

A biblical guide on sexual intimacy. The author challenges common assumptions couples have about sexuality and presents the richer biblical narrative of sex as a metaphor of God's covenant love. Couples view their sexual relationship, including their greatest struggles, as an avenue to learn about God and themselves.

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Chapter 1

Knowing Your Backstory

When our three sons were little, one of their favorite toys was LEGO bricks. I spent practically every Christmas morning for over a decade helping them build castles, spaceships, and villages. The worst thing about a building block set is realizing that somewhere along the way, you got a step wrong. Misplacing just one piece in the building process will distort the whole project. Often my sons and I would find ourselves carefully deconstructing what we had worked so hard to build in order to discover where we went wrong in the building process.

Your sex life is a lot like this. You can tell that something isn't right. Maybe you can even pinpoint a specific problem like past sexual trauma, the impact of porn, body parts that won't cooperate, or a huge difference in sexual appetites. But underneath those problems is, most likely, a faulty foundation upon which you've been building your sexual relationship.

When I talk with married couples, they often want solutions to the obvious problems they are experiencing in sex. A wife asks, "I've

never enjoyed sex. How do I get into it when I'm exhausted all the time?" Her husband wants to know, "How can I get my wife to be more adventurous in bed?" As a couple, they want help recovering from infidelity or navigating body image issues. These are important and practical questions. But before dealing with the practical aspects of sex in marriage, couples need to do some deconstructing to ensure that they are building from the right foundation.

To put it bluntly, I have the sneaking suspicion that you may be working with a wrong understanding of the purpose of sex in your marriage. Why? Because I certainly was. I was raised in a wonderful Christian family, attended solid churches and Christian schools, and earned three advanced degrees in psychology, giving me practically every advantage in my early marriage. Even so, it has only been within the past decade that I've learned a framework for sex that has revolutionized how I approach this topic in every area of life, including my marriage.

No matter what challenge you and your spouse are dealing with in your sex life, your framework for how you understand the gift of sex is absolutely essential for addressing the real-life questions you are asking.

WHAT'S YOUR BACKSTORY?

Imagine that you are binge-watching a Netflix series. Your spouse plops down next to you in the middle of episode five and begins peppering you with questions. Why did they shoot that guy? Is that the love interest? Is she a spy? Pretty frustrating, right? You probably respond with the obvious, "You have to watch the first four episodes to understand what's going on in this one."

Backstory is everything. It paints the picture for how we understand and interpret the events that are happening right now. Have you ever considered that your sex life has a backstory? And your

spouse's sex life has one as well. These backstories include what has happened between the two of you and also what you experienced before you ever met.

Your sexual backstory is not just the things that happened to you as a teenager or young adult, but how those experiences shaped *how you think about sex*. You don't come to your marriage bed with a blank slate. You come with expectations, fears, secrets, shame, and an unspoken understanding of what "good sex" should look like. Take Sam and Emma as an example.

Emma was raised in a conservative religious home. Her parents rarely talked about sex other than "check-ins" to make sure she didn't go too far with her high school boyfriend. Her church youth group once did a series on God and sex, from which she walked away learning that it was her responsibility not to make the guys in her life "stumble."

When she went to university, even the Christian guys she hung out with engaged in casual sex with female friends. Sex was a form of recreation and was certainly expected in any dating relationship. Although Emma was more conservative than most of her friends, she was sexually active with a few of the guys she dated.

Two years out of college, Emma and Sam met through mutual friends. It didn't take long for Sam to share his view of sex and why it was important for them to set physical boundaries in their relationship. Sam had a history of porn use that began when he was eleven. In college, Sam got connected to some guys through a Christian ministry that introduced him to God. As part of his discipleship journey, Sam began addressing porn use in his life. He regularly met with a group of guys who asked him to be honest about whether or not he was looking at porn. Sam admitted to a "stumbling journey" toward purity. Some months were good and some were bad.

