

FGBC: God in the Dark: Righteousness in the Dark

Ruth 3

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Have you ever wondered whether God could possibly be paying attention as He runs the universe? Like the stuff that is going on in your life seems to have no rhyme or reason, and be a whole lot more harmful than good?

Or, have you ever questioned what it actually looks like to live your life inside God's will when God doesn't send post cards or emails letting you in on exactly what that is?

If either of these ideas ring true then the book of Ruth is for you. It's a short book that packs a punch and paints a picture of God at work in the dark.

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So in chapter 1 we encountered Naomi who was walking through some of the worst times any of us could imagine. There was famine and her family was starving so they moved to a pagan country to survive. And then Naomi's husband died. And then her two sons died. And she was left essentially destitute.

Eventually the famine subsided and she returned to Israel with Ruth, her young, widowed daughter-in-law. Now both these women believed in God, but Naomi's testimony was that "The Almighty has made my life very bitter." Loss had hardened her.

Ruth, on the other hand, believed God was both in control and good. Even in the midst of tragedy He was working all things out for the good of those who love Him and who are called according to His purpose. And while at first it didn't look this way, God's fingerprints started appearing on the canvas of the story. And these fingerprints bore good fruit in her life and down the line resulted in the birth of King David and ultimately the Saviour of the world – Ruth the faith filled Moabite shows up in Jesus' lineage!

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So let's look at the fingerprints. In chapter 2 Boaz shows up on the scene. He's a wealthy man and a relative of Naomi's husband. But most of all he is a godly man who seeks to live his life and run his business in a way that honours the Lord.

And so as Ruth takes refuge under God's wings God provides for her through Boaz. And as this starts happening Naomi's heart softens and she begins not just to trust God, but to believe that He is taking care of her.

And her testimony changes from bitterness to hope as she says “[God] has not stopped showing His kindness to the living and the dead.”

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Now in today’s chapter these three godly people, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, begin making plans. And the phrase I want you to keep in mind as we look at this is “strategic righteousness.”¹

If chapter 1 and 2 were about seeing God at work in the dark, chapter 3 is about making proactive decisions to honour Him with our lives because He is at work in the dark. And the way to do this is to be strategically righteous.

Now “righteousness” means being in a right relationship with God. And you live this way by doing what is right. But strategic righteousness does not mean simply avoiding wrong.

So when you don’t call someone down behind their back that’s an absence of bad, but you haven’t actually done anything good. If you didn’t cheat on your taxes this year – great! If you didn’t shoplift at the mall last week – way to go. But this is at best a passive righteousness. Really you just avoiding evil.

Strategic righteousness is about taking the initiative to proactively do something in order to bring something good about.

This is what Jesus is talking about when He says:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
(Matthew 5:9)

Jesus doesn’t say “Blessed are people who manage not to fight with their mother in law.” Or “Blessed are people who avoid kicking the neighbour’s yappy dog.” Jesus says people who are known as God’s children look around the room and find ways to actively increase peace – they dream up ways to build relationships and then intentionally, strategically make it happen.

And this kind of righteousness is all over chapter 3. Naomi exhibits it in verses 1-5, Ruth follows her lead in verses 6-9, and in verses 10-15 we find out Boaz has been doing this all along. Three godly people working out their obedience to God without knowing exactly what He is up to – This is righteousness in the dark.

¹ Outline adapted from John Piper <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/ruth-strategic-righteousness>
(Accessed May 17, 2019)

Alright, let's start with Naomi's strategic righteousness. Grab your Bible if you haven't done that yet. Let's pick up our text in Ruth 3 starting in verse 1.

[Read Ruth 3:1-5]

Now, as a parent of a young girl who is growing up fast I just want to confess that this makes me uncomfortable. Like, hello! How are you imagining this is going to work out Naomi? "Go, my daughter, make yourself look hot. Wait for this guy to have a bit to drink. And then climb into his bed and do what he says." Great idea!

Does this hit anyone else as a bit of a strange thing to read in the Bible?... But here's the thing, the Bible is full of stories like this. Some people think this is a nice book for teaching kids to behave, but I bet those people haven't actually read it. This is a powerful book that will flip your worldview on its head if you dare pick it up. So be careful!

