

Being Like God

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[0 : 0 0] Let me just tell you again what we're going to do tonight. I'm trying to give you a big picture of this text. We won't look at some of the fine detail, but we will look at it and try and work out what its core is. And then the second thing is, at the end, as a way of reflecting on the text, we will do what we did last week, that is, I will play a video clip of the text read again, which I borrowed from Mars Hill in the United States.

It's just a really wonderfully read text, and that will help us do some reflecting on it. Okay, let's pray. Our Father and Lord, we pray that you would open our eyes, that we might behold wondrous things from your word.

Please soften our hearts, that they might receive that word. Transform our wills, that we might be doers of that word. Loosen our tongues, that they might proclaim it. And we ask this for the glory of your Son, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Well, friends, it had been a long day, and the kids were finally asleep, and Joe and Mildred, they finally flopped down in front of the television late evening, and the stories batter their senses as they listen to the late news.

Yet another war is breaking out in another part of the world that has already been battered by famine and economic disaster. Yet another boatload of people have arrived on the periphery of Australia, seeking asylum, or perhaps just a new start in life.

[1 : 2 0] And then there are the advertisements about destitute children who might be helped enormously by some small cash commitments on a regular basis. And Joe and Mildred sit there and wonder, well, how should they react?

After all, they know God. They know His Son, Jesus Christ. What would be an appropriate response? I mean, how would God have them react and act? Well, now, Zachary is in church on Sunday night.

He sits at the same place, in the same place as usual. There's still some time left before the service starts, and there's the usual sort of hubbub of activity, and the usual suspects are arriving in the usual way, and the leaders are rushing around trying to find the various people who are responsible for whatever is happening in the service.

And then Zachary notices Russell again. Russell is a single man. He's not attractive in looks. He's a little unkempt and perhaps a little overweight.

He's socially awkward and he's difficult to talk to. And today he sits in his usual seat, and as usual, no one talks to him. He will be greeted perfunctorily in that greeting time, and then he'll stand around at supper for 20 minutes, waiting for someone to talk to him.

[2 : 3 4] And then he'll give up, and he'll go the lonely walk home to dinner on his own in front of the TV. Now, Zachary knows God. He knows his son, Jesus Christ.

What do you think an appropriate response is that Zachary might take, and why? How would God have him act toward Russell? Claire works as a team leader in an IT company, and she looks across at Mark, as she often has in the past few weeks, and he's deeply engrossed in interacting with something on the computer screen.

It looks as though it might be work-related, but Claire knows that it probably isn't, except in this very peripheral way. And she looks again at her computer screen, and she notices how few jobs he has completed in comparison to others on the team.

This morning, after yet another complaint has come in from a client about the quality of his work, she wonders, what should I do? It is sloppy, incomplete, inadequate.

Now, Claire is a Christian. She knows God. She knows his son, Jesus Christ. And she wonders, what would be an appropriate response for me to make?

[3 : 46] How would God have me act? What should I do? Now, Mark and Jocelyn are parents. Their eldest son is now eight years old. They deeply love him, but he is strong-willed, and they've been worn down by yet another fight with him.

And they've sent him tasks to do before the rest of the day's activities, but they can hear what he's doing. And they know that it is not what they asked him to do.

Mark and Jocelyn, you see, are Christians, and they know God, they know his son, Jesus Christ, and they wonder, what should we do with our son? What would be an appropriate response?

How would God have us act toward this son that he has given us? Friends, can you see what I'm saying? I've given you all of these scenarios to say that all of us who are Christians are caught in worlds of complex relationships.

We are caught in situations that demand a response from us. Today, we are going to have a look at some people in the Bible who live in the same world that we live in. Oh, it's separated by a number of centuries, but it is the same world that we live in.

[4 : 54] They, too, are forced to make decisions. They, too, will seek to make those decisions in a way that honors the God that they have come to know. And my hope this evening is that as we observe them doing this, we might learn from them.

My hope is that as we read God's word, he might speak to us about our own situations and give us some principles that will guide our thoughts and our actions. So that in mind, turn with me in your Bibles, please, to Ruth chapter 2.

As I said last week, this is a wonderful book. And today we're going to look at the whole chapter. And the first thing I'd like us to do is let me remind you of the story so far. The story is one that generally is well known, but it's good to tell you.

Our story is set in the days of Israel's history in the Promised Land. And the early days of that history, it's a time when there's no temple, there's no king over Israel, Israel's ruled over by judges, and life in the land is fairly fragile.

