

WHEN PASSIONS ARE CONFUSED

In the midst of the horrors surrounding the World War II Holocaust, a teenage Jewish girl carefully recorded her frightening experiences and private inner thoughts. In a portion of her diary, addressed to the imaginary friend she had always wanted, she shares one of her most troubling secrets.

Feeling distant from her unsympathetic mother, Anne Frank writes of her confusing sexual attraction for females: "I remember that once when I slept with a girlfriend, I had a strong desire to kiss her, and that I did so. I could not help being terribly inquisitive over her body, for she had always kept it hidden from me. . . . I go into ecstasies every time I see the naked figure of a woman. . . . It strikes me as so wonderful and exquisite that I have difficulty in stopping the tears rolling down my cheeks. If only I had a girlfriend." 1

Anne Frank's disclosure is a vivid example of the kinds of thoughts within many young people who occasionally experience this type of attraction. They're both alarmed and excited in the fleeting moments or dreams when their bodies are sexually drawn to the same sex.

Some say that the presence of these attractions qualifies a person as a "homosexual." But this isn't true. Confused feelings about sexuality are not unusual among teenagers. The attractions exist, in part, for reasons outside of a person and do not mean they are abnormal. The existence of such feelings, however, signal deeper feelings of hurt, anger, and fear.

Like heterosexual temptation, same-sex attraction torments the lives of a significant number of teenagers and adults--male and female, single and married, churching and unchurching. It's a struggle that cuts across all segments of population, economic status, and social standing.

For many, especially Christians, shame and a fear of condemnation drive the struggle underground, making it difficult to seek help and understanding. Some deny the feelings, hoping they'll go away. Many others live with a pervading sense of hopelessness about the possibility for change. If the attractions turn into a preoccupation, the temptation to embrace homosexual behavior is great.

Adding to the struggle is a surging cultural acceptance of homosexuality and a misrepresentation of what the Bible says about homosexual behavior. These two forces have made homosexuality easier to accept as "normal."

If you or someone close to you is weary of struggling with homosexual attractions or activities, the following pages outline a process of hope and direction for those exhausted by the enslaving grip of unwanted fantasies and/or behaviors.

We will also discuss the Bible's view of homosexuality, and we'll offer a level of understanding that can eliminate some unnecessary confusion surrounding the development of same-sex attraction. Some will find the material difficult to accept. But remember that Jesus promised to offer help and freedom to those who are willing to embrace what is true (Jn. 8:32).

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WHAT IS HOMOSEXUALITY?

Defining Homosexuality.

Homosexuality is a persistent preoccupation with erotic encounters involving members of the same sex, which may or may not be acted out with another person. Put another way, it is making deliberate plans to entertain and cooperate in sexual fantasies or behaviors with someone of the same sex.

Homosexuality is vastly different from questioning our sexual orientation because of the presence of occasional same-sex attractions. Having the attractions are obviously part of the struggle, but they are not something for

which we are morally responsible. It's when we begin planning to entertain the attractions in fantasy or behavior that we cross the line.

Secondary Problems.

The following is a description of some additional disabling struggles that are regularly associated with homosexuality.

1. Alcohol and Drug Use. Research shows a "significantly higher percentage of alcohol and drug use" among both males and females who participate in homosexual activities.²

While there are other implications, alcohol and drugs are often used to mask the emptiness found in homosexuality. They help provide the illusion that "this is the life." In the beginning, the newly-found excitement is enough to leave the impression that homosexuality satisfies. But as is the case in any heterosexual sin, the excitement wears off. Alcohol and drugs are then used to cover the hollowness that nobody wants to admit.

One Christian man said he used alcohol to "obscure the truth" regarding what was taking place around him. "I consumed gallons of it. It allowed me to continue my double life and prevented me from seeing the reality I had created for myself."³ Another man put it this way, "Of course I use drugs. How else could I do what I do?"

2. Depression. Many can't escape the fact that homosexuality fails to satisfy their hungry souls. Feelings of hopelessness and despair settle in, blanketing the heart with a crippling emotional nausea, making it difficult to function normally.

Studies show that approximately 35-40 percent of both the male and female homosexual population have had a history of major depression. While the percentage of heterosexual women who struggle with depression is similar, it is sharply different for men. Only 3 percent of heterosexual men typically struggle with depression.⁴

3. Suicidal Tendencies. Homosexuality is also associated with elevated suicidal thoughts and attempts. Research reveals that roughly 40 percent of both male and female homosexuals have seriously contemplated or attempted suicide.⁵ A desire to end the empty despair often found in homosexuality partly explains the high rate of suicidal tendencies.

