

REDEEMING SEX IN MARRIAGE

HOW the GOSPEL
RESCUES SEX, TRANSFORMS
MARRIAGE, and REVEALS
the GLORY of GOD

SCOTT MEHL



P U B L I S H I N G

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To Lara, my beloved

*Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm,
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
the very flame of the LORD.
(Song of Solomon 8:6)*

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FOREWORD

Writing a book on the biblical view of sex requires special wisdom. The author walks a line between celebrating the beauty of what the Bible discusses and not saying more than is appropriate. This struggle is not new. In the same chapter in which the apostle Paul eloquently describes the beauty of Christlike love between a husband and wife, he also warns of sexual sin, oversexualized talk, and selfish discontent.

Into this milieu steps my friend Scott Mehl—a growing Christ-worshipper, learning husband, passionate father, concerned counselor, and wise shepherd. From our first discussion of this project, I recognized our shared passion to shine the light of the gospel of Christ on this topic. He acknowledged both the challenge of writing this kind of book and its desperate need in the body of Christ. Reading the final work, I see he has taken on the challenge to meet this need well.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, Scott is a brother who has delved into the richness of the Scriptures to mine precious truth regarding sex. He shares how his own view of sex has changed as he has walked with Christ and increasingly understood Christ's love, God's plan, and his own place as a disciple. What he has learned, experienced, and enjoyed, he seeks for us to learn, experience, and enjoy as well.

As a discreet husband, he shares how God has used his study of Scripture to shape his view of marriage and practice of sex. He describes tears and conversations, starts and restarts, as he

implemented what he learned into loving practice. He explains how he and his wife have developed their own love through the physical delights of marriage.

As a passionate father, Scott desires that his own children grow in their relationship with Christ, their understanding of the biblical view of sex, and their wisdom in grappling with the world's challenges. He offers insight into our own efforts to do the same. Whether we are discipling our children, our grandchildren, or others, we will be helped by these pages.

As a concerned counselor, Scott knows the struggles and complications that sex, lust, immaturity, and a scarring sexual past can bring into a marriage. He has heard many couples share their stories with tears. He has helped them to wrestle with the struggles of sex gone wrong. Through hours of interaction with heartbroken husbands and wives, he understands how misplaced focus, misunderstood desires, malformed practice, and unfortunate sexual sin work together to create suffocating circumstances that suck the joy out of marriage. Scott recognizes how this poisonous cocktail wreaks havoc, but he also provides the necessary hope for a better future.

In addition, Scott writes as a wise pastor-shepherd. Just as the Great Shepherd desires the very best for his sheep, Scott desires for every married reader to experience the heights of marital love and its accompanying physical, emotional, and spiritual pleasures. He both understands and appreciates how marriage, sex, Christ's love, and God's glory all uniquely connect as part of worship. What he knows, he seeks to help us to comprehend and apply in our own experience of Christ as individuals and as couples.

I invite you to walk with Scott as he shows you how the gospel rescues sex. With your Bible in hand, you can carefully apply what you read and experience a transformed marriage for the glory of God.

Kevin Carson
Pastor, Professor, Author, Counselor

PREFACE

Another night had ended in frustration and discouragement. No matter how many conversations they'd had or how many books they'd read, Jerome and Naomi simply couldn't seem to get on the same page. Even when things were going well, just one miscommunication had the potential to bring years of disappointment and hurt to the surface. Anger and bitterness would roar into the bedroom like a flash flood, overtaking everything in their path. One time, the resulting argument even woke their kids. How were they supposed to explain the tears running down their faces that late at night? Sex seemed so complicated and demanding. It had never come easy. It left them both wondering, "If sex is a gift from God, why did he give us such a broken and defective gift?"

Holden and Monica had a very different problem. Physical intimacy was an almost daily part of their relationship. They both had high libidos and prioritized being together as often as they could. Yet, for all the sex they were having, there was a strange emptiness to it. They consistently found it physically enjoyable, but each went through seasons of feeling more used than loved. Sex often felt more like a chore (albeit a fun chore) than a way to really connect, and they struggled with a nagging sense of disappointment, no matter how often they were together. They would wonder, "Why did God create us with such strong desires that always leave us unfulfilled, even when we're physically satisfied?"

