

“He Will Not Rest Until It Is Finished,” Ruth 3:1-18 (September 4, 2016)

Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? ² Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³ Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.” ⁵ And she replied, “All that you say I will do.”

⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. ⁷ And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸ At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! ⁹ He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.” ¹⁰ And he said, “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. ¹² And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. ¹³ Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning.”

¹⁴ So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, “Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.” ¹⁵ And he said, “Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out.” So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city. ¹⁶ And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, “How did you fare, my daughter?” Then she told her all that the man had done for her, ¹⁷ saying, “These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, ‘You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.’” ¹⁸ She replied, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.”

PRAY

We are working our way through the book of Ruth over four weeks, and today we are in week three and studying chapter three of Ruth. A little background by way of reminder: in chapter one, and we saw how an Israelite man named Elimelech moved his wife, Naomi, and their two sons to Moab, which traditionally was an enemy of Israel. Once in Moab, the two sons marry Moabite women, but then Elimelech and his two sons die. The three women are now widows.

Naomi, a woman who deeply trusts the God of Israel to love and provide for her, resolves to go back to Israel and reestablish her life there. And though she urges her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab, one of them, Ruth refuses to leave her. Ruth has been converted –

even though she is from Moab, she now also trusts in the God of Israel to love her and provide for her. Together, the two women return to Israel, but they are poor and still widows. So Ruth takes the initiative and goes out into the fields to try and glean some barley so she and Naomi can turn it into bread they can eat, and “it just so happens” (though it didn't really “just happen,” it was God’s providence) that she goes into Boaz’s field, a godly man who shows Ruth kindness after kindness.

That gets us up to chapter three. I love studying Old Testament narratives like Ruth. Ruth is at the very least a great story, it is a well-written story, and so it’s fun to read. The more you learn about Ruth and the customs of the time the more fun it is to read.

But, more than that, Ruth is a true story about how godly people, people who placed their faith in the God of Israel to protect and provide for them, lived their lives. Living by faith is hard. “⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.” Hebrews 11:8. That’s what Ruth and Naomi were doing, living by faith, but it’s hard to do that because you cannot see and you do not know where you are going to wind up when you live by faith.

We need stories to teach us and encourage us to live by faith, and one of the great values of spending several weeks carefully studying the book of Ruth is that we are taught what true faith in God looks like.

Three things we’ll look at this morning: first, faith takes risks. Second, faith that risks dreams big. Third, faith that risks really doesn’t risk at all.

First, faith takes risks. Let’s re-read verses 1-4: Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? ² Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³ Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.”

Naomi’s stated goal here is to find a husband for Ruth. That’s verse 1: when Naomi says, “Should I not seek rest for you?” that’s what she means. Women in that culture, in that time, did not live as adult singles. They needed the protection of men around them, they needed the provision only men could provide.

Now if you just heard those verses read and thought, “That sounds like a weird way to go about getting a husband,” Ruth going down to the threshing and basically climbing into bed with Boaz, you’re right. What happened at the threshing floor *was* weird. This emphatically was not something Israelite women did as a part of the courtship process.

And once you know more of the cultural details surrounding it, this sounds even more weird and, honestly, scandalous. First, it’s harvest time at the threshing floor. That was a

big party, because that's when all your labor as a farmer finally pays off. Harvest time is when you get paid, so there is a celebration.

These parties at the threshing floor involved alcohol, as parties often do. We read in verse 7 that Boaz drank, and his heart was merry, toward the end of the evening.

Third, threshing floors at harvest time were known as places where lots of sexual immorality often took place, as often happens after big parties where alcohol is consumed.

Fourth, Naomi says in verse 4 that Ruth needs to watch carefully where Boaz lies down and go “uncover his feet.” In Hebrew, that phrase is often, in fact almost always, a euphemism for nakedness. “Feet” is often a euphemism for the male sexual organ. Finally, Naomi tells Ruth in verse 4 to uncover Boaz's feet and “lie down,” and in Hebrew “lie down” is a euphemism for sex. To the Hebrew reader, verses 1-7 would have sounded even more scandalous than they do to our ears.

