

# Sex and Faith

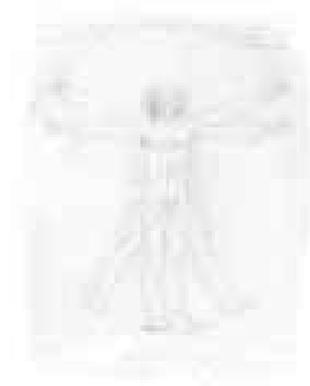
Celebrating  
God's Gifts

David Boshart

CLOSER THAN A BROTHER ~ MEN'S SERIES

# Sex and Faith

**Celebrating God's Gifts**



**by David Boshart**

Faith & Life  
Resources

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*Newton, Kansas  
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Closer Than a Brother—Men's Series  
SEX AND FAITH: CELEBRATING GOD'S GIFTS  
by David Boshart

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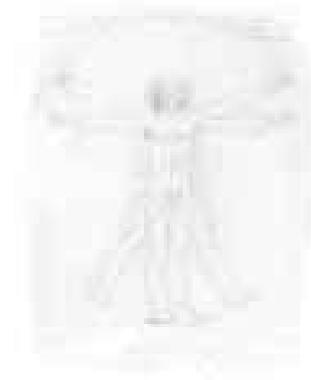
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# Welcome to this study!



***Forty-one Foods to Increase Your Sexual Appetite***

***What Every Woman Really Wants***

***Twenty-one ways to Pump Up Your Sex Life***

**M**onth after month, the covers of men's magazines use these and similar headlines, promising to unlock the mysteries of a great sex life: You'd think after so many attempts, they would eventually get it right. Yet the publishers continue to crank out magazines that keep promising to give you the edge that will send you over the top in your sexual adventures.

Why do they do it? Because sex sells. Advertisers know that if they can sexualize their products, they will sell better. The media in our age proclaim that toe-curling, eye-popping sex produces love, intimacy, and fulfillment. No matter that we hear very few stories of successful, faithful relationships among those who broadcast this message. The fact remains that people in our culture, especially men, buy into the sexual lures of the day.

Christian men have to shout pretty loudly for an alternative view of sex to be heard. When they

***If you are the group leader ...***

Please see the section, "How to use this booklet" and other notes in the "Leader's Guide" on page 46.

try to do so, they have to be pretty sophisticated to gain respect for their views. The going can get tough. In order to be true to their commitments as God's servants, they need the support of others around them who help them remain clear about the great gift that sex is when it is expressed in the way that God intended.

Unfortunately, we Christian men have not always succeeded in creating safe places to talk about sexuality. Perhaps because we tend to be competitive, it is difficult for us to be vulnerable with one another about something as private as our sexual experience. Most of our church settings include both genders, and they often include our spouses. These settings do not lend themselves to our sharing about our needs, desires, and temptations.

We also sometimes have a difficult time naming our needs. In the wake of the feminist movement, some of us have begun to feel like all things male are inferior, shallow, insensitive, or even morally reprehensible. We also tend to dwell on comparisons, which can get in the way of collaborative dialogue. Sadly, our attempts to talk about sexuality tend to either degenerate into seedy humor, or else we make sex so sacred that it loses all its playfulness.

The purpose of this study is to provide an opportunity for men to gather with one another and around the Scriptures to reclaim the goodness of sex and masculinity. This study assumes that marriage is the context God intended for sexual intimacy. Much of the material may therefore seem to be directed toward married men. However, we hope that single men will feel just

as free to participate, offering their insights and sharing their struggles. Married men need to hear the voices of single men to gain a fuller, broader view of what it means to be male in this time and place.

Session 1 will look at sex as an expression of a healthy, covenanted relationship. Sex as God intended it to be can help us experience profound intimacy. Apart from God's design, however, sex can easily be manipulated for self-gratification.

Session 2 focuses on the male quest for undeserved acceptance. So much of our lives, including our sex lives, are stressed by the need to achieve and to perform. True fulfillment lies in knowing that we are loved no matter what.

In Session 3 we will focus on the different needs that men and women bring to their sexual relationships. Too often our differing desires have been a point of tension. What if we recognized these different needs as a part of God's intentional design to keep sexual relationships on target?

Sexual temptation, of course, is a big issue for Christian men. Session 4 will take a hard look at its power and our need for honest self-awareness. Part of dealing with the lures in our culture involves naming our struggles and finding support in dealing with them.

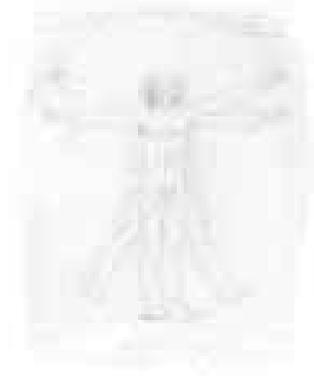
In Session 5 we will think about sex through the life stages. As we mature, our sexual needs and interests change. For some this is a time of utter loss. For others, sexual experience grows richer

with age. Let's talk about how we can maintain sexual health at each stage.

Finally, this study is meant to be enjoyed. While there are many deep issues to be discussed, we hope you have a sense of humor and build a good foundation of fellowship as you tell your stories, listen to each other's struggles, and journey together toward greater awareness and health in your sexuality.

## **Session 1**

# Sex—The Glory and the Risks



*Sex is a glorious gift of God that brings great joy when expressed right. Sex can also derail our lives when it is abused.*

### **Opening worship**

**Hymn:** "Praise, I Will Praise" (HWB 76)

**Prayer:** Take a few moments in silence to reflect on how you have understood sexuality throughout your life. How have your ideas, principles, and longings changed over the years? Then pray the following together in unison:

Creator God, we thank you for the way you have made us.

We thank you that you have made us sexual beings.

We celebrate the delights and the longings of erotic love.

We also confess our temptations to spoil these gifts.

Teach us, O God, to seek wholeness and purity.

Help us understand the mysteries of our passions.

Grant that we may honor you always through our lives. Amen

### ***Exploring the topic***

Men think a lot about sex. Whether consciously or not, they know that sex is a great way to express their deepest, most personal, most intimate feelings. There is no other activity that more graphically demonstrates what it means for two people to lay their souls bare before one another.

Sex also has its risks. When we first begin a relationship, for example, we have no idea what the future will be. When we eventually find ourselves in a fulfilling, exclusive sexual relationship in marriage, we are glad for the risk we took in starting the relationship to begin with. Successfully navigating those risks can heighten the glory of this wonderful gift of God.

The writers of the Bible show sexual intimacy as one of God's great gifts to humanity, given to us in sacred trust. Let's explore how the writer of the Song of Solomon reveals both the joys and the risks that come with this gift.

### ***Read aloud Song of Solomon 4:1-15***

Christians have not always known what to do with Song of Solomon, written hundreds of years before Christ. As a love poem, it is unlike any other literature in the Bible. Some scholars have tried to make the song "useful" by spiritualizing the sensuality that fills its pages. They suggest that the poem must be about the coming relationship between Christ and the church. While the book can be read that way, more and more are recognizing that it is mostly a celebration of romantic love. It is an extended poem that portrays the painful pleasure of two hearts, separated by distance and longing to be made one.

