

## **Sex: A Gift or a God?**

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Rich Nathan

January 25-26, 2003

Song of Songs: Eros Redeemed

Romans 1:18-32

I am in the midst of a series from the Song of Songs. The next section in the book is about sexual love expressed in a beautiful and rather explicit way – the love of two passionate lovers on their wedding day.

Before I look at the goodness, the joy, the sheer ecstasy of sexual love in marriage when everything is right between a couple, I feel like I need to clear the ground first this week and spend time talking about sex when it's broken, sex when it's gone off the rails, sex when it's anything but life-giving and refreshing and God-glorifying.

If we're going to be honest, Christians as well as non-Christians, singles and marrieds alike, experience sex and their own sexuality in 21<sup>st</sup> century America often as an area that has produced pain, sometimes shame, guilt, a feeling of hopelessness, in many cases addiction, bondage, anxiety, and confusion. Many Christians have wondered if God hasn't played a cruel trick upon us by giving us the gift of sex and sexual feelings.

It is so obvious it is almost trite to say that we live in a sex-saturated society. I was at Barnes and Noble and just went to the magazine rack the other day to scan the covers. From rock review magazines like Rolling Stone, to weightlifting magazines, to movie magazines, to computers, a dominant theme was sex. When I came to men's and women's interest magazines, virtually the only theme was sex. Sex was the first word on about 15 different major magazine titles. The articles had titles such as:

- Sexual Super Power
- Earn Your Ph.D. in Sex
- The Supermarket of Sex
- Sex So Good your Neighbors Will Complain
- His 240 Sexual Secrets (240? Can you imagine having 240 secrets about anything, much less 240 sexual secrets? )
- Sex and Horoscopes
- Sex and Food
- Sex and Travel
- The Big Sex Issue

The great British author, CS Lewis, commented about 60 years ago about how our sexual appetites had gone utterly off the rails by saying you can get a large audience together for a strip-tease act, that is to watch a girl undress on the stage. Now, suppose you come to a country where you could fill a theater by

simply bringing a covered plate on the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop, or a bit of bacon. Would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food? If someone had grown up on a different planet and looked at Planet Earth would they not think that there was something equally odd about the state of the sexual instinct among us?

C.S. Lewis goes on to say modern people are fond of saying “sex is nothing to be ashamed of.” If they mean that there’s nothing to be ashamed of in the fact that the human race reproduces itself in a certain way, or in the fact that sex gives pleasure, then they are right. Christianity says the same thing.

If they mean that there is nothing to be ashamed of for the state into which the sexual instinct has fallen to, they are quite wrong. There is everything to be ashamed of. There is nothing to be ashamed of in enjoying your food. There would be everything to be ashamed of if half the world made food the main interest of their lives and spent all their time looking at pictures of food and movies of food, dribbling and smacking their lips.

What other appetite have we let become so dominant a feature of our culture? Certainly not our need for love or companionship. Not our desire for friendship or acceptance. Not our need for food or drink or air or affirmation.

You can’t watch a situation comedy on TV without being assaulted by jokes about genitals and pornography and homosexual and lesbian innuendos and double entendres. Turning on the TV sometimes makes you feel like you are swimming in raw sewage.

We live in an age of AIDS and an explosion of venereal diseases and violent sex crimes and premarital sex, and regular reports of molestation by teachers, by priests, by grandparents, by parents – one child in 4 is now molested. We live in the age of downloaded files of kiddy porn and phone sex and chat rooms and abortion and sexual harassment suits. No Christian can live in this culture as a Christian without having to continually fight for purity without having to wage a private battle for sexual sanity.

Christian writer John White, who was a beloved acquaintance of mine and who recently died, said, “God gave us sexuality as a refreshing lake of joy. But we in our sin have turned that lake of joy into a fetid swamp. And in this evil smelling place, this place of brooding darkness and death, the church is now sinking.”

Before I talk next week about the beauty and joy and goodness of sex as a nourishing, replenishing gift, I want to talk today about the misuse of sex. How our entire culture and we have turned sex into a surrogate God. I’ve called today’s talk: Sex: A Gift or a God? Let’s pray.

