

Real Love and Counterfeits

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks so much, as Freddie said. My name is Jesse, and so excited for today. Good morning to everybody. And a quick aside, just good morning to all those who can't be with us. I'm just thinking of a lot of precious people that, for the sake of their health, just need to be at home, but they're listening online. So, man, love you guys, miss you guys, thinking about you. Some of our Marines and other people that serve us so well in that capacity, also through deployments and trainings. They might be out, but might be listening online.

Miss you and love you as well. If it's your first time with us, man, this is actually, I'm really excited because we're jumping into a new series, and it's in the book of Ruth. And so, if you have a Bible with you, you can go ahead and turn to Ruth chapter one. And let me just kind of set up what Ruth is about. It's actually this epic story that shows us what love really is, hence what we're calling the name of the series, Real Love. And love is something we all care about.

We live our lives trying to understand it, define it. We're trying to experience love. And then, when we get love, we want to hold on to it, right? We want to live in kind of the happily ever after deal. I mean, think about in our culture, just in the time that we've grown up in life, like listening to the radio, the books we read, how many songs and books are written about new love, lost love, wounded love, passionate love. I mean, it's everywhere, right? It's what we listen to and say, we love love, right? That's what our culture is. We love love. We always have, and we always will. But I want us to realize that our culture has been telling us what love is. It's been holding out to us an idea of what love is. We've grown up in that. It's a reality.

And oftentimes, what's told, what we're told, what we're disciplined into about love is it's about finding your prince charming or your perfect princess. And then you meet and you fall in love and you live happily ever after. And that formula has made Disney billions of dollars, right? And it's made billions of dollars because we're eating it up. And it plays well. It plays well with kids' naivety. It plays well to their innocence. But I mean, us adults, we grow up, we get a little jaded, you know, doesn't play to us so much. Because the longer you live, the more you realize that what you've been taught about love just doesn't play out in real life. Life doesn't work like a romantic comedy. And it never will because that's not what real love is. That's like the shallow, that's like the cheap imitation of love that we've been sold. It's counterfeit. It looks a lot like love, but in the end, it has no real substance or value. And if you're here or listening and not a Christian,

I hope that you take this journey through Ruth with us because you're going to see the beauty and the power and the majesty of what real love is and what it looks like. And if you are a Christian in the room, I'm glad you're coming along this journey too because to be perfectly honest, the fruits of our lives often show that we don't know what real love is either.

[3 : 1 2] And what's at stake for all of us is that it affects our understanding of who God is. When we believe this counterfeit love, it affects, what we do is we project that onto God because God is love. And so if we have this jacked up belief and understanding and knowledge of what love is, we are also going to assume God's like that as well. And so the consequences is that we don't live knowing the fullness of his love and grace. We're not living in that. We don't fully trust him.

We don't fully obey him in every single way. And that in turn affects every aspect of our life, our identity, our joy, our happiness, our commitment, our patience, the list can go on and on and on. God's love isn't a cheap romantic love that's based on beauty or chemistry or sparks flying. The Old Testament actually tells us 250 times that God is love, but not just any love. He is steadfast love. It says that about God 250 times, just in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word that is there is a word called hesed. And it is a word that is rich and deep in meaning. And it's almost always assigned to God. It's a word that means merciful. It means faithful. It means loving kindness.

It means steadfast love. And it's a type of love that is sacrificial and serving and committed and unchanging and never ending. It is faithful love. Marines, you'd call it *semper fidelis*. And God wants us to know this kind of love because that is who he is. He doesn't teach us by giving us ten principles. Instead, what he likes to do, he likes to put skin on it. He puts it into historic narrative. And that's what we're going to look at here in Ruth. We get to see real love lived out in real life. So without further ado, let's start in Ruth chapter 1 verse 1. It says this, In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem and 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 Malon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem and Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. And so like any good story, this one quickly brings us into the players and the plot of what the drama is going to be all about. And it starts with what looks like a pretty good call that any reasonable man would make.