Now, let's assume Naomi literally means for Ruth to uncover Boaz's feet (and nothing else) and physically lie down next to Boaz (but not have sex with Boaz). By the way, I do think that's exactly what happened. If they did have sex that night, verse 8 would make no sense: “At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! ⁹ He said, “Who are you?” Why would he a) be startled, and b) wait until then to ask her name if they'd had some kind of encounter earlier in the night?

Nothing sinful happened, it sounded scandalous and if someone had seen Ruth it would have appeared scandalous, but there was no scandal. Still, assuming all that, **it's still incredibly risky behavior!** I can't emphasize this enough: Old Testament courting practices did not involve a woman going in the dark to where her favorite guy had laid down after a big party and uncovering his feet (or anything else) and then snuggling up next to him so that he would wake up and see her. It was risky behavior then, and it would be now, too.

If a young woman, a student at Ole Miss, came up to me after the service and told me about a boy she liked, a Christian boy, and really godly young man, and she wanted to marry him, and she asked me what to do about it, I would not tell her, “Wait until his fraternity party is winding down after the Alabama game in a few weeks. Only do this if Ole Miss wins, don't do it if they lose because *then his heart will not be merry*. And once you're sure he's asleep, sneak into his room in the Phi Delt house, take the covers off from on top of him, and then crawl into bed with him.” I'd never give that counsel, and I certainly wouldn't cap off my counsel with the final words Naomi gave Ruth in verse 4: “Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and *he will tell you what to do*.” I bet he would tell you what to do. I'd never, ever advise this.

Now Naomi wanted for Ruth a good thing – a husband, who could care for Ruth and provide for her. She wanted to get Ruth a family of her own. But so much could have gone wrong with Naomi's plan! First, it was dark at the threshing floor. Ruth could have

accidentally laid down next to the wrong guy. She could have been sexually assaulted in that case. Or even if she did manage to sleep next to Boaz, he could have turned out to be a bad guy. Boaz could have taken advantage of Ruth that night. Or, perhaps worst of all, Boaz could have seen Ruth there in the middle of the night and been offended. Gotten up, screamed at her, called her a prostitute, and driven her off in total shame.

So what do we make of this weird plan to get Boaz to propose to Ruth? It was incredibly risky, but *faith takes risks*. That's the lesson! Naomi and Ruth, it's clear from chapters one and two, have a deep faith in the Lord God of Israel. They believe all the promises in the law of Moses that God will provide for his people and mean to bless them. But that does not mean that Naomi and Ruth must be totally passive while they wait on God to deliver. No, they can, by faith, take steps to try and make it happen.

Naomi and Ruth, therefore, take a calculated risk. They knew Boaz's character and reputation, so they didn't think he would take advantage of her. And Boaz had obviously taken an interest in Ruth – we can read about that in chapter two. The barley harvest would have lasted several weeks, so Boaz had all that time to observe Ruth and learn her character. So they calculate that if Ruth can get to and away from the threshing floor without anyone seeing her (because that would ruin her reputation), Ruth can put herself in this position to make it clear to Boaz that she is willing to marry him, and Boaz will propose marriage to her.

If you ask, “Why set it up that way? Why doesn't Ruth just go talk to Boaz directly during the day? If that wasn't proper, then why not get someone else to act as a mediator? Why not Naomi?” I don't know – maybe there wasn't time for that. Maybe Ruth and Naomi were running out of food now that they couldn't glean because the harvest was over. And maybe Boaz was especially shy, awkward, and so he needed this kind of direct approach before he'd ever broach the subject of marriage. After all, he's made it to middle age apparently without ever having had a wife.

We don't know why exactly, but Ruth and Naomi had faith in God that he wanted to provide for them, and they took a chance that it would be through Boaz it would happen.

