

JOSHUA RYAN BUTLER



BEAUTIFUL UNION

HOW GOD'S VISION FOR SEX
POINTS US TO THE GOOD,
UNLOCKS THE TRUE, AND (SORT OF)
EXPLAINS EVERYTHING



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MULTNOMAH

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Dearly Beloved,

I want to welcome you to these pages. Yes, *you*. Whether you're single or married, the cynic or the romantic, happily in love or heartbroken and lonely, or somewhere in between. You are welcome here. This book is for you.

You might be wrestling with desire or reeling from the impact of divorce, married in bliss or married and barely hanging on, loving your body or feeling trapped inside it, drowning in five kids or isolated in an apartment by yourself. You might be a twitterpated teenager, a widow in grief, or haunted by the one who got away. I'm so glad you're here; this book is for you too.

Perhaps sex and romance are a source of pain, frustration, confusion, or anger. The abuser who inflicted himself upon you like a storm and whose memory still haunts you today, the attractions that got you called names and kicked out of your home, the addiction wrapped in secrecy and shame that you've tried to break but just can't shake, the stillborn child whose anniversary all these years later still brings you to tears. I'm for you; this book is for you too.

We are gathered here today, invited by Christ to discover ourselves as his beloved.

While I may not know you, I do expect I know some things about you—things that we share. I expect your life has been personally impacted by many of the things we'll discuss. I expect that you know, deep down, in your very flesh and bone that *you were made for more*. More than an aimless sexual searching. More than a dead-end marriage. More than *whatever* you've endured. *You were made for more.*

As we discuss the grand narrative that is above and under and behind and all through each of our stories, I expect you'll feel something come alive within you. Something big. Something beautiful.

So let me say right up front what I hope comes clearly through on every page of this book: *you are loved*. By God. By me. Everything—*everything* starts with that. Ends with that too.

I'm glad you're here. And it's my prayer that by the end of this book, whether we agree about everything or not, *you'll* be glad you've been here too.

With love in Christ,

Josh

INTRODUCTION

Of Trampolines and Icons

“**M**y parents got a trampoline!” Elijah excitedly exclaimed. It was second grade, and I was visiting my best friend’s new home for the first time. “No way!” I responded. “Let’s go see it.”

I followed his lead, as we searched through bedrooms, opened closet doors, and looked behind living room couches. We were on the hunt for any sign of that trampoline’s blue matted borders, short stubby legs, and black interior net. I *loved* trampolines. I was thrilled at the prospect of taking flight to new heights on one for grownups.

“Where is it?” I asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, have you seen it?”

“No, not yet.”

My confusion must have shown. “Well, if you haven’t seen it, how do you know it’s here?”

Elijah explained that his new bedroom was located directly beneath his parents’ bedroom.

“Sometimes at night,” he said, “my parents pull out the trampoline. I can hear them bouncing around on it . . .”



This is a book about that trampoline. We never did find it. Elijah was convinced his parents packed it up each night, after using it so enthusiastically. Somehow they managed to store it away, hidden. We remained enchanted by the mystery.

In the years to come, however, this mystery cleared up. We grew older, and it dawned upon us what the bouncing above his bedroom was all about. We discovered that while not strictly a piece of playground equipment, *yes*, the secret Elijah's parents had hidden in their bedroom was fun. (And *yes*, it can help you take flight, in a manner of speaking.)

Yet there is still a hiddenness, a mystery surrounding sex, that can point us to God in surprising and very life-giving ways. I've discovered in my life—as a Christian, a husband, a father, and a pastor—that what was hidden in the bedroom upstairs is a signpost of greater things. Sex tells us something. It shows us humans where we've come from and where we're going. In its mystery can be glimpsed the origin of our existence, the glory of our redemption, and the destiny of our world. Its mystery speaks to realities greater than Elijah and I as kids ever could have imagined.

Sex as Icon

Beautiful may not be the first word that comes to mind when you think of sex. Particularly the Christian vision for sex. *Backward. Bigoted. Outdated. Oppressive. Prudish. Puritanical*. These words are what many think of the traditional Christian sexual ethic today.¹ The faithful might feel they *have to* follow it, but nobody really *wants* to. Frail devotion to a list of don'ts, can'ts, and won'ts is driven by duty, not desire. And the God who made such a laundry list of buzzkill rules ain't pretty.

God might seem to you like a cosmic killjoy or a stern lecturer disappointed with your honest desires or shameful past. How could such a God care much about your regret after an unsatisfying one-night stand or your heartbreak over unrequited love? How could such a God really care about the dilemma of that unplanned pregnancy or your sobbing on the floor in the wake of a

third miscarriage? What about the bland or painful sex in an unaffectionate marriage or the frustration of a “dead bedroom”?