Xu and Yuka had been married for decades. They had a healthy relationship in many ways, including physically. But when Xu got sick, their sexual relationship went on the back burner. After a yearslong battle, Xu eventually recovered, and he resumed most of his previous activities. One of the lingering physical effects, though, was an almost complete loss of sexual desire. Xu counted it a blessing in one sense, since he was no longer tempted to lust. But this was a real disappointment for Yuka, whose desire for physical intimacy had increased as she aged. Yuka wanted to know, “Why does God allow me to feel this kind of desire when my husband so rarely does? Was his previous desire for me just some physiological urge?”

Luis and Isabel had just returned from their honeymoon and were in a bit of a panic. Leading up to their wedding, they had talked about the problem of sexual expectations, but they had still assumed that things would go much more smoothly than they had. Their time together in the bedroom over their first week of marriage was filled with awkwardness, embarrassment, and divergent desires. They knew not to expect some sort of “Disneyland” experience and had figured it would be more akin to the “county fair” variety of sex. What they got, though, felt like an abandoned arcade with no electricity. Now they were wondering if they had made a mistake in getting married. “Why did God call us together if we’re sexually incompatible? If sex is this much work, what’s the point?”

Why Did God Create Us like This?

Maybe you see yourself in one of these stories. Or maybe your story’s a bit different. Maybe you’ve asked some of these same questions. Maybe different questions have arisen as you’ve navigated your own sexuality and sexual experiences.

When it comes to our sexuality, each of our journeys is filled with its own unique blessings and challenges. But whether we’re young or old, satisfied or frustrated, hurt or healed, we all have

questions about sex and sexuality—whether we’re willing to ask them or not. And the most fundamental (and difficult) questions we have are those that begin with “Why?”

- Why do we have sexed bodies that fit together in perfect complementarity? And why does fitting our bodies together feel so euphoric?
- Why do we experience this strange attraction that moves beyond affinity and feels irresistible? And why does that attraction make us want to be so close to another person that even clothes become an unwanted barrier?
- Why is shame so potent when we reflect on our sexual pasts? And why doesn’t that shame keep us from making more mistakes in the present?
- Why is the world so obsessed with sex? And why does it feel like there’s something they know that we’re missing?
- Why do we naturally long for sexual experiences? And why do our sexual experiences and desires often go so horribly wrong?
- Why did God create us like this?

When it comes to sex, we all have a lot of questions. But *having* a lot of questions isn’t the same as *asking* a lot of questions. If we’re honest, the vast majority of the questions we have about sex and sexuality go unasked, whether out of shame, embarrassment, or just a lack of opportunity.

And when we do ask them, the answers we receive often feel incomplete, clichéd, or pragmatic. We’re taught what to do and what not to do. We’re handed avoidance strategies, accountability groups, or technique manuals, but we hardly ever hear sex discussed in ultimate or eternal ways.

Take, for example, the last question on the list above. If your spouse, your friend, or even your child asked you, “Why did God

create us as sexual beings?” how would you answer? Where would you even start? Reproduction? Marital protection? Is it some kind of cosmic wedding present? Why *did* God create us like this?

In the coming chapters, I want to help you to answer this question. Because the way we answer this most fundamental question about sex will determine whether we’re able to find truly satisfying answers to the myriad of other questions that arise.

Personal and Pastoral Answers

The journey to find satisfying answers on sex isn’t just some academic exercise for me. I’m not primarily an academic—I’m a pastor. I’m a husband and a father. I’m a shepherd of an ethnically and generationally diverse church. And the reason I’ve searched for answers to these questions is to help the people I love most in this world (my wife, my kids, my family, and my church family).

I want to invite you into the riches of what we’ve discovered together over the years. The insights in this book have come from living in community with the Cornerstone West LA church family over the past eighteen years. We’ve wrestled through these questions in various contexts and life stages, discovering together the riches of God’s design for our humanity, including our sexuality. I’ve counseled hundreds of couples on these topics, and I’ve scoured the entirety of God’s Word to understand the nature of sex and its implications for our lives. And everything I have to share has been shaped and re-formed by my wife, Lara, as the theological truths and the biblical principles that this book is going to explore have come to inform our own understanding of marriage, each other, and, ultimately, God.

