

*foreword by*  
Dr. Mark Laaser

HOW SEXUAL BROKENNESS  
REVEALS OUR WAY TO HEALING

# unwanted

Jay Stringer

*Unwanted* is, without rival, the best book on broken sexuality I have ever read. It is heartbreaking and hope-restoring, and with immense kindness, it proceeds to where most work stalls and refuses to enter. Jay's research is groundbreaking. No one has pursued these dark waters with as much light-offering, data-bound research. Even more, Jay offers the heart of the gospel in a manner that doesn't trivialize sin or addiction but lifts the battle up to the ambivalence we have about freedom. This book will be a classic that anchors us in brilliant research, soul honesty, and biblical reflection.

DAN B. ALLENDER, PHD, author of *Healing the Wounded Heart* and  
coauthor of *God Loves Sex*

Over the past twenty-five years of ministry, I've witnessed many men and women floundering in a sea of hopelessness due to their own (or a spouse's) sexual brokenness. That's why I'm so excited about and grateful for Jay's work in the field of sexual addiction and restoration. If you're hungry for deep healing, or searching for practical ways to help others heal from unhealthy emotional entanglements and sexual dysfunction, *Unwanted* will be an incredibly sharp tool in your tool belt!

SHANNON ETHRIDGE, MA, author of *Every Woman's Battle*

Jay Stringer's *Unwanted* demonstrates a depth of insight and wisdom that I found stunning! I have been counseling men and women in the church who are battling with sexual brokenness for over thirty years and have written fifteen books on the subject. Yet I found Jay's grasp of the subject profound, and the graphic illustrations he used to summarize various points were worth the price of the book alone. It will truly help many come out of their shame and finally find freedom. Stringer is a top gun, and I would fly with him into combat anytime!

DR. TED ROBERTS, cofounder of Pure Desire Ministries International

As bleak as the landscape of sexual brokenness may appear, God always raises up his people to proclaim a path to healing and redemption. Jay Stringer is one of those voices. *Unwanted* is a courageous, insightful work that challenges us to look beyond the *what* into the *why* of our sexual sin. This book will undoubtedly equip many on the journey to freedom.

DR. JULI SLATTERY, cofounder of Authentic Intimacy and  
author of *Rethinking Sexuality*

*Unwanted*'s breakthrough research into the origins of sexual brokenness convincingly shows why tips and techniques to combat it have failed to lead to the freedom we desire and are designed to enjoy. *Unwanted* is a life-giving room of grace where all of us can find relief from the heartache of sexual shame. Jay Stringer invites you to know your story and dare to believe that you will be loved more—not less—for what it reveals. The culture, including the church, has needed this book for decades. Thousands will experience God's kindness and healing through it.

BRUCE MCNICOL, president of Trueface

If sexuality is anything, it's complicated! This thing that involves our whole selves—body, mind, spirit—this thing that can compel our behavior but is also shaped by our habits. In *Unwanted*, Jay Stringer shines a spotlight on one important aspect of our sexual lives—our personal history, particularly the way our sexuality intersects with our brokenness over time. By inviting us to be compassionate with ourselves and curious about our story, he helps us to look beyond the shame and embarrassment that so often deaden us and toward real, authentic, healthy ways of relating to ourselves, our loved ones, our community, and even God.

DEBRA HIRSCH, author of *Redeeming Sex*

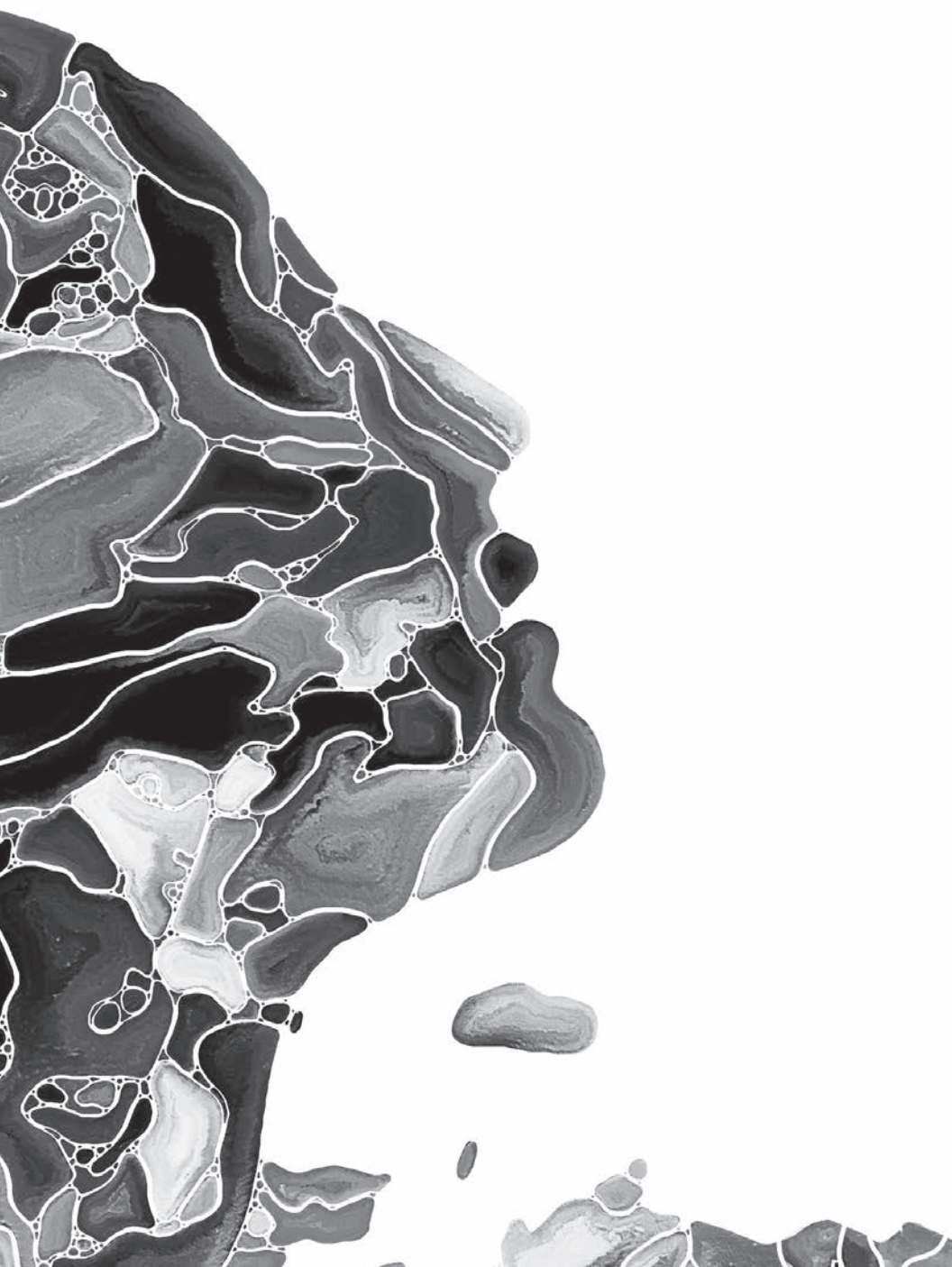
A thorough theoretical framework and nuanced vocabulary are critical tools when dealing with unwanted sexual desires, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Even with these, the journey to persevere requires real stories of personal discovery and hope. In *Unwanted*, Jay Stringer not only provides a set of tools to understand these matters but also offers a story and vision for those who find themselves in dark places.