Well, in those days, there was a man called Elimelech. And Elimelech had a wife called Naomi and two sons. And famine had struck the land of Israel, and so Elimelech and his family had moved to the land of Moab.

[6 : 08] And while they were there, Elimelech died. And his sons took Moabite wives. And one of those wives was a woman called Ruth. And the next thing that happened is that the sons also died.

And Naomi was left there in a foreign land without the support of men and with two dependent women. It's about this time that Naomi hears that the Lord has brought relief to the people of Judah.

And so she says, decides that she'll go back to her own land. And the decision forces a decision upon her two daughters-in-law. And one says, in the end, that she won't go back with Naomi.

You remember this from last week. And Ruth, though, decides she will stay with Naomi. She has aligned herself with Naomi. And not only this, she has aligned herself with Naomi's people.

And she's aligned herself with Naomi's God. And so the two of them journey back to Judah. And Naomi makes it clear that as she does, it is with a heart full of bitterness. You see, the Lord has dealt hard blows to her.

[7 : 10] She left the land full. And the Lord has brought her back empty. But, you know, they're right back and life's got to go on. You know, somehow these women have got to find a new life and they've got to somehow survive.

They must find a way to eat. They must find a way to exist. And so the closing verses of Ruth 1 tell us that on entering the land, they enter at the time of the barley harvest.

Fruitfulness has returned to God's land. You see, it's brimming. The rain has fallen and things are going well. And we wonder, will there be fruitfulness and blessing for these two women?

And with that, we enter into Ruth 2. So open your Bibles. And the first thing that happens in chapter 2 is we're introduced to a new person. And you'll find him in verse 1 there. Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.

Now, just a few things about him that you can read for yourself. They were introduced to this man. We're told a number of things about him. Verse 1, his name is Boaz. Verse 1, he is a kinsman of Naomi.

[8 : 18] That is, he's related to Naomi in some way on her husband's side. Third, he's a man of substance. Our translation calls him a prominently rich man.

However, the Hebrew conveys the image of a man of wealth who is also a man of stature in his society. In other words, this is a man who not only is a man of substance financially, he's a man of substance socially.

This is a very good man to have around. He's prominent in society. He's rich and so on. And the information about Boaz immediately stirs some hope in us, you see, because here we have these two destitute women.

Here is a kin of Naomi. He is a pillar of society. He's rich. And you think, he's a good candidate for some help if it's going to come from anywhere, isn't he? And perhaps he might be part of the mechanism by which the bitterness of Naomi might be turned into something that is no longer bitterness.

And later in this passage, if you look on, our hopes are lifted a little bit when we meet Boaz for the first time. Because if, did you notice in the text, when we meet him for the first time, in verse 4, he arrives at the field.

[9 : 29] And do you notice what he does? He greets the people in the Lord's name. That is, he greets the reapers in Yahweh's name. And they respond by blessing him in Yahweh's name.

This is a man not only of status and substance and financial wealth. He's a man who knows the Lord. It's a very promising start to this chapter.

Now, let's move on. Look at verse 2. We're reminded of where we left off last week, barley harvest. In other words, great opportunity for the women to put together some food for the year. However, it appears as though Naomi, well, she's bound in her bitterness.

How do I know that? Well, have a look at it. The initiative doesn't come from Naomi, the older woman. It comes from Ruth, the younger woman. And she takes some action. Look at verse 2. Ruth tells Naomi, look, I'm going to go out and see if I can gather some food.

She hopes to find someone in whose eyes she might find favor. And Naomi gives her permission. But she doesn't go herself. Anyway, at this point, I need to explain a little bit about Israelite law.

[10 : 32] So let's just do a little bit of side and go back to Deuteronomy and the other legal books of the Old Testament. Israelite society, Israelite law was concerned about the poor in Israelite society.

It was a very concerned society. Israelite law prescribed ways that you looked after your poor people. And one of the ways was you told landowners that when they harvested, they were not to be too rigorous in their harvesting.

You know, one of the ways was that when they were harvesting, when, for example, if they had some olive trees, when they went to get the olives, they would not climb. They'd shake the olive trees till all the olives popped down.

But then they wouldn't climb up afterwards to make sure they got the ones right up the top and right out the edges. The ones that were not quite ripe and hadn't quite fallen yet. They were to leave the olives that didn't fall.

And those olives, well, the poor could scramble up and get them. And that would be some extra for them. But the same thing was to happen with harvesting fields. They were not to go to the very corners of the field.

[11 : 38] You know, the harvesters were not to sort of, no, they were just to go around the edges and anything that was left around the fences and the fence posts and the edges of the field, they were to leave for the poor.

