

How Far Would You Go?

As you're driving downtown along 8th Street, often you'll see people who don't have a home. What's your immediate thought? Is it sympathy? You feel bad for them that they're in this position, that they'll be sleeping in a shelter, or maybe on the street or in a park, who knows where? You wonder what they need the most. Some hold up signs offering to work to support their family. Some say that anything helps.

Does your mind jump to judgment? How did they end up in this situation? It must have been something they did. They wasted their money on an addiction. They weren't responsible enough to hold down a job and pay rent. It must be their fault that they ended up in this position.

How far would you go to help that person on the street? Do you give them the spare change in your car? Do you drive to an ATM to get something more? Would you buy them a meal or bring them food from home? Would you try to establish a relationship and keep checking up on this individual? Would you open a room in your home to let them stay the night, or longer? Offer them a job, even something small, so they can work and earn income? Would you stand by their side and walk with them through any rehabilitation process to get back on their feet? How far would you go?

Let's picture a different scenario. Say you're a young woman who got married to an out-of-country boy who moved to town. As many do when they get married, you leave your parents' house to live with your husband. You grow close to his family, especially his mother. Your husband's dad died earlier, so your mother-in-law is already lonely and grieving. Ten years into your marriage, your husband and his brother die, too. Suddenly, you, your sister-in-law, and dear mother-in-law are a group of widowed women. What do you do?

Well, your mother-in-law isn't from your country; she's just living there temporarily. She finds out that the famine in her own land is over and decides to go home. At least she'll know the people there and maybe have some extended family. Her own lineage won't continue, but she can have some comfort in the time left before she ultimately dies too. As she sets out to return home, you and your sister-in-law show her the courtesy of starting along the road to see her off. How far do you go?

Naomi turns around and tells you to go back. She thanks you for the kindness you've shown her and your dead husbands, and she prays that the LORD continues to show you kindness, that you may find new husbands and have rest and security with them. As much as you promise to go with her, she resists. What more can she offer you? Is an old woman going to have more sons? Should you young ladies wait for new boys to grow up? Would you be happy in those marriages? No, Naomi tells you to stay in your own country with your own people and gods. It's familiar, there's more guarantee of safety and a future there. Why go to a foreign land with no promise of marriage and a family - what a woman was looking for in those days?

How far do you go? You've lived with your mother-in-law for at least 10 years now. You have a bond, a relationship. You've established this new life. And yet, that life was taken away from you when your husband died. Naomi's right. Your best prospects are to stay in your own country where you could marry a Moabite man. In Israel, who would take you for a wife? And if you're not a wife in that era, what are you? Why should you stay with Naomi? Your sister-in-law seems to make the rational choice, and she returns home. But in this story, Ruth stays. She clings to Naomi with loyalty and love.

How far would she go? **“Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”** Ruth declares her commitment. She didn't know where they'd end up, or if they'd need to keep moving from place to place as women without husbands to support them. Plus, she was moving to a foreign country she'd never seen before. Even more, she was leaving behind the gods she grew up with. How could she make this commitment?

The text doesn't tell us that Naomi's family had converted Ruth. But these words from Ruth show that she knew the LORD and his love, a love that goes to the ends of the earth. She was so willing to do whatever it took to help Naomi that she swore in the LORD's name, sealing her pledge by the highest authority. The LORD she learned about from this humble Israelite family taught Ruth to love her neighbor as herself. The LORD led Ruth to go as far as death if that's what it took to stay with Naomi. When her mother had no one left, Ruth would not abandon her.

Would you do the same? Would you go to great lengths to help someone in need? If you were asked to leave the only place you'd ever lived to move to a land with no prospects, no hope for you? If the person you were going with repeatedly told you, "No, turn back, it's too bitter! You don't want to come!"? Yes, you had a relationship with her, but what if she dies too? Then you're left all alone. It's not worth it. Shouldn't you look out for yourself?

Isn't that the way of the world? If you're going to go to great lengths to care for someone, take care of yourself first. When we see someone in need, what kinds of thoughts hold us back from helping? "If I help, that might put me in danger. How can I even help? I'm not capable of fixing their situation. If I give them my time and energy and money, what's left for me?" Our hearts are so focused on ourselves that we see our neighbors as a distraction from the true priority. Even in their deepest needs, we become more concerned about how helping them will hinder and harm us.

How could Ruth make such a bold choice? The kindness of the LORD motivated her to keep showing kindness. Through Ruth, God was showing Naomi that his hand wasn't against her but would continue to provide for her in new ways. Even without a husband and sons to work, God fed Naomi and Ruth through another relative. Ruth went to work in the fields of Boaz, picking up the grain dropped behind his harvesters. Through Boaz, God showed kindness to Ruth - he kept her safe, made sure she had enough to eat and drink throughout the day, and sent her home with extra grain. Eventually, Boaz would take this foreigner as his wife, upholding a family law by marrying his relative's widow. And so, Naomi's lineage continued, as Ruth and Boaz had a son. God filled all of Naomi's needs, showing kindness through the people around her.

Isn't that often how the LORD works today? He is not inattentive to our needs. He knows each of us and cares for us deeply. Maybe you know someone who's reached the end of a decade and feels like they've lost everything. Life is far too bitter for them; there's no hope. And no one should try to help them, because it would only end up worse for the helper too! But we know the love and power of our LORD. We've seen him visit in time of need and attend to the cares of the suffering. How does the LORD do this? He works through people. He works through you.

How can you be like Ruth? How can you be a good Samaritan who stops to help the person left for dead on the side of the road? How can you set aside concern for self and go to great lengths to care for a neighbor in need? Look to Christ. See the great lengths he went to in order to help someone in need, someone left for dead. Jesus knew what it would cost him. But he wasn't concerned about himself. He had deep compassion for the suffering, the hopeless, the ones who couldn't pick themselves back up on their own.

Jesus left his native land to walk where we walk, to dwell where we dwell. Our people became his people; he made sinners his companions. And on this earth, where all are bound to die, Jesus came to die too. He was buried here. But because Jesus is true God, the God of Naomi, the God of Ruth, and our God, he also rose from the dead. He lives triumphant and continues to meet all our needs. This is the love of our LORD, the kindness that visited the people of Israel in their famine and the grace that delivers us from our destitution.

Now, Christ's love compels us. We look to Christ, not merely as an example. We certainly want to imitate Christ, to model the care he showed for us to the people around us. But ultimately, we're seeking to bring Christ to the world. In a miraculous way, we're both serving *as Christ* and serving *Christ himself*. When we help a neighbor in need, Christ works through us to show his care and to provide for his dear children. At the same time, Jesus says that whatever we do for the least of these - for the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick, those in prison - we're doing this for him.

How far would you go? What lengths will the LORD's love drive you to this week? What can you give to someone in need? As you use your time, energy, skills, and money, how can you serve Christ by serving others? Maybe we're not called to uproot our life like Ruth and move to a new place. But maybe God wants us to uproot our way of life, our former way of thinking. How can you radically change your living to meet the needs of someone around you? As you consider how to love your neighbor, remember the love of your LORD. See what great love your God has shown you, and in your freedom, go and do likewise. Amen.