WILLIAM M. STRUTHERS, author of *Wired for Intimacy*

Wow. This book is a weapon for freedom and flourishing in a world bombarded with sexual pain and brokenness. If you are tired of the blame-and-shame methods filled with guilt and fear around sex, Jay offers a life-changing alternative: restored sexual wholeness and flourishing. Sex is good? Indeed. Refreshingly honest and humble, Jay refuses avoidance and despair around the most painful oppression of our time. Using a divine strategy with incredible skill, Jay enters our brokenness and finds the keys to our sexual freedom and wholeness within the depth of our pain. Get this book. Read this book. Let the healing and freedom come.

DANIELLE STRICKLAND, cofounder of Infitum and  
author of *The Ultimate Exodus*

**unwanted**



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Jay Stringer

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*Unwanted: How Sexual Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing*

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## Foreword

WE ARE IN THE MIDST of a great sexual crisis in our culture. Despite our having more knowledge than ever about relationships, how our brains process and create pleasure, and how God ultimately designed us for sexual desires, sexual brokenness is at an all-time high. The beauty and holiness of sexuality have been unimaginably corrupted by the sex-trade industry, the explosive growth and ubiquity of pornography, and a fading moral code guarding any degree of sanctity about sex. Many are calling this crisis a “tsunami,” like the one that hit Japan some years ago. The fallout and debris are polluting our oceans.

At such a time as this, in which the sexual crisis is ever growing, we immensely need this book. While we recognize the calamity of unwanted sexual behavior in our world today, we do not grieve as those without hope: At the heart of the gospel is the belief that our brokenness does not separate us from the love of God. It *connects* us.

One of the standard Christian responses to sexual brokenness has been to simply attempt to “turn off” sexual fantasy or problematic sexual behavior. We do this, at times, for good reasons: We do not want our hearts seduced by the things of this

world. Most of us truly want to honor God with our lives. But saying no to sexual perversion is not an adequate paradigm for *recovery*. In Romans 12:2, the apostle Paul offered a fuller vision for how our hearts and minds change. We are instructed not to be conformed to the ways of the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Renewing our minds is not about turning *off* our minds. It is about turning *to* pursue the deepest affections God has given us.

Modern neuroscientific research has demonstrated the scientific accuracy of Paul's claim by showing the brain is in fact plastic. That is to say, it can actually build new pathways and new associations! This is a physiological dynamic, not just a spiritual one. I participated in a brain scan study at Vanderbilt University in which the researchers could actually see a new pathway in my brain. This pathway had the ability to override, even at a deep level in my brain, the powerful effects of all the pornography and sexual activity that I had participated in during the years of my own sexual addiction. I have now been in recovery for thirty-one years, and my brain has been transformed and renewed.

I have seen thousands of people with sexual brokenness begin their own journeys to transformation. One of the ways this has happened is through a concept I pioneered over three decades of ministry and counseling. This concept, now faithfully advanced in Jay Stringer's work, is that our sexual fantasies are nothing to be ashamed of. They are, in fact, our greatest teachers.

Many people have told me they almost fell out of their chairs when they heard me speak about this. My point is that sexual fantasy is often created out of a need to satisfy the deepest emotional and spiritual longings we have. For example, it is no wonder many of the men I counsel often fantasize when they

are lonely or angry. The fantasy is an attempt to reconcile, in their own strength, all that seems broken around them. When we pay attention, sexual fantasies are messengers from our souls to reveal our deepest longings. And these longings are good.

This is just one of the many reasons I'm grateful for *Unwanted*. This is a book centered on an audacious claim: The specifics of your sexual brokenness can reveal your unique way to healing. Jay Stringer addresses the adverse impact of our sin and addiction while showing us how the particulars of these realities can guide us to our long-awaited healing and liberation. It is my sincere hope that this book is read widely, both within and outside the church.

One of my greatest joys is getting to know some of the bright emerging thought leaders in this field. Such a man is Jay Stringer. *Unwanted* is full of Jay's clinical skill, deep theological understanding, and groundbreaking research that I know you will find fascinating. His ardent insight and heart for the gospel are going to shape the field for years to come. You will pick this book up because of your struggle with unwanted sexual behavior, but through its pages, you will discover a fuller vision of healing and desire than you ever imagined.

This book is a blessing, one that I know you will greatly benefit from.

*Mark Laaser, MDiv, PhD*

*Faithful & True*

APRIL 12, 2018



## Introduction

*The young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God.*

BRUCE MARSHALL, *The World, The Flesh, and Father Smith*

*When you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.*

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Beyond Good and Evil*

A MAN I WAS COUNSELING—I'll call him Jeffrey—sat in my office a week before Christmas. It was our first session together, after he had been arrested on charges of soliciting prostitution. Jeffrey is one of hundreds of thousands of men who buy sex in the United States. He told me he had bought sex on Saturday mornings since his college days in Pennsylvania. Halfway into our session he remarked, "I don't understand all the reasons I do this. But I know there is an amazing feeling that comes over me when I lock eyes with a woman on the streets."

I asked Jeffrey to tell me a bit about what Saturday mornings were like for him as a child. He replied, "My mom would usually leave my older brother and me home alone on the weekends because she worked a second job. We were always on the verge of poverty, and she was gone quite a bit." His father had left the family when Jeffrey was eleven years old. He continued, "My older brother was more of a loner. He could stay inside listening to music or playing video games for hours. I wasn't like that. I usually just rode my bike around the neighborhood."

I asked Jeffrey if he may have been out looking to find something or someone if he rode his bike on a usual basis.

He thought for a moment and said, “Sure. I remember cruising through my neighborhood trying to find girls I knew from middle school. I would ride around for hours just to see if I could get ‘that look’ from a classmate.”

Twenty years later, unbeknownst to him, Jeffrey’s Saturday-morning ritual was essentially the same. The bike became an SUV. Cruising around for a middle-school crush became his approach to finding exploited women. A mom with a second job was now a spouse whose job at a concert venue required her to work weekends. As an adult, Jeffrey was recreating the dynamics of his childhood. Like most of us, though, he had no awareness of doing so.

At the end of our first session, it was apparent that Jeffrey’s strategy to ride away from the loneliness and anger of a painful childhood had become the very vehicle now driving him into a life of crisis. This is often the case with our unwanted sexual behavior. The behaviors that help us survive our formative exiles become increasingly problematic when we expect them to work over a lifetime.

