

2019



harvestusa



Stories of Faith and Perseverance
in Singleness and Marriage



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HARVEST USA brings the truth and mercy of Jesus Christ by:

- Helping individuals and families affected by sexual struggles
- Providing resources that address biblical sexuality to individuals and churches

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From the Founder

Fighting the Good Fight



In our Spring 2019 issue of *harvestusa magazine*, we highlighted a new direction for our ministry: The Sexually Faithful Church Initiative. It's a new focus on the local church, aimed at developing a comprehensive plan to disciple our church community toward living faithfully according to God's design for sex, sexuality, and gender.

Of course, HARVEST USA has already been doing this for more than 35 years—walking with sexual strugglers toward wholeness in Christ. And yet, we know that the front lines of our ministry are increasingly being drawn inside the church because the culture "out there" is becoming the culture "in here", the local church. In response, the bride of Christ must cast a renewed vision of sexual integrity that is honoring to Christ. Not only is this God's best

for individuals, but it's the only way for families and society as a whole to flourish.

In this issue of *harvestusa magazine*, we feature several stories of perseverance from men and women who struggle with same-sex attraction, pornography, or gender dysphoria. Each author has benefited from HARVEST USA's direct ministry, and each story depicts sexual struggles that can dominate a person's life.

Temptations, desires within, and struggles without (the world, the flesh, and the devil) make sanctification a journey of successes and failures, of starts and stops, but always, because of the Spirit, pushing in the direction of pursuing and following Christ.

These stories also reflect the grace and power of Jesus Christ and his Body, the Church, where growth and change occur. Living with sexual integrity before the Lord is not merely about obedience, but making Jesus Christ the center of one's life. It's about letting the good news of God's grace melt and shape our hearts, enabling our obedience to flow from a renewed desire. Thus, we repent of our sins and embrace the One who continually gives life.

The first article in this issue is an excerpt from a new HARVEST USA resource, *God, You, & Sex: A Profound Mystery* by David White, former HARVEST staff member and now associate pastor in a local church. David writes vividly and compellingly about his singleness following the death of his first wife, when he struggled with deep loneliness and the temptations and pain that accompanied that journey. But he also writes about how centering his life on Christ became the strength he needed to persevere during his season of singleness.

Another article is an excerpt from a new HARVEST USA minibook, *Your Dating Relationship and Your Sexual Past: How Much to Share* by Ellen Dykas. One crucial "Sexually Faithful Church" initiative is for churches to shepherd pre-married couples so that past and current sexual sins are brought into the light *before* a wedding takes place.

We also highlight a third HARVEST USA resource, our 15-session video series, *God's Design for Sexuality in a Changing Culture*. This series was designed to help churches talk about sexuality by fostering open dialogue and explaining the how and why of God's design for sexuality.

I hope that the content of this new issue is a help to you in ministry and an encouragement to you in your faith.

In Christ,



John Freeman
Founder and Ministry Liaison, HARVEST USA

Single Sexuality

By David White



Regardless of our marital status, all of us are sexual beings. The Bible has more to say about single sexuality than “*Just say no!*” Despite its challenges, the Bible suggests singleness is a “gift” for some (see 1 Corinthians 7:7–9). While many singles struggle without a spouse and long for marriage, others may not resonate with the feelings of loneliness discussed below. Many single Christians live joyful, content, and especially fruitful lives for the kingdom, specifically because of their unmarried state.

I know the challenge of being an older single. After twelve years of marriage, I suddenly lost my first wife to complications from breast cancer. I was thirty-nine years old (with twin eight-year-old girls). After her death, I was single for almost three years. Though my personal experience with singleness is limited, I write with a keen awareness of the difficulties singles face. Every person’s story is different, but I hope that what follows is helpful to single readers as they seek to faithfully embrace their sexuality.

Single and Waiting (on the LORD)

The creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 suggests that waiting on the LORD was built into the world from the beginning. After Adam’s creation, God declares, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (v. 18), then proceeds to create the animal kingdom ahead of Eve. But we see the eventual blessing as Adam meets Eve and erupts in poetic exultation. However, waiting is more pronounced and painful after Genesis 3. There is a reason why there are multiple complaints of “How long, oh LORD?” in the Psalms. Now life is filled with disappointments and unfulfilled dreams. As Proverbs 13:12 expresses, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.” Many of us are living with the deep heartache of hope deferred.

If this is your experience, I want to share a perspective on waiting. It is an active place. I used to think waiting meant trying to be patient, like waiting for the bus with nothing to do. Not so. Waiting on the LORD is active. In fact, it is a place of warfare. Years ago, reading through the Psalms, I was struck by the conclusion of Psalm 27, “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!” (v. 14). Do you hear what David is saying? Waiting on the LORD is a terrifying place to be.

It is not for the faint of heart, but requires incredible, Spirit-given strength. Courage is not the absence of fear;

it is moving forward despite your terror. This is true for any waiting God calls us to, but especially the waiting that stretches on for years and decades. If you are wrestling with your singleness, I encourage you to see this as a battle that takes courage, and a place where God wants to meet you.

In the Old Testament, marriage is assumed to be the normative mode of life, with childbearing as a critical component. This is partly due to the creation mandate “to be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28), as well as the building anticipation that a deliverer would come from Abraham’s seed, a son of David, to free Israel from her oppressors. But the focus on physical generation begins to shift as Isaiah prophesies about this coming deliverer.

Isaiah 53 is one of the most wondrous passages pointing to Jesus’s sacrificial death.

Written hundreds of years before his earthly life, it describes his crucifixion and even the manner of his burial. After describing Jesus’s death and the reality that he was “cut off” from his generation and the land of the living (v. 8), the passage turns and makes a shocking pronouncement: “Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand” (v. 10). There is an anticipation of life after death—resurrection!—and the production of *offspring*. Although Jesus lived his perfect human life as a single man and was literally childless, Scripture regards Jesus’s single life as having produced a *family* in the community of his followers. This was a striking claim in the ancient world, in which married life and the production of physical children was the assumed norm.

Isaiah went on to describe the drastic change that is coming with the advent of the Messiah:

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say,

“The LORD will surely separate me from his people”; and let not the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.”

For thus says the LORD:

“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” (Isaiah 56:3–5)

This was an incredible statement! The Old Testament law declared that no one with damaged or removed genitalia

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could even enter God's assembly (Deuteronomy 23:1). Such people were second-class citizens, at least as far as worship in the temple was concerned. In this context, Isaiah's pronouncement was a strong affirmation that God saw those who, through their physical and relational status, were excluded from a central aspect of Israel's religious life. Isaiah envisioned a new day when, in a transformation of the creation mandate, physical generation is no longer the name of the game. Laying out this history highlights the extraordinary redirection that results from Jesus establishing the kingdom of God. Isaiah thus offers singles something "better than sons and daughters"—an everlasting legacy based solely on the work of God through his people who bring about a spiritual generation that carries into the world to come.

Approaching the New Testament, this change is even more pronounced. When questioned about the practice of divorce, Jesus brought his listeners back to God's original intent at creation. But he concluded his teaching about the permanence of marriage with a profound declaration: "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (Matthew 19:11-12).

Instead of insisting on the importance of marriage and the production of children to fulfill the creation mandate, Jesus proclaimed some people will choose singleness for the sake of God's kingdom. This is the first time in the Bible that singleness is depicted as a desirable and even *exalted* state! As we'll see below, this is because of the heightened focus on the kingdom that corresponds with the coming of Christ.

Paul took Jesus's exhortation further, encouraging the believers at Corinth to seriously consider lifelong singleness because spouses created divided loyalties, wanting to serve the kingdom but also wanting to bless their spouses (1 Corinthians 7:6-9, 25-40). The call to serve in Jesus's kingdom reorients the focus and is prioritized above the creational calling to "be fruitful and multiply". To this end, he encouraged lifelong celibacy, although he freely acknowledged that it is not sinful to marry. (Also see Paul's clear refutation in 1 Timothy 4:1-3 of those who forbid marriage.)