True faith in God does, from time to time, take risks. There are a million different ways I can apply this, but I'll only apply it the most obvious way: to relationships. It is God's will for almost everyone in this room to one day be married. I say that because around 90% of all Americans who live past the age of 25 do eventually get married, and the more actively you are involved in a church the higher than percentage gets.

But to get married, especially if you're going to marry someone godly, it will almost certainly involve risks. What I'm about to say presupposes a method and philosophy for dating that pleases God. I don't have time to go into all that today, but back in February I preached an entire sermon on it – you can go back and listen to it. And many of you (even some of you older than me) will think what I will say is hopelessly antiquated but *I don't care because I'm right*.

Getting married involves risks, and almost all of these risks should fall on the guys. I'm not talking about taking the precise same risks Ruth did. None of you guys sneak into a sorority house tonight and pull the covers off a girl's feet and climb into bed because J.D. said you had to take a chance.

But if you are going to get married, you've got to be around some godly young women. So get involved in a campus ministry or be a part of a church where you can meet them. If you want to eventually have a family, then college is the place to start because you'll never again be around this many eligible, godly young women again in your life. That's not the risky part. That comes next. Once you've met a godly young woman, *you have to ask her out*. And don't do it by text – call her up on the phone or ask her in person. Not only is that the right thing to do, it's also more likely that you'll get a yes that way. Meet her at her door, then open the door for her to your car. Take her out to eat, and pay for her meal. And after a few to several dates, you bring up the subject of your intentions. You initiate the conversation about where you want this relationship to go.

Is that risky? Yes, it's risky. You risk getting turned down. You risk getting your feelings hurt. You risk a little embarrassment. It's not Ruth sneaking into bed with Boaz risky, but it's still a risk. But that's what it means to be man of faith – you take risks.

And, young women, you need to take risks, too. If you thought I sounded a thousand years old with what I said to the boys, you're going to think I'm a Neanderthal when you hear what I'm going to say next. Elisabeth Elliot's mom was right when she told her daughters, "Do not chase boys, keep them at arm's length, and don't let them know what you're thinking." I guarantee you that's the way to attract a godly man. But it is entirely possible that a godly young man is hanging around you, you've spent a lot of time together, you're clearly friends but you want more and you're tired of this "friend" situation because it's gone on for months and months. It seems like he wants more, too, but he isn't saying anything. He isn't asking you out. He isn't taking the initiative.

At that point, I'm not saying you necessarily need to get rid of him. Maybe he's like Boaz, and he's shy. Maybe he's just clueless. Guys generally are clueless. Maybe he doesn't have a dad telling him how he needs to take the initiative. Maybe he went to the Florida State game so he didn't hear J.D. say it. So you might need to take the risk (and it is a risk) of pulling him aside and saying, "I know we are friends, but it sure seems like you want something more from this relationship. I don't want to be your cheap girlfriend forever. You need to make up your mind about what you want." Is that risky? Yes – it's not climb into bed with Boaz risky, but you could wind up a little embarrassed.

Faith in God takes risks, and since it's probably true that God wants you to be married, it's an appropriate risk. And this can turn out well: I know of two very prominent Christian pastors – if I said their names, you would know them (I'll tell you after the service if you ask) – whose wives had to have this conversation with them, and then they started dating and eventually got married (and it turned out great).

Second, faith that risks dreams big. Ruth 3:6-9: ⁶ So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. ⁷ And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸ At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! ⁹ He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.”

Remember, all Naomi wanted was a husband for Ruth. But when Ruth gets alone with Boaz, she goes beyond that. If that’s all Ruth was after, she would have said, “I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant...” That meant, “Make me your wife.” But then she goes on and says, “for you are a redeemer.” And the word “redeemer” translates a very important Hebrew legal term, *goel*.

