

SEX, JESUS,
AND THE
CONVERSATIONS
THE CHURCH
FORGOT

Mo Isom



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To my humble husband, Jeremiah.

Thank you for choosing me.

*God's immeasurable grace comes to life in the
most overwhelming ways through your love.*

You stared at my past and took a knee for my future.

I am honored to be your bride.

You will always be my One and Only.

With love, your Only One

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Introduction

Sex.

I don't think we're talking about it enough.

Sure, our culture is saturated with it. Our computer screens are pumped full of it. Our televisions ooze it. Our radios scream about it. Magazines and books and apps and social media outlets stream it down our throats.

Lust, body ideals, pleasure, foreplay, porn, adultery.

We're obsessed with it. We're fixated on it. We're entertained by it. We think we're deeply all-informed about it. We boast in the freedom we have to do what we want with our bodies. We tally the number of partners we've had. We're convinced it's necessary in a normal dating relationship. We're numb to the random hookups and one-night stands. We want to experience it, tease it, taste it, flaunt it, worship it . . .

But we're not willing to *really* sit down and talk about it.

While society twists, perverts, cheapens, and idolizes it, we—the church—are relatively silent about it. Awkwardly stumbling around it. Running from it. Building desperate rule

lists of dos and don'ts. And, as a result, allowing the sanctity of God to be stolen by the insatiable lust of the lost.

Somewhere along the way we've allowed ourselves to be drowned out of the conversation. In a halfhearted attempt to stay relevant and relatable, we've caved in to the narrative that sex—the most prominent and overwhelming focus of our entire society—isn't for *us* to really talk about.

Right?

Wrong.

It's our responsibility to talk about it. It is our calling, as the body of believers, to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ—and every version of the holy Scriptures I've ever read talks openly and candidly about sex. It is a topic fiercely close to God's heart, a topic that flows from the pages of His Word. A topic laced with affirmation, guidance, and reproof. God, after all, is the inventor of sex. We were made, by Him, as sexual beings. So if it's a topic fiercely close to His heart, it must become a topic fiercely close to ours.

I choose to speak up. Not as a preacher but as a pilgrim. A pilgrim who learned every hard lesson, every hard way. Who sinned time and time and time again in search of a pleasure I just couldn't find. Who has a mess of a testimony that was nurtured and redeemed by a King who makes our hopeless things holy.

I'll speak up for every person whose family thought their church was having certain conversations with them. The ones whose church thought their family was having certain conversations with them. The same ones who were then force-fed more than they needed to see and know by a shameless culture that couldn't have cared less about them.

I'll speak up for the teen who is tangled in the bondage of pornography. For the girlfriend feeling pressured to go further

and “give it up” in order to show her boyfriend how much she loves him. For the college-aged coed who can’t escape the constant temptation and stimulation on every app, website, and show. For the woman who saved herself for marriage and couldn’t figure out why she felt so ashamed on her wedding night. For the wife and husband who, at times, feel like disconnected strangers between their own sheets. For the person who can so casually watch sex play out on TV and movie screens and still can’t figure out why they’re dissatisfied with the real thing. And for every person in between.

I’ll speak up.

I’ll speak up with a voice that’s unashamed to stand up to a crazed and confused world and redefine sex by its God-designed meaning. A voice that’s not afraid to bear my battle wounds if they help point anyone back to God’s redeeming truth. A voice that’s sick and tired of the world pressuring us to ride its ever-changing tide; one that’s found its firm foundation in God’s unchanging truth.

Reclaiming sex as the act of holy worship God always intended it to be isn’t taboo or embarrassing—it’s eternity-shifting. And eternity matters to me.

It’s time to begin reclaiming sex for the glory of God. It’s time to invite Jesus back into the bedroom. It’s time to start the conversations that the church forgot. And to stand up, boldly, as a body of believers, and defend the most intimate act of worship and praise we’re free to know. It’s time to equip our minds and hearts with the truth of our value, our self-control, our bodies, and our relationships. It’s time to start to understand and lean into the roots of why God cares so deeply about sex and be reminded that sex begins with the condition of our own hearts.

At the end of the day, in a suffocating world, the Word of God breathes boldly true. Whether you listen now, learn it the hard way later, or forever try your hardest to repress the truth, one day you will stand before the Lord and He will search your heart and know your truth. But in the meantime you have the opportunity to encounter His shame-destroying grace, have your heart perspective reframed, and find freedom in His loving reproof.

