

John Mark Comer

Love- ology

Loveology

God. Love. Marriage. Sex.

And the Never-Ending Story of Male and Female.

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Loveology

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Genesis 2v15 – 25

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Now the LORD God had

formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs

and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

The beginning

In the beginning God created Adam.

Then he made Eve.

And ever since we've been picking up the pieces.

Love and hate.

Marriage and divorce.

Sexuality and adultery.

Romance and heartache.

Everything we know (and think we know) about love. First dates, men down on one knee, the Hallmark cards with elderly couples who look exactly the same—it all started with two naked humans in a garden.

This book is about what's right in male-female relationships—what God created and called “good” all those years ago. And this book is about what's wrong—about fallout east of Eden.

We are the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve. We were

created “male and female.” We were set up to love. To absorb the love of God into our bloodstream and then to share it with another human being.

But we don't live in a garden anymore. We're the exact opposite of “naked and unashamed.” We wear clothes—some of us more than others, *a-hem!*—and far too often, our clothes are a cheap facade to mask our guilt and shame.

When it comes to love, we are both the victim and the perpetrator of the crime. Because we are human, we love, but because we love, we *bleed*. Love is the source of our highest highs and lowest lows. Love is joy and laughter and gift and freedom and faith and healing, but when love goes south, it's a knife to the chest.

If you're a child of divorce, you feel the tension. You know better than anybody what happens when love breaks down, yet you are drawn to love like a moth to a flame. It's in your blood. Children grow up dreaming of marriage. Little boys want to marry their moms. Little girls put on white dresses and play “march down the aisle.” You're no different. But at the same time you live under a dark cloud of paranoia. Will you make the exact same mistake as your parents? Will you become another statistic? Will your dream become a nightmare?

And there's good reason. The odds are not in your favor.

Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce.¹

Did you catch that? *Fifty percent.*

Because we hear that stat all the time, we grow numb to how gut-wrenching and nauseating it is. The chances of your marriage lasting more than a few short years are fifty-fifty.

Toss a coin into the air. Call heads or tails. Slap it on your wrist.

Those are the odds.

What happened? How did we get from the Garden of Eden to *this*? And how can we get back on track?

Ervat davar

The writer Matthew tells a story about Jesus fielding questions on divorce. Divorce was rampant in Jesus' day, just as it is in ours. Marriage was unraveling at the seams. And one day the Pharisees showed up at Jesus' door asking for his take ...

"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"²

In today's language, "Is God ever okay with divorce? If so, when?"

A quick bit of history to make sense of the Pharisees' question. In the first century, there was a raging debate over an obscure text in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). In *Deuteronomy*, Moses said, "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him

because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce ...”³

The phrase “something indecent” is *ervat davar* in Hebrew, and it’s just as ambiguous in the original language as it sounds in English. What did Moses mean by “something indecent”? There were two sides in the debate.

On one side was the school of Shammai, which followed the teachings of the right-wing, conservative rabbi named Shammai. He said there was one, *and only one*, reason a man could divorce his wife – adultery. That act broke the bond of marriage with the hammer of infidelity. That was his interpretation of “something indecent.” Sadly, Shammai’s interpretation was the minority view.

On the other side was the school of Hillel, the leftist progressive of the day. Rabbi Hillel said a man could divorce his wife for “any and every reason.” If she gains five pounds, that sounds like “something indecent” – divorce her. If “you aren’t happy anymore” – divorce her. As crazy as it sounds, we have records of Hillel’s teachings where he says things like, “If she burns the toast – *ervat davar!* Divorce her!”⁴ For obvious reasons, Hillel’s take was by far the popular, majority view.

And to clarify, Hillel’s interpretation was called the “any and every reason” clause and was written on marriage certificates around the time of Jesus.

Now back to the Pharisees’ question ...

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *any and every reason*?”

The Pharisees are essentially asking Jesus, “Where do you stand on divorce? With Hillel? Or with Shammai? What’s your take?”

Jesus’ answer speaks volumes ...

“‘Haven’t you read,’ he replied, ‘that at the beginning the Creator “made them male and female,” and said, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’”

In other words, “You’re asking the wrong question.”

The question you should be asking is, “What is God’s *dream* for marriage?” And to answer *that* question, Jesus takes the Pharisees back to the beginning. He quotes from one of the first stories in the Scriptures. And it turns out to be a love story ...