What was a *goel*? In ancient Israel, the only asset each family had was their land. And each family was guaranteed some land on which they could live and grow their crops because they were assigned it when they first entered the Promised Land during the time of Joshua. But when a family became poor, and it’s still six months until the harvest but they don’t have anything to eat, sometimes they had no choice – they had to sell their land to buy food.

The law of Moses then mandated that a *goel*, a close male relative, come along and buy the land back, redeem the land, so that the family wouldn’t have to leave it. Leviticus 25:25: “If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer [*goel*] shall come and redeem what his brother has sold.”

But a true *goel* would do more than that. You could spot a *goel* in Israel when he comes into the life of the family and makes their problems his problems. The more desperate a family’s situation, the further in a *goel* would dive to meet the need. So, for example, if all the men in a family were dead, like Naomi’s, the *goel* would come along and take the widow into his home. Deuteronomy 25:5-6: ⁵ “If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. ⁶ And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.”

Now that sounds strange and even creepy to us, but it’s because we live in a very individualistic culture. In our culture, the widow should be able to remarry whomever she chooses, or remain unmarried if she wishes. If your husband dies, ladies, I promise the elders of Grace Bible Church aren’t going to come along and try to get you to marry your brother-in-law.

But in that culture, family was everything. They were not individualistic, they were communal. Naomi’s family is about to be wiped out, and so her world is ending. She’s thinking, “Who cares if I live, if I have no sons to carry on the family name?” But a *goel*’s job was to come along and make sure that would never happen. A true redeemer

would not only make sure the family has food to eat and land to live off of, but that the family name would continue through a son.

So, Naomi orchestrates this elaborate plan just so that Ruth can get a husband, but Ruth goes down to threshing floor with a faith that not only risks but dreams big. It is not enough to Ruth to just get herself a husband. Her faith dreams big, that Boaz won't just be a provider for Ruth but he will be a *goel* who would get back Naomi's land, Naomi's family name, Naomi's life – in other words, not just provide for Ruth but also literally restore Naomi's life. Out of love for Naomi and faith in God, Ruth dreams big. Ruth is not playing small ball baseball; she is swinging for the fence.

I said last week that Christians shouldn't worry about planning out their lives. So many of us have spent so many hours agonizing over what's going to happen to us in the future, and we shouldn't do it because *we can't plan our lives out*. We have no idea where we'll be next week, let alone in twenty years. We can't know that, so we shouldn't waste the energy in trying to plan it all out.

But I do think that while Christians shouldn't be doing a lot of big planning, *they should be doing a lot of big dreaming*. I don't mean Christians need to spend anytime daydreaming about material things, about vacation homes, about money and possessions. The less time we spend thinking about that the better.

Instead, Christians ought to regularly look at the various ways we are gifted and like to serve the Lord (whether it's leading a Bible study or teaching kids or going on mission trips or building things or cooking) and we ought to daydream and say, "God, what might you do through me? How might my labors best advance your kingdom? Who all might you reach through me?" And just start to dream about it – ask God to give you a vision for what you could do to glorify his name.

We ought to look at our spouses, and dream and say, "God, I know you're going to use the way I love my spouse to make him or her into something wonderful, I know you will transform my spouse– I can't wait to see what it is." And daydream about ways to love your spouse better. We ought to look at our kids and say, "God, these children are not mine – they are yours. I need your grace to love them and be patient with them every day. But I can't wait to see the adults they turn into. What all are you going to do in and through their lives over the next eighty years to magnify your name?" It will encourage you to continue to love and raise them correctly now. We ought to daydream about our church, our youth group, our missionaries, and say – "God, what will you do in Oxford and the world abroad through Grace Bible Church? How many lives will you touch? How will you glorify your name?" If we could ever reach a critical mass of people who would daydream like that, I am absolutely convinced it would transform our community.