Bottom line, Sam couldn't wait to get married so he would finally have an approved outlet for his sexual desires and fantasies. The

couple was married within a year of first meeting. Family and friends celebrated with them and waved goodbye as they set off for their new life together.

Fast-forward several years. Emma and Sam have navigated through many of the challenges of early marriage, but sex continues to be a rough spot. They experienced the clumsiness of newlywed sex, but the real problems began a few months later. Sam shut down. He found that he had no desire to be sexual with his wife. When she flirted with him, he changed the subject. Although he was married to a beautiful, passionate woman, Sam found himself reverting back to porn and masturbation, and he couldn't figure out why.

Emma went into a downward spiral of sadness and insecurity. She wondered if this might be God's punishment for sleeping around in college. She felt completely rejected by Sam. "When we were dating, he couldn't wait to have sex with me. Now, he doesn't even look at me when I'm naked. What's wrong with me? Why am I not enough for him?" Add a few children and years of unspoken shame and frustration, and this couple doesn't know how to begin addressing the issues that sex represents.

Or consider the backstories of Amy and Jim. Amy was raised by a single mom who had a series of live-in boyfriends. When Amy was ten, her mom's boyfriend began making sexual comments toward her and eventually began molesting Amy. The abuse continued for several months until Amy's mom discovered what was happening. Although her mom kicked the guy out of the house, she never spoke to Amy about the abuse. Without any guidance and filled with sexual shame, Amy followed her mom's example of going from guy to guy until she met Jim.

Jim brought his own pain into their marriage. Although he wasn't sexually abused, he grew up in a family that was emotionally distant. The only way Jim understood closeness and intimacy was to be sexual with his wife. Not long into their marriage, Jim became

very frustrated when Amy began avoiding sex. Jim continually made sexual advances, only to be shot down again and once again. Every time Jim initiated sex, Amy froze. When they did have sex, she felt used and violated.

As a Christian couple, Amy and Jim knew sex was supposed to be a gift from God. They couldn't understand why God would give them a gift that represented so much pain and disappointment.

Out of the tangled experiences of their backstory, sexuality for both of these couples has come to represent some strange blend of blessing from God, shame from the past, and unmet expectations.

If I were meeting with couples like these, they would want to know how to get on the “same page sexually.” They would want to understand why one of them avoids sex and why they are so hurt and disappointed with something they were told to look forward to. Instead of answering these questions, I might begin by asking them questions like, “Why do you think God created you as a sexual person? What do you think it means to be sexually whole or sexually broken?”

Friend, you and your spouse cannot solve the problem of sex until you have the right perspective of what it's supposed to look like in the first place. You can't *do* sex right in your marriage until you *think about* sex correctly in your marriage. And most likely, your backstory has muddled your perspective of what it means to be a sexual person.

Whether or not you are aware of it, sex was rich with meaning before you ever said “I do.” Even the avoidance of sex has purpose. Sex is not just two bodies connecting, but involves the complex interchange of everything sex has come to mean to both you and your spouse. Your backstories live beneath the symptoms of mismatched

You can't do sex right in your marriage until you think about sex correctly in your marriage.

sexual desire, a request for “kinky” sex, and the longing for what you can’t quite grasp.

We use templates or narratives to try to make sense of why sex is so difficult, how to solve our problems, and whether or not it’s even worth trying anymore. Most Christians view sex through a combination of both the secular culture’s perspective of sexuality and a simplistic version of religious teaching on the topic.

THE CULTURE’S STORY OF SEX

The culture’s story of sex is all about experiencing personal pleasure. Sex is supposed to be great! To be a truly happy person, you must be with someone who is consistently meeting your romantic and sexual needs. If you and your spouse are fighting about sex, you may simply be sexually incompatible.

Scholar Blaise Pascal who lived more than three hundred years ago noted that, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.”¹ When we run away from God, we must fill that void with something. For many, the answer is romantic love and sexual fulfillment. While sex in our world has been cheapened, at the same time it has been elevated to represent our identity, our value, and our happiness.

