

Redeeming
SEXUALITY

EXPLORING **GOD'S** DESIGN
FOR SEX AND SEXUALITY

Redeeming Sexuality pulls back the curtain and invites you into a conversation about sexuality that people have been tiptoeing around for ages. It's an honest conversation without shame or judgment. A conversation that will give you a renewed understanding of sexuality and help make sense of the confusion and pain we sometimes feel in this area of our lives. It's a conversation that invites you to delight in the goodness of God and the hope that the Gospel brings to every area of our lives.

—Ruthie Delk, author of *Craving Grace*

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Redeeming Sexuality

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

At the beginning of each chapter and throughout the entirety of this book, I've included stories of different women and their experiences with sex and sexuality. These stories are a compilation from the many women I have encountered throughout my lifetime. While my own story is also interwoven throughout the book, no one story reflects my experience or the experience of any other woman. Details in each story have been changed to protect those who have been gracious enough to share their experiences with me.

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REDEEMING SEXUALITY

I grew up in a Christian home with a father and mother who loved the Lord and did their best to teach me the truth of Scripture and foster in me a love of Christ. My first exposure to sex and sexuality was at a family member's home. Stacks of Playboy and Hustler magazines were strategically placed in the bathroom for easy access. I was probably nine or ten years old at the time. I lost my virginity at fifteen. I didn't even know the guy really. I was more curious than anything. For the next fifteen years, I experienced one sexual encounter after another—some I chose, some I didn't. Each one compounded the sense of shame and worthlessness I felt. By the time I decided to follow Jesus, I could barely stand myself. But at the same time, I felt like, for the first time, I might have found what I'd been looking for all along. It's been fifteen years since I started following Jesus. I hardly recognize my life now. I am not who I was. Jesus took all my shame, all my guilt, all my suffering, and I am free. He even uses my story of sin and brokenness to bring others hope

and encouragement. I still have the scars from my past choices, but they don't define me anymore. I am a new creation.

God created us as sexual beings. He created sex and our desires for sexual connection. These things are inherently good, but sin twists and corrupts God's creation. The problem is not the desire. The problem comes either in our indulging the desire in ways God has forbidden, or in our condemning something that God has created and blessed.

Sex is everywhere. It appears on almost every magazine cover: "30 Ways to Have More Sex." "Bored with your Sex Life?" "Getting The Sex You Deserve." Titles such as these surround us in every grocery store checkout line across America. With all the sexual messages in movies, television shows, books, and commercials, it is obvious to see that we live in a sex-saturated society. Who knew a hamburger could be so sexy?

The messages that influence our beliefs and understanding about sex make it a hard topic to navigate. The world says sex is the ultimate life experience. Sex is idolized. It is great and powerful, and you should be free to pursue and experience it, unhindered by religious rules and old-fashioned belief systems. In our sex-saturated society, virginity is an oddity; it is something to be lost, not cherished. If you believe in any governing standard for where sex and sexuality are concerned, you risk being labeled a bigot, a hate-monger, a prude. Our society has placed so much emphasis

on self-discovery through sexual expression, in fact, that it sex has become synonymous with a person's very identity.

But at the same time, the world says sex is not special. It is not seen as something to be reserved or preserved or protected. Sex is a commodity; it has been devalued and removed from the context that actually makes it special. It can be had anywhere, anytime, and with anyone you please. Sexual partners are a dime a dozen. Sex is cheap, fun entertainment. No commitment required. No strings attached. It is simply no big deal.

But reality paints a much different picture. One in four women are victims of sexual abuse, including rape, date/spousal rape, and molestation.¹ Eighty percent of these women are assaulted not by a stranger, but by someone they know.² Twenty-seven million adults and thirteen million children worldwide are victims of human trafficking, eighty percent of which is for the purpose of sex. And, according to UNICEF, thirty million children have been sexually exploited through human trafficking over the past thirty years.³

In 2006, spending on pornography reached ninety-seven billion dollars worldwide; the United States was the fourth largest consumer. Forty-six million babies are aborted every year worldwide—over one hundred thousand aborted per day.⁴ Sixty-five percent of American teens have sex before they graduate high school. Seventy-five percent of American women have sex before they get married.⁵ The Centers for Disease Control states that twenty million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases

appear every year, half of those among young people ages fifteen to twenty-four. These cases cost the United States approximately sixteen billion dollars every year in health care costs.⁶ The marital infidelity rate is reported to be anywhere between ten to twenty-three percent. These numbers are rising among women to the point that they are almost equally as likely as men to be unfaithful. The marriage rate is decreasing, even though the population is increasing, and the divorce rate seems to be holding steady at around one divorce for every two marriages.

