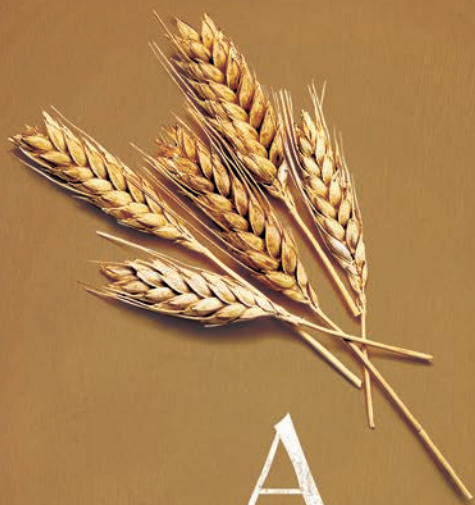


Author of *A Praying Life*

Paul E. Miller



A
LOVING
LIFE

In a WORLD *of* BROKEN
RELATIONSHIPS

“I’m not exaggerating when I say that this is the most honest, timely, and helpful book I’ve *ever* read about the costly and exhausting demands of loving well. And at the same time, *A Loving Life* is the most faithful, alluring, and encouraging presentation of God’s love for us in Jesus I’ve fed on in years. These two themes go hand in hand. Through the biblical story of Ruth, Paul Miller gives us hope, not hype—the freedom to suffer well, stay present, and live expectantly in all of our relationships. Thank you, Paul, for making the gospel more beautiful and believable to me.”

Scotty Smith, Teacher in Residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“Every once in a great while one reads a book that is so profound, so fresh, and so life changing that you can’t get it out of your mind or your heart. *A Loving Life* is that kind of book. Walk with Paul Miller, Ruth, and Naomi to the place of real love, and you’ll never again settle for a substitute. Read this book, rejoice in it, and give it to everyone you know. They will bless you for giving it to them as I bless Paul Miller for writing it.”

Steve Brown, Host, *Key Life* radio program; author, *Three Free Sins: God Isn’t Mad at You*

“If there is a message the world needs more to hear and to start obeying than the one Paul Miller brings here, I don’t know what it is. Beautifully written and attested by plenty of personal experience, *A Loving Life* unearths dimensions of the book of Ruth I had never noticed, and will now never forget.”

Andrée Seu Peterson, Senior Writer, *World* magazine

“The book of Ruth is about *hesed*, a loyal love, that Ruth shows to Naomi, Boaz shows to Ruth, and, behind the scenes, God demonstrates to his people. Paul Miller not only brilliantly explains the story of Ruth, but also shows how *hesed* love can transform us and our relationships. I highly recommend this book.”

Tremper Longman III, Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies, Westmont College

“Being married to Joni, a longtime quadriplegic, I know my marriage vows are always in need of polishing. And Paul Miller’s new book fits the bill; I’ve yellow-highlighted nearly every page. *A Loving Life* reinforces that the best—the only—kind of love is one-way and without an exit strategy. If you are looking to shore up the for-better-or-for-worse, in-sickness-and-in-health promises in your marriage, you couldn’t lay your hands on a better read.”

Ken Tada, Director of Ministry Development, the Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“‘Death is the center of love.’ Miller’s insight comes as he beautifully retells the story of Ruth in terms of the gospel, revealing a path of love more dear and deep than our cultural icons and distractions can create, and more precious than any pursuit of self can dream. Here is love vast, unmeasured, boundless, free, and freeing.”

Bryan Chapell, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary; Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

“The word *love* is often either a vague sentiment or just another four-letter word. But in Paul Miller’s hands, the quiet, compelling reality emerges. You will witness how love is thoughtful, principled, courageous, enduring, and wise—all the things you know deep down it should be. And even more than those fine things, you will be surprised and delighted at how true love is grounded in God.”

David Powlison, faculty, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation;
Senior Editor, *Journal of Biblical Counseling*

“Paul Miller reminds us with boldness and insight that a relationship with Jesus Christ means journeying with him to the cross, where we most know of the love of God for us. As such, it is the only path to learning to incarnate that love ourselves—and so to dance to the Spirit’s constant rhythm of being loved and loving others.”

