

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Choices: Choosing to Serve – Ruth 2

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today* where, for the next twenty minutes or so, we shall be seeking to learn, from the book of Ruth, about serving God. This is the second in a series of talks, centred on this book, under the general title of 'Choices'. Last week my friend, Glenn Baxter, focused our attention on choosing to follow God and referred us to Ruth 1, so our title this week follows on neatly, for if we are truly following God we should be concerned about serving Him in this world. However, before we plunge into Ruth 2, I wish to talk generally about serving the Lord, which is both a privilege and an implication of being a Christian.

One of the questions, often asked by young Christians especially, is whether, or not, being conscious of a need constitutes a call to service. I will give an example to make it more apparent just what I mean. For instance, if in your church, or fellowship there is a shortage of helpers in the Sunday club, or whatever you call your children's work, and you know that you could fill the vacancy, if you put your mind to it then, I believe, that could be a call from God to serve Him. You have to be honest and sincere in your consideration of the particular task, for if you have no ability, or aptitude, then perhaps it is not for you. Alternatively, it is easy to say that you are unable to help simply because one is too lazy to commit to regular service in the ranks of those that serve the Lord Jesus.

Secondly, some special task might require a definite leading of the Spirit of God. If there is an appeal for helpers in another country, or another region of the UK, then I would be of the opinion that the Lord would make it plain that it was a specific call to you personally. Gladys Aylward felt that she was being called to serve as a missionary in China, yet others, who were responsible for missionary organisations at that time, felt that, as she could not pass the examinations, she was not suitable. So strong was the call that she laboured and prayed, for some considerable time, until she was able to reach China as the companion and helper of a lady worker, who was already resident in China.

Someone listening to me might be questioning as to whether Christianity really requires us to follow in a pathway of service. Before addressing that question, can I emphasise that service does not earn us merit with God. The only basis for our acceptance by God is that outlined by the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, which is our justification by faith in the Lord Jesus. This rich forgiveness comes through the atoning death of Christ on the cross at Calvary. A children's hymn, that I learnt many years ago, puts it simply, yet truthfully:

*"Nothing can for sin atone -
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
Naught of good that I have done -
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!"*

I say again, these words might be simple, or even simplistic, but they remind each one of us that there is only One who is good enough for God and that is His well beloved Son.

Now, if we consider another verse of that children's hymn, it will tell us why there is an implication in Christianity to serve the Lord:

*"Oh precious is the flow,
That makes me white as snow!
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus."*

If there is no other way to be right with God, and the atonement is precious to us, then surely that dictates that we follow and serve the Lord out of a grateful heart.

One of the best examples from Scripture of service is that of Nehemiah, where he organises many Israelites to devote many days to building a wall around Jerusalem. Few of them seem to be experienced builders, yet all of them joined in willingly to rebuild the broken defences around what was the main city of the land. Perhaps I ought not to say all of them, as according to Nehemiah 3:5, the nobles of Tekoa refused to work, meaning that the ordinary people of that place had to do the work that they should have done. This is an important point to note as we consider the topic of

service. I have no doubt that the work of God will get done, despite our unwillingness to carry it out. It simply means that God will use someone else to do the work we should have done.

Now we must move on to Ruth 2 which, as I said a few minutes ago, is the basis of our study for today. Last week we ended with Ruth, from Moab, and her mother-in-law, entering the land of Israel, which Naomi had left, with her husband and two sons, several years before. While they were there, Naomi's husband died, along with her two sons who had married Moabite women. Only Ruth wished to travel back with her mother-in-law uttering the famous lines: "...whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

The last verse of chapter 1 simply states that Naomi and Ruth arrived at Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest.

As we are primarily concerned with the principles of service, and not with the narrative of Ruth, I will mainly concern myself with comments on the verses in chapter 2 that indicate details which will teach us something about choosing to serve God. 2:2-3 inform us that Ruth took the lead in the decision to glean in the field of a rich relation of Naomi's. "And Ruth the Moabitess said unto Naomi, Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace. And she said unto her, Go, my daughter. And she went, and came, and gleaned in the field after the reapers: and her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz, who was of the kindred of Elimelech."