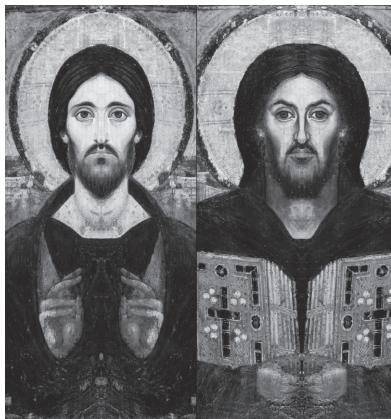
Beautiful may not be the first word that comes to mind. But what if I told you it can be? That it even *should* be? What if I told you that, in light of the Christian gospel, your understanding of your body and of sexuality can be driven by beauty? That’s the goal of this book: to restore the beauty of the Christian sexual ethic. And the first step is to learn to look *through* it to greater things.

At vs. Through

Sex is iconic. It’s designed to point to greater things. That’s the central thesis of this book. What do I mean by “icon”? Historically, icons were not meant to be looked *at*, so much as to be looked *through*. They pointed to something beyond themselves.

Take *Christ Pantocrator*, for example, one of the most famous icons in church history.² At first glance, Jesus’s face looks strange. His features are contorted; the two halves don’t match. The left side of Jesus’s face boasts the soft look of a shepherd: welcoming and peaceful, with a hand outstretched in the sign of blessing. The right side holds the piercing gaze of a judge: with a stern eye, pursed lips, and a raised eyebrow, holding the book of the Gospels.





The contrast becomes even more explicit in this second image, where someone has taken each half and mirrored it into a whole. *What's going on here? Did the artist make a mistake?* we wonder. *Was Jesus unable to "hold his pose"?* But the contrast between these two "sides" of Jesus is intentional, and we *lose* something when they lose their difference.

The icon is not intended to be a literal depiction of Jesus, like an Instagram selfie showing the Savior's snazzy new haircut to the masses or a photo ID to give the TSA security agent. Rather, it's a window into a greater reality. It is a picture of something larger.

Jesus holds *love* and *justice* perfectly together. Mercy and righteousness are inseparably intertwined in his identity, bound together in union through the excellency of his character and the perfection of his person. In other words, don't look *at* the icon as a photographic replica but *through* it as a window into the nature of the One it points to.

Similarly, God has designed sex to point beyond itself to greater things. In Ephesians 5:32, the apostle Paul says sexual union is a "profound" mystery because "it refers to Christ and the church." *Whoa!* That's some heavy-duty symbolism. Sex is an icon of much larger things, including the mystery of our salvation. (We'll explore how in chapter 1.)

At first glance, a man and woman joined together at the hip can seem clumsy and contorted (like those two halves of Jesus's

face). We might wonder whether the Artist made a mistake, carving a sculpture with conflicting halves that don't quite match. Yet properly understood, sexual union is like stained glass in a cathedral: intended to give us a lens into the transcendent, and a glorious glimpse into the heart of God.

A Mega Mystery

Let's go back to that Ephesians passage. When Paul says sex is a great mystery, the phrase he uses in Greek is *mega mysterion*—literally, a “mega mystery.” That's how big this mystery is; it's *mega*.

Yet while our culture has put sex in a “mega” place, it has stripped it of its mystery. As my friend Elijah and I grew older, we entered a pornified culture where everything was sexualized. Today we see this everywhere: from steamy scenes on Netflix to music videos on YouTube; from sidebar ads on Facebook to children's toys at Target; from profile pics on Tinder to racy selfies on Instagram. As everyone knows, skin sells.

We're more exposed to images of sex than ever, yet ironically—perhaps because of this—more out of touch with its deeper meaning. We've been trained by our culture to look at sex but not to look through it.

For many, sex has been reduced to nothing more than the raw, physical act. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, one kid eloquently observed how sex has simply become “a piece of body touching another piece of body—just as existentially meaningless as kissing.”³ Two bodies bouncing up against each other—meat on meat, desire on desire—nothing more. We're in danger of becoming pornified carnivores simply seeking to devour one another.

This is a smaller vision of sex, not a bigger one.

The mystery has been lost because sex no longer speaks to a greater reality in which we're found. Yet sex is a mega mystery, Paul reminds us, because it points to greater things.

Our goal is to restore the icon. We're out to wipe the dust off and let the vibrant colors beneath shine brilliantly once more.

Restoration can take some work, as any art enthusiast will tell you, but it's worth it when you uncover the treasure and see the craft of the Artist clearly again.

As we undertake this restoration project, I want to invite you to reclaim your childhood curiosity again. To become like Elijah and me all those years ago, out to search the nooks and crannies of our heavenly Father's earthly home, curious about the transcendent mysteries above that shape our terrestrial life below. For then as now, the secret of the universe is hidden just above the trampoline in your parents' bedroom.

So let's open our imaginations again to knowing what we don't know and to the possibility that God's vision just might be bigger and more beautiful than we ever dared dream.