I suspect this 1 Corinthians 7 passage is rarely preached in American churches. The suburban church typically

portrays marriage and family as the normative ideal. The goal of a singles ministry is to get everyone paired off and participating in the rest of the life of the church: coming to potlucks with casseroles (instead of a bag of Doritos), producing offspring to populate the children's ministry, and so on. For many churches, children are still their best church-growth strategy. Although churches acknowledge that in Christ things are different than the Old Testament, they still operate as though what matters most is getting married and having children. I preached at a church in Philadelphia and met a single guy in his thirties. As we chatted, he shared about his move to the city. Even though he continued to work in the distant suburbs, he opted for a long commute, changing churches and moving into the city because in that context he is not the bizarre anomaly he'd been in his former, suburban church. There has been little affirmation—at least in many American suburban churches—of the New Testament's high calling of singleness.

Working through the Pain

I realize for many unmarried Christians this vision may not offer much comfort. I once preached on Malachi 2:10-16. In this section, the ancient tribe of Judah is rebuked for divorcing their wives from among their own people in order to marry foreign women who worship idols. Malachi raged, "Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? *And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring.* So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth" (v. 15, emphasis added). As I discussed this passage, I shared some of this vision of singleness—that singles have opportunities to nurture spiritually-generated "offspring." Some single folks in the church were encouraged by this, but others felt it wasn't enough. Many singles—and not only women—want actual physical offspring. They want to be parents and hold their own children. What can we say to such a widespread and understandable human desire?

With such unique disappointments in the lives of many single people, along with God's special design of marriage at the creation, we may be forced to conclude that singleness, with its challenges, is one aspect of the brokenness of the world due to the Fall. If this is an accurate assessment, it means singleness may always come with an ache on some level. For some it is a "gift," and presumably, they have "self-control" and do not "burn with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:7,9). But the fact is that many face singleness for a host of reasons while not experiencing a sense of having been designed for it.

If God is truly God, there is no getting around that he is behind everything in existence. His sovereignty is behind your singleness. If you're not happy about it and you're not talking to him, you need to start. Because, I guarantee you this—whether you are speaking directly about this issue or not, it affects your relationship with him. Perhaps you are ignoring him in your pain, shutting him out (sadly, this is one of my personal tactics). And, of course, if you're shutting him out, you're turning somewhere else to medicate your pain. Maybe you're losing yourself by searching Christian Mingle, Netflix binging, or trying to assuage your desire with porn or romance novels. Or perhaps it's alcohol, work, exercise, or food. Or a combination—eating ice cream doused in chocolate liqueur, while doing work on your laptop, sitting in front of Netflix on your smart TV, while occasionally swiping through potential dates on your tablet . . . twenty-first-century idolatry can certainly multitask.

Embracing Promises Amid Pain

While the truth of God's sovereignty sometimes sounds cold and distant, I urge you to see it in light of his amazingly particular love for you. David, considering God's close attention to the details of his life, declared, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it" (Psalm 139:6). He went on to describe God's thoughts toward him as innumerable as the grains of sand. God's thoughts toward you are vast and particular and fine-tuned to your unique life. We must think of his sovereignty over the details of our lives in the context of this particular love.

Consider the amazing declaration of Isaiah: "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. . . . You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you. . . everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made'" (Isaiah 43:1, 4, 7). Not only did God create and form you to be a unique image bearer, but he calls you *by name* as his very own. Because you are incredibly precious and loved, his eyes are on you and he wants to honor you. The ultimate Bridegroom does not leave you alone; he gives you his name. And, finally, did you catch why he created you? *For his glory!* Alongside these incredible statements, the New Testament teaches that Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify

for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14, emphasis added). Do you hear the bridegroom language? He wants to possess you as his very own, and that's why Jesus came—to win his bride.

If you are single, I long for you to hear these words as deeply true, rather than spiritual platitudes. Jesus wants to meet you in your pain, disappointment, and unsatisfied desires, and give you comfort—this is a profound spiritual reality. Jesus promised, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." (John 14:18). He knows our deep need for him, and he longs to be intimately united to us.

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Despite its challenges, I want to encourage you that singleness has a place of honor in the kingdom of God. According to the Bible, you are in a position to do far more for the kingdom than those who are married.

But there is something else incredibly important: your life, lived well, is a revolutionary challenge to the principalities and powers of this dark world as your obedience educates the spiritual forces of the manifold wisdom of God (see Ephesians 3:10; 6:12). Our culture is seduced by sexuality and daily sells us the lie that a life without sex is not worth living. Your commitment to live chastely as a single Christian proclaims to a watching world that there is another King, whose own willingness to embrace suffering disarmed the lies of the enemy (see Colossians 2:15). You testify to the truth that sex is not necessary to have a rich, powerful life. It is an ongoing challenge to grow in learning that God's "steadfast love is better than life" (Psalm 63:3), but far from something to be pitied, your life is a countercultural battle cry that the world (and the church!) needs to see!

This article is adapted from David White's new book, God, You, & Sex: A Profound Mystery, published by New Growth Press. God, You, & Sex is available for purchase at harvestusa.org.

All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

David White is associate pastor at Springton Lake Presbyterian Church in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania. Formerly he served as Director of Discipleship at HARVEST USA, overseeing ministry to men, women, and families impacted by sexual sin and teaching nationally about sexual issues. He is the author of *Sexual Sanity for Men and God, You, & Sex: A Profound Mystery*. David is married to Jennifer, and they are blessed with four children.

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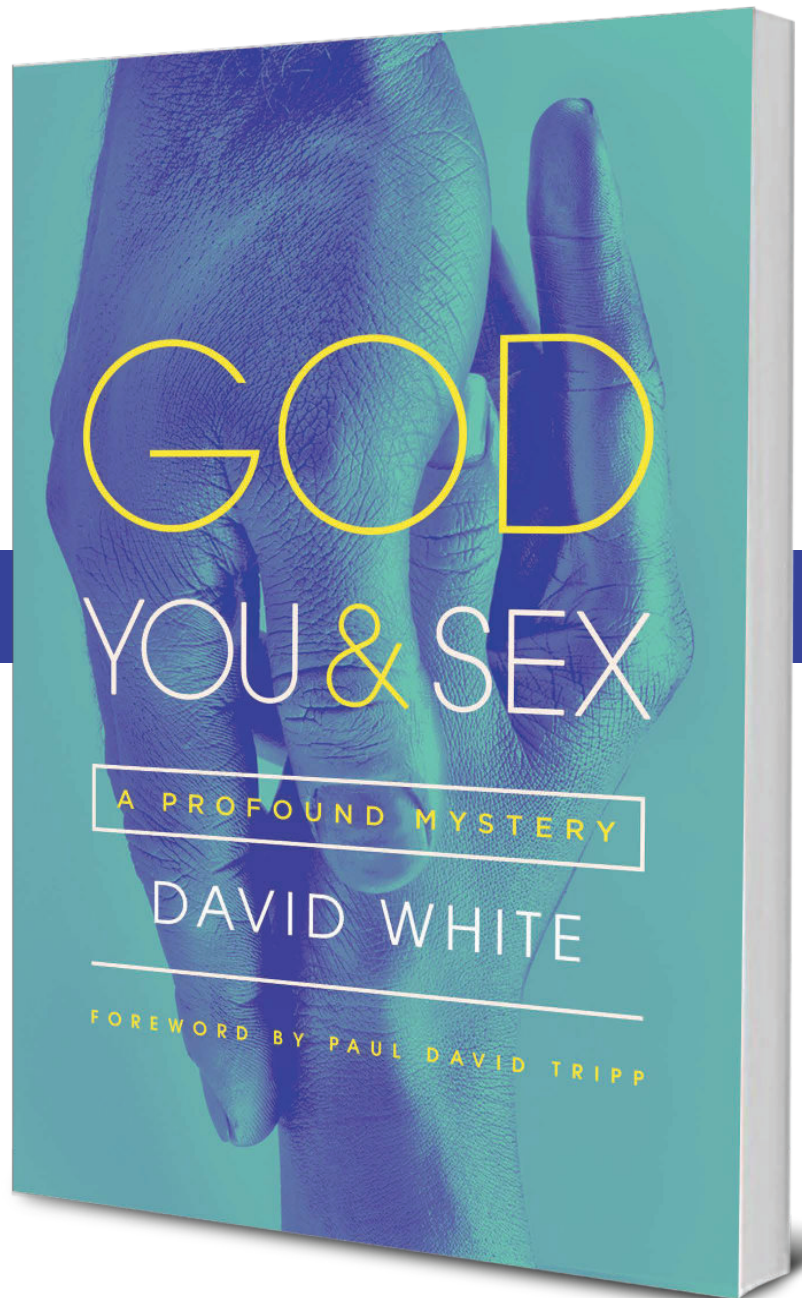
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— **PAUL DAVID TRIPP**