It’s from this personal and pastoral context that I hope to help you answer the most fundamental questions we all have about sex and sexuality. My prayer is that, in the coming chapters, you will discover both the God-given nature of your sexuality and the

magnitude of Christ's power to redeem it. In addition, I pray this discovery will empower you to live a life of sexual integrity and wholeness like never before. *That* is what this book is about.

Clearing the Table

The kitchen table in my house serves many different functions. It's a homework desk, a craft table, an "inbox" for forms that need to be signed, and a storage place for a seemingly endless amount of random daily items. It gets cleared every night, but by dinnertime the next day, it's always filled with stuff again. So before our family can set the table and enjoy the meal that's been prepared, our kids first have to clear everything else off.

Given the various expectations you may be bringing to a book about sex, we need to start by clearing the table. In that spirit, let me tidy up some potential clutter and confusion before we sit down and dig in. Here are a few things this book is *not*.

First, this book is not an abstract theological reflection on the nature of sexuality. My prayer is that you will find this book both deeply theological and richly practical. We're going to walk through the biblical story, tracing what God has revealed about sex and sexuality from Genesis to Revelation, but as we do this, we're going to continually ask the questions "Why?" and "So what?" Theology is not truly known and understood until it is applied, so we're going to walk the ancient truths of Scripture all the way into our modern world. Even more specifically, we're going to walk these ancient truths all the way into your bedroom, that you may bring freedom, peace, redemption, and holiness to the marriage bed. Too often we have sought to invite God into every aspect of our lives and relationships *except* the bedroom. But we can't shut the bedroom door and leave him out in the hall. *All* of life is his. And all theology *must* be practical theology.

Second, this book is not the latest salvo in the raging sexuality culture war. Questions about sex and sexuality are being passionately debated in seemingly every corner of our society—from kindergarten classrooms to corporate boardrooms and from local parks to NBA arenas. While this book unavoidably exists within the context of those larger debates, my goal is not to score points or take shots amid the raging culture war. For Christians who are committed to following Jesus and developing a biblical sexual ethic, I simply want to help us formulate a *positive* biblical understanding of the nature of sex and sexuality in order to empower our godward obedience, maximize our God-centered joy, and, ultimately, pursue God’s glory.

Third, this book is not a manual of sexual tips and techniques. Far too many Christian books on the topic of sex devolve into Christianized how-to manuals for “great sex.” Although exciting diagrams and edgy practical advice may be titillating, my experience is that they prove to be less than helpful for most couples. While the second half of this book will be immanently practical, the principles we’ll explore will be applicable to couples across the spectrums of experience, conscience, and preference. Ultimately, I hope to help couples explore and discover *each other* rather than to impose some arbitrary sexual ideal. My goal is for you to know and love both God and your spouse more deeply. The truth is, you will probably have better, more enjoyable sex as a result. But that is a happy by-product of my writing, not the primary goal.

Fourth, this book is not a replacement for the healing that comes through wise friendships. I don’t know the details of your sexual past. But chances are it’s not great. It may be littered with sexual sin, or you may have been the victim of sexual harassment, mistreatment, or abuse. My prayer is that this book might be a helpful resource as you regain a biblical understanding of God’s design for sex. However, if you’ve been sexually mistreated or abused, there’s no modern

book that can provide what you need. I encourage you to talk with a trusted friend in your local church about what happened to you. Seek your pastor's guidance regarding the best place to find help and healing. My heart breaks for you. But, as I hope the coming chapters will show, I also know there is hope for you. Healing is possible.

Having cleared some clutter, we can now begin to set the table in preparation for the meal ahead. As we do, I'd encourage you and your spouse to read this book together. Trying to grow in your sexual relationship by yourself would be like trying to ride a bicycle with only one wheel. This process requires two by design. So, before we begin, ask your spouse if they'll join you on this journey.

And do me—and yourself—a favor by not skipping over the more theological part 1. I'll help you get practical in part 2, but you'll miss out on the most glorious aspects of physical intimacy if you don't first take the time to build a solid theological foundation. There are truths we need to explore. There are passages we need to unpack. There are big, fundamental questions we need to answer—questions like “Why *did* God create us like this?”

