

Gleaners Bible Studies A 12

THE WAYS OF A STRANGER - STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

Study 1

"I WILL GO"



Ruth chapter 1

The story of Ruth is very beautiful and most important. As an Old Testament writing it has something distinctive and definite to say. Although it has only four quite short chapters, it plays an important part in the development of Bible history. Therefore we must not only enjoy its beauty, but also seek to learn what it has to teach us. This is our aim in these four simple studies.

It is interesting to notice the time in which the events recorded in Ruth took place. In **verse 1** we read, "***In the days when the judges ruled***". This links the book with the events in the **Book of Judges**. Now these events make very sad reading. Judges tells of days when the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, were in a state of chaos. We read that "***there was no king in Israel; and everyone did what was right in his own eyes.***" (**Judges 21: 25**) Many people out of the tribes had lost their inheritance and were virtually in bondage to peoples they should have destroyed. There was no clear leadership, and little religious life in the land. Now look at **Ruth 4: 22** and you will see that the last name in the book is that of David - the great future king of Israel and Judah. This takes us forward into the **Book of 1 Samuel**. Samuel was the last of the judges and in his day, the Monarchy of Israel began. So, as the inheritance is recovered with Ruth and Boaz, David, of Judah's royal line is introduced. The Book of Ruth is a link between the nation's sad past and its more hopeful future.

Look at **verses 1-5** for the background of the story. Two Israelites, Elimelech and Naomi, with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, went to Moab from the famine-ridden land of Judah. A journey of some fifty miles. While they were there, tragedy overtook them. The husband and both sons died, leaving the mother, Naomi, and two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to loneliness and sorrow. Naomi presents a very sad picture to us. Life had turned sour for her - everything seemed lost. Yet this family should never have been found in the land of Moab. They had left the place where God's blessing and presence were promised, for a heathen land full of idolatry. The famine was but a punishment for the nation's sin, resulting in hardship, suffering and sorrow. But whatever was happening in Israel, to go to Moab was going away from God. Trouble was bound to follow and conditions would only go from bad to worse. To go away from God is to ask for trouble! As Christians, we can learn from these verses that it is easy to get away from God. **Disobedience** means **Distance**, and eventually **Distance** brings **Disaster**.

In **verse 6** we read of good news from a far country. The Lord had visited His people again and the famine was over. This news finally filtered through to Naomi and brought a ray of

hope. Undoubtedly, feelings of homesickness and a longing to be back in her own country, would have swept over her. So, with Ruth and Orpah, she set out to return to the land of her birth. Remember as you read **verse 7** that the two girls had never seen the land of Judah. The God of Naomi was a stranger to them, except perhaps for the things which Naomi had told them. Yet from Ruth's decisive words, it would seem that Naomi had faithfully witnessed to them about her faith and her God.

Think of the four steps built into our story so far. **Disobedience, Departure, Distance, Disaster**. But now we think of **DECISION**. The parting of the ways came through the efforts of Naomi to persuade her daughters-in-law to return to Moab. She was old, they were young. They knew the gods they were leaving - the God of Naomi was comparatively unknown to them. They were strangers to Israel, its people and its ways. What place was there in the land of promise for these strangers? Yet this story does tell of God's love for the stranger. The people of God were always taught to love those living among them who did not belong to their nation.

In **Exodus 22: 21** and **23: 9** God tells His people how they should treat strangers. They were never to hurt them or make them feel unwanted. This is a proof of God's 'big heartedness'. It was also a reminder to Israel that they owed their freedom to God's kindness for they were once strangers in Egypt. As Ruth came into Naomi's homeland, she could be sure that at the very least, she would not be ill-treated or shunned, see also **Leviticus 19: 33-34**.

The **Decision** that Ruth made was really remarkable. Orpah went back to her old home and her own people and we never hear of her again. But for Ruth it was the turning point of her whole life. Things would never be the same again. Think of what she turned her back on. All the things that normally would be most valued - her homeland, her friends, her idol-gods - everything that had meant 'life' to her - would be left behind. Her choice meant a new way of life altogether. The words in which she expressed her decision to Naomi are some of the most wonderful ever spoken. They were words of faith and commitment. Study them carefully in **verses 16-17**. She stepped out upon a pathway that had God as its goal. Just imagine how Naomi must have felt when Ruth said to her "***Your God shall be my God***". We can imagine perhaps the tears running down her face as she realised her testimony and years of prayer were at last effective. So Ruth came to Bethlehem - for life and until death!