Pastor and Best-selling Author



Overcoming Porn Through Confession and Community

By Anonymous



"You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence." (Psalm 90:8 ESV)

Sexual sin is not easy to speak about. And yet, in my experience, the key to overcoming it is to bring it into the light, in spite of that innate push to keep it hidden.

My first memory of my own sexual depravity reaches back to my earliest memories in childhood. I couldn't have been any older than five years old, but even then I knew what I desired when I picked up a pen (maybe it was a crayon) and drew a picture of a naked woman. One of my parents, I can't remember which, saw my drawing and spanked me for my "artwork". I still remember not understanding the reason

why I was being punished. What I did learn was that, if I wanted to draw or see pictures like that again, I was going to have to keep it a secret.

Although I wasn't hooked yet, the seeds of sexual sin were already beginning to take root inside of me. Growing up, there began to be occasions when I would sneak onto the computer when no one was around to look at pornography. When I hit puberty, my struggle became a consistent one. I was a pudgy pre-teen with a lot of social anxiety, terrified of women. With no confidence in myself, I didn't think a girl would ever want to be with me. It was an awkward time that fueled a desire for escape, so I turned to virtual women—women who wouldn't say "No" and would never reject me.

Pornography became my escape—even before I'd ever attempted to pursue a girl in real life. To this day, that low view of myself and fear of rejection has continued to fuel my sexual sin. As a man I still struggle with my fear of women, feeling much like that same pre-teen of years ago, without confidence or hope.

Before finding the men's biblical support group at HARVEST USA, I failed to realize that there are other sins in my life which also need to be addressed—like anger, envy, and even gluttony. It was here at HARVEST that God began to shine light on these other sins in my life as well, in addition to sexual sin.

HARVEST has also helped me see that I've bought into a lot of lies about God. At my lowest points I have accused him of wanting to destroy me; in the midst of prolonged temptation, I have struggled with his provision. And I still struggle to find pleasure and joy in him, making my Christian experience more of an effort than the easy, personal relationship with God that I'd expected. Not until I came to HARVEST was I able to identify these aspects of my struggle that had gone unrecognized beforehand.

HARVEST was the first place where I felt comfortable being open *about* my sexual sin. And it was the first place where I met other men who admitted to struggling with the same things I do. Although I was nervous beforehand, I left my first meeting filled with hope and praise. I've learned that a temptation shared with others facing the same issue means you struggle together. This has enabled me to confront my own sin in very positive ways. My new friends are praying with me and for me, because they want to see me through this as much as I do.

"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!" (Ecclesiastes 4: 9-10)

HARVEST has taught me *how* to fight sexual sin. One of the most important things you can do is to confess it with someone you trust. HARVEST is where I've connected with several brothers in the faith who are willing to hear my confession. Always willing to offer help when I seek it, they have never given up on me, even when I've wanted to give up on myself. There is power in numbers when fighting sexual sin.

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Another habit essential to my fight against sin is to literally voice my heartfelt lament to God. I love reading the laments of Scripture. The Bible contains lots of them, many generic enough to apply not just to my personal struggle against sin, but to a plethora of other life difficulties as well. This encourages me, knowing that God still speaks into a world that is difficult and imperfect, just as he spoke long ago to people facing difficulty and despair.

I've begun thinking of a lament as what happens when theology meets reality—not that theology is pitted against reality, but my theology often gets *ahead* of my reality. At HARVEST they refer to this as 'formal' theology versus 'functional theology'. I lament when the two don't line up perfectly. And when *the way I live* doesn't fit the way God *calls me to live*, that's when I experience self-inflicted pain. That's also when God wants me to recognize the weakness in my functional theology and return to him. God would rather me come to him with weak theology, than not at all.

And a lament to God should always be accompanied by praise. In its entirety, the Book of Psalms progresses from lament to praise. And that is where God is taking me right now. He is moving me to praise because he wants me to delight in his work in this world, especially his saving work through Christ. My temptations feel surmountable when I move from lament to praise.

Reflecting back over my time at HARVEST, I appreciate the tremendous amount of personal growth that has occurred in my own life. But I still see a long road ahead. Slowly but surely, God has been peeling back the layers, showing me that sexual sin is intimately connected to other struggles in my life. Often, my battle against pornography is the result of other areas in my life which I've neglected. As I address them, my fight against sexual sin becomes more effective, which is also when I am able to see more fruit in other areas of my life.

If you desire change in your struggle against sexual sin, confession is a great step toward freedom. Be encouraged that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion" (Philippians 1:6). You are not alone. God is with you, and he promises to sanctify you and conform you to the image of his Son.

In this article, we do not disclose our ministry recipient's real name because he has chosen to remain anonymous.

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A TEMPORARY AFFLICTION:

One Man's Story of Wrestling with Same-Sex Attraction

By Anonymous

HARVEST USA: Jason, when was it that you first began to notice that your romantic and sexual attractions were for the same sex and what impact did this have on you?

Jason: Probably around fifth or sixth grade? Yeah, those are my earliest recollections. I grew up Catholic. So, I had this deep sense of right and wrong. I'm not sure *how* I knew it was wrong, other than maybe just cultural influences around me or whatever. But I knew right away these were not feelings I should have. And because of that, I never shared them. Instead, I kept them deep within me for quite a number of years afterward.

HARVEST USA: How long did you keep it a secret?

Jason: I kept these feelings to myself until I shared them with a woman I was dating. We were close enough that we were considering marriage, and I felt I had to share them with her, or we could not move forward in our relationship.

HARVEST USA: So I'd say, you grew up with a pretty big secret. And you grew up within the Catholic church. How did that impact the way you related to God?

Jason: It's interesting that I never really reflected on that very much. At the time, I didn't have a very personal relationship with God. But I went to church every week and almost never missed. When I was 18, I began working in a steel mill in Pittsburgh, where a man led me to Christ. And that was when my relationship with God changed radically. It

became a much more personal one. And it was then that I fervently began praying that these desires would be taken away. Now, I'd never acted on them. And because of that, I didn't have a great sense of guilt. But I still felt shame for what I was thinking and feeling. But that didn't translate into 'Well, God doesn't love me.' Or 'God doesn't care for me.' That never happened. I never felt God was against me in any way.

HARVEST USA: That's encouraging. So, after you became an adult, you prayed that these attractions would go away?

Jason: Absolutely. Always.

HARVEST USA: How old are you now, Jason?

Jason: I'll be 64 this year.

HARVEST USA: Do you still have the same attractions?

Jason: I do.

HARVEST USA: Really? How would you talk to someone who says that, if you are a believer in Christ, then why aren't these attractions gone?

Jason: Look at Scripture carefully. We know that God answers prayer, but not always in the way that we might hope. I've come to the conclusion that it was not in God's good and perfect will to take these struggles from me. And I think it's really important for people to realize that many of us

are given challenges that we have to turn over to the Lord to work through, rather than expecting him to take them away completely. So, I would say to someone else who is struggling: Pray with all your mind that the Lord will take your struggle away. But if he doesn't, that doesn't mean that he doesn't love you. And it doesn't mean that you are condemned. It just means to keep on, looking for his strength.