The Game Plan

Here's the game plan. We'll start by looking at "The Beauty of Sex" (chapters 1–5), exploring not only what God has to say about sex but what sex is designed to say about God. I hope to convince you that God's vision is *way* more beautiful and compelling than anything else our culture has on offer. All would-be contenders are left in the dust.

Next, we'll move to "When God Says No" (chapters 6–10), seeing how the beauty of God's vision helps explain why some things are off-limits. We won't shy away from the tough topics in this book. We'll talk directly about divorce, premarital sex, adultery, gay sex, pornography, abortion, and more. If these are part of your story, however, take comfort: Jesus came not to beat you up over your past but to fight for your future. He's not out to imprison you in guilt or shame but to liberate you for his kingdom. Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save it, and to draw you—wherever you may be coming from—into union with him forever.

Sex can be an icon or an idol, either a window we look through to get a glimpse of the glory and goodness of God, or a mirror that reflects our selfishness, brokenness, and destruction.

The point of exposing the idols is to restore us as icons.

Finally, in “A Greater Vision” (chapters 11–15), we’ll expand the theological foundations that support the beautiful vision of the earlier chapters.

And what, at the end of our exploring, shall we discover? That God is love. The love of God is the endgame of this book, for it is what the icon points to. God designed sex to reveal his love in technicolor.

So, let’s pull back the veil on the icon. Like gazing through *Christ Pantocrator*, our ultimate goal is a fresh vision of Jesus. For in the radiant light of Christ, sex becomes a window into something greater, a catalyst that can lift our gaze to the heart of the gospel and the hope of the world, like a springboard we can launch from to take flight into the heavens and ascend into the mysteries of God . . .

Like a trampoline.

PART I

THE BEAUTY

OF SEX

*Rediscovering the Goodness of
Embodied Life and Love*

SEX AS SALVATION

I used to look to sex for salvation. I wanted it to liberate me from loneliness, to find freedom in the arms of another. But the search failed. My college sweetheart dumped me. I found a rebound to feel better about myself—and hurt her in the process. I then fell head-over-heels for the “girl of my dreams” (at the time) and spent the next five years pining after this friend who didn’t feel the same.

I wanted to feel wanted, yet wound up alone.

Our culture looks to sex for salvation too. We want romance to free us from solitary confinement, to deliver us into a welcome embrace. “A nobody can become a somebody,” the myth goes, “if you just find the right person.” Yet the search often leads to sadness. The lover lets you down. The rapturous embrace starts to suffocate. The emotional high crashes and burns.

Idolizing sex results in slavery. You can chart up your long list of ex-lovers and join Taylor Swift in telling the newest applicant, “I’ve got a blank space, I’ll write your name.” You can find yourself in the Egypt of a new romantic wasteland, more cynical and isolated than when you first began. Yet I’ve discovered a crucial corrective in the gospel that can lead us out into true freedom . . .

Sex wasn't designed to *be* your salvation but to point you to the One who is.

Union with Christ

Sex is an icon of Christ and the church. In Ephesians 5, a “hall of fame” marriage passage, the apostle Paul proclaims:

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and [cleave] to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.¹

Now, the context here is marriage. “Leave and cleave” is marriage language (we’ll look at this in a future chapter), and the surrounding verses are all about husbands and wives, not hook-up culture. Yet that second part, about *the two becoming one flesh*, is consummation language that refers to the union of husband and wife.²

Paul says *both* are about Christ and the church.

This should be shocking! It’s not only the giving of your vows at the altar but what happens in the honeymoon suite after, that speaks to the life you were made for with God. A husband and wife’s life of faithful love is designed to point to greater things, but *so is their sexual union!* We’ll get to marriage soon enough in this book, but let’s start with this gospel bombshell: Sex is an icon of salvation.

How? I’d suggest the language of generosity and hospitality can help us out.

Generosity and Hospitality

Generosity and hospitality are both embodied in the sexual act. Think about it. Generosity involves giving extravagantly to someone. You give the best you’ve got to give, lavishly pouring out your time, energy, or money. At a deeper level, generosity is

a giving of not just your resources but your very *self*. And what deeper form of self-giving is there than sexual union where, particularly for the husband, he pours out his very presence not only *upon* but *within* his wife?

Hospitality, on the other hand, involves receiving the life of the other. You prepare a space for the guest to enter your home, welcoming them warmly into your circle of intimacy, to share your dwelling place with you. Here again, what deeper form of hospitality is there than sexual union where, particularly for the wife, she welcomes her husband into the sanctuary of her very self?

Giving and receiving are at the heart of sex.

Now, obviously, a man and woman both give to each other and receive from each other in the sexual act. Sex is mutual self-giving. Yet, on closer inspection, there is a distinction between the male and female sides of the equation.

The Bible makes this distinction explicit. The most frequent Hebrew phrase for sex is, literally, “he went into her” (*wayyabo eleha*). Translations often soften this for modern ears, saying he “made love to her,” or they “slept together.” But the Bible is less prudish than we are, using more graphic language to describe what happens in the honeymoon tent.