The faces Jeffrey sought out in middle school, which brought him a sense of validation and even rest, were now costing him more than tens of thousands of dollars a year when we added up all of the expenses associated with buying sex. These financial costs were only a microcosm of all the other damage occurring in his life: secrecy and isolation in his marriage, anxiety about losing his corporate position if he were discovered, and a deep-seated belief that shame would be his closest ally. The more he bought sex, the more unwanted he felt in every realm of life.

### **What Is Unwanted Sexual Behavior?**

Unwanted sexual behavior is any sexual behavior that continues to persist in our lives despite our best efforts to change it. This

could be pornography use, affairs, using hookup apps, or buying sex. Our behavior could meet the criteria for hypersexual or compulsive sexual behavior, but it could also involve infrequent struggles that keep us from a life of sexual integrity. The longer our unwanted sexual behavior persists unaddressed, the more likely it is that we will feel unwanted as well.

You might be able to relate to Jeffrey in some way. Maybe you find yourself involved in sexual behavior that is unwanted. Or maybe you have loved ones struggling with unwanted sexual behavior and are trying to understand why they indulge in behavior that so clearly damages the relationships they claim to care about most.

### ***The Crisis of Unwanted Sexual Behavior***

The statistics associated with unwanted sexual behavior in our world are staggering. The Society for the Advancement of Sexual Health conservatively estimates that between 3 percent and 5 percent of all Americans can be classified as addicted to sex.<sup>1</sup> This represents an alarming nine to sixteen million people. Additionally, 64 percent of thirteen- to twenty-four-year-olds intentionally watch pornography at least once a week.<sup>2</sup> By the time children become teens and young adults, 62 percent of them will have received a sext (sexually explicit image via text), and 41 percent will have sent one.<sup>3</sup> And if all that were not enough, the average age of initial involvement in prostitution for girls is estimated between fourteen and eighteen years of age.<sup>4</sup>

Pornography is the most predominant form of unwanted sexual behavior, infiltrating every aspect of the places we live, work, and worship. Consider these statistics:

- Porn use will nearly double the probability of a couple's getting divorced.<sup>5</sup>



- Approximately 35 percent of all Internet downloads are porn related.<sup>6</sup>
- Porn sites receive more monthly traffic than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined.<sup>7</sup>
- Porn is a \$97 billion industry, with as much as \$12 billion of that coming from the US.<sup>8</sup>
- About 57 percent of our pastors and 64 percent of our youth pastors struggle or have struggled with pornography.<sup>9</sup>

It should be clear that what Jeffrey is experiencing is not a unique or isolated case.

### ***Lust-Centered Approaches Are Ineffective***

The overwhelmingly standard evangelical response to sexual brokenness has been to address it through the lens of “lust management,” even declaring war against it. This approach has oversimplified and trivialized a far more complex issue within human sexuality. Efforts to eliminate lust will set us up to manage our sexual lives with a tourniquet. We spend the best years of our lives attempting to stop the flow of lust through darting our eyes from beautiful people, slapping rubber bands around our wrists when we have sexual thoughts, and asking accountability partners, in an attempt to stay vulnerable in community, to keep account of what erotic websites we’ve visited. I think we can all agree this cannot be what God had in mind for sex and community. The reality that more than half our faith leaders and the great majority of Christians view pornography should indicate that our strategies have proven ineffective.

Our inability to succeed in purity only compounds our pain. And then, in our pain, we default to the same ineffective

treatment plan. We spend time in prayer, fast, pursue accountability, and hope that God might change us. The complexity is that the underlying issues that drive our sexual lust and anger do not get examined.

How many of us have ever asked God to help us *understand* our lust? This book is an invitation to heal, but to do so, your current framework for understanding and treating your problems will likely need to be abandoned.

### ***Fantasies Are Road Maps***

Despite the overwhelming grip of shame and guilt, I do not believe that sexual fantasies are something to condemn. Sexual arousal is one of the greatest gifts God has given us, and we do not need to spend a lifetime annihilating it. And although some sexual behavior is abhorrent and should be discontinued, addressing sexual struggles *through the lens* of abhorrent behavior intensifies shame, and shames drives us deeper into the very behavior we wish to stop.

There is another approach. It begins by *listening to our lust*.

Sexual failures, Internet searches, and browser histories expose our sin, but far more, they are road maps. Sexual brokenness pinpoints the location of our past harm and highlights the current roadblocks that keep us from the freedom we desire. If we are willing to listen, our sexual struggles will have so much to teach us.

You may not like the “map” you’ve been given, but to navigate your way out of unwanted sexual behavior, you will need to pay closer attention to what it desires to show you. One evening of deliberate curiosity for your sexual fantasies will take you further into transformation than a thousand nights of prayerful despair.

## **Sexual Brokenness: The Geography of God's Arrival**

Scripture is clear that God moves into human struggle, rather than teleporting us out of it. At the beginning of the Gospel of John, God moves so much into human struggle that he takes on our *sarx*—the New Testament word for the vulnerable, prone-to-sin form of flesh—and “move[s] into the neighborhood” (1:14, MSG). Our sexual brokenness is the geography of God’s arrival.

It is my conviction that the God of the universe is neither surprised by nor ashamed of the sexual behavior we participate in. Instead, he understands it to be the very stage through which the work of redemption will be played out in our lives. Present sin is the doorway to the wider work of the gospel to bring healing to the wounds of the past and comfort, even power, to the difficulties of the present. Therefore, the sooner we assume a posture of curiosity for our sexual brokenness, the more we will prepare our hearts for the redemptive work ahead.

God approaches us for our joy, not due to his disappointment in us. His heart is to exchange beauty for ashes, joy for mourning, and praise for despair (see Isaiah 61:3). There is no depth of shame that the love of God cannot reach. There is no story he cannot redeem. The paradox of the gospel is that our failures do not condemn us; they connect us.

In writing this book, I wanted to understand the key drivers of unwanted sexual behavior. Why do we choose some sexual behavior and fantasies and not others? In preparation, I read books, listened to podcasts, and met with leaders and organizations pioneering the fight against pornography. Some brought accountability where there was isolation. A number of organizations introduced software to block the ubiquity of erotic content. And others offered a message of love to those experiencing despair. Although I support each of these endeavors,

I knew from my work with clients that there was more going on in their sexual behavior, and therefore more was needed to unlock the doors to freedom.

As a licensed mental-health counselor and ordained minister, I help men and women who tend to have two distinct story lines. For one, they disclose a conscious decision to counteract their current unwanted emotions and experiences. Some feel that their needs are not met and seek out affairs to give them surrogate but shameful experiences of connection. Others struggle with a baseline level of misery and discover that pornography use offers them a temporary reprieve from the difficulties of life.

After I hear my clients' present-day struggles, a second story line often emerges rooted in the formative years of their childhood. They consistently tell stories of unwanted experiences of abandonment or bullying, vague references to "awkward" or "weird" sexual moments with people trusted within their families, experimenting with neighborhood friends, finding family members' porn stashes in "hidden" yet completely obvious locations, and dynamics with mothers or fathers that required deep emotional enmeshment. These two converging story lines unfolding in my clients' stories revealed the foundational premise of this book: The formative experiences of our childhood (loneliness, pain, sexual arousal, secrecy, and relational ambivalence) are all being repeated in our unwanted sexual behavior as adults.