Romans 1:18-31 – *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*

*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*

*Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.*

*Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.*

Romans 1:18-31 begins with a statement of God's judgment. We read, *For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven.* The apostle Paul begins this section of scripture with a shocking statement. God's wrath, God's judgment is right now being revealed. In other words, Paul is about to argue that right now the world is experiencing the judgment of God. The final judgment, the judgment that the world will experience when we all stand before Holy God on Judgment Day and are judged for the activities and attitudes, the behaviors and the motives we displayed here on earth while we were alive. Judgment Day is just the caboose on the train that began millennia ago when our first parents sinned against God.

The judgment of God is something that is presently being felt by people in this world. Do you think about the world this way? When you look out at the world and see all of its brokenness and pain and frustration and futility, do you say to yourself, "The world that I am looking out on is currently experiencing God's judgment and is lying under God's wrath?"

It's like salvation. Salvation is not just something you can experience in the future when you die and go to be with Jesus. When you receive Jesus and live under his rule, you get to experience salvation now – not in all its fullness, but really, truly salvation now. When people depart from God's plan for living, we don't just experience judgment later on in the by and by. We experience judgment now, God's wrath now, not as terrible, not as awful, not as fearful as it will be on the Day of Judgment, but terrible and awful nonetheless.

Why is this present world experiencing the judgment of God? The apostle Paul traces what I call a terrible line of descent, an awful spiral down beginning with ingratitude and a search for independence. Verse 21 reads, *Because [the reason for God's judgment] though they knew God they did not glorify him as God or give him thanks...* Ingratitude and a search for independence.

This leads to the next step-down. The ingratitude is bolstered by ignorance and lies. Verse 21b, *...but became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and (verse 25), they exchanged the truth of God for a lie.*

Ingratitude and a search for independence; ignorance bolstered by lies. This leads to the third step in the line of descent – idolatry. Verse 23, *They changed the glory of the incorruptible God for the image of corruptible man, birds, beasts, and reptiles.* Idolatry.

The fourth step down is sexual immorality. Verse 24, *Therefore God handed them over in the desire of their hearts to uncleanness for the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves...Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.*

Ingratitude leads to ignorance bolstered by lies leads to idolatry, which leads to immorality and finally imprisonment. Verse 28-29, *Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.*

This is a terrible spiral down. Now, it is important to understand this process, to break it down into its terrible constituent parts – part by part – to analyze it, to reflect upon it, because if you don't, you will never understand your own sexual brokenness. Perhaps even more importantly, you will never understand the way

of sexual healing. See, we cannot start with our broken sexuality if we want to get well. We have to trace the problem back further. How did we get to the place sexually that we now find ourselves?

You may spend years, perhaps decades trying to free yourself from some bondage to lust or pornography or homosexual attraction or fantasy or whatever. If you are a follower of Christ, you almost certainly have prayed about your secret problem. You have felt guilt. You have felt shame. You may have confessed your sin not only to God, but to others. You may have memorized Bible passages or tried the discipline, will power, grit your teeth approach to your struggles.

Yet, I believe unless you really understand sexual immorality simply as one more terrible step down, unless you really get a handle on how you got to where you are at, you will not diagnose your problems deeply enough to ever find the healing God intends for you. We must start our thinking not with our sexual immorality or our sexual struggles, but with our ingratitude and our search for independence from God.

Now, let's start at the beginning of the line of descent, right at the beginning of the spiral down. Where does sexual brokenness and sexual addiction and all the experiences of sexual shame and confusion begin for us? It all begins with ingratitude toward God.

Verse 21, *For (because) they knew of God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.* Friend, your brokenness did not begin with your childhood exposure to pornography or the pain of the molestation you experienced. It didn't begin with the overly legalistic, shame-producing message you got at church or in your Roman Catholic home. At a fundamental, spiritual level your brokenness and my brokenness begins with our ingratitude towards God, our failure to glorify God or give him thanks.

Gratitude is the basic orientation toward life. To be grateful we must see ourselves as weak and dependent and as the undeserving recipients of God's gifts. A grateful person is a person who looks at all the good in their lives, their relationships, their marriages, their friends, their bodies, their intelligence, their influence, their ministries, their money, everything and says, "God all of this, all that I am, all that I produce, if there is anything good, it is all due to you."

A grateful person is a person who agrees with the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 4:7 where he says "*What do you have that you did not receive?*" It's all a gift. It's all grace. It's all – everything pleasant, joy producing and encouraging – it's all the result of the open-handed generosity of God.

In our sinfulness, we don't want to acknowledge that we secretly, deeply, carefully resent that we live in creaturely dependence upon the gifts of God.