HARVEST USA: And you never married? Because you mentioned that you had a relationship that was moving toward that. And that's when you divulged your long-held secret. Did the relationship with her break off because of that?

Jason: Not at all. She was very willing to go forward. And I saw a Christian counselor. And even some non-Christian counselors, in my attempt to maybe tap into something that my prayers alone had not done. Finally, I came to the conclusion that I could not in good conscience marry because I did not have the physical attraction that I felt was necessary in a marriage relationship.

HARVEST USA: But, since living your entire adult life as a single man, do you find yourself dealing with deep periods of loneliness, or even abandonment by God?

Jason: I will say that there are times when I feel that the struggle God has given me has prevented me from experiencing close emotional and physical intimacy, the joys of family, and the joys of a partner. But I can't imagine having that in my world. So, I realize it is off-limits for me. And that is when I sometimes feel shafted.

HARVEST USA: So, you still struggle with the fact that God has allowed you to have this experience.

Jason: Yeah, I mean, I accept that he has allowed it. And I've gotten better about that. But it is not necessarily easy. Recently, the pastor in a local church asked me, "Well, are you still praying to, you know, be healed?" And I said, "No, not that way." And he replied, "Well, why not?" I said, "Because he's allowed me to live like this for more than forty years." I've already had my answer. The question now is, how do I live with this in a Godly way?

HARVEST USA: Do you outwardly label yourself as a gay Christian?

Jason: I kind of understand the deep need for some folks to be recognized within the church as having particular needs and struggles in common. But I also find any qualifier for any further description of Christianity to be potentially harmful. Therefore, I do not call myself a gay Christian.

HARVEST USA: Then, how do you communicate to the church who you are, without labelling yourself as a gay Christian?

Jason: I think of myself as a Christian man with a particular pattern of sin struggle. I think it's important to concentrate on the fact that we are Christian. We don't have a group in church who are, let's say, struggling with truth-telling. And I do think that the church needs to be more cognizant of the struggle and its ramifications. But I don't think it's helpful to be called a 'gay Christian'.

HARVEST USA: Does your church know of your struggle?

Jason: Yes, the leadership in my church knows, as well as my small group. It's not something I've advertised widely, but I've not hidden it under a bushel, either.

HARVEST USA: Were you the one who informed the church leadership? And, as a man who lives with sexual attraction to other men, how have you been treated by the church?

Jason: I've had nothing but support from my church leadership, as well as those church members acquainted with my struggle. I am presently a deacon, and I served as an elder in a previous PCA church. That leadership knew of my struggles as well. So, I feel great support from those who know who I am as a man, including this particular struggle.

HARVEST USA: So, you've not found yourself in a position in the church where you've felt boxed in or excluded.

Jason: Never. My own observation is that a lot of people who struggle with same-sex attraction are reserved and tend to isolate themselves. They are neither outgoing nor engaging. And that hurts them in the long run. But because I knew my church leadership well, I recognized that I could safely share my own situation with them. And already knowing that my church sponsored a ministry that began through HARVEST USA helped as well.

HARVEST USA: So, having the safety of knowing that you will not be categorized or dismissed or in any way marginalized is an essential for anyone.

Jason: Yes, absolutely! But the church must work harder to provide, clearly letting it be known that someone who struggles will find support and grace, rather than shunning and condemnation.

HARVEST USA: Obviously, we live in a highly sexualized culture that, across the board, sees sexuality as the core aspect of a human being today. Therefore, we are awash in media about homosexuality being okay and even good. Mainline churches have already embraced same-sex

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in a Godly way?

relationships and same-sex marriage for years now. Does that in any way make it harder for you to live as one who has chosen to follow Christ and live as a celibate man?

Jason: Not at all. But it is incredibly difficult to see all around me not just a reluctant acceptance, but almost a celebration of this type of lifestyle which is a departure from traditional physical thinking. Yeah, that part is difficult. And it makes it a challenge which is not easy to fight on a consistent basis. I love the arts—plays and everything like that. And that realm is certainly awash with that type of temptation.

HARVEST USA: So, what do you do about that?

Jason: Because of my interest in the arts, sometimes I probably get too close to seeing things that are not the healthiest for me, either from a cultural perspective or because they are attractive. It is honestly very difficult to consistently turn from it. Because it is everywhere.

HARVEST USA: Yes, there's no way to get away from it, even on just a regular TV channel.

Jason: Exactly. Everybody has the same-sex relationship storyline.

HARVEST USA: What do you think the church should do, knowing there are boys and girls, even in your local church who are growing up with same-sex attraction and living in a culture that screams at them, "This is okay!" What should the church be doing for these tweens and teens?

Jason: I think that a good discussion about sex and sexuality is often lacking in the local church. And by that, I don't mean just the obligatory sermon once a year against premarital sex. I think there needs to be an acknowledgement that kids might already be dealing with this. The church needs to provide a very comfortable, safe space. I don't think most churches do that very well.

HARVEST USA: I agree.

Jason: Especially conservative churches. In my own church, there are probably several same-sex strugglers, in addition to myself. But what I have seen over time is that there are fewer and fewer of us, because so many just go to denominations that will embrace them. And if the conservative church isn't even talking about it, these people

are never going to feel welcome enough to participate. For that to happen, churches need to have more of these kinds of struggles on their radar, creating a context for discussion in an environment that is neither judgmental nor condemning.

HARVEST USA: I agree, silence increases the isolation. Therefore, the need to be in a united community where you are known may not take place in a conservative congregation. Right? And, so drifting toward a more welcoming or embracing church becomes a stronger temptation.

I'm curious, did you grow up with siblings? If so, did they know about this struggle of yours?

Jason: I did. And, yes, they knew about it. My younger brother is actually a practicing gay man. We're very close. Our sister died of a drug overdose.

HARVEST USA: Is your brother religious?

Jason: No. Even though we are radically different in that way, we're still very close.

HARVEST USA: What has been the most helpful, practical way that others have come alongside you?

Jason: What has been lifesaving for me has been the times when families have reached out to me in my loneliness, often because of my association with the father or the husband. They have invited me into their family circle and loved me well.

The most important thing for churches to know is that being single, regardless of the reason why, is hard. I urge church members to invite single people to be part of your family and get to know them better. Think about it—children become the center of a family and of every couple's world. And that makes it difficult to reach beyond that to others who might be feeling shame and loneliness. But that has to happen because it is key.

HARVEST USA: What helps you the most theologically to navigate your life and faith?

Jason: That God loves us wildly, that things we endure on this earth are temporary, that all things will be made new. In the meantime, he provides the strength to navigate this life. These are the thoughts that bring the most encouragement to me.

In this article, we do not disclose Jason's real name, because he prefers to remain anonymous.

What helps you
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A person wearing a red jacket and dark pants stands in a field of tall, golden-brown grass. The person is out of focus, standing in the middle ground. The foreground is filled with sharp, detailed stalks of grass. The background is a soft, hazy sky with a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

It Can Happen to Anyone: A Wife's Fight Against Porn

By Anonymous

“For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.” (Psalm 51:3 ESV)

I looked at my calendar, confused. I already had a dentist appointment scheduled Wednesday. But another one on Friday? I skimmed my phone contacts and of course I hadn't saved the dentist's phone number. I checked my wallet for where I'd placed the business card—gone now. And I'd recycled our Yellow Pages long ago.

Old Me would've simply looked up the number in my Safari browser (and probably neglected to save it once again).

New Me doesn't have this option. As I paw fruitlessly through my wallet one last time, I feel a little angry. And a lot humbled. If I didn't have a porn habit, sending pictures of myself for cheap approval, then I wouldn't be fishing for something as routine as my dentist's phone number, simply because my husband helped lock up the internet. Now I'll have to interrupt my husband at work so he can Google it for me or wait until he returns home to log on for me so I can search for it myself. I feel childish and rather petty, seeking “permission” to use a computer or have a new app installed on my phone. But costing my marriage, my family, and certainly God's glory for the sake of freely accessing the internet will never balance. I must know my sin.