Joseph “Skip” Ryan, Minister, Park Cities Presbyterian Church; Moderator,
General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America

“I was sure that Paul Miller’s *A Praying Life* had to be his greatest, but *A Loving Life* is better. How can we care for others much more than for ourselves? How can we escape from the slippery pit of our ‘feel good’ culture? Keep going through the book of Ruth and discover good and godly ordinary life, and how you can live it in an extraordinary way—the way of love, God’s way.”

D. Clair Davis, Emeritus Professor of Church History, Westminster
Theological Seminary

“*A Loving Life* is a worthy successor to Paul Miller’s much-appreciated book on prayer. It is a careful, thorough analysis of the book of Ruth, understanding it as a love story and making good applications to our own experiences and needs for love. Paul here shows not only a deep understanding of God’s Word, but also a rich knowledge of human nature, both in the ancient world and today. He offers biblical responses to many of the misunderstandings and problems we have with love of all kinds. May the Lord give this book a broad readership!”

John M. Frame, J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy,
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida

“Reading this book nourished me deeply. With caring attentiveness especially to often-overlooked ‘modern’ widows and widowers, Paul Miller gently pastors us through the story of two courageous, *hesed*-embracing single women, Naomi and Ruth. He invites us to embrace the death at the center of covenant love and to learn it as the downstroke of reality—the upstroke of which is ever the grace of surprising resurrection. In Christ, Christians all, and the world, reap the far-reaching blessing of these unlikely benefactresses. And we do again in this little book.”

Esther L. Meek, Professor of Philosophy, Geneva College; author, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology; A Little Manual for Knowing*

A Loving Life: In a World of Broken Relationships

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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.

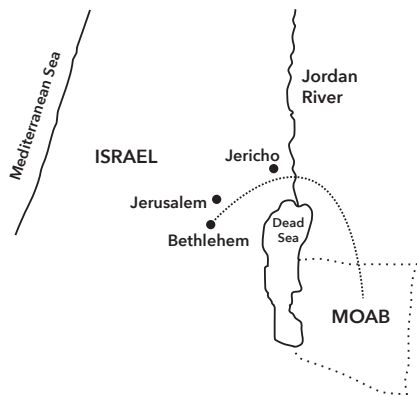
In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were 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

COMMITTED LOVE

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

COMMITTED LOVE

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.



LOVE WITHOUT AN EXIT STRATEGY

As the three women walk down to the Jordan River Valley, the full weight of the implications of Naomi's daughters-in-law returning with her dawns on her. The first words of a biblical character are often a clue to his or her character, and Naomi's first words are filled with a thoughtful love:¹ "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'" (Ruth 1:8).

Naomi begins by blessing Ruth and Orpah, by thinking about their futures. She blesses them twice. First she asks that the Lord would "deal kindly" with them. The phrase translated "deal kindly" is actually *hesed*, a word unique to Hebrew that combines "love" and "loyalty." She wants God to do *hesed* love with them.

Understanding *Hesed* Love

Sometimes *hesed* is translated "steadfast love." It combines commitment with sacrifice. *Hesed* is one-way love. Love without an exit strategy. When you love with *hesed* love, you bind yourself to the object of your love, no matter what the response is. So if the object of your love snaps at you, you still love that person. If you've had an argument with your spouse in which you were slighted or not heard, you refuse to retaliate through silence or withholding your affection. Your response to the other person is entirely independent of how that person has treated you. *Hesed* is a stubborn love.

Love like this eliminates moodiness, the touchiness that is increas-

ingly common in people today. When my father, Jack Miller, began to observe this phenomena in the 1970s, he said, “It is like people don’t have any skin. They are all nerve endings.” Moodiness often begins with accumulated slights or the day just not working. Our inner spirits momentarily give up on life, and we stop caring how we affect people around us. Self is set on hair trigger. If we do *hesed*, that is no longer the case. It doesn’t mean that we don’t have moments and days when we have the cranks or share how fragile our spirit is; we just refuse to let it affect us. *Hesed* is opposite of the spirit of our age, which says we have to act on our feelings. *Hesed* says, “No, you act on your commitments. The feelings will follow.” Love like this is unbalanced, uneven. There is nothing fair about this kind of love. But commitment-love lies at the heart of Christianity. It is Jesus’s love for us at the cross, and it is to be our love for one another.