COMMON MYTHS ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

Today we are confronted with several myths that cloud the truth about homosexuality. In the following section, we will look at some of these myths and evaluate their arguments.

MYTH #1--People are born homosexual.

In recent years, some have claimed that homosexual orientation is biologically and genetically determined in the same way that eye or hair color is fixed. While genetic influences and predispositions may contribute to any unwanted behavior, it is important that we aren't misled by research alleging that homosexuality is genetic or inborn. A few scientific studies, two in particular, have been trumpeted as the basis for such a claim.

Dr. Simon LeVay conducted a study in 1991 on the brains of 41 cadavers. The cadavers consisted of 19 homosexual men, plus 16 men and 6 women presumed to be heterosexual. He reported that a cluster of neurons in a distinct section of the brain were generally smaller in the homosexual men as compared to the heterosexual men. As a result, he hypothesized that the size of these neurons may cause a person to be either heterosexual or homosexual.⁶

For his theory to be true, however, studies would have to show that the difference in size occurred 100 percent of the time. But even Dr. LeVay's own study failed to do this. For example, 3 of the 19 homosexual men actually had larger neurons than their heterosexual counterparts. His study also revealed that 3 of the heterosexual men had smaller neurons than did the homosexual men.

Another major weakness in this study is that there is no proof that the portion of the brain highlighted in Dr. LeVay's study has anything to do with sexual preference. For these and other reasons, it's evident that LeVay's study lends no support to the myth that people are born homosexual. Even LeVay himself has retreated from his hypothesis and "deserted his research."⁷

The second study was performed in 1991 by Dr. J. Michael Bailey and Dr. Richard Pillard. They examined how widespread homosexuality is among twins and adopted brothers when at least one sibling was homosexual. Among other things, they found that 52 percent of the identical twins studied were both homosexual. From this they suggested that genetic makeup may be the reason so many identical twins were homosexual.⁸

For their theory to be fact, however, there should never be a case when one identical twin is heterosexual and one is homosexual. It's genetically impossible since both identical twins share 100 percent of the same genes.⁹ If sexual orientation is genetic, then both identical twins will always be either heterosexual or homosexual. Bailey and Pillard's findings of only 52 percent discredits their own hypothesis. In fact, their findings show that nongenetic factors play a significant part in shaping sexual preference.

MYTH #2--Homosexuality is a harmless alternative.

Despite the normal and harmless image often attributed to homosexuality, the facts reveal that, like immoral heterosexual behavior, those involved in homosexual activities pay a sad and tragic price--physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Physically. In addition to the debilitating physical complications common among men who practice homosexual activities, a host of sexually transmitted diseases and infections can also be contracted. Because few are able to maintain "monogamy," promiscuity rapidly increases the spread of these ailments, which include hepatitis B, anal warts, herpes, gonorrhea, syphilis, and shigellosis. They cause flulike symptoms, chronic liver disease, severe diarrhea, cramps, ulcers, and even death.

The most familiar and equally dangerous of all sexually transmitted diseases is AIDS. Here in the United States, this killer disease hits mostly males who engage in homosexual acts and intravenous drug users and their sexual partners.¹⁰ It's estimated that 30 percent of all 20-year-old males involved in homosexual behavior will contract or die from AIDS by the age of 30.¹¹

Emotionally. One prevalent emotional price of homosexuality is depression. This is often accompanied by strong feelings of loneliness and guilt, dulled only by alcohol or "one more" sexual encounter. Female homosexual relationships are particularly burdened with extreme possessiveness and jealousy.

Spiritually. While it can't be seen as easily, the spiritual consequence is the most costly. As with other efforts to find independence from God, homosexuality separates us from the only true Source of life. It gives the illusion that we can survive our disappointing world on our own without the God who longs to give us the free gift of life (Rev. 22:17). But a life without the God of the Bible is a life without real meaning, joy, and love. At best, only a hollow, fleeting imitation can be discovered.

MYTH #3--The sin of Sodom had nothing to do with homosexuality.

Genesis 19:1-8 records a story that occurred just before the destruction of Sodom. Two angels were visiting Lot when the men of the city surrounded his house and began shouting, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them" (Gen. 19:5). Some assert that the Hebrew word yadah, which is translated "have sex with" should be taken to mean "to get acquainted with." They say the sin attempted in the city of Sodom that night was not homosexuality but a violation of hospitality. They say the men disregarded ancient rules of hospitality by insisting on getting acquainted with or questioning Lot's visitors.

