

Redeeming Love

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- [0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Loving Heavenly Father, we thank you that you speak to us in your word. And we ask, Father, that you would open our hearts and minds and hear what you have to say.
- Lord, we ask, as James encourages us, Lord, that we would not only be hearers of your word, but doers of the same. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. I remember a little Australian boy some 30-something years ago who was diagnosed with an allergy to chocolate.
- Right before Easter. Now, I'm sure for any 37-year-old or maybe 47-year-old adult, self-denial of chocolate is a serious thing. But for a 7-year-old before Easter, this was a serious moment of abstinence.
- Now, I'm honestly not sure whether the provision of a carob Easter egg made it harder or easier. But in any case, life presents us with these occasions when what is best for you actually requires you to say no.
- To yourself. But there's a good deal of illogic here, isn't there? I mean, it doesn't feel like you're acting in your best interests when you're saying no to yourself.
- [1 : 1 1] And we're actually pretty good at thinking of arguments to somehow convince ourselves that that's actually not what's going on. But it doesn't change the situation. Life does present us with situations where what is our best requires us to say no.
- And life under God is no different. Saying yes to God regularly involves us saying no to ourselves. But it can be hard to keep trusting that what God wants is in fact actually best.
- And this is the truth that this episode of Ruth is there in the Bible to engrave that on our hearts and minds. This truth.
- Now it's not easy. But truly, when we say yes to God and no to ourselves, we are serving our best interests. And that's actually what makes the question that Naomi poses at the beginning of this episode so ironic.
- The story resumes in chapter 3 with Naomi saying to Ruth, Now, taken by itself, the question is actually not so ironic.
- [2 : 2 6] Yes, of course. Naomi should seek Ruth's best interest. That would be a good thing to do. It would be a kindness in return for everything that Ruth has been doing for Naomi.
- Naomi should indeed find a home for Ruth. But Naomi is about to hatch a plan that looks a lot like the plan her husband Elimelech came up with when he made that fateful decision to return to Moab.
- If you remember back several weeks ago when we began our sermon series in the book of Ruth, you'll remember that it turned out very badly for Elimelech and his family when Elimelech had decided to go to Moab.
- He was effectively turning his back on God and his promises, even though he thought that he was indeed securing his best interests. And this is actually what makes Naomi's question so very ironic.
- Yes, Naomi should seek the best interests for Ruth. But not by making the same mistake her husband Elimelech had made that brought her family into such a disaster.

[3 : 34] And even more than that, this plan that Naomi's hatching sounds an awful lot like one of the most sordid moments of the Old Testament. Naomi's plan looks a lot like the plan that Tamar hatches in Genesis chapter 38 to secure an heir from Judah.

Now, if you're not up in your Old Testament stories, that's okay. This one's tucked away in the back corner of Genesis. But the basic plot of that story is that one of Judah's wicked sons is struck dead by God.

And Onan, his brother, is obligated to provide an heir for his young widow, Tamar. Now, Onan doesn't want to do this because providing an heir for his dead brother is actually not in his best interest.

And God strikes him dead as well. So we're left in the situation where Judah doesn't want to actually do this either because he's scared that he might get struck dead and it leaves Tamar with only one option.

So Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute in order to get Judah to get her pregnant. And the plan looks like clockwork. Poor Tamar realizes the only way to get an heir from Judah is to dress up like a prostitute.

[4 : 53] This is effectively the plan that Naomi is hatching for Ruth. In verses 2 to 4, Naomi tells Ruth to conceal her identity and sneak down to the threshing floor when the festivities have died down and see if she can seduce Boaz.

Now, some of the cultural distance between us in Edinburgh 2017 and the ancient world of the Old Testament can actually conceal some of the basic contours of this plan.

But the biggest giveaway is the fact that Naomi is telling Ruth to uncover Boaz's feet. Now, feet is a euphemism for genitalia in the Old Testament. But even if you miss this, Naomi is telling this young woman to uncover a man's legs in the dead of night after he's been consuming significant quantities of alcohol and to nestle up next to him on the threshing floor.

Now, if you hear in the previous sermons in Ruth, you'll remember that we've even been reminded there's a very real risk of rape for young women in the harvest season. And that it's a good thing that Ruth is actually being protected from that danger.