[5 : 50] Elimelech is a guy with a wife and two sons. He lives in a small town, and there's this famine in the land. And this was, you have to remember, this was a long time ago. This happened a long time ago. And it was at a time where you ate what you grew. Like there weren't freezers or grocery stores or Walmarts or warehouses full of boxed up processed food that people could just go and say like, man, this isn't going to go bad for another 10 years. I'm just going to grab some of this. If harvest didn't come, you were in big trouble. So Elimelech does a seemingly sensible thing. He goes to where the food is. Now this doesn't seem like a big deal, but Elimelech's actions are actually in line with counterfeit love. Counterfeit love always looks out for itself. Elimelech picks up his family and goes to a different country.

But this is a bigger deal than we realize, and it's a bigger deal for a few reasons. First, we have to remember where and when this story is taking place. It lands us, it says it's in the time of the judges, right? So Israel is only a few generations into living and possessing the land. This inheritance that God had promised them and then given to them. Literally, as they get into the land, God assigns each family a portion of the land. It's like his gift to them as his people. I'm not only going to be your God, I'm going to give you a place and establish you in a place. Each of you will have a household and a plot of land to be in charge of and to cultivate and to have neighbors. He determined the boundaries where they would live. God promises people that in a covenant. And in that covenant, he said, like, man, if you are faithful to obey me, if you are faithful to worship me alone, you know what? That ground is always going to yield you a harvest. It's always going to be fruitful.

You will never go hungry. But what we see here, when famine hits the land, when things got tough, what does Elimelech do? He leaves. And this was a vote of no confidence in God as provider and covenant keeper. That's basically what Elimelech's actions are saying without saying them. The irony here is that Elimelech's name means my God is king. But he doesn't live like that, does he? See, back then, people believe that gods ruled over certain territories. So a nation's God was the ultimate authority over that particular place. And that authority was even higher than the king that ruled over that nation. A nation's God was seen as the provider and protector. If you lived in that land, he was the one that was bringing the harvest. He was the one that you paid homage to for having a harvest and being able to feed your family and being protected from other nations and marauders.

So Elimelech, he goes to Moab, whose God is Shemash, which translates into filth or loathsome. He was the God that provided and protected for the land of Moab. So Elimelech, we have to appreciate here, isn't just switching addresses. He's switching allegiance to who he's choosing to worship.

Elimelech doesn't wait it out in Bethlehem in faith. God, maybe you're going to come through. Now, he doesn't search as hard or consider if he's been faithless. He doesn't consider how he's been faithful to God's covenant that he made with his people. Now, instead, he pulls away. And counterfeit love does that. When things don't go your way, what do you do? When things get difficult, what is your response? What do you run to or who do you run to? And I'm sure Elimelech had his reasons.

[9 : 33] They were probably very practical and very sensible. And let's be honest, it's really easy to write off faithfulness and live in compromise for the sake of practicality. Counterfeit love is totally okay with that. You lose the spark in your marriage, leave. Your friendship hits a rough patch, cut it

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

Okay. So even if we would never act that way with God, we have no problem doing that to the community he puts us in, right? See, Elimelech just doesn't walk away from God. He actually abandons his community.

Most likely, his neighbors were his close friends and family. And he leaves. He wasn't thinking like, man, you know what? Let's get through this together. Let's like hunker down and gut this out and face this together. Now, he's a survivor at heart. He's a slave to control and to ensuring that the present is okay. And he's wanting to ensure his future happiness. But survivors, what they do is they put themselves first with no thought of the broader community around them and what that might mean for other people. It's opposite to what is described of the disciples in the book of Acts. See, we had all things in common. They shared their lives and their bread and their resources so that nobody had need. You know, what's interesting too here is Moab itself, right?

The name Moab literally means no father. So Elimelech leaves his inheritance that God has given him in Bethlehem, the house of bread. And he goes to the place where there's no father. He leaves the place where God is over it, where God is father over that land, and he goes to be an orphan in the land of Moab.