There are two or three points that I want to high-light from these verses. The first is that Ruth, being an alien, would not find it easy to work in the fields with the Jewish women. There might be tasks that need doing in the church, or fellowship, to which we belong that we could easily find excuses why we couldn't do them. We should note, from the verses I read, that Naomi, who could, and perhaps should, have gone to glean in the fields, stayed in Bethlehem. She might have been too old, or tired, after the journey, yet she did not even introduce Ruth to the workers. It was all left to Ruth who took up the challenge with no second thoughts. Are we imitators of Ruth's diligence in commencing a work that needs to be done?

The second point is that the work was both back breaking and hot. Gleaning for ears of corn that had fallen from the ripe stalks, after they had been cut by the harvesters, was not an attractive job. We are sometimes anxious that tasks in the public eye, involving recognition and not too much hard work, can be eagerly seized by those who want such recognition. In Matthew 6:5, the Lord Jesus speaks of men praying on the street corners so that they will be seen and honoured. His telling comment was that they will receive the reward they are seeking, namely the praise of men. As all of our service for the Lord should be done solely for Him, we should not seek that which thrusts us into the limelight, unless we are honestly convinced that the Lord of the harvest is calling us to it.

The third lesson is the obvious one, that Ruth actually went to the fields and began her work, which might seem an indisputable comment; however, obedience is so important. Whereas we can discuss and plan about a task with profit, we must also remember that, sooner rather than later, we must take up the work and actually begin. We read in verse 3 that Ruth went and gleaned. Eventually all our talking, considering and waiting must give way to starting the task before us.

Verse 7 illustrates another vital step in the pathway of the servant: "And she said, I pray you, let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves: so she came, and hath continued even from the morning until now, that she tarried a little in the house."

Please note that Ruth gleaned from 'the morning until now', which from the context seems to be most of the day, only stopping to rest for a little while in the house provided for sheltering from the sun. From this we see that service involves hard work and consistency. Some service could be a 'one off' type of job, such as building the walls of the city that we commented on a little earlier. Other service, like teaching children in a Sunday school, or week-night youth group, might require a regular, consistent commitment.

When we choose to serve God, we must remember the words of the Lord Jesus in Luke 9:62: "And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

These are serious words which must cause us to count the cost before we commit ourselves to His service, yet can anyone, who has experienced the rich forgiveness of the love of God, ever refuse to take up the cross to follow and serve the Lord Jesus?

From 2:8-9 we read how Ruth was encouraged by Boaz to glean along side of the other girls, as they moved across the field, where the corn had been cut. Taking the example of Ruth, as she followed the instructions of Boaz, I want to emphasise the importance of working alongside of others. Fellowship in the Lord's service is extremely important as we can then encourage one another. When we are partners in the work, we are ideally situated to uphold each other in prayer. Ruth was also told to drink from the vessels that the young men had used to draw from the well. Again, I

want to suggest that we need to feed and drink from the heavenly wells provided by the Lord for our spiritual well being. Do we read the Scriptures regularly and meditate upon them? Do we spend time seeking God's presence? I have recently been reading AW Tozer's *The Pursuit of God*, which has a striking sentence, in the preface, about the people who have a hunger for God: "They are athirst for God, and they will not be satisfied till they have drunk deep at the Fountain of Living Water."

Are we those who treasure and use the resources that God has provided?

In verse 10 Ruth expresses her appreciation of Boaz in the way that he favoured her: "Then she fell on her face, and bowed herself to the ground, and said unto him, Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldst take knowledge of me, seeing I am a stranger?"

If this verse tells us anything, it is that Ruth was aware of the privileges she was receiving from the hands of the rich landowner. We also should never forget the privilege of being a Christian. Paul tells us, in Ephesians 1:3, that we have been blest with all spiritual blessings, in heavenly places, in Christ Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 4:7, the same apostle writes that we have this treasure in earthen vessels, this treasure being the light of the knowledge of the eternal God. We should always be aware of the inestimable privilege of having the knowledge of God while still in our mortal bodies.

Verse 11 brings another important element that should not be missing from our lives when we have chosen to serve God. Here, Boaz tells Ruth that he is aware of all that she had done for her mother-in-law, by leaving the land of her birth, to accompany Naomi into a country where she was a stranger. Her manner of life had changed dramatically as she moved from Moab to Israel. If we say that we believe in, and serve, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, then there ought to be evidence in our behaviour that reflects just that. We cannot use language that does not become the Gospel, neither can we show temper tantrums instead of godly patience. We should know how to live as Christians, even though we dwell in a material world where enriching ourselves seems to be the accepted norm.