One Sunday morning, I learned how graphic this language can be. My friend Karen was publicly reading Scripture for our church service, and we’d recently switched to a more literal Bible translation. We were in Genesis 29, where Jacob marries Leah and Rachel, and the phrase *wayyabo eleha* shows up (we discovered) a lot! Karen has, you might say, a “Rated G” personality: very prim, proper, and polite. We all saw her cheeks turn bright red, with a lot of awkward pauses, as she had to continually read the phrase “and Jacob *went into her*” over and over again. After that Sunday, we went back to a less wooden translation, and laughed a lot with poor Karen.

The Hebrew language is onto something, however: there’s a distinction between the male and female roles in sexual union. Each brings something unique to the fusing of two bodies as one, and this distinction is iconic. On that honeymoon in Cabo, the

groom goes into his bride. He is not only *with* his beloved but *within* his beloved. He enters the sanctuary of his spouse, where he pours out his deepest presence and bestows an offering, a gift, a sign of his pilgrimage, that has potential to grow within her into new life.

This is a picture of the gospel. Christ arrives in salvation to be not only *with* his church but *within* his church. Christ gives himself to his beloved with extravagant generosity, showering his love upon us, and imparting his very presence within us. Christ penetrates his church with the generative seed of his Word and the life-giving presence of his Spirit, which takes root within her and grows to bring new life into the world.

Inversely, back in the wedding suite, the bride embraces her most intimate guest on the threshold of her dwelling place and welcomes him into the sanctuary of her very self. She gladly receives the warmth of his presence and accepts the sacrificial offering he bestows upon the altar within her Most Holy Place.³

Similarly, the church embraces Christ in salvation, celebrating his arrival with joy and delight. She has prepared and made herself ready, anticipating his advent in eager anticipation. She welcomes him into the most vulnerable place of her being, lavishing herself upon him with extravagant hospitality. She receives his generous gift within her—the seed of his Word and presence of his Spirit—partnering with him to bring children of God into the world.

Their union brings forth new creation.

Body Image

We have a lot of euphemisms for sex in our culture. *Swiping right*. *Netflix and chill*. *Between the sheets*. The Bible has one too: *one flesh*. This is the most significant shorthand for sex in Scripture. Jesus uses it. Paul does too. And when they do, they're alluding to Genesis 2, the creation story of Adam and Eve (we'll look at this later). Ephesians 5 says this euphemism is ultimately about Christ and the church.

One flesh is a body image. It's unabashedly physical. Our cultural euphemisms, in contrast, speak *around* sex. *Swiping right* refers to how you meet. *Netflix and chill* to setting the ambience. *Between the sheets* to where the action takes place. Yet *one flesh* zeroes in much more directly on the center of sex itself: bodily union. Unlike that blushing sex talk your parents gave you in junior high, mumbling something about "birds and bees," there's nothing sheepish here. *One flesh* is about the merging of two separate bodies into one.⁴

This body image is a sign of salvation. God has invested it with sacred meaning. This contravenes the chorus of a recent pop song, which describes sex as forming "a monster with two heads."⁵ That depicts sex as a monstrosity, where conjugal union forms a strange aberration of a creature, with parts not meant to fit together but somehow making it work.

God's vision, however, is much more like that classic song by the Postal Service, "Such Great Heights," where Ben Gibbard croons that God made us "into corresponding shapes like puzzle pieces from the clay." Our Creator has designed us, majestically and intentionally, with the ability to come together as one.

When we do, it points to something greater. The union of Christ and the church loads sexual union with meaning and power, as something beautiful and holy. Do we treat it with that reverence and awe? Or cavalierly as a personal plaything?

Whether or not you ever have sex (we'll talk about singleness in a moment, which is highly revered in the Bible), the one-flesh nature of our species' design is a sign of something much more majestic: You were made to be united with God.

Even our sexual desire can point to the gospel. As Preston and Jackie Hill-Perry observe, husbands are to love their wives "as Christ loved the church" (Ephesians 5:25):

[Christ] had to do something in order for the church to respond. I think, in the same way, the men have to show this love and this affection for the woman to respond. . . . Christ didn't need anything to love, to feel love, to feel emotional

for his bride. . . . Husbands are wired like that; we don't need you to do anything. I come in the room, I come in the house, and I see you and I want you.⁶

A husband's unprovoked desire is a sign of Christ's pre-existing affection for his bride. Christ wanted to be with us—before we wanted to be with him—and took the first step in movement toward union.

This doesn't mean women are *less* sexual than men, but rather that their sexual desire tends to work *differently* than men. To borrow language from Dr. Emily Nagoski, men's sexual desire tends to be more *spontaneous*, while women's tends to be more *responsive*.⁷ Meaning, husbands generally don't need much prodding to be "in the mood." (While individual experiences vary, on average men initiate sex more often than women.)⁸ Wives, on the other hand, usually prefer to be romanced toward the bedroom.