And those leftovers, whether they were olive trees or harvest or wheat or barley or whatever it was, were called gleanings. That is what Ruth is after. She's after gleaning things from the edges.

There she stands. She's waiting there. She's on the edge of some likely field, hoping that she'll be able to gather up some of the gleanings. You know, she'll wait for them to go past and then she'll scramble in after them and she'll pick up what's left over.

Now, at this point, I want you to imagine what Ruth might realistically expect. Imagine the scene. Harvest time. There's been a famine.

Landowners have not had crops for some time. They will be seeking a bumper crop. And the poor of the land will have not had a good supply of food for quite some time.

[12 : 37] They will be hanging around, you know, almost drooling, as it were, waiting to see whatever they can scrounge. And into this situation comes Ruth. Now, remember who she is.

I mean, this is not just an Israelite woman. This is a woman in a man's world. Second, she is a foreigner in an Israelite world.

Third, as the text regularly reminds us, she is a Moabitess. And remember what we discovered about Moabites last week. The Moabites came about as a result of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters.

Genesis 19. There are a group of people who opposed Israel's entrance into the Promised Land, Numbers 22 to 24. The law explicitly states in Deuteronomy that they were to be excluded from the congregation of God's people, Deuteronomy 23.

Do you think they're going to give much to her, this Moabite woman? She's not going to be exactly welcome in the gleaning fields of Israel, is she?

[13 : 42] The point is that Ruth ventures out, and as she does, ventures out after gleanings, she could only really expect what would be a human response. And that response might be discriminatory.

It might be even violent, or perhaps even abusive. In most likelihood, it would not exactly be welcoming. You can see this later in the chapter. Look, check verse 9.

Boaz intimates that Ruth might be exposed to harassment from young men. Then look at verse 22. Naomi talks about her possibly being bothered or assaulted.

So that's what Ruth might expect. It's not really, you know, she was going out to the field. She's not really expecting a good outcome, is she? So that's the sort of expectation she might have.

It would not be positive. Let's turn away from what she might expect to see what actually happens. Look at verse 3. Verse 3 tells us that, well, as it happened, she came to part of the field that belonged to Boaz.

[14 : 45] Now the words, as it happened, have connotations in Hebrew of chance. If we were to translate it, we might say something along the lines of, well, as luck would have it.

Anyway, as luck would have it, Boaz sees Naomi. Now we all know there's something else going on here, but that's how the text presents it, as luck would have it. And he asks after her.

And he finds out, well, she's a Moabite. And then he finds out she's associated with Naomi. And now look at verse 9 again. Boaz addresses Ruth. And he urges her to glean in his field alone.

He urges her to glean in his field alone. And he says, and I'm going to protect you from possible harassment. And I'm going to provide for you. He tells her to freely make use of the water that's there available.

And verse 14, he offers her food from his own table. In fact, he feeds her so abundantly that she can take some home to Naomi later on that day. He also instructs his young men to ensure that her gleanings are supplemented by extra.

[15 : 46] You know, he says, just throw a few extra ones her way when you see her. And at nightfall, she has an ipar of barley, which is an extraordinary amount for a gleaner to have gathered.

I wonder if you can see what I'm saying, what the text is saying to us. The point is, where Ruth might have expected a mere legal response at best, she has experienced abundance.

Boaz has been her provider. He has been her protector. He has been an extravagant benefactor for her. He has gone well beyond anything that the law prescribed.

He has gone well beyond what Ruth might have expected. But let's move to the last few verses of the chapter. In verses 17 and 18, we return to Naomi. And look at verse 18. Naomi sees what has been gathered.

And she recognizes that something special has happened here. This is extraordinary. And she says, who's been responsible for what I see here? Where have you cleaned today?

[16 : 50] And where have you worked? And then she reflects a little bit theologically on the incident. In verse 19, she says, well, blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.

Now, my own take on this verse is that she's reflecting on what Boaz has done. And she's saying, this is divine. This is a divine action. Now, let me explain.

I wonder if you remember last week. Those of you who are regular here, you know I use this word quite often. That we talked about that special Hebrew word. That word, chesed.

It is that word which is used to describe God's overwhelming, surprising kindness and love. And it is the thing that Naomi prayed that Ruth and Orpah would receive from God in chapter 1.

Remember, we talked about it last week. It's what seemed to, well, it's what she seemed to be bitter about in chapter 1 that God hadn't given to her. She seemed to be saying that God was not showing chesed to her.