And Ruth's an example of this. So whatever this story feels like right now, you will be amazed to know this isn't a story about stupidity or sexual promiscuity. This is a story about strategic righteousness in light of God's involvement in the dark of our lives. Let me explain:

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So Naomi starts acting in these first few verses – and that's significant. In chapter 1 she couldn't see how God could possibly be working in the difficulty of her life – she felt like He was out to get her. But here she is developing a strategy. That's a big change.

When you are a victim all you can do is mope about how bad you have it; when you are depressed it's impossible to make plans. And this is where Naomi was in chapter 1. But she isn't there anymore. How did this happen?

Well, strategies of righteousness are the overflow of hope. And hope comes from a changes in perspective. So in chapter 1 Naomi believes God is in control, but He is mean. He's playing with her life and she's bitter.

But then in chapter 2 that changes when she catches a glimpse of God's fingerprints and we read:

"May the LORD bless [Boaz]!" Naomi told her daughter-in-law. "[God] is showing His kindness to us as well as to your dead husband." (Ruth 2:20)

When Boaz showed up and started taking care of Ruth, Naomi was blown away because she saw God in it. He was taking care of them! And this sparked hope. And out of this hope her strategic righteousness begins to percolate and she makes a plan.

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Now this isn't just for Naomi and Ruth, this is for us. Throughout this series we've been talking about seeing God's fingerprints in our neighbourhood. He's all over this Harwin thing. God has opened a door of opportunity to us that we have prayed for. And He's provided the finances and the personnel to accomplish it, all at the same time. 4 things totally outside our control lined up in the last half year – it's amazing!

And we need to encourage each other about this and stir up hope because hopeful churches make plans and strategize. Churches without hope drift into a maintenance mentality. But when Jesus-followers see God working and feel His kindness towards them, hope starts to return and churches can begin making plans for strategic righteousness instead of just avoiding evil.

And friends, this is a great time to be part of Fort George / Lighthouse. God is at work here, and we have been given VIP tickets to participate. So let's be strategic in our righteousness.

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Alright, Naomi is looking for a husband for Ruth. And Boaz has the potential to be that– he's a guardian redeemer. So if he marries Ruth then the family name and inheritance stays in the family – and this was incredibly important for the ancient Jews because God had stipulated that the land He gave them was not to be given away.

So Naomi is doing something righteous, but her strategy is out there! I mean she tells Ruth to get attractive, sneak onto the threshing floor, and lie down at Boaz' feet after he's gone to bed. Where's this going to go?

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Now Naomi's motive is clear. She wants Boaz to marry Ruth. But why she doesn't just send a Facebook message asking for a lunch date to chat isn't clear. I mean doesn't she know that the chance of this going bad is about 2 in 3?

So righteous Boaz could drive Ruth out in disgust for her lack of morality. Or he could give into the temptation and have sex with her. Or he could be moved by her offer and honour her by getting married.

Now there are a lot of risks here. And knowing how things turn out we can all imagine some alternative strategies I'm sure. But this is the way it goes in the dark – we never know how things are going to end, do we? And neither did Naomi, but she makes a plan and sets it in motion anyway.

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Enter Ruth. Look at verse 6

[Read Ruth 2:6-9]

So Ruth bravely follows Naomi's lead and the author makes no note about how she feels. And it would have been awkward. It would have looked like she was there for sex. And remember, we live in a time where culturally sexuality is loose, but this has never been the expectation for God's people.

Throughout scripture sex has always been reserved for the marriage relationship. So Jesus said:

For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you. (Matthew 15:19-20)

And Paul said:

Let there be no sexual immorality, impurity, or greed among you. Such sins have no place among God's people. (Ephesians 5:3)

And you can find this theme throughout scripture going back to the very beginning.² So if Ruth is righteous then this isn't an option, but because she is human and so is Boaz it's a real risk. But she takes the risk to participate in Naomi's plan.

