

GM // onliners // newbies

Starting a new series in the book of Ruth. [Bibles turn R1]

This is an epic story that shows us what love really is.

And love is something we all care about ...

We live our lives trying to understand it, define it, experience it, and hold on to it.

Think about how many songs and books are written about new love, lost love, wounded love, passionate love.

We love love!! Always have, always will.

But we have to realize that we've grown up being told what love is ...

It's finding your prince charming or perfect princess ... and then living happily ever after.

And that's made Disney billions\$

It plays well with kid's naivety and innocence ... but adults ... not so much...

B/C the longer you live the more you realize that what you've been taught about love doesn't play out.

Life doesn't work out like a RomCom.

And it never will B/C that's not real love.

That's a cheap imitation we've been sold.

It's counterfeit...

It looks a lot like love, but in the end it has no substance or value.

And if you're here or listening and not a Christian ... I hope you take this journey through Ruth with us, B/C you'll get to see the beauty and power of real love.

And if you're a Christian ... I'm glad you're coming along too ... B/C the fruit of our life often shows that we don't know what real love is either.

What's at stake for all of us is that it affects our understanding of who God is.

B/C God is love.

But if our concept of love is jacked up ... we'll assume God is like that.

And so we don't live knowing the fullness of His love and grace.

We don't fully trust him ... we don't fully obey him in every way.

That affects every aspect of our life, identity, joy, happiness, commitment, patience ... the list goes on and on.

God's love isn't a cheap romantic love based on beauty and chemistry and sparks flying.

The Old Testament alone tells us 250 times that God is "steadfast love".

The Hebrew word is "chesed".

It is a word that means merciful, faithful, loving-kindness, steadfast ...

It is a type of love that is sacrificial, serving, committed, unchanging, never ending, faithful.

Marine's would call it "semper fidelis".

And God wants us to know this kind of love B/C that is who he is.

He doesn't teach us by giving us 10 principles.

Instead he puts it into a historic narrative ... he puts skin on it so we get to see it lived out in real life.

Ruth 1:1-2

1 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. 2 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.

Like any good story this one quickly brings us into the drama.

It starts with what looks like a good call that any reasonable man would make.

Elimelech is a guy with a wife and two sons.

He lives in a small town.

There's a famine in the land.

And this was a long time ago where you ate what you grew.

There weren't freezers or grocery stores or warehouses full of boxed up processed food.

If the harvest didn't come ... you were in big trouble.

So Elimelech does a seemingly sensible thing ... he goes to where the food is.

This doesn't seem like a big deal ... but Elimelech's actions are inline with counterfeit love ...

Counterfeit Love Looks Out For Itself

Elimelech picks his family up and goes to a different country.

But this is a bigger deal than we realize for a few reasons.

First, we have to remember WHERE and WHEN this is taking place.

This is in the time of the Judges.

Israel is only a few generations into inheriting the land God had promised to give to them.

Literally, each family was given a portion of land in the nation of Israel.

It was God gift to them ... He determined those boundaries and where they would live.

And God promised his people in a covenant, that if they were faithful to obey and worship him, he would make the ground fruitful so they would never go hungry.

But when famine hits the land ... when things get tough ... what does Elimelech do?

He leaves ...

This is a vote of “no confidence” in God as provider and covenant keeper.

[irony is Elimelech means my God is King, but he doesn't live like it.]

See, back then people believed that gods ruled over a certain territory.

A nation's god was their ultimate authority, even higher than the king.

A nation's god was provider and protector.

So Elimelech goes to Moab whose god is Chemosh ... which translates into filth or loathsome.

He was the god that provided and protected for the land of Moab.

So Elimelech isn't just switching addresses ... he's switched allegiance.

Elimelech doesn't wait it out in Bethlehem in faith ...

He doesn't search his heart or consider his faithfulness to the covenant God made with his people.

He pulls away.

Counterfeit love does that.

When things don't go your way ... what do you do?

When when things get difficult ... what is your response? Who do you run to?

I'm sure Elimelech had his reasons.

They were probably very practical and sensible.

It's easy to write-off faithfulness and live in compromise for the sake of practicality.

Counterfeit love is totally okay with that.

You lost the spark in your marriage ... leave.

Your friendship hit a rough patch ... end it.

God isn't meeting your expectations or answering your prayers ... walk away.

Even if we would never act that way with God we have no problem doing it to the community he puts us in.

See, Elimelech doesn't just walk away from God ... he abandons his community.

Most likely his neighbors were his close friends and family.

He wasn't thinking ... let's get through this together.

He's a survivor ... a slave to control and ensure present and future happiness.

But survivors put themselves first with no thought to the broader community around them.

It's opposite to what is described of the disciples in the book of Acts who had all things in common ... and shared their lives, bread, resources to meet each other's needs.

What is interesting is that Moab means "No Father".

Elimelech leaves the place where God is his Father to be an orphan.

He chooses to be a survivor rather than a son.

And for a while it seems like his decision turned out to be the right one...