Following Christ is just like this. We come to Him, like Ruth, as strangers needing His love and forgiveness from sin. If we really mean to be Christians we need to commit ourselves fully to following Christ and leave our old life completely behind us. The blessing of the Lord Jesus in our lives can only be fully enjoyed as we yield everything to Him. Notice how complete Ruth's surrender was as she went with Naomi.

We end this lesson with noting Ruth's unflinching

Determination to go with Naomi. This is the key to her way of life. **“She was determined to go with her”, verse 18.** Neither the return of her sister, nor the plea of Naomi, could deter Ruth from her chosen course. Her courage shines out clearly. Nothing could alter her decision. She is a wonderful example for us. In the face of Satan’s efforts to lure us away from a decisive commitment to Christ, we must determine to **GO** with Him all the way. Though a stranger, Ruth found satisfaction and eventually enjoyment in the fruits of her determination in association with Boaz. Ask yourself now, ‘Am I determined to follow Christ all the way?’

Study 2

“LET ME GO... AND GLEAN.”



Ruth chapter 2

The return of Naomi to Bethlehem caused a stir. She had grown old since she had left home and much had happened to sadden her. She says of her experience, **“I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty”.** (chapter 1: 21) We remember that it was during the time of famine when she left, yet she said she went out full! Now she comes back from a country that offered plenty and she laments that she is empty! We can learn here that wherever God is there is fullness, even though life may be hard and difficult. But to go to any place where He is not honoured, is to find life empty and dissatisfying. The best way to live as a Christian is to live near the Lord all the time. Like Naomi, once we get away from Him, we will find that it takes a long time to get back again.

Ruth, the stranger of Moab, comes back with Naomi, and her coming probably made people talk. Ruth could have felt strange and lonely. She loved Naomi very much, but she knew no-one else. She had to make her way among a people who were proud of their position as the people of God. To them, Ruth as a Moabitess was an outcast - she had no title to the things they enjoyed. Yet again, we can remind ourselves that God loves the outcast and the stranger. We shall see that God led her in a remarkable way into paths of blessing. For not only does God love, but He is willing also to lead.

We are introduced in **chapter 2: 1**, to the most important character in the Book of Ruth - Boaz, of the family of Elimelech. He was a **“man of great wealth”** and his name means ‘in him is strength’. We shall see how he was just the one who could help Ruth in her need, and eventually she becomes his wife. I am sure we can see in Boaz something of the character of the Lord Jesus Christ. We come to Him in our need and He has so much to share with us. Compare **Philippians 4: 19, Ephesians 2: 4-7.**

There were not many ways for widows to earn a living in those days, and Ruth and Naomi were poor. But the law laid down that the gleanings of the harvest and the corners of the fields be left for the poor and the widows. (See **Leviticus 19: 9-10 and Deuteronomy 24: 19**) So Ruth did not sit idly at home. She went about finding support for herself and Naomi. **“Let me go to the field and glean heads of grain”**, she says. (**Ruth 2: 2**) So Ruth took her place as a poor widowed stranger and sought the necessary food for her need. By ‘chance’ in the common open field, she gleaned in the part belonging to Boaz, Elimelech’s kinsman. His kindness goes far beyond the law’s demands, (**2: 9, 14-16**), and Ruth returns with an ephah of barley. An ephah was a large container

holding about 22 litres, so Ruth had gleaned about a half hundredweight of barley by her own hard work and Boaz’s generosity.

“Where have you gleaned today”?, Naomi asks Ruth in **verse 19**. Naomi realises that someone had been kind to Ruth. It was good that Ruth was able to tell of the kindness of Boaz and also of the **“handfuls of purpose”** that he had let fall for her as she gleaned. As you read this chapter notice how Boaz treated Ruth. He received her into his fields and gave her a warm welcome, and she began to share in his wealth. This chapter teaches us a great lesson in seeking God and of God’s willingness to bless those who seek and obey Him.

Let us see what we can learn from the practice of gleaning. The whole thing began with Ruth’s **Desire** to find food for herself and her mother-in-law. Because she was a stranger, she was dependent on the kindness of others for her very life. It was the only means of survival for her at this time and it was through this desire to glean that she entered into her future blessings.

