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INTRODUCTION: A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH LOVE

George¹ sat across the table from me in a Chicago restaurant. Nine years ago he had been an elder at his conservative evangelical church when he'd walked away from his wife, Teresa. He told me, "I'm good at starting to love, but really bad at the follow-through." I thought Teresa would agree. I said, "So you have a love-hate relationship with love. You want intimacy, but you become overwhelmed with the work of love." George nodded.

I had contacted George on a whim. I'd known him and his wife at the time of their separation and divorce, and I'd been praying for Teresa. I was doing one of our A Praying Life seminars in Chicago and the thought had occurred to me, "Contact George." He'd texted Teresa out of the blue a couple of times during the year, hinting that he was sick of his life. I wondered if there might be an opening. Two weeks before, unknown to me, Teresa had begun to pray that God would bring godly men into George's life. When I contacted him, he agreed to meet.

I asked George why he'd left Teresa. He said, "I was overwhelmed by the black hole of her needs. I couldn't take her demanding spirit and constant criticism." I knew Teresa would not disagree—God had done a work in her since the divorce. I thought there was no point in beating around the bush: "George, at the heart of love is incarnation that leads to death. Death is at the center of love. It happened to Jesus. It happened to us."

I took a drink of water and continued. "I discovered this twenty years ago when I immersed myself in the Gospels, the story of Jesus's life. This understanding of love transformed how I related to people."

I knew George was puzzled by what I was saying, but I wanted to give him a map for the future. I wanted him to know that there was at least one person in the world who thought it was possible to endure in love. I wanted to give him hope.

I was praying my way through the meeting, unsure of what to say. Sure enough, George asked me, “What does Teresa think of me?” I had nothing to lose, so I said, “George, you lack three things: purity, integrity, and endurance.” He didn’t disagree. He told me that the night before, he’d slept with a woman he barely knew. Though saddened, I was heartened by his honesty. It was a step in the direction of integrity.

Beginning a Journey of Love

George had inhaled the spirit of the age. He’d been chasing his feelings and desires instead of doing the good work of love. His last long-term relationship had broken up, and he’d been devastated. He was alone now, and he hated it.

I wanted George to understand what love looked like, so I said, “Before sleeping with that woman last night, you went on a path with her. The two of you went through a kind of dance. You were both kidding yourselves, but it was still a mini-journey. All of us are on journeys, regardless of whether the journey is characterized by self or love. The Hebrews thought of a life of love not as just a state, but as a path of righteousness, a direction.”²

George leaned toward me as I talked. I sensed that it was providing a new frame for him to think about his life. So I continued, “Satan wants us to view our life in isolation, as disconnected from any path. For example, Vegas’s marketing slogan, ‘What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.’ You can come to Vegas, have anonymous sex, and return home as if nothing happened. Of course, that’s a bunch of baloney. Vegas changes you. We bring Vegas back home in our hearts. Everything we are doing is creating the persons we are becoming. Our life is a trajectory.”

I invited George to join me on a pilgrimage of learning to love. I invite you to do the same. We learn to love not abstractly, but on the journey itself. On a journey we lock ourselves into a specific, physical path. So in this book we’re going to lock ourselves into the Bible’s story of Ruth and Naomi as they make this journey of love. On the way, we’ll discover not only love but ourselves as well. Learning to love is inseparable from coming alive as a person, from seeing our own hearts, and how the siren song of the age seduces us.

From Dreams to Disaster

George's self-reflection "I'm good at starting to love, but bad at the follow-through" reflects our culture. We start well but end badly. Because of our culture's debt to Christianity and its resurrection hope, we are a culture that dreams big about love.

No place dreams better than Disney. The promise of Disney—marriage happily ever after—dominates the popular mind of our age. It is a good but unrealistic dream. When God is removed from the dream, the story turns out badly. Christianity without Jesus just doesn't work. The Disney dream raises unrealistic expectations and then dashes them on the rocks of human frailty. Naive expectations make us high maintenance and supersensitive. Human frailty makes us cynical, doubting the possibility of love. The new American journey is from naiveté to cynicism. The result? We feel abused, betrayed, and bitter. It was better not to have dreamed. The magic is gone.

