

Lake Cities Community Church  
Series: Living Above and Beyond – Living a Life  
of Hesed. Study of the Book of Ruth  
9-9-07  
Pastor Craig Schill

## **Living Above and Beyond** **Ruth 1:14-22**

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The bar was set at 9-inches higher than Michael Stone’s personal best. He began to get nervous. Fear would be a more accurate description. The stands were still filled with about 20,000 people even though the final race had ended an hour earlier. The pole vault is truly the glamour event of any track-and-field competition. It combines the grace of a gymnast with the strength of a body builder.

Michael had been looking forward to this moment since his was a child. He was now one of the final two competitors in the pole-vaulting event at the National Junior Olympics. Michael needed to clear this vault to win. *Would Michael be able to go above and beyond the bar?*

We are talking this morning about the extraordinary. We are talking about the type of person who would set the bar 9” higher than he had ever set it before. We are talking about the type of person who accepts increased risks - but not, as ABC Sports used to say – “For the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat!” No - we are talking about a person who would go above and beyond -- for the sake of love. Are you that type of person? Am I that type of person? Who go to extreme lengths to show love to another person? To your spouse, children, a friend, a person in the church who you know has a need, your neighbor who does not know Christ? There is fork in the road this morning – on one side is the ordinary. The expected. The safe. On the other side is the extraordinary, the risky, the surprising.

Please turn to Ruth, chapter 1 – this morning we are in verses 14-22. Before we pick up the story, let’s take a moment to review. Two weeks ago I encouraged us to *savor the story*. Ruth falls into the genre of biblical narrative. It is one of the most beautiful and beautifully constructed stories

in the Bible. One commentator I read this week overflowed with praise: “It is the book of the OT which has long been cited as a perfect example of the art of telling a story.” (Phyllis Tribble, *Ruth*, Anchor Bible Dictionary, 1999). High praise, but that is the type of comment you find over and over again, from those who study Ruth.

Because it is a story, we must pay attention to the way the story unfolds. Setting, plot, characters and literary devices. The setting – you will recall - is a tragic one – the story is set during the time of the Judges, and there is a great famine in the land. Elimelech’s family travels to Moab to find food where Elimelech dies. His sons marry Moabite women and they return to somewhat normal life for 10-years, and then the sons die. This led to our first important interpretive questions: “*Was it sinful for Elimelech to sojourn to Moab, and was it wrong for the sons to marry Moabite women?*”

I would like to expand on my response to these questions because they have bearing on today’s text. We basically have three options - Yes it was sinful, no it was not, or we just don’t know. The scholars and commentators are split on this question.

If it was sinful – the story become one of punishment and redemption. The reason for all the tragedy is because of the family’s lack of trust in God, sinful alliances with an enemy nation and marriage to foreign women. When they leave Israel everything goes wrong – when they return to Israel, the blessing returns. It is a legitimate option. A recent commentary states, “We now see the danger of moving to and staying on in a place of sin. There is temptation to marry outside the people of God. What was the punishment for this disobedience? Sudden death.” (J. Darline Peipman, *The Book of Ruth*, 2004, p.47).

But you do not have to take that position. The view I hold is that neither the sojourn to Moab nor the marriage were necessarily sinful. Why? Temporary dislocations because of famine were common and not condemned in the O.T. Famine sent Abraham to Egypt, Isaac to the Philistines,

Jacob to Egypt and. Years later, Elisha told the Shunammite women “**Arise and go with your household, and sojourn wherever you can sojourn; for the LORD has called for a famine, and it will even come on the land for seven years.**” 2 Kings 8:1. You see, long famines and years of dislocation were common in Bible times.

Regarding the marriages to Moabite women – intermarrying was a constant problem for Israel – because the people often adopt the foreign gods instead of Yahweh. Also, the law did forbid certain marriages, to women of the seven countries that were displaced from the Promised Land (Deut 7:1-4). But, Moabites were not one of those nations and so there is no clear objection from the law. And further, the law did not forbid foreign people from adopting the ways of Yahweh, which appears to be the case in our story. Frederic Bush comments, “There is not the slightest hint that the tragic deaths of Elimelech and his sons in any way resulted from their having forsaken their people in a time of trouble or their having moved to Moab where the sons married Moabite women. Later rabbinic exegesis used such themes of retribution and punishment to the full, but they are read into the story, not out of it.” (Frederic Bush, “*Ruth*”, WBC, p. 67).

The reason we have interpretive options on these points is because regarding the sojourn and the marriages the author is silent, neither commending nor condemning the choices – And so whatever position we take, we must take with humility.