My work with clients and conversations with leaders in the field led me to the conviction that comprehensive research was needed to get to the root of what is driving unwanted sexual behavior. To do this, I designed an instrument containing more than one hundred questions to collect primary data from individuals who were struggling with sexual behavior they wished to

stop. (The survey tables can be found at the back of this book in the appendix.)

More than 3,800 people participated in my study, one of the largest of its kind. The respondents were men and women who sought out nationally and internationally known organizations for guidance in the midst of their sexual brokenness. Their collective courage to discuss some of the most intimate portions of their stories is now revealing insights that will change the course of how we understand and treat unwanted sexual behavior in the decades to come. Throughout this book, I will reveal the key drivers of unwanted sexual behavior I learned from the research. What I can tell you from the outset is that the research shows that our sexual struggles are not random or capricious. There are always reasons. If you want to find freedom, it begins by identifying your specific reasons.

The research findings frame the three parts to this book. Part 1 explores the question “How Did I Get Here?” This section will take you on a journey into the most formative years of your life. You will learn the key childhood events and relational dynamics that most predicted a lifetime of unwanted sexual behavior. Part 2 addresses the question “Why Do I Stay?” This section will explore the present-day difficulties in your life that are most common with thousands of men and women remaining trapped in sexual brokenness. Until these specific drivers are transformed, the use of unwanted sexual behavior is often necessitated. And finally, part 3 answers the question “How Do I Get Out of Here?” My hope is that by the time you arrive at this question, parts 1 and 2 will have more or less convinced you that until you understand the reasons for your unwanted sexual behavior, attempts to get away from its grip are futile. You will learn how to get out, but each step is rooted in the wisdom gained in the previous two sections.

## My Story

We are more likely to be ashamed of our unwanted sexual behavior when we do not understand it. Recognizing the meaning of my fantasies has been one of the most significant aspects of my journey into sexual wholeness.

Several years ago, I found myself on a therapist's couch exploring sexual fantasies I had been troubled by and ashamed of for more than a decade. Before I named the specifics of my unwanted sexual behavior, I told my therapist that I considered never talking about it in therapy. I, like many of my professional colleagues, had a deep fear that my sexual brokenness would be grounds for disqualification within ministry. She asked me how I had come to this conclusion and noted how odd it would be for me to be involved with the population of men and women I work with without addressing a great deal of my own sexual life. Her words to me were liberating because she located me in my life story, not in my perceived failure.

I went on to tell her some of the unique aspects of my fantasy life and how they had been present with me since I was an early teen. I put my head down and paused. She waited to speak until after I looked back up. "Jay, tell me again about where you come from. What was your role in your family?"

I am a therapist, and I was annoyed at her question. I would have preferred her condemnation. I did not want to talk about my family. I wanted her to be troubled by my confession, even to imply that I should second-guess my desire to be a therapist and minister. She did not do this. Instead, she stood by her question and waited about twenty seconds for me to respond. She was inviting me to *know* and therefore come to *love my story*.

I told her that my parents and siblings used to tell me their problems with one another and how I served as a container for their resentment and concerns.

“If only that were all!” she said playfully. “Anything else?”

I went on to tell her more about my story. I would be an emotional support for my mom when my dad was unhappy or left to attend to his pastoral duties. I even remembered hearing messages on my home answering machine involving various affairs and sexual crises that were happening in the life of the church. I was gifted at being able to read the angry and pain-ridden faces of my mom and offer my life to her as the caring son.

My therapist nodded and said, “And now tell me what you know about the lives of the women who have entered into your fantasy life. I would imagine you are quite gifted in reading their anger and needs. Might it be possible that your fantasies are playing out a similar drama that you played out with your mom?”

I was speechless but felt as if the matrix of my sexual life were finally integrating and clarifying. Her questions helped inform a great deal of my sexual life, including my fantasies, pornography preferences, and style of relating with women. Blankets of shame and condemnation lifted because my therapist was inviting me not primarily to stop my lust but to engage the sexual story I was set up for.

I left the session and wrote down this sentence: “If we fail to engage the ways we were sexualized in the past, we leave open the high probability that these patterns will become more pronounced in the future.” Sexual struggles reveal the truth of our stories in ways that will constantly surprise us.

### **God’s Curious Pursuit**

There is a story in Genesis 16 about an Egyptian teenager by the name of Hagar. She is brought in as a concubine because Abram and Sarai have been struggling with infertility issues for more than ten years. Hagar, whose name means “stranger” or “sojourner,” successfully conceives a child for Abram and

Sarai. But Sarai, the barren wife, turns on Hagar and unleashes mistreatment. Commentators of this story have remarked that this mistreatment has a particularly cruel bent to it, some even suggesting it to be as severe as sexual assault.<sup>10</sup>

In the next scene, Hagar is on the run, heading into the desert, where by all accounts she will die. It is here in the wilderness, the geography of trauma and death, that a miraculous thing happens. The presence of God finds this pregnant teenager and asks her the two best questions any one of us can be asked when we are in distress: “Where have you come from?” and “Where are you going?” (verse 8).

What I want to underscore is that the voice of the Lord is never filled with accusation or frustration. God’s presence invites us to greater reflection as to how our unwanted lives became the way they are today.

Far more than trying to diagnose you as a sinner or addict, I will ask you questions. You will read about individual accounts and research findings from men and women whose stories have remarkable similarities to your own. Your task is not to draw hard-and-fast conclusions but to be intrigued by the data. Our sexual brokenness, if we pay attention, is revealing our way to healing. As we begin this journey, ask yourself, *Where is it that I come from? And where is it that I am going?* May your heart be curious as you study the great tragedy and beauty that your story reveals.





# A THEOLOGY OF UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED why God made us so sexual, especially when it often seems to plague us with shame? I've wondered the same thing. What I am struck by is the reality that sex was God's idea. And I have to believe that because he invented it, he knows the power it will render in our lives.

Let's think about that: God is the designer of erotic pleasure. The clitoris, for example, is the only organ in the human body that serves no other function except for providing an avenue to sexual pleasure. God's mind, like ours, is sexual. We are made in his image and therefore don't need to feel ashamed that we are sexual beings.

Contrary to what we often conclude at the height of our sexual brokenness, our sexuality is not an impediment to knowing God. Sex shows us just how much he is committed to giving

us beauty and pleasure. Sex, if we allow it, will awaken us to the deepest reservoirs in our souls for pleasure and connection. There will be times we experience the madness of our sexual desire, but there are also times when we allow the passion of sex to lead us to imagination of how God desires us to pursue all aspects of our lives. Sex is one of the most important means through which we will discover the heart of God.