Every human being harbors an arrogant fantasy of being a self-made man or a self-made woman. We all are like King Nebuchadnezzar in the Old Testament book of Daniel who looking out at the city, said in Daniel 4, *Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?*

I built it. I did it. I accomplished this. You know the old story of the grandfather who tells his grandson, “Son, if you see a turtle sitting on top of a fence, you now it didn’t get there by itself. Somebody put it up there.” We are like that turtle only we believe, all of us, that we got on top of the fence by ourselves.

Friend, do you realize even your capacity to work, your ambition, your analytical abilities, your social skills, is all the gift of God? We stand on the shoulders of God. We stand on the shoulders of thousands of other people and we think that we are 10 feet tall by ourselves.

Our ingratitude leads to ignorance bolstered by lies. Look at the second half of verse 21: *...but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.* And in verse 25, *They exchanged truth about God for a lie.*

A fog settles over the hearts and minds of people who try to assert their independence from God. We think we see clearly. We think we perceive clearly. We think we are approaching the world the way it is, but we are actually looking at life through the fogged-over lenses of our fallen independent hearts. In our confusion, we really begin to believe that lies really are the truth – lies about God, lies about ourselves, lies about our needs, lies about sex.

Friend, if we could just take a minute of our consciousness and break it down moment by moment, thought by thought, frame by frame, we would be shocked by the extent, the sheer numbers, of lies we believe. Regarding virtually every emotional problem, psychological problem, and spiritual problem is a web of lies about God, about ourselves, about life, about what we believe. Lies protect; lies are the fortress walls around our quest for independence from God. Tear down the lies and we get close to the real core issue.

Lies about sex multiply like rabbits. The more sexually broken a person is, the more lies they believe, the more distorted is their thinking. Again, if you want to get at your particular struggle with sexual sin, you’ve got to probe deeply. Your behavior, your choices, your decisions are all a manifestation of something deeper. Core beliefs, core lies need to be challenged.

Like what?

In many cases, we separate sex and love. People have sex, but they don't make love. Our hearts and our sex organs are a thousand miles apart. What God intended to be together we believe can be separated.

More lies are: It doesn't really matter what we do with our body. I can still enjoy a great relationship with God, while we use our bodies in ways that he forbids. We believe we can separate and compartmentalize our bodies from our relationship. We compartmentalize sex over here and our relationship with Christ over there. Sex over here and intimacy with God over there. Sex over here and worship over there.

Lies. Like the lie that says because of this unfair circumstance that I find myself in, I am entitled to have this relationship or engage in this particular sin. Because my husband neglects my emotional needs, because he has great difficulty being affectionate, because we don't connect on a deep intimate level, I am entitled to engage in an emotional affair with a co-worker, with someone in a ministry or a group I participate in, with an old friend from school. We say an emotional affair is not really adultery.

Lies. My wife is undersexed. She rejects my overtures, therefore I am entitled to seek sexual gratification elsewhere.

Lies. I was married. Surely no one can fault me for not being celibate now.

Lies. I'm on the road for business. There's nothing wrong with watching a pornographic movie in my hotel room. I don't do it at home.

Lies. A little lust never hurt anyone. Everyone flirts.

Friend, are you in touch with the lies you deeply believe about sex? Can you list them? Can you put your finger on the arguments that you employ to protect behavior that you cherish?

Ingratitude leads to ignorance, which leads to idolatry.

*Verse 23, They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds, and animals and reptiles. Verse 25, They worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator who is forever praised. Amen.*

Idolatry – we worship creation instead of the Creator. We take God's gifts and we turn them into gods. We worship a gift instead of God alone. How do we do this? Instead of looking to God to meet our need for love or intimacy or completion, we reach into sex.

LeAnn Payne, a Christian therapist, talks about bent men and bent women. In marriage, she says many men are bent toward their wives instead of reaching upward toward God. Many wives are bent toward their husbands instead of reaching up toward God. Rather than bring the fulfillment of Christ to our marriages, we seek fulfillment in marriage. Instead of bringing the love of Christ, the joy of Christ to marriage, we seek it from marriage. Likewise, with sex. The thrill, the satisfaction, the aliveness, the relief from boredom, the feeling of being alive, of being vital, of being loved – all the things God wishes to give us, all the things Jesus says, “Look to me and I will give you.” We bow down to sex and say, “This creaturely gift will serve as a substitute for God.”

