

JOSHUA RYAN BUTLER

BEAUTIFUL UNION

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**SAMPLE
ONLY**

**UNCORRECTED
PROOF**

STUDY GUIDE

A PRACTICAL COMPANION FOR DEEP
REFLECTION, GOOD CONVERSATION,
AND TOUGH QUESTIONS YOU REALLY
WANT TO ASK (BUT HAVEN'T YET)

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MULTNOMAH

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Sex is designed to point to greater things. Big, beautiful things. That's the message at the heart of *Beautiful Union*: exploring how God's vision for sex points us to the good, unlocks the true, and (sort of) explains everything. This vision is for you, whether you're single or married, young or old—whatever your life circumstances. For in Christ, these grander realities are offered to us all.

This study guide is designed to help you dive more deeply into the key concepts of *Beautiful Union*: to reflect on them and make them your own, to creatively explore their significance from fresh new angles, to discuss those concepts with others or journal on their implications for your life, and to integrate God's beautiful vision into the intricacy of your own life and circumstances.



This guide is a companion to the book *Beautiful Union*, and it can be used individually or in groups (such as book clubs, discussion gath-

erings, and other kinds of small groups). When you use this guide alongside the book, it will help you—and your group, if you’re a part of a discussion group—to get the most out of the content.

The guide is divided into seven sessions, with each session covering two or three chapters (called mini-sessions) from *Beautiful Union*. Each mini-session includes a brief re-introduction to the chapter followed by the same basic components: Unpack It, Use Your Imagination, and Reflect on It. (More on each component below.)

Although this guide is divided into seven sessions, go at your own pace. If you’re using this book in a group study, then it might work best as a seven-week study with participants reading and reflecting on a few chapters each week. Or your group may decide to stretch it out to a fourteen-week study. Do what works best for your schedule and timeline.

Reading Schedule for *Beautiful Union*

If you haven’t already read the book *Beautiful Union*, do so as you work your way through these sessions:

Session 1	Intro and Chapter 1
Session 2	Chapters 2–3
Session 3	Chapters 4–5
Session 4	Chapters 6–7
Session 5	Chapters 8–10
Session 6	Chapters 11–12
Session 7	Chapters 13–15

Unpack It

Here you’ll encounter questions designed to help you recap, unpack, and cement key insights from each chapter. Use this space to record important takeaways, making them your own, so you can easily return to them later.

Use Your Imagination

These creative exercises are designed to help you reflect, using your imagination in unexpected ways, on a big idea from the chapter. These work best when you don't rush through them, so set aside ten to fifteen minutes, ideally, for each exercise. Take time to let your imagination explore the exercise and journal your reflections.

Reflect on It

These exercises are intended to guide you in reflecting on the significance of a central idea in your own life and what it might mean or look like to live in light of these big, beautiful realities you're exploring in the book.

Group Leaders

If you're completing this study in a group setting and you're the facilitator of your group, here are some simple guidelines that can help make this group journey through *Beautiful Union* more rewarding. Each session has enough content for sixty to ninety minutes of group time, depending on how long your group likes to spend in deeper discussion of each topic.

If you're part of an established small group going through *Beautiful Union*, your group is probably familiar with how to review content in workbooks and studies similar to this one. It may not be necessary to prescribe every detail of the group meetings, though this brief refresher may help you prepare for the group's discussion.

Review and Pray

Before meeting with the group, read the chapters of *Beautiful Union* associated with the upcoming session (see the reading schedule on page XX) and complete the mini-sessions. Then pray for each person in your group and for your time together.

Group Members

Encourage every group member to read the assigned chapters of *Beautiful Union* and complete the sections in this guide before they arrive at the meetings each week.

Getting Started and Introduction

Once your group members have arrived, settle into a place free of distractions where you can sit comfortably for the next hour. Then, when you're ready to get started, ask a group member to read the mini-session's introduction aloud.

Unpack It

Ask someone else to read through the questions, one at a time, and ask group members to share the initial thoughts they wrote down.

