

Redemption: A Lesbian Rescued From the Dead End of Sexual Sin

Unbelievers don't "struggle" with same-sex attraction. I didn't. My love for women came with nary a struggle at all.

I had not always been a lesbian, but in my late 20s, I met my first lesbian lover. I was hooked and believed that I had found my real self. Sex with women was part of my life and identity, but it was not the only part—and not always the biggest part.

I simply preferred everything about women: their company, their conversation, their companionship and the contours of their/our body. I favored the nesting, the setting up of house and home, and the building of lesbian community.

As an unbelieving professor of English, an advocate of postmodernism and poststructuralism, and an opponent of all totalizing meta-narratives (like Christianity, I would have added back in the day), I found peace and purpose in my life as a lesbian and the queer community I helped to create.

Conversion and Confusion

It was only after I met my risen Lord that I ever felt shame in my sin, with my sexual attractions and with my sexual history.

Conversion brought with it a train wreck of contradictory feelings, ranging from liberty to shame. Conversion also left me confused. While it was clear that God forbade sex outside of biblical marriage, it was not clear to me what I should do with the complex matrix of desires and attractions, sensibilities and senses of self that churned within and still

defined me.

What is the sin of sexual transgression? The sex? The identity? How deep was repentance to go?

Meeting John Owen

In these new found struggles, a friend recommended that I read an old, 17th-century theologian named John Owen, in a trio of his books (now brought together under the title *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*).

At first, I was offended to realize that what I called “who I am,” John Owen called “indwelling sin.” But I hung in there with him. Owen taught me that sin in the life of a believer manifests itself in three ways: *distortion* by original sin, *distraction* of actual day-to-day sin and *discouragement* by the daily residence of indwelling sin.

Eventually, the concept of indwelling sin provided a window to see how God intended to replace my shame with hope. Indeed, John Owen’s understanding of indwelling sin is the missing link in our current cultural confusion about what sexual sin is—and what to do about it.

As believers, we lament with the apostle Paul, “For the good I desire to do, I do not do, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who does it, but sin that lives in me” (Rom. 7:19-20).

But after we lament, what should we do? How should we think about sin that has become a daily part of our identity?

Owen explained with four responses:

1. Starve it. Indwelling sin is a parasite, and it eats what you do. God’s Word is poison to sin when embraced by a heart made new by the Holy Spirit. You starve indwelling sin by feeding yourself deeply on his word. Sin cannot abide in his word. So, fill your hearts and minds with Scripture.

One way that I do that is singing the Psalms. Psalm-singing, for me, is a powerful devotional practice as it helps me to melt my will into God's and memorize His Word in the process. We starve our indwelling sin by reading Scripture comprehensively, in big chunks and by whole books at a time. This allows us to see God's providence at work in big-picture ways.

2. Call sin what it is. Now that it is in the house, don't buy it a collar and a leash and give it a sweet name. Don't "admit" sin as a harmless (but un-housebroken) pet. Instead, confess it as an evil offense and put it out! Even if you love it! You can't domesticate sin by welcoming it into your home.

Don't make a false peace. Don't make excuses. Don't get sentimental about sin. Don't play the victim. Don't live by excuse-righteousness. If you bring the baby tiger into your house and name it Fluffy, don't be surprised if you wake up one day and Fluffy is eating you alive. That is how sin works, and Fluffy knows her job. Sometimes sin lurks and festers for decades, deceiving the sinner that he really has it all under control, until it unleashes itself on everything you built, cherished and loved.

Be wise about your choice sins and don't coddle them. And remember that sin is not ever "who you are" if you are in Christ. In Christ, you are a son or daughter of the King; you are royalty. You do battle with sin because it distorts your real identity; you do not define yourself by these sins that are original with your consciousness and daily present in your life.

3. Extinguish indwelling sin by killing it. Sin is not only an enemy, says Owen. Sin is at enmity with God. Enemies can be reconciled, but there is no hope for reconciliation for anything at enmity with God. Anything at enmity with God must be put to death. Our battles with sin draw us closer in union with Christ. Repentance is a new doorway into God's presence

and joy.

Indeed, our identity comes from being crucified and resurrected with Christ:

“Therefore we were buried with Him by baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in the likeness of His death, so shall we also be united with Him in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man has been crucified with Him, so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we should no longer be slaves to sin” (Rom. 6:4-6).

Satan will use our indwelling sin as blackmail, declaring that we cannot be in Christ and sin in heart or body like this. In those moments, we remind him that he is right about one thing only: Our sin is indeed sin. It is indeed transgression against God and nothing else.

But Satan is dead wrong about the most important matter. In repentance, we stand in the risen Christ. And the sin that we have committed (and will commit) is covered by his righteousness. But fight we must. To leave sin alone, says Owen, is to let sin grow—“not to conquer it is to be conquered by it.”

4. Daily cultivate your new life in Christ. God does not leave us alone to fight the battle in shame and isolation. Instead, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the soul of each believer is “vivified.” “To vivicate” means to animate, or to give life to. Vivification complements mortification (to put to death), and by so doing, it allows us to see the wide angle of sanctification, which includes two aspects:

a. Deliverance from the desire of those choice sins, experienced when the grace of obedience gives us the “expulsive power of a new affection” (to quote Thomas

Chalmers).

b. Humility over the fact that we daily need God's constant flow of grace from heaven, and that no matter how sin tries to delude us, hiding our sin is never the answer. Indeed, the desire to be strong enough in ourselves so that we can live independently of God is the first sin, the essence of sin and the mother of all sin.

Owen's missing link is for believers only. He says, "Unless a man be regenerate (born again), unless he be a believer, all attempts that he can make for mortification [of sin] ... are to no purpose. In vain he shall use many remedies, [but] he shall not be healed."

What then should an unbeliever do? Cry out to God for the Holy Spirit to give him a new heart and convert his soul: "Mortification [of sin] is not the present business of unregenerate men. God calls them not to it as yet; conversion is their work—the conversion of the *whole* soul—not the mortification of this or that particular lust."

Freed for Joy

In the writings of John Owen, I was shown how and why the promises of sexual fulfillment on my own terms were the antithesis of what I had once fervently believed. Instead of liberty, my sexual sin was enslavement. This 17th-century Puritan revealed to me how my lesbian desires and sensibilities were dead-end joy-killers.

Today, I now stand in a long line of godly women—the Mary Magdalene line. The gospel came with grace, but demanded irreconcilable war. Somewhere on this bloody battlefield, God gave me an uncanny desire to become a godly woman, covered by God, hedged in by His Word and his will. This desire bled into another one: to become, if the Lord willed, the godly wife of a godly husband.

And then I noticed it.

Union with the risen Christ meant that everything else was nailed to the cross. I couldn't get my former life back if I wanted it. At first, this was terrifying, but when I peered deep into the abyss of my terror, I found peace.

With peace, I found that the gospel is always ahead of you. Home is forward. Today, by God's amazing grace alone, I am a chosen part of God's family, where God cares about the details of my day, the math lessons and the spilled macaroni and cheese, and most of all, for the people, the image-bearers of His precious grace, the man who calls me *beloved*, and the children who call me *mother*.

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