Rather than viewing sex as something that God has created for His glory, our culture tells us that sex is a morally neutral aspect of what it means to be human. Our greatest good is to be sexually fulfilled and satisfied. In a 2016 study, the Barna Group concluded:

The move among the greater U.S. population—most evidently among younger generations—is a de-linking of marriage and sex. Sex has become less a function of procreation or an expression of intimacy and more of a personal experience. To have sex is

increasingly seen as a pleasurable and important element in the journey toward self-fulfillment.²

Based on the culture's story of sex, you should explore your fantasies and desires because this is a crucial part of finding your true self. Anyone (including God) who hinders your sexual expression and fulfillment is morally wrong because they are keeping you from happiness. Don't stay in an unfulfilling marriage. Don't get married unless you try it out with cohabitation. Don't let anyone tell you who you should be. As the saying goes, *you do you*.

Pornography reinforces this view of sex. For the past few decades many educators and counselors have promoted porn as a form of positive sex education for children and adults.³ In my doctoral training in psychology, I was taught to encourage couples to use porn as a way to heighten sexual excitement. The problem is that porn teaches a view of sex that is unrealistic and separated from genuine connection with an actual human being. Porn fuels the belief that great sex is all about your personal experience of easy arousal and orgasm.

When men or women have grown up looking at pornography, they learn to view sex as a consumer. I should get what I want, when I want it, and how I want it. Sex is about obtaining pleasure, excitement, and a release for personal benefit. Porn doesn't ask anything from you but exists to immediately cater to your every sexual fantasy. Porn trains a person's sexual response to be impatient, selfish, and always demanding something more exciting than what you experienced last time.

Clint explains how this played out in his marriage:

When Charity and I got married at twenty-three years old, I was suffering from an addiction to pornography but wouldn't have called it that at the time. I didn't want to let it affect our marriage and resolved that after we said our vows, porn would no longer

be a part of my life, and it would stop controlling my thoughts. I prayed that everything I had done would just magically go away and never interfere with my marriage or sexual intimacy with Charity.

Unfortunately, it didn't take long for us to experience porn's effects on our relationship. The very first night, only hours after we said our vows, I was dissatisfied with our sexual experience. I couldn't shake the pornographic thoughts during intercourse and compared Charity's body, her experience, and my experience to what I had watched online for over a decade.

Sadly, I expected that our sex life would look like a pornographic film. I thought sex would be effortless, pain-free, and filled with all kinds of positions and multiple orgasms for both of us. Instead, my wife experienced pain. I made comments about her body that were unkind and constantly compared our experience to what I was exposed to in pornography, leaving me disappointed sexually from our very first night.

Charity recalls me being very disappointed with the frequency of sex, the positions we tried, and me being unable to orgasm or make her climax on cue. We didn't talk about it, and I began to believe that it would always be this way. We both became defeated quickly, and I believed I would never experience anything close to what I thought we were going to have. Eventually, I turned back to pornography and masturbation as a way to cope with feelings of inadequacy and that I was internally flawed.

While you may not have a sexual addiction or history of pornography use like Clint, don't underestimate how society's story of sexual wholeness has impacted your marriage. Many Christian couples believe that their sex life is fundamentally broken if it's not always pleasurable and compatible. Underlying their frustration, they believe: *A great sex life means being married to someone who has a*

similar sexual appetite. We climax together and have to put forth very little effort to enjoy sex. I've met with both men and women who contemplate divorce or justify an affair because their sexual needs are not being met within marriage. Often when I speak at events, people share their stories with me. One woman told me bluntly why she felt she was free to have sex with other men. "I haven't been in love with my husband for more than a decade. So in God's eyes, I'm not really married to him anymore."

Having sex with a real person who has feelings and their own sexual needs means you have to be patient, understanding, and unselfish. To the extent that you buy into the culture's story of sex, you will hit a brick wall when you can't make sex "work" in your marriage. At a recent conference, a man told me, "My wife really doesn't turn me on. Sex has never been great. Now we pretty much just avoid it. Honestly, I've learned to meet my own needs through fantasy and masturbation. It's just easier than trying to connect with her. Sometimes I wonder if God has someone else out there for me who would better meet my sexual needs." If sex is less than pleasurable in marriage, what's the point?