[11:28] He chooses to be a survivor rather than a son. And for a while, it seems like a very good decision. It looks like his decision turned out to be the right one, which actually practical decisions tend to do that, at least in the short term. And we often take that as a sign of God's approval. Well, everything's working out pretty good right now. God must be like, hey, thumbs up, A-okay. 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 would have probably been some serious FOMO back home, right? He's beat the famine. They seem to be like, you know, plenty of food. He's held on to his wealth.

His sons have grown up. They got married. I mean, this is the stuff we all want our social media streams filled with, right? It's like, man, this just looks really, really good. Elimelech's vindicated. He's bet big and won. But then we read in verse three, 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 10 years, and both Malon 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's now a widow, but at least she has her two sons still. But then it's not long before they die too. How quickly the triumph has turned into tragedy. And this is where the story starts to pick up steam. The drama becomes very real. We kind of lean in. What is going on? What is happening? 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 and his family's name. They will be erased from history.

[13:46] And to an Israelite, this is one of the greatest tragedies that could befall somebody. But Elimelech wouldn't have to live with that burden and that pain. Naomi would. Today, it's harder to really appreciate how dark and hopeless Naomi's position is right now.

See, in the ancient world, women had very little power because it was a male-dominated, agrarian, warrior society. It's tempting to kind of look back on that with chronological snobbery at how the ancient society treated women, which it's worth saying wasn't great.

Okay? We're not saying like, hey, we need to get back to that. That's not what this is about. I mean, God is all for women's equal rights and holds them in equal value to men. But the point of the story isn't to put those societal values on trial. It's to point out how vulnerable the position Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah are in. And listen to Naomi's own words to understand how she feels, how she's experiencing this darkness. She says, if I should say I have hope, it is exceedingly bitter for me. Those are the words that are coming out of her heart and that she is confessing. This is what I'm experiencing. She's feeling the hopelessness of life. Life is tasting bitter to her right now. A commentator, Hubbard, 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 and protection of a husband in a male-dominated ancient society. Further, her age and poverty effectively seal off three options normally open to a widow.

Widow, go home, remarry, get a job. Naomi is lost. Further, she faces her declining years with no children to care for her and no grandchildren to cheer her spirits.

[15 : 50] The Hebrews believed that there were three different types of existence. You had life, which was joy and good and happy. You had death, and then you had this kind of living death.

And this last category was for those in the crucible of suffering, where life on earth is so bad, it has lost its meaning and purpose. As Paul Miller points out, Naomi doesn't just lose her husband and two sons. She loses her future, her very reason for living. So I'm saying all this, I just want us to 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, and jaded toward life. It hurts other people. Now, we can step back and say like, man, this, pinning this all on a limelight, it's just all his fault. He should have, we should have done better.

And yet, there's another part of us that's probably thinking like, man, God, where are you at in all of this? How come you didn't step in and stop this from happening? Why would you let Naomi and her two daughters-in-law get into this place of such darkness and hopelessness? Up to this point, God seems uninvolved and silent and removed from the story, but it's actually in Naomi's darkest hour that she finally gets some good news. In verse 6, so 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 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 also far from her home, right? But here we see this glimmer of hope. We see this glimmer of hope that pierced her darkness. God had visited his people. He had remembered them. He had remembered his covenant with them, even in the face of them not deserving it. He comes, and he visits them, and he brings food, and he ends the famine. And 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 right now. It's far away. She's far away from home. She's far away from Bethlehem. So what does Naomi do? She chooses to return. Now, at first glance, this seems like another convenient decision, right? We might even think, like, how is this really different to Elimelech? Like, Naomi has a lot to gain from going back home. There's food there again. It seems like the sensible thing to do, but we have to remember how Naomi is returning. She isn't coming back triumphant. She's returning defeated. But she isn't too proud to turn back and come home. And here, we begin to see, for the first time in the story, the difference between counterfeit love and real love, because real love is marked by humility. You have to know what Naomi knew about her homecoming.