Rather than fearing we're too sexual, we should be more concerned that we have not yet become sexual enough. When I spend time with people experiencing lifelong struggles with unwanted sexual behavior, especially pornography, I'm always struck by how little they enjoy sex. God gave us the most remarkable minds and bodies, specially designed to experience the fullness of fantasy and pleasure. If we move out from our hovels of sexual shame and meaningless hookups, there is so much more awaiting us as children of God.

Central to Christian theology is that men and women are sexual beings who are made in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 says, "God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (NLT). Bearing God's image is the essential feature of our identity. No affair, no addiction, and no sexual shame can destroy it.

The concept of an image bearer has been used throughout various empires around the world. Typically, leaders or dictators would construct statues or manufacture coins that bore their images to remind their people about whom they served. Israel's God, however, is not satisfied with stone statues and manufactured coins; he has something much more beautiful in mind. God creates men and women to reveal his glory—to show the whole world what he is all about.

We see the image of God in one another when a friend

pursues us in a season of heartache, when we spend time at a barbeque with friends during an endless summer night, and when we laugh heartily at a good joke. But we see our image-bearing potential most vividly, yet mysteriously, in the stunning experience of sex.

## Evil

I am asking you to consider the possibility that evil has been plotting against your sexuality throughout your life. The evil one, Satan, wants to destroy the glory of God, but he cannot. Therefore, he goes after what most *images* this God: women, men, boys, and girls.<sup>1</sup> In the same way that a terrorist might attack the children of a president because a direct attack is too risky, the evil one seeks to mar the distinctive beauty that God gives to us as his children. If you were to set out to attack the image of God, you would need to do more than ridicule how worthless a human pinky toe appears. Instead, you would plot after the most vulnerable, beautiful, and powerful dimension of who we are: our sexuality. This is the mind of evil.

According to John 10:10, the intention of the evil one is to “steal and kill and destroy.” If this is true, I think it is safe to assume that evil would be working deliberately to ruin our sexuality with this threefold approach. C. S. Lewis, in the preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, wrote,

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this book, I intend to keep the line of tension between these two poles taut. Acknowledging the role of evil never negates personal responsibility to mature, and in striving for integrity, we can never underestimate the intent of evil to sideline us.

Evil hates the beauty of sex, and because it cannot abolish its existence, it works to corrupt its essence. Evil succeeds every time we think of sex and subsequently feel damaged, ruined, and out of control in lust. It has completed massive research on us and knows we are far more likely to pursue shameful sexual behavior when we are experiencing difficult emotions. It also knows we are far more likely to be at war with our desires than to pursue greater beauty for our sexual stories. We may find ourselves longing for marriage or a better marriage, but disappointment is all that ever seems to pass. In our loneliness and anger, we may not choose the maturity of growth; instead we accept the invitation of evil to pursue pornography. Evil seduces us away from personal growth and into an escape that will paradoxically inject us with greater shame.

The evil one's work may appear in overt ways against our sexuality through something like childhood sexual abuse, but his tactics are also more covert. In 2017, the *Boston Globe* released an article titled "The Biggest Threat Facing Middle-Age Men Isn't Smoking or Obesity. It's Loneliness."<sup>3</sup> We live in a day where we have never been so lonely and, at the same time, had such access to pornography. I have to believe that the evil one has schemed for this association.

The way I see the work of evil is like this. For those who have known loneliness, evil seduces them to pursue sex as their most important need. They find sex to be a cheap consolation and in the end discover the original ache of loneliness to be even more intensified. For others, evil will use childhood sexual

abuse to steal their ability to be fully present to the pleasure of sex in adulthood. And for millions of men who live with a baseline level of futility, evil baits them with the promise of power within pornography. When they try to get unhooked, their futility is compounded. Evil's tactics are diverse, but the wreckage of shame often looks the same.

### **Evil's Achilles' Heel**

When we see the power of sex at work in the world, we often hear about it destroying society, not creating thriving societies. But sex is about the flourishing of creation, not the release of tension, the medication of pain, or the power to control another. The ancient Greeks used the word *eros* to refer to the power of sexual (or erotic) love and understood it to be the spark of creation. As the story goes, the world was formless, a black hole of nothingness. But then *eros* entered in. And when it arrived, the whole world had to transform. Mountains rose up, rivers and streams flowed with living water, and flowers blossomed in a brilliant display of color.<sup>4</sup>

The creation-forming power of erotic love highlights the Achilles' heel of evil. Evil cannot create anything out of nothing. It can't clothe a tree with an abundance of beautiful leaves, it can't make hops or grain for beer or spirits, and it can't create the beauty of a human life. But what it can do is promote deforestation, seduce us to drink to the point of alcoholism, and through the production of pornography degrade women and dissolve the integrity of men and women.

The kingdom of darkness is extremely clever, maniacally focused on efficiency. It's been scheming longer than any human empire to mar the things that most reveal God. It wants to destroy the rain forests, promote systems of greed, and pit nations against one another in killing sprees. But worst of all, it

wants to destroy our bodies, to mar the very qualities that make us most like God: our beauty, our ability to give and receive pleasure, and our desire to know and be known.

### **Unwanted Sexual Behavior: Sin or Addiction?**

Approaches to healing that are centered on what is wrong with us will never lead to the type of transformation we desire and deserve. The gospel teaches us that we are beloved before any sexual sin or addiction entered into our lives, and we remain so, even at the height of our brokenness. When sin and addiction language overshadows this belovedness, the inevitable outcome is clinical and theological approaches that rely heavily on behavior modification. When sin and addiction language helps reveal and connect us to our belovedness, the desire to change comes from our pursuit of beauty, not our self-contempt or latest strategy to combat sexual desire.

One of the growing realities in our culture is that we use the word *sin* less and less to describe problematic sexual behavior. The preferred word, if we recognize any disorder at all, is now *addiction*. There are aspects of this shift that I find deeply encouraging. This shift is forcing us to exchange our intellectual laziness for a more curious engagement with the origins of our sexual brokenness. What I am discouraged by, however, is that Scripture uses the most beautiful and wise words I have ever read to talk about sin.

I believe we need a model that integrates sin *and* addiction. I've found that the more I understand what the Bible says about sin, the more I understand the nature of addiction, and the more I understand what science reveals about addiction, the more I understand the nature of sin. These concepts need not be pitted against each other. As we will come to see, they dovetail beautifully.

## **Sin**

I follow the brilliant Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary, in her two propositions related to sin:

1. Discussion of sin should serve the strengthening of Christian faith, not the weakening of it. “Our concepts of sin should never be fashioned or deployed in a manner designed to harm people, to break their spirits, to marginalize them, to destroy their sense of belovedness, or to constrain the conditions of their flourishing.”<sup>5</sup>
2. Sin is a relational category highlighting our separation from God. “To be in sin is to be alienated from God.”<sup>6</sup> When sin is discussed in our culture, we often imply that it occurs when we do “bad” things. A proper biblical understanding of sin, however, recognizes the relational separation that drives our unwanted behavior.