So this book is for you. I don't have all the answers. And I don't have space in these pages to address all of the different types of sexual sin struggles that are manifesting in our world and, possibly, have collided with your life too. The things I've personally experienced are all I really have any authority to speak into. I only have my testimony. But I know God uses our vulnerability for His glory, so I trust He will use these words in diverse and wonderful ways—with more intention than I could ever hope to. Please hang with me through these pages; I know there is a piece of this book for you.

If you are the weary wanderer navigating how your sexual identity and your faith become married at the cross, I hope you'll see this book through. If your perspective on sex has been shaped by the world rather than the Word for long enough, I hope my reckless and redeemed testimony will connect with you. If you're finally ready to replace perversion with purpose and pain with purity, this book, my friend, is written for you. I pray God meets you through these words, collects the pieces of your fractured story, and resurrects in your heart the beautiful reminder that He, alone, can make all things new.



Let's Call It Like It Is

I couldn't forget the night if I tried.

It was just one instance of one too many.

I sat on the bed while he was half-undressed and part of me wondered how on earth I even got there.

The guy I *actually* liked was in the other room, with another girl, doing who knows what.

But there I sat with his friend, who no part of me even respected, hoping that maybe if I seemed cool and low-maintenance and fun, he'd do me the favor of passing on a good word.

I rationalized away the conviction spinning through my head and once again gave in to the choice I didn't even want to make. He got what he came for. A small piece of foreplay—a halfhearted performance. I pretended to enjoy it, then lay there wondering how much longer I needed to continue to pretend I was drunk so the shame of this wouldn't feel like quite so much.

What was I doing? How did I get here? Every part of me knew that I carried more worth. I was so much more valuable than the dispensable, passed-around girl. But somehow I was back here—in the filth I'd never thought I'd find myself in. Pawning off my value in desperate hopes of feeling loved. Giving men my body in hopes they would give me their hearts.

Somehow I, the smart, well-mannered, high-achieving, “churched” girl, was drowning in my choices—a slave to sin I'd never cared to learn enough about, stuck playing the tired games of the world.

Band-Aids and Bullet Holes

I'll be the first to admit my sexual testimony is a mess.

A mess of misguidance and misbehavior, confusion and conviction, rebellion and repentance. It's a maze of boundary-pressing and power-leveraging, ignorance and impatience, lust and lost wandering. Add to the mix an overwhelming dose of overexposure, countless control issues, grief-triggered overcompensation, and a catastrophic case of insecurity. And there you have it. Me. A well-rounded girl on the surface blindly stumbling through a sin-filled battlefield within my heart.

The captain? My sin-nature. The casualty? My soul.

It's easy to see now that almost all of my sexual frustrations, bondage, and brokenness grew out of the fact that, ultimately, I knew nothing about sex.

And I mean *nothing*.

But you couldn't have told me that then. No, I lived most of my adolescence and young adulthood confidently convinced that I knew all there was to know about it. I saw what the

world showed me. I listened to what the world told me. I was interested, enticed, and aware of this sex thing that seemed so delightfully imposing. I had a laundry list of thoughts, ideas, reasons, and rationalizations. On the outside I was a “good girl” from a good family, smart and well-mannered. But in my own mind I waved the proud banners of wonder and womanhood, my freedom of exploration, my right to my own body and my own sexual identity, my entitlement to dress and act as I pleased.

My moral compass often hinged on what was socially acceptable at the time, which seemed to be a more and more permissive guide as I moved through different seasons of life. In our culture, sexual expression is praised. And women, above all else, hold great power and esteem if their beauty and sexuality are enticing. After all, it's our body, our life, and our choices. That's what we are conditioned to believe and how we're conditioned to behave.

But, in truth, I knew absolutely nothing about sex.

Real sex.

That holy kind of sacrificial sex. That God-designed act of worship created to righteously unify a husband and a wife bound by the commitment of a covenant. That act that carries the weight of the cross in its wake and teaches us the power of tangling souls under a promise made before the Creator of it all. That comfort-bringing, fear-dispelling, soul-sanctifying kind of sex. That God-pleasing sex worth waiting for and celebrating, worth saving until His design designates. That all-inclusive physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual surrender.

No, I knew nothing about *that* sex.

And the church didn't talk about it either.