[18 : 56] Naomi. She couldn't sneak back into town quietly, right? It wasn't like, hey, I'm going to move back into the old house, kind of shutter the doors and windows, and just kind of order DoorDash and receive all my stuff so nobody knows I'm here, but I can still exist, right? That's not what she can get away with. It's going to be very public, her homecoming. She's going to be, and people are going to remember, she was part of this family who abandoned everyone in her community in a time of famine. And the only thing she's coming back with is two Moabite daughters that her sons married. And this would have been a mark against her as well. 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. Man, obey God so you don't turn out like Naomi. And Naomi agrees with this. She says herself at the end of verse 13 that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. That's what she is feeling. Actually, the proud and selfish thing for her to do would have been to stay put where she was at. Just better to die in Moab with whatever honor you have left 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. They can harden them or they can soften them. An old Christian proverb says the same sun that melts the ice hardens the clay. And Naomi may be experiencing a lot of conflicting emotions. She may believe that God is punishing her, but nevertheless, she puts her hope in God. And she puts her hope in him and the outcome of her future squarely into his hands. This is humility. This is a step of faith. This is a first step into repentance, which is a word meaning turning back. Repentance is an act of homecoming. Turning back from our own Moabs of disobedience and false saviors and hopes that we've put in other than God. The things that we run to other than him. And repentance is willing to run back to God. And like Naomi shows us, it's not an easy prospect.

Repentance is hard. I don't care how long you've been following Jesus. Repentance is always hard because we're proud. We don't like to admit when we're wrong. But repentance and humility are hallmarks of real love. And 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's a road that has to be traveled. If you're a Christian, this is a road we have to travel. If you want to live in Jesus's real love, you want to understand it and know it and experience it, this is a road we have to travel. Because real love isn't just one decision. It's not just one moment of repentance. As we travel down this road, it leads us into further decisions that can sometimes be even more difficult. And we see this with what Naomi does next in verse eight. She surprises us even further. But Naomi says to her 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.

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. They said to her, no, we will return with you to your people.

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? 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, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it's exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me. Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, basically saying goodbye. But Ruth clung to her. Naomi doesn't cling on to Orpah and Ruth, the last thing she has left in this life of comfort and hope. Instead of feeling that she deserves for them to stay with her, what does she do? She sends them away. Naomi's thinking about what's best for them, not what's best for her. And that's what real love does. Real love is marked by self-sacrifice. Naomi knows her two daughters are going to be pulled down with her when they get to

Bethlehem. They can't just show up and marry some dude, right? They're Moabite women. No Israelite man would marry them. And the kind of Israelite man that would marry them isn't worth marrying anyways.

[23 : 49] They have no sons who could grow up and care for them. Naomi understands she'll be at the bottom of the social strata when she hits home. And she doesn't want that for her daughters. That's love.

Love wants the best for others regardless of what the personal cost is. And Naomi gets honest. She paints a hopeless picture to convince them that staying there in Moab is better. And it gives her young daughters a chance to hit reset on life. They aren't attached. They have no kids. They're still young. So you know what? The chances of some Moabite dude coming and marrying them was pretty high.

And if they stay in Moab, guess what? Their life gets back on track. And that's why Orpah's decision here makes sense. She's like, man, she loves Naomi. She cries. She says goodbye with tears. She's going to miss her. But she makes the sensible decision. And that's why Ruth's decision is mind-boggling. She heard the same pitch. Is Ruth just a slow learner? What's going on? Is she just slow on the uptake here? Like, what's going on? If this were Texas Hold'em, what she is doing is she is seeing Naomi's kindness and raising her. Verse 15, Ruth says, or Naomi says to Ruth, see your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law. But Ruth said, do not urge me to leave you or to return for 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. May the

Lord do so to me and more also if anything, but death parts me from you. And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said, she said no more. So we look at Orpah. 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, faithful, steadfast, unchanging. Love that is committed at all costs. You and I, we can't do this. We can't live this Chesed love without dying to ourselves every single day.