As our culture loses its Christian moorings and searches for new myths, for new ways of making sense of life, it is lurching back to the world of paganism—the world before Christianity—where "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). That quote describes the time of the judges, which is the setting of the book of Ruth. Ruth begins with, "In the days when judges ruled . . ." (Ruth 1:1). A modern paraphrase for our culture might be, "In the days of Oprah when *feelings* ruled. . . ." Oprah has an amazing ability to empathize with people, but she, along with most of our cultural elites, channels nineteenth-century thinkers like Emerson and Thoreau who made feelings and self-actualization absolute. "How I feel" or "my happiness" is the new standard.

George used the language of feelings to do what he felt like. He told Teresa when he left her, "I'm not happy and marriage is not for me. I grew up, and I got tired of it all." The false hope of Disney combined with following his feelings had shaped George's behavior and given him a false trajectory or path to follow. The result? Not only was George lost, but Teresa was discarded.

Thousands of modern "widows" and "widowers" find themselves in similar straits: the spouse stuck in a loveless marriage with a harsh and demanding partner; the young woman who has offered herself to a man

without the protection of a committed relationship and now finds herself abandoned; the young woman searching in vain for a young man to love her—with so many men enmeshed by the listless, commitment-phobic spirit of our age.

Whatever the source of the broken relationship, the result remains the same—the loneliness of a fairy tale gone bad. What do you do when you are abandoned by your husband? How do you survive when no matter how much love you pour into your wife, she becomes more demanding? How do you endure in love? How do you endure without love when you long to get married? How do you keep your spirit from shutting down?

To these modern widows and widowers, I write this book—to encourage you, to give you a hope and a future. We'll pursue that by joining two ancient widows, Ruth and Naomi, on their journey. The book of Ruth is an ideal narrative for our post-Christian world, where breaking covenants—not enduring in love—is the new norm. Ruth offers a template for love that understands both the craziness of our modern world and a way forward. Ruth is all about surviving and even thriving in a collapsing world.

Enjoying the Beauty

I hope the book of Ruth affects you the way a trip to the Grand Canyon or Chartres Cathedral near Paris might. How do you *apply* the Grand Canyon or Chartres? Of course, you don't *apply* the Grand Canyon—you are stunned by the beauty. You don't *apply* Chartres—you worship there. You stop talking as you let it fill your soul. You are silent as your soul expands. You sense that you don't have enough capacity to capture the beauty—the experience of entering and beholding beauty is too much.

It takes time to travel to the Grand Canyon or Chartres. So be patient with the historical background laced throughout the book. As we follow the story of Ruth and Naomi, we are entering a different world from our own, going back 3100 years to 1100 BC and what historians call Iron Age I. But when we pause to understand the cultural and language differences, we'll discover that people are the same.

Because we'll discover different aspects of love as we encounter them in the story of Ruth, our journey, like all good journeys, will have

a meandering quality to it. But that's part of the fun of pilgrimage. Our journey follows the book of Ruth, building like a Bach fugue, simple at first, almost plain, then growing gradually more complex as the following themes emerge:

- *Love*. What is love? What is the cost of love? Why do we shy away from love? What does it mean to love when you get no love in return?
- *Gospel*. How does understanding the love that we see in the book of Ruth enrich and anticipate our understanding of the gospel, of God's love for us? How is the gospel a journey?
- *Community*. How do we create community? What is the glue that keeps us together?
- *Lament*. How do you relate to God when he seems to have deserted you? How does faith encourage us to lament? Why do we dislike the idea of a lament?
- *Prayer*. What does a praying life look like? Do we wait for God to act or do we act? What does it mean to live in a story?
- *Femininity*. What does it mean to be feminine? How do we survive and even thrive in a world (as this one was) dominated by men?
- *Masculinity*. What does a godly man look like? What characterizes him? How do you combine gentleness and power?

The story of Ruth can transform you if you allow it to remap your own story and draw you into a life of love. In a world that is losing its capacity to feed our souls, I hope that the book of Ruth fills your soul, and then overflows into your life.

