

Honoring Each Other
in Marriage

SEX
AND
SELF-
FORGET-
FUL
NESS

Doug Hanna

“*Sex and Self-Forgetfulness* paints a beautiful picture of how fulfilling, enjoyable, and honoring marital intimacy can be (and is meant to be). It upholds the dignity of women, debunking the idea that sex is just for men, and calls husbands to view sex as an opportunity to serve their wives. This is a must-read for all married Christian couples.”

Rebecca Vavilov, PhD, BCDNH, LEHP, Fertility
Awareness Educator; founder, Ova Wellness

“In a culture obsessed with self and sexual pleasure, Doug Hanna wisely shows that true joy in God’s gift of sex is found in self-forgetful love. This book offers rich biblical wisdom, honest hope for couples facing sexual brokenness, and a gracious path toward deeper intimacy and lasting fulfillment as God designed.”

Steve Watters, Director of Communications, Truth78;
coauthor of *Start Your Family: Inspiration for Having Babies*;
FamilyMaking.com

“If I know that a couple is struggling with sexual intimacy in their marriage, *Sex and Self-Forgetfulness* is the book I will recommend! With great pastoral care, Doug has given a Scripture-filled roadmap for Christian couples to understand God’s design for sex, his redeeming grace for sin, and his delight in their pursuit of selfless, self-giving love for each other.”

Mark Sanders, President, Harvest USA; coauthor of
Discovery: A Biblical Support Group Curriculum for Men
Pursuing Sexual Integrity

“This book blends a beautiful picture of God’s design for marital intimacy with practical wisdom for Christian couples living in a world of extreme sexual brokenness. Hanna’s work is perfect for getting new marriages off to a great start and for helping couples who have struggled with sexual satisfaction in marriage for years. Highly recommended!”

Dustin Bruce, Dean, Boyce College

“In *Sex and Self-Forgetfulness*, Doug offers a compassionate yet courageous look at sex through a biblical lens, exposing harmful distortions and bringing needed clarity. He handles difficult topics with honesty and grace, revealing how self-giving love fosters true intimacy in sex. This book is insightful, healing, and deeply valuable for the church.”

Kristin Nave, Bible Teacher; podcast host, *Love the Bible*;
author

Sex and Self-Forgetfulness

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To the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

Have mercy on us.

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INTRODUCTION

The Life of Self-Forgetfulness

Christians aren't prudes. Well, at least we shouldn't be.

The Bible lays out an exciting vision for sex that is safe, pure, unifying, fulfilling, satisfying, and really, really pleasurable. Sex, like the rest of God's creation, is "very good" (Genesis 1:31). The God who created the heavens, the earth, you, and everything else is seriously devoted to your sexual pleasure.

At the same time, the Christian's approach to pleasure in any sphere of life (not just sex) is radically countercultural. The Christian life flows from the radical idea that the only way to find true life is by laying your life down for others. God exalts us when we make ourselves low, he empowers us when we serve, and he brings resurrection on the other side of death to self.

Jesus calls all of his followers to live this kind of life. In Jesus's day, while the secular authorities and worldly people around them were using any opportunity for their own pleasure, he taught his disciples that their lives should be different: "On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave to all" (Mark 10:43–44). Jesus invites us to lay down our lives to lift others up—just like he did: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Christian joy is counterintuitive; we find true life by laying our lives down.

This probably doesn't sound earth-shattering just yet. You have probably heard songs, sermons, and slogans that promote this way of life. You may even have Mark 10:45 displayed somewhere in your home on a mug or canvas from Hobby Lobby. But there seems to be a profound disconnect between Jesus's vision for the Christian life (laying your life down for the good of others) and our actual lives each day. Christians who are conformed to the world frequently talk about defending our own rights and "looking out for number one." Even in marriage we are often quick to meet our own needs while neglecting the desires of our spouse. We need to recapture Jesus's call of self-forgetful discipleship and apply it to every area of our lives, including sex.

The simple goal of this book is to apply Jesus's vision for the Christian life to sex within marriage. What would it look like to pursue sex from a posture of serving others (namely, our spouses), rather than meeting our own needs? How would our approach to sex change if we really believed Jesus's teaching about serving others and applied it to our marriage bed? In the counterintuitive way of our crucified King, sexual satisfaction is found by serving your spouse, not by insisting on your own way.

Let me say it again because this is the main point of this whole book: Sexual satisfaction is found by serving your spouse, not by insisting on your own way. The way to find real joy in bed is laying your life down, thinking less about yourself and more about your spouse. Self-forgetfulness.

