protective covering of Ruth with the Lord's wing.

And Ruth, perhaps I think we've got her seeing here, that marriage to Boaz was to be the means by which the Lord was going to protect her. And whether Ruth quite perceived this, she probably was too humble, I think, to suggest this, but it was also the case that the Lord was going to repay her in full for her past kindnesses to Naomi by providing for her like that.

Ruth is really theologically very perceptive. She's seeing how God is working in her case. And she's seeing that theologically the Lord was going to work here not by direct intervention, but within righteous human acts.

And I think we can say that Ruth illustrates important biblical principles. Firstly, for the provisions of God's word to be fulfilled, it's necessary for the believer completely to identify with the Lord and with his cause.

[16:10] And that's what Ruth had done back in chapter 1. Verse 16. Naomi says, look, your sister's going back, sister-in-law's going back to her people and her gods, go back with her.

Ruth replies, don't urge me to leave you or to return back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay.

Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. Ruth has identified herself completely with the Lord.

She's done, if you like, what the Lord Jesus himself said in Matthew chapter 6, verse 33. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.

And that's what Ruth has done. And that leads to the second thing. The promises of God are to be claimed by faith. And Ruth, by faith, is claiming the Lord's promises.

[17:19] Now, that's not presumption. That's not presumption. That's doing what the Lord looks for. Martin Luther, when he was commenting on Ruth, said that Ruth was a living, daring confidence in God's grace.

Ruth had, rather, Ruth had a living, daring confidence in God's grace. Those two things, I think, challenge us all as we pass from one old year in God's providence to a new year.

Have we been fully identified with the Lord's cause? Have I been fully identified with the Lord's cause?

I've got to examine my life about that. You have to examine your lives about that. And if we have done that, we are entitled to claim by faith God's promises.

And it may well be that we haven't been. You know, I think sometimes the trouble which the Lord's people face is that we believe the threats, but we don't necessarily believe the promises.

[18:37] And sometimes congregations of the Lord's people as well as individuals, don't achieve from the Lord's service what they might, because they haven't believed his promises.

The promises of God's word are to be claimed by faith. Now, Ruth's response here, I think, is the response of a spiritually enlightened person to God's grace.

And when she claimed the benefits of God's covenant with his people, she acted in faith.

She didn't know how matters would turn out, but she did know and understand that she was entitled to it, because she had fully identified herself with God's cause.

Now, many, many, many people fail in one of, and sometimes both of these two points. There are people who claim God's promises for themselves before they fulfill the conditions, and that's presumption.

[19:49] God's promises, the fullness of God's promises, are to his people, people who put their trust in the Lord Jesus for their salvation. When you do that, you are entitled to the promises God has given to everyone who puts their trust in the Lord Jesus.

And there are also people who aren't willing to launch themselves out on the strength of God's promises. They're putting their trust in the Lord Jesus, but they seem in effect not to believe that they have confidence in God.

God's promise in the Lord Jesus. So on the hand, you get people who are waiting patiently as they see it for the fulfillment of prayers, failing to realize that God expects them to claim the promised blessing and to go out in faith.

And there are also people, of course, who think that they're entitled to God's promises, even though they haven't put their trust in the Lord Jesus. Ruth, I would suggest to you this morning, is an example of a person of active faith, a person who realizes that when you identify yourself completely with the Lord Jesus, then the promises are yours.

You know, there should be no such thing as secret believers, believers who won't put their trust in the Lord Jesus completely. There shouldn't be people who aren't willing, who do trust him but aren't willing to identify themselves fully with him, with his people, people who won't make a profession of faith for various reasons.

[21:36] How can you not do that and expect to be able to claim the promises? Two go together and faith, and Ruth, I would suggest to you, actually demonstrates what it means to have real faith.

So we've got the planning of Naomi and we have the faith of Ruth. I think thirdly, we can say here that there is a theology in chapter 3 of the book of Ruth which is really very, very important.

First of all, can I draw your attention to verse 1. One day Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, my daughter, should I not try to find a home for you where you will be well provided for?

Verses, and chapter 1 and verses 8 and 9, we have Naomi wanting the same things. We've already drawn your attention to that. Go back each of you to your mother's home. may the Lord show kindness to you as you have shown to your dead and to me.

May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband. She sees that provision as the Lord's province. That's something the Lord has to do.

[22 : 43] But now, there's a providential opportunity provided by God. God has given the opportunity opportunity and Naomi begins to answer her own prayer in a very similar way to the way in which Ruth calls on Boaz to answer his own prayer.

And in the way both Naomi and Ruth act in those two situations, what I think we have is, if you like, a model of how often, often, often, divine and human actions work together.

How the Lord plans things so that his actions and the actions of his people will work together. No passive waiting for events to happen.

Naomi seizes the initiative when the opportunity presents itself. So, Naomi, in other words, acts to execute God's plans. And it's often the case that that's what God wants us to do.

to act, to execute his providentially revealed plans. The Lord's people should be able to look back in the course of a year and see ways here and there at least where what they have done, if they've acted in faith in the right way, is they can see how they have acted to bring about what God has revealed by his plans.

[24 : 12] You know, there's always in the human life and the human experience balance. The Lord's sovereignty and human responsibility. And human responsibility does not invalidate or impinge or reduce the Lord's sovereignty.

The Lord expects his people to fulfill their responsibilities when he reveals to them what they are.

And can I suggest that really there's another thing too, perhaps in verse 3 in particular, wash and perfume yourself and put on your best clothes, then go down to the threshing floor but don't let him know you were there until he's finished eating and drinking, and so on.

Can I suggest that what we've got here is Naomi modelling something else which the Lord's people are required to do, and that's to display, well, call it human ingenuity if you want, or perhaps we might say sanctified, created thinking.