Ruth had to die to a sensibly safe future in Moab. She chooses to go down the path, the harder path of loving Naomi, sticking with her no matter what. The question we have to ask ourselves, why does

Ruth do this? Well, we actually see why. It's in her confession to Naomi. Your God will be my God. Real love requires faith in God who is real love. Ruth is a true believer in Yahweh, Israel's God, Naomi's God.

[27 : 08] And what's happening is because of that faith, she is becoming like the God she worships. That's true for us too. You will become what you worship. That we can't help it.

Ruth worshiped 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 apart from God, apart from his help. It's impossible for us to die to ourselves every single day. We just won't do it. We're too selfish. Our nature is just way too selfish. We need God's power. We need faith in him. We need the Holy Spirit. We need the Holy Spirit who is God who dwells in us and empowers us to live out his real love.

And this translates into doing the hard things. Burning the boats like Ruth does here. No turning back. Where you live, I'm going to live. Where you die, I'm going to die. She isn't staying in Bethlehem until Naomi kicks the bucket and then she's hightailing it back to Moab. No, she's all in. She's committed to changing her national identity, who her God is. She's changed her allegiance. There's something greater in Ruth that's captivated. Something'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, even if that meant being there at the bottom of the social strata.

[28 : 44] She wants to be buried there. Ruth doesn't know what the future isn't going to hold. There isn't some guarantee and then they lived happily ever after. That's not what Ruth is going in with. She's going in eyes wide open. The road ahead, it's going to be dark. It's going to be hard.

It's going to be difficult. But you know what? I want to be a part of what God is doing in that place, no matter what it takes. I'm going to love Naomi to the bitter end.

Because I've seen something of God and that is way better than anything else I've ever experienced. She's putting all her chips in for Israel's covenant God, who is real love.

And when you have real faith in this real God, who is real love, it changes you. You start to live that out. Now this part of the story ends leaving us wondering what is going to happen next. What is going to happen when they get to Bethlehem? And it's actually, it's a good cliffhanger. And we'll find out what happens next week. As the band comes up, I want to ask, I want us to consider how to respond. If you're here and you're not a Christian, man, I just want to invite you, man, surrender yourself to this God who is 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, or you're an orphan in a land of no father to come back home.

And the father did that by sending his son to die for you. Jesus said, I'm the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the father, but through me. And God is inviting you today to come and be a son. Be a son back in his place where he rules and he reigns, where he visits us with bread and food and feeds our souls what they truly been longing for. It's burning the boats and putting all your chips in on this Jesus who died for your sins. And I want to invite you, if that's, you haven't done that ever, I want to invite you to do that today. Now for those of us in the room who are Christians, you would say you're a follower of Jesus. I want to ask you, has counterfeit love taken root in your heart? Are you living in broken relationships, bitterness? Do you really believe that God is this has said love that we're starting to see in this story? Do you really believe that he loves you and is committed to you no matter what? What you've done? It doesn't matter how recently you've done it. It doesn't matter how far away you've done it. It doesn't matter how bad it, whatever you did was. He's committed to you no matter what. He is steadfast love. He is unchanging.

[32 : 02] So often we drift into living like survivors who run to different Moabs because we aren't sons that understand the love of the Father fully. And I just feel like today the Father is just calling us into not just knowing about this love, but to experiencing this love.

And that's what it's love is. It's just not something that is a concept for your mind to recite to itself. It's more than just a definition. It is an experience. It's a love that overwhelms you.

It's a love that fills you to overflowing. It's a love that... It's a love that melts your heart. No matter how hard your heart has gotten, it's a love that melts your heart. And it's a love that leads you back home.

Could I just have us all stand? If we can just close our eyes. And I just want us, man, the Holy Spirit might be doing something in some of us.