When feelings are the standard, we are left adrift on a turbulent sea. Every good feeling becomes a new path, so we become good at starting to love, but bad at finishing. Soon we are lost and alone in a maze of relationships.

When we get lost, we hunt for an escape. It is easy to appear to be doing *hesed*, when in fact you’ve exited a relationship emotionally. If someone has hurt you, you may slip into emotional revenge, hunting for bad news about that person or just running a magnifying glass over his or her character. Or you exit in your mind by creating or nourishing a world that doesn’t exist. Guys can be drawn to porn; women to romance novels.

Because *hesed* love isn’t centered on the fairness, it can reset quickly. For instance, if you’ve had an argument with a spouse or friend, you may be tempted to pull away, to distance yourself. Sometimes that distancing is appropriate, but more often it is a silent mini-revenge, a way of punishing the person for hurting you. But with *hesed* love, after an argument, even when tension is in the air, you don’t allow your spirit to pull away. You move toward the other person; you don’t allow an ugly space to grow.

Why is *hesed* love so important? Because life is moody. Feelings come and go. Pressures rise and fall. Passions ebb and flow. *Hesed* is a stake in the heart of the changing seasons of life. Words of commitment create a bond that stands against life’s moodiness.

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Ruth and Orpah have already been showing Naomi this one-way love. Naomi's comment suggests this: "May the LORD do *hesed* with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me." Naomi is asking God to show them the same *hesed* that they have shown her.

Understanding Rest

But Naomi isn't finished. She has a second blessing: "The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" (Ruth 1:9). The Hebrew word for "rest" is *manoah* and is related to Noah. It means "a place of settled security," a place where *shalom* (peace) takes place. In a sense we are all hunting for rest.

Naomi's faith is striking. She assumes that Yahweh can bless her daughters-in-law in Moab. In the ancient world, gods were hardwired to ethnic groups and their land. Winning a war meant that "our god beat up your god." So Kemosh, the god of the Moabites, is strong in Moab but weak outside of Moab. Ancient people would assume that the same is true of Yahweh: strong in Israel but weak outside the borders. But the Hebrew Bible—along with Naomi—insists that Yahweh is not just a local deity but the God of the whole earth. He can bless even in Moab.

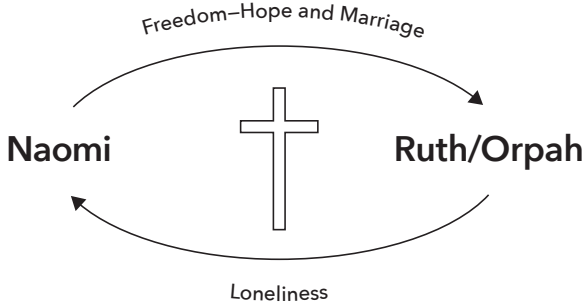
The Structure of Love

We can sense the strength of Naomi's character behind her kind words. She begins her double blessing with two sharp commands: "go" and "return." She is not negotiating. She is ordering. She has to be strong. She is taking the most precious thing in her life, her family, and destroying it for the sake of love. Because of her love, she has to push away what she loves the most, destroying the only thing she has left in the world, her only reason for living. She can't change her life, but she can improve the lives of her daughters-in-law. We are watching *hesed* in action.

Naomi gives Ruth and Orpah freedom, marriage, and children, and takes on her already broken life, loneliness, and poverty. By giving up what little hope she has left, she gives them a hope and a future. By deepening her own death, she offers them a reason for living. That kind of exchange anticipates Jesus's death, where he takes our sin and gives us his gift of acceptance, righteousness, and purity. Substitution is the

structure of love (see fig. 2.1). That’s why, subconsciously, we are allergic to love. We rightly sense that death is at the center of love.

Figure 2.1. How hesed love works



I saw my friend Joanne give up almost as much as Naomi when she invited her younger sister Shelly to live with her to protect Shelly from a sexual predator. Shelly is disabled and is naive about men. She lived with her parents, and they let her sit around and watch TV most of the day. A man who already had four children by four different women began pursuing Shelly. When Joanne got wind of this, she pled with her parents to let her take Shelly into her home. Joanne, like Naomi, begged for the privilege of narrowing and burdening her own life. When you realize that death is at the center of love, it is quietly liberating. Instead of fighting the death that comes with love, you embrace what your Father has given you. A tiny resurrection begins in your heart.