From the outset, I want to be very clear that the idea of sexual self-forgetfulness should not be used to justify any form of spousal abuse. If you are a victim of abuse, I hope that this book's look into the self-forgetful love of Christ will heal and help you. If your experience of sex (within marriage or not) has not been positive, my honest prayer is that this book offers a

better way—confronting the brokenness that you have experienced with the beauty and power of redemption.

This book is *not* a comprehensive theology of sex. The goal is not to unpack everything that the Bible says about sex and how it all fits together; others have done that better than I ever could. This is also not a sex manual with guidance and techniques to please your spouse. Again, there are plenty of great Christian resources available for those topics, and a list of those can be found in appendix 3 of this book.

This book has a more narrow focus. I hope to help you better understand God’s design for sex and your marriage in order to help you approach sex in the right way. Romans 12:2 calls this process renewing your mind: We fill our minds with the truth of God’s Word to drown out the lies of the world so that we might see real transformation.

What Is Self-Forgetfulness?

Self-forgetfulness is one way to summarize that radical life vision of Jesus—that is, finding true life when we lay our lives down for others and gaining true flourishing by walking the path of forgetting ourselves to serve others. We don’t think of our own interests, we forget ourselves as we serve others. In light of the death of Jesus, we must lay down our lives for the good of others. Throughout the New Testament, we’re repeatedly called to live self-forgetful lives. Here are just a few examples:

- “Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:38–39 NIV).
- “Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it” (Luke 17:33 NIV).

- “The one who loves his life will lose it, and the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25).
- “For the love of Christ compels us, since we have reached this conclusion, that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all so that those who live *should no longer live for themselves*, but for the one who died for them and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:14–15, emphasis added).
- “This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. . . . Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth” (1 John 3:16, 18).

While anyone can define self-forgetfulness, only Christians can truly live it out because the foundation of our self-forgetfulness is Jesus’s self-forgetfulness. We are to love others, including our spouses, because Christ has first loved us. He is our example, but he is also our Savior. He loved us in our weakness and sin (see Romans 5:6–11). He loved you through your sexual suffering. He loved you in spite of your sexual sin. He redeemed you from the selfishness that used to define your life, and then he gave you a new life to live for him.

The love of God in Christ has to be the defining foundation of your marriage. In Colossians 3, before husbands and wives are called to live out God’s design for their marriage and love their spouse (vv. 18–19), they are reminded that they are already chosen by God and “dearly loved” (v. 12). We do not earn God’s favor by being better husbands or wives; God’s favor comes to us because of the work of Christ alone.

Christ is a redeeming Savior who sets us free to serve others. In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul stresses for four chapters that the Galatians are free from the obligations of

circumcision and the Law of Moses. Then he encourages them to use that freedom for good: “For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don’t use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love” (5:13). We are set free from any obligation to the law, not so that we might serve ourselves, but that we might forget ourselves and serve others in love.

When it comes to sex, self-forgetfulness means the following:

- Our first concern is the pleasure of our spouse, not ourselves.
- We are careful to make our spouse feel comfortable and safe.
- No part of a sexual encounter is unimportant. We aren’t trying to just get to the “good part.”
- We are radically committed to holiness in our sexuality because we are more devoted to God’s glory than our own pleasures.

When it comes to sex, self-forgetfulness *does not* mean the following:

- Either spouse being pressured to perform sexual acts that they aren’t comfortable with.
- Either spouse being satisfied at the expense of the other.
- Either spouse having blank-check permission to demand sex any time.
- Either spouse abusing the other in any form (in or out of the bedroom).

Self-forgetfulness is something we pursue for ourselves, not something we demand from our spouses. Don’t read this book to figure out how to get more out of your spouse. Instead, focus on learning how to *give* more to your spouse. The Bible’s commands to serve one another are for you to read and take to heart, not just instruction for your spouse.

One implication of serving our spouses in sex is consent. Christians who believe that all people are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) should be extremely committed to consent. I'm concerned that marital rape may be extremely prevalent among Christians. This flies in the face of God's design for sex as a wonderful, self-giving, mutually-satisfying encounter. If you or someone you know is a victim of domestic abuse, do not hesitate to flee and contact local authorities.

If you have abused your spouse in any way, you need to walk in sober repentance. You have abandoned Jesus's call of self-forgetfulness, believing worldly lies that power, strength, and manipulation can rightly be used for your own advantage. These are distinctly un-Christian lies that do not lead to flourishing. Christ does not celebrate the strong who force their will, but says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5 ESV). Abusive spouses must walk the narrow path of self-forgetfulness, abandoning their pursuit of power and control to follow after the Savior who "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Once again, Christ is our Savior and our example.

Abusers should take their sin very seriously. If you have abused your spouse in any form, pursue radical repentance (see part 2 of this book) and outside counsel. In abusing your spouse, you have also abused their trust. Rebuilding this trust will be a long process, but self-forgetfulness frees you to let go of your entitlement and walk the long path of restoration.