[17 : 48] But look at this verse now. Look at verse 20. This is striking when you see it. She says, blessed be he by the Lord, whose chesed.

Has not forsaken the living or the dead. Whose kindness, whose generosity, whose mercy has not forsaken the living and the dead. Naomi's clear. This is of Yahweh, the Lord.

This is from Yahweh, who is the source of unexpected kindness and overwhelming generosity. What this man has shown her is what she expected from God and knows is the character of God.

He has not deserted Naomi. He has acted according to his nature. He has shown chesed to her. Now, the references to the Lord in relation to Boaz make sense now, don't they? Remember the ones I showed you at the beginning?

Now, Boaz is a man of the Lord. And she indicates this in verse 12. And as he indicates in verse 12, his generosity is simply a reflection of the generosity of God, the Lord of Israel, under whose wings Ruth has sought refuge.

[19 : 00] Can you see what's going on in Naomi's brain? She knows reality. She knows that the reaction of Boaz is not just luck or chance.

It's not as luck would have it. It is as Yahweh would have it. You see, she knows the source of such generosity.

And it is against human expectation. And therefore, it can come only from God. Ruth is not an Israelite, but she has received generosity, kindness, chesed from the Lord.

Ruth is not a servant of Boaz, but she has received generosity from the Lord's man. This chapter is just wonderful. It tells a wonderful story. But I wonder if you can grasp the reality.

This is not just a love story. It's not just a wonderful, quaint story inserted in the Bible as an introduction to David the king, you know, to validate who he is or whatever. It's not just the story of a bitter woman who begins to experience something positive in life.

[20 : 02] That'd be nice, wouldn't it? But that's not what this is. This is profoundly theological. It is not a story of this woman just finding a way ahead as a woman in a man's world. It may be that.

It is not about men being better husbands. It's not about that. It may have some ramifications for that. But that is not what this text is about. This text is a story about God.

It is about God. It is about the God of Israel. And he is the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in chesed.

He is a God who has the whole world in view. And he is a God who cares for his people. But he's also a God who shelters the alien, the stranger and the sojourner.

This is who he is. Then we Christians know who this God is through Jesus. See, in the midst of his ministry in Luke 13, Jesus refers to his up and coming death.

[20 : 59] And in the midst of his ministry in Luke 13, Jesus uses similar language of God in his chapter. He talks about how often he desired to gather the children of Israel together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

Or as how God did. And this is the language that Boaz uses of Ruth. To Ruth in chapter 2, verse 12. He talks about the God of Israel under whose wings Ruth has come for refuge.

Wonderful image, isn't it? Here a hen or an eagle or just as a place of refuge. And in John chapter 10, Jesus switches the language and he talks about sheep and shepherds.

And he says, I'm the good shepherd. Well, the good shepherd offers protection and salvation. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The good shepherd has sheep outside the fold of Israel. The good shepherd doesn't lay down his own life unwillingly.

No, in spontaneous, unexpected, overwhelming kindness and love, he lays down his life willingly. Friends, can you see what I'm saying? This man Boaz, he's the grandfather of King David.

[22 : 12] And he's the ancestor of Jesus. And he's a man of God. And here he acts like God. He shows God's overwhelming love to this stranger.

And through his descendant Jesus, God will show overwhelming love to all strangers. He will send his son into the world so that we who are aliens to God's people might experience his mercy.

This is our God, you see. He has acted in Jesus so that we can find refuge under his wings. Friends, I wonder if you can see the implications of it. Because it is quite profound when you push it hard.

In this chapter, Boaz is simply acting like God. He knows God from his law. Please understand this, you see. I think we think this way about God.

He knows God from his law. But Boaz doesn't just know God from his law. He knows that what is known about God in law is not the full picture of God.

[23 : 16] You see, behind the law stands a God who is love, kindness, who doesn't just act rightly or legally, but acts in overwhelming kindness and in extravagant love.

This is what Boaz does. He could have acted legally and just said, yeah, you have the corners of the field there. You take those gleanings. Don't you take anything else off me, though. That's what God says you can have.

That's what I give you. No, he says, I want to be like God who gave the law because he's generous and kind. And you, here, have some more.

Now, he might have some other interests in mind, but he's reflecting, he's acting like God. This is what Boaz does. He acts with extravagant love. He acts like God. But we Christians know God even deeper than Boaz did.

We know God's extravagant love on the cross. And so our love should be even more extravagant than that of Boaz. And we are called upon to be like Christ.

[24 : 21] Like the Christ we know. Like the God we know in Christ. And that is to happen in every area of our life. In our family life. In our congregational life.