**The glory.** In this passage we see how a lover idealizes his beloved. "You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you" (v. 7). We also see that desire is heightened by the fact that the two are pining for the time when they can be united sexually with one another: "A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed" (v. 12). While sex is not yet possible for them, the man sees in his beloved "a well of living water" (v. 15). These words can easily put us in touch with those times in our own lives when we have happily "lost our heads," driven by forces deep in our bodies and souls that are beyond our rational senses.

For all that is sensual in Song of Solomon, however, we do not see two people throwing themselves at each other in reckless abandon. These lovers have located their sexual attraction in the cradle of lifelong commitment. In Song of Solomon 8:6-7, the lover says, "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave." Here we see how the two lovers' attraction is like God's love. It is a passion that is born of commitment and faithfulness. It is stronger than death. Their erotic passion does not in itself produce steadfast faithfulness; rather, the seal of their commitment becomes the fountain out of which sexual passion will spring forth often.

**The pitfalls.** Losing our head in sexual attraction also poses some potential pitfalls. The story of Solomon's own life is a powerful example. In 1 Kings 11 we learn that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. A handful for any one man to be sure! Solomon had a special penchant for foreign women, whom he used to nurture his

political alliances. He lent his concubines out to visiting dignitaries. And it was this drive to collect women that ultimately lead Solomon astray (1 Kings 11:33).

From Song of Solomon 6:13, the “beloved” appears to be a Shulammitite woman. Some Bible scholars suggest that she was taken from her home to become the latest in Solomon’s collection of exotic women. But, the theory goes, this woman had promised her love to a man (the lover) who longs for her return. The dialogue in this song, then, captures the longing between the two separated lovers who believe that their love will prevail, even as the woman’s wedding to Solomon approaches.

This scenario is supported by chapter 5:2-8, where the language and events are very different from the rest of the story. Here, in her sleep, the woman hears her true love calling and she tries to escape from Solomon’s palace. She runs out into the streets in search of him only to be captured by Solomon’s guards. They beat her and bruise her into submission.

Interestingly, in the last chapter of Song of Solomon, the beloved powerfully exposes the nature of true romantic love. The beloved says, “Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon; he entrusted the vineyard to keepers; each one was to bring for its fruit a thousand pieces of silver. My vineyard, my very own is for myself...” (8:11-12). Even if Solomon were to take this woman by force, he could not command her love. Solomon considered his collection of exotic women a symbol of his power. But this constant seeking after the next most exciting sexual adventure ultimate-

ly led to Solomon's demise. From the accounts of the later part of Solomon's life, his women led Solomon to honor other gods, and thus abandon his relationship with the God of Israel.

Sex that is used for self-gratification at the expense of another turns a gift from God into an act of violence. Sexual desire rightly expressed, on the other hand, is a glorious gift of unconditional acceptance and steadfast faithfulness. Sex is the outward symbol of an inner reality of two hearts becoming one. The erotic richness of sex shared in the context of steadfast faithfulness truly reflects the creative purposes of God.

### ***Talking it through***

In groups of two, talk about the questions listed below before you choose one or two to discuss. Identify which question is the most pressing for you at this stage of life. Which questions reas-

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### ***Food for thought 1: Media distortions***

Prime-time television can leave us with the impression that everyone is having awesome sex regardless of how long they have known their partner, and regardless of who their former partners have been. There is little or no talk about contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual dysfunction, or the possibility of unplanned pregnancy. On TV, all that is needed is two (or more) people who are alone (or maybe not!) and whose minds have shifted into neutral.

The groundbreaking study, *Sex in America* (see resources on page XX) claimed that the sex lives of those depicted in movies and on TV programs hardly reflect the reality of the American sexual experience. (Similar

conclusions are probably true of Canada.) The study showed that 83 percent of those surveyed had either one or no sex partner in the previous twelve months. Compare that with the many situational comedy shows on TV where characters have many sex partners in a given season.

The survey showed that only 1.4 percent of married people had sex within days of their first meeting. This, say the authors, "indicates that the Mr. Goodbar type of pickup sex is highly unusual." North Americans are far less experimental and adventurous in their sexual lives, they have sex far less and with fewer partners, and they are more faithful to their marriages than our media suggest.

sure you? Which ones do you find threatening? Which pose the greatest struggle for you?

1. How do you respond to the notion that Solomon is actually a villain in the Song of Solomon (see article above)? What can we learn from the contrasts between the story of Solomon's addiction to foreign women, and the erotic love between faithful lovers portrayed in the Song?
2. In your experience, does erotic passion generate a loving relationship or does a loving relationship generate erotic passion?
3. What is the relationship between media portrayals of sexuality and sexual experience in society in general and your life in particular?

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**Food for thought 2: "Everyone is doing it"**

Our family recently watched the teen movie, *Ten Things I Hate about You*. In it an embittered high school senior projects caustic venom toward all things male around her. Her younger sister cannot understand this. She remembers a time when her older sister was considered pretty and much sought out by the boys around her. Eventually the older sister reveals that it was during that time that she and her attractive boyfriend had sex because "everyone was doing it."

When the predominant message in our culture is that "everyone is doing it," should it surprise us that our teens are more sexually active than ever before? In her sensitive commentary on family life in North America, *In the Shelter of Each Other*, Mary Pipher says, "Sex has been demystified, which may be a good thing, but it's

also been marketed, which is not a good thing. We have moved from sex that is forbidden and terrifying to sex that is as accessible and interesting as a breakfast burrito.... As teenagers talk about sex, what is most noteworthy is their lack of joy."

As teens move into young adulthood, approaching the time when many of them will get married, it is sobering to imagine that by the time they marry, many of them will have been sexually active but will not have known the joy of sex. Adults in our Christian communities need to fill an important void in society's messages about sex. We need to demystify sex as a forbidden topic of conversation, but at the same time reclaim marriage as the place where sexual expression is filled with joy.

To what extent do you find that movies and television set your standards for what constitutes great sex?

4. How can Christian men reclaim the sanctity, the mystery, and the joy of sex within a marriage covenant?

After about twenty minutes, gather again in the larger group. If you feel free, share one thing that you want to think more about in terms of your sexuality.

### **Closing worship**

**Reading:** Listen as someone reads from Song of Solomon:

Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm;  
for love is strong as death,  
passion fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
a raging flame.

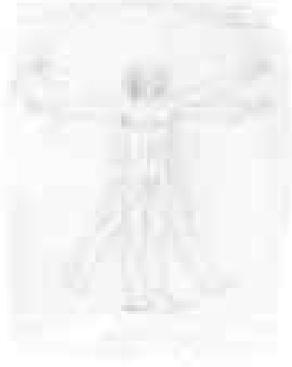
<sup>7</sup> Many waters cannot quench love,  
neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love  
all the wealth of one's house,  
it would be utterly scorned.

—*Song of Solomon 8:6-7*

**Prayer:** In a time of silence, consider how these words reflect not only human love, but also God's love for you. In a time of free prayer together, pray for each other, naming the struggles or hopes that have been shared in the group.

**Hymn:** "Take my Life and Let it Be" (HWB 389)



## **Session 2**

# Man's Struggle to Be Man

*Being a man is not only about achieving and earning our way in life. It is also about allowing our lives to be blessed by the grace of unconditional acceptance.*

### **Opening worship**

**Hymn:** "Come O Thou Traveler Unknown" (HWB 503)

**Prayer:** Reflect on the meaning of your own name. If you do not know it, do you know why you were given your name? Were you named for someone in your family or someone your parents admired? Would you change your name if you could?