Jordan explains how porn impacted his view of sex: "I dissociated sex from love. It just became a primal instinct. I got to the point where I didn't want to have sex with my wife because sex had become so tarnished that I didn't want to tarnish her."

Another fallout of the culture's view of sex is the emphasis on performance. Both men and women express the pressure to live up to the unrealistic experiences presented by pornography. Cory explained, "I'm always wondering, *Am I good enough?*" His wife Keyla added, "The world presents sex as the secret sauce that you need in

The culture's greatest fault is not in that it over promises on sex but that it under promises.

life. But it made me view men as cheaters and women as objects.”

While the culture’s story puts a lot of emphasis on having great sex, it actually misses the beauty of a far deeper intimacy that sex in marriage calls us to pursue. The culture’s greatest fault is not in that it over promises on sex but that it under promises. It teaches us to think like three-year-olds who become so fascinated by the wrapping paper that we never think to open the true gift.

THE CHURCH’S STORY OF SEX

I recently posed this question on Facebook: “What did you learn from the church about sex?” Responses came flooding in. About half of them simply said, “Nothing.” Here is a sampling of the other responses:

Don’t have sex! It’s the unforgivable sin.

True love waits. Purity rings. The rose petal being ripped off.

Christians don’t talk about sex.

You’re broken or used if you have premarital sex.

It happens in marriage, but rarely.

Sex before marriage was forbidden. Girls who got pregnant beforehand were viewed as tramps.

Our pastor said boys need to keep their pants zipped and girls need to keep their legs crossed. The message we seemed to be getting from our youth minister was as long as you don’t go all the way, then you’re still a virgin.

Don’t do it until you’re married. Then wives should meet their husband’s needs so that they don’t “wander” into sin.

It’s a sin if you have sex outside of marriage.

If a girl got pregnant, she had to stand in front of the congregation and apologize. Even when our pastor's daughter got pregnant.

From church, I don't recall hearing any teaching about this. From my mom, your virginity is the most valuable thing you have, don't lose it.

Wait until you're married, but after you're married it's fun.

These comments are representative of what I hear everywhere. This is how most of us have learned to think about God and sex.

Let's first address the silence. When you never hear a Christian leader talk candidly about sex, you probably assume that God Himself doesn't have much to say on the topic. Because of the silence from the church on sex, a lot of people don't even consider that God cares about this area of our lives, other than judging us for sexual sin. This means that you are far more likely to look for advice on sex through an internet search than you are from Christian sources.

Second, notice the focus on sexual morality. Sex is viewed first and foremost as a category of good and bad behavior without any explanation of why God tells us to "save sex for marriage." Sexual moral failures are considered the worst kind of sin, described as "unforgivable." This is why we often hide sexual sin instead of seeking help and restoration.

Then there is the disparity between what girls and women learn in the church versus what is taught to boys and men. Women, young and old, are considered the moral gatekeepers of sex. Only guys are supposed to really want sex and are expected to push for it. Once you get married, much of the teaching is around a woman's "marital duty" to her husband. Women are blamed for a husband's porn use and sometimes even for her own sexual trauma because of what she was wearing or for putting herself in a bad situation.

Finally, notice the absence of any clear teaching on what to expect in marriage, other than “it will be fun.” There is no mention of the common and real-life struggles of mismatched desires, how to deal with shame or betrayal, and the reality that married sex takes work, commitment, and sacrifice.

The church’s traditional story of sex has largely been reduced to biblical warnings about sexual sin and immorality without any explanation of why a loving God would be so mad about our sex lives. “Sexual immorality is bad” has for many been translated as “sexuality is bad.” As one secular comedian said, “To hear many religious people talk, one would think God created the torso, head, legs and arms, but the devil slapped on the genitals.”⁴ We are currently witnessing the fallout of a generation of Christians who grew up hearing only the rules about biblical sexuality without a larger vision for God’s purpose and redemption. We will dive into that a bit more in chapter 3.