But here we have this scenario which sounds a very strong echo from the story of Tamar and Judah. And this is Naomi's plan. Naomi is also after an heir in place of her dead sons.

[6 : 12] She's sending Ruth in to Boaz with a slightly milder version of Tamar's plan to secure the same. My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you where you will be well provided for?

Yes, you should, Naomi. But this is certainly not the way to go about it. What's happening here is that Naomi is showing that she has no idea what it looks like to seek the best interests of Ruth.

She is just as lacking in wisdom as her dead husband, the Limelech, when he decided to head for Moab. But in stark contrast to Naomi, in this chapter, Ruth and Boaz show us exactly what it looks like to seek our own well-being.

And this is at the very heart of the story. Ruth and Boaz put faithfulness to God ahead of their own interests. They obey God even when it comes at some personal cost to themselves.

Now let's look a little more closely at exactly what Boaz does. We see that Ruth defers to Naomi and she goes along with her plan. So she covers herself up. She goes down to the threshing floor and in the dead of night she lies down next to Boaz and uncovers him.

[7 : 33] What's kind of interesting is how half-hearted Ruth is in all of this. She just lies next to Boaz. That's all. And the irony increases when we hear that lying there, the uncovered Boaz gets cold.

And he wakes up and he literally bumps into Ruth. Who are you? I'm your servant, Ruth. Spread the corner of your garment over me since you are a kinsman redeemer.

Well, what is Boaz going to do? He's being solicited by this beautiful young woman but Boaz puts faithfulness to God ahead of his own interests. Ruth is offering herself to him but he knows he cannot succumb.

He knows there is a kinsman nearer to Naomi than he. And unlike his great-grandson, Boaz will not sin against his brother. King David would take another man's wife for himself but Boaz refuses to take a woman who belongs to another man.

Boaz doesn't take Ruth under his blanket like she asks. Instead, he tells Ruth to sleep at his feet until daybreak. He passes up what could be his and he puts God ahead of his own desires.

[8 : 46] Boaz says yes to God and no to himself. But let's take a little look at Ruth. It's even more under the spotlight than it is with Boaz. Yet again we see Ruth put faithfulness to God ahead of her own interests.

If you have been here for the previous sermons in Ruth, you'll remember. We've seen this before. There's a pattern of behavior going on here. At the very beginning of the story, she declares to her mother-in-law, Naomi, your God will be my God.

And she leaves all that she has and returns with Naomi to Israel. Boaz actually draws attention to this next time that we see Ruth putting faithfulness to God ahead of her own interests.

In verse 10, he says, The Lord bless you, my daughter. This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier. You have not run after younger men, whether rich or poor.

Once she's in Israel, Ruth doesn't seek out a young bachelor. Instead, she's willing to marry a kinsman of Naomi so that she can give Elimelech an heir.

[9 : 58] But Ruth's faithfulness doesn't stop there. A third time, we see her say yes to God and no to herself. Ruth actually listens to Boaz and accepts what he says.

She embraces the possibility of being married off to some other unknown kinsman redeemer. Who knows what this guy might be like? Boaz is old, but at least he's rich.

Faithfulness to God now means turning her back on what would have been a very materially comfortable life with Boaz. Ruth could very easily have continued with Naomi's plan and seduced Boaz, but she doesn't.

In fact, it probably would have been more tempting to actually go along with Naomi's plan now, but yet again, she chooses faithfulness to God. There's a nearer kinsman redeemer and she should marry him.

Once again, she says yes to God and she sleeps at Boaz's feet. In contrast to Naomi, Ruth and Boaz show us exactly what it looks like to seek our well-being.

[11 : 05] They say yes to God, even when it comes at some personal cost. They put faithfulness to God above their own immediate interest. But why? They do this because ultimately they know that we are never saying no to ourselves when we say yes to God.

Saying yes to God, even when it comes at a price, is always in our very best interest. This is something that Jesus was eager for us to learn too. In Luke 9, verse 23 and 24, Jesus says, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for me will save it. Jesus is saying here, if anyone would say yes to God, they will be regularly required to say no to themselves.