Reflection Questions

1. Where are the tension points in your sexual relationship with your spouse?
2. What questions do you have about sex that you don't normally ask—or have maybe never asked?
3. What are you hoping to gain from reading this book?

Part One

THE THEOLOGY OF SEX

1

THE PURPOSE OF SEX

As a young adult with a regrettably checkered sexual path, I found sexuality simultaneously pleasurable and confusing. Maybe you can relate. It wasn't the mechanics of sexual activity that confused me—it was those pesky “why” questions.

Why is this desire so strong?

And why do I have so much trouble controlling it?

Why do I have to wait for marriage?

Why do God's rules seem so restrictive?

I felt like I was wandering through a dim, foggy forest—the type of place where, every time you think you've gotten your bearings, a few steps are all it takes to reveal that you are, in fact, still completely lost. I needed a map and a compass. I needed something to make sense of the powerful urges, overwhelming emotions, and unique physical sensations that made up my sexuality. But even the best Christian resources I found failed to make things much clearer.

The older I got, the more questions I had. Eventually, I got married, but not even that lifted the fog. Neither my time with my wife nor the advice we received from numerous Christian books and conferences helped to clarify what sex was for or why God had created it. I mean, I was aware of the role it played in reproduction,

but there was a power and a depth to sex for which I didn't have a category. To be honest, even after graduating seminary and becoming a full-time pastor, I was still confused about why God had created sexuality and how to glorify him with it.

Don't get me wrong—I knew the rules. Like most Christians, I had been thoroughly educated about what sex *wasn't*. The guidelines weren't hard to understand. And I had accountability groups and internet software to help me to follow them. But all the rules in the world couldn't bring me any closer to understanding why God had created this aspect of my humanity or how to truly honor him and my wife in it.

Imagine someone trying to describe the *Mona Lisa* by listing all the things it is not. We could play that game for hours, and I would still have no idea what the *Mona Lisa is*, let alone appreciate the genius of Leonardo da Vinci revealed through it. Yet I'm afraid that is exactly what the church has done with sex. We've spent so much time and energy clarifying what sex is *not* that we've lost the biblical vision of what it *is* and what God created it for. An immeasurable amount of ink has been spilled reiterating the following:

- Sex is *not* to be experienced with someone who is not your spouse.
- Sex is *not* to be experienced with someone else of the same sex.
- Sex is *not* to be experienced alone or with a stranger on a screen.

But even if you check all three of these boxes, you are still far from knowing how and why sex *should* be experienced.

As we'll explore in the coming chapters, God created sex to be a mystery and an adventure. In Christ, it is a journey of hope-filled restoration. Equipped with the biblical vision of sexuality and the sexual redemption available through the gospel, we find that the

fog of confusion clears and that the sun breaks through the densely packed leaves, revealing a captivatingly beautiful path forward.

But without such clarity, we will remain disoriented and confused. And I'm afraid that's the state in which most Christians find themselves. For many of us, sex is an area of life characterized not by redemption and clarity but instead by shame and confusion. And this confusion is wreaking havoc on our lives and our churches.

Confusion Reigns

Without clarity regarding God's design for sex and sexuality, we are left to cobble together our understanding from a smorgasbord of unreliable sources. This creates a whole host of problems. All our sexual struggles are magnified by our misunderstandings about sex. And all our sexual activities are hindered by these same misunderstandings. Confusion reigns, and it is leaving devastation in its wake.

Some of these devastating effects are obvious. The widespread use of pornography, even among those in the church, is fueled by this confusion. So are many of the ways Christians are increasingly compelled by arguments from the LGBTQ+ movement. Instances of sexual abuse in the church, and efforts to cover it up, are also more common when we don't have a theologically rich and biblically faithful understanding of God's design and purpose for sex.

But I'm afraid the effects of our confusion are also felt in much more subtle, but no less devastating, ways. The husband's battle with masturbation is rendered powerless because he thinks of sex as a physical need. The elderly couple's marriage slowly grows distant because they believe sex is unimportant. The newlyweds' times of intimacy are filled with anxiety because the young bride was taught that she could never say no. The wife with a disability, now unable to have sex, is consumed with sadness because she has imbibed the message that sex is the ultimate human experience.