In the Heidelberg Catechism, a Protestant confessional document, there is a question about how human beings know their misery. It’s an odd question, until you understand that the German word for *misery* is *elend*, meaning to be out of one’s native land, with a deep sense of homesickness. Sexual brokenness can feel so miserable precisely because deep within us is a belovedness that aches to return home. The gospel tells us that our belovedness will never change according to our wanderings. But our belovedness is intended to change our wanderings.

In the New Testament, sin is understood to be an organized economy or even a type of regime. Paul, the Bible’s chief theologian, discussed sin in reference to what it is *against*.<sup>7</sup> Sin is anti-law, anti-righteousness, anti-spirit, anti-life, essentially anything against the regime of God.<sup>8</sup> According to Cornelius Plantinga Jr.,



former president of Calvin Theological Seminary, “In the biblical worldview even when sin is devastatingly familiar, it is never normal. It is alien. It doesn’t belong in God’s world.”<sup>9</sup>

The irony of sinful sexual behavior is that it is actually *against* sex. It is not that we want *too much* sex; it is that we want too much *anti-sexual* behavior. We know the beauty and power of sex, but we also know when we are pursuing a deviant imitation of a beautiful erotic life. It is not possible to become too sexual for God. It is possible, however, to grow increasingly trapped in anti-sexual behavior.

The biggest biblical idea about sin is that it is an intruder, and therefore “once in the world, the only way for it to survive is to become a parasite on goodness.”<sup>10</sup> Think this over. In every childhood story we read, the villain could not be an evil genius without first being a genius. We often wonder how particular people in our society, such as pedophiles or corrupt politicians, can be so seemingly out of touch with empathy. The reality, however, is that they are often acutely aware of the desire their victims have to be chosen and delighted in. Those whom we deem most evil are so damaging precisely because they are skilled at using empathy for exploitive means.

The intelligence and exploitive power of evil come from twisting the good gifts God has given. Nothing about sin is created out of nothing; all its power is trafficked from goodness. “Goodness,” said C. S. Lewis, “is, so to speak, itself: badness is only spoiled goodness. And there must be something good first before it can be spoiled.”<sup>11</sup>

Plantinga Jr. went on to say that people “may rebel literally for the hell of it, but this is rare. Usually they are after peace of mind, security, pleasure, *Lebensraum*, freedom, excitement. Evil needs good to be evil. Satan himself, as C. S. Lewis explains, is *God’s* Satan—a creature of God who can be really wicked

only because he comes from the shop of a master and is made from his best stuff.”<sup>12</sup> Through this lens, porn users, sex buyers, and adulterers would be seen as under the influence of evil, which seeks to traffic their longings for legitimate experiences and convert them into desires that will lead, in the end, to pain.

One example of where we can see the influence of evil is in prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation. Men who buy sex often experience alienation and shame for purchasing exploitive, entitled sex. The shame then drives them to buy more sex, all the while increasing the excruciating alienation and trauma of the women and girls (and males) whose bodies are purchased. The compounding interest that evil earns from anti-sexual behavior makes it the most profitable enterprise of all time.<sup>13</sup>

The good news is that in Christ, all our sin—past, present, and future—has been atoned for. Therefore, the purpose of addressing sin should never be to corner heavy-laden people with further evidence of their moral failures. Sin language helps people to name their pain and invites them to consider how good yet humbling it would be to return home.

The Father who waits for us is not ashamed of us. On the contrary, he is a cheerful and indiscriminate host.<sup>14</sup> He offers invitations to everyone, particularly those whom society deems most unclean, unworthy, and perverse. What should make us most uncomfortable about sin is not our failures but how loose God is in his table invitations. Can we really be that loved and desired at the depths of our failures? Sin is an opportunity to be loved abundantly.<sup>15</sup>

### **Addiction**

The contemporary definition of *addiction* is only about a hundred years old and refers to a dysfunctional dependence on drugs

or behavior such as gambling, sex, or eating. Prior to the twentieth century and a few vague references in Shakespeare, you would need to go back to ancient Rome to find a word similar to our modern use of *addiction*. In Rome, *addictus* referred to someone defaulting on a debt and consequently being assigned to a creditor as a slave until the debt was paid off.<sup>16</sup> The usage is ominous, and in my counseling work, men and women struggling with unwanted sexual behavior often use strikingly similar language to refer to their behavior: “No matter how much I want to be free of it, nothing works. I’m enslaved to it until I die.” The tragedy is that their lives bear this out as they forfeit money, reputation, and ultimately the stunning beauty of their lives to unwanted sexual behavior.

World-renowned addiction expert Dr. Gabor Maté wrote, “Emotional isolation, powerlessness, and stress are exactly the conditions that promote the neurobiology of addiction.”<sup>17</sup> One of the greatest insights into this reality came from a study of Vietnam soldiers who became addicted to heroin during their deployment. When the soldiers left the horrors of combat and arrived safely in the United States, 95 percent of them stopped their addiction.<sup>18</sup> The results suggested to researchers that “the addiction did not arise from the heroin itself but from the needs of the men who used the drug.”<sup>19</sup> If you want to understand why you are addicted to something, you have to understand the conditions that keep your addiction in place.

Although the study of addiction can teach us a lot, it is not without its limitations. In the treatment of sexual addiction, the premise is that addictions exist because the addict has negative core beliefs about him- or herself. These negative beliefs then set the addict up to remedy the pain through the pleasure found in sexual behavior. Therefore, addiction is primarily a form of medicating oneself. There is much to affirm in this idea, but it

overlooks something significant: Addicts know that indulging in their unwanted sexual behavior will result in self-contempt. Every time.

In my view, our self-contempt is not a by-product of unwanted sexual behavior; it is the very aim of it. Through this lens, unwanted sexual behavior is not primarily an attempt to remedy or self-soothe the pain of a wounded child. It is attempting to reenact the formative stories of trauma, abuse, and shame that convinced us we were unwanted to begin with. In other words, we are not addicted primarily to sex or even a disordered intimacy; instead, we are bonded to feelings of shame and judgment.

In this way, unwanted sexual behavior is not seeking medication but rather a familiar poison to deaden our imagination that something could change for the better. As one songwriter wrote, “Every gambler knows that to lose is what you’re really there for.”<sup>20</sup>

In order to heal from our unwanted sexual behavior, we need to address both the biological and situational factors that keep our struggle in place. The neurochemicals of sex bring pleasure to our bodies that is even capable of hijacking our motivation and attention. But we also know that sexual behavior does not exist in a neurochemical silo. Sexual arousal is influenced by the relational wounds and present-day difficulties that mark our lives. The insights of nature and nurture are not opposed to one another; they are essential angles for seeing the complex diamond of human behavior.

### **The Fear of Freedom**

When you are involved in unwanted sexual behavior, one of the most maddening dimensions of your life becomes your fight with freedom. You long for liberation, but you also experience

a strange comfort in the misery and pleasure your unwanted behavior provides. Jeffrey, whom we met in the introduction, would sometimes describe his identity as a prisoner who was not strong enough to live as a free man. He knew that the pornography he consumed and the sex he purchased were deeply destructive to his life, but when he attempted to stop using them, he felt worse.