Ruth and Orpah know that Naomi is inviting even more death into her life. So when she kisses them good-bye, they respond by wailing, Eastern culture’s strongest form of lament. “Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, ‘No, we will return with you to your people’” (Ruth 1:9–10). The girls aren’t budging. Being gracious doesn’t work. So Naomi tries a new strategy in her pursuit of love.



THE LOST ART OF LAMENT

Naomi's initial strategy to sacrifice her own future for the sake of her daughters-in-law's future fails. Their *hesed* of her can't be broken, so she pulls out all the stops in this brilliant, grief-stricken argument:

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 . . ." (Ruth 1:11–13)

At the heart of Naomi's argument is an ancient form of Social Security called levirate marriage. If a woman's husband died, his brother was obligated to marry her, to take her as a second wife. Any children she had by him would receive her first husband's inheritance. This law not only saved a wife from famine, but provided heirs for the deceased husband and continued his name.

Naomi is implying that if she were to give birth to more sons, then she would give them to Ruth and Orpah as husbands. But Naomi is not pregnant, and she is too old to have children. She brings home her point by sketching out an incredible, multilevel miracle. If she were to (1) get married that night and (2) become pregnant with (3) twin (4) boys (5) on her wedding night, it would still be too long for Ruth and Orpah to wait. Ruth and Naomi are likely in their late twenties. If they were to wait another eighteen years for the hypothetical miracle boys to grow up, they

would be in their midforties, too old to have children and with their lives mostly gone.

Naomi answers her own question as to whether they would wait with an emphatic “Absolutely not!” She paints a situation as bleak as possible in order to help Ruth and Orpah see how hopeless their situation would be with her. “Face the facts. I’m as good as dead.”

Making the case so strongly with her daughters forces Naomi to think about how awful her own life is. Her heart breaks and grief pours out: “No, my daughters, for it is more bitter for me than you that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me” (1:13).¹ To drive home the point that they should not come with her, she passionately reminds her daughters-in-law how bitter her life is—more bitter than theirs. They have both lost their husbands, but they are young and can remarry. Hope is not lost. But Naomi has no hope. She is telling them, “My life is over. Yours doesn’t have to be.” Naomi literally says in the Hebrew, “for the hand of Yahweh went out against me.” Her only conclusion is that “Yahweh’s own hand has attacked me!”² Libbie Groves puts it this way:

Naomi is an Israelite, one of Yahweh’s own children, and yet his hand has persecuted her. There is deep, ancient, forever-binding covenantal anguish in her complaint. Yahweh is her God, and yet he is against her. He has not only allowed but orchestrated the mini-holocaust of which she is the sole survivor, left destitute and without hope. That hurts! You might expect to be treated badly by some stranger, but not by your dad.³

What Can We Say to Naomi’s Lament?

Naomi makes us, with our Western cultural roots, a little nervous with her seeming disrespect of God. Yes, her life is hard, but should she blame God? Her open passion sends shivers down our stoic-tuned religious sensibilities, and we instinctively clamp down with our theology and say, “Naomi, God is orchestrating this. He’s in control. Don’t blame him.” Her grief and anger unsettle us and open doors to unbelief in our own lives. We’d rather quiet her with good theology. We think we’re comforting her, but maybe we’re trying to keep our own demons in place.

How does God respond to her accusations? In the context of the whole book of Ruth, Ruth’s love is God’s response to Naomi’s lament.

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God often uses human agents to show his love. So God weeps with her: “Then they lifted up their voices and wept again” (Ruth 1:14).

I remember many years ago at a pastors’ conference, a pastor opened up his heart and shared his struggles with cynicism and unbelief. He lamented, “What about me? What do I do with my heart?” The other pastors began offering advice—all except one young missionary. He was so troubled, he interrupted them and said, “Our brother doesn’t need advice; he needs someone to weep with him.” Then he burst into tears and prayed for the struggling pastor. It transformed the conference.

What can we say to Naomi’s lament? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. We just weep with her. That is good theology, to weep with those that weep. God does not lecture Naomi. Nor should we lecture those who are grieving. It is a striking example of Jesus’s command to “judge not” (Matt. 7:1). Oddly enough, good theology drives Naomi’s frustration with God. She feels anguish precisely *because* she believes God is in control. In contrast, paganism resigns itself to the hand that fate deals us.