Why did God make it this way? Christian sex blogger Sheila Gregoire has a theory, observing how men can often climax quickly through intercourse alone, while women generally require foreplay and external stimulation:

That means for women to feel pleasure, men have to slow down and think about their wives. Sex is best when it isn't just "animal" style, where you simply have intercourse with no foreplay, because that won't feel good for her. Men have to learn to be unselfish if sex is going to work well for both partners. . . . God deliberately made our [female] bodies so that if we're going to feel good during sex, men have to take time to serve women.⁹

Female desire points to the gospel as well, in other words. Her desire to be romanced is iconic of the church, which has had the flames of our desire stoked by the passion of Christ's sacrificial devotion toward us.

This means a husband who just wants to use his wife for selfish pleasure or his own personal release is not only bad at sex;

he's failing to image Christ well. A woman's need for foreplay to enjoy full sexual satisfaction is a sign of our affections being warmed as the bride of Christ by his amorous advances and pursuit. Similarly, a husband serving his wife in the bedroom can be a sign of Christ's initiation with his church in salvation, cultivating our responsive affection toward him.

The one-flesh union of bodies is iconic of the giving and receiving at the heart of salvation. Sex is a sign of the life you were made for with God. You were made to receive his generous self-giving, to experience his extravagant pursuit of you in this divine romance. You were made for an extravagant response of worship, giving yourself back to him in affection and praise. You were made to encounter the divine embrace in this beautiful union.

Tragic Inversions

This architecture of sex helps explain some tragic inversions. Take rape, for example, the most extreme inversion of generosity. Rape (and all forms of sexual violence, abuse, or exploitation) turns *giving of* the self into *taking for* the self. It converts generosity into a form of theft, breaking down the door uninvited, and barging into the home to ransack whatever it wants. The intruder leaves the object of their lust ravaged in their wake.

Sexual violence and abuse shatter the icon of sex in the most despicable way, replacing an image of Christ with the idol of self in its place. It is violent burglary of the highest order, a horror that rightly stands under the judgment of God.

Such acts assault the image of God in the person violated, impacting their dignity in a traumatic way that can scar them for years to come. Sexual assault violates the safety, beauty, and faithfulness sex is designed for in marriage, turning the beautiful into something brutal, intimacy into invasion. Because sex is designed for something so powerful, its abuse can wield that much more damage. As C. S. Lewis remarked, love "is a stronger angel, and therefore, when it falls, a fiercer devil."¹⁰

Christ confronts rape. At the cross, he stands in solidarity with

the survivor through his suffering. As his own body is ravaged and the spear pierces his side, he identifies with the sexually assaulted in the brutality inflicted upon them. Through the power of his resurrection, Christ offers his hand to lift up the abused from the trenches, raising those with him from the depths they were submerged beneath, in the power of his grace.

Exalted in blazing glory, Christ confronts the abuser with his victory over their villainy, holding power to judge them unless they are willing to confess their wickedness and fall upon his forgiveness, to be run through by the sword of his mercy that has power to transform and make new.

Rape corrupts the character of the icon.

Prostitution, meanwhile, is the most symbolic inversion of hospitality. It's worth recognizing that those involved in prostitution are often pressured to do so by circumstances beyond their control, and this is not strictly comparable to the sins of rape and other sexual violence that I just described. While still a violation of the icon of sex, we'd do well to remember the warmth and compassion with which Jesus related to and ate with women who today would be described as "sex workers."

Yet prostitution welcomes a "guest" while charging admission. It turns what ought to be an exchange of pure gift into a transaction. It makes a person a product. Selling sex rents out a holy place, converting the sanctuary into a transit station, a bus depot for the traveling stranger on their way to the next stop. It forgoes covenant for compensation, turning the communion of persons into a commodity for profit. Hustling accommodates users who only want an individual for what they can get from him or her, before moving on.

Today, many call it sex work rather than prostitution, with the goal of dignifying it as a legitimate means of employment. The term *sex work*, however, itself reveals the nature of the problem: Grace has become a work. The sacred gift of mutual self-giving has shifted to a profession undertaken for a paycheck. While sex has always involved an exertion of energy, you now sweat for a salary.

This is why, in biblical imagery, the prostitute is a prophetic parody of the people of God, why the whore of Babylon is the corrupt counterpoint to the bride of Christ.¹¹ When we forsake our first love and wander from the One we were made for, it's as if we're selling ourselves out to the highest bidder.

We grieve the tough circumstances that pressure many into the sex industry. We empathize with, care for, and stand alongside those who are victims. We should confront pimps and johns when they manipulate, exploit, and prey upon people in desperate straits. But we are right to feel that something deep is violated in the act of prostitution itself, for it disfigures the hospitality that is iconic of the gospel, within the secure communion of God's faithful love.