The middle-aged man demands sex from his sick wife in order to “keep him from lust.”

We justify far too much sexual activity that is selfish, manipulative, or even abusive because we are confused about sex. Far too many feelings of guilt, shame, dirtiness, and hopelessness are fueled by this same confusion. Confusion reigns, and it is a tyrant.

A Culture of Confusion

Unfortunately, this confusion has only been compounded by many of the messages (and messengers) that have dominated evangelical culture over the last few decades. We’ve seen the widespread deconstruction of “purity culture” as its mixed messages and false hopes have been exposed. We’ve seen the moral failures of far too many celebrity pastors who once presented themselves as sex and dating experts. We’ve seen secret sexual abuse uncovered at shocking rates. Things seem to be getting more confusing, not less.

Even when local churches are sources of healthy biblical teaching, the people in those churches are often more influenced by “evangelical” publishers than by their own pastors. In their book *The Great Sex Rescue*, Sheila Wray Gregoire, Rebecca Gregoire Lindenbach, and Joanna Sawatsky analyze their survey of thousands of Christian women. Reflecting on the survey, they write, “The good news is that many, many ministry leaders are doing marriage and sex teaching well. The majority of women who reported hearing the harmful messages about sex . . . did not hear them at church. . . . But there’s still some bad news: they were getting the messages from evangelical resources and books. . . . [Pastors,] the resources your parishioners are accessing are undermining your work right under your nose.”¹

1. Sheila Wray Gregoire, Rebecca Gregoire Lindenbach, and Joanna Sawatsky, *The Great Sex Rescue: The Lies You’ve Been Taught and How to Recover What God Intended* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021), 237.

And in the era of online preachers and Christian social media influencers, that undermining has only become more prevalent. Christians are simultaneously being taught that sex is a universal physical need and that women shouldn't expect to enjoy it. They're being taught both that men can't control themselves and that mere physical attraction is unambiguously sinful. Indeed, we're not just confused—we're living in a culture of confusion. The culture of the world may have lost its mind regarding sex and sexuality, but the culture of the church has often failed to provide a sane, alternative vision. And without a clear, biblically faithful, theological vision of sex, the confusion in our churches will only continue to worsen.

Order Out of Chaos

It's in the context of this confusion that I invite you to meditate with me on what God himself has revealed about the nature and purpose of sex. Our God is a God who brings order out of chaos—clarity out of confusion. And in a world that has seemingly *always* been confused about the nature and purpose of sex, he has spoken timeless words of grace and truth—words that can cut through the fog to reveal something concrete, compelling, and beautiful.

But clarity doesn't always come quickly or easily. If we want to truly understand God's purpose for sex, we need to sit patiently at his feet and allow him to tell us—on his terms, in his way. You see, sex isn't simple to understand, nor is it simple to explain. It is richer than we could ever imagine. We will never plumb the depths of love and sex this side of heaven. Trying to oversimplify it makes things only more confusing, not less. So my prayer is that you will patiently walk with me through the theological vision of sex, resisting the temptation to flip forward to the practical chapters. Like reading chapters 4–6 of Ephesians without reading chapters 1–3 first, trying to apply the biblical principles for sex without first wrestling with the

gospel-infused theology behind them will always leave us frustrated, discouraged, and more confused.

Contrary to popular belief, God's revelation regarding sex includes more than just rules and commandments. He has done far more than tell us what to do and what not to do. If we listen carefully and commit to thinking deeply, we will find that God has in fact given us all we need to know about sex (see 2 Peter 1:3). He has affirmed the significance of our identities as sexual image bearers. He has explained the implications of our sexed bodies. He has shown us the reasons behind sex's power and intensity. He has revealed the purpose of sex.

So, what is the purpose of sex? Why *did* God create us like this? While no simple answer will be able to encapsulate all that sex is and all that God reveals through it, we can begin by summarizing what we find in Scripture. But even a summary answer can't be contained in one simple sentence. So, instead of asking, "What is the purpose of sex?" maybe we should be asking, "What are the *purposes* of sex?"

In his Word, God reveals five fundamental purposes of sex.