Jeffrey likened his fear of freedom to a book he read in college about the Soviet Gulag, a massive system of forced labor camps where some eighteen million people were passed through.<sup>21</sup> One prisoner who escaped decided to turn himself back in. He told his fellow prisoners, “Freedom isn’t for us. . . . We’re chained to this place for the rest of our lives, even though we aren’t wearing chains. We can escape, we can wander about, but in the end we’ll come back.”<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey and so many battling sexual brokenness continue to participate in slavery because the prospect of life without the dependency makes them too uneasy.

This fear can change, I promise. Your life story set you up to experience the bondage of unwanted sexual behavior, and owning this story with a heart of curiosity and agency will provide the way out. Your sexual behavior is unwanted because you intuitively know it does not bear the beauty you were made for. God is not ashamed of us. He wants you to know a beauty you never could have conceived of at the height of your despair. I have seen this beauty transform Jeffrey’s life and have no doubt you will see it transform your own.

From here, we turn to part 1 of this book, which will explore the question “How did I get here?” One way of thinking about unwanted sexual behavior is to see it as the convergence of two rivers: your past and the difficulties you face in the present. The place where two rivers converge is called a conflux and is where you will find the strongest current. For example, the

Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers join together in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to form the Ohio River. If you want to understand the Ohio River, you need to take a look at the Allegheny and the Monongahela, as well as their conflux.

Similarly, if you want to understand why sexual struggles exist in your life, you have to understand the tributaries that make the struggles possible. Part 1 of this book will address the primary tributary: the formative stories of your childhood.

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**FOR REFLECTION:**

- Have you ever sensed the work of evil in your life? When? What dimensions of your life do you think it was trying to impact?
  - Think of a time when you felt the beauty of your body or sexuality. What images or scenes emerge for you?
-





PART 1

# HOW DID I GET HERE?





## SETTING THE COURSE OF UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

ON A RAINY DAY IN MARCH, a client named Lindsay entered my office, sat down, and said, “In all honesty, I don’t feel as if I should even be in therapy. I should be able to get over my need for porn, but I’m here so that I can find out what is wrong with me.” A week prior to her first appointment, Lindsay asked for her boyfriend’s help to get rid of a virus her computer developed. Her boyfriend tried to isolate the problem and looked into her Internet history. He was shocked to find a massive amount of pornography. When he asked Lindsay about the porn on her computer, she had a mild panic attack and eventually told him she had been struggling with pornography since middle school. Lindsay had always wanted to get help but had felt as though pornography were such a man’s issue. As a woman, she felt uniquely ashamed. She was not aware that one

survey found that one in three women watches porn at least once a week.<sup>1</sup> Another study found that 56 percent of women twenty-five years old and younger and 27 percent of women older than twenty-five years old seek out porn.<sup>2</sup>

Whether it is pornography, buying sex, extramarital affairs, or promiscuity, your unwanted behavior has likely left you with a sentiment similar to Lindsay's. You should have been able to fix the issue by now, and if you can't, you assume there is something deeply flawed in you. This is the language of self-hatred. What I'd like you to consider is that your contempt for your failure is the very thing that blinds you from seeing the factors that set you on an inevitable trajectory toward unwanted sexual behavior.

I want to be clear that your stance toward what we will travel through in part 1 may be one of resistance. I have never met a client who at some level has not minimized the role their family and community of origin played in the development of their behavior. After I had given a lecture to men in Seattle who had been arrested for soliciting women in prostitution and explained the role their families of origin had played, one man said, "I hear what you are saying, but my parents were great people and have never really disappointed me." He then went on, in the same breath, to say that his father left his mother for another woman and that his mom now asks him to take her to all her doctor appointments and church meetings. "She always tells me it's great that I am still single, so that I can be available to spend so much time with her. I am glad I can love her so well. What I am trying to figure out, though, is why I always need to have a prostitute in my car after I get done spending time with my mom." It should be clear at some level that this man has known harm and that the role he is being asked to play for his mother since the breakdown of his parents' marriage is

contributing to his acting out. The choice of unwanted sexual behavior is never accidental. There is always a reason. Your path to freedom from unwanted sexual behavior begins with finding the unique reasons behind yours.

The vast majority of men and women I've worked with tend to condemn themselves for their initial involvement with unwanted sexual behavior. This is like indicting yourself for a cancer diagnosis when you grew up next to a leaking nuclear waste facility. We tend to blame ourselves rather than study the conditions and relationships that most inform our sexual struggles. I am asking you to consider the possibility that your sexual struggle is not random. Could there be dynamics in your family, community, and culture that contributed to your contamination? Jesus says that unless you leave your family—your mother, your father—you cannot follow him. We cannot walk with Jesus into healing if we remain loyal to protecting the people and communities that most contributed to our harm.

As we proceed, I ask that you be attentive to what you are feeling. Where do you feel uneasy? When do you feel disloyal to your family? When do you feel self-contempt? When do you feel the need to universalize your struggle? Where are you deeply curious? This section is not about locating blame in others; it is about pondering the ways that the harm of others has influenced you toward behavior that has cornered you with shame.

Before we address the specific family systems and childhood events that drive unwanted sexual behavior for adults, let's briefly explore three central tenets that will frame our discussion:

1. We are born with dignity.
2. Honor and honesty (not blaming or minimizing) both must be addressed within our family systems.
3. Our sexual brokenness is not random.

## **We Are Born with Dignity**

The word *sex* is taken from the Latin word *secare*, which means to sever, to amputate, or to disconnect from the whole. A major dimension of our relational and sexual lives, then, is the awareness of how severed we are from one another and the way we go about reconnecting.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, sexuality is much more comprehensive than what we choose to do with our genitals or wedding rings. God designed us with the ability to develop a sense of self (identity) and establish joyful and meaningful connection with others (relationships). Sexuality will flourish in your life to the degree to which you develop your identity and build meaningful relationships with those around you. Identity and relationships interanimate each other: The more you know yourself, the more intimate connection you can have with others, and the more connected you are to others, the more you will discover who you truly are.

Our earliest life lessons are *secare* experiences. We are born so dependent on relationships that our heartbeats and body temperatures are regulated in reference to our caregivers. But we are also born able to increasingly self-soothe. Researchers found that when parents were taught to encourage their infants to self-soothe (putting them down awake and waiting a few minutes to respond to their distress), their infants slept longer and woke up less.<sup>4</sup>

Early one morning, I awoke to my son crying. Knowing he was sufficiently fed and had been sleeping through the night for months, I was surprised to hear his sobbing. I stumbled out of bed and walked across the cold floors to his room. I greeted him gently and checked for the evidence of wet or soiled clothing. Nothing. “Up,” he said as clearly as any twenty-month-old could muster. I told him it was still very early and he needed to go back to sleep. “Up,” he said again, with greater gusto. I

picked him up, and he immediately wrapped his little strong arms around my neck and pulled his body close. I held him for a few moments and sang his favorite song. He interrupted my tone-deaf singing with an abrupt “No. Down!” Again I was surprised. He had rejected me for many things, but never for my singing. “You want to go back to your crib?” I replied. “Yes. Down,” he said as his body reached for the crib. I lowered him back down, and he immediately turned over to his stomach to fall asleep.

