



SEX GOD

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SEX GOD CHAPTER 1
GOD WEARS LIPSTICK

In 1945, a group of British soldiers liberated a German concentration camp called Bergen-Belsen. One of them, Lieutenant Colonel Mercin Willet Gonin DSO, wrote in his diary about what they encountered:

I can give no adequate description of the Horror Camp in which my men and myself were to spend the next month of our lives. It was just a barren wilderness, as bare as a chicken run. Corpses lay everywhere, some in huge piles, sometimes they lay singly or in pairs where they had fallen. It took a little time to get used to seeing men, women and children collapse as you walked by them . . . One knew that five hundred a day were dying and that five hundred a day were going on dying for weeks before anything we could do would have the slightest effect. It was, however, not easy to watch a child choking to death from diphtheria when you knew a tracheotomy and nursing would save it. One saw women drowning in their own vomit because they were too weak to turn over, men eating worms as they clutched a half loaf of bread purely because they had to eat worms to live and now could scarcely tell the difference. Piles of corpses, naked and obscene, with a woman too weak to stand propping herself against them as she cooked the food we had given her over an open fire; men and women crouching down just anywhere in the open relieving themselves . . . [a] dysentery tank in which the remains of a child floated.⁸

This account is shocking, horrible, and tragic. But why?

Because people shouldn't eat worms?

Because people shouldn't make piles of corpses?

We answer yes to these questions because no one should be forced to live in conditions such as those at Bergen-Belsen. And yet we intuitively understand that the wrong being done to these prisoners – these *people* – was much more

significant than just the physical conditions forced upon them. A concentration camp is designed to strip people of their humanity.

It's anti-human.

And in the Scriptures, anything that's anti-human is anti-God. Genesis begins with God creating the world and then creating people "in his own image."⁹ The Hebrew word for image here is *tselem*, and it has a specific cultural meaning.¹⁰ The stories of Genesis originated in ancient Near Eastern culture, where a king was said to rule in the image of a particular god. The famous King Tut is an Egyptian example of this. His full name was Tutankhamen, which is translated "the living image of [the god] Amon." The king was seen as the embodiment of a particular god on earth. If you wanted to see what that god was like, you looked at that god's king.

The writer of Genesis makes it clear that in all of creation there is something different about humans.¹¹ They aren't God, and they aren't going to become God, but in some distinct, intentional way, something of God has been placed in them. We reflect what God is like and who God is. A divine spark resides in every single human being.¹²

Everybody, everywhere. Bearers of the divine image.¹³

Picture a group of high school boys standing by their lockers when a girl walks by. One of the boys asks, "How do you rate that?" They then take turns assigning numerical values to the various parts of her anatomy, discussing in great detail how they evaluate her physical attributes.¹⁴

This scenario happens all the time, all over the world, every day. It's a pastime for some. There are television shows and websites and endless discussions all devoted to deciding who's hot and who's not. It's an industry, a form of entertainment, a culture.

And it's everywhere.

The problem is that “that” is actually a “she.” A person. A woman. With a name, a history, with feelings. It seems harmless until you're that girl – and then it hurts. It's degrading. It's violating. It does something to a person's soul.

WHEN A “SHE” BECOMES A “THAT”

Jesus had much to say about what happens when a woman, an image-bearer, a carrier of the divine spark, becomes a “that.” In the book of Matthew, Jesus teaches that “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”¹⁵ He connects our eyes and our intentions and our thoughts with the state of our hearts.¹⁶

Jesus then takes it farther. He says, “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away.”

Which is a bit violent. Not to mention painful. And if taken literally, renders half of the human race blind in a matter of moments. Not to mention that blind people are fully capable of lusting. Our only conclusion is that Jesus is using the “it's merely a flesh wound” picture here to point us to something else.¹⁷ Some truth beyond the removing of body parts. If we're not supposed to take it literally, then how, or where, are we supposed to take it?

Jesus explains by saying, “It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”

How did we get from lust, which is so common and doesn't seem like that big of a deal, to having your body thrown into hell in just a couple of sentences?