This claim has serious problems. The fundamental flaw is that the immediate context shows the meaning of the Hebrew word yadah clearly to be sexual in nature. Just three verses later, the same word is translated "slept with,"

which Lot used when he offered his virgin daughters to the men of the city in place of the men in his house: "Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them" (Gen. 19:8).

Lot's offering of his daughters, as horrendous as it was, makes no sense unless we understand that the intentions of the men of Sodom was sexual rape. Lot had no reason to think the men would merely want to question or get acquainted with his daughters. As horribly wrong as Lot was, it's clear that he thought the men might be willing to settle for sexually violating his daughters.

It's true that this story in Genesis 19 is only a condemnation of homosexual rape. But as we will see, it's an example of what other Bible passages teach: All homosexual activity is a sinful violation of God's design for men and women.

MYTH #4--Biblical references condemning homosexual behavior do not refer to homosexuality as we know it today. Some people speculate that the biblical passages indicating homosexual activity as sinful refer to a completely different kind of homosexuality than is practiced today.

For instance, they suggest that Leviticus 18:22, which states, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable," is only condemning homosexuality associated with pagan religious practices. A similar claim is made regarding the apostle Paul's comments about homosexual behavior in Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. Some propose that Paul's statements referred only to pederasty (sex between men and boys) or prostitution involved in pagan worship. In either case, it is argued that Paul did not have in mind "loving and committed" homosexual relationships.

One of the major shortcomings in this sort of speculation is that there is nothing in the surrounding context of these passages that justifies limiting the meaning of these verses to homosexuality involved with pagan worship or to pederasty. The meaning certainly included such activities, but there's no evidence to suggest that Paul was referring to these activities exclusively.

Conversely, the context shows, for example, that it's impossible to restrict the meaning of Romans 1:24-27 to pederasty, given that Paul referred to female homosexuality in the same way as male homosexuality: "Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another" (vv.26-27).

Furthermore, an examination of the Greek word *arsenokoites* used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 clearly shows that his intent was to condemn all homosexual lust and behavior, including what takes place today.

Biblical scholars have long understood the Greek word *arsenokoites* translated "homosexual offenders" in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and "perverts" in 1 Timothy 1:10 to mean "one who lies with a male as with a female, a sodomite."¹² It's also been demonstrated that Jews in the Greek civilization acquired the word *arsenokoites* from the Greek Old Testament text of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, which condemns homosexual activity in general.¹³

It's evident that Paul didn't restrict the meaning of this word to certain kinds of homosexual behavior. Even ancient Greek writings used it in a broad sense that would include all homosexual behavior.¹⁴ Therefore, according to Paul, all forms of homosexual activity are sinful.

MYTH #5--Homosexuals can't change.

The Bible plainly states that people can overcome homosexuality. After listing a number of categories that typically characterize unbelievers, including "homosexual offenders," Paul reminded the believers in the city of Corinth, "That is what some of you were" (1 Cor. 6:11).

Paul witnessed firsthand how the power of God's mercy and grace drastically changed the lives of people, regardless of their struggles. And God can do the same for anyone today. Before focusing on the godly solutions

Paul had in mind, let's examine how living in a fallen, rebellious world contributes to broken relationships and confusing sexual attractions.

HOW DO HOMOSEXUAL ATTRACTIONS DEVELOP?

People do not change simply by gaining more insight into how same-sex attractions develop. But a deeper understanding can be an important first step.

No one develops homosexual attractions in exactly the same setting. Nor can we put into words all that's involved for every individual. Yet those who tell their stories often report a few common themes that seem to make a person susceptible to developing homosexual attractions. These themes frequently center around parent-child relationships, peer interactions, and childhood sexual abuse.

This is not to suggest that all of these themes exist or occur to the same degree in every case. Nor are they the only factors that contribute to homosexual attraction. Nevertheless, they appear to be the major contributing influences.

It's noteworthy to point out that factors such as genetics and hormones may cause some to be born with certain physical traits that may make them more susceptible to the formation of same-sex attractions, but these are indirect factors. They don't assure that a person will develop homosexual attractions any more than a person who is tall and agile will develop an interest in playing basketball.¹⁵ Furthermore, these factors are minor in comparison to the following:

Parent-child Relationships.

The potential for enormous benefit and harm exists in every parent-child relationship. Many who struggle with homosexual attraction report that their childhood relationships with their same-sex parent and/or opposite-sex parent was a time of great disappointment and rejection.