In our social life. In our evangelistic life. I want you to listen to some of the exhortations from the New Testament. When Paul is advising the Christians of Corinth about their money.

Do you hear what he says? He says, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We read this passage in 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians. You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. That though he was rich.

Yet for your sakes he became poor. So that by his poverty. You might become rich. See friends, God has been rich in generosity toward us in Jesus Christ.

We should be rich financially as well. That's what Paul is saying in 2 Corinthians. Elsewhere Paul tells the Christians, Look, you have been forgiven. Forgive as you have been forgiven.

[25 : 24] Accept as you have been accepted. Love as you have been loved. John makes clear that we are to love one another. Even as we have been loved extravagantly by God.

Friends, this is to be the mark of our lives. We are to be known as those who love like God and his son Jesus Christ. And we are to be like those.

Not just among those we know. But amongst the stranger. The alien. The refugee. The poor. The disadvantaged. The uncared for.

The one that does not know Christ. And this is to be so whether... Hear me what I'm saying. This is to be so whether they are rich, they are poor socially, or poor spiritually.

You see, to the materially disadvantaged, we are to be rich in material generosity. To the spiritually disadvantaged, we are to be rich in spiritual generosity. We are to share the great news of Jesus in our words, and in our support of those who have gone into the world to share it.

[26 : 27] Those who divorce evangelism from social justice have not really fully understood what is going on in the gospel. We are to come to know the God who is rich. We have come to know the God who is rich in mercy.

Let us call to the world to find shelter under his wings. For you see, God loves and longs to gather the world together under his wings. To bring them all into submission to his son, for that's the best place for them to be.

Now, I wonder if you can see how this impacts on the people. Remember the people we met back at the beginning? Those little stories I told you at the beginning? When Joe and Mildred watched the television, what are they to do?

They are to remember God's generosity toward them in Jesus. Then they'll know how to answer their questions. When Zachary notices Russell in church, what's he to do?

He's to remember how God was generous to him in Jesus, and to treat him the same. When Claire looks across at Mark at work and works out of responsibilities, she's not to forget God's generosity in Jesus.

[27 : 32] And when Mark and Jocelyn are considering what they might do with their rebellious son, they are to remember God's generosity in Jesus. Friends, I wonder if I might just at this point, just sharpen it up just a little bit for us.

You see, I've been in this church for one year now, and I've observed lots. And there is much that I've come to admire about this church and its people. However, I might say this tonight, there are some things that are not commendable.

And I'm not speaking particularly about this congregation, I'm just talking about generally here at church. There are some things that are not commendable. You see, I hear people here criticising others.

Sometimes their criticism is based on someone's nationality or background. Sometimes they're based on someone's style of worship. Sometimes they're of their interests and biases that they might have.

Sometimes they're of one congregation criticising another, and it works all sorts of ways in our six congregations. And there's a sense that we're right and others are wrong, or that others have it in for us and that we're neglected or persecuted.

[28 : 39] And it cuts multiple ways across our congregational life. Friends, did you observe Boaz in this chapter? Have you seen what God's attitude to his enemies is in Jesus?

This is what we are called to be. Do not be sucked in by grumbling or complaining or criticising or gossip. It is not on for the people of God in Old or New Testaments.

For we are God's people who have received God's mercy. That's what matters. We know God's great revelation of himself in Jesus. And we have found God to be accepting, forgiving, gracious and kind, whose hand is always open with good things.

Let us act as God's people. Let us forgive as we have been forgiven. Accept as we have been accepted. Be generous as God has been generous to us.

Let us love as we have been loved. Let us welcome as those who have been welcomed. Let us serve others even as we have been served by our Lord Jesus Christ.

[29 : 55] And for those of us who are already doing this, and there are many, many people, that's what I've come to love about Holy Trinity, many of you like this, then let me urge you to excel even more. Let us outdo one another in showing love and grace and kindness and God-likeness.

That's what God wants of us. He's saying, be like me. And I excel in this. Be like me. Be like my son, Jesus Christ.

Be overwhelming in love and generosity and kindness. For that's what I'm like. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for Boaz.

Thank you that he caught something here that we need to catch time and time again. Please help us to be like you and like your son.

And Father, we pray particularly tonight for our congregational life right across Holy Trinity. We pray that this God-likeness might seep into every part of our existence.

[31 : 04] That we might be like the Lord Jesus. And that we might reflect him, particularly in our relationships with each other, but our relationships with the world as well. And we pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Now, as promised, we're now going to just have the text read again. And just use it as a...