

“This is a timely and sensitive book that offers a positive vision for human relationships. It shows that responsible handling of the Bible can lead to more love, not less.”

Peter Williams, Principal, Tyndale House;  
Author, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*

“With sensitivity, faithfulness, and clarity, Rebecca McLaughlin addresses ten questions often raised about the Bible and same-sex relationships. For each, she deftly engages with different interpretations of the Bible’s teaching and, in dialogue with personal stories, provides a more compelling interpretation. A most helpful book for anyone wanting concise, accessible, sensitive, and biblically faithful approaches to these questions.”

James Robson, Principal,  
Oak Hill Theological College, London

“Rebecca McLaughlin is not afraid to tackle the toughest questions our culture has for Christianity, and in this short book she has again shown her willingness to teach biblical truth clearly, straightforwardly, and compassionately. I hope this book is widely read by both those who agree and those who disagree.”

Kathy Keller, Author, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles*

“With characteristic clarity and compassion, Rebecca McLaughlin examines the most common arguments that Christians use to support the idea that God affirms same-sex relationships. Careful and nuanced argument will help the reader have confidence in what the Bible does teach—and assurance that it is good news for everyone, including those who experience same-sex attraction.”

Ros Clarke, Associate Director, Church Society

“This is outstanding: short, readable, warm, well illustrated, clear, and gracious. Rebecca’s blend of personal experience, biblical study, and cultural wisdom is richly displayed in this book, and it is just what we need.”

Andrew Wilson, Teaching Pastor, King’s Church London

“It can be easy for Christians today to wonder if we’ve got it wrong on an issue as high-stakes as same-sex sexuality. Deeply biblical, and illustrated in real-life examples, Rebecca McLaughlin’s book shows us the Bible’s consistent and compelling vision for human sexuality. Christians will find this illuminating, reassuring, and deeply encouraging.”

Sam Allberry, Associate Pastor, Immanuel Nashville;  
Author, *Is God Anti-gay?*

“This book explains in a powerful, clear, and compelling way what the Bible says about same-sex relationships. I love Rebecca’s writing. She writes with humility, precision, and faithfulness, and the gospel testimony that comes through it is beautiful. You’ll come away from this book not only better informed but more in awe of God’s incredible, sustaining grace.”

J.D. Greear, Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, NC; Council Member, The Gospel Coalition

“This book offers gentle correction to those who long for a biblical reinterpretation that allows for same-sex marriage, while also offering a liberating vision of singleness and relationship intimacy within the body of Christ. McLaughlin shows how a truly biblical understanding of sexuality focuses all of us on Jesus. This is an important and grace-filled little book.”

Darryl Williamson, Lead Pastor, Living Faith Bible Fellowship, Tampa, FL

Does

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Bible

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Affirm

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Same-Sex

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Relationships?

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Examining 10 Claims about  
Scripture and Sexuality

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Rebecca McLaughlin



*For Paige,  
my beloved sister*

Does the Bible Affirm Same-Sex Relationships?

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# Contents

Introduction: A Tale of Two Testimonies	9
<i>Claim 1:</i> Christians Should Just Focus On The Gospel of God’s Love	15
<i>Claim 2:</i> Jesus Was Silent on Same-Sex Relationships	25
<i>Claim 3:</i> God’s Judgment on Sodom Isn’t a Judgment on Same-Sex Relationships	33
<i>Claim 4:</i> It’s Inconsistent to Follow the Old Testament on Same-Sex Sex but Not on Shellfish	39
<i>Claim 5:</i> Paul Condemns Exploitative Same-Sex Relationships, Not Consensual Ones	45
<i>Claim 6:</i> Paul Was Condemning Excessive Lust, Not Same-Sex Sexual Orientation	55
<i>Claim 7:</i> The Word “Homosexual” Wasn’t Used in Bibles until 1946—It’s a Misinterpretation	63

<i>Claim 8: The Trajectory of the Bible Is toward Rejecting Slavery and Affirming Same-Sex Marriage</i>	73
<i>Claim 9: Unchosen Celibacy Yields Bad Fruit</i>	85
<i>Claim 10: A God of Love Can't Be against Relationships of Love</i>	97
Epilogue	111



## Introduction: A Tale of Two Testimonies

**W**hen I showed up at Cambridge for my undergrad degree, I had a secret. I'd been a follower of Jesus for as long as I could remember. But as soon as I was old enough to have romantic feelings, they'd homed in on other girls. I'd hoped it was just a phase. After all, I was in single-sex education. Maybe I just hadn't met enough guys. I told myself that when I went to university, I'd start to fall for men. But my feet had barely touched the ground at Cambridge when I started having feelings for a female friend.

I felt embarrassed. I'd told a handful of people over the years, but it was extremely hard to talk about. I wanted to get married one day, but I was a passionate Christian, and I was convinced that the Bible was against same-sex relationships, so I felt stuck. I tried to wait out my feelings, still swearing to myself that it was just a phase. But by the time I started my Ph.D., I could

no longer swallow my own story. My tendency to fall in love with women wasn't an adolescent phase. It felt more like a waste: a secret, pointless, painful sadness that I could not shake.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, my (now) friend Rachel was starting as an undergrad at Yale. She'd grown up in a non-religious home in California, and she felt sure that there was no God. Aged fifteen, while studying with a female friend, Rachel had been struck by quite how beautiful her study partner was. This was no mere observation. It was a powerful attraction. So she started strategizing about how to turn this friendship sexual. Over time, they grew close, and when this friend asked Rachel what she wanted for her sixteenth birthday, Rachel replied that she wanted a kiss. This was the start of an on-and-off romance which lasted several years.