Given all this, it may not surprise you to know that there are even legitimate businesses devoted to helping married people have an affair. One such company boasts over fifteen million users in twenty-five different countries and even advertised during the 2008 Super Bowl. The company's founder was quoted as saying, "Our mission was to say that if you're thinking about having an affair, you're not alone. It's part of the human condition. We'll help you meet someone and not get caught. If you want to be clandestine, we're an intelligent choice."⁷

The likelihood is that we have all either experienced the brokenness of sex and sexuality in this world, or we are close to someone who has. The church has long attempted to be a source of truth around the topic of sex and sexuality, calling those who are single to live with sexual purity and to reserve sex for marriage, and calling those who are married to honor the covenant of marriage and to be faithful to their spouses. In spite of the church's attempt to counteract the messages of society, members

of the church struggle not only with sexual sin, but also with confusion and frustration over what sexual purity looks like, as well as what constitutes a healthy marital sex life.

This confusion is only compounded through the messages taught by fundamentalist churches. Ideas such as “sex is for procreation only” and “good girls don’t” fill women who have sexual desires with a sense of shame, guilt, and despair. Many young Christian women have come to believe that sex is dirty, that it is unspiritual, and that it is something they should avoid. This is true not only of those who are single, but also of those who are married. Women who were raised with this teaching struggle to give themselves freely to their husbands, sometimes even feeling impure and ashamed. They find it hard to make the switch from “off limits” to “partake and enjoy,” feeling a sense of guilt and shame for enjoying sex with their husbands. Author and pastor Joshua Harris reveals the danger of this type of message in his book *Sex Is Not The Problem (Lust Is)*:

Misplaced shame can be dangerous because it saps our strength for fighting our real enemy. A person who is wrongly ashamed of being a sexual creature with sexual desires will quickly feel overwhelmed and helpless because he’s trying to overcome more than just lust—he’s trying to stop being human.⁸

No matter whom you ask, the question of sex is typically met with a variety of responses. Many married women commiserate over their husband’s frequent sexual advances, while many single

women wish they had a sex life to complain about. Some women battle deep feelings of pain, shame, and worthlessness over abuse they suffered at the hands of another person, while others have found significant healing from what was done to them. Some women quietly navigate confusion, feelings of shame, and questions of identity due to same-sex attraction, while others dive headlong into same-sex relationships. Some wonder if there is any hope of freedom from the shame of their past choices, while others have experienced God's forgiveness and redemption in the darkest of situations. Some women enjoy a healthy sex life with their husbands, while others could be satisfied never having sex again. Even the most sexually healthy women, at times, have to navigate the challenges and confusion surrounding the topic of sexual intimacy.

Questions for Reflection

1. If sex did not exist, would that make your life easier or more difficult? Why?
2. What has been the largest influence on your view of sex: your parents, friends, your own experience, or something else? How has this shaped your view?
3. What are some ways sex is portrayed in our culture? Is it glorified or degraded?
4. What do you think the Bible teaches about sex?

SEX IS NOT JUST A MEN'S ISSUE

For many years, sex has been perceived predominantly as a men's issue, especially within the church. Men are often challenged about the topics of fidelity, lust, pornography, and the like—while women have long flown underneath the radar, being challenged by the church mostly on the issue of modesty. Even in the entertainment industry, men are often portrayed as sexual aggressors or perverts—the ones who can't withstand temptation, though that trend is changing. As a result, many women have a faulty theology of sex and sexuality. This is problematic because “the way we talk about sex reflects and forms the way we think about, and ultimately the way we practice, sex.”⁹

Essential to a theology of feminine sexuality is the truth that every woman is a sexual being. You cannot deny it or repress it. To do so would be to deny the person God made you to be. While that may look different according to each woman, sexuality is part of who you are and who you were created to be. *You were created as a woman.* You are genetically coded as a female. This includes your reproductive systems, your hormonal makeup, your anatomy, and even your brain. Neuropsychiatrist Louann Brizendine states in her book *The Female Brain* that while ninety-nine percent of male and female genetic coding is exactly the same, the one percent variation between the sexes influences every single cell in your body. It affects everything from the nerves that register pleasure and pain to the neurons that transmit perception, thoughts, feelings, and emotions.¹⁰ That means you think, feel, understand, and process situations as a woman.

But we must not confuse femininity (being a woman) with how we express or live out our femininity. There are many legitimate expressions of womanhood. Some women may love to cook, while others may struggle to boil water. Some may swoon over the latest fashions, and others may stay on top of the latest sports stats. Some women find enjoy a good play or the ballet, while others prefer to spend a week hiking through the Grand Canyon. The point is that what you do or do not do, what you do like or don't like, or how you dress or style your hair does not define you. Whether you are more athletic or more academic—more likely to design a skyscraper, a dress, or a weekly schedule for your family—you are inherently, distinctly feminine.