And either way, we are left with two major problems – first widows (3 widows in a patriarchal culture – we are worried about their provision and protection) and the second, extinction. With Mahlon and Chilion dead, and Naomi too old to have more children, it seems very unlikely that any heirs will be produced. Hubbard said, “In Israel, there was no greater tragedy than for a family to cease to exist.”

To try to solve the problem of the two younger widows, last week Naomi put forward a plan – that they would return to their Moabite relatives – there they had a much better chance of

marrying and finding security, than traveling with her back to Bethlehem. Both Orpah and Ruth Objected to this plan, but Naomi insisted – and that is where we pick up the story in verse 14

### **Orpah’s Path (Ruth 1:14-15)**

“And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. Then she said, ‘Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’”

Our text begins with more weeping – this reminds us that these women truly loved each other. Verses 14 and 15 are about Orpah’s path – her kiss to his mother in law is a kiss good bye – she returns to her Moabite relatives, as Naomi asked her to do. And so we have another interpretive question – “Was Orpah wrong to return?” Interestingly, Jewish tradition paints Orpah in a very negative light by making the unlikely claim that she was an ancestor of the giant Goliath and so in the battle of David and Goliath you have the paths of Orpah and Ruth locked in an epic battle.

What about Naomi’s comment that Orpah returned to her god. Is Naomi endorsing the reality or worship of Chemosh the horrible Moabite God? That does not seem likely. Instead - in the ancient world, deities were associated with geographic regions. To return to Israel, was to return to where Yahweh was. To return to Moab was to return to the god or gods of that land. It does not necessarily indicate that Orpah returned to pagan worship of those gods, but that she has made the choice to return to Moab to that culture.

Just as I have argued for us not to be too hard on Elimelech, and his two sons, I am going to argue that we should not be too hard on Orpah. Remember that Orpah would have stayed with Naomi and begged and pleaded with her to stay and go to Israel. She only returns at Naomi’s request – and more importantly, we must remember that *she goes back to Moab with the blessing of Yahweh’s hesed* – love (verse 8). One commentator put it this way: “May one fault Orpah for

unforgivable disloyalty to Naomi? On the contrary, the narrator avoids criticizing her. In fact, her departure merits some praise as an obedient daughter who properly accepted Naomi's wise counsel.

- Hubbard, *Ruth*, p.115.

### **Ruth's path (Ruth 1:16-17)**

As verses 14-15 were about Orpah, verses 16-17 are about Ruth. In one of the most beautiful passages of Scripture we read:

“But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the Lord do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.” When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Now we are back to the extra-ordinary. We are back to the bar being set 9” higher than it has been set before. We see a risky decision, a bold decision, a beautiful decision. Orpah did the expected and Ruth the unexpected. Ruth could have said – “I will make sure you make it to Israel, and then I will return to Moab.” She could have said, “I will stick with you as long as you are alive, but when you die, I will return to Moab.” But what does she say? “Where you go I will go – Your people will be my people – Your God, my God – where you die I will die. And may curses fall upon me is anything makes me break my vow.”

*This is our first picture of hesed.* I have talked about this word briefly in the past two weeks. It is a Hebrew word – and *hesed* drives the book of Ruth – it comes up first in verse 8 in Naomi's prayer. That God's *hesed* would be with her daughter-in-laws and now Ruth's vow is a picture of *hesed*.

Here is a working definition: *Hesed* is “Loving and kind actions stemming from loyalty and commitment between close friends or family members.” It is a concept that does not translate well into English. We do not have one word that reflects the depth of *hesed*. Translations of the word include: kindness, lovingkindness, mercy, love, unfailing love, etc.

Usually *hesed* takes place within the bonds of a covenant. God’s covenant with Israel – family relationships or close friends. And in Ruth the element of extra-ordinary – generous kindness and love comes out. *Hesed* has been described in the book of Ruth: “Generous, expansive love, contagious goodness, beyond the call of duty, extraordinary commitment.” Let me give you some modern examples to help us make concept more concrete.

When we ask our children to do their chores – and they do them – that is expected – it is good but that is not *hesed*. But once, when Tammy and I went out and the kitchen was a disaster – we threw a passing comment to Trevor - “Trevor, please try work on the kitchen while we are gone.” What we would have expected would have been for the dishwasher to have been run and unloaded. The table wiped down. The catsup put away. But, when we came back the kitchen was spotless – floors moped, counters clean, the clutter gone – dishes put away.” I think he even lit a candle. That was *hesed* – above and beyond!

For those of you who have been to our house – some of you know about that 3x3x3 concrete cube that once held up a satellite dish. I took a couple wacks at it with a sledgehammer a while back and quickly gave up on the job. When Tammy’s dad visited last weekend – he said, I think we can take that out. And so after driving 18-hours to spend time with us, he rented a jackhammer and we worked hours and hours into the night and finally dismantled what turned out to be one of the most difficult home improvement jobs I have encountered – I would not have done that on my own – That was *hesed*.