Naomi models human resourcefulness in the service of a worthy God-sanctioned goal.

And I want to suggest to you that the Lord often works through just that kind of human sanctified ingenuity.

[25 : 36] Naomi wasn't telling Ruth to deceive Boaz. She wasn't telling her to do anything unworthy. She was telling her to make the maximum use of the opportunity.

And God sometimes requires his people to think creatively in his service, not just in the same old ways all the time. Sometimes the Lord requires his people to do something in a new way.

Just like the Lord Jesus, remember, after he'd risen from the dead, was with the disciples in Galilee. They'd gone fishing, remember, and Peter and the others had fished all night and he says, put the net over on the other side of the boat.

And there was Peter and the others, experienced, successful fishermen, hadn't caught anything.

The Lord Jesus says, do this in faith and they do it and they succeed.

And sometimes that's what the Lord wants. He wants us, he's created us, as people who can think rationally, he's created us as people who can exercise ingenuity, who can think creatively.

[26 : 42] Sometimes he requires us to do that. And that's what I think Ruth, Naomi, sorry, is modelling here. And can I also draw your attention to not the Lord's faithfulness, well the Lord's faithfulness is certainly here, there's no doubt about that, but to human faithfulness as well.

And that comes out in Ruth. Ruth had acted neither from passion nor from greed, she had acted sacrificially. She had reckoned, if you like, that her own happiness was secondary to the provision of an heir for Naomi, providing for Naomi's food and drink, and also she saw herself as having a responsibility to provide an heir for her first husband mother.

Reminds us, doesn't it, of the Lord Jesus himself. Philippians chapter 2. Well-known verses, I scarcely need to read them. But in Philippians chapter 2, in the middle of that famous passage called the Song of Christ sometimes, the calming christian, we have verses 6 to 11.

And there we read that the Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, didn't consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, he found an appearance as a man, he humbled himself, became obedient to death, the even death and a cross.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that's above every name, that the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and under the earth, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[28 : 18] I think there's a parallel here. In fact, all through the book of Ruth there's parallels with the Lord Jesus. Fascinating book, tremendous amount of theological prophecy, if you like, in the book of Ruth.

But what we have here is Ruth displaying faithfulness on human terms. And human faithfulness earns commensurate payment from the Lord.

The Lord doesn't allow human faithfulness to go unrewarded. Sometimes it takes time. Sometimes he takes time. not by his standards, but by our standards.

But the Lord doesn't let it go unrewarded. And that's an important theological point, and I think Ruth, if you like, embodies that important theological point, that human faithfulness earns commensurate repayment from the Lord.

But especially, can I suggest that chapter three highlights in verse six. No, it's not verse six.

[29 : 31] The whole part really highlights that in all, shall we say, forward spiritual movements, there are moments when the Lord's people have to trust the bare word of God, the bare word of his promise, and we have to venture out in faith.

And I want to suggest that if our lives are in a right relationship with God, and if we honestly want to go his way, and not our own way, that the Lord gives us permission to launch out in faith, and to risk for his sake.

I think above all, that's what chapter three perhaps teaches, that in all spiritual movements which are going to succeed, which are going to make advances for the Lord's cause, there are moments when we have to trust the bare word of God's promise, and launch out.

Now I don't know, obviously, how the Lord has dealt with you in the course of this past year. The whole free church knows something of how the Lord has dealt with you in 2007, but it is the case that there are moments in the history of God's people, individually and collectively, that where what the Lord requires is that you should launch out on the strength of his promises.

I can't make that application any more specific than that to you, either individually or collectively as a congregation, but it does seem to me to be the case that that's what this chapter teaches, and whether we're talking of ourselves individually or as families or more collectively as a congregation of his people, then Ruth chapter three does throw light on that sort of situation that we're in.

[31 : 37] God carries out his work so often through believers who sees unexpected opportunities as gifts from God.

May the Lord give you those sorts of gifts, and may he give you the grace to discern them and to implement them. Let us pray.

Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks that you are indeed a God who is sovereign, and whose providence extends over all your people.

We pray, Lord, that you would give us wisdom always for what you would want us to do, wisdom to analyze how you have been acting with us in the past and for us, wisdom to discern how we should behave and act in the future as you give us grace to.

We pray, Lord, that we would always seek, that we would act in accordance with your commands, that we would be people who are remembering that just as you revealed yourself to be the God, declared yourself to be the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, which requires your people to think back as to how you have acted, and on the basis of that, to go forward.

[32 : 53] May we be people also who have great confidence, unending confidence in your promises, and have no doubt whatsoever about your promise to be with your people and to sustain them in difficult times and to make them part of that glorious heavenly kingdom which even now is being constructed in the heavens above.

We pray, Lord, that you would be with us, that you would sanctify us all, make us holier, make us people who are more righteous, people who are more sensitive to your leading, and people who are constantly striving to do what is right in your sight.

If we have done wrong in this year which has drawn to a close, enable us to recognise it for what it is, to seek forgiveness, and to turn our backs on it, and to go away from it.

We give thanks, O Lord, that in your word you have given us all the guidance we need as to how you want us to live. You have revealed in it everything that you want us to know about yourself, bearing in mind always that all these things will be even more clear in heaven above.

And we pray, Lord, that it would be the case that all your people here, young and old, would already be on the path to that heavenly destination. We look forward, O Lord, to the time when we will stand before you, that we will, when we will see the Lord Jesus as he is with clarity, and realise that we are more like him than we ever thought we could be.

[34 : 22] Be with us, O Lord, we pray. Continue with us and bless us this day, and do us all good, and provide for us in the days that are ahead. And may the Lord Jesus have all the glory.

In his name we ask it. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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