Part One

COMMITTED LOVE



SUFFERING: THE CRUCIBLE FOR LOVE

Suffering is the crucible for love. We don't learn how to love anywhere else. Don't misunderstand; suffering doesn't create love, but it is a hot-house where love can emerge. Why is that? The great barrier to love is ego, the life of the self. In long-term suffering, if you don't give in to self-pity, slowly, almost imperceptibly, self dies. This death of self offers ideal growing conditions for love. So, not surprisingly, this book on love, the book of Ruth, begins with the descent of Naomi's family into a crucible of suffering.

Naomi had a dream. It was a simple dream of a husband, children, and grandchildren. With a few deft strokes, the narrator paints the death of that dream, the death of her entire family. Suffering sneaks up on her, tragedy on tragedy.

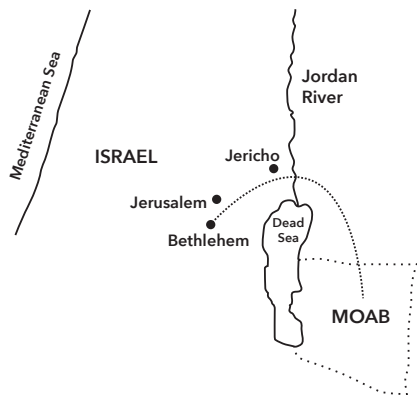
In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1:1–5)

Ancient readers would have been intrigued and possibly troubled by the family's move to Moab (see fig. 1.1). The Moabites were the hillbilly cousins of the Israelites, the result of an incestuous relationship between

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Lot and one of his daughters. *Mo* means “who” and *ab* means “father.” So *Moab*, reflecting its murky origin, is the land of Who’s Your Daddy?¹

Figure 1.1. Map of Moab



Bad blood grew between the cousins. When the Israelites tried to pass through Moab on the way to Canaan, the Moabite king opposed them by bribing the prophet Balaam to prophesy against them. When that backfired, the women of Moab seduced the Israelite men. The Israelites regularly called Kemosh, the Moabite god, “filth”

or “loathsome.” One day Yahweh would crush Kemosh in a pit of manure (Isa. 25:10–11). Moab meant trouble.² And trouble is what the family found in Moab.

Naomi’s losses would be staggering for any culture, but in the ancient Near East for a mother to lose not only her husband but also her sons was the epitome of suffering. A leading management consultant posed this hypothetical situation to American men: “Your mother, your wife, and your daughter are all in a sinking boat and you can rescue only one of them. Who do you rescue?” Sixty percent would rescue their daughter and 40 percent their wife. All would leave the mother adrift. Sorry, moms. The consultant then posed the same question to Saudi men, and every one of them said they would rescue their mother. Why? In the traditional cultures of the Near East, mothers have no identity outside the home. Their daughters marry and leave while their sons remain, forging a powerful mother-son bond. Their sons are their life.³

Naomi has lost her life. She has entered into a living death. Where we see a sharp line between death and life, the Hebrews saw a gradation.⁴ Living outside of Israel, the Promised Land, is already a partial death. Now with the death of her husband and two sons, Naomi’s life is functionally over. It no longer has meaning or purpose. If you have experienced deep, sustained suffering, then you know Naomi’s frame of

mind. Death would be a relief. You might not commit suicide, but if your life ended you wouldn't care.

Naomi's tragedy is a series of downward steps. First Elimelech dies, but hope is not lost because her two sons find Moabite wives, and their sons could carry on the family name. But the two wives, Ruth and Orpah, are barren, so Naomi has no grandsons to carry on Elimelech's name—that is the heart of Naomi's tragedy. The death of her two sons seals that tragedy. One of the families in the oldest clan of Bethlehem, the Ephrathites, has died out.⁵ So Naomi doesn't just lose her husband and two sons; she loses her future, her reason for living.

There is a remnant though. In ancient Near Eastern culture, the wife moved in with the husband's family. Daughters left home; brothers and their families stayed. Brothers lived together, even after their father died, maintaining their inheritance as common property.⁶ Psalm 133 reflects how good it is when "brothers dwell in unity" (v. 1). So both Orpah and Ruth have been living with Naomi for some time. Now Naomi is left with the empty shell of a family, a fragile, highly vulnerable family. "Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi are headless. There are no husbands, no fathers, no sons to take a protective role."⁷ Because of her age, Naomi is not likely to remarry. She has no trade or means of support. All exits were closed.