It is easy to have the wrong kind of resignation to suffering. In *A Praying Life* I tell the story of how our daughter Kim would pace in the early morning because of her autism. My wife, Jill, would yell at Kim to go back to bed, and I would ignore Kim, just trying to get some sleep. On the surface, Jill’s yelling seems less spiritual than my silence, but the opposite is true. Jill was passionately engaged with something that wasn’t working. I shut it out. God can work with the former, not the latter. He can work with something that is moving, but not when our head is (literally) under the pillow. In fact, it was only because Jill yelled that I finally began to pray with Kim regularly.

In the West, we’ve lost the practice of lamenting. In contrast, the ancient Hebrews were constantly in God’s face. About one third of the Psalms are laments where the psalmists pour out their hearts to God. Listen to these Hebrew laments:

Why, O LORD, do you stand far away?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Ps. 10:1)

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me? (Ps.13:1)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?
(Ps. 22:1)

How long, O Lord, will you look on? (Ps. 35:17)

O LORD, why do you make us wander from your ways
and harden our heart, so that we fear you not? (Isa. 63:17)

Such honesty seldom characterizes our praying. Our inability to lament is primarily due to the influence of the Greek mind on the early church. Greek Stoicism believed that emotions—anything that interrupted the goal of a calm and balanced life—were bad. The passionate person was the immature person. Balance was everything. Naomi's brokenness feels unbalanced, so instinctively we want to correct her tilt.

A lament grieves that the world is unbalanced. It grieves at the gap between reality and God's promise. It believes in a God who is there, who can act in time and space. It doesn't drift into cynicism or unbelief, but engages God passionately with what's wrong.

When God didn't seem to be answering her prayers for Kim, Jill started praying her Social Security number because it seemed like God didn't know who she was. That's a lament with a Philly twist!

Imagine if George had been able to lament when he faced his wife's demanding spirit: "God, I don't know how to live with my wife. She's driving me crazy. It feels like I'm entering a black hole to listen to her." A lament is a prayer, a plea for help. No one can endure the weight of *hesed* love alone. An honest lament makes *hesed* love possible.

At the same time, Naomi's lament turns inward. Her genuine faith and deep love combine with hints of bitterness ("God has attacked me") and self-pity ("it is more bitter for me than you").⁴ Absent in her lament is any recognition that her family might have erred in leaving Bethlehem. God is the only one at fault. We'll discover later that the narrator suggests that the return to Bethlehem was a kind of repentance on Naomi's part. Instinctively, we like neat categories of saint or sinner. But like many of us, Naomi is ambiguous.

Accepting ambiguity is immensely helpful in the work of love, because when we encounter this strange mixture of good and bad in

COMMITTED LOVE

another person, we tend to lock onto the evil and miss the good. We don't like ambiguity. We prefer the clarity of judging.

The Cost of Love

Naomi's conversation with her daughters-in-law goes through three phases. She begins by warmly but firmly directing them home. When they refuse, she paints a bleak picture of her future, laying out the hopelessness of her situation with cold logic. Finally, the grief that has pierced her soul comes to the surface. But even in her grief Naomi uses her anguish to care for Ruth and Orpah, saying in effect, "Do you really want to be around someone whom God has attacked?"

Look how painful this conversation is for Naomi. Her daughters-in-law don't brush off easily because they had bound themselves to her in *hesed* love. So Naomi is forced by her *hesed* of them to become firmer. In other words, their love for her deepens her agony. She is forced to make her hopeless life even worse by pushing away the two people dearest to her. Naomi is correct. Her life is indeed bitter.

Ironically, Naomi has to get rid of what is left of the skeleton of her family for the sake of love. The very act of love tears her apart. She is cutting off her leg to save their lives. She is broken by love.

That is *hesed* in action, death at the center of love. C. S. Lewis captures Naomi's grief perfectly:

There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. . . . The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.⁵

Ruth and Orpah do not debate Naomi, because she is right. The first time Naomi initiated kissing them good-bye, but this time, "Orpah kissed her mother-in-law." Overcome by Naomi's logic, Orpah leaves for home.