And to avoid this fate you should cut off your hand? Poke out your eye? *That* would be better?

He's stretching it a bit, isn't he?

Or did we miss something?

To understand how Jesus makes these connections, we have to explore the first-century Jewish understanding of heaven.

In the book of Psalms, it's written: "The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all."¹⁸ To the Jewish mind, heaven is not a fixed, unchanging geographical location somewhere other than this world. Heaven is the realm where things are as God intends them to be. The place where things are under the rule and reign of God. And that place can be anywhere, anytime, with anybody.

It's also written in the Psalms that "the highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to humankind."¹⁹ So there is this realm, heaven, where things are as God wants them, under the rule and reign of God. But the earth is different. God has allowed for the temporary existence of other kingdoms. Other realms of authority. The earth "he has given to humankind." Which means we can do whatever we want. We can live however we want. We can choose to live under the rule and reign of God, or we can choose to rebel against God and live some other way.

Now if there's a realm where things are as God wants them to be, then there must be a realm where things are not as God wants them to be. Where things aren't according to God's will. Where people aren't treated as fully human.

It's called hell.

Think about the expression "for the hell of it." When someone says "for the hell of it," what they mean is that whatever is being discussed was done or said for no apparent reason. It was, in essence, pointless. Random. And God is *for*

purpose and beauty and meaning.

When we say something was a “living hell,” we mean that it was void of any love or peace or beauty or meaning. It was absent of the will and desire of God.

We hear about war zones being like hell, working conditions being hellish, a divorce being emotional hell, a famine feeling like hell on earth.²⁰

Concentration camps are hells on earth.

And that’s Jesus’ point with the “gouge out your eye” teaching. His point isn’t that you should mutilate your body if you find yourself lusting after someone. His point is that something serious – sometimes hellish – happens when people are treated as objects, and we should resist it at all costs.²¹

When Jesus talks about heaven and hell, they are first and foremost present realities that have serious implications for the future. Either can be invited to earth, right now, through our actions.

It’s possible for heaven to invade earth.

And it’s possible for hell to invade earth.

A friend of mine talks honestly about how he spent years exploiting women for sex. He knew exactly what to say, how to act. He was a master at finding a woman who had a troubled relationship with her father and manipulating the situation for his pleasure. The first time he was telling me his story, he made a profound point that is true for all of us. He said that exploiting women for sex didn’t just rob them of their humanity, it robbed him as well. As the years went

on, he found that he didn't like what was happening to him. He was becoming less human in the process.

He said he was becoming a monster.

In treating women as objects, he was losing something of his own humanity. Somewhere along the way he came to his senses. He was repulsed by the person he was becoming. He describes it as a "rebirth" in which for the first time he saw things as they really are. Several years later, my friend came across a group that works undercover in Southeast Asia to free young girls from the sex trade. In remote rural areas, girls are kidnapped and brought to the city, where they are forced to work as prostitutes. My friend signed up and recently went undercover on a "mission," rescuing girls and helping them start a new life. I was with him when he showed a group of people a picture of him surrounded by the girls he had helped rescue. People were blown away by the picture.²²

He's charging into hell and bringing heaven with him.

We don't respect the divine image in others just because we want to uphold their humanity. It isn't just about them.

It's about us.

It's about our humanity as well.

I just received an email asking if I would sign a petition protesting the use of torture to get information from enemy soldiers caught in battle. The email said this issue is being debated among politicians right now and that the public needs to speak up on the matter.

There's a debate about this? The issue isn't just what torture does to the person being tortured, it's what torturing does to the person doing it. We're already in trouble when people debate the use of torture as if it's only about what it does

to the enemy.

Our own humanity is at stake.

THE NEW HUMANITY

The first Christians had a phrase for what happens when people properly respect and acknowledge the image of God in those around them. In the letter to the Ephesians, we read about a group of people who were previously divided because of race, background, wealth, socio-economic status, worldview, and religion.²³ One group is made up of Jews, the other Greeks, and in this new church, they find themselves united because they've all become followers of the resurrected Jesus Christ. All of the old categories simply don't work anymore. This new commonality, this new bond, is simply bigger than all of the things that had previously kept them apart.