Bone of my bones

In the Genesis narrative, God looks down on the world and sees that Adam is a lonely human on a solitary planet. “It is not good for the man to be alone,” he says.⁵

So God does something about it. He causes a deep sleep to fall over Adam. Then he takes a rib from the man’s side, and from that rib – from Adam’s *bones* – he creates Eve.

Adam wakes up to a dream. And he *sings* over the woman ...

“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”

Notice that the first words out of a human's mouth in the Scriptures are a love song.

And with a smile on his face, God joins in the song and says, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

When God said that, God created marriage.

Did you catch that?

God created marriage.

This whole thing was his idea. Love, marriage, sexuality, romance — it all began in the mind of God. It was his imagination, his creative genius, that thought it all up.

Marriage did not evolve fifty thousand years ago in ancient Mesopotamia as a way to deal with civic litigation. It was embedded into human DNA right from the start.

That's why people from *every culture on the planet* get married. From

Papua New Guinea to New York City, one strand runs through the tapestry of the more than seven billion people on earth – marriage.

Marriage is the product of creation, not culture. Humans get credit for a lot of stuff in the Genesis story. We came up with science and technology and the arts and architecture and urban planning – but not marriage. It goes all the way back to God.

This means that God knows how it's supposed to function. How it's supposed to work. The God who *created* marriage knows what it's supposed to look like.

But somewhere along the way we lost sight of what God intended. We need to circle back to the beginning, to the story that started it all. The reality is that the garden story holds out two truths.

The first is that *love is beautiful*. All those years ago, God created something stunning. Despite the pain, the heartbreak, and the long odds, we keep coming back to the love song that is male and female. Somehow we know, deep in our bones, that it's well worth the risk.

At the same time, though, we all know that *something is wrong*. The beauty of the original creation is still there, but it's been marred and warped.

Something happened in that garden. The serpent found his way into Eden. He came upon Adam and Eve in the beauty of unpolluted,

innocent love. Seething with hatred and jealousy, all he could think to do was destroy the first marriage.

God is the creator of life. The serpent is not his equal, *but he is his opposite*. Jesus called him “a murderer from the beginning” and exposed his agenda as one who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy.”⁶ What God builds up, the serpent tries to tear down. What God sets free, he tries to imprison. What God creates, he tries to deface.

Adam and Eve’s love was far too beautiful for the serpent to leave unmolested. All it took was a lie.

God had told them not to eat from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” because “when you eat from it you will certainly die.” But the serpent whispered in Eve’s ear, “You will not certainly die. For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”⁷

What was the lie?

That God isn’t our lover. That he’s not after our joy. That we can’t trust him. That God’s way isn’t the best way. That we know better than God.

And the first humans—gullible and naive—bought the lie.

From there the love story turned into a tragedy. The first place sin wreaked havoc was in Adam and Eve’s relationship. Adam blamed

his wife. Eve blamed the serpent. Two people at each other's throats – and the first sitcom marriage was born.

It's easy to think of Adam and Eve as stupid. Premodern cave-men one step removed from the apes. But are we any different? Any better?

The reality is that we all face the *exact same choice*. Which tree will we eat from?