*Then pray the following:*

O Father in heaven,

Thank you that you know us and call us by name.

Thank you also for the life you have given us:

for power to be stewards of the resources we have,

for opportunities to reach new heights, and even for the struggles which bring us new understandings of ourselves.

Name us, O God, that we might see ourselves as you see us. Amen

### ***Exploring the topic***

We men find a great deal of satisfaction through our work and accomplishments. Sometimes our entire sense of self-worth, however, is wrapped up in how well we perform, or how we measure up against others. We often set up a world of winners and losers, which suggests that some people should be valued and others don't matter. A common message in our society is that if we work hard enough or aspire high enough, we can achieve wholeness, we can earn intimacy, and we can deserve the trust of others. But these most important blessings in life are not automatic rewards for our efforts. They are gifts that we receive from those who choose to give them.

### ***Read Genesis 32:22-32***

Jacob has outgrown his role as a dutiful son-in-law. He has served his uncle Laban's interests for 22 years, during which he earned the love of his life: Rachel. In spite of his deceitful beginnings (Gen. 27), Jacob has become relationally sensitive and capable of listening. He values trust, honesty, compatibility, flexibility, and compromise.

Now Jacob has turned his face toward home. He is going back to Canaan to claim the promise God made to Abraham to make his descendants a great nation. But as Jacob turns toward home, there is something he must yet face. He must confront his brother Esau whom he cheated years ago. The struggle Jacob faces is intensely personal. The storyteller goes out of the way to show us that on the night of his struggle, Jacob is alone (v. 24).

A man wrestles with Jacob until daybreak. We do not find out until the end of the story that this

man was God's representative. Even so, the man does not prevail against Jacob. As the two struggle, the man strikes Jacob in the hip and puts his hip out of joint, leaving him with a limp that will forever remind him of this struggle.

In spite of the painful injury, Jacob does not let go. Jacob seems aware that this is the most important struggle of his life. It is as if his whole future depended on the struggle. As daybreak approaches, the man cries out, "Let me go." But Jacob holds on and says, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So the man gives Jacob a new name, Israel, which means, "The one who strives with God." And here we see the true nature of this struggle revealed. It is not enough for Jacob to win this wrestling match. Jacob knows that he needs something else in order to have peace—something he could not win or earn.

Though Jacob is a fugitive, he has built a noble fortune away from home. With Uncle Laban, he has learned how to prosper by honest means. Now Jacob tells God, "...with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies" (32:10). But as he faces Esau's justified vengeance, we find Jacob desperate for a blessing that he cannot earn. He receives a name that recalls his struggle with people *and* with God, and that reminds him that God's grace has allowed Jacob to prevail.

The next day Jacob sees Esau coming toward him with an army of 400 men—clearly enough manpower to obliterate the entire household of Jacob. Jacob bows himself to the ground in submission seven times as he approaches his brother. But instead of the condemnation that Jacob

deserves, Esau runs to Jacob and embraces him. They both weep tears that begin a long-awaited healing. Esau blesses Jacob with the gift that no amount of struggle could earn. Esau offers undeserved acceptance to Jacob.

There is perhaps no greater struggle among men than the search for unconditional acceptance. In a sermon entitled "The Magnificent Defeat," Frederick Buechner says, "Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, are his who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy, are only from God." These last qualities, which answer our deepest needs, cannot be earned. They can only be received from one who is willing to give them.

Writing in *Marriage Partnership* magazine, counselor Paula Rinehart says, "Every day a man walks into a world that says, 'Prove yourself. Prove that as a man, you have something

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**Food for thought 1: Single and loved**

A good marriage is a primary place where men can receive acceptance and grace. But what if you're single? As a pastor, I have heard from people in their early thirties about their experience of the world's hostility to their single status. Movies and advertising all promote couplehood as the hallmark of a fulfilled life. Tables in restaurants are set in even numbers making singles feel like the odd one out. Churches' singles ministries, while welcomed by some singles, have often felt to others like an artificial culture that only serves to remove them further from the "marriage and family" crowd.

The church can be a place of welcome and affirmation for single peo-

ple. The world says, "If you are unmarried, at least you can prove your acceptability by sleeping with other people." The church is where an alternative view is promoted: that real wholeness is found in Jesus Christ. In our denomination, congregations are encouraged to have services of blessing for singles that affirms their celibacy as a gift, and that offers support for their calling to sexual purity.

The church community can therefore become the place where singles, and all others who may not have homes of acceptance and love, can find unconditional love, be vulnerable, and become the people God calls them to be.

worthwhile to offer.' In ways both blatant and subtle, a man is evaluated and measured and stacked up against the next guy all day long. The big question in his mind, conscious or not, is whether he is man enough."

Jacob "became a man" that night, not for what he achieved, but because God blessed and named him. In our relationships, too, our manhood is strengthened when we can come home to unconditional acceptance. When a man has a wife who loves him and takes him into the most intimate of embraces, he receives a powerful symbol of a pure love that transcends merit. With a heart of faith, he may think, "This must

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**Food for thought 2: From boys to men**

As one who is mechanically challenged, I find it funny and ironic that God blessed me with two sons who are "gearheads." Trying to help my sons explore their giftedness in mechanical endeavors has been frustrating for them and for me. I have often felt inadequate as a father.

Thankfully, our sons have other male role models, too. Our church has a mentoring program that begins in seventh grade, and both of our sons chose young single men as their mentors. The men are brothers who own a classic car restoration business. Our sons have spent a lot of time watching their mentors restore classic Porsches. My oldest son's mentor also coached him through buying his first car—a badly neglected Volkswagen—and making it road-worthy.

No father can provide all that a boy needs to become a mature member of the community. When much of our society fails to affirm what is good

about being male, one of the greatest contributions that Christian men can make to God's kingdom is to be mentors who take an active interest in the lives of boys. It's the way boys become men.

What is asked of adults now is that they stop going *forward*, to retirement, to Costa Rica, to fortune, and turn to face the young.... One can imagine a field with adolescents on one side of a line drawn on the earth and adults on the other side looking in their eyes. The adult in our time is asked to reach his or her hand across the line and pull the youth into adulthood.... If we don't turn to face the young ones, their detachment machines, which are louder and more persistent than ours, will say, "I am not part of this family," and they will kill any real relationship with their parents.

—Robert Bly, *The Sibling Society*

be what God's love is like." Unfortunately, many women do not understand this about their men because men don't always know how to say it. To talk about one's need for this kind of love requires one to be vulnerable, to take the risk of being needy. That is man's struggle to be man.

### ***Talking it through***

In pairs (or alternatively in smaller groups), do one or more of the following:

1. Share about times when your self-esteem felt threatened as you compared yourself with your friends or colleagues in such areas as business achievement, physical strength, or sexual bravado.
2. Many times when spouses talk to each other about each one's needs, the conversation easily degenerates into scorekeeping, blaming, or "if you would only" accusations. If that has been true of your marriage, how have you dealt with it? Talk about ways you have helped your wife understand how you function and what you need. How have you experienced unconditional love from her? What has that done to your sense of manhood?
3. Discuss the quote from Robert Bly at the end of the article. How well do you feel your parents initiated you into adulthood and manhood? What are you doing to prepare your sons for manhood?

In the larger group, develop two definitions of manhood—one that is dictated by the values we see in our society, and the other that is shaped by the biblical values you have discussed today.