1. Sex is a means of covenantal union.
2. Sex is a means of mutual pleasure.
3. Sex is an expression of marital love.
4. Sex can bring new life.
5. Sex is a shadow of our relationship with Christ, as his church.

Each of these five purposes is a part of God's fundamental design for sex. But there are differences in how each one functions. The first three purposes are what I call *essential* purposes. Purpose number four is the *blessed* purpose. And purpose number five is the *transcendent* purpose of sex.

The Purpose of Sex

Essential	Blessed	Transcendent
covenantal union	new life	shadow of our relationship with Christ, as his church
mutual pleasure		
expression of marital love		

The three *essential*² purposes of sex are *always* necessary for God-glorifying sex. God designed sex to always function as a means of covenantal union, a means of mutual pleasure, and an expression of marital love. If any one of these purposes is missing, sexual activity cannot honor God or accurately reflect his design.

The *blessed*³ purpose of sex is a bit different. Childbearing is a fundamental part of God’s beautiful and mysterious design for sex. In the connection between procreation and sex, God has revealed deep and magnificent truths about the nature of intimacy, family, and creation. But to say sex that doesn’t result in new life doesn’t glorify God would be going too far. New life is a special blessing that, at times, naturally and miraculously proceeds from sex.

But beneath all four of these purposes lies the one *transcendent*⁴ purpose of sex. The way in which sex points to the relationship between Christ and the church is glorious, mysterious, and, unfortunately, largely unfamiliar to many of us. We’ll unpack this more later. But for now let me just introduce this simple yet potentially

2. You could also call these the *relational* purposes of sex. I use the term *essential* here to highlight that all of these purposes are necessary for any sexual activity to honor God.

3. You could also call this the *procreational* purpose of sex. I use the term *blessed* here to highlight the unique way this purpose functions as a blessing, one that may or may not be present in any specific instance of sexual activity.

4. You could also call this the *eternal* purpose of sex. I use the term *transcendent* here to highlight the distinction between this overarching purpose and the four other purposes mentioned.

uncomfortable concept and allow you to wrestle with it as we move forward: sex is about God.

There's so much more to say, but I'm going to save it for the pages ahead. We'll unpack the first four of these purposes in chapter 2 and then explore the transcendent purpose of sex in depth in chapter 3. My hope is that all five of these purposes will come alive to you as we contemplate the various biblical narratives, instructions, and poems that God uses to convey the fullness of his design.

However, while understanding God's design for sex will help to address our confusion, definitions alone can't bring the sexual healing and freedom we long for. As we all know from experience, confusion isn't our only problem.

Paradise Lost . . . and Found

Our sexuality isn't just confused—it's also broken. *We* are broken. Not hopelessly so, but genuinely broken nonetheless. Just like every other aspect of our humanity, our sexuality has been ruined by the sin of both ourselves and others. And no other aspect of our humanity experiences that ruin more intensely than our sexuality.

Sex is uniquely powerful. It produces intense euphoria that is unmatched by any other human experience, but it is also capable of producing intense pain. It's not too much to assert that, in our sexuality, we may experience a taste of both heaven and hell.

Sexual harassment, coercion, unwanted exposure, and abuse leave particularly deep wounds. The darkness produced by sexual suffering can feel oppressive. Your first sexual experience may have occurred not willingly but at the insistence of another—whether it was an unsolicited pornographic pop-up ad or the attack of an abuser. Or you may have endured any number of other unwanted sexual encounters—whether it was the crude joke of a coworker or a coercive date.

Suffering is magnified when it touches our sexuality. This is why being sexually harassed is different from being bullied. This is why rape is different from other forms of physical assault. In chapter 5, we will explore how the gospel's restorative power brings redemption to even our most tragic sexual suffering, but for now I simply want you to hear this: God knows, he cares, and he is doing a work of redemption in you. He is healing that which has been broken.

Remember your word to your servant,
in which you have made me hope.
This is my comfort in my affliction,
that your promise gives me life. (Ps. 119:49–50)

Our own sexual sin also carries a uniquely destructive force. Indulging in pornography, sleeping with a date, or cheating on a spouse all lead to outsized consequences. Our seared consciences promise it won't be that big of a deal, but they always lie. The truth is, sexual sin *always* damages and *never* satisfies.