Do you see? Is the Spirit of God showing any of you how you look to sex for needs that God wishes to meet? Is God’s Spirit showing any of you how you have made sex into an idol?

Bob Dylan wrote a song some years ago that was called “You’ve Got to Serve Somebody.” He said you may serve the devil or you may serve the Lord, but you’ve got to serve somebody.

See, we are by nature, by our very creation, worshipers. We will seek pleasure and blessing and love and power and whatever benefit we believe we can get from something or someone. The price we pay is the service of that being or thing. You’ve got to serve somebody! That’s the price. You serve and worship God or you serve and worship work, or another person, or sex, or, what is often the case, we serve and worship ourselves.

We, the idol makers, become our own idol. Self-worship is behind sex worship. We refuse to say no to our appetites. We refuse to say no to our self-seeking. We cater to our self-pity, our feelings of anger and bitterness. We demand to feel always attractive, always valued, always admired, always loved. Often behind sex-worship is a bigger idol of self-worship. The idol, if you were honest, is you. The idol in my life that I bow down to, if I am honest, is me.

The next step down is immorality. Verse 24, *Therefore god gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.* And verse 26, *Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones.*

When a person turns away from God and begins to worship idols, the idol of sex, the idol of self, God removes his spiritual protection and lets us go. Three times in the text we read the dreadful words, “God gave them over.” Verse 24: *God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts and to sexual impurity.* Verse 26: *Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even the women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones.* And verse 28: *Furthermore,*



*since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.*

He gave them over.  
He gave them over.  
He gave them over.

We often think that God's judgment is shown when he disciplines a person, when he pulls the rug out from under someone and exposes his or her sin. A wife discovers her husband is using pornography. A roommate discovers his or her roommate is sleeping with their boyfriend or girlfriend. An affair is discovered. You become pregnant out of wedlock. You get a disease. We think that God's judgment is revealed when a person is caught and exposed.

The truth is that catching someone is often a sign of God's severe mercy. When God intervenes it is a sign of his love. He comes to rescue. He exposes to heal. He disciplines so that he might restore.

The judgment of God is sown precisely in God not intervening – when God hands us over, when he doesn't stop us; when God doesn't bar the door.

Let me close with this. In his book *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*, Jeffrey Satinover tells a little parable of the process of addiction. One day a white skylark flew over a Middle Eastern country when she heard a merchant cry out, "Worms! Worms! Worms for feathers! Delicious worms." Little did the skylark know that the merchant was the devil.

The merchant motioned the little skylark closer saying, "See the lovely worms I have?" The skylark looked at the worms that looked bigger and juicier than anything she had ever dug up for herself.

The merchant said, "The price isn't high. Two worms for a feather! Two worms for one!"

The skylark was unable to resist. After all, she had many feathers. So she plucked out one of her feathers, just a small one, and gave it to the merchant. Then she snatched up two of the plumpest and juiciest worms she had ever eaten and flew off.

The skylark returned day after day, trading one of her feathers for two worms. One day, however, when she leapt up in the air to fly away, she fell to the ground and had the stunning realization that she was unable to fly. All of the worms she had eaten made her body grow fatter and fatter and all of the feathers she had plucked made her grow balder and balder.

Then the merchant came, picked up the little skylark, and put her in a cage. He slammed the little cage door shut and with a loud SNAP! of his fingers and he vanished into the desert air.

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**Song of Songs: Eros Redeemed**

**Romans 1:18-32**

- I. Spiraling Out of Control
  - A. Our Culture
  - B. God's Judgment (Rom. 1:18)
  
- II. Spiraling Down to Addiction
  - A. The Line of Descent
  - B. The Tracing of the Line
    - 1. Ingratitude and Independence (Rom. 1:21)
    - 2. Ignorance and Lies (Rom. 1:21, 25)
    - 3. Idolatry (Rom. 1:23)
    - 4. Immorality (Rom. 1:24, 26, 27)
    - 5. Imprisonment (Rom. 1:28, 29)
  
- III. Spiraling Up to Freedom
  - A. If Ingratitude is the Issue, Then Thankfulness and Weakness is the Answers.
  - B. If Ignorance and Lies are the Issues, Then Truth and Repentance are the Answers.
  - C. If Idolatry is the Issue, Then Worship is the Answer.
  - D. If Immorality is the Issue, Then Grace is the Answer.