Where Is God?

We get an inkling of Naomi's internal struggles from the meaning of the names. Bethlehem is actually a two-word name like New York. *Beth* means "house," and *lehem* means "bread." So *Bethlehem* means "house of bread," possibly a granary or a reference to the abundance of food. Naomi's husband's name, Elimelech, means "my God is king." Naomi means "pleasant." The two sons' names are Mahlon ("weak") and Chilion ("frail").⁸

Ancient readers took names seriously.⁹ If we listen like an ancient reader, this is what we hear:

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of the *House of Bread* in Judah went to sojourn in the country of *Who's Your Daddy*, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was

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My God Is King and the name of his wife *Pleasant*, and the names of his two sons were *Weak* and *Frail*. They were Ephrathites from the *House of Bread* in Judah. They went into the country of *Who's Your Daddy* and remained there. But *My God Is King*, the husband of *Pleasant*, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both *Weak* and *Frail* died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Can you hear the irony? A famine in the *House of Bread*? *God Is King* is dead? *Pleasant's* husband and sons have died? Reality is mocking God. In other words, because Naomi hopes in God, her grief intensifies. When God does not meet our expectations, it opens the door not just to despair but also to cynicism, to shutting down our hearts with God.

Don't Flee the Crucible

Suffering is the frame, the context, where we learn to love. Sometimes it is a sucker punch—the phone call from the doctor or the note from the spouse—but most of the time it slips up on you, bit by bit, as it did Naomi and Ruth. Then comes the day when you realize that you hate your life, and you want out.

The Disney dream not only fails to prepare us for the crucible, but it also makes the crucible far worse. We come into relationships expecting the best, and often discovering the worst. The shock of encountering the ugliness of sin leaves us floundering.

We have much to learn about love from this story, but all we need to know at this point is this: you can't flee the crucible. Love will not grow if you check out and give in to the seductive call of bitterness and cynicism—or seek comfort elsewhere. We have to hang in there with the story that God has permitted in our lives. As we endure, as we keep showing up for life when it makes no sense, we learn to love, and God shows up too.

George fled the crucible. Overwhelmed by the demands of love, he set out on a false pilgrimage. He had listened to a modern myth that says, "Love is a feeling. If the feeling is gone, then love is gone." Hollywood has no resources to endure in love when the feeling is gone. Actually, that's the point when we are ready to learn how to love.

Hints of Resurrection

One of the oddest things about deep suffering is that the sun comes up in the morning. Life limps along. So after our quick thirty-thousand-foot overview, the narrator of Ruth takes us to ground level, and we watch three women, the remnants of a family, trudging along the road from Moab.

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. So they set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. (Ruth 1:6–7)

Naomi and her daughters-in-law, in keeping with a wider definition of family, instinctively operate as a unit. But strikingly, Orpah and Ruth have decided to leave their families, their entire social network, and their cultures to live with their mother-in-law in a foreign land. In traditional Eastern cultures the daughter-in-law became a servant of the mother-in-law. This led to a tremendous amount of abuse. Even in the West, we joke about the mother-in-law–son-in-law relationship only because the real deal, the mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relationship, is often too painful. That Ruth and Orpah prefer their mother-in-law gives us some sense of how remarkable Naomi must be.

Naomi is doing the one thing essential for pilgrimage: she is enduring, hanging in there, literally putting one foot in front of the other as she heads back to Bethlehem. But how do you hang in there? Where do you get the power to love when you don't get any love in return? How do you face living alone? The answer is simple: hope. You can hang in there if you know the end of the story.

A glimmer of hope leads Naomi back. Yahweh (“the LORD”) has visited his people. It isn't just that weather patterns have changed; God is involved. We're at ground zero of what makes love possible, of the difference between Disney and Christianity. Disney is *groundless human optimism*. The gospel is *real divine hope*—God breaking through into the story of my life, creating resurrection. This glimmer of resurrection hints of good things to come.

Teresa saw a hint of resurrection when she started praying for men to come into George's life. Two weeks later, seemingly out of the blue, I had this thought, “Contact George.” We can endure in love if our God acts in time and space. Hope is critical to love.