Gender Dynamics

It's worth noting the gender dynamics of rape and prostitution. Rapists are nearly universally men, while prostitutes are predominantly women.¹² This is to be expected, if rape is an inversion more particular to the male side of the equation and prostitution to the female side. Rapists use violence to "give"; prostitutes take money to "receive." (Of course there are exceptions to this rule, but in general the principle holds true.)

It's also worth observing that less extreme inversions exist too, more subtle distortions that may not land you in jail but can wreak havoc on a marriage. The *self-giving* of generosity can turn inward to *self-gratification*: using your partner as a means to an end, objectifying them to fulfill your own wishes and desires. Men have an infamously stronger tendency to struggle with this one: focusing more on pleasing themselves in the bedroom, leaving women feeling used in the process. (Pro-tip for the husbands: *Slow down!* It's not a race. The goal is not to go from 0-to-60 in 4.2 seconds; you're not a Maserati.)

When Jesus says to be a servant, and that it's better to give than receive, this applies in the bedroom as much as anywhere.¹³

Hospitality, on the other hand, can turn inward to an *unwel-*

coming posture: refusing to receive the other's presence, declining to prepare a space for them, shutting the door on intimacy, and locking the bolt behind you. Over time, the warmth from the honeymoon can become a churlish cold shoulder. Women are known for having a stronger tendency to struggle with this one. (It's usually not the guy going, "I have a headache")¹⁴

Obviously, guys can be inhospitable too, and gals can be self-gratifying. These are averages, not universals. It's worth observing, however, that these famous dynamics between men and women relate to the icon.

Christ and the church are the model. Not only for marriage but even for sex. They reveal that sex is designed for mutual self-giving, characterized by generosity and hospitality. Inversely, sex sheds light on the nature of the gospel: the giving and receiving, intimacy and warmth, joy and delight we were made for with God.

The Nature of Grace

Sex helps explain the nature of grace. Some people struggle with the concept of grace: Did God choose me, or did I choose God? Am I an active agent in my salvation, or simply a passive bystander? The problem, I'd suggest, is we often have a *mechanical* vision of how grace works, rather than an *organic* vision.

Take driving a car as an example of a mechanical vision: Only one person can sit behind the steering wheel, accelerate the gas, hit the brakes—operate the machine. Meanwhile, the passenger is a sedentary tourist, watching the scenery pass by out the window.

Watch what happens, however, when we shift to an *organic* vision, like sex: "Did he sleep with her, or she sleep with him?" *Yes!* The answer, of course, is yes. Both statements are true; both people are involved. The physical union happens *through* the will of both parties, not *against* the will of one (assuming the act is consensual).

Yet while each party participates, they are each involved in a

different way. This difference is significant and beautiful. The groom *enters into* the bride with his presence, while the bride *receives* the presence of the groom within herself. Classically, these were referred to as the *active* and *passive* roles in conjugal union. Don't read too much into this language—women are obviously *active*, and men *receive*, in sex—yet it gets at something real that's present in the physiology of our “one-fleshness.”

The distinction is iconic. It is not accidental that Christ is described as “Bridegroom,” rather than simply “Spouse.” Christ has the active role in his union with and salvation of his beloved, giving himself generously to the church. This is not to communicate more value to the role of husband but to highlight an iconographic reality. We have the passive role in salvation, receiving him with hospitality as his bride. While our role may be *passive*, however, it is also *participatory*. Similar to how the bridal role in bodily union is passive (at a deep conjugal level) while also actively participatory (at a broader surrounding level), so also our relation to Christ is receptive but not idle.

We work with Christ, as he works in us.

Two Dangers

This confronts two historic dangers in the grace conversation. On one side, there's what we might call the “Just lie there and take it” heresy: where we're just lethargic observers, watching from the outside-in, entirely uninvolved in this thing that is happening to us. This false view of grace squashes human agency, making it hard to understand biblical injunctions to run the race well, and to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

This call to salvation becomes like the advice British mothers reportedly once told young women on their wedding nights, “Lie still and think of England.” Duty without delight.

Grace doesn't *annihilate* agency, however. It *activates* agency. Properly understood, God's indwelling presence *liberates* our affections and desires from the destructive power of sin, *freeing* our personhood to now live for God. The grace God gives is not

some *stuff*, like motor oil to help your car run more smoothly on its own. No, the grace God gives is his very *self*, his Spirit, the presence of his love poured into your heart, that warms your affections and re-animates your life through giving and receiving, through reciprocal, welcome, and loving union with him.

God's grace *within* us frees us to give ourselves fully to the God who is *for* us.

On the other side, with grace, there's what we might call the "Go become the groom" danger: God is out there waiting for you to rise up, get your act together, and impress him. You gotta get Jesus's attention, so put on the makeup and high heels and go out to win his affection.