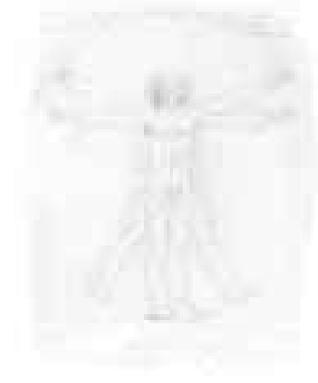
### **Closing worship**

Spend some time in silent confession for the ways in which you have sought to “enthroned” yourself through competition. Confess times when you have willed someone else to be the loser. Confess your tendency to rely on your own ability to bring significance to your life. After a period of silence pray together the prayer of St. Patrick:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,  
Christ behind me, Christ before me,  
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,  
Christ to comfort and restore me;  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,  
Christ in hearts of all that love me,  
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger. Amen

### **Session 3**

# The Dance of Oneness



*Great sex is not just a matter of having our desires fulfilled. It also means giving of ourselves, receiving love, and paying attention to the needs of the other.*

### **Opening Worship**

**Song:** "Take My Life" (HWB 389)

**Prayer:** Take a few moments and reflect silently on your life's journey. When have you felt the greatest sexual satisfaction? When have you felt the greatest frustration? After a few moments pray the following together:

God, you have created me and you know me.  
You know when I get up and when I lie  
down.

You know where I lie down and with whom I  
lie down.

You know when I give and when I take,  
Teach me to love as your Son loves,  
To be first to give,  
And in giving find joy. Amen

### **Exploring the topic**

When men and women fall in love, it is clear to them that they are made for each other. As they marry, couples harbor a not-so-secret hope that

from their wedding on, they will live “happily ever after.” So why is it that we spend so much time in our marriages negotiating our needs, including our sexual needs? If men and women were really meant for each other, why does marriage often resemble what poet Julia Kasdorf calls “mostly an awkward three-legged walk”?

***Read Genesis 1:26, 27; 2:18-25***

That men and women belong together is highlighted in the biblical creation story: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created *him*; male and female he created *them*” ( Gen. 1:27 New International Version, emphasis added). The shift from the singular to the plural pronoun is lost in inclusive language versions such as the New Revised Standard Version (which uses *them* each time). The singular/plural references in the original Hebrew Bible gives us a strong sense of two genders reflecting God as a *single* humanity.

In the story of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2), the complementary relationship is dramatized. The man sees the woman and exclaims, “This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh....” There is instant recognition. It is as if the man says, “Finally here is the other part of me.” This goes beyond male-female relationships in marriage. True human community cannot happen apart from male-female relatedness

If men and women complement each other, this also means that they are different. These differences provide wonderful opportunities for love and wholeness, but they also pose the possibility of grave misunderstanding.

***Looking for different things, and that's okay.***

Many men enter marriage assuming that the sexual needs of their partner are the same as theirs. They believe sex will now be easy, convenient, and frequent. After all, who would turn down morally acceptable sex? But sometime during the honeymoon, they come up against the different sexual expectations of their partners, and things change! Many men go through a period, often of many years, of quiet confusion, feelings of rejection, and frustration when their wives do not respond as they expect. Out of this frustration comes blame, accusation, and bargaining, only moving the couple farther apart from each other.

When a man is already feeling inadequate or rejected, it isn't easy for him to know how to name his need and talk about what sex does for him. As a result, his wife can quickly come to see his sexual desire as shallow, objectifying, and "only about sex". It's then that husbands and wives need to come back to the image of God that is reflected in their union. The needs of both husbands and wives are valid. In fact, they are essential to maintaining the dance of oneness that is as old as human history. Men and women need to understand the needs of the other as being of equal importance.

For a woman to be ready for sex, she needs to know that she is special, cherished, honored, and safe. Lovemaking for a woman often begins at six o'clock in the evening over dinner, when she and her husband do the dishes together, or when they talk about her day with undivided attention. Lovemaking involves loving touches and attentive looks long before bedtime. When

***The surest way*** to a great sex life is to initiate acts of love long before you're under the covers.

emotional needs are met, she is ready to give herself in intimate embrace.

**Longing for acceptance.** At the same time, women must understand that sex is an important way that men know that they are special, cherished, honored, and safe. A woman's willingness to accept a man into her body undoes all the negative messages of conditional acceptance that men live with in their daily lives. Many women are not aware that this is largely what sex is about for men. (For an excellent description of the differing needs of men and women see John Gray's *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom*, listed in the resources list on page XX).

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**Food for thought 1: Making your move**

We men are often pretty task-oriented, and we bury ourselves in work and routine. That means it's also easy for us to forget about romancing our wives. How can we nurture our love for our spouses when we're not in bed? Here's an idea:

Make a list of all the things that your wife loves to have you do for her. If you don't know, ask. Keep adding to the list as new ideas come your way. Put each idea on a slip of paper and put the slips in a bowl or bag in your dresser or in your desk drawer. Each day pull one of these slips out as a reminder of something you can do to make love to your wife.

Here are some ideas, if you need help getting started. (But choose carefully! Obviously, not all women respond equally well to all of these.)

1. Bring her flowers or candy for no reason.
2. Make plans for her birthday or your anniversary.
3. Kiss and hug her when you part ways for the day, and first thing when you're back together again.
4. Bring her a small gift when you've been away from home.
5. Give her flowers on Mother's Day.
6. Plan dates that actually require some setting up.
7. Affirm and complement her in front of others.
8. Hold her like you really want her.
9. Touch her appropriately when you are in the car or in public.
10. Give her twenty minutes of undivided attention while you actively listen.

Movie sex gives little indication that men live with feelings of insecurity. We want to know that we can turn our women on. But when we are honest with ourselves, we also know that sexual bravado can be a mask for our longing for unconditional acceptance. Because many of us are chronically afraid of not measuring up, it isn't easy for us to explain our need for someone to provide reassurance, acceptance, and safety. But we can learn to trust our wives enough to openly discuss our needs and our insecurities.

Why did God make us so complicated? Perhaps God intended sexual differences to be a way of ensuring that we keep negotiating, keep exploring, keep plumbing the depths of the other. Perhaps God intended these differences to keep sex oriented toward giving rather than taking.

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**Food for Thought 2: The mommy factor**

I used to live in a community where a local jeweler would run the same Mother's Day ad on the radio, year after year. The ad asked the male listener to recall all the nice things that his mother did for him as a child: wash his clothes, pour his cereal, make his meals. The speaker would go on to say, "Now your *wife* does those things for you, so come into our jewelry store and buy a gift to thank her for all the things she does that your mother used to do for you." Every year when I heard that ad I nearly drove off the road in disgust.

Unfortunately, many men do expect their wives to take care of them as their mothers once did. Let's face it, it's nice when we have someone to do the things for us that we would rather not do ourselves. But there is hardly a romance-killer more effective than

when we ask our wives to be our moms. In her book, *Ten Stupid Things That Men Do to Mess Up Their Lives*, Laura Schlessinger says, "Men tend to see marriage as the discharge of courtship and live as boys expecting our [sic] mommy wives to take care of us."

Many of us aren't very good at talking about what we really need. So we try to recreate an experience in which mother met our needs without being asked. The result—if our wives stand for it at all—is that we live with a grudging maid, not a willing lover. We may have our bed made, but we'll miss out on our deeper need for intimacy and companionship. It is important for us to grow up, take responsibility for our own needs, and learn to talk with our spouses about our deepest needs.