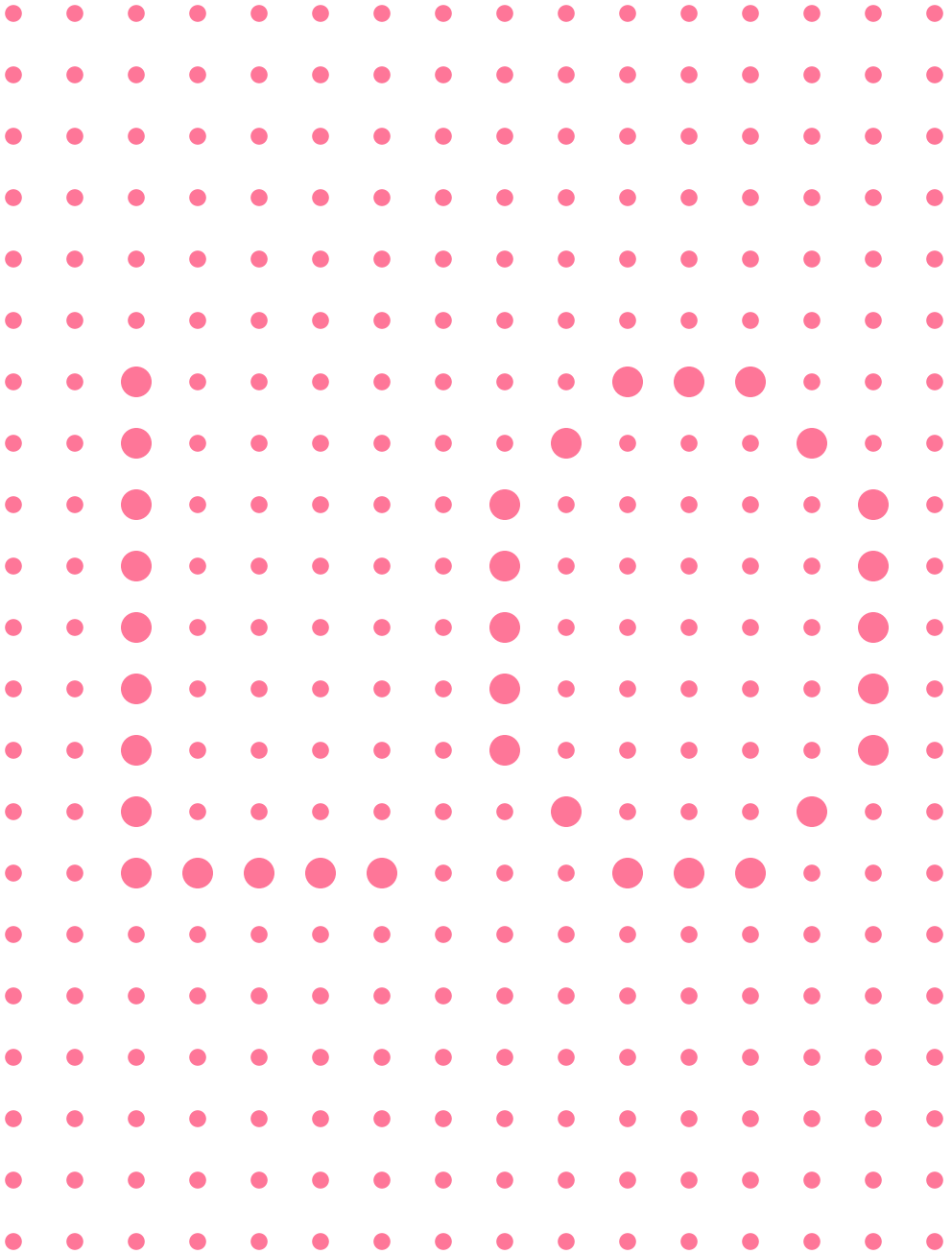
Will we buy the lie? Go our own way, thinking we know better than God? Flip a coin and hope for the best? Or will we listen, not to the voice of the serpent, but to the Creator. Will we believe that God's way is the best way? He is the Creator, *and he's good*.