While some parents more than others should feel a greater sense of sorrow over the ways they failed or harmed their children, it's wrong to place all the blame on the parents. On the other hand, it's equally wrong to contend that family relationships have nothing to do with the development of same-sex attractions. As Anita Worthen and Bob Davies point out, "Actually the truth lies somewhere in between, and the situation is different for every family."¹⁶

Same-sex Parent. All children long to connect emotionally with their parents, especially their same-sex parent. This relationship is a vital part in the process of growing to feel complete and secure as males and females. When a child grows up feeling emotionally cut off from his or her same-sex parent, whether it's real or imagined, it interrupts this process. If the distance continues, the process never resumes, leaving a child feeling rejected, empty, and insecure as a boy or girl. Deep down inside, the child senses that something critical is missing, which can cause a child to seriously question his or her identity as a boy or girl.

One woman never recalled feeling nurtured by her mother. "I played varsity volleyball, and she never came to any of my games. She laughed when I started my first period. She didn't want me to have a bra when everyone else in my class had one. In short, I never felt encouragement or support in areas that nurtured my femininity."¹⁷

While children desperately long for connection with their same-sex parent, some grow to suspect that this relationship will only bring greater rejection and harm. In order to prevent further harm, many tend to distance themselves from this parent. This form of self-protection is commonly referred to as "defensive detachment."¹⁸

Instead of expressing their desire for connection and acceptance, they hide it. Instead of remaining open to a close relationship with their same-sex parent, they become angry and distrustful. For many, it's the beginning of seeing all close relationships with the same sex through eyes of anger and mistrust.

One man recalled how he withdrew from his demeaning father long before his father left the family. His parents' divorce simply made it "official." Another woman described it this way: "In my heart I had cut my mother out of my life, emotionally and relationally."¹⁹

Pulling away and hiding the desire for connection with their same-sex parent didn't make the desire go away. It unknowingly caused the desire to grow stronger. When sexual desires start to emerge around the age of adolescence, the buried yet growing unmet desire for same-sex love and connection can subtly merge with sexual desires. As adolescents are attracted to what's missing, and as they experience moments (whether actual or fantasized) when they sense someone touching their unsatisfied desire for same-sex love, their bodies may respond sexually. Moments like these, usually with an older adolescent or adult, are often when sexual attractions for the same sex surface.

Opposite-sex Parent. The relationship with the opposite-sex parent is not as crucial to the development of same-sex attractions. But in many cases this relationship intensifies a problem created by the distance and/or assaults of the same-sex parent.

For instance, an opposite-sex parent can expand the distance and hostility between a child and the same-sex parent by inappropriately confiding in the child about various marital problems. Then there are situations when an overprotective mother may never allow her son to risk expressing himself as a male by displaying any strong initiative. Or she might constantly ridicule his competence, making him feel more out of place and insecure as a male. This could also involve a father who wanted a son so much that he treated his daughter as a son, ignoring her femininity altogether.

When a child who is already feeling cut off from his or her same-sex parent has his or her gender inhibited, criticized, used, or ignored by the opposite-sex parent, it fertilizes the soil from which a homosexual attraction can arise.

Peer Interactions.

Children who are disillusioned with their same-sex parent may also experience a similar degree of distance and rejection among their same-sex peers, which adds to their level of confusion and insecurity. In some cases, they expect the same kind of treatment.

Just as with his dad, a little boy may feel like a misfit among his male equals. Just as with her mom, a little girl may feel she doesn't belong with girls her age. But the desire to fit in is still screaming to be met. If children or teenagers don't fit in and identify with their same-sex peers, they may be drawn toward unhealthy relationships that seem to hold out the promise of acceptance.

Peer relationships are also the context where "chum" sexual experimentation occurs. Some who struggle with homosexual attractions recall times when a form of sensual (i.e. kissing) or sexual contact took place with same-sex peers. While this is not uncommon for many children, events like these can plant additional seeds of doubt and confusion about one's sexual preference.

Sexual Abuse.

Tragically, for many men and women, homosexual attractions are also rooted in haunting incidents of past sexual abuse. Sexual abuse involves any contact or interaction whereby an older, stronger, or more influential person uses a vulnerable child or adolescent for sexual stimulation. (For a more complete discussion of sexual abuse, see RBC booklet *When Trust Is Lost*.)