Do you want to become a strong Christian? If you do desire spiritual growth, then you must desire the right kind of food. The food for Christians is not found among sheaves of barley and wheat, but in the Scriptures, the Word of God. Just as Ruth went each day to glean in the fields, so you should come to the Bible each day, with a desire to read those truths which become the food of our spiritual life. **John 6: 33-35** has something to say about this. The Lord Jesus offers Himself as the Bread of Life, to satisfy spiritual hunger. Then **1 Peter 2: 2** speaks of **“the pure milk of the word”** by which we grow. Young Christians especially need to develop desires for the Word of God, otherwise growth in spiritual life is hampered.

The fascinating thing about the story of Ruth’s gleaning is the way in which God guided her to the right fields. No doubt there were many farmers who had fields of barley when she arrived in Bethlehem, but of them all she was **Directed** to the right place. The unseen hand of God guided her to the place where the greatest blessing could be found. Note the wonderful relationship Boaz had with his servants. (**verse 4**) It was from this point that he came into her life in a marvellous way. Now we can think here of the part that prayer must play when reading the Bible. God answers desire with direction. We can pray with David, **“O send out Your light and Your truth! Let them lead me”.** (**Psalm 43: 3**) The progress made by Ruth was encouraged by the kindness of Boaz. Besides caring for this young stranger, he made sure that **“handfuls of purpose”** should be dropped for her. When she went home she had plenty for herself and for Naomi. **“Where have you gleaned today?”** - ask yourself this question in relation to your own Bible study.

Ruth obeyed the commands of Boaz to stay where she could find most food. This was wise behaviour. **“Do not go to glean in another field”**, was his command. (**verse 8**) She was **determined** to stay in the right place while food was available. (**verse 23**) She did not allow any distractions. Having found food, she stayed with it. Significant behaviour! When you begin to study your Bible, Satan will do everything in his power to spoil your appetite. Books, television, sports or hobbies; any time-consuming occupation can interfere with ‘feeding on the Word’ - ‘gleaning’ in satisfying spiritual fields. Remember though, that even in Bible study, the good can often be the enemy of the best. To be strong spiritually, we have to follow Ruth’s example and glean continually in the right fields.

So we have seen how Ruth, the stranger, meets Boaz, the great man of wealth. He is a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. She is now beginning to enjoy his kindness and his grace.

Study 3

FINDING REST



Ruth chapter 3

Gleaning in the fields of Boaz was rewarding for Ruth as far as it went, but it was obvious that it could not bring permanent satisfaction. The harvest would soon be over and this chapter tells us about the joy which came as the harvest was gathered in. Boaz was obviously a successful farmer and gained his wealth through skillful management.

One interesting feature of the story is the quiet way in which Naomi guided her daughter-in-law with sound advice. She could see the great possibilities of security for Ruth in a lasting relationship with Boaz, their kinsman. Poverty had robbed Naomi of the enjoyment of the inheritance of her husband. In going to Moab she had lost the wealth which once belonged to Elimelech. But she saw that if Boaz could do his part as a kinsman and take Ruth to be his wife, much blessing could result. The ancient customs of Israel in relation to buying or redeeming the lands of dead relatives could be satisfied and so the continuance of the inheritance in the family name could be assured.

What could be done? Naomi sent Ruth to find Boaz as he threshed that which he had gathered from his harvest. Notice how, in **verse 3**, Ruth is told to wash and anoint herself and to put on suitable attire to meet this great man. It is to her credit that Ruth was willing to obey Naomi in every detail. It was good advice that she was given and she benefitted by it. This is a very important point, because had Ruth been at all rebellious or tried to assert her independence she would have missed the blessing. Instead she was humble and submissive, and ready to learn from the experience of a much older woman. However, the idea behind these preparations was for Ruth to make herself fit to meet Boaz. She was only the poor stranger, he was the great man of wealth.