From verse 15 we read that Ruth, as she continued to work in the harvest field, was unaware that Boaz had given instructions to his reapers to let her glean amongst the sheaves. The following two verses state: "And let fall also some of the handfuls of purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not. So she gleaned in the field until even, and beat out that she had gleaned: and it was about an ephah of barley."

From these verses I think we can learn a couple of lessons without stretching the Scriptures. In verse 15 we saw that Ruth was unaware that, ultimately, it was Boaz who caused her to be successful, when she was gleaning amongst the sheaves, as he instructed his reapers to leave something for her to gather. In 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 we read: "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase."

We must never forget that, ultimately, our service is in the Lord's hands. We can never gain any glory for anything that is achieved in the Lord's service for, as Paul wrote, it is God that gives the increase. There are a few lines from a well known hymn that expresses something of what I mean:

*"Stand up! Stand up for Jesus!
Stand in His strength alone;
The arm of flesh will fail you,
Ye dare not trust your own".*

It is only the strength, or Spirit, of God that will achieve anything of lasting value through our service for the Lord.

Notice also, from 2:16-17 of Ruth that we quoted a few minutes ago, that Ruth beat out what she had gleaned. I suggest that we need, as servants to meditate and study the Bible, which we believe is the word of God and not just skim-read it. Seek out the meaning; let it lead us into the presence of the Lord in the same way that Ruth worked on the ears of barley that she had gleaned. When she had finished there was ample food for her and her mother-in-law. We need to feed our souls on the Word of God in order to feed others, as well as ourselves.

In verses 19 and 20 Ruth learns more about the kindness of Boaz, as well as her relationship to him through her marriage. My point here is that, by serving and feeding on the Word, we will know more about the great God who rescued us from the mire of sin to place our feet upon the solid ground of the rich salvation, secured for us by the Lord Jesus. Our service is never separated from our knowledge of God. Our desire to serve Him should never be at the expense of longing after His presence. I quote the American writer, AW Tozer, again, when he wrote about those who seek the Lord: "They will...turn away with tears to hunt some lonely place and pray, 'O God, show me Thy glory.' They want to taste, to touch with their hearts, to see with their inner eyes the wonder that is God."

I pray that each one of us will have the Spirit implanted desire to taste and see that the Lord is good.

My last two or three points, this morning, are based upon Ruth 2:23: “So [Ruth] kept fast by the maidens of Boaz to glean unto the end of the barley harvest and wheat harvest; and dwelt with her mother-in-law.”

The first of these points is to re-emphasise that the true servant never stops, until commanded to, or the task is finished. In Ruth’s case this was when the wheat harvest was gathered in, even though she began when the barley was being cut. She could have argued that she had worked hard enough by gleaning through the barley harvest without going into the wheat fields. We have chosen to serve the Lord of the harvest who has sent us into the fields that are white unto harvest. We ought not to please ourselves or use every minute of every day as our own. Christianity is not a hobby!

Another detail from this verse, that I wish to consider, is that Ruth dwelt with her mother-in-law. This, I suggest, tells us that her attitude and respect for Naomi never changed. I know that social customs then were not the same as they are now, and that women then would not set up a home of their own. The Scripture, however, makes a point of telling us that Ruth dwelt with her mother-in-law, so I am using this to emphasise that Christians remain dependent upon the Lord. We never move out of His presence to work on our own account.

My final thought is based upon the fact that she retained a measure of humility in being subject to Naomi. She could have boasted that it was her efforts, and her efforts alone, that put bread on the table of the shared home. It is easy for us as Christians to become arrogant and proud of what we are doing for the Lord, yet how wrong is such an attitude. If we are followers of the Man who called us to learn from Him, then we must learn to be humble and lowly. Matthew gives us these words of the Lord in Matthew 11:29: “[Jesus said], Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.”

To be imitators of the Lord in lowliness and meekness is not an easy matter.

My prayer this morning is that we all, through grace, are believers in the Lord Jesus and that, belonging to Him, we will choose to serve Him. To paraphrase Scripture, ‘We are not our own. We are bought with a price.’ Consequently, we should be zealously serving the Lord with humility of mind and dependence upon Him. Faithfulness is one of the aspects that the Lord of the harvest is looking for in His servants, as He will give, in a coming day, the increase and the commendation, in a coming day of, “Well done thou good and faithful servant.”

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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