Studies show that incidents of sexual abuse are prevalent in the childhoods of adult homosexuals.²⁰ Those who work with adult individuals seeking help for homosexual struggles repeatedly hear stories of boys having been sexually molested, usually by older boys or men. They regularly hear of girls having been sexually abused, typically by a close male family member, friend, or authority figure.

As is the case with any of the factors mentioned, sexual abuse does not automatically produce homosexual attractions. But for some it can be a major part of a context in which homosexual attractions can form. The way the damage of sexual abuse affects the development of these attractions tends to be different for men and women.

The Damage Of Sexual Abuse On Men. Strong ambivalent feelings experienced during and after incidents of sexual abuse by an older male can be a part of what forms homosexual attractions. Ambivalence is "feeling two contradictory emotions at the same moment."²¹ The result is overwhelming shame and confusion. The fact that somehow, in such an awful context, a young boy felt some pleasure brings a raw sense of shame. Relational connection and physical contact occurred, which naturally aroused and brought him emotional and sexual pleasure, but it also felt so horrible.

Enjoying a level of sexual pleasure with a man or older boy is difficult for a young boy or adolescent to reconcile. The shameful confusion increases when sexual abuse was the only context in which his thirst for male love and connection was seemingly quenched. It leaves the deceptive impression that sex and love always go hand in hand.

Shame and confusion provoke nagging thoughts like, "What does that say about me? Maybe I am homosexual." Consequently, the damage from ambivalent feelings can mislead confused young boys into thinking they're something they're not.

The Damage Of Sexual Abuse On Women. Intense feelings of betrayal as a result of sexual abuse are frequently a component of what fuels homosexual attractions for women. Betrayal is the experience of being set up, used, violated, and discarded. Perpetrators of sexual abuse often lure potential victims with a level of affection and attention no one else has offered.

The betrayal of sexual abuse teaches young girls or adolescents that it's too dangerous and painful to want and hope for love from men. As a result, many struggle with a deep hatred and mistrust of men. It similarly spurs them to hate their femininity. Some grow to become terrified of and repulsed by expressing any part of their femininity that longs to be loved and cared for by a man. In their mind, it's the main reason they were abused.

When a young girl, who may already have an exceptionally strong desire for same-sex connection because she's been deprived of it, is sexually abused by a male, the damage of betrayal can powerfully ignite homosexual attractions. Homosexual attractions can emerge in young girls when a hatred of men and a hidden, unquenched thirst for female connection exist simultaneously.

Not everyone who experiences homosexual attractions entertains them in fantasy or behavior. Those who do, however, entertain them because of what they believe homosexuality provides.

WHAT DOES HOMOSEXUALITY PROVIDE?

People who are hurt and angry, and who feel insecure and out of place as males or females, come to see homosexual activity as a means of finding relief, securing safety, and taking revenge. It rarely starts out this way. But once they get a taste of what homosexuality provides, they're hooked. As they start to pursue more of what they've stumbled across, they begin to believe that what homosexuality provides is necessary and deserved.

Finding Relief.

Many who engage in homosexual activity find it to be a way of getting the love and acceptance they didn't receive from their same-sex parent and/or peers. They hope to gain a sense of completeness and relief to the aching void in their souls. They describe the period just before and during homosexual activity as a time when something gels inside or falls into place in a way that touches their emptiness. As one man described it, "I am trying to put something right in myself, something I didn't get as a child."²²

Others also see homosexuality as a way of being absorbed and taken over by someone greater than themselves. It's common for many in this struggle to be drawn to members of the same sex who appear to possess desired qualities they themselves feel they lack. As they are being absorbed by someone greater, they can also take in from the person that which they believe they lack. This brings feelings of completeness, relief, and rest.

Men primarily gain this through sex, while women achieve it more through emotional involvement. This is why it's much easier for women to forsake sexual interaction than it is for men, and yet so hard for them to end an unhealthy relationship.²³

Because the relief is always temporary, they have to keep going back again and again for more. In this way, homosexuality becomes an enslaving addiction. One man likened his involvement in homosexual behavior to a drug. "I took the 'homosexual drug' for the same reason that others take chemical drugs: I wanted to feel better; I wanted to be accepted; and other things hadn't produced satisfaction."²⁴

Not only can relief be found in moments of temporary completeness, but it also comes when the shame of repeatedly relying on something perverse that fails, deadens the desire to love and be loved. One man said, "I have habitually done things that I am so ashamed of I don't see how I can love myself, much less God or anyone else." His shame came to be the reason he saw himself as unfit to give and receive love. This brought relief, in that it made it easier to deny his painful ache for love. (For a more thorough discussion of shame and addiction, see RBC booklet *When We Just Can't Stop*.)