Your feminine sexuality encompasses your genetic makeup and distinctiveness as a woman, as well as how you express yourself as one. It is both who you are naturally and how you function in the world around you. Feminine sexuality is powerful. It has the potential to bring life and strength to others; it also has the power to manipulate, control, and destroy. Therefore, it is important that we gain an awareness of who we are as sexual beings and that we learn how to steward our sexuality in a way that honors God and serves others in love.

HIGH SCHOOL/COLLEGE-AGED WOMEN

High school and college-aged young women are coming of age in a culture of unparalleled sexual confusion. While sexual immorality and confusion are nothing new and can be traced back even to the early church days (1 Corinthians 6:9–20), never

before have people had the idea that they get to choose their gender. Our society is obsessed with sexuality, and it is at the center of many heated debates in the public sphere.

As these young women begin to grapple with the onslaught of hormones and natural desires, they are caught in the crosshairs of the messages of society and the church. Television, movies, advertising, and music are increasingly sexualized and tantalizing, making it hard for young women to manage these new desires. In an attempt to protect women from the devastation of sexual sin, the church uses catchphrases such as “guard your heart” and “true love waits.” While these messages are well intended, many young people express confusion over how to live them out in their day-to-day lives.

Are these messages of action from the church enough to help young women understand and navigate sexual sin and its effects on themselves and those around them? How are they supposed to express their sexuality without stepping outside of the God-given boundaries for sex? How are young women supposed to think and talk about sex? How should they handle their desires for intimacy and connection with another? How are they to interact with a man? How can young women live out their sexuality in a way that brings life and strength to those around them, rather than creating shame and emotional baggage that will affect both themselves and future generations?

SINGLE WOMEN

Single women of all types—whether never married, divorced, or widowed—wonder how they are supposed to express their sexuality while not engaging in sexual activity. They feel they cannot express a very real part of who they are as women. The longer the season of singleness, the harder it becomes to manage these legitimate desires for intimacy and sexual expression. Denial and repression of these desires is often burdensome and frustrating. Culture continues to awaken and stir these desires, playing on physical urges and desires for emotional intimacy. This can bring a sense of shame for feeling these desires or despair that they can never be fully expressed.

Sexual choices a woman makes as a young adult shape this season of her life. Can there be healing from the devastation caused by her choices in young adulthood? Can there be healing from wounds created by others? How can a single woman “manage” legitimate desires for intimacy and sexual expression? How can she express her sexuality in ways that bring life to others, in ways that glorify God? How can she be content, even satisfied, in a season of singleness that she might not choose for herself?

MARRIED WOMEN

The marital sexual relationship is a gift from God. It is both an expression of intimacy and a pathway to intimacy. But marital sex is not without its challenges. Sex can be a point of conflict and deep hurt within a marriage. Some women are frustrated by their husband’s desires for sex. They feel like an object and outlet

for his sexual desires. Others wish their husbands pursued them more. They feel unattractive, undesired, and confused.

For some married women, the challenges are unique to their season of life, such as wrangling young children and managing the home or coping with the hormonal havoc brought on by menopause. For others, it may be a matter of priority, and sex is way down on the list. Maybe it is your post-pregnancy body that makes you avoid intimacy. Maybe it's a career that leaves you exhausted at the end of every day. Or perhaps you don't feel connected to your husband at all and you are struggling to make sense of the desires you feel towards other women. Regardless of the challenge, the marital sexual relationship—and the way you think and talk about it—has huge implications on your life and the lives of those around you.

How do you sustain a healthy sex life through every season of married life? How do you express your sexuality outside of your marriage in a way that brings life to others and glory to God? How should married women talk about sex with their husbands? How should they talk about sex with their friends, married or unmarried? Should a woman always say yes when her husband wants to have sex? How do you navigate questions of frequency or the challenge presented when one spouse's desire for sex is greater than the other's? What is permissible in the bedroom, and what is off-limits?

THE BATTLE RAGES . . .

It is impossible to be neutral on this topic. We are either part of the problem, or we are part of the solution. We are either engaging in healthy dialog with our spouse, with our children, and with others, or we aren't. You may be healthy, but you have friends, neighbors, and children who aren't. The sexualization of our culture is so overwhelming that we cannot assume we are unaffected by it. Or we are blissfully unaware and need to be educated. Either way, we cannot disengage.

A quote often attributed to Martin Luther says,

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Wherever the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that one point.¹¹

As you survey the landscape that surrounds us, it is clear that sex and sexuality are areas where the battle rages.

However, none of this should come as a surprise. The Apostle Paul forewarns it in his letter to the young pastor Timothy:

You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love

only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly.