Sam Rayburn, a democratic leader from Texas, served for more than 48 years in the US House of Representatives, including 17 years as speaker of the House. At the height of his career he was one of the most powerful men in the world.

But he was known as a good friend, who never outgrew. He was known for honesty. He chose not to amass wealth, and died with only \$15,000 to his name.

One night, a friend's teenage daughter passed away. Early the next morning the man heard a knock on the door and when he opened it, there was Mr. Rayburn standing outside.

"I just came by to see what I could do to help," said Rayburn. "I don't think there is anything you can do, Mr. Speaker," said the broken father. "We are making all the arrangements."

"Well," Mr. Rayburn said, "have you had your coffee this morning?"

The man replied that they had not taken time for breakfast. So Mr. Rayburn said that he could at least make coffee for them. While he was working in the kitchen, the man came in and said, "Mr. Speaker, I thought you were suppose to be having breakfast at the White House this morning." "Well I was," Rayburn said, "but I called the President and told him I had a friend who was in trouble, and I couldn't come."

That is *hesed*. You see Orpah was not wrong – but it was not hesed. Of the two women, Ruth is held out for us as an example to inspire us.

### **Point of Application**

Do you see our application this morning? Now you can't always do the extraordinary – again, the way of Orpah is not bad - but what characterizes your life? Do you always do what is safe and expected? Or do you sometimes goes above and beyond for the sake of love, for the sake of the other person. How this week might you show hesed? Children – have you ever even considered – going above and beyond with your chores – because of your love for your family? Husbands – isn't

it about time to go above and beyond for your wife? If she asks you to rub her back – don't do the Orpah back rub – what it expected – rub-rub. Do the unexpected – put some effort into it! Wives, isn't it time you went above and beyond for your husband – he needs *hesed* from you – verbally, physically. Think about how attractive *hesed* is to a lost world – a world thirsting for something genuine. May we find *hesed* for our lives, our relationships and our church.

### **Noami's Path (Ruth 1:19-22)**

If there one person in the story who needed *hesed* it was Naomi. She arrives with Ruth in Bethlehem and the welcoming committee is there asking, “**Is that Naomi?**” Naomi is so hurt, and angry and bitter that she does not even see the *hesed* that has been shown to her – she says, “**I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty**” (v21). And so the narrator has to remind the audience that this is not the case, “**So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabites, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the Barley harvest.**” It is especially beautiful to share *hesed* with those who are hurting, those who are not even in a frame of mind to say thank you.

And so, because of *hesed*, we have hope for Naomi, even though she sees no hope for herself. She is still very much the victim of great tragedy. But it is the beginning of the barley harvest, so we have hope that perhaps some provision may come to these two widows.

### **Conclusion**

May we share *hesed* this week with those around us – why? Because *hesed* is what God shows to us. Give thanks to the LORD of Hosts – For the Lord is good – His lovingkindness (*hesed*) is everlasting. (Jer 33:11). Psalm 59:16: I shall joyfully sing of Your lovingkindness (*hesed*) in the morning, For You have been my stronghold, And a refuge in the day of my distress. Lam. 3:22-23

The LORD'S lovingkindnesses (*hesed*) indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. *They* are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. "May the Lord grant *hesed* to you as you have dealt with the dead and with me." (1:8)

Michael Stone carefully picked up his pole. He felt his heart pounding. He was sure the crowd did, too. The silence was deafening. When he heard the singing of some distant robins in flight, he knew it was his time to fly. As he began sprinting down the runway, something felt wonderfully different, yet familiar. The surface below him felt like the country road he used to dream about. The rocks and chunks of dirt, the visions of the golden wheat fields seemed to fill his thoughts. When he took a deep breath, it happened. He began to fly. His take-off was effortless. Michael Stone was now flying, just like in his childhood dreams. Only this time he knew he wasn't dreaming.

It was either the eruption of the people in the stands or the thump of his landing that brought Michael back to earth. On his back with that wonderful hot sun on his face, he could only envision the smile on his mother's face. Michael was immediately swarmed with people congratulating him on the greatest accomplishment thus far in his life. 17 feet 6 inches: a National and International Junior Olympics Record.

Michael's Stone raised the bar. He beat his personal best by 9 inches. He had gone above and beyond – what anyone expected. Was it easy – no? It would have been easier to never have tried, especially for Michael Stone, especially since Michael Stone is blind.

**God calls us to go above and beyond! What is that extra 9-inches for you? Who will you show hesed to this week?**