Securing Safety.

For many, homosexual relationships usually become a guarded attempt to feel complete without engaging certain aspects of their masculinity or femininity. In homosexual involvement, people can avoid the characteristics of their gender they fear and hate the most.

Many men dread exhibiting the initiating strength of their masculinity because it was ridiculed, rejected, or inhibited. So they avoid expressing it. This is one reason passivity characterizes the personal relationships of so many males who struggle with homosexuality.

Just by virtue of her difference, a woman requires more of a man's strength in a close, romantic relationship. In homosexuality, however, a man can find moments of illegitimate fullness without having to offer his strength because another man will not require strength in the same way as a woman.²⁵

Women, on the other hand, are inclined to hate and fear the receptive tenderness of their femininity that was exploited and betrayed. Relationships with men require unpredictable levels of tender vulnerability with unpredictable results. In homosexuality, women can safely avoid this form of tenderness while gaining a sense of completeness.

People also attain safety in homosexuality by avoiding close nonsexual relationships with the same sex. Homosexual involvement becomes a way of reconciling the difficult bind of wanting love from the same sex and yet hating and distrusting close relationships with the same sex.

In homosexual involvement, people can get a taste of love and connection without having to enter into a close relationship of trust with the same sex. This is partly why male homosexuality is marked by high levels of promiscuity. As one man described it, "Going from one man to the next is my way of getting a fix without ever having to really trust a man."

While it's true that female homosexual relationships tend to last longer and experience levels of emotional closeness, the partners are not truly trusting their hearts with each other. What they are trusting is their own ability to manipulate and keep a relationship that is self-serving.

Taking Revenge.

People involved in homosexuality tend to find that it's a powerful way of expressing their deep-seated rage, especially toward those who've shamed them and let them down. For instance, one man maintained homosexual relationships as a way of slapping the face of a father who ruthlessly demeaned him. There are some men who thrive on acting feminine as a way of shocking people's notions of masculinity. This can also be true for some women who take on an overly aggressive style of relating to people.

Finding relief, securing safety, and taking revenge are what make homosexuality appealing. More important, they are also symptomatic of the root problem within homosexuality.

WHAT IS THE ROOT PROBLEM?

There is no doubt that those entangled in the web of homosexuality have troubled hearts that are scarred with relational disappointments, misunderstandings, and assaults. As significant as these are, they do not represent the fundamental problem within homosexuality.

The root problem is the same as the source of any immoral, idolatrous thought or behavior. At the deepest levels, homosexual relationships reflect our demand to live life on our own terms. Even when convinced that our ways are wrong, we scratch and claw for autonomy. With two-fisted independence, we ignore the God who designed us to find rest and completeness in Him. Homosexuality is one of many ways to suppress the truth about the One who created us to find our life in Him.

In Romans 1:18-26, Paul made a strong connection between homosexuality and suppressing the truth of God. Paul explained that the suppression of truth (v.18), seen in a proud, indignant refusal to honor and thank God (v.21), is the start of a downward spiral progression that leads to foolish thinking (v.21), loss of moral discernment (v.21), and ultimately idolatry (v.23). Rebellious sexual lust and behavior is one of the ways idolatry is expressed (vv.24-25), which includes homosexuality and many other expressions of independence (vv.26-27).

Everyone is born with the sinful tendency to ignore God and live independently of Him. Before we were ever sinned against, even before we took our first breath, we were inclined to move in this direction: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5). In other words, sin is genetic. Because our painful past helps to mold and set the specific directions in which we live out our sinful tendencies, we need to take it into consideration. But our painful wounds are never the root problem.

As difficult as it is, acknowledging the sin of defiant independence as the root problem in homosexuality provides the hope that change can take place. Why? While the gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't claim to undo our painful past, it does offer forgiveness for our sinful responses. This releases us to rise above the wounds in our hearts to live a life of passion, meaning, and love.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF REPENTANCE AND GROWTH?

Any discussion of change has its limitations. It's impossible to fully capture in words the mystery of God working in the human heart. Nevertheless, the following thoughts are offered to provide some general guidance in the process of change that will occur when we encounter God.

What To Expect.

God offers a pathway to repentance and growth. Receiving His forgiveness and being adopted into His family is immediate. But walking the pathway is a lifelong process. The process will probably be more difficult for those who've struggled with homosexuality for a longer period of time. But no matter how hopeless one may feel, the hope for change is real. Over time, the tormenting same-sex attractions will loosen their grip. The desire to resist homosexual fantasies and behaviors will be strengthened because something far more significant will seize a person's purpose and passion for life.