And she's strategically active as well. So when Boaz wakes up and finds a beautiful woman in his bed she tells him why she is there:

I am your servant Ruth... spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family. (Ruth 3:9)

Now if this sounds like a strange pickup line, you need to know there are layers here. The words "spread the corner of your garment" are a clue and they tie back to the central verse of chapter 2 that we focused in on last week.

So if you remember, Boaz was telling Ruth why she had found favor with him and with God and he said the reason was because she had taken refuge under God's wings."

² For Old Testament examples see Leviticus 19:29 and Deuteronomy 21:13-21

And literally the words Ruth uses here are “spread your wing over me.”

Now giggle if you need to, but this isn’t a line Ruth came up with in the moment, this was her plan. She’s being forward, but not sexually forward. She is saying “I’m willing to allow you to be God’s provision and protection for me, if you’re offering.”

Now Ruth is putting herself out there. There is room for this to go bad. But then godliness doesn’t mean refusing to do anything that could go bad. The fact is we follow a God in the dark. He doesn’t tell us how things are going to work out, He walks with us through them.

So the reality is that while the leaders here believe God is opening an opportunity for us to minister to the kids of Harwin and their families, there is risk. Maybe no children from Harwin will be interested in what we offer. Maybe the Russian church rental will go badly. Maybe Spencer is going to hate kids. We don’t know what the future is going to hold.

But God doesn’t expect us to know the future, He expects us to live strategically righteous lives. He wants us to do the best we can to partner with the increase of His glory and expanse of His kingdom. And that’s our intention.

So Naomi has a plan, and Ruth has a plan, and Boaz has a strategically righteous plan as well. Look at verse 10.

[Read Ruthe 3:10-18]

There is a ton here, but the big thing is that Boaz is stoked about Ruth’s offer of marriage, because he actually initiated it.

So back in the barley field when Boaz was commending Ruth for taking refuge under God’s wing what he was actually saying is: You’re an amazing woman to come and take refuge under God’s wings. You’ve given up a lot to do this. You left home and family and security to make God your God. You’re the kind of woman that I want to cover with my wings.” He’s telling her that he is attracted to her godliness. But his offer is subtle and nuanced because he is older and he doesn’t want to scare her off. I’m leaving that alone today.

But Ruth and Naomi are women and so they would have talked this through when Ruth got home. And the more Ruth thought about it the more she realized she would love to be married to that kind of man.

And so she strategizes a scenario where she can say “yes” to him with his own words just in case he isn’t offering this. Now it’s dark. Boaz has just woken up when Ruth speaks. Imagine how charged the silence is after her request that he cover her with his cloak.

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Blood is pumping. Two people are in love, and they are alone in the dark. And Boaz responds not in passion, but with strategic righteousness.

In verse 11 he says “All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character.” What he means is I’m not going to take advantage. I’m going to treat you right. And then he unpacks this in verse 12.

“Although... I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I.” Boaz takes steps to do the right thing for righteousness sake. He is going to live his life in a way that honours God even if it means he doesn’t get the girl – he’ll risk that. Friends, this is what godliness looks like. And we will find out how the story ends next week.

But brothers and sisters, two things by way of conclusion. First, for those of us who aren’t married and who are pursuing relationships, our culture says “if it feels good do it.” But as Jesus followers we have a higher call – we can use our sexuality to honour God. So don’t let Netflix determine your morality, be like Boaz and Ruth. Profoundly in love and powerful in self-control. Figure out how to get married. That’s strategic righteousness.

But second, in church business, just like in love, godliness means making strategic plans to move towards something good. We are never going to know in advance what the future holds, but we do know that our God is always at work in the dark.

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So next week we have a Soup and Bun lunch after next Sunday’s service along with a town hall meeting. You are all invited. The soup’s going to be great, but the content of the town hall is going to be incredible. So plan to come out and discuss the barley harvest opportunity that God appears to be opening up to us at Fort George and Lighthouse.

Related to this, if you want to know the future, you can – in a very limited way. The Inter-generational Committee, and the other church leaders have prepared a draft of next week’s Town Hall meeting that you can read through and prepare for that meeting.