All the church talked about was *not* having sex, always boxing sex into the confines of dos and don'ts, rights and wrongs. Always under the awkward and tentative guise that *that* topic wasn't the most comfortable to address. They often spoke with careful, prepackaged words. Words that seemed detached from any relatability to what was *actually* going on in the world outside of those walls. It was as if they were afraid to have those types of conversations too soon—or too late. To be too honest or too mundane. As if they were overwhelmed by the tangled layers of all that topic contained and so instead kept the dialogue safe. And, I would imagine, hoped the families were diving deeper and teaching more at home.

I can hardly blame them. Not only is the topic of sex a layered, complex, and multifaceted discussion, but on top of the complexity it's already blanketed in, the world has essentially bullied the church out of the conversation. The world has so massively exalted, worshiped, and stolen ownership of all things sex-related that the church has, at times, lost footing and leverage in the fight for young people's attention. So in an effort to get even a whisper of truth into the screaming match that is the great, worldly, sexual debate, the church has often clung to the simple and clear articulation of what is sin and what is not. The rule list of what to do and what not to do.

But the infection that's grown out of that incomplete prescription is that we don't want to avoid something just because we are told to. When a list of right and wrong is all that is reinforced, we begin to see the holy and hope-filled Word of God as a rule book rather than a love letter written to our hearts. A layered and wisdom-soaked love letter gently explaining the deep-rooted *whys* that compel us to live differently from the start.

And sure, consequences are a compelling force for following the rules, but we are a generation of compartmentalized conscience. We compartmentalize our faith from our actions to serve our own desires. We often disregard the rule list and act according to impulse. Then, foolishly and soul-threateningly, we remarry the entities when they collide and get mad at God for the consequences and cause-and-effect results in our life. And we struggle with our faith—doubting the goodness of a God we never cared to actually understand or obey in the first place.

But as a result of this tug-of-war for a seat at the table in people's hearts, there is a massive conversation the church forgot, a conversation that comes from the lips of a King and begins long before the symptomatic response of promiscuity.

We've forgotten to celebrate sex as an incredible gift given to us by God and instead have solely preached against the symptoms, forgetting to address the root of it all.

As the church we've forgotten to talk about the *whys*.

We've forgotten to start from the beginning and share *why* and *what* should frame and guide our sexual understanding.

We've stood at the pulpit and shaken our frustrated fists at the world, preaching about the failings of our sexual morality and our lack of self-control, but we've forgotten to first address the aching, bleeding needs of people's hearts. We're trying to put Band-Aids on bullet holes. From bullets that never should have had the power to penetrate our God-designed souls.

We need to know the *whys* at the root of our wandering. We need to know the cause at the core of our temptation. We need to hear more than "do this, don't do that." We need to know why it matters to listen and obey in the first place. Because most of our sexual sin struggles grow out of our lack

of a deep-rooted understanding of what sex is, how God sees us, why God calls us to what He does, and why obedience to that calling is worth the sacrifice. Sexual understanding, above all things, is not simply about behavior modification, it's about heart transformation. But at the beginning of heart transformation comes heart education.

So before my testimony can carry any leverage or impact, we have to get on the same page about what sex truly is, and we have to open our hearts to the *whys* that will ultimately be the only things that can compel response.

At the Root of It All . . .

It helps to start this whole sexual conversation with an accurate and perspective-shifting definition (or for many, *redefinition*) of what sex even is.

Sex is God's invention.

It's comprised of physical, mental, emotional, and above all spiritual acts of connection designed by the Creator for the unity, pleasure, and reproduction of the very lives He created. Sex is a holy gift purely designed by a God who delights in lavishing His creations with every good and perfect blessing. It is a pure act given to us as a gift to enjoy and delight in under the divine guidance of the appropriate context, circumstances, and boundaries.

Sex is an all-consuming, all-inclusive act of worship and praise. It can't stand alone as just a physical act. Or just an emotional act. Or just a mentally engaged decision. We can rationalize all day long that sex can be had in a detached manner but, in reality, we're only fooling ourselves. That

argument is invalid and baseless, really, because sexual acts always tie souls. They always leave a mark—they were always intended to. Whether we carry them out within God's design is what determines whether that mark is a seal or a scar, because sexual acts were designed to bind two people. In the God-designed context between a husband and a wife, sex is one of the most powerful agents of unification, devotion, and surrender. But outside the guidelines God designated for His own invention, sexual acts become sin. And sin only ever serves to unhinge.

Physically, sex includes a beautiful range of acts and expressions. Mentally, sex is a catalyst for the activation of unbelievably powerful neurotransmitters in our minds. Emotionally, sex is an expression of love, surrender, trust, and sacrificial service to another. And spiritually, sex is a tangler of souls, a bonding agent that leaves a permanent imprint on our hearts and our spirits.