In fact, Jesus is saying that if we are unwilling to say no to ourselves, we cannot say yes to him. Saying yes to Jesus means saying no to yourself at regular intervals along that path behind him.

But crucially, saying yes to him and no to ourselves is ultimately in our best interest. And that's what Jesus means when he says, whoever loses his life will save it.

[12 : 31] not only do we receive forgiveness of sins, resurrection from the dead, and eternal life, but as we say no to ourselves at these regular intervals down the path behind the Lord Jesus, our lives gradually come to look more and more like his.

Is there anything that could be more precious than having our sins and guilt stripped off our backs and being clothed with the beauty of Christ now and forevermore? Following Jesus will mean saying no to yourself at regular intervals behind the path of Jesus.

It will present you numerous occasions when you're presented with the choice of saying yes to him and no to yourself. But whatever this might cost, it is ultimately a very small price for what he holds out to us.

Is that something you need to learn afresh tonight? Or perhaps take to heart for the very first time if you're following Jesus without a cross on your back, take Ruth's words onto your lips.

Say to Jesus tonight, your God shall be my God. Jesus has overcome the grave. He's taken away the power and penalty of sin. He holds the keys to life in his hands.

[13 : 49] In our time of prayer, speak to Jesus from your heart. Do that too if you are following Jesus with a cross on your back. Learn afresh what that means tonight.

Pause to consider what does that look like in my life? Or perhaps better said, what does that not look like in my life? Now, in certain ways, it actually does look exactly the same as it did for Ruth and Boaz.

This is something we shouldn't overlook. Now, the situation they're in is extremely contrived, but God still makes some claims on our lives in the area of marriage. For Ruth, saying yes to God meant making God's choice of a spouse her choice, even if there came some conflict in between these two things.

Saying yes to God for Ruth meant marrying the nearest eligible kinsman redeemer. Now, we don't live under the old covenant like the people of Israel did, but God still makes a claim on our lives when it comes to who we marry.

Paul is completely clear that if we do have a choice in the matter of whom we marry, that person must be a Christian. He addresses this as clear as day in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, verse 39.

[15 : 02] It's actually the only verse in the New Testament that relates directly to the situation where a Christian woman faces the decision of who to marry, and Paul says there he must belong to the Lord.

Now, the risk of increasing the awkward factor by 100 and making the unmarried people in our congregation totally embarrassed. I'm going to do that anyway. I'm going to point out that the example of Ruth is an obvious application for your life.

Should you choose to get married, you'll find many fine people. You will meet many wealthy people, many charming people, many beautiful people, many interesting people, many honourable people, but God tells you, you must marry someone with a cross on their back.

Now, Kate and I have been married for nearly 20 years now, and that's long enough to actually be able to count on our hands, the number of people we know, our friends who didn't marry followers of Jesus, and you know what?

They're not following him anymore either. That choice of saying yes to God and no to themselves, that choice cost our friends their faith.

[16 : 12] So saying yes to God in this area of your life might well say, be saying no in exactly the same way that Ruth did. And we need to see that God's way is always in our best interests, even if it comes at a cost.

For Boaz 2, saying yes to God meant saying no to himself in this area of marriage. Boaz knew that sleeping with Ruth would be adultery against this nearer kinsman redeemer, and adultery is always wrong.

Men, if we are going to follow Boaz's example, this must be etched on our hearts and minds. And it must also be etched on our hearts and minds that yielding to this kind of temptation is never in our best interest.

It can only lead to disaster. In this area of marriage, saying no to ourselves and yes to Jesus actually looks very similar to what it meant for Ruth and Boaz, even though our lives are totally different and this situation is so contrived.

But the really big thing here is not to say, it's not just about marriage. It's not the only area of our life where we face this choice of saying yes to Jesus and no to ourselves.

[17 : 21] There are many other instances in our days, days in, day out, where we face this same choice. The other night at the end of an irritating day, which was at the end of an irritating week, I was racing down to the chemist.

Kate had rung them up and said that I was coming, that I might be there a minute or two after seven, and they said, yeah, that's fine. So I get there and they shut the door in my face. Now the irritation omit is now sort of inching into the red, which is why that I could no longer see that I was faced with exactly one of these situations.