My son’s early-morning crying was an expression of his experience of *secare*. He woke up in distress and cried out with a desire to be reconnected with those who love him. He knew at a primal level what his needs were, and once he was reconnected with love, he was able to calm himself and choose rest. In this respect, our sexuality is about how we express our desire to know and be known in all the fear and beauty of what it means to be human.

It is vital for us to address our sexual brokenness from a standpoint of the dignity of self and the dignity of our longing for connection. No person, no matter how troubled or vile, can ever escape the reality of being made to grow in maturity and simultaneously receive care, gentleness, and rest in the context of relationships. This is just as true for an infant as it is for a man when he leaves a hotel room after buying sex or watching pornography.

In the book of Genesis, God creates the world and looks out over all that has been made and calls it “good” (1:31). The one thing, however, that is not good? Adam’s being alone. In Genesis 2:20, Adam names all the livestock, the birds in the sky, and the wild animals, and you have to guess he observes the animals engaging in some serious mating rituals. You can almost see Adam scratching his head and asking God, “Well,

what about me? Is that type of mating behavior for only the animals? God, do you realize there is no one suitable for me?”<sup>5</sup> It is a hilarious verse. God sees Adam’s aloneness and maybe even his befuddlement and begins his crowning act of creation: the formation of Eve.

Adam’s aloneness is rescued through the creation and presence of Eve. She is formed not to serve Adam in the traditional sense but to partner with him in cultivating (ruling and subduing) the goodness of earth. Sexuality allows us to turn away from the constant demands of life and turn toward relationships in order to feel less severed, less amputated, and less disconnected in our fragmented world. But sexuality is never complete if it remains inwardly focused. Sexuality turns outward, too, cultivating the world around us with the unique identities God has bestowed within us.

As we journey through life, we inevitably undergo formative experiences of disconnection from those who were most intended to bring us into wholeness. Cruelty, abandonment, and divorce divide us from our parents. Bullying, abuse, and humiliation divide us from our peers. It is in the aftermath of these stories that we live as exiles “east of Eden.”<sup>6</sup> We wander about in search of home but settle for a narcissistic identity reflected back to us from the amount of sex, power, and money we are able to obtain. Sexual brokenness is not a life sentence; it is an invitation to heal our wounds and learn who we want to become.

### **Honor and Honesty Must Be Addressed**

Abraham is the patriarch of many of the major faiths throughout the world. He is revered for his personal faith and obedience to go to the land God was calling him to. What we rarely mention, however, is that Scripture also tells us that our

patriarch trafficked his wife, agreed to impregnating a teenage slave named Hagar (whom we discussed in the introduction), and then turned out to be a real bona fide coward when his barren wife and pregnant slave started fighting. The honesty of Scripture is shocking. Scripture writers honored Abraham but were equally honest about his shortcomings.<sup>7</sup>

Many families and faith communities have embraced the lie that if we are honest, we could not truly honor, and if we honored someone, it would certainly come at the cost of honesty. When given the choice between honesty and honor, I find that most of my clients are naturally bent, to some degree, to be dishonest about what they have experienced in their families. They favor a type of pseudo-honor and present a rosier picture to themselves and others. They may do so out of virtue, but more often than not, they do so because they fear what would happen to them if they disclosed the truth about their families or communities.

One client, Christy, told me that disclosing the sexual abuse she suffered from her father felt like the most dishonoring thing she had ever done in her life, even more dishonoring than cheating on her spouse. She remarked, “If my family knew I was talking about my dad’s abuse and if he actually had to address it, our whole family would fall apart. My mom would leave him, and then what would happen to my dad? I think he would be suicidal. The family functions so much better if I just live a lie.” As you can see, honor and honesty are greatly at odds here.

If you are prone to separate honor and honesty, it is worth pondering how this division between the two came to be. A couple of questions you might want to consider: When did you learn to keep honesty and honor separated? Who taught you that it would be better to honor someone than to tell the truth with kindness and strength? Who taught you that it



would be better to tell someone a brazen lie than to bring truth with deep respect for the other? What would happen to a family Thanksgiving dinner if you spoke with both honesty and honor? A genuine mark of maturity is the ability to hold two simultaneous truths together at the same time.

The writers of Scripture recognized that honesty and honor should never be separated. In other words, honor and honesty are intended to be married, so far as to say there was a private ceremony that brought them into a covenant together. Until you understand that honor and honesty are two sides of the same coin, you will likely be inclined to separate them.

What I have found in my story and with hundreds of men and women is that our desire to honor others is often a smoke screen that keeps us from entering heartache. It is a brilliant and tragic maneuver we have all learned to make. We swerve to protect others so that we do not have to face the implications of what their harm has brought. What if all this were not so? What if you could live where the streams of honesty and honor could converge? May you enter your story with honor *and* honesty.

### **Sexual Brokenness Is Not Random**

If you wanted to understand why men from Somalia became notorious for hijacking and terrorizing ships, you would need to study the conditions that set up this behavior. It's easy to say they "shouldn't" be doing that, but it is another thing to consider the why behind their piracy.

The reality is that Somalian pirates used to be fishermen—that is, until foreign fishing vessels stole their fish. The United Nations estimated that almost \$300 million worth of seafood was stolen each year from their coastline.<sup>8</sup> If you combine this theft with a country oppressed by violent warlords, what would you expect these men to do in order to survive? Their pirate

behavior is not random; it reveals the wounds of the past and highlights the present problems that need to be transformed. We look to the past not to find excuses for reprehensible behavior but because narrative holds the key to unlocking destructive patterns and implementing all future change.

I have paid close attention to how men become seduced and entangled in lives of sexual addiction and struggle. I have found a number of thematic predecessors that mark the lives of my clients long before their sexual behavior leads them into lives of crisis. One of the most difficult things about working with people is that we are more comfortable talking about how screwed up we are than carefully studying the why behind our unwanted sexual behavior. This will require us to survey landscapes that many of us hold as sacred, if not off limits: family and community.

Over the next few chapters, we will explore five key childhood drivers of unwanted sexual behavior: rigid and/or disengaged family systems, abandonment, parents who were emotionally enmeshed with their children, a history of trauma, and sexual abuse (both overt and subtle forms of it). Although these five key drivers may not immediately resonate, I encourage you to read each of them, as they are more widespread than you may have originally thought.

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- Do you find yourself bent more toward honor or honesty with your family? If you are bent more toward honor, what did you experience that you feel a need to be dishonest about?
  - At this point in your journey, what past stories or present dynamics do you think most influence your involvement in unwanted sexual behavior?
-