I'm reminded of my sin, even as I experience changes in my daily minutiae, like figuring out a new way to locate a phone number. My sin is ever before me as I feel frustrated by these changes, however trivial. Then there are times when I feel victory as I see my almost-full cell phone battery from lack of use—and lack of temptation. My sin is before me when I'm quietly folding laundry and my brain starts to replay porn that I viewed five years ago. My sin is before me as I watch my husband spend two hours trying to correctly install web-filtering programs on our computers. Tenderly, my sin is before me when he hugs me afterward and tells me he loves me.

An hour after my missing-phone-number debacle, the dentist calls to confirm Wednesday's appointment—like a nod from my heavenly Father that he sees my plight.

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” (Psalm 51:5)

As a married woman—a pastor's wife, at that—with a house full of preschoolers, I don't much fit the “profile” of a porn-user. I have no history of abuse, and the only traumatic event I seek to escape is the tedious monotony of life on-call with preschoolers—diapers, laundry, dinner, dishes, repeat. Sometimes not fitting the stereotype can make me feel lonely, or exceptionally depraved. In those moments when I'm more responsive to God's wisdom, I see it as a reminder

of how desperate my heart is: no matter how orderly my life looks on the outside, I was born a sinner and a sinner I will be until Christ's return.

I didn't date much in high school. I was painfully shy but constantly craved affirmation that I was good enough—pretty enough, smart enough, friendly enough. Motivated by curiosity and feeling some warped pressure to “keep up”, my first internet search for pornographic pictures occurred after hearing a fellow female classmate share that she missed having sex. I'd never even seen male genitalia and my research was a way to feel *good enough*, perhaps even *prepared enough*.

In college my curiosity morphed into intrigue. None of my friends dated much or seemed pressured to be in a relationship, while I felt plagued by loneliness. I discovered porn videos and in the solitude of my dorm room began fantasizing that I could be that woman in the videos—beautiful, desired, confident. Although I contemplated it, my resistance to sharing this new habit with anyone left me vulnerable and solitary. Praise God for his mercy, that he protected me from any harmful relationship in which my lonely heart would have undoubtedly sought affirmation in a man's physical attention, rather than God's perfect affection.

I met my now husband in my junior year of college. This led me into a prolonged season in which the internet wasn't a temptation. He truly led me to desire a deeper relationship with God; beautifully the desire for affirmation elsewhere faded as I found it in this godly man and perfectly in God, himself. As an engaged couple, we stumbled our way through a conversation about sexual histories and our desires and expectations for physical intimacy. I remember feeling deep shame creep over me as I shared pieces of my struggles, but what sweet, precious relief to yet again experience not only his forgiveness but my heavenly Father's as well.

As newlyweds, we enjoyed—and struggled through, on occasion—our new physical freedom as husband and wife. I don't remember feeling particularly tempted to find those old websites. But that all changed when we began expecting our first child. That old context of loneliness resurfaced with no close workplace friends and my husband's first pastoral position. Combine that with hormone surges from pregnancy and few defenses, I began to find new access to porn videos. My husband had just left for an overnight church retreat. I was alone. And then the old lies returned: *I'm not good enough...A good pastor's wife wouldn't look at porn...A good mom wouldn't, either...Besides, no one would find me attractive, anyway...I'm not good enough.*

As my pregnancy progressed, I had numerous frank conversations with my husband to build accountability and

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Each failure makes my marriage harder to restore. Yet, each failure reminds me again of my wicked heart that desperately needs to rely on Jesus.

resistance to this sin. Hormones shifted, our baby was born, and we were thrust into that world of figuring out how to be parents. Busyness temporarily outweighed any room for temptation.

But in the swirl of acclimating to my new role as a mother, I never fully processed why I'd been tempted in the first place. I didn't root out the reason why my husband's affirmation was no longer sufficient for me. I didn't confront my own lie that a pastor's wife does not struggle like I did. I just assumed that, because these temptations went away on their own, I was "better" now.

Not surprisingly, when I was pregnant with baby #2, my struggle came roaring back. This time I found a website where women submitted their own pictures for comments and even re-postings. Never having dropped back to my pre-pregnancy weight after my first child and desperate for affirmation in spite of my growing belly from my second child, I submitted my own photo. Never mind that my husband showered me with compliments and sought my physical affection. Was I still desirable to others? After the initial thrill from that post faded, I was deeply ashamed. I sat in a Sunday service, fighting tears, knowing I just had to confess this to my husband, and that he'd be devastated. I was also fearful. Could he be fired for this? What was wrong with me? I remember a tearful conversation with him and lots of crying. Then I remember a season of waking early for time in the Word and prayer—something I'd never done before. All glory to the Holy Spirit for convicting me and enabling me to obey his leading!

"[A] broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Psalm 51:17b)

Oh, how I have been dreading writing this next part of my story....

I wish I had learned my lesson. I wish I had taken more time to pray, reflect, and see where these "triggers" came from, other than blaming pregnancy hormones. I wish I had remained vigilant, even when the temptations relented, to maintain internet filters and time restrictions on my computer and smartphone and more honest accountability check-ins with my husband. But how easily we forget!

I became pregnant with our next child and my husband accepted another ministry call, prompting us to move away from all that was familiar and stable. Cue again loneliness and fear of not being "good enough." Again, I found virtual strangers to whom I could send photos of myself—more cheap insurance as I, the Homemaker and New Pastor's Wife, sought affirmation from somewhere. I attended new church services, pushing forward, but feeling miserable.

Finally, I closed out my online accounts permanently—no more photos. I remember cold afternoons in our new backyard, reading my Bible and praying while my kids played. Slowly the temptation faded; slowly I rebuilt my relationship with the Lord. Significantly, I chose not to confess to my husband this time. Having nailed this online door shut to strangers, I felt it would cause more harm than good. Feeling almost noble, I bore my guilt alone, as if that were punishment enough for my crime.

It festered...until I couldn't keep my secret anymore. My out-of-the-blue, terrifying-yet-impossible need to confess to my husband ended in another heartbreaking revelation. This one was even more difficult, because my sin had gone on for so long without him knowing. He felt lied to. It took weeks before our marriage felt "right" again; even then, shame would still creep up on me. Restoring my relationship with Christ was another uphill battle; I felt plagued, living a lie while serving in my home and my church.

My struggle continues. Usually I measure my life as 'spiritually neutral', distinguished by peaks of Godly growth, cancelled out by valleys of sexual sin. Since my battles come and go, it's easy to box them up, like a winter coat that gets put away when spring emerges. Satan's lust for victory is never far away, like recently when I snuck off to send another photo to a website. Enter yet another hard conversation with my husband and new internet restrictions and countless tears. No internet filter can heal my desperation for true spiritual healing.

"Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit." (Psalm 51:12)

Each failure makes my marriage harder to restore. Yet, each failure reminds me again of my wicked heart that desperately needs to rely on Jesus. I could throw away my computer, but my wicked heart will still find a way to sin—even if only in my mind. My weapons for protection are still the same: prayer, regular Bible reading, tools like *Sexual Sanity for Women*, and HARVEST USA's *Journeyers in Grace* biblical support group. I've had both a recent failing and victory as well. One day I recognized my own loneliness before it could lead me to temptation by simply texting a friend to see how she was doing. I've pushed myself to serve high school girls at our church, instead of letting that "not good enough" feeling cripple me.

While I may never be sin-free in this life, by God's grace my sin will continue to fade as he is ever illuminated.

In this article, we do not disclose our ministry recipient's real name because she has chosen to remain anonymous.