This Book Is Written for Couples to Read Together

This book is written as a journey for couples, and I hope you'll read it together. I hope this book will open your minds to a new way of seeing sex in marriage—a more thoroughly Christian way

to approach intimacy. These ideas will be exciting and life-giving. Sex is meant to be a unifying force in marriage. Reading this book on your own may give you a totally different vision and set of expectations for sex than your spouse has, which may actually leave you *less* unified. I hope you'll pick up the book together, measure its content against the teaching of Scripture, and discuss how it should inform your own sexual relationship.

You could even read it out loud to one another. If everyone is comfortable with it, you could even read it *while naked* (just kidding, but only a little bit). If reading the book together (with clothes on or not) sounds impossible or awkward, chapter 1 will help you understand *why* talking about sex is hard and how we can find comfort in the glorious redeeming love of Christ, our self-forgetful Savior.

If your sex life isn't facing any significant hang-ups or hurdles right now, praise God. I hope you'll keep reading, for two reasons: First, sex is a wonderful gift from our infinite God, and we are called to serve our spouses as perfectly as Christ has served us. We all have room to grow because the gift is impossibly good and the standard is impossibly high. Second, I hope reading the book will equip you with tools to serve other couples. If your marriage is strong, you have a responsibility to help other couples, especially those in your own church. I hope this book helps you follow that call.

If you're not married, this book will still be helpful for you to develop a more biblical view of sex. If you're engaged and reading this book in preparation for marriage, I highly recommend reading it with an older man or woman who is helping you prepare for marriage rather than with your fiancé.

If your spouse isn't able or willing to read the book with you, an afterword at the end of the book will offer guidance on how to incorporate its teachings into your marriage through open,

honest communication and, when necessary, biblical conflict resolution.

As you read this book, I hope it changes your life. I hope it changes your spouse's life too. If your spouse starts doing something that you read in this book, don't write it off (i.e., "You're just doing that because the book told you to"). Instead of being frustrated that someone had to teach your spouse, be thankful that they're humble enough to learn and grow.

Format of Each Chapter

This book is divided into thirty short chapters, most of which are centered on one passage of Scripture. Along the way, you'll hear stories of other couples and the challenges they faced in their own marriage beds. None of these stories is real; I've created them from an amalgamation of my own experiences and what I've heard from couples I've counseled. If past recipients of my counseling ministry are reading this book, I promise that none of the stories is about you. The hang-ups that Christian couples face in sex are usually very common. If you see part of your story reflected in the marriages in this book, be encouraged to know that you aren't alone and your issues are not insurmountable.

It's important to know that these stories are not representative of every marriage. While I've tried to make these stories balanced, I know that men are more often cast as sexual sinners in them while women are more often cast as sexual sufferers. In this, I'm *not* trying to communicate that only men struggle with sexual sin or that only women experience sexual betrayal and abuse. In every marriage, both spouses come to the table, and the bedroom, with a complicated mess of sin *and* suffering. Fictional stories in books cannot fully communicate this complexity.

Here's the format we'll use as we tackle each chapter:

- Scripture—Most chapters will flow from one passage of Scripture.
- Testimony—Examples from other marriages will help us understand the problems that selfishness breeds in marriage.
- Exposition of Scripture—We'll unpack the Scripture passage for that chapter, seeking to understand what the words mean and how they fit together.
- Application—Applying the information will address your head (as we see how the Scriptures should transform our thinking and worldview) and your hands (as we discover practical tips for pursuing a more satisfying sexual union with our spouse).
- Something to Talk About—This section provides a conversation starter for you and your spouse.
- Something to Pray About—This section provides a brief prayer prompt to help you ask God to search you and to make your sin and shortcomings known.

Ready to dive in? Let's go.

Part 1:

Understanding God's Design

God is the creator of sex. He knows how it works best. Like everything in this life, sex will bring us the greatest joy when we enjoy it as God intended. Seeking sex apart from God's design is almost as unwise as taking a bath with your toaster. We want to find the joy that God intended for sex and avoid the harm that sex can cause when it's used the wrong way. To do that, we'll spend the first chapters unpacking a few central truths about God's design for sex.

CHAPTER 1

Why Talking About Sex Is Hard

Both the man and his wife were naked, yet felt no shame.

—*Genesis 2:25*

The man replied, “The woman you gave to be with me—
she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate.”

—*Genesis 3:12*

Tony and Susie’s sex life was a mess because their whole life together was a mess. In light of past abuse, Susie walked into marriage already nervous about sex. After Susie discovered thousands of pornographic images on his computer, Tony blamed this sin on his wife. According to Tony, Susie refused to meet his needs and complained too much. Susie blamed her complaining on Tony’s emotional distance, which was obviously (according to her) caused by his secret pornography addiction. They were at their wits’ end and knew they needed help, but the thought of talking to one another (let alone a counselor) about *sex* was terrifying.