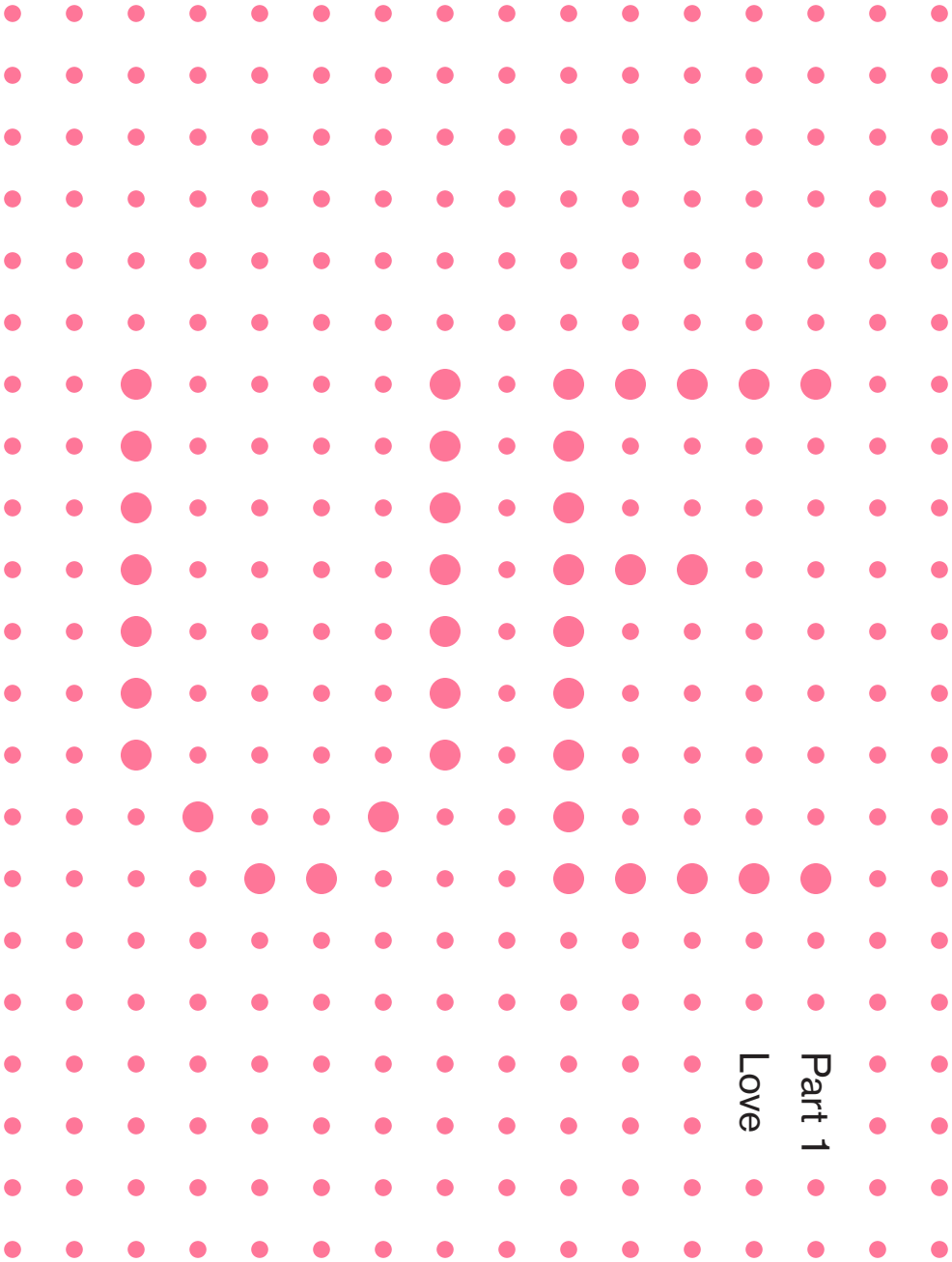
Somewhere along the way we lost the plotline. And if we want to find our way back to Eden, back to “naked and unashamed,” then we have to follow the voice of Jesus.

I'll admit it seems a bit strange to take advice on love from a single guy. I guess the life of a wandering rabbi/prophet/Messiah wasn't exactly conducive for romance. Yet we believe that Jesus is the living God come among us.

The God who said, “It is not good for the man to be alone” and the Rabbi who said, “Have you not read ...?” are one and the same.

And from the lips of Jesus we get loveology ...





Part 1

Love

Ahava

I believe in love at first sight. Well, kind of.

It was the sixteenth of September, 1998. I was at a party with friends, outdoors on a hot summer evening. In the Northwest we get an Indian summer, and September is my favorite time of the year. It was a perfect day—high 70s, but with a soft breeze. The trees over my head were making that swishing sound they do when they flirt with the wind.

In the middle of a conversation, I saw her out of the corner of my eye. She was a vision of long, curly black hair and deep, almond-shaped eyes, and she was walking toward *me*.

You know those guys who are suave with the ladies?

I am not one of them.

Girls make me nervous. I'm clumsy and awkward *on a good day*. And *this* girl—well, let's just say all my fine motor skills went out the window.

I'm sure I was staring. Heck, I was probably drooling. I dropped a pen I'd been fiddling with. "Shoot. I'm such a klutz." Before I could reach down, she walked over and picked it up off the ground. "Here

ya go,” she said—and all I could do was stare at two of the brownest eyes I’d ever seen.

She might as well have said, “Will you marry me?”