Just as it was important to Ruth **HOW** she met Boaz, so it is important to us as Christians as to the condition in which we approach God. Ruth realised that she needed to be clean and dressed suitably for the occasion. One effect that the reading of the Bible has on our lives is to make us clean and fit for God's presence. **Psalm 119: 9** tells us that obedience to God's Word cleanses us from those things that are wrong. It is good to be able to say when we learn what God wants us to do, the words of Ruth to Naomi, "**All that you say to me, I will do**". (**verse 5**)

As we go through this chapter we notice **WHERE** Ruth is found in relation to Boaz. Having found him and allowed him to recognise her, she lies at his feet until morning comes. This may seem strange to you, but Boaz was very content having eaten and drunk well. He lies down to sleep and is suddenly aware, at midnight, of someone at his feet. Imagine his surprise when he finds the Moabitess there. What is she doing? I always admire the boldness of Ruth as she reminds Boaz that he is a near kinsman to her mother-in-law and therefore to her, (**verse 9**). In seeking rest and security she casts herself completely upon his kindness. There is no pride with her - she humbly waits at his feet.

Let us gather up three important lessons at this stage of the story. We see three things about Ruth's approach to Boaz.

1. She took care that she was clean and pure as she went to him. (**verse 3**) Again, this teaches us that if our lives are to be right with Christ - if we are to enjoy His blessing - there must be **Holiness**. We have already noticed the care with which Ruth obeyed Naomi in this. She wanted to be her best and to look her best for this man upon whom she depended. We shall only find the highest blessing that Christ gives if we are holy in the way we live. Holiness leads to happiness. Notice what **1 Peter 1: 13-16** says about this. It is important.

2. The second point we can learn about Ruth here is her **Humility**. She is found, as we have seen, at the feet of Boaz, her protector. This is quite a beautiful touch to the story. But it reflects the attitude of Ruth all the way through. She never lost sight of the fact that she was just a stranger. She had no right to expect anything from Boaz. His generosity was her only hope. But he recognised the spirit that made her take this place, "**Do not fear**," he says, "**I will do all for you, that you request**". (**verse 11**) We are reminded of the important words of the Lord Jesus, "**Everyone who exalts himself will be abased; and he who humbles himself will be exalted**". (**Luke 18: 14**)

3. Finally we notice that she had every reason to **Hope** for a happy future. Notice the words of Naomi to her, "**Sit still, my daughter... for the man will not rest until he has concluded the matter this day**". (**verse 18**) Humanly speaking, as a Moabitess, Ruth was right out in the cold - without God and without hope. But the kindness of Boaz encouraged her wholehearted trust. He not only wanted to give her blessings - he wanted her. This was tremendous! It meant that all that he had, became available to her, and she just had to trust him. No other way was possible. She could go to no one else. I wonder if the picture has really gripped you? It was either Boaz or nothing! So it is with the Christian and Christ. Our only hope is in Him. Without Him we are lost like Ruth, we have to trust Him, to hope in His love and purposes. He will not let us down! **Ephesians 2: 8-9** tells us that it is only Grace that saves us. All our hopes are in the living Lord Jesus Christ.

So the scene is set for the last great act of Boaz to claim Ruth for his own. We will see that all his promises will be fulfilled.

Study 4

REWARD OF JOY



Ruth chapter 4

Stories which end happily are always good to read. You know how so many of these stories end, 'So they lived happily ever after!' This is the great beauty of the story of Ruth and Boaz. Maybe you wonder how it could be that a woman from a country like Moab, with all its idolatry and godlessness, should enter a community so exclusive in its religion as that of Israel. From a human standpoint you would say, 'No chance!' However we have learnt that in this Book from Scripture, God is not only holy and just and righteous, but is also full of kindness and compassion to the outcast and stranger. Amazing, isn't it? Ruth, the stranger becomes Ruth, the citizen. And more than that - the wife of Boaz. This is the way God does things, and He is just the same today!

This chapter describes a little of the ancient Jewish custom of carrying on the family name and inheritance. Both Elimelech, Naomi's husband, and her sons, Mahlon and Chilion, had died in the land of Moab. Ruth had no claim to any of their land, unless a kinsman of Elimelech bought them back again. As far as Naomi was concerned, the law was that whoever bought the lands, must also take Ruth for his wife, in order to carry on the name of the family. (**verse 5**) We notice that there was a nearer kinsman than Boaz. So Boaz, while willing to fully redeem the inheritance, waited for the decision of this man. It is obvious that Boaz loved Ruth and he must have rejoiced when the nearer kinsman was unable to act as redeemer. Notice the custom in **verse 7** which gave evidence of the intention to redeem. Thus the way was open for Boaz to have Ruth for himself. This chapter is a description of the ancient custom of redemption. So the stranger becomes wife to the wealthy Boaz. What a story! I do like the way in which Boaz declared his love for Ruth so that all could see that he meant business. **Verse 9** tells us how he publicly called for witnesses to the fact of the union between himself and Ruth. It was the beginning of a tremendous life together of joy and happiness. Ruth was a stranger no more - she was now one of the family.