Sex is one of the most vulnerable activities we’ll ever participate in during this life (after all, we have to be naked for it). Our bodies aren’t the only thing being exposed—our hearts and

emotional lives are also left out in the open as we express our love for one another. When it goes well, sex can bring more pleasure than almost anything else on this earth. When it goes poorly, it can bring more pain than almost anything else on this earth. In the vulnerabilities of sex, people can do a lot of damage.

Talking about sex is hard, not only because it is an incredibly intimate topic, but also because none of us is starting from a blank slate. We are all sexually broken people living in a sexually broken world. The sexual brokenness we feel comes from the sin we have committed and the suffering we have experienced at the hands of others. We are sexual sinners, distorting God's design in a myriad of ways. We are sexual sufferers too, as other people have broken God's design and taken advantage of us.

There's nothing new about this. In Genesis 1–2, marriage, including sex, is portrayed as the climax of creation. Everything in Genesis 1 culminates with God creating humans in his own image and giving humanity dominion over all of the earth (1:26–30). If you read Genesis 1 quickly, you'll notice that more space is given to the creation of humanity than anything else. When God created humans, the story slows down and the narrative shifts as God's masterpiece is formed.

In Genesis 2, the story slows down again to tell us about God's creation of marriage. After declaring eleven times that his creation was "good" or even "very good," God shockingly says that something in creation was "not good." The only "not good" thing in God's very good creation was "for the man to be alone" (2:18). God remedies Adam's "not good" alone-ness by forming a companion for the man and joining them together in the first marriage.

And what was the first marriage like? Absolute bliss. Naked and unashamed. Adam and Eve enjoyed the pleasures of a sexual relationship with none of the pain or baggage caused by sexual

brokenness. They enjoyed the trust of marriage with none of the pain caused by sexual betrayal.

Everything was perfect. Until it wasn't.

The First Casualty of the Fall

Marriage, the climax of creation, is also the first casualty of the fall. When Adam is confronted with his sin, he immediately turns on his wife. She was no longer “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (2:23) but becomes “the woman you gave to be with me” (3:12). No longer naked and unashamed, Adam felt the need to distance himself from his wife.

And that's the world we live in today. We live on this side of Genesis 3, where we sin against others (in person or through a screen), others sin against us, trust is broken, and marriages are attacked.

Going through this book may be painful, especially for those who have experienced sexual abuse in the past, those who are living in difficult marriages today, or those who can't imagine there really is an escape from the shame of sexual immorality. That's to be expected and doesn't mean that you are damaged goods or that sex can't be wonderful for you. It does mean that it's going to take a lot of work to get there. Thankfully, we worship a God who is a glorious Redeemer.

God did not leave us in this brokenness. In fact, in his plan, he would actually use sex to indirectly bring about redemption for all of humanity. Speaking to the serpent, God declares a cosmic war: “I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (3:15). Although childbearing was cursed by sin, God promised that the woman would have a child who would crush the serpent's head and make everything

right again. Generations of children were born from the union of a man and a woman, with God's people always looking for the promised Savior. Until, finally, another child unlike any other was born in a way like any other—from a virgin.

Restored Joy Is Possible

Jesus is that child, the offspring of the woman. Jesus came to make all things new and restore our joy. By his grace, we really can experience joy-filled sex today.

As we wait for Jesus to return and fully restore us from the brokenness caused by sin, we need to be patient with our spouses in conversations about sex. In a fallen world, trust and vulnerability are difficult to give, slow to earn, and quick to lose. It may take time to have real conversations about sex, and that's okay. Since you and your spouse are committed to one another until death do you part, you're not in a rush.

We also need to be patient in the actual act of sex. Sex and sexual pleasure aren't automatic in a fallen world. We should expect each encounter to take time, effort, and creativity if we're going to make our spouse comfortable and vulnerable. Again, we're not in a rush.

The world is broken, and sex is really hard, but Jesus is coming back to make all things new. Let's fight to make our marriages a foretaste of his restoring grace.

Something to Talk About

Each chapter will end with a conversation starter for you and your spouse. During these conversations, be sure to apply James 1:19, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. . . ." Listen well, don't defend yourself, and share openly.

- In what ways is talking about sex difficult for you?
- What kind of sexual brokenness have you experienced?

Something to Pray About

- Confess to God the brokenness and baggage (caused by your own sin, by what you have suffered, or both) that make sex difficult. Ask him to help you and comfort you.
- Ask God to help you patiently care for your spouse, sexually and otherwise.