Christians ought to have a faith that takes risks and swings for the fence, because you serve a big God, and the more you come to love and trust the God of Israel, the more you want to turn everything in your life over to him and see him work. So, as an exercise of your faith, *pray big about what God might do*. "Come, my soul, thy suit prepare: Jesus

loves to answer prayer ... Thou art coming to a King, Large petitions with thee bring; For His grace and power are such, None can ever ask too much ...”

Third, faith that risks really doesn't risk at all. Ruth 3:10-11: ¹⁰ And he said, “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.”

And everyone breathes a sigh of relief, because Naomi and Ruth's gamble paid off! Boaz does turn out to be a man of character, he doesn't take advantage of Ruth nor does he reject her as a loose woman. He accepts her proposal of marriage.

Then, though, we read verse 12, where Boaz says, “And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I.” In other words, Boaz is saying, “Yes, I am obligated under the law to be a *goel* for Ruth and Naomi, but there is a closer male relative to the family. He has the right of first refusal – only if he refuses can I step in.” And everyone says, “No!!! Does that mean Ruth and Boaz don't end up together after all?” And the answer to that is ... you must come back next week and listen to the sermon on chapter four to find out. It's how we preachers get repeat business.

But here's the point: **it doesn't matter!** You think, “How can you say it doesn't matter?” Because Ruth's faith *is not ultimately in Boaz*, good guy though he is. Ruth's faith is in the God of Israel. And she is not worried about her situation *at all*.

All the commentators point out that the last thing we hear from Ruth in the book of Ruth is verse 17: she reports to Naomi what happened with Boaz at the threshing floor and tells Naomi, “These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, ‘You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.’” And that's it. There is no indication anywhere in chapters two, or three, or four that Ruth is in the slightest bit nervous.

There is indication that Naomi is nervous about how it will all turn out. In verse 18 she says, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man [Boaz] will not rest but will settle the matter today.” I think Naomi is really saying that to comfort herself, because Ruth is not nervous. *There is every reason to think that Ruth reclined on the ground next to Naomi and just munched on her grain until it was all resolved.* Why? Because her faith was in the God of Israel, and Ruth believed God would work it out. Ruth's faith in God was so strong, she knew that even the risks she took really weren't risks because God would take care of her somehow. “The Lord has promised good to me, His Word my hope secures; He will my Shield and Portion be, as long as life endures.” Ruth wouldn't have known those words, but she knew the sentiment behind them like few in world history.

Don't you want to be like that? You can. I've said this every week in Ruth and I'll say it again: we have infinitely more reason to know God will work all things out for our good than Ruth did, because we know what God has done for us in Jesus.

We said earlier that you can spot a *goel* when he comes into your life and makes your problems his problems. No one has ever done that for you like Jesus. In Jesus Christ God himself became a man (and he didn't have to), and he lived a perfect life of obedience to God on earth. And then on the cross, he made our problems his problems. Think about that. We are sinners, justly deserving the wrath of God. But rather than give us what we deserve, God gave us his son, and Jesus took the punishment we deserve for our sins so that we could receive from God the blessing he earned. "When Jesus died on the cross, he was the *goel* for the whole world. God didn't simply send us a set of instructions; he sent his Son. He didn't just give us advice; he gave his own flesh. He didn't just show us how to do it, but he did it himself – all the way to his death." Paul Miller, *A Loving Life*, 115. Jesus made our problems, his problems, *and he fixed them!*

Naomi said of Boaz, "He will not rest until the matter is settled." But Jesus did not rest until on the cross our ultimate problem was settled and he could cry out, "It is finished – no more payment for sin is demanded. Now, you will be taken care of forever." To the degree you believe Jesus is your *goel*, that he has entered into your life and made all your problems his problems, *then you can relax! What do you really have to worry about?* Jesus has this! Then you can have the kind of faith that takes big risks, that dreams big, but is so relaxed that you can sit on the ground and munch on the grain until it is revealed how God works everything out. Let's pray that we all would have that faith today.

PRAY