This is upside down. It valorizes human agency, letting it stand prior to and autonomous from God's gracious presence and affectionate pursuit. It's not on you to initiate and penetrate the divine life with your own active effort, in hopes that maybe he'll receive you. The gospel says: *No!* Christ has the active role in salvation. God has come for us in Christ, has initiated with us to make us his own, not when we are at our best but when we are at our worst.

I'd suggest this illuminates why, in cultures around the world, it is generally considered the groom's role to pursue, court, and woo the bride. The groom's pursuit is iconic of the gospel, a picture of Jesus coming after us. Now in practical terms, of course, this isn't a hard and fast rule; it's more than okay for a girl to ask a guy out and "initiate" in a relationship. (Ruth pops the question with Boaz and is a hero for it).¹⁵ But generally speaking, we're drawn to the guy laying it all on the line to go after his girl. This archetypal pursuit echoes the cosmic story of the world, of the Christ who's come to lay down his life for us and win our affection as his bride.

Jesus is the pursuing God (hey, I know a guy who wrote a book on that, wink wink).¹⁶ The gospel is not about you going out to find God; it's about God who's come to find you—and be with you forever. It's not about you trying hard enough, working long

enough, or jumping high enough to get his attention. It's saying yes to the One who's gone all the way to hell and back to win *your* affection.

That's the nature of grace.

Single Like Jesus

At this point, O thoughtful reader, you're likely asking, *Wait a sec, what about singleness?* This is such an important point, I want to pause and address it directly. Does all this emphasis on sex and marriage throw shade on singles as living a "less than" life? *By no means!* In fact, quite the opposite.

Jesus was single; Paul was single. So if you're single, you're in good company. Jesus lived the most fully human life ever, and he never had sex.¹⁷ This means you don't need sex, romance, or marriage to have all the meaning and fulfillment in the world.

The New Testament elevates singleness as a vocation equal (if not preferable) to marriage. You can experience life in God's kingdom, Paul suggests, with even fewer distractions than married life can bring.¹⁸ When the church is functioning as it ought, Jesus says, you can experience rich relationships that go deeper even than biological family.¹⁹ Celibacy has a deep and respected status in church history, for both men and women.

On a practical level, this means singleness and marriage are not better or worse. They are merely different. Navigating them demands a willingness to surrender in various ways throughout our lives, and this is deeply personal and individual, lived out in the context of our community and our unique journey with Christ.

But here's the point, particularly if you are single: You can have the reality without the sign. You get the movie (God's way of life and love) without having to sit through the sneak preview (sex in covenantal relationship). You can experience union with Christ—the very thing marriage was designed to point to all along—in intimacy and power. I like the way celibate pastor and author Sam Allberry puts it:

If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency.²⁰

In other words, marriage provides a picture of our union with Christ, giving us categories for its sacred nature, intimate depth, and all-of-life scope. Singleness, meanwhile, unveils how this union with Christ is enough to meet our deepest longings and fulfill our heart's greatest desire. You don't need human romance to experience the more transcendent and beautiful union you were made for with God.

Maybe you did not choose singleness. Maybe your journey has felt lonely, even painfully lonely. If so, I'm sorry—God sees the difficult road you've been on and is there to walk with you. My hope is this encourages you, with the deeper beautiful union you were made for that is there for you in Christ.

While each of us must discern our desires in light of our individual situations and life contexts, marriage and singleness can both be *good*. Which is good for each of us is part of our individual story and discernment process.

Here's the point: marriage pictures Christ *and* the church; singleness relies on Christ *as* the church. What does this imply? That the greatest resource for a more exalted vision of Christian singleness is—ironically—a *higher* view of marriage, not a *lesser* one. They rise or fall together.

Some Christians want to take marriage “down a notch” to bolster singleness, but this is misguided. You don't need to *reduce* marriage to *elevate* singleness. It's not a zero-sum game. Properly understood, they mutually benefit one another. An iconic vision bolsters singleness by exalting union with Christ, the reality which fulfills both vocations together.

Jesus is both the Great Bachelor and the Glorious Groom. Jesus *gave up* sex and marriage (on a horizontal level), in order to *give his life for* his bride (on a vertical level). Jesus bypassed the sign in order to obtain the reality it pointed to. Singles can follow in Jesus's footsteps.

Singleness can be prophetic. Our culture wrongly sees sex as

necessary for human fulfillment, a means of a sort of personal salvation. As historian Carl Trueman observes, nobody needs to be told the movie *The 40 Year Old Virgin* is a comedy:

The very idea of someone reaching the age of forty with no experience of sexual intercourse is inherently comic because of the value society now places on sex. To be sexually inactive is [in the eyes of our culture] to be a less-than-whole-person, to be obviously unfulfilled or weird.²¹

The problem is this: Jesus is a forty-year-old virgin! Or, at least, he was a thirty-three-year-old one. This may sound like heresy in our culture today, but the King of the universe didn't need sex to have a meaningful life . . . and neither do you. You don't need romance to fill that hole inside your heart. You don't need that other person to complete you. You can live the fullest of lives in the kingdom of God.