As important as these changes are, people need to broaden their expectations beyond relief from homosexual struggles. Change also involves the development of an invigorating passion to share one's heart with God and to love those who bear His image (Mt. 22:36-39). It is precisely the growth of this passion that replaces a desire for homosexuality. Encountering God's merciful forgiveness provides the basis for this passion to grow (Lk. 7:47).

Encountering God.

Nothing has more power to transform self-centered people into loving people than a growing amazement and appreciation for the gospel--the remarkable story of God becoming a man and then suffering for our sinful rebellion against Him (Jn. 3:16). Nothing has more power to change us from the inside out than to believe that the One who died in our place rose from the dead to live His life through all who trust Him (Gal. 2:20).

In the first century, this extraordinary story not only saved a calculating murderer from the penalty of his sins, but it eventually seized his heart in such a way that he abandoned his malicious persecution of Christians and became one of the most compelling witnesses of Jesus Christ.

That man, known as the apostle Paul, said that enslaving lusts and pleasures will begin to ease their grip on our lives as we encounter God's merciful kindness and love (Ti. 3:3-5). Jesus taught that freedom from enslaving sin results from coming to know the truth (Jn. 8:31-36). In other words, we meet God's mercy in a context of truth, not denial.

Those who struggle with homosexuality need to honestly tell their own personal story. This will open the door to the truth, steer them into surprising dimensions of grief and repentance, and lead them to powerfully encounter God.

Telling One's Story. Everyone has a story to tell. And it's important that it be told truthfully. This is especially the case for people enslaved in a struggle like homosexuality. Although it will be painful, they need to tell their story to a trusted friend, counselor, or group of people who care and understand the pain and sin of homosexuality.

In any case, God should hear their personal story of pain and sin. It's not that God needs to be informed, but people who struggle with homosexuality tend to harbor anger and doubt toward Him. Many are angry with God because they blame Him for "making" or "allowing" them to have homosexual attractions. Others doubt His goodness because He didn't protect them from past sexual abuse. Unless they honestly wrestle through their anger and disappointment, their hearts will not be open to surrender to Him. Telling God their story creates an opportunity for deep surrender to occur.

Telling one's personal story also provides an opportunity to piece together how homosexual attractions may have developed from past disappointments or assaults to one's dignity. While understanding alone doesn't produce change, it helps individuals place into proper perspective what they are and are not responsible for. Those who struggle with homosexuality are not responsible for the presence of homosexual attractions. It's not their fault that they were rejected, ridiculed, or sexually exploited as children. They are responsible, however, for ignoring God by pursuing the relief, personal safety, and revenge found in homosexuality.

The details of one's story may be sketchy and disorganized at first, but careful exploration will expose significant themes. Not everything will be recalled. Some things won't make sense. They don't have to. What sets the context to encounter God is not complete recollection or having an explanation for everything that's happened. But it's a heart that is open to grieve the deep hurts of life as well as the harm one has caused self, others, and God in responding to those wounds.

Owning Grief. Grieving is entering the pain over what's been lost or what never came to be. Most people avoid grieving the deep hurts of life. To many, it seems so senseless. For others, it's too frightening. Yet it's the best path to walk. To those who grieve, God promises to comfort, to forgive, and to draw near (Mt. 5:4; Jas. 4:8-10). Instead of leading to greater despair, grief awakens our hearts to a hunger for God that only He can fill.

There is much to grieve over as painful stories are recounted: the ache of never getting a father's attention or approval, the hollowness of a mother who never cared, the sting of mockery from parents or same-sex peers, the loss of trust and innocence as a result of sexual abuse. But grief must not end there. It's equally important that a person grieve over his or her sinful responses to being hurt.

Grief over sin is the experience of being cut to the heart with a deepening sadness over the ways our lives are diabolically at odds with what God intended. Instead of loving, many involved in homosexuality have selfishly used the ones they claim to love to get relief from their emptiness. Instead of giving, many have cheated others by avoiding close, nonsexual relationships with the same sex in order to stay safe. Rather than forgiving and seeking restoration, many have sought to even the score against those who've failed or violated them.

Hearts should be pierced by the wrongfulness of pursuing relief, safety, and revenge. But even more significant is the core sin of alienating God (Ps. 51:3-4) by replacing Him with an idol and refusing to embrace one's God-given gender.