The first Christians called this the “new humanity.”

In the beginning, God created us “in his image.” So first, God gave us an image to bear. Then God gave us gender: male and female. Then God gave us something to do, to take care of the world and move it forward, taking part in the ongoing creation of the world.²⁴ Later, people began moving to different places. It takes years and years of human history to get to the place where *these* people are from *here* and *those* people are from *there*. Different locations, skin colors, languages, and cultures come much later in the human story.

What we often do is reverse the creative process that God initiated. We start with different cultural backgrounds and skin colors and nationalities, and it's only when we look past these things that we are able to get to what we have in common – that we are fellow image-bearers with the shared task of caring for God's creation. We get it all backward. We see all of the differences first, and

only later, maybe, do we begin to see the similarities.

The new humanity is about seeing people as God sees them.

WHEN THEY BECOME WE

I was having lunch in September of last year with a group of people I had just met. We were discussing the kind of work we each did and places we had been, and one man started telling stories about being in the marines. He had led one of the first groups into Iraq during the Gulf War in 1991. He talked about what it was like to enter enemy territory and to be shot at – about the complexities of war – and he had us all on the edge of our seats. During one battle he and his marines won quickly, they had to arrest the soldiers who had just been shooting at them. They lined them up and were handcuffing them when one of them ran up to him waving a letter, begging to have it sent immediately. The man was frantic and starting to cause a scene. He kept repeating that this letter he was holding had to be sent immediately. He then looked the marine in the eyes and said, “Please mail this letter for me. It’s to my father, and he must know that I love him.”

The man telling the story paused, looked around the table at each of us, and said, “He had no idea about the troubled relationship I had with my own father. Here I am, out in the middle of nowhere in the desert of Iraq, trying to arrest a group of soldiers who moments before were trying to kill me, staring at a man who wants me to mail a letter for him, thinking, *I could be him.*”

Several years ago a woman called the church where I was a pastor because she wanted to talk. We set up a time to meet, and when she showed up, I asked her how I could help. She said that she was a prostitute and didn’t want to live anymore, so she had made a plan to kill herself. She described in detail how she was going to do it, when she was going to do it, and where it was going to

happen. She was very thorough. She said she was telling me all of this because she had to know whether she would go to heaven or hell when she died. Somewhere in the course of telling me her plans, she mentioned that she had a daughter because one of her clients had gotten her pregnant. She was confident that a family member would raise her daughter when she was gone.

I asked her to tell me more about her daughter. She gave a few details. Then I asked what her daughter's name was.

She replied, "My daughter's name is Faith."

Faith.

There are these moments when the enemy all of the sudden becomes just like me.

When a soldier becomes a son.

When a prostitute becomes a mother.

When they become we.

When those become us.

When he becomes me.

Moments when all of the ways that we divide ourselves and rank each other and convince ourselves of how different, better, and unlike we are disappear, and we are faced with the fact that first and foremost, we are humans. In this together. And not that much different from each other.²⁵

Jew. Gentile.

Marine. Iraqi.

Orphan. Family.

Pastor. Prostitute.

We could be them.

THIRTY YEARS LATER

When I was five, my family visited my grandparents in California during Christmas vacation. They lived in an apartment building with an alley beside it – very exciting for a boy who lived on a farm in Michigan. At some point in my exploration of the alley, I decided to make a Christmas present for my dad out of the things I had found there. So on the morning of the twenty-fifth, my father had the privilege of opening a gift of a piece of black and green drainpipe glued to a flat gray rock with little white stones resting on the inside of it.

A masterpiece, to say the least.

The reason I remember this is because I visited my dad at his office a few days ago, and while I waited for him to finish his meeting, I wandered around looking at the pictures on his walls and the papers on his desk and the things on his shelves. On one of his shelves sat the drainpipe and rock sculpture, thirty years later.

He still has it.