When each partner has to be the first mover in meeting the needs of the other, the dance of oneness truly reflects the nature of the God who always makes the first move toward us in love.

***Talking it through:***

Either in your groups of two, or in a large group, discuss the one or two questions that are most relevant to your situation.

1. How well do you and your spouse recognize your particular needs as men and women? Have you talked about how you each understand what "great sex" is? Do you find it difficult to remember to romance your wife throughout the day, and outside the bedroom? Similarly, does your wife recognize how important sexual expression is for you in connecting to your feelings of being cherished, loved, and accepted? Identify one thing you would like to do to improve your relationship with your spouse or significant other.
2. How has your sexual identity been shaped by your childhood experiences? To what degree do you expect your spouse to be the "mommy" who takes care of you? How have such expectations affected your marriage?
3. Identify one thing you would like to do to improve your relationship with your spouse or (if you are not married) significant friend.
4. Obviously, men and women bring their complementary gifts to relationships other than marriage. Name some specific ways in which such relationships strengthen your church or

community. How can strong nonsexual relationships between men and women be nurtured and safeguarded? What can you do to encourage such relationships?

Gather again in the large group, and allow time for sharing of insights. If possible, name your commitments or intentions for personal transformation in relationships.

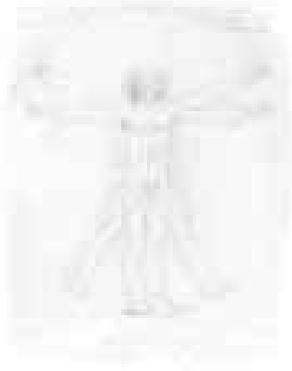
### **Closing worship**

**Prayer:** In silence or in brief spoken prayers, offer to God your commitments to work at healthier communication with women. Close with the following:

God our lover,  
in whose arms we are held,  
and by whose passion we are known,  
require of us also that love  
which is filled with longing,  
delights in the truth,  
and costs not less than everything,  
through Jesus Christ. AMEN

— HWB 740

**Hymn:** "New Earth, Heavens New" (HWB 299)



## **Session 4**

# Temptation and Accountability

*To deal with sexual temptation we need the support of other Christian brothers who are willing to talk openly together about key issues.*

### **Opening worship**

#### **Reading:**

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

**Happy are those to whom the LORD  
imputes no iniquity**

**And in whose spirit there is no deceit.**

While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.

**For day and night your hand was heavy  
upon me;**

**my strength was dried up as by the heat of  
summer.**

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;

**I said, "I will confess my transgressions to  
the LORD,"**

and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (pause)

Therefore let all who are faithful offer

prayer to you; at a time of distress, the  
rush of mighty waters shall not reach  
them.

**You are a hiding place for me; you pre-  
serve me from trouble;**

**you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.**

—*from Psalm 32*

**Song:** “You are my hiding place” (contemporary chorus) or “In the stillness of the evening” (*HWB 551*)

### ***Exploring the topic***

Poets, novelists, magazine writers, and movie makers have all been intrigued by forbidden love that leads to the violation of sexual boundaries. The steamy book and magazine covers we see in our drugstores and on airport book stands show how fascinated we are with the deceptive promises of forbidden sex. Yet the mysterious power of sexual temptation can make it difficult for us men to see the women we love for the persons they are. It also makes it difficult for us to see ourselves for who we really are.

The Bible is brutally honest about temptation, beginning with the serpent’s offer of forbidden fruit to Adam and Eve. In the area of sex, the biblical writers recount a number of stories of temptation and sin, some of which include more salacious detail than we would ever include in our own church periodicals! They include the rape of Dinah (Gen. 34), Judah’s liaison with his daughter-in-law Tamar (Gen. 38), Samson’s dalliance with Delilah (Judg. 16) and David’s adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). These stories show both profound brokenness and, in some cases, amazing repentance and restoration. The story chosen for this session illustrates what happens when godly sexuality is violated and boundaries are crossed.

### ***Read 2 Samuel 13:1-21***

This story has all the elements of any contemporary scandal: lust, rape, deception, domination, with incest thrown in for good measure. Prince Amnon, son of King David, falls in love with his stepsister Tamar. Early on we see that Amnon becomes so frustrated because he cannot have her that he becomes ill. When Amnon confesses to his friend and cousin, Jonadab, that he is in love with Tamar, Jonadab devises a plan: Amnon will pretend to be ill, then send for Tamar to nurse his ailment.

When Tamar comes to Amnon's bedroom, he clears the room. When she reaches to feed him, Amnon grabs her and begins to force her to have sex with him. Tamar struggles against Amnon, appealing to his sense of reason. But Amnon is beyond reason, "He refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her" (2 Sam. 13:14 NIV). Following the act, Amnon "hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her" (v. 15).

***One thing leads to another.*** In this story we see the nature of sexual sin. First, Amnon loses his perspective. His desire for Tamar frustrates him "to the point of illness" (13:2). When a man wants a woman so badly that he feels ill, it is a clear warning that his desire is all about using that woman for his own gratification. Amnon's lust for Tamar was only about Amnon.

Second, we see Amnon caught in self-deception. Notice in the story that Tamar is described as "his sister," indicating that she is unreachable for Amnon. But when he thinks about possessing her, he describes her as "the sister of my brother

Absalom" (v. 4). By making Tamar Absalom's sister rather than his own sister, it is clear he is trying to justify having sex with her. Amnon is creating his own reality. But the reality he is creating involves the violation of someone else.

Third, Amnon violates Tamar by overpowering her. Amnon is physically stronger than Tamar and he is able to force her to do what he wants her to do. Men need to be conscious of this when they relate to women. Physical strength creates a power imbalance that easily corrupts sexual relationships.

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**Food for thought 1: Sex on a screen**

We men are not the only consumers of pornography, but we are wired to be aroused through our visual sense. This makes us especially prone to the lure of sexual pictures and images. More than any other delivery system, the Internet has made access to pornography more accessible, more discrete, and more confidential than ever before. Dr. Louis McBurney, writing in the fall 2002 issue of *Marriage Partnership* magazine, cites research that shows that "60 percent of all web site visits are sexual in nature."

For some men it's a onetime curiosity. For others, one visit leads to two, then three, until they suddenly find themselves trapped in an addiction to pornography. For these latter, pornography consumes enormous amounts of time, reaps mountains of shame, and causes men to expend a lot of energy keeping the secret from spouses, employers, and friends. It leads them to become dissatisfied with their own sex lives, and open to sexual experiences outside their own moral boundaries.

Unfortunately, since the milieu through which pornography is delivered is so private, it is easy for men to keep this sin secret, and difficult to get the help they need when pornographic interests turn addictive or even criminal. Coupled with the shame that often accompanies such behavior, it is little wonder that men only find help when they are found out.

To find healing from the grip of pornography requires a safe place. Men who are dealing with this kind of shame need a community of friends who can model that we need never be afraid of the truth. Men who long for healing from sexual bondage of any kind will need the support of brothers who invite confession, offer the assurance that they will stand together, and will not keep a record of wrongs. This community of brothers will demonstrate the redeeming and restoring love of Jesus as they bear each other's burdens.