—2 Timothy 3:2–5 (NLT)

Or as the ESV Study Bible states, “They will have the appearance of godliness but not its essence.”¹² Paul warns Timothy that the times will be difficult and marked by godlessness; people will be *self-indulgent* and *self-righteous*. And that is the hard truth for Christians today: we can be just as godless in self-righteousness as we are in self-indulgence.

As we prepare to engage this topic, the challenge for all of us is to identify where we are on the continuum. Do you identify more with the self-indulgent pleasure seeker, or do you identify more with the moral and self-righteous woman? Maybe you’ve been on both ends of the spectrum—indulgent in your youth and self-righteous in your marriage, or even vice versa? Wherever you find yourself on the continuum, both ends are characterized by autonomy, a form of *moral independence*. On one end, we have a striving for morality and righteousness apart from the cross. On the opposite end, we deem God impertinent to the conversation

about sex. I.e, *There is no governing authority; I determine what is best for me.* The remedy for both self-righteousness and self-indulgence is the same: the hope of the Gospel.

. . . THE WAR IS WON!

We have hijacked sex from the God who created it, and we have used it as recreation, as a weapon, and as a way to turn a profit. We use sex as a way to gain value, power, and relationships, and to fill an aching void within us. Without the Gospel, without the deep and abiding truth of Scripture, and without the power of the Holy Spirit, there is no hope for change. **We need a vision of redeemed sex and sexuality.** The truth of Scripture is that *sex was God's idea.* He created it, and therefore it is good. As a part of His good creation, He is at work even now redeeming and restoring what we have broken. He is busy healing the hurt and pain you suffered at the hands of another. He desires to free you from the bondage of sexual sin. He longs to reveal His goodness and faithfulness to you in your season of singleness. He delights when you take pleasure in His good gift of sex with your husband. He longs to bring you rest, peace, and clarity in your confusion over sexual identity. He is ready to speak His truth into this broken, distorted area of our lives.

The hope and encouragement of the Gospel is this: regardless of who you are, what you have done, what you struggle with, or whether you tend toward self-righteousness or self-indulgence, God made a provision for your sin through Jesus's death on the cross. Jesus, though fully God, humbled himself by taking on

human flesh, becoming fully man. He faced every temptation common to man, and yet He did not sin. Because He was also fully man, He was able to offer himself as a perfect, living, and holy sacrifice on our behalf. On the cross, Jesus took on all of our sin, and in its place God gave us Jesus's righteous standing. Then God raised Jesus from the dead as proof that He had conquered sin and death. God then sent His Holy Spirit to dwell in and among us as proof of our adoption into the family of God. His Spirit is at work in us even now, conforming us to the image and likeness of Christ. He will continue this good work in us until Jesus returns and ushers in his new kingdom, at which time sin, death, and suffering will be conquered once and for all. Everything broken will be made new. There will be no more crying, no more suffering, no more temptation, and no more pain. And we will dwell with Him forever and ever. Paul marvels at the implications of these truths:

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since He did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't He also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and He is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean He no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in

danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, “For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.”) No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:31–39 (NLT)

So, while the battle may be raging, the war has been won. This is the foundation of our hope. There is no life God cannot redeem. There is no pain He can’t heal. There is no soul He can’t comfort. The Lord can do miraculous work in a life surrendered to Him. God is for you. While you may still struggle with sin, temptation, suffering, and pain, there is hope for significant healing, freedom, and life change. And one day, He will bring you finally and fully into His eternal joy, perfect and complete.

HOMEWORK

The truth of God’s word brings light into dark places. There is perhaps no place darker than the shame, suffering, confusion, and pain of sexual sin—whether sin we committed or sin committed against us. The purpose of this study is to equip you with a biblical and practical understanding of sex and sexuality. The reading is broken into seven chapters. Some chapters are long, but they are broken into subsections to make reading a few pages each day possible. Questions for reflection can be found throughout each chapter. I encourage you to set aside time each day to read and answer these questions. Doing so will create an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to meet with you personally and shed light on the areas in which you need His truth, His comfort, His conviction, and His healing.

I pray that over the next seven weeks, “God will fill you with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may live worthily of the Lord and please Him in all respects—bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might for the display of all patience and steadfastness, joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the saints’ inheritance in the light” (Colossians 1:9b–12 (NLT)).

Questions for Reflection

1. Does sex seem more important to men or to women? Why do you think so?

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2. Is sex important to you or is it something you could easily do without?
3. Knowing there is so much brokenness around sex and sexuality, why do you think God created it?
4. Do you think of your sexuality as being an integral part of who you are or a small part of who you are?
5. Do you feel like your biblical understanding of sex is complete, or is it lacking in some areas? What is one aspect of sex or sexuality in which you need some biblical clarity?
6. What is one way you are currently experiencing brokenness in your sexuality that God wants to redeem?
7. What are some specific challenges you are currently facing in this season of life regarding sex and sexuality?