As people begin the process of telling their stories and owning their grief, they can start to see the depth of their need for God's forgiveness. As they grieve over sin and accept God's forgiveness, the stunning story of how God's love and forgiveness intersects with their own personal stories of tragedy and sin will begin to capture their hearts. As they welcome God's merciful forgiveness made possible through Jesus Christ, gratitude and confidence about God's goodness and love will begin to replace bitterness and doubt (1 Jn. 4:9-16).

The danger in telling one's story is that it can be misused. People can get so caught up in their painful past that they use it to justify further involvement in homosexuality and other sins. But this is a misuse of truth. The ultimate purpose for honestly telling one's story is to draw out tears of grief over sin, which can lead to repentance (2 Cor. 7:8-10).

A Heart For Repentance. What is repentance? It is a change of heart that enables us to depend on God. It's a humble process of giving up our belief in a false god and uniting with the heart and mind of the One who made us for Himself (Lk. 15:17-21).

But repentance is not something we merely choose to do. It is also something that happens to us as God Himself works changes in us that we could never produce in our own strength. Our part is to have a heart for the repentance He gives, to believe it can happen, and to seek it persistently in prayer.

Those who want to leave their life of homosexuality often feel their situation is hopeless. But a heart for repentance doesn't sigh with despair, "I'm beyond help." Rather, it hopefully maintains, "I'm wrong and far from the person I was meant to be, but I'm not beyond help. I've tasted enough of God's forgiveness to know He is good. Although He allowed certain tragedies in my life to occur, I'm becoming more convinced of His goodness as He takes what others intended for harm and uses it for good (Gen. 50:20). I'm going to keep asking, seeking, and knocking for God to forgive and renew me" (Lk. 11:9-13).

In His own timing, God will bring those involved in homosexuality the kind of change they truly seek, if they seriously intend to use the change He brings for His loving purposes. Paul stated, "He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all--how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

A Passion To Love.

Encountering God's forgiveness weakens the powerful hold of homosexuality and gradually creates a passion to love others. Aspiring more to live out the calling to be "imitators of God" who "live a life of love" (Eph. 5:1-2) is what can finish off and replace a struggle like homosexuality. Unless homosexuality is replaced with a growing passion to love, it's likely that any freedom from the struggle will be only temporary.

Instead of using people, a growing passion to love has eyes to see the dignity in others and creatively considers ways to draw it out. Rather than avoiding close relationships with the same or opposite sex, it risks getting involved, giving of one's caring strength or tenderness without having to know the results. In place of seeking revenge, it longs to offer the same kind of forgiveness and reconciliation it received from God.

Nothing brings more satisfaction and joy than getting caught up in the thrilling privilege of anticipating each new day as an occasion to know God and for Him to use our lives as instruments of good in the lives of others. A passion to love and be loved is the heartbeat of repentance and growth.

WHAT'S A FRIEND TO DO?

Jesus was a friend of sinners. As His followers, we need to consider what it means to be involved as friends in the battle for the souls of people. If we want to be friends to those who struggle with homosexuality, we first need to be open to the fact that there are many forms of lustful struggles going on below the surface of life, including homosexuality.

A friend or family member's struggle with homosexuality surprises and frightens far too many Christians. Many feel shocked and afraid, and typically withdraw. At best, some recommend counseling or encourage them simply to stop. In either case, they miss the core issues of pain and sin.

Presume for a moment that we had eyes to see the core issues of pain and sin in the human heart. Knowing the agony in our own hearts, knowing the different streaks of lust and independence that we all wrestle with, an individual's battle with homosexuality would not take us off guard or immobilize us with fear. Consequently, we'd be better friends.

Many of us are equally guilty of approaching homosexuality from a self-righteous attitude. We act as if this sin is greater than our own, emitting a language of hostility, mockery, and disgust, which sadly taints the appeal of the gospel. Self-righteousness is a large reason why we are not Christlike friends to those who struggle with homosexuality.

We need to have more of the attitude Jesus spoke of when He said, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? . . . You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Lk. 6:41-42).

Jesus' words remind us that if we see others' sin without seeing our own more deeply, then we've negated our right and privilege to invite them to a different kind of life. Therefore, we must base our efforts to be a better Christlike friend to those struggling with homosexuality on the confession and growing demise of our own self-righteousness.

If we open our eyes to see the pain and potential for lust in all of us, and if we allow the depth of our own sin to humble us, we can reach out with true compassion and create a context where individuals will feel open to reveal their homosexual struggles, hear the truth, and find hope.

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