Use Your Imagination

Give the group time to talk about the imagination exercise, offering space to share and unpack what they each wrote down.

Reflect on It

Encourage discussion of the responses in this section of the guide, and don't forget to take your time. As you lead your group through this guide, remember these pro tips:

- *Make time for each person to share.* The goal is to get everyone talking, to have everybody's voice heard and included as part of the discussion. This doesn't mean everybody needs to answer each particular question, but be mindful if a few people dominate the discussion.

- *Don't make everyone share.* Sex is a sensitive topic. Some people might not be comfortable sharing their thoughts or experience, or they might still be processing and not be ready to share yet. Respect that. Don't pressure people to contribute who aren't ready or don't want to.

My hope is that by the end you'll have a bigger, more beautiful vision of God, the gospel, and the Christian vision for sex. I know I've been impacted tremendously by reflecting on the concepts at the heart of this book, and I hope you will be too.

In Christ,
Josh

PART I

**SEX AS
ICON**

BEAUTY AND MYSTERY

Based on the introduction of *Beautiful Union*.

Takeaway: Sex is iconic.

It's designed to point to greater things.

*B*eautiful may not be the first word that comes to mind when you think of sex. Particularly the Christian vision for sex. *Backward. Bigoted. Outdated. Oppressive. Prudish. Puritanical.* These words are what many think of the traditional Christian sexual ethic today. But what if I told you *beautiful* can be the first word that comes to mind? That's the goal of this book: to restore the beauty of the Christian sexual ethic.

Sex is iconic. It's designed to point to greater things. That's the central thesis of this book. What do I mean by "icon"? Historically, icons were not meant to be looked *at* so much as to be looked *through*. They pointed to something beyond themselves. Sex can be an icon or an idol, either a window we look through to get a glimpse of the glory and goodness of God, or a mirror that reflects our selfishness, brokenness, and destruction.

The first step in restoring the beauty of Christian sexual ethics is to learn to look *through* it to greater things. At the end of our exploration, we shall discover that God is love. The love of God is the

endgame of this book, for it's what the icon points to. God designed sex to reveal his love in technicolor.

Unpack It

1. When you think of Christian sexual ethics, what words first come to your mind? Is *beauty* one of them? Why or why not?

2. Historically, icons were not meant to be looked *at* so much as to be looked *through*. They pointed to something beyond themselves. Sex is iconic. What do you think of this idea?

- a. Use the space below to make a list of some greater things you think God might have designed sex to point to, regarding the nature of our world and the life we were made for with God.

3. Our culture has put sex in a “mega” place yet stripped it of its mystery. We’ve been trained by culture to look *at* sex but not to look *through* it. What are some ways you’ve seen a reduced vision of sex show up in our culture—that is, in movies, television shows, songs, or other pieces of pop culture?

- a. Do you find this vision for sex satisfying, or do you wish there were something more?

4. How might people around you describe the greater purpose of sex? Think of your friends and family, neighbors and co-workers. What words might they use to describe what sex is for?

5. God designed sex to reveal his love in technicolor. How might sex be designed to point to the love of God? Describe some specific characteristics, in a healthy experience of sex, that might reflect aspects of God’s love.

6. What are some ways this image of love might get broken? Describe some specific practices or experiences that could break God's design for sex and fail to accurately reflect the love of God.

7. List at least one thing from the introduction that stood out to you or surprised you.

Use Your Imagination

Imagine you are a twelfth-century peasant in France. The printing press hasn't been invented, so you don't own a Bible. You've heard the stories of Scripture, but you are illiterate. When you visit your local church, however, you see an icon of *Christ Pantocrator*. The priest explains its symbolism to you.

1. What role might this icon play as a learning tool for your understanding of God?

2. How might it function as a memory device for your imagination?

Like that twelfth-century peasant, our current culture is illiterate about God in many ways. Yet it's obsessed with sex. If God has embedded sex like an icon in the heart of our society . . .