Which practical decisions tend to do ... at least in the short term.

We often take that as a sign of God's approval.

But you can't sow in counterfeit love and reap good results.

Counterfeit Love Always Leads To Pain And Sorrow

If Bethlehem got Elimelech's early Instagram posts there'd have been some serious FOMO.

He's beat the famine ... they got plenty of food.

He held on to his wealth.

His sons grew up and got married.

This is the stuff you want your social media feed filled with.

Elimelech's vindicated ... he bet big and won.

But then ...

Ruth 1:3-5

3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, 5 and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Elimelech dies in the place he hoped would save him.

He chooses to live in the land of "No Father", and in bitter irony there his sons become fatherless.

Naomi is now a widow, but at least she has her two sons...

But it's not long before they die too.

How quickly the triumph has turned into tragedy.

This is where the story really picks up steam.

The drama becomes real.

The choices Elimelech has made has put his remaining family in a vulnerable position.

Not only that ... he's essentially ended his family lineage.

With no son to carry on his name ... both his name & his family's name will be erased from history.

To an Israelite this was one of the greatest tragedies that a family could experience.

But Elimelech wouldn't have to live with that burden and pain.

Naomi would.

Today it's harder to really appreciate how dark and hopeless Naomi's position is.

See in the ancient world women had very little power b/c it was a male-dominated agrarian warrior society.

It's tempting to look back with chronological snobbery at how ancient society treated women ... which, it's worth saying, wasn't good.

[God is all for women's equal rights and holds them in equal value.]

But the point of the story isn't to put those societal values on trial...

It's to point out how vulnerable these women are.

Listen to Naomi's own words to understand how she feels.

"If I should say I have hope ... it is exceedingly bitter to me."

She feels no hope ... and life tastes bitter.

A commentator puts it this way...

"Not only has a family of four now shrunk to one, but that survivor has lost all identity...Naomi's fate is indeed bitter. As a widow she lacks the provision & protection of a husband in a male-dominated ancient society. Further her age & poverty effectively seal off three options normally open to a widow (go home, remarry, get a job)...Naomi is lost...Further she faces her declining years w/ no children to care for her & no grandchildren to cheer her spirits." – Hubbard

The Hebrews believed there were three different types of existence. Life, death, and then a kind of living-death.

This last category was for those in the crucible of suffering...

Where life on this earth is so bad, it has lost its meaning and purpose.

As Paul Miller points out ... "Naomi doesn't just lose her husband & two sons; she loses her future, her reason for living."

I hope you feel the weight of counterfeit love's consequences.

It never leads to anything good in the long run.

It brings about the death of marriages, friendships, churches, families.

It leaves us bitter, hopeless, jaded toward life.

It hurts others ...

Now, we can pin it all on Elimelech ... it's all his fault.

But we can also wonder ... “Where is God at in all of this?”

Up to this point God seems uninvolved, silent, and removed from the story.

But it is in Naomi's darkest hour that she finally gets some good news ...

Ruth 1:6-7

6 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. 7 So she 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.

I'm sure what added to Naomi's sorrow was that she was far from her home.

But here is a glimmer of hope that pierced her darkness.

God visited his people ...

He ended the famine.

There is food again in Naomi's hometown.

God shows up in the depths of Naomi's pain and plight.

But his touch isn't close ... its far away in Bethlehem.

So Naomi chooses to return.

At first glance this seems like another “convenient” decision.

How is this different to Elimelech?

We have to remember “HOW” Naomi is returning...

She isn't coming back triumphant ... She is returning defeated.

But she isn't too proud to turn back and come home.

Here we begin to see the difference between counterfeit love and Real Love...

Real Love Is Marked By Humility

You have to know what Naomi knew about her homecoming.

She couldn't sneak back quietly ... move into her old house ... shut the doors and windows ... **and order Uber Eats so she doesn't have to see anyone.**

She is part of a family who abandoned their people in a famine.

The only thing she's coming back with is two Moabite daughters that her sons married.

And this too would have been a mark against her.

God told his people not to marry foreigners.

No doubt she would have been the subject of all the town gossip and ridicule.

Her story would have been used as a tale of caution ...

"Obey God so you don't turn out like Naomi!"

And Naomi agrees ... she says herself at the end of verse 13 that "the hand of the Lord has gone out against me."

Actually, the proud and selfish thing to do would have been to stay put.

Better to die in Moab with some honor, rather than be humbled back home.

But we see something different in Naomi ... the first sign of virtue in this story.

Trials can do one of two things to our hearts: harden them or soften them.

An old Christian proverb says "The same sun that melts the ice hardens the clay."

Naomi may be experiencing a lot of conflicting emotions.

She may believe that God is punishing her ...

Nevertheless she puts her hope in God and the outcome of her future into his hands.

This is humility ...

This is the first step into repentance ... which is a word meaning turning back.

Repentance is an act of homecoming ... turning back from our own Moab's of disobedience and false saviors that we run to.

It is willing to run back to God.