I was hooked. There was something about her smile. It was warm and disarming. She was calm. Relaxed. Soothing. Everything I’m not.

And she was *beautiful*. I mean, crazy, over-the-top, don’t-even-try-or-you-will-make-a-fool-of-yourself beautiful.

Everything after the pen is hazy. I’m sure I muddled through a short dialogue and embarrassed myself. But I remember I didn’t sleep that night.

Or the next.

Or the next.

She took over my mind. Her troops marched in and colonized my imagination. All I could think about was seeing her again.

A few weeks later I said to a friend, “I think she’s it.”

He was annoyed, understandably. “What? You barely know her!”

And he was right. It was an impetuous thing to say. I barely knew her. But that didn’t matter for one simple reason: I was *in love*.

I had no clue what was coming around the bend. No idea that our picture-perfect romance would be followed by a less-than-ideal marriage. That my entire paradigm for our relationship was seriously off-kilter. That hard stuff was brewing on the horizon.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

At this point in my story, I was awash in feelings of romantic love—attraction, tension, mystery, allure. I was in love, deeper than I'd ever been. Drowning, and loving every minute of it.

Time for a definition

In love. What does that even mean?

“Love” is a junk drawer we dump all sorts of ideas into, just because we don't have anywhere else to put them.

I “love” God, and I “love” fish tacos. See the problem?

The way we use the word is so broad, so generic, that I'm not sure we understand it anymore. How should we define *love*?

To some, love is tolerance. I hear this all the time in my city. The idea is that rather than judge people, we should “love” them. And what people mean is that we shouldn't call out something as wrong. After all, as long as it's not hurting anybody, who are we to judge? And while this sounds nice, and forward, and progressive, it doesn't

work for me. The opposite of love isn't hate. It's apathy. And there's a fine line between tolerance and apathy.

To many of us, love is passion for a *thing*. It's the word we call on to conjure up all our feelings of affection. We *love* hiking, or we *love* that new record by the band you've never heard of, or we *love* chips and guac.

When we aim the word at *people*, we usually mean the exact same thing. When we say we love someone, we mean we have *deep feelings of affection* because they make us feel alive all over again—adventurous, brave, happy.

Love, by this definition, is pure, unfiltered emotion. And your role in love is *passive*. It's something that happens to you. Think of the phrase “fall in love.” It's like tripping over a rock or a curb. And it's fantastic. But there's a dark underbelly to feeling this kind of romantic love. If we can fall into it, then we can fall *out* of it.

What happens when the emotions fade or disappear? What happens when someone *else* makes you feel even *more* alive? Then you have a serious problem on your hands.

If you're dating, it's not the end of the world. You break up and move on.

But what if you're engaged? Married? Do you stay together, even though you're not “in love” anymore? Or do you go the way of the 50 percent?

I believe that marriage is for life. Remember what Jesus said? “What God has joined together, *let no one separate.*” I stand with Jesus, which is why I think we need a redefinition of love that will stand up to the frontal assault of life. And we find that redefinition in the Scriptures.

There's a letter in the New Testament called *1 John*. It was written by a guy named – well, I'm sure you figured that part out. John was one of Jesus' disciples. He spent three years with Love-incarnate, and he was known as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”¹ That pretty much makes him an expert on the subject.

John's definition of love is blatant and clear-cut – “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”²

Love = Jesus on the cross.

There you have it, in black-and-white.

If you want to know what love looks like, don't look at a dictionary. Look at a Jewish prophet crucified outside Jerusalem. Look at God in the flesh, giving his life away for the world.

Does that sound anything like “deep feelings of affection”?

Don't get me wrong. I have no doubt that Jesus was *feeling* something in that moment. It was “for the joy set before him” that

“he endured the cross.”³ Love *is* emotion, but it’s gotta be more than that.

Notice that John uses the word *love* as both a noun and a verb. “This is *love* ... that he *loved* us ...”

Love is a noun *and* a verb.

Put another way, love is a feeling *and* an action.

When it comes to the feeling of love, you’re in the passenger seat. As I said before, your role is passive. It’s something that happens to you. But with the action of love, you’re at the wheel. Your role is active. It’s something you do.