Far from the bitter old woman she is usually portrayed as, Naomi is

a woman of heroic love who is broken by life. She loves in the midst of tragedy—there is no greater test of character. She doesn't turn inward and take care of herself. Nor is she a two-dimensional, plastic saint. She loves with wisdom and boldness, even courage.

Loving against My Feelings

A good friend of mine, Debbie, was told by her husband, Robert, "I don't have any feelings for you anymore so I'm leaving." When I heard this, I thought, "Really? And what spouse doesn't feel that multiple times in his or her marriage?" Because it didn't feel good, Robert walked away from a thirty-year-old marriage commitment.

Like Robert, Naomi felt and articulated the full weight of her broken life. Life was so bad that it felt like the Lord himself had attacked her as an enemy. It felt like she had been abused by a seemingly loving Father. But unlike Robert, Naomi didn't let those feelings trap her. She felt her anguish, yet she was free from the tyranny of her feelings.

Debbie's life was shattered by Robert's rejection of her. She told me that she would keep it together at work all day and then burst into tears in the car and cry all the way home. Her life became one long lament for her now former husband. "God," she prayed again and again, "bring him to the end of himself." Yet Debbie didn't make the lament central. She didn't demand that God bring Robert back. She did not give in to the power of her feelings. This is critical for the journey of love.

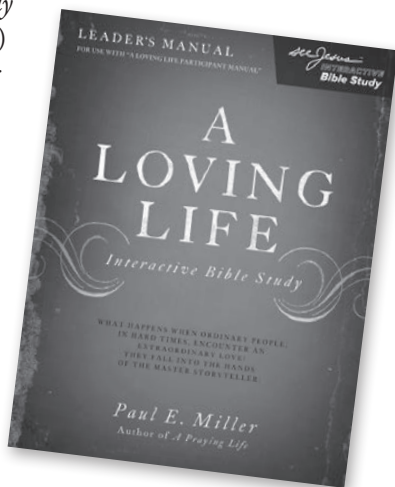
My father once told a young woman, a lingering hippie who had inhaled the spirit of our age, that she didn't have to act on her feelings. She said, "Really?" She had never heard that before. She'd always assumed that to be "true to yourself" meant you had to act on your feelings. The conversation was a moment of liberation for her. She realized that when we follow our feelings, we eventually become trapped by them. They define us. We think we can't love our spouse because we don't *feel* like we love him or her. We've defined love as a feeling over which we have no control. We are trapped.

Our modern age creates categories (grieving widow, terrible twos, bipolar) and then traps people in them. For instance, if we label two-year-olds with "terrible twos," then they are no longer responsible. So

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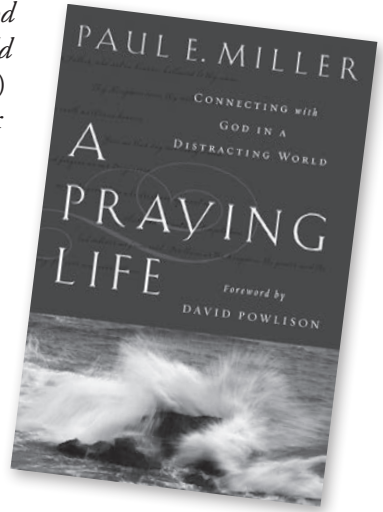
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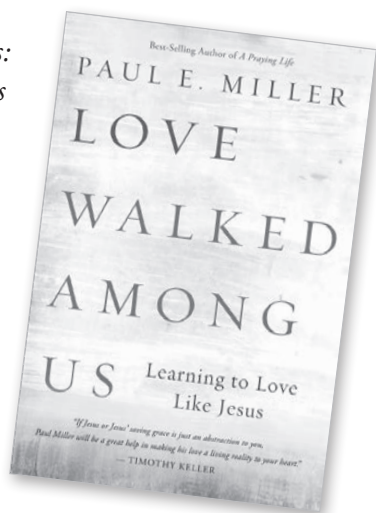
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PAUL E. MILLER is the best-selling author of *A Praying Life* and executive director of seeJesus, a ministry that creates and conducts interactive discipleship seminars throughout the world. He and his wife, Jill, live in the Philadelphia area and have six children as well as a growing number of grandchildren.

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