You may have made regrettable sexual choices. You may be making regrettable choices right now. You may be haunted by your past, or you may be stuck fantasizing about some idealistic future. You may have been a manipulator or even an abuser.

A haunting sense of sexual guilt is an all-too-common Christian experience. Sexual experiences have a way of sticking in our minds, and the very experiences we long to forget are often the memories we most indelibly retain. Again, we'll come back to the power of God's sexual redemption in chapter 5, but for now I just want you to hear this: God knows, he forgives, and he is doing a work of redemption in you. When you repent, he meets you with grace and mercy. He is healing that which has been broken.

Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality . . .

will inherit the kingdom of God. And such *were* some of you. But *you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.* (1 Cor. 6:9–11)

God doesn't just define sex for us—he also redeems it. In the tragedy of our suffering and the failure of our sin, God is redeeming our sexuality. The biblical story is a saga of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. And as God's image bearers, created male and female to glorify him, we have a powerful story of sexual creation, sexual fall, sexual redemption, and sexual restoration. It is a story of order being brought out of chaos.

Returning to the Garden

When you think of order being brought out of chaos, what do you picture? I have a bit of an engineering mind, so I picture order as a straightened-up desk, a color-coded Excel sheet, or a city with consistently parallel and perpendicular streets. Order is something that is contained and predictable.

But that is not what God's "order" usually looks like. God's order involves the impossible complexity and overwhelming beauty of creation. His order includes the expanse of the universe, the complexity of the human brain, and the innumerable colors of the sunset after a storm. He knows how many grains of sand are on the beach, but he does not arrange them neatly in a row. They come and go; they shift and move constantly. Their movement is unpredictable to us, but it is not chaotic. God's order looks less like a city and more like, well, a garden. This is why even the new Jerusalem is filled not with concrete and buildings but with trees and a river (see Rev. 21:22–22:4).

To God, *ordered* is not the same as *predictable*. *Ordered* is not the same as *fully comprehensible*. Many of the things that God, in

his infinite glory, has ordered cannot merely be defined—they must be considered and experienced. Their richness and complexity defy simple explanation. Which is why God tends to reveal truth about the most rich and complex aspects of his world not through logical prose but through poetry. The mind-blowing realities of creation are revealed to us in the first chapter of Genesis using poetic language. The heart-rending realities of suffering and lament are revealed to us through the poetry of the Psalms. And the soul-stirring depths of sex are revealed to us through the poem to end all poems: the Song of Songs. Or, as it is sometimes called, *The Song*.⁵

The Song is not just a poem (or a collection of poems); it is a collection of poems filled with garden imagery. It is a poetic meditation on sex as it was in the garden of Eden: sex that is *ordered* but not necessarily *orderly*; sex that is beautiful, passionate, unpredictable, and indescribable. The Song is a call to return to the garden. It is a gentle and compelling invitation by the God of the universe to behold the glories of one of the most intimate and powerful aspects of our humanity. And by this, God intimately reveals a powerful aspect of himself.

Similarly, I hope that this book will serve as an invitation as we explore the riches of the Song, and the entire Bible, together. No matter your past—no matter what you’ve seen, thought, experienced, or done—your Savior, your Beloved, wants to usher you back into the garden. He wants to take you by the hand and clear up your confusion, heal your brokenness, affirm your redemption, and remind you of your ultimate hope.

And from the vantage point of the garden, God wants to show you the sun-soaked, captivatingly beautiful path forward. He wants to reveal to you the richness and the intimacy of sex and show you

5. I’ve gleaned both this helpful abbreviation and the overall structure of Song of Songs, as explained in the next paragraph, from Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

what sex was designed to reveal about him. God is inviting you to meditate on the nature and purpose of sex, because in it we come to better understand the nature of God himself.

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:16–17)

Reflection Questions

1. What messages in the world or in the church regarding sex have been most confusing to you?
2. In light of the sexual suffering and sexual sin in your past, how do you feel about the assertion that God is healing what is broken in you?
3. Who in your church family could you talk to about the complexities of your sexual past as you read through this book?
4. What is your initial impression of the five fundamental purposes of sex introduced in this chapter?