Where saying yes to Jesus means saying no to yourself. So when I get there, it's worth thinking about, what would it have taken not to tell that chemist exactly what I thought of him for shutting the door in my face, but rather it would have said, you have a good evening, you must be tired.

What would it have taken? What brings yourself to saying no to yourself and yes to Jesus is seeing the gain you are passing by if you do not.

This opportunity to say no to yourself is an opportunity to clothe yourself in the beauty of Christ. It's an opportunity to be conformed to his likeness.

[18 : 37] when you see the immense gain that Jesus is holding out to you, you will always say yes to God and no to yourself. Whatever that choice might be, whether it's a choice between a harsh word or a kind word, the choice between grace or bitterness, whether it's a matter of our heads, our hearts or our hands, we will always say yes to God.

if we really can see that turning our backs on this chance is actually not in our best interest.

If you can see yourself clothed in Christ's beauty, you will want that beauty more than whatever it is that is alluring you away from him. If you can see yourself reflecting Christ's glory, if you truly can see that, you really won't take up whatever shameful alternative is presenting itself, whether it's a matter of our head, our heart or our hands.

Because isn't that the choice that you made when you first resolved to follow him? Isn't that what you could see? I was reflecting on this a little later in the week when a driver nearly opened the door in front of me when I was riding down Morningside Road, reflecting on the gain Jesus holds out to us in denying ourselves.

I was a little better equipped to handle that situation. So what difference will that make to your life this week? Perhaps it's worth reflecting now on the kinds of situations that you regularly face.

[20 : 11] That where saying yes to God requires you to say no to yourself. Following Jesus does mean saying no to yourself at these regular intervals on that path behind him. And the only way we can say that to ourselves is by fixing our eyes on the great gain that there is in saying yes to Jesus.

Not only do we receive forgiveness of sins, resurrection from the dead, and eternal life, but in denying ourselves his Holy Spirit clothes us in Christ's beauty and conforms us to his image.

And we need to know that deep in our hearts if we are indeed to not grow weary in saying no to ourselves when we say yes to God, even if it comes at a cost. And at the end of this episode, you know what?

The book of Ruth wants to remind us of this great reality. At the end of chapter 3, we just get this little hint of how the story will end. As Ruth steals away from the threshing floor just before daybreak, Boaz tells her in verse 15, take off your shoe.

And he pours out six measures of seed for her to take home to Naomi. Naomi. It's a little hint of how the story will end. We see the resurrection. We know how the story ends for us.

[21 : 33] But here we go, a little hint. Boaz is giving Naomi seed by Ruth. This is more euphemistic pictorial language. The story will conclude with Boaz marrying Ruth.

And we will see Naomi cradling Elimelech's ear. We will see Boaz giving Naomi seed by Ruth. This little hint of how the story will end reminds us that God has our well-being at the very heart of his purposes for us.

Saying yes to God is never saying no to yourself. Faithfulness to God is always in our best interests. And that's because God doesn't play games with his people.

No eye has seen, nor ear has heard, nor mind has conceived for what God has prepared for those who love him. whatever it may cost to say yes to God, it is not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

And when we stand in the resurrection and see the Lord Jesus face to face, we will not ever regret relinquishing whatever it was that it cost us to say yes to Jesus.

[22 : 41] We will remember that that was a choice well made. And so Naomi's question is actually a very good one. Should we not seek our own well-being?

Yes, absolutely. We should seek our well-being and that of others too, but that well-being is bound up in the promise of the gospel. And receiving that promise inevitably involves us saying no to ourselves.

So why don't we ask our Heavenly Father now that he would indeed give us the grace that we need to do to save this every day to our Lord Jesus. Loving Lord, you know our weaknesses.

You were clothed in human flesh. You still are clothed in human flesh. You knew our life then and you know our lives now. We ask, Lord, for the grace to follow you down your path with a cross on our back.

We pray, Father, for the grace to say yes to you and no to ourselves, whatever the cost. Fix our eyes, Lord, on the joy that is set before us. And give us grace, Heavenly Father, not to grow weary in doing good.

[23 : 52] We ask this in your Son's precious name. Amen.