He brought it home with him and put it in his office in 1977 and hasn't gotten rid of it.

We know why he kept it. How you treat the creation reflects how you feel about

the creator.

When a human being is mistreated, objectified, or neglected, when they are treated as less than human, these actions are actions against God. Because how you treat the creation reflects how you feel about the Creator.

To be a Christian is to work for the new humanity. Jesus commands his followers to feed and clothe and visit and take care of those who need it. They're fellow image-bearers, they're just like us, and when we love them, we're loving God.

A church exists to be a display of the new humanity. A community of people who honor and respect the poor and rich and educated and uneducated and Jew and Gentile and black and white and old and young and powerful and helpless as fully human, created in the image of God.

These bonds we have with each other are why, for many, there is so much power in the Eucharist, also called Mass or the Lord's Supper or communion. We take the bread and dip it in the cup to remind ourselves of Jesus' body and blood.²⁶ To reflect on the truth that we're all in this together, one body, and that his body being broken and blood being spilled are for our union.

It isn't just about our relationship to God as individuals. Often communion is seen as a time to reflect on God's love for us in Jesus' dying on the cross. Which it is. But it was originally just as much about my desperate need to be reminded of your humanity and the humanity of all the people around us.

When I respect the image of God in others, I protect the image of God in me. When Jesus speaks of loving our neighbor, it isn't just for our neighbor's sake.²⁷ If we don't love our neighbor, something happens to us.

And in trying to protect the image of God in them, we just might be protecting

the image of God in ourselves in the process. Because with every decision, conversation, gesture, comment, action, and attitude, we're inviting heaven or hell to earth.

I have a new hero. Her name is Lil, and I would guess she's in her late fifties. I met her earlier this year when she introduced me to her daughter, whom she was pushing in a wheelchair. Early in their marriage, Lil and her husband²⁸ decided that they would adopt two children. As they became familiar with the family services system, they learned that there were kids in the system nobody wanted. So they went to the local adoption agency and asked for the kids with the most pronounced disabilities, the most traumatic histories, and the most hopeless futures. They asked if they could have the kids nobody wanted. Over the past thirty or so years, they have raised well over twenty children, raising their biological children alongside their adopted children.

When Lil got to this point in her story, she reached down and patted her daughter and said, "This is Crystal. She's twenty-seven years old but will be about six months old developmentally for the rest of her life. She can't talk or walk or move or feed herself or do anything on her own. She will be like this, totally dependent on us, until the day she dies. And I love her so much. My family and I, we can't imagine life without her. She makes everything so much better."

What is Lil doing?

She's bringing heaven to earth.

She gives us a glimpse into another realm. Into a better way. The way of God.

She and her family have taken kids who were discarded because of their perceived lack of worth and said, "No, you are not to be rejected and turned away. We are going to love you as an equal, as a human, as one of us."

They show us how God loves us.

They reflect the image. And when you see it lived out like this, you're seeing heaven crash into earth.

Instead of seeing labels like "handicapped," "reject," or "invalid," Lil and her husband and her kids see only one label: "human."²⁹

And so they have only one response: love.

And it makes all the difference in heaven and earth.

Which takes us back to something that happened during Colonel Gonin's stay at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp:

It was shortly after the British Red Cross arrived, though it may have no connection, that a very large quantity of lipstick arrived. This was not at all what we wanted, we were screaming for hundreds and thousands of other things and I don't know who asked for lipstick. I wish so much that I could discover who did it, it was the action of genius, sheer unadulterated brilliance. I believe nothing did more for these internees than the lipstick. Women lay in bed with no sheets and no nightie but with scarlet red lips, you saw them wandering about with nothing but a blanket over their shoulders, but with scarlet red lips. I saw a woman dead on the postmortem table and clutched in her hand was a piece of lipstick. At last someone had done something to make them individuals again, they were someone, no longer merely the number tattooed on the arm. At last they could take an interest in their appearance. That lipstick started to give them back their humanity.

Because sometimes, the difference between heaven and hell may be a bit of lipstick.