And like Naomi shows us it's not an easy prospect.

Repenting is hard b/c we are proud.

We don't like to admit we were wrong.

But repentance and humility are hallmarks of Real Love.

For all of us this is the first step back on the road of Real Love after we've landed in Counterfeit Love's landfill.

And it is a road that has to be traveled.

B/C Real Love isn't just one decision ... one moment of repentance.

As we travel down this road it leads us into further decisions that are more and more difficult.

We see this with what Naomi does next.

Ruth 1:8-14

8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. 10 And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” 11 But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, 13 would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.” 14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

Naomi doesn't cling to Orpah and Ruth ... the last thing she has left in life.

Instead of feeling that she "deserves" for them to stay with her ... she sends them away.

Naomi is thinking about what's best for them, not what's best for her.

That's what Real Love does.

Real Love Is Marked By Self-Sacrifice

Naomi knows her two daughters will be pulled down with her when they get back to Bethlehem.

They can't just show up and marry some dude.

They are Moabites ... no Israelite man would marry them.

They have no sons who could grow up and care for them.

Naomi understands she'll be at the bottom of the social strata, and doesn't want that for her daughters.

That's love ...

Love wants the best for others regardless of the personal cost.

Naomi gets honest and paints a hopeless picture to convince them that staying there in Moab is better.

It gives her young daughters a chance to hit reset on life.

They aren't attached ... have no kids ... are still young.

Some Moabite dude would be quick to marry them.

If they stay in Moab their life gets back on track.

That's why Orpah's decision makes sense.

She loves Naomi, but she's being released to live her best life.

And that's why Ruth's decision is mind-boggling.

She heard the same pitch!

Is Ruth a slow learner? What's going on...

If this were Texas Hold-em ... She sees Naomi's kindness and raises her.

Ruth 1:15-18

15 And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return 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. 17 Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." 18 And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

Orpah makes the sensible decision.

Ruth makes a Real Love decision.

As Hubbard says in his commentary ... “Understand Orpah; Emulate Ruth.”

Ruth shows us what God’s Real Love is like ...

He is the God of “Chesed” ; love that is immeasurable, faithful, steadfast, unchanging ... love that is committed at all costs.

You and I can’t do this without dying to ourselves every day.

Ruth had to die to a sensibly safe future in Moab.

She chooses to go down the path of loving Naomi ... sticking with her no matter what.

But why does Ruth do this?

We see it in her confession to Naomi ... “Your God will be my God.”

Real Love Requires Faith In God Who /s Real Love

Ruth is a true believer in Yahweh ... Naomi’s God.

She is becoming like the God she worships.

You and I will become what we worship.

Ruth worshipped the God who is *chesed* love.

She isn't a morally good person doing all the right things through her own effort.

Faith is fueling her decision to die to herself.

You and I can't live out Real Love in our own strength ...

It's impossible to die to yourself every day.

We need God's power ... we need faith ...

We need the Holy Spirit ... God who dwells in us and empowers us to live out *His* Real Love.

And this translates into doing the hard things ... and burning the boats like Ruth does ... no turning back.

"Where you live I will live ... where you die I will die."

She isn't staying in Bethlehem until Naomi kicks the bucket.

She is all in ... she's committed to changing her national identity ... she's changed her allegiance.

There's something greater that's captivated her heart.

Something greater than being a kept woman in the land of Moab.

She would rather be a citizen of a kingdom under God's rule.

She isn't going to return to Moab once Naomi kicks the bucket.

She wants to be buried there.

Ruth doesn't know the future ... it doesn't look bright.

But she's putting all her chips in for Israel's covenant God
who is Real Love. [Real Faith ... Real Love]

**And this part of the story ends leaving us wondering ...
what is going to happen next?**

What will happen when they get to Bethlehem?

It's a good cliff hanger ...

We'll find out what happens next week. :)

BAND COME UP:

Not A Christian:

- Surrender yourself to God's real love.
- Like Ruth ... it begins with faith ... believing that God is who he says he is ...
- It's turning your back on your old way of life ... leaving your spiritual Moab to come back home.
- It's burning the boats and putting all your chips in on Jesus who died for you sins.

Christians:

- Has counterfeit love taken root in your heart?
- Are there broken relationships ... bitterness ...
- Do you really believe that God is *chesed* love...
- That He's committed to you no matter what.
- His love is steadfast ... unchanging ... regardless of what you do.

- So often we live like *survivors* who run to different Moabs b/c we aren't *sons* that understand the love of the Father.
- The Father is calling us into an experience of his love.
- It's not just a love you know with your mind ... you experience it ... it overwhelms you ... fills you ... melts your heart ... leads you back home. [pray for that]

[MAYBE: Prayer of Examine]

- Let's take a minute to examine our hearts and respond to the Holy Spirit's conviction.
- That may mean repentance to God and repentance to people.

Communion

- This is the testimony of God's Real Love.
- He did whatever it took to bring us back home.
- Body broken ... Blood Shed