Finally, we see that Amnon did not have the accountability structures that we all need to live faithfully. Because sexual sin involves self-deception, we need friends who will help us see ourselves as we truly are. Jonadab is identified as a *friend* of Amnon, though he was also his cousin. But rather than mirror back to Amnon what he was seeing—that Amnon is consumed by lust and about to violate another person—Jonadab becomes an accomplice to Amnon’s self-deception and sin. In fact, he invents the plan that leads to the rape of Tamar.

***A false, lonely world.*** All sexual sin involves a retreat into a false world and away from our community. We create a reality in our minds that makes crossing a boundary okay, perhaps even noble. Creating our own realities becomes possible when we separate or isolate ourselves from a community to which we are accountable. Notice in the story that Tamar attempts to reason with Amnon that what he is about to do “is not good in Israel.” Amnon’s community has appropriate channels for right relationships between a man and a woman, but it frowns on what he is doing here.

Amnon, however, no longer cares about what his community thinks. Amnon cares only about Amnon. How might this story have turned out differently if Amnon’s “friend,” Jonadab, had been like David’s companion, the prophet Nathan, who seemed to be able to see inside the soul of his friend (2 Sam. 12)? What if Amnon had cultivated a friendship that was honest enough to confront destructive behavior?

As a pastor, I have watched as men have wandered away from their wives, consumed by lust for another woman. In every case, the presenting symptom is the distance the man puts between himself and his community. This allows him to begin creating a new reality in which his sin will be acceptable. More often than not, openness to confrontation is cast aside.

For such a man to be rescued from a fall, he needs deep friendships with people who are able to confront him in love with truth. These relationships are too rare, too precious, but desperately needed in our day. Whether the tempta-

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**Food for thought 2: Masturbation**

Former U.S. Surgeon General, Jocelyn Elders, was quickly dismissed from her post when she came under fire for suggesting that masturbation might be taught in sex education classes as a way of coping with adolescent sexual urges. The event only highlighted the question that bothers many Christian men: Is masturbation sinful compulsive behavior or simply a way of skimming off the pressure and frustration of unspent sexual energy?

Since the Bible is silent on the subject, the answer seems to be, "It all depends." Masturbation can easily become a compulsive behavior that becomes an end in itself. For some, masturbation is a way of avoiding intimacy. When a marriage falls on difficult times, masturbation can quickly become a way to remain distant. It can override the natural rhythms of sexual desire that motivate us to reengage our relationships with our spouses. In such cases, the sin isn't so much the masturbation

itself as it is the desire to make sexual gratification self-centered, rather than shared in communion with one's spouse.

On the other hand, some masturbation may not carry such negative freight. In his book *Sex for Christians*, theologian Lewis Smedes says, "There are couples whose sexual needs come to a boiling point at very different temperatures; for a person whose boiling point is low, masturbation, rather than being a substitute for shared love, can be a safety valve." Another example might be those who have once known sexual fulfillment with a spouse but because of health or death cannot enjoy sex. Here, masturbation may be a way of lovingly remembering the love that was once intimately expressed.

One thing is certain: Men masturbate. To answer their questions about masturbation, they need to end their silence and start talking about it.

tion is sexual or not, all Christian men need trusted brothers who can ask the hard questions. We need brothers who can stand before us as a mirror and remind us of who we truly are.

### ***Talking it through***

In your regular dyads, or in other groups of two or three, discuss the one or two questions that you feel most ready to engage.

1. We all deal with temptations to sin sexually. Without getting into more details than you feel ready to share, talk about how you have confronted such temptations in your life. If you have crossed boundaries, how have you dealt with it?
2. What would you need to see in your men's group or circle of friends that would make it a safe place to confess your sexual struggles, temptations, and sins, and to support each other in living faithful sexual lives? What steps are you ready to take to establish that kind of trust?
3. How have you dealt with periods in your life when sexual intercourse was not available to you because of singleness, separation, disabilities, or bereavement? What have you found to be healthy means of nurturing faithfulness in your sexuality during these times?
4. What strategies do you use to deal with the lure of pornography and other stimulants of inappropriate sexual desire? Discuss the pros and cons of "radical surgery" (e.g., cancel your Internet account) versus the manage-

ment of your temptations in the presence of those lures.

5. Talk about the "Food for thought 2." Do you agree with the notion that "it all depends..." when it comes to masturbation. Why, or why not?

Take a few moments in the larger group to share any insights, resolutions, or prayer requests that you feel are appropriate for the group.

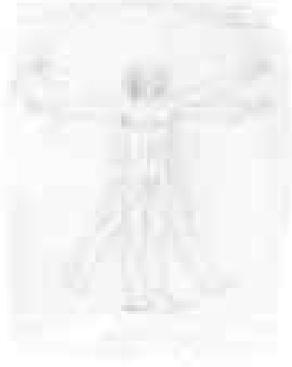
### **Closing worship**

Do one or both of the following.

Read Psalm 51 meditatively together. This psalm was probably written to capture David's deep longing for healing and wholeness following his adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). Spend a few moments in silence, offering your sexuality to God, and praying that God be honored through your sexuality.

**Hymn:** "Lord, I Am Fondly, Earnestly (*HWB 514*)

As you sing, visualize the fountains of God's grace opening in heaven and pouring salvation over you.



## **Session 5**

# Sex and Life Stages

*As we mature, we experience changes and losses in our sexual lives. Sexual health through the life stages comes as we discuss these changes with those close to us, and lean into the future with the support of God and our Christian community.*

### **Opening worship**

**Hymn:** "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" (HWB 328)

**Reflection:** On an index card list the decades of your life beginning with your twenties. Give each decade a descriptive label that summarizes something positive about that time.

**Prayer:** In silence, thank God for the unique gifts that come in each stage of life. Conclude the prayer time with the following:

God, you are from everlasting to everlasting.  
We thank you that you have given us life;  
we thank you for the gifts of each stage of  
life.

Teach us to be good stewards of our days.  
Keep us conscious of eternity  
and prepare us to live forever with you.

Amen

### ***Exploring the topic***

It is often said that the only things that are certain in our lives are taxes and change. Life doesn't stay the same.

- When we are in our twenties we believe that if we had a fulcrum big enough and a lever long enough we could move the world.
- According to the slogan of the sixties, once we've reached our thirties we are no longer to be trusted, because we've likely sold out.
- In our forties many of us feel that our energy and earning belong to everyone but ourselves as we raise our children.
- In our fifties we begin to reckon with questions of our mortality and we measure what we have accomplished.
- In our sixties, we have less to prove and we begin to anticipate, or dread, retirement.
- In our seventies and eighties we may tend to look backward more than forward as we cherish our memories and wonder at the generations to come.

This natural progression, though it takes many forms, reminds us that the way we deal with change affects the way we experience and appreciate life. We experience physical, psychological, and career changes. We experience changes in our sexuality as well.

### ***Read aloud Ecclesiastes 12:1-7***

This passage contains many metaphors for

aging, and they're not necessarily optimistic. The writer speaks of the changes in what excites us, what moves us, and what gives us our sense of "pleasure" (v. 1). He speaks about a time when desire fails (v. 5). At different stages in life we want different things, we value different experiences. It seems this is true of our sexual experience also.

Someone has suggested that if our sexual urges are like an erupting volcano in our twenties and thirties, as we get older it is more like a rolling wave that slowly rises in the sea until it finally breaks on the shore. While our sexual interests change as we mature, we can experience healthy sexuality through our last years if we can adjust our expectations.