3. How might reclaiming an iconic vision of sex deepen your understanding of God?

4. How might such a vision help those around you experience a fresh encounter with God?

Reflect on It

Before embarking on this journey, take some time to pray about and reflect on any hopes, fears, or questions you might have. Feel free to

What are your hopes for this book? What is one thing you're hoping to learn? A question you're hoping to answer? An experience you're hoping to heal? A theme you're hoping to discover?

Sex is a sensitive topic. What fears do you have? What are some unhelpful ways you've heard sex talked about that you hope to avoid as you progress through this guide?

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SEX AS SALVATION

Based on chapter 1 of *Beautiful Union*.

*Takeaway: Sex is an icon of salvation,
a sign of our union with Christ as his church.*

Sex wasn't designed to *be* your salvation but to point you to the One who is. It's not only the giving of your vows at the altar but also what happens in the honeymoon suite after, that speaks to the life you were made for with God. A husband and wife's life of faithful love is designed to point to greater things, but *so is their sexual union!* Sex is an icon of Christ and the church.

Christ arrives in salvation to be not only *with* his church but also *within* his church. Christ gives himself to his beloved with extravagant generosity, showering his love upon us, and imparting his very presence within us. Christ penetrates his church with the generative seed of his Word and the life-giving presence of his Spirit, which takes root within her and grows to bring new life into the world.

Similarly, the church embraces Christ in salvation, celebrating his arrival with joy and delight. She has prepared and made herself ready, anticipating his advent in eager anticipation. She welcomes him into the most vulnerable place of her being, lavishing herself upon him with extravagant hospitality. She receives his generous

gift within her—the seed of his Word and the presence of his Spirit—partnering with him to bring children of God into the world.

Their union brings forth new creation.

Unpack It

1. Read Ephesians 5:31–32. Paul says it’s not only the *vows* of marriage (“leave and cleave”) but also the *consummation* of marriage (“one flesh”) that speaks to Christ and the church. Sex is an icon of salvation. This elevates the sacred significance of sex.

- a. How does this iconic view of sex confront those in our churches who might see sex as dirty?

- b. How does this confront those in our culture who might see sex as simply about personal pleasure?

- c. Does this differ from your personal view of sex? If so, how?

2. Take a moment to consider how you've historically thought about sex, the male and female contributions to sexual union, and sexual desire. Use the space below to write out a few thoughts.

- a. How is the idea that generosity and hospitality are embodied in the sexual act different from your original stance about male and female contributions to sexual union? How is it the same?

- b. How does desire as an icon of Christ's affection for his bride affect your view of male desire?

- c. How does desire as an icon of the church's longing to be romanced affect your view of female desire?

3. In what ways does sex as an icon of salvation create a fuller understanding of God for you?

4. The less extreme, tragic inversions of the iconic design are _____ and _____. What were your initial reactions to reading about these less extreme inversions?

a. How have you experienced these lesser inversions in your own life or seen them played out in the lives of those you are close with?

b. How does it feel knowing that these are not part of God's design?

5. While marriage shows us the *shape* of the gospel, singleness shows us the *sufficiency* of the gospel.¹ How does an iconic vision support, rather than detract from, the sacred significance of singleness?

- a. What are ways the church has fallen short of this vision at times?

- b. Why is it crucial that the church uphold a sacred vision for singleness?

6. List at least one thing from this chapter that stood out to you or surprised you.

Use Your Imagination

Take a moment to review the phrasing “one flesh” from the book (page XX). Let’s contrast the one-flesh union with some other (un-biblical) metaphors for salvation. To be clear, the following are *not* accurate visions of salvation. They are false, yet they represent some approaches people often take to God. The point is to contrast the beauty of sexual union against the backdrop of these false images God has *not* chosen to use. Consider what each of these false metaphors would communicate about the nature of the gospel.