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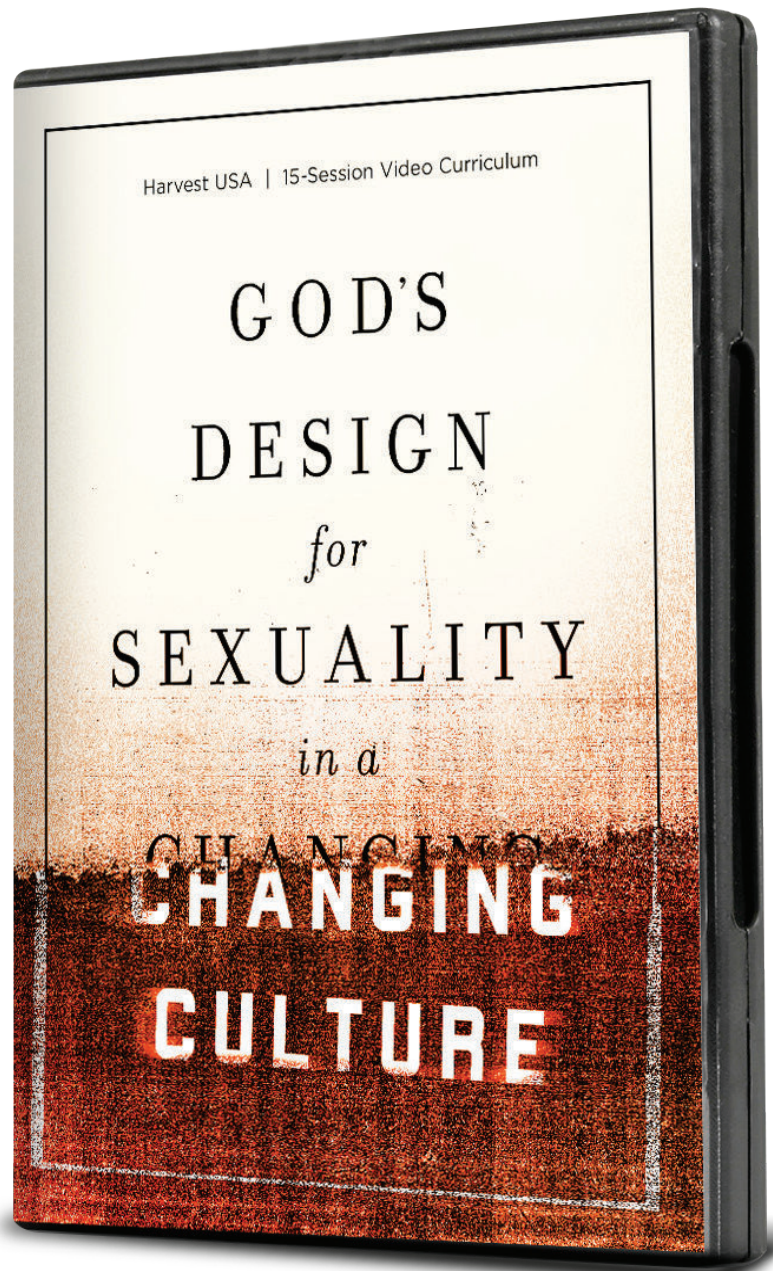
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"God's Design for Sexuality in a Changing Culture is a sturdy resource that will equip churches to be ambassadors of truth, grace, and freedom in a culture that's awash in sexual confusion."

— **ANDREW T. WALKER**

Director of Policy Studies,
The Ethics and Religious Liberty
Commission, author of *God and
the Transgender Debate*



God's Design

FOR SEXUALITY IN A CHANGING CULTURE

By Nicholas Black

HARVEST USA's new ministry venture, The Sexually Faithful Church Initiative, aims to help churches be proactive in discipling the church community to understand and trust in the wisdom and glory of God's design for sex, sexuality, and gender. (See the Spring 2019 issue of *harvestusa magazine* for a fuller explanation.)

One major component for assisting the church community to embrace what God is saying about how we ought to live with our bodies is through teaching. But not just the usual way churches teach, through sermons and lectures (nothing wrong here, but it's not enough). We mean through engagement and dialogue.

The church is making two errors today in dealing with sexual issues: One is to not talk about the subject; the other is to talk without engaging in a discussion. Both these approaches weaken God's people because, unless the issues are thoroughly explored, most Christians don't know how to think through the ways the culture is influencing them.

Getting the issues of sexuality out on the table and discussing them in open, safe settings is critical to helping people understand why God's design for sexuality is good and why it remains relevant for our lives today. Understanding and faithfully following God's Word in how we ought to live with the bodies God has given us will only take place when we better understand how Christian belief contrasts with current cultural thought.

The church needs to get its people talking! But talking also invites listening, so if we create a context for safe discussions, we can talk about Scriptural truth in a loving way that can help people see and understand the reasons why God's design for sex and sexuality is good for each one of us individually and at large in our society.

And if we can do this within the church by talking respectfully with truth and love, then we can model the way to speak with those who do not believe what Scripture teaches. These are intensely personal issues, and those who do not follow Scripture here feel threatened by any talk from a religious or faith perspective. By speaking intelligently—with accurate knowledge of the issues—the Christian worldview potentially gains a hearing, and that is typically the way God works to change hearts and minds.

That's what *God's Design for Sexuality in a Changing Culture* intends to do. We decided to film 15 of our most popular teaching presentations and reduce each talk to a 30-minute video. We then provide a discussion guide so that churches and small groups can interact with the material.

By showing the video teaching in a group context, it provides an environment for discussion and dialogue. People will watch the same video at the same time, so that means everyone hears the same material. In an age where videos are viewed more than books are read, we think this will entice more people to listen to these important messages and engage in the kind of discussion that can lead to further understanding and embracing of Scriptural truth.

It will be necessary for someone to lead the class or group discussion. It shouldn't be an unstructured free-for-all. But the leader must make the post-video discussion safe for

everyone. The issue of sex, sexuality, and gender—and how we ought to live faithfully before God with our bodies—is a highly emotional topic.

Everyone struggles to live well with God's powerful gift of sex, sexuality, and gender. There will be people in your class who struggle here, and some have painful sexual histories that make this discussion difficult.

And some may come to different conclusions about what a biblical view of sex, sexuality, and gender is. Having a safe and open conversation about these topics includes having a discussion about why people choose to interpret the Bible in different ways. There may be a temptation to assume a person who thinks differently is not really

committed to the Bible, but such is not necessarily the case. It is important to understand *why* a person interprets the Bible in specific ways and to engage in respectful dialogue about why you disagree. This is the only way to build the trust that is needed when engaging in conversation about such personal and vulnerable topics. A willingness to listen

to each other is critical so that everyone understands the ways Christians are being influenced by our culture.

That doesn't mean you have to agree with someone's perspective or opinion. It may be necessary in the class or group to say that such a view is outside of Scripture and/or outside of the historical understanding of the church. There is no intent here in these discussions to affirm or suggest that multiple viewpoints on sex, sexuality, and gender are acceptable, or that how we live our lives as sexual and gendered beings is open to any interpretation that is at variance with Scripture and Christian tradition. It does matter that biblical principles for faith and life are affirmed and encouraged.

We do, however, need safe and open discussion to help people learn and come to the place where they want to obey God. We grow into obedience to Christ (Matthew 11:28-30). We need to help one another know what we need to learn, and then encourage each other to grab hold of God's revealed will on this matter and assist one another to live it out faithfully, in the strength that God gives to his people.

Nicholas Black is the editor of the *God's Design for Sexuality in a Changing Culture* video series, and he was the former Educational & Resources Director at HARVEST USA. Nicholas has recently been called back into pastoral ministry at New Life Presbyterian Church of Glenside, PA.

**It does matter that
biblical principles for
faith and life are
affirmed and encouraged.**

Your Dating Relationship and Your Sexual Past

By Ellen Dykas



Derrick and Carli are three months out from their wedding. Invites have been sent, RSVPs have come in, the honeymoon has been booked. When they sat down last week for their final premarital counseling session, they both had the wedding jitters. However, a painful and unexpected truth came out in that hour of counseling—a secret Derrick had kept not only from their premarital counselor but from Carli as well. He had been struggling with pornography off and on for the last twelve years, since he was fifteen. He had tried everything he knew to overcome it, but he was always on his own, never daring to share this with anyone. Now that he was in seminary to become a pastor, the terror of being found out had kept him even more committed to hiding. However, as he explained, he loved Carli and wanted her to know about it before their wedding so that she would be able to help him.