***How we see the rest of life.*** Healthy sexual aging is tightly connected to our larger view of life. If we accept our sexuality in the context of our past and future life stages, and if we can locate ourselves on a journey that countless souls have traveled before, we will be better equipped to deal with our changes in an emotionally healthy way. We will recognize that we are always moving toward the end of this life and a return to the God who gave us breath (v. 7).

For those who are blessed with spouses through the aging process, Ecclesiastes 9:9 gives us a glimpse into a fulfilled sexuality in old age: "Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life." The intimate embrace of one who has known us in triumph and in loss can be a powerful reminder of the depth of God's love.

For a variety of reasons, men struggle with the progression through life stages. Some attempt to reverse the clock by reclaiming their youthful vigor. Many a man has tried to hold back the forward progression of life by trying to connect with a younger woman or by collecting a series of sexual conquests. But these will ultimately leave him empty because time continues to move forward. Sadder still, he loses an opportunity to embrace the gifts that God gives for each stage of life. He forfeits the chance to live fully in the present and thus deepen his spiritual life.

**Going through sexual grief.** By middle age some men feel inadequate in what they have accomplished. They may have experienced failure, and their guilt lingers. Perhaps their family has not turned out as they had hoped. Perhaps they have lost a job when their employer replaced them with younger men with more energy and drive. Those who experience a failed marriage are at a stage in life where it is

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**Food for thought 1: Sexual dysfunction**

Testicular and prostate cancer are two conditions that affect a lot of men in their thirties and older. These two cancers are among the most treatable of all cancers, although many men are uninformed about them. Early detection through regular testicular self-exams and prostate screening provides the greatest hope for cure.

For both husbands and their wives, it is extremely important to talk about the possibility of erectile dysfunction (impotence) resulting from cancer or other causes. For some men, the fear of dysfunction can itself be enough to cause it. Men need reassurance from

their wives that they are more than their sexual performance. They also need to inquire about medical and therapeutic resources that may help restore sexual function.

When dealing with sexual dysfunction, the brain is the most important sexual organ we have. That doesn't mean that all sexual dysfunction is a matter of "mind over member." But it does mean that there are many creative ways that husbands and wives can bring physical sexual pleasure to one another. Frank communication about what is pleasurable is an important key to sexual satisfaction.

difficult to start over; they must now redefine how they relate to their children or how they will manage the complexities of blending families. All of these emotional events have an impact on a man's sexuality.

Sometimes, of course, sudden physical changes are thrust upon us. Men or their wives become physically disabled in ways that limit their freedom for adventure, or for sexual expression. A long illness, medication, or dysfunction will obviously keep men from "business as usual." There is a quiet group of men in every community whose spouses succumb to early dementia, making sexual relations impossible or inappropriate.

Whether in confronting natural life changes, or dealing with imposed changes, the resistance to moving forward can be very powerful. It feels

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**Food for thought 2: Sexual losses**

Dealing with loss is a part of our sexual lives. Early in marriage, most men deal with feelings of confusion or disappointment when their wives have different ideas about when and how to make love. Some are surprised by sexual difficulties like frigidity or impotence, that may have their roots in past sexual abuse. Some losses are tragic and unexpected, as when one's spouse is unfaithful. Some changes are simply a part of the aging process.

Loss is one of the most difficult things for us men to deal with. It makes us feel powerless. Our first inclination in dealing with it usually does not include seeking help from others—yet, ironically, that is what we most need. Sexual losses are very person-

al and require the same kind of grieving we experience with other losses. There is no greater comfort in a time of loss than to have the support of a Christian community of intimate friends who can walk with us through the anger, denial, and other stages of grief.

Unspoken and unnamed losses often lack closure. What a blessing it could be for men to gather around one who is struggling with a loss due to sexual dysfunction, relational failure, or mental illness—and shoulder his burden. What a powerful witness it would be for his friends to plan a worship ritual in which these losses are offered to Jesus, the healer of our every ill!

more hopeful to go back and reclaim the familiar than move forward into the uncertain. But to age in a healthy way, we need to lean into our anxieties and reaffirm our value as children of God, men whom Jesus deemed worthy to die for. Our uncertainty about the future is an opportunity to seize the promise that our true prize lies in God and God's kingdom, not in what we have accomplished in this life alone.

By confronting our fears we come out on the other side with greater strength and richer character, equipped to encourage those who come after us. For all men—married, single, divorced, or widowed—the faith community becomes an important point of reference as we move from one life stage to the next. Because there is a place for everyone in God's family, all can become true elders who build others up through encouragement and example.

### ***Talking it through***

In your groups of two, pick the one or two questions that you feel ready to talk about.

1. What do you celebrate most about your sexuality at this stage of your life? What losses do you mourn?
2. What worries do you have about potential health problems and their complications for sexual function? What are you doing about these issues?
3. If you have had to deal with one of the following "losses," talk with your partner about steps you have taken, or would like to take, toward healing:

- sexual dysfunction, either your own or your spouse's
  - unhealthy or painful views of sex
  - unfaithfulness, either your own or your spouse's
4. How have you experienced the changes in your spouse's sexual identity and expression?
  5. What has the experience of sexual loss taught you about God? about Christian community?

Reassemble in the larger group, and leave some time for those who wish to share insights with the group.

### ***Closing worship***

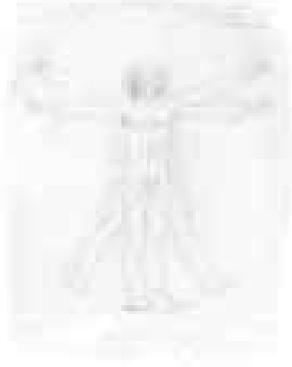
***Read:*** Psalm 139 as a way of reaffirming God's faithfulness to us throughout all of life.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
 you discern my thoughts from far away.  
 You search out my path and my lying down,  
 and are acquainted with all my ways.  
 Even before a word in on my tongue,  
 O Lord, you know it completely.  
 You hem me in, behind and before,  
 and lay your hand upon me.  
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.  
 Where can I go from your spirit?  
 Or where can I flee from your presence?  
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
 If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there..

If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
(*Psalm 139:1-10*)

**Prayer:** In silence, think about men you know who are experiencing difficult losses in their lives. Then, without naming the people, speak words or phrases that express your hope for their healing (example: "restored pleasure" or "caring communication").

**Hymn:** "God of Our Life" (*HWB 486*)



# Leader's Guide

One of the aims of the *Closer Than a Brother* series is to encourage men to find "spiritual companions." Some of this work may already have been done, and the men in your group may already have a partner with whom to pair up when dyads are called for. If you have not yet dealt with this issue, you may wish to review pages 10 to 12 in the first booklet of the series, *What Really Matters: Conversation Starters for Men* by J. Lorne Peachey and Everett J. Thomas. If your group, or members in it, have not been exposed to that study, you may wish to start with it, or at least use its suggestions for starting spiritual companion relationship.

## **How to use this booklet**

This booklet is designed so that each participant can have his own copy. The book should be used for participation in the group (for example, the responsive readings and discussion questions), and for personal reflection and growth between sessions. As leader, encourage the men to read the session articles ahead of time, and to bring their books to the sessions.