Sex is powerful. And purposeful. And as simple as it is deeply complex.

It is the most incredible and freeing gift—in the appropriate context.

But when we simplify or cheapen or commercialize sex as anything less than what it truly is and what purpose it serves in God's absolute and perfect design, we open a Pandora's box of ways that our minds, our hearts, our bodies, and our souls can be trivialized.

My research for this book was absolutely dizzying. The statistics I found reflecting young people's exposure to, perceptions of, and practices of many things that fall under the sexual umbrella were as varying and confused and extreme and daunting as you could imagine. What they summarized

for me was a clear and undisputable fact that we, as a culture, have very mixed perspectives, opinions, and definitions of sex, as well as what qualifies as sexual sin. And the sources of those definitions are about as unreliable, misinterpreted, and widely varying as the numbers they reflect.

But before we get all high-and-mighty as Bible-believing Christians and think that somehow our demographic is exempt from the nauseating stats and figures, prepare for a reality check, because professed Christians are the very ones who comprise some of the most startling stats. And it all serves as evidence that even the church is missing the mark in teaching biblical literacy about sex, as a whole.

Did you know that 96 percent of young adults, professed evangelical Christians included, are either encouraging, accepting, or neutral in their view toward pornography, and don't see the use of porn as a sin? As a result, in 2016 alone, people watched 4.6 billion hours of pornography *at just one website* (the biggest porn site in the world). That's 524,000 years of porn or, if you will, around 17,000 complete lifetimes.¹

In. One. Year.

Another study conducted in 2016 found that 82 percent of teens desire to have only one partner for life but also found that only 3 percent of Americans actually wait to have sex until marriage. Just 3 percent. (And, sadly, as you'll learn through the pages of my story, just because someone waited to have intercourse until their wedding day in no way guarantees they never struggled with other types of sexual sin.²)

For women utilizing online dating platforms, 33 percent admit to having had sex on their very first online dating encounter.³ And one third of the young adult population between the ages of 20–26 admit to having posted nude or seminude content online.⁴

From 2012 to 2016, 41.2 percent of women conceived pregnancies out of wedlock. And in 2014 alone, there were 1,609,619 out-of-wedlock births.⁵

There are so many more facts and figures and numbers and polls that serve to showcase the current sexual climate of our society, but what these types of stats scream to me are two primary things: First, you are not alone in your sexual wandering; 97 percent of us (and I think it's safe to say a decent chunk of that remaining 3 percent) know the power of sexual temptation, lust, desire, and action outside of God's design. So if it's any solace right from the start, you're not the outlier. You haven't gone farther or done more or seen the worst repercussions compared to anyone else. And I'm in your boat. I know I've had my share of struggles too. I hope I can weave my words together well enough throughout this book that you close the cover knowing you are understood and loved. Redemption finds us where we are, and it's waiting here for you. It sits among the 97 percent and offers hope.

Second, I'm reminded in looking at these numbers that these stats and figures and polls are just symptoms. They are evidence that, in the midst of a sex-saturated world, we do not know as much about sex as we think. Because if we deeply understood the physical, mental, emotional, and, above all, spiritual definition of and implications of sex, I don't think these numbers would look anywhere near the same. I don't think they could.

Education can't help but lead to revelation, and revelation can't help but lead to transformation when we accept God's definition as truth. Understanding God's design of sex, and the fact that it is far, far more than a physical expression, can't help but compel us to understand there is weight in the act.

There are lifelong and even eternal implications at stake. There are either life-draining or life-training practices at work in the process, depending on how we handle ourselves sexually. There is heavy significance in the heart condition we carry as we move through our days.

We are sexual beings, because sex is a deep and instructed desire in our hearts. God placed it there. But if we do not know the holy premise behind the pleasure, we become ill-equipped to handle temptation, ill-armed to fight sexual fixation, and ill-willed toward a God who we think demands obedience for the empty sake of obeying moral law.

Understanding and appreciating the true definition of sex and God's design must be followed by understanding and appreciating the *whys* that compel us to care. Because the *what* and the *whys* strengthen one another. The *what* equips our minds, but the *whys* compel our hearts. Our sexual perspectives will never be compelled to change until the *whys* catapult our heart conditions to change first.



God's will is for you to be holy, so stay away from all sexual sin. Then each of you will control his own body and live in holiness and honor— not in lustful passion like the pagans who do not know God and his ways. (1 Thess. 4:3–5)