1. *Climbing the Sacred Mountain.* God sits atop a treacherous mountain. Athletes train their whole lives in preparation for the ascent. Only those who develop muscular strength, physical agility, and cardiovascular endurance can master the climb. On the appointed day, climbers race to the top. Those with injuries or disabilities are prevented from participating in the race. Many climbers die on the trek. Only those who make it to the top see the face of God and are awarded a new mansion to live in for their efforts.

a. What does this metaphor imply about the nature of salvation?

b. In what ways does this metaphor contradict what God tells us about the one-flesh nature of salvation (see the discussion of Jesus as the pursuing God on page XX)?

c. How does such grace change how you approach God?

2. *The Work Crew.* God sets prisoners free, breaking them out of captivity from their dark cells of solitary confinement. Once out in the light of day, however, they're immediately clothed in orange jumpsuits and put to work. They pick up trash, mow lawns, build playgrounds, construct homes, and help old ladies cross the street. Everyone is given a walkie-talkie so God can give them their new assignments every hour, on the hour. They never see God again but are given just enough food to have the energy to complete their assignments.

a. What does this metaphor imply about the nature of salvation?

b. In what ways does this metaphor contradict what God tells us about the one-flesh nature of salvation (see "In Defense of Romantic Worship Music" on page XX)?

c. How does such love change how you live with God?

3. *The Popularity Contest.* Winners in a popularity contest are given elite access to the private network Life Hacks with the Savior. Every day, Jesus posts a new video with the hottest tips on diet, exercise, time management, romance, and more. Those who follow the daily regimen become smarter, faster, healthier, happier, and more attractive than their peers. While Jesus has never met them personally, he gives them all they need to live much more satisfying lives.

a. What does this metaphor imply about the nature of salvation?

b. In what ways does this metaphor contradict what God tells us about the one-flesh nature of salvation (see “The Heart of Salvation” on page XX)?

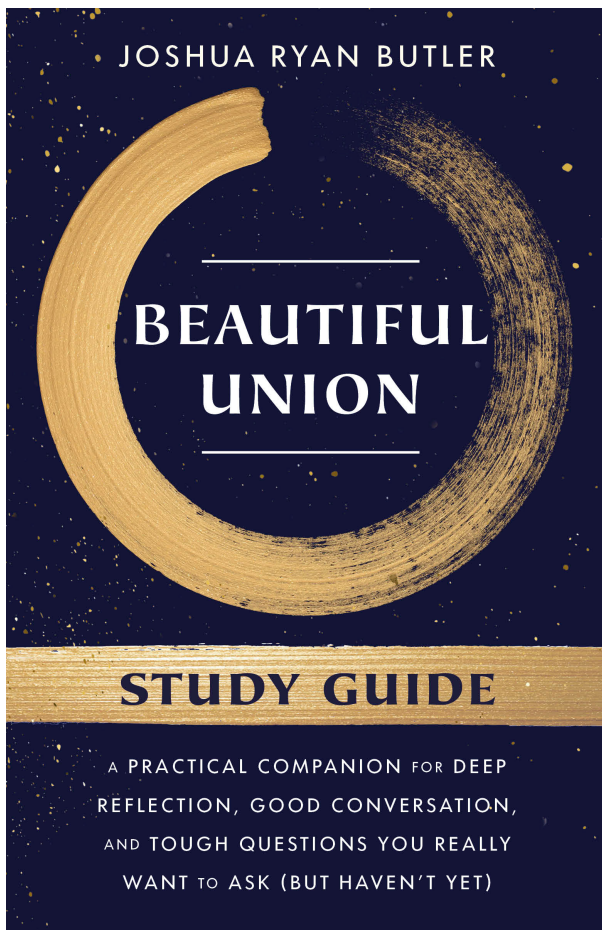
c. What does such security do to your heart and affection toward God?

Reflect on It

You were made for union with God. How does this differ from what you’ve previously understood about the point of the Christian life?

How is this a more beautiful picture of the nature of salvation than popular misunderstandings of Christianity? How can you hold on to sex as an icon of salvation to remind you of the life you were made for with God?

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