Be sure to check the individual session notes that follow. But for conducting each session, the following hints on the flow of the sessions may be helpful:

### ***Opening and closing worship***

You will likely want to adapt the opening worship and closing exercises to fit the needs of your group. If you are not a singing group, you may want to use the words of the hymns in some other way, or use other appropriate openings. Have hymnals available as appropriate.

### ***Exploring the topic***

If the men do not read the material ahead of time, you should be prepared to present the content of the articles to the men as a lead-in to the section, "Talking it through." The articles are short enough that you may read them aloud together. Ideally, however, the material should be read ahead of time, or should be presented more informally than simply reading it.

### ***Thinking it through: dyads and close-to-home conversation***

The sessions often call the group to break into dyads for sharing. We also encourage men to remain in the same dyad through all the sessions, so that they can begin to experience the benefits of spiritual companionship. However, you must discern how far your group is ready to go with the use of dyads. If your group does not know each other well, dyads may feel threatening to some when they are asked to talk more personally about themselves.

You are encouraged to push out the group's comfort zones, but don't force it. If your group does not feel ready to try dyads, ask them to meet in groups of three or four and/or to talk less personally about the same issues. This is better than no discussion at all. However, as the sessions continue, you may challenge them to

be bolder in their sharing. Also, if some want to meet in dyads and others do not, consider having a “two-track” system, with some dyads, and some larger groups.

### ***Notes for individual sessions***

This study touches on one of the most personal, yet most important, issues that men think about: sex. Given the sensitivity of the topic, it will be important to develop trust and safety within the group. Take time to get to know each other. Be sensitive to the comfort level of the group. Commit yourselves to confidentiality. Sometimes, talking *about* the discussion questions may be as valuable as responding *to* the questions.

#### ***Session 1: Sex—The Glory and the Risks***

A foundational assumption for this study is that the appropriate context for sexual expression is in marriage. Nevertheless it will be important for you to recognize the possibility that not everyone in the group has always held this assumption. Your group will have some diversity in both understanding and experience.

The interpretation of Song of Solomon that is presented in the article may be new to most in your group. For your own preparation, be sure to read the article first, then, if possible, read the entire book of Song of Solomon in one sitting. You may also wish to consult Bible encyclopedia articles or commentaries on this book.

In the discussion, establish a “no-question-is-too-stupid” climate. Feel free to see the humor in some of the descriptions of the beloved’s body

in Song of Solomon 4:1-15 ("Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn..."). How flattering is that to our twenty first century ears? Playfulness can go a long way toward creating a relaxed atmosphere that will help the men speak freely.

### ***Session 2: Man's Struggle to Be Man***

Many men do not know how to extend or receive unconditional acceptance, restoration, and forgiveness. It may be helpful to your group if you can share a personal story in which you experienced unconditional love, forgiveness, or an undeserved kindness.

The constant comparison that goes on among and about men can be pretty painful. You might open this subject in the discussion period by playfully identifying the age-old question that secretly plagues us all, "Does size really matter?" Here is an important opportunity to build trust among the men in your group. Give your group time to talk about how they experience comparison in their daily lives.

This session also touches on the perspectives of single men. If you have singles in your group, talk about the false relationship we sometimes create between sexual activity and manhood. How might the story of Jacob and the chapter challenge society's notions of manhood? What is the most important thing men need?

If all the men are married, the question at the end of the session can open a discussion of how they can find language to express the way they experience love from their wives. It would be a true gift if the men could leave with new ability to name what, in their relationships, strengthens their sense of manhood.

The brainstorming exercise about the initiation of adolescent boys in the Christian community is intended to generate ideas that can be implemented. Invite the group to make real commitments to mentor boys into Christian maturity. This could be an opportunity for the men of your group to enter into a transforming ministry in your community!

### **Session 3: The Dance of Oneness**

Offering men permission to talk about their disappointments, confusion, and struggles in marriage can open a door to healing. It can also open a can of worms. Watch that the discussion doesn't become an opportunity for men simply to complain about their marriages or their wives. You may need to coach some to speak respectfully and sensitively. It will also be important for you to reaffirm the need for confidentiality regarding what men share in these discussions.

If there are singles in your group include them in the discussion. Invite them to talk about their feelings about being single and to tell their stories. Brainstorm what unique resources single men bring to those who are married.

You may wish to spend a few minutes creating a group list of ways to rev up the romance in your marriages, using the "Food for thought 1" as a springboard. If you like, make formal commitments to follow through on two or three items, and plan to report back at a future session.

### **Session 4: Temptation and Accountability**

This session could prove to be the most threatening to the group. It could also open the door to significant healing. Be sensitive to those who

may be testing the waters of confessing things for which they carry a great deal of shame. As with other discussions, emphasize the need for confidentiality.

If there is a lot of silence, do not try to force the discussion. Simply observe the silence, and indicate that it is a sign that the group is thinking. Encourage the men to find other appropriate settings if this session has sparked a need to talk one-on-one.

If discussion is too much of a threat for some, you may wish to have them spend a few moments journaling about their temptations or sexual sins. They may wish to journal in the form of a letter to Jesus. After journaling, invite members of the group to place their confessions together in a pile and burn them as a way of signaling release, forgiveness, and restoration.

If someone in the group shares that they are involved in sexual sin of any kind, be sure to seek the commitment of the group to pray for this individual and to support the individual. Offer to go with the individual to talk about the situation with your pastor or a counselor.

### ***Session 5: Sex and Life Stages***

For the reflective exercise in opening worship, have writing instruments and index cards available.

Depending on the ages of your group members, this session could touch some nerves. No one wants to think about performance failure or loss of vitality. Many men simply do not know how to talk about their sexual losses.

Allow men to name their anxieties, fears, and losses, then tell their stories if they wish. Gather around those who share painful experiences, and pray for God to bless them and renew their joy in knowing that they are children of God. Consider developing a grief ritual for those who have experienced significant sexual or marital losses.

Another possibility for this session or a subsequent one would be to invite a Christian physician to talk with your group about sexual dysfunction and/or changes in sexual function as one ages. Or invite a panel of people that might include a physician, a therapist, a crisis counselor, and a chaplain.

### ***Extending these sessions***

If your group has begun to bond through this study and wishes to continue further, consider taking a retreat together. One format that could work is to allow time for men to describe their life journeys with their sexuality. A suggested outline for sharing could include:

- sexuality as it was modeled by your parents
- how you dealt with your sexuality in adolescence
- dealing with sexual energy as a single person
- sexual learnings in early marriage
- how your sexuality has changed in each life stage
- how your sexuality has informed your understanding of God

Many Christian men today are looking for opportunities to walk with peers as they ponder key life issues. Macho talk in the locker room or political discussions at lunch just aren't nurturing their souls. The study series, *Closer Than a Brother*, helps men go deeper in their life with God through men's groups and accountable relationships in the church family.

# Sex and Faith

## Celebrating God's Gifts

Men think about sex a great deal, but most find it difficult to talk personally and honestly about it. Many have questions about appropriate and healthy habits of thought and action, but don't know how—or are afraid—to raise them with their friends. *Sex and Faith* assumes that sexual health gets a big boost as Christian men learn how to support each other in their sexual journeys. The booklet gives guidelines for five sessions on the glories and risks of sex, the meaning of manhood, keys to sexual fulfillment, temptation and accountability, and sexuality through life stages. Through worship, biblical reflection, and discussion, the sessions are designed to help men grow in their understanding of themselves, become more faithful in their lives, and experience God.

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