Carli was shocked . . . and heartbroken. *He's just telling me about this now?*

Now what do they do? Should they move ahead with the wedding and hope for the best? Do they postpone it? Do they call it off?

Michael and Shaina have been dating for eight months and are now beginning to talk about marriage. Sure, they have a few fears, but excitement is growing as they both sense God is doing an amazing thing in their relationship.

However, there are significant secrets hidden in each of their hearts. Each has engaged in pornography and masturbation, though it's Shaina who is more actively pursuing porn online. She is most drawn to lesbian stories in the sites she visits.

Shaina has been encouraged that, since her relationship with Michael became serious, her struggle with lust seems less intense, even if she's still giving into temptation. She's thought to herself, "God must be preparing me to marry him. Maybe when I'm married to him, the temptations toward women will go away all together?"

Michael would be shocked to know that Shaina struggles with porn. It's completely off his radar that women would be tempted in that way. He's mentioned several times that "men really wrestle with lust . . . it's a guy thing." She wants to be confident in his love for her, but his comments have tempted her to feel dirty and ashamed because she's looked at porn for years—lesbian porn at that—and *isn't* a guy.

Should she be honest with him, or just with her two closest female friends who can keep her accountable? Wouldn't it be more hurtful for him to know? After all, her private fantasy life isn't really hurting anything, is it?

Maybe you connect with one of these stories. You're engaged to someone you truly love and yet you wrestle with knowing exactly what you should share with your

fiancé(e) about your past sexual experiences and your present temptations and struggles.

Perhaps you're not in a relationship at all right now, but you'd like to be married in the future. You're anxious about the *how*, the *what*, the *when*, and the *how much* of sharing the parts of your story that include sexual struggle and sin.

These are important things to seriously and prayerfully consider *before* you get engaged, and even more crucial to consider before you get married.

But what happens when a couple enters marriage and they *don't* really know each other? Wise premarital counseling addresses important issues of family history, depth of faith in Jesus, finances, children, sex, roles of each spouse, desires for lifestyle (standard of living, social life, ministry involvement), etc. However, people often marry having avoided, or barely discussed, a critical component of their story: sexual history.

Sexual history refers to experiences of sexual activity with another person, or with oneself, sometimes through technology-based communication and/or sexual fantasy. Knowing a person's sexual history includes understanding what his or her struggle has looked like in terms of length of time, frequency of giving way to temptation, attempts to fight and overcome sin, and a willingness or resistance to be transparent and accountable with others. Sexual history also includes traumatic experiences of being sexually harassed or abused.

There are any number of reasons dating people (and premarital counselors) avoid discussing sexual history:

1. **Fear.** *It's scary and feels too vulnerable. Will my boyfriend or girlfriend reject me? Is my past or present struggle too much for him or her to handle?*
2. **Some think, "Let the past be the past."** *Sharing this will be more damaging than helpful. Leave it alone and trust God to work things out.*
3. **Private sin struggles.** Pornography, masturbation, sexual hookups, mental fantasies, etc. may seem to lose some of their tempting power in the euphoria of a new dating relationship. It's easy to think that perhaps your relationship with this person has solved the problem, as Shaina believed.
4. **Shame.** Derrick had kept his porn struggle hidden from everyone until that fateful moment in the counselor's office. Shame is a persuasive yet destructive force that leads many to keep secret sin in the dark.
5. **Feeling intimidated.** Therefore, they avoid them altogether. Pastors, mentors, and counselors allow personal fears and feelings of insecurity to inhibit the necessary probing into these sensitive issues.

For couples to grow into an honest, truly knowing-each-other level of intimacy, it takes time, risk, and vulnerability. This needs to begin in the dating relationship, as both man and woman wisely open up their true selves, one to the other. Based on that true knowledge of each other, including sexual history and present struggles, each can discern if this is a relationship they want to commit to for life. For this to happen wisely and thoroughly, couples need other trusted people to help them navigate these crucial and often scary conversations—*before* they get engaged.

Before a couple gets engaged, they should be able to say, "I know you. I know your story, strengths, weaknesses, temptations, sins and the pattern of your life."

make a wise decision regarding a lifetime investment into a marriage. Sexual history is certainly one such issue.

Wisdom would lead this couple to invest the time, money, and effort to "go deep" in knowing this house to the best of their ability before purchasing it. Even though they've seen the house with their own eyes and have walked on the floors together, there's more to learn. To avoid the cost and process of a professional home inspection, or to ignore the long-term implications found during the dangerous discoveries of one, would be foolish at best and catastrophic at worst.

Why It's Wise to Discuss Sexual History Before You Get Engaged

Couples are wise to not wait until engagement and "formal" premarital counseling to discuss sexual history. *Pre-engagement* is the time for the messiness to be shared and known—not in traditional premarital counseling, which is almost always pursued post-engagement. Why?

Engagement communicates, *I'm committing myself to marry you, as is. I delight in you, respect you, know you, and will support you to grow in Christ through your joys, trials, temptations, and struggles.* Therefore, *before* a couple gets engaged, they should be able to say, *I know you. I know your story, strengths, weaknesses, temptations, sins and the pattern of your life. I want to marry you and stand by your side, ministering to you as I also receive your love and ministry to me.*

Consider another life-impacting decision that requires thorough knowledge and taking the time to gain detailed information before taking action: buying a house. Most people would never purchase a home before the costly, time-consuming process of completing a home inspection. Buyers want to know everything possible about a house before making one of the most significant purchases of their life. A thorough home inspection, conducted by an experienced and trustworthy person, will produce a report that addresses the true condition of that house, from the roof to the foundation. A well-done home inspection brings every problem—both present and potential—into the light. Relationships are much more complex than a physical structure—and thus the importance of knowing potential challenges is that much more crucial!

If it's commonly accepted as wise to inspect a house, how much more so for couples to do the hard work of knowing, and being known by, each other as thoroughly as possible before committing to marriage? A man and woman need to know each other's external and internal issues, both past and present, so that they can

Committing yourself to marry a person is so much weightier than buying a house! Taking the time, effort, and vulnerability to truly know a potential spouse isn't an "inspection"—it's a way to show humble love to one another and build trust. Rest assured, God delights in honesty and is committed to helping his children walk in the light before him and each other.

Jesus Strengthens and Comforts You in the Process of Sharing Your Sexual History

Sharing your sexual history can be a scary thing to consider. The Lord says that honesty is a good and necessary part of being joined with other Christians (see Ephesians 4:25). If honesty is crucial for our relationships in the church, how much more important is it for those who are preparing to join in the most intimate of unions? Here are some encouraging truths to consider as you prepare to be completely honest with a potential future spouse.

You're not alone. One of the beautiful facets of a Christ-centered relationship is that it's not just a twosome. Jesus is with you to guide, encourage, and enable you to do the right thing and walk in the light rather than hide. (see Ecclesiastes 4:9–12)

God promises mercy to those who walk in the light. Proverbs 28:13 contains a sweet promise and a sober warning as well: "Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy." A lack of joy and freedom in Christ, versus God's mercy and grace—which reality do you want to live in? Which of these qualities do you want to be embedded in the foundation of your relationship? Jesus already knows us fully and loves us completely. This truth compels us to confess and turn from sin, which is the invitation given to us in the gospel! Humility before God in acknowledging your need of his gracious love will

God forgives our sin and redeems our past. As God forgives you, you and your future spouse will have many opportunities to offer and ask for forgiveness, participating in Christ's work of redemption in each other's lives (see Colossians 3:12-17). Your relationship becomes a testament to the power of the gospel to make all things new, and to restore years of sinful living. In fact, one of the beautiful ways that God uses the unique "one-flesh" union between husbands and wives is to give them a 24/7/365 experience of being known, unashamed, and

Jesus is our eternal companion and spouse. Finally, Jesus is with you now and forever, and will never abandon you. Your relationship may not survive the vulnerable process of sharing your sexual past. It's better to know now, before making lifelong marriage vows, if this person can accept and be committed to the real you.