We can learn so much from this story about the way in which God deals with those who become Christians. Look at **Ephesians 2: 1-10** and see how it fits so wonderfully into the picture of Boaz and Ruth. It links **Past, Present and Future** together.

The **PAST** is black because of what we were before we became Christians. **Ephesians 2: 1-3** gives us a vivid picture of this. Perhaps we can pause in our studies to realise just how awful are the effects of sin. To be a stranger, in the sense that Ruth was, is nothing compared with being away from God. Think of what this means - "**dead in trespasses and sins**" - "**sons of disobedience**" - "**children of wrath, just as the others**". If you are a Christian, and I hope you are, this is the kind of life you have left behind. I cannot think that Ruth would ever want to go back to the old life in Moab with its sin and idolatry. She would, no doubt, sometimes remember all that the past had been like. But would she ever want to go back? No indeed! Those who truly follow Christ and love Him turn their backs on all the sin of the past. They should never want to go back.

The **PRESENT** in these verses is very wonderful. "**But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us**". (**Ephesians 2: 4**) We noticed in our study of Ruth, how that Boaz showed his kindness and love to her all along the way. This enabled Ruth and Naomi to survive. But it was only a foretaste of the greater things to come. Through God's kindness and love the Christian life becomes happy and full of satisfaction. Instead of being dead, we are quickened and have life. Instead of darkness, we have light. It is good to remember that Boaz is a type of the Lord Jesus, our Great Redeemer, and the One who has wealth enough to supply all the needs of those who trust Him.

The **FUTURE** is bound to be bright if the **Past** and the **Present** are put right. This is the heart of Christian experience. Look at **Ephesians 2: 7** and see how wonderfully the kindness of God will be seen in "**the ages to come**". Just as Ruth was associated with Boaz, so all who are saved through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ will be with Him for ever, as a part of

the Bride of Christ. This is a wonderful future for the Christian.

In concluding, we can note that the most striking feature of this simple and beautiful story of Ruth, is the sense of God's intimate concern in humble affairs. He is the One who orders all the circumstances of daily life, even for the most unimportant people. For we have seen how the new found faith of a Moabite girl, and her sacrificial love for her mother-in-law are woven into the great tapestry of God's plan of salvation. God rewards Ruth with the gift of a husband and son - and Naomi finds solace for her grief in this grandson. When God steps in, the ordinary events of life take on extraordinary significance. For this child, Obed, became grandfather to David, the founder of the royal line of Israel from which Christ Himself took human flesh, in another birth at Bethlehem.

Questions

Study 1 "I WILL GO"

1. In what religious and political condition was the nation of Israel at the time when the events in the Book of Ruth took place?
2. Why should Elimelech never have taken his family to Moab?
3. Say briefly what the law's teaching was concerning strangers.
4. Why was Ruth's decision to go with Naomi so remarkable?
5. What parallel do you see between the character of Ruth and the Christian?

Study 2 "LET ME GO... AND GLEAN"

1. Comment on Naomi's statement in **1: 21a**.
2. Why do you think Boaz was so kind and generous towards Ruth? (Refer to the chapter).
3. How can Christians achieve spiritual growth?
4. What will spoil our appetite for the Word of God?
5. What do you see of God's guidance in this chapter?

Study 3 FINDING REST

1. What was Ruth's attitude to Naomi?
2. What spiritual lesson can we learn from Ruth's preparation to meet Boaz?
3. In what way is Boaz a type of the Lord Jesus?
4. How will the reading and study of God's Word benefit us?
5. What is the main lesson you have learnt from this chapter?

Study 4 REWARD OF JOY

1. What does this lesson teach us about the character of God?
2. State briefly what you understand by a "**Kinsman Redeemer**."
3. What does **Ephesians 2** teach us about the **PAST** of the Christian?
4. What is the Christian's hope for the **FUTURE**?
5. What is the most important or helpful thing you have learnt from your studies in Ruth?