And the feeling of love isn’t bad. There’s nothing wrong with romantic feelings. The first song (Adam’s poem in Genesis 2), and the longest song (*Song of Songs*) are both celebrations of romantic love. If you are “in love” – enjoy it. We are emotional creatures. God made us that way. Romantic feelings are a gift from the Creator God.

But at its root, feelings can be selfish. Behind all the flowers and poetry and twitterpation, there’s a narcissist hiding in the closet.

When we say “I love you,” what we often mean is, “When I’m around you, I feel happy. You make me feel better about myself. Comfortable in my own skin.” Now, that’s not all bad, but you don’t have to be a psychologist to figure out where that road leads.

Love, the action, the *verb*, is a whole other story. At its core, love—as defined by Jesus on the cross—is *self-giving*.

Over and over again, the authors of the New Testament point to Jesus' death on the cross as the ultimate act of self-giving love.

In another place, John writes, “For God so loved the world that he *gave* his one and only Son ...”⁴

The prolific author Paul writes that God “did not spare his own Son, but *gave* him up for us all ...”⁵

And in Paul's mind, Jesus' death is the model for how a man is to love a woman. Later he writes, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and *gave* himself up for her ...”⁶ Husband or wife, male or female, we can *all* take a lesson from that.

Why love is about washing feet

This idea of Jesus as the model for how we are to love each other sounds docile and tame and cliché, but when we actually read about the life of Jesus, it's stunning.

I love the story in *The Gospel of John* where Jesus washes the disciples' feet.⁷ In the first century, foot washing was the job of a servant or, worse, a slave. The streets were unpaved. Filled with dirt and muck and animal droppings. People walked around in sandals, not shoes, and by the end of the day, their feet were ... well, use your imagination. But Jesus, *the embodiment of the creator God*,

the God who made humans from the dust on the street right outside the door, picks up a towel and starts to clean the grime from between John's toes.

Imagine the mayor of a city pulling up a manhole cover, dropping down into the sewer, and starting to shovel crap. Now dial that up by a factor of a gillion, and you're starting to see what's going on in the story.

When Jesus finished with the disciples' feet, he asked, "Do you understand what I have done for you?" Almost as if to point out the staggering implications of what just happened. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."⁸

Jesus' life is *the* example for how to love.

It's that easy.

And that difficult.

Because to Jesus, love is serving. It's cleaning garbage off his feet. It's wiping grime from between her toes. It's choosing — *choosing* of your own free will — to play the role of the servant, the least important person in the room.

And that is not easy to do.

That's why love is commanded by God in the Scriptures. Jesus said, "A new *command* I give you: *Love* one another."⁹ In fact, Jesus said the greatest command in all of the Torah (the Bible of his day) was to "love the Lord your God ... love your neighbor as yourself."¹⁰

Remember how we talked about the difference between the feeling of love and the action of love? You cannot command feelings. You can only command actions. God does not command you to *like* your neighbor or to have *deep feelings of affection* for your neighbor. He commands you to *love* your neighbor.

But what kind of love?

The Jesus kind of love. Cross-shaped love. The down-on-your-knees-with-a-smelly-towel-in-your-hands sort of love.

When you strip love down to its essence—its core—it's *self-giving*. Yes, it's romantic feelings, but we have to understand that it's so much more.

Ahava

In Hebrew, there's this word *ahava*, and it's a godsend as we learn about love. In English, we have just the one word—*love*—to denote a wide range of positive emotion, but in Hebrew, there's a handful, and each one draws out a specific nuance.

You can *rayah* somebody. That's the love you feel for a friend. In fact, it can be translated "friend" or "companion." In one ancient

Hebrew story, a man says to his girlfriend, “Arise, my *rayah*, my beautiful one, come with me.”¹¹ *Rayah* is when you want to get out of town, spend time together, talk, play, goof off, and just do life shoulder to shoulder. We all need a good *rayah*.

Then there's *dod*. This word is used in the opening line of *Song of Songs*. The woman says, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your *dod* is more delightful than wine.”¹² *Dod* is when you see a woman and you instantly want to make babies with her, when you see a guy and all you can think about is what his skin would feel like up against yours. *Dod* is when keeping your hands in your pockets takes every ounce of strength in your being.

We'll get to *dod* later ...