Ellen Dykas is the Women's Ministry Coordinator at HARVEST USA. Ellen's passion is coming alongside women in their spiritual journey.

A stylized illustration of a man and a woman sitting at a round table, engaged in conversation. The man, on the left, is wearing a white shirt and a dark tie, holding a glass of coffee. The woman, on the right, is wearing a dark top and is also holding a glass of coffee. They are both looking towards each other. The background is a simple light gray wall.

Your Dating Relationship and Your Sexual Past

How Much to Share

☐ AGE
 ☐ SEX
☐ SEXUAL ORIENTATION
 ☒ SEXUAL ACTIVITY
☐ SEXUALITY
 ☒ SEX

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Ellen Dykas





How Our Marriage Survived My Gender Dysphoria

By Anonymous

In 2015 I began to struggle with gender transitioning and whether God's Word would allow me to live as a woman. God's answer to me was a resounding "NO!" This is my story.

The question of my gender identity began tugging at me during early childhood when I found a bag of girl's dresses in our garage. I secretly tried on every dress. Fast forward a few years, my subsequent struggle with pornography began as a pre-teen when a neighborhood friend and I discovered a box of old pornographic magazines in one of the local farmer's abandoned cars. It was a struggle that would last for the next 35 years.

My earthly father led me to the Lord at the age of seven after attending a local church camp. Diane and I met at that very same camp ten years later. During the two years that we dated, I shared with her my struggle with pornography. In spite of this, my bride agreed to marry me and walk alongside me. You see, both of us believed in the common fallacy that marriage would be the answer to my struggle with lust. We were wrong! Instead, our marriage would yo-yo for the next 25 years. At times, when our walk with Christ was maturing, our marriage was amazing. In between, when I struggled with porn, our relationship turned distant and resentful; each time, little by little, my sin would slowly escalate. Yes, sin does that. You don't skip from A to M to Z; instead, you progress slowly from A to B to C. And when you reach M or Z, you wonder, "How did I get here?"

After twenty years of marriage my lustful desires began to escalate exponentially, to the point where I began wearing women's undergarments, a habit which slowly grew into full blown cross-dressing. After reading about Bruce Jenner's transition to Caitlyn in 2015, I began to seriously consider the possibility of transitioning, myself. And several months after Diane and I celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary, I shared with her my desire to experiment with living as a woman. My desire to dress as a woman was no longer enough. Hence, I was about to enter the next phase of my struggle with lust, covetousness, and idolatry.

I confessed to my bride, not only that I wanted to live as a woman, but that I wanted her to share in my gender dysphoria, embracing this journey with me! You see, I believed we could continue to enjoy life together, only this time as two women. And I also believed that, by becoming a woman, I could finally conquer my struggle with lust that had persecuted me now for more than 35 years. I so wanted this struggle to end that I was willing to do anything. I questioned God: "Why did you make me this way? Why did you put such strong sexual desires in me? I just want to live for you, but I cannot put to death this sin in my life!"

Satan appeared to be winning the battle for my life, our marriage, and our family, but God had other plans! Over

the next four difficult years, he worked miraculously in our lives and our marriage, pursuing us in different ways and maturing our faith, while burning the sin from my heart and life. And, although we were both believers, because of our different reactions to my gender dysphoria God led us both on two remarkable, contrasting journeys.

Diane turned completely to God for her strength, crying out to him from the beginning. He walked her through what she now describes as the most agonizing time of her life. In time, God revealed to Diane that she had made *me*

her god! Without realizing it, she had been placing her trust in me, instead of him, and I had become her idol. With this realization, God provided Diane comfort. Faithful and obedient, she kept praying and began relying exclusively on him.

I wish the same had been true for me. I tried having it both ways, keeping myself in church, weekly men's Bible studies, even accountability groups, and discipleship with a fellow brother in Christ who struggled with pornography like I did. But I still allowed pornography and my own sinful desires to consume my thoughts, convincing myself that God would be OK if I chose to live as a woman. And, thus I continued to justify my own sinful desires. After all, since he made me, he also must have made these desires and feelings as well!

As my struggle with gender dysphoria advanced, it appeared to be the answer to my life-long struggle with pornography. Or so I thought! What I found was that, when I wasn't able to cross-dress frequently, that old struggle with pornography would return. Not only had my gender dysphoria not healed my pornography addiction, but in time, it even escalated it! Slowly, I was becoming what I really loved. Yes, I loved God, but I loved my sin more. And my sin was *idolatry*, plain and simple.

In her obedience to God, Diane saw my situation clearly. But, stubborn and rebellious, I was blind to God's truth because I wanted to walk with my Lord and Savior *and* live in my sin! I became the double-minded man described in James 1:6-8: "One who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

But God was still faithful. He pursued me, even when I failed to pursue Him, in spite of my doublemindedness and false assumptions held onto since my youth. What I'd originally thought of as 'a small compromise' had enslaved me over time, culminating in gender dysphoria and threatening my marriage. Rules that I thought didn't apply to me, or were outdated and limited my fun, I dismissed. Thinking I could create my own boundaries, I failed to see that God's laws were intended to protect me.

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Blindness caused by sin is why many will disagree with me, and I realize that, in today's culture, my point of view will not be a popular one. But having traveled this journey, I know now beyond a shadow of a doubt that my gender dysphoria was rooted in my rebellion against God. I allowed lust to reign in my life for all those years. And that lust ballooned into even uglier sins—idolatry, selfishness, and covetousness—sins that I cherished over my Savior. I was guilty of interpreting God's Word through the lens of a secular worldview and I chose what I thought best suited me! In full rebellion, I even used Scripture to justify my actions, dismissing those who tried to speak truth to me.

Together, Diane and I sought help from numerous Christian counseling services, only to be turned away because they did not feel prepared to deal with the gender dysphoria struggle. Then, in a unique and unexpected way, God led Diane to the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF) where she restarted her college education. Amazingly, God personally used those courses to minister to both of us, becoming our personal counselor, himself.

Then we learned about HARVEST USA. Together, we attended a conference where we listened to Tim Geiger speak on transgenderism. Afterward, I reached out to Tim for help and over the next six months, Tim disciplined me via Skype. Diane also received counseling from HARVEST USA staff as well. At the conclusion of our remote counseling sessions, we traveled to Philadelphia for intensive face-to-face counseling with Tim and several other members of the HARVEST USA staff who disciplined us and prayed with us.

Diane and I are so thankful that God provided HARVEST USA to walk faithfully alongside of us.

Several months after our time at HARVEST USA, God revealed my rebellion to me, caused by my sins of lust, covetousness and idolatry. While I was praying one day, God even spoke out loud to me when I heard a literal voice say, "It is done." I was stunned! I looked around to see if anyone else was present, but I was alone. Immediately, I knew our tribulation was over. As I continued to move toward God in repentance, about a week later he placed the beautiful old hymn "I Surrender All" in my heart, one I had learned as a child. From that moment on, God removed my sinful desires, released me from my self-imposed yoke of spiritual blindness, and began to repair the destruction I had sown.

Only now can both Diane and I fully appreciate God's redemption in our marriage. If you struggle with pornography, gender dysphoria, or any other sin, remember God's promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). When Diane and I were married, God already knew this tribulation was ahead of us. He never allowed us to give up on our covenant with him or our marriage. If you are his child, he will never give up on you, either! My prayer is that my own testimony will lead you to allow God to write his story with your life. He loves you more than you will ever know!

In this article, we do not disclose our ministry recipient's real name and we refer to his wife as "Diane" because they have chosen to remain anonymous.



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