You can be single. Like Jesus.

The Heart of Salvation

Union with Christ is the heart of salvation. This is the greater reality sex symbolizes. Sometimes we've made salvation more about other things, like going to heaven when you die. But we don't use Jesus to get to heaven; Jesus is how heaven has come to us! Others make salvation more about fixing things on earth. But the deepest fracture to be fixed is our distance from God's life-giving presence.

Jesus is the center. He is where the heavens have opened, blowing wide the dam to bring the floodwaters of God's presence rushing back into earth. Receiving him is how you have access to the life of God, here and now. Union with Christ can turn your mourning into dancing and deserts into gardens.

This is the New Testament's dominant language for salvation: union with Christ. The phrase Christ "in you" shows up all over, in places like these:

“Do you not realize . . . that Jesus Christ is *in you*? ”

(2 Corinthians 13:5)

“If Christ is *in you*, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.”

(Romans 8:10)

“Christ *in you*, the hope of glory.” (Colossians 1:27)

Similarly, our being “*in Christ*” shows up 242 times.²² At first glance, that may sound like it contradicts the one-flesh image (isn’t the picture of Christ *in us*, not the other way around?). But the phrase speaks to our corporate identification with Jesus. Think of it like marriage, where a wife traditionally took on the last name of her husband and entered into his family.²³ If the uniting of bodies in conjugal union speaks to Christ “*in us*,” then the broader uniting of lives together in marriage speaks to us “*in Christ*.”

With that in mind, consider victorious proclamations like these:

“*In Christ Jesus* you who once were far away have been brought near.” (Ephesians 2:13)

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are *in Christ Jesus*.” (Romans 8:1)

“If anyone is *in Christ*, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV)

Christ is *in us*, and we are *in Christ*. Christ “*in us*” speaks to his indwelling presence that unites us to him, while us “*in Christ*” speaks to our corporate identification with him. This is what it means to be a Christian—Christ in you; you in Christ—the language of a surprising, beautiful union!

It might surprise you to know the word *Christian* appears only three times in the New Testament—usually on the lips of outsid-

ers.²⁴ That's because when it comes to insiders, the New Testament simply talks about being united to Jesus. When you drill down to the deepest core of what it *means* to be a Christian, it's union with Christ.

The heart of salvation is in the body of Jesus.

In Defense of Romantic Worship Music

Now, the church as bride is a *corporate* picture. Jesus is not a polygamist, with billions of brides around the world. Paul doesn't say the one-flesh mystery refers to Christ and *his churches* but rather to Christ and the church. I am not the bride; you are not the bride. *We* are the bride. The exalted King doesn't have a harem, each competing to get some time on his calendar. The church has a collective identity, united in the power of his Spirit, with a cosmic unity as the people of God.

Yet Jesus does come to make his home in each of us personally, to indwell us with his presence. This means there's a proper place for intimacy, affection, and devotion in our life with God.

Some critique worship songs that sound too intimate. My friend Sarah became a believer and called this "Jesus is my boyfriend" music. "It sounds like someone took a Katy Perry pop ballad," she said, "and simply replaced all references to the guy she liked with the word *Jesus*." I laughed. And asked why this was disconcerting. "It just sounds disrespectful," she explained, "to the greatness, transcendence, and *bigness* of God!"

"I get the critique," I told her. It's true, some lyrics can be overdone or cheesy. My pushback, however, was this: Jesus isn't our boyfriend; *he's our husband!*

There is a scandal of intimacy to the gospel. It's scandalous that the Almighty, transcendent Creator has drawn so close: taking on skin and soul for our salvation, bearing our sin, and rising whole to dwell with us forever. God's goal is not just to hang out *with* us but to dwell *within* us. Not just to make us his buddies but his *bride*. This should liberate our hearts with adoration, affection, and praise.

Sex as icon puts a fresh spin on what it means to “receive Jesus.” In some circles, the phrase has become so ubiquitous as to become a cliché: *Have you received Jesus into your heart?* But it is a powerful phrase worth retaining—for it speaks to the heart of the gospel.

Christ *has* come to dwell within our hearts as his people, renewing our greatest affections and desires from the inside out with his love.²⁵ Sex as icon adds another layer of symbolism: corporately, the church receives Christ into her *gut*, or loins, a biblical image for a place both intimate and vulnerable, the seat of strength and vigor, and the center of procreative power.²⁶ Christ’s indwelling presence reaches within even these foundational depths for us as his people, and he makes us fruitful.

The church is the bride of Christ. There is a proper place for devotion, desire, and yes, romance, in our worship of Christ as his church. Whether you’re a man or woman, single or married, this image communicates the closeness God has designed us for with him. Our union should move us to shout together the grace of the God who has taken up residence within our life as his people, who has shaken us from the inside out, and who is revolutionizing our lives in intimacy and power. The one-flesh icon reveals a truth much greater.

We were made for union with God.

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