Before you get too angry with your pastor or parents, realize that they were just repeating the messages that have been passed down from earlier generations. Many Christian leaders throughout modern church history have promoted an incomplete and unbiblical understanding of this beautiful gift from God. Just consider some of these quotes:

“Nothing is so much to be shunned as sexual relations.”
—St. Augustine⁵

“Intercourse is never without sin; but God excuses it by his grace because the estate of marriage is his work.”
—Martin Luther⁶

“The Holy Spirit leaves the room when a married couple has sex, even if they do it without passion.”
—Twelfth-century theologian Peter Lombard⁷

“The wedding day is, ironically, both the happiest and most terrifying day of (a young woman’s) life. On the positive side, there is the wedding itself. . . . On the negative side, there is the wedding night, during which the bride must pay the piper, so to speak, by facing for the first time the terrible experience of sex. At this point . . . let me concede one shocking truth. Some young women actually anticipate the wedding night ordeal with curiosity and pleasure! Beware such an attitude! . . . One cardinal rule of marriage should never be forgotten: Give little, give seldom, and above all, give grudgingly.”

—A pamphlet for young brides written by a pastor’s wife in the late 1800s⁸

Over the years, I’ve met countless women and men who describe the impact this thinking has had on their sex lives. They all say something similar: “All I ever heard was ‘save sex for marriage,’ and somehow I was supposed to flip a switch on my wedding day. Well, I’ve never been able to flip that switch.”

As you will read in the next chapter, the Bible says a lot about sex, and it’s actually good news for your marriage! I am thrilled to see Christian leaders begin to address sexual issues with candor and the richer message of the Bible. But I don’t want to skip over the fact that most of us have to deconstruct some LEGO-like building pieces related to how we view God and sex.

I love God’s Word. By calling you to “deconstruct,” I by no means am suggesting that you move away from a biblical understanding of sexuality. I’m actually encouraging you to press more deeply into it.

If the sum total of your religious teaching on sex has convinced you that sex itself is shameful, please keep reading! If you believe that God can never truly bless your sex life because of past sin, the Bible has great news for you. If you think that God doesn’t care deeply about your sexual pain, I challenge you to rethink your understanding

of God. If you believe that God has rejected you because of your particular form of sexual struggle, let's revisit what it means that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst."⁹ If you view sexual pleasure as something that your spouse owes you, you're missing the whole purpose of sex in your marriage. And if you think that you and your spouse have experienced God's best just because you don't cheat on each other or fight about sex, get ready for a wonderful surprise!

My friend, God is not a barrier to a fulfilling sex life in your marriage, even if you have received hurtful and incomplete messages from the church. In fact, understanding God's heart for sex is the key to unlocking the power and beauty of this great gift in ways that you may not even be able to imagine.

You and your spouse were created for more than the superficial pleasure of an orgasm. The fullness of God's plan for your marriage is not simply about moral duty and obligation. Sex for you right now may represent anger, disappointment, hurt, shame, and even despair. You may feel hopeless and resigned because you've tried many suggestions of how to have a great sex life.

This is where Ken and Linda were for more than three decades of their marriage. At one point, they had a book burning in their backyard with all of the books they had read on sex and marriage that got them nowhere. They had given up.

What finally made the difference for Linda and Ken was realizing that they were working with the wrong understanding of sexual wholeness, both from a cultural and religious perspective. It's as if their GPS had been hijacked, giving advice that led them to a never-ending series of dead ends.

"Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."¹⁰ Have you ever considered that this may include God's word to you considering sex in your marriage?

Hidden in the pages of the Bible is a mysterious story of sex that

Knowing Your Backstory

is timeless and full of hope. It will give you an entirely new way of viewing not just the ecstasy of sexual pleasure in your marriage, but also how God can show His goodness through your greatest sexual challenges.

I truly cannot wait to tell you this story!

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