For now, let's drill down on this word *ahava*. This kind of love is something more. Something deeper, wider, and stronger. It's both of the above—*rayah* and *dod*—plus some. It's a love that goes down to the soul, the deepest part of your being. It's a love that is unbending and unflinching, and that doesn't take no for an answer. It's relentless and implacable.

At the climax of the poem called *Song of Songs*, there's a moving stanza ...

Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for *ahava* is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.

It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
Many waters cannot quench *ahava*;
rivers cannot sweep it away.¹³

Are you picking up on the imagery?

Ahava is like death, like the grave—an unstoppable force that we are powerless to fight off.

Ahava is like a fire out of control, engulfing forests and cities. It cannot be quenched.

And *ahava* is like a tsunami, a tidal wave of fierce, unbridled power bearing down on the world.

The point of the poetry is that *ahava* is strong. Feelings, no matter how vivid, in the long run, are weak. They come and go. But *ahava* has resolve. Staying power. It has that word we all tend to avoid—*commitment*. Over time, it builds up a head of steam, and it breaks through every obstacle. It's a love of the heart, and a love of the will.

My grandparents on my mother's side have been married for sixty years this summer, but a few months ago the doctor found a tumor on my grandma's brain. They rushed her into surgery, and right now she's in recovery. She can barely string together a sentence, but my grandfather is right at her side, 24/7. And here's the crazy part—they are more "in love" than ever before. That's *ahava*.

Ahava is the one and only kind of love that will carry a relationship past the early “deep feelings of affection” and through the whole of life—decades of highs and lows, marriage and family, a career and unemployment, suffering and celebration, sickness and health, and well into the epilogue of life.

You can't build a marriage on deep feelings of affection alone, because they're unreliable. *Flaky* would be an understatement. And you can't build a relationship just on *rayah*. Friendship is vital, but you need an extra spark, something more. *Dod* isn't enough either. No matter how beautiful he or she is, over time, the body will start to wrinkle and age and decay. What happens then? When you still have *decades* of life ahead of you? You need something more.

You need *ahava*.

The Via Dolorosa

I still think about that night so many Septembers ago when I first saw my wife. We were *kids*. I was a freshman in college, eighteen years old. I had no clue what I was getting into. Nobody told me the “deep feelings of affection” fade after a few years. I guess I wasn't listening when the experts said that people who marry young have higher divorce rates.

But even if I had known all that, it wouldn't have changed a thing. I still would have chased her to the world's end. It was feelings that started it all, but we needed something more to make our marriage stick.

Here we are today, with over a decade of marriage under our belts. Three kids, a mortgage, and – thank God – *no* minivan.

And we still love each other.

There are days when we're "in love" – when we *feel* love. When we feel the *déjà vu* of that first night in the park. And then there are days when we are tired, annoyed, and grouchy, and we feel – let's just say – "other" kinds of emotions for one another.

Through all of life, though, we are *learning* to love each other in Jesus' way. Learning the genius of cross-shaped love.

A while back, I spent a month in Jerusalem. I wanted to learn more about the context for Jesus' life, and there's no better place to do that than in the City of Peace. But a month is a long time to be away from home, and the entire time my mind was turned to my wife. Absence was doing its thing, and I was realizing – all over again – what a gift Tammy is to my life. After endless hours together, I still missed her. I still craved her next to me when I nodded off to sleep.

One night I walked the Via Dolorosa – the road Jesus walked to the cross.¹⁴ It's a moving experience to imagine Jesus – *the creator of everything* – covered in blood and open wounds, tripping his way up the hill to Golgotha. And that evening, walking in the Judean heat, the gravity of Jesus' love hit me all over again. *That's* what Jesus means by "love one another." It's a love that feels – deep, raw, and true emotions. And it's a love that *does*.¹⁵ A love that walks through

the crowd of haunting spectators and up to a Roman guard waiting with a hammer and a bag of nails.

Tammy and I have a long way to go, but we're learning about this kind of love. And it's hard, for sure, but it's not all blood, sweat, and tears. The cross is just the beginning of the story. Three days later, the world was rocked by the empty tomb. And resurrection is a beautiful thing. But to get to Easter, Jesus had to go through Good Friday.

The same is true with love. To get to the deep feelings of affection—the romantic love we grow up dreaming about—we have to march down the Via Dolorosa. We have to go the way of the cross.

And the beauty is—we're not the first lover to go down that road.

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