In the off times, Rachel pursued other pretty girls—some of whom identified as Christian. The fact that she could not only out-argue Christians but also seduce them added to her comfort in her atheism. But by the time she set off for college, Rachel was back with her first girlfriend, and she could not have been happier. Until her girlfriend broke up with her.

Rachel was devastated. She was already finding college hard. She'd excelled in high school, but she was struggling to keep up at Yale. So the blow to her heart of losing her girlfriend landed on top of a blow to her pride. "I wasn't thinking, *I should turn to Jesus*," Rachel recalls,

“because I didn’t believe in Jesus.” But in her misery, a philosophy lecture made her wonder if she’d been too quick to rule out God. Rachel still felt confidently atheist, but she prided herself on knowledge. So she started googling religious terms. Without intending to, Rachel kept stumbling on stories about Jesus from the Bible.

The Jesus of the Bible was utterly unlike the Jesus Rachel had imagined. She’d thought of Jesus as a boring old conservative. But she discovered that he was not only radically loving but also incredibly smart. Rachel felt drawn to Jesus. But she also sensed a problem. She hoped to fall in love again and marry a woman someday, but she’d picked up that Christians were against same-sex marriage. Then again, the only two self-identifying Christians she knew at Yale were two women who were dating each other. So she went to visit them to ask how they had worked things out.

These two young women welcomed Rachel warmly and explained that there had been a big mistake: the Bible, read correctly, *does* affirm monogamous same-sex relationships. They gave her a booklet which laid out their case. Rachel read it eagerly and felt a surge of hope. But then she started googling the Bible passages the booklet referenced. As far as she could see, what the Bible said and what the booklet said seemed utterly at odds. So Rachel threw the booklet out in disappointment, kicking herself for wondering if there was room for her in Christianity.

Rachel thought that she was done with Jesus. But not long afterwards, she spotted a book titled *Mere Christianity* on a friend's bookshelf.<sup>1</sup> Ashamed to acknowledge her interest, Rachel stole the book. A few days later, as she was reading it in the library between classes, it burst on Rachel that there was a God. For a moment, she felt nothing but fear. She knew that this God was breathtakingly holy and that she was thoroughly sinful. It wasn't only that she had slept around. Rachel also knew that she was cruel and selfish. She had lied for fun and stolen things—including the book in her hands! Rachel recognized instinctively that she was guilty before God. But at that moment, she also understood for the first time that Jesus had stepped in to take the punishment for all her sin. As she sat there in the Yale library, Rachel knew that stepping into life with Jesus meant closing the door on same-sex romance. Yet Jesus' offer of forgiveness and eternal life and love seemed too good to refuse. So she took it.<sup>2</sup>

### Your Story

I don't know what your story is when it comes to sexuality and Jesus. I don't know what hurts you carry or what hopes you harbor in your heart. I don't know if this book was put into your hands by somebody who wants to change your mind or if you're reading it because you don't know what to think yourself. I don't know if, like me, you have a lifelong history of same-sex

attraction or if you're looking at these questions from the sidelines, so to speak. But whatever the reason, I'm so glad you're here!

Like the booklet Rachel was given by her college friends, this book works through some of the most popular arguments in favor of affirming same-sex sexual relationships for Christians—but it comes to the opposite conclusion: that the Bible does not affirm such relationships. In fact, it warns us in the strongest terms against them.

I'm painfully aware that covering so many arguments in such a short book might feel inadequate. But my aim has been to take seriously the ten claims that this book addresses. As far as it is possible in a short space, I've attempted to articulate each argument carefully, explore why it might seem persuasive, and explain where I think it falls short.

The first chapter looks at the big story of the Bible and why the question of same-sex relationships is not a question we can set aside. The second explores Jesus' words on marriage and on sexual sin. Chapters 3 and 4 work through Old Testament texts that reference same-sex sexual relationships. Chapters 5 to 8 examine the three New Testament texts that speak directly to this issue, through the lens of common questions. Chapters 9 and 10 seek to offer a biblical vision both for faithful singleness and for same-sex relationships of love that are not sexual or romantic.

Given my own lifelong history of same-sex attraction, you might think my conclusion—that the Bible leaves no room for followers of Jesus to pursue same-sex sexual relationships—makes this short book a tragedy. You might even think this book is an attempt to foster hatefulness toward those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. But it is not. Instead of urging anybody toward hatred (of themselves or others), I hope instead to point us all to Jesus' love. And with Jesus' death-defying, life-creating, never-ending love at the center of the picture, I want to sketch a vision from the Bible of deep, joyful, Christ-exalting love between believers of the same sex: not a love that mimics marriage but a no less precious, different kind of love.

Whatever your story and however you might feel as you begin this book, my hope is that it will act like a compass to help you navigate the Bible for yourself on this vital topic. My prayer is that like me, like Rachel, and like many other friends I'll mention in this book, you'll ultimately find that Jesus is the path to life and love beyond your wildest dreams.

# CLAIM 1: Christians Should Just Focus On The Gospel of God's Love

**I**n the first book in the *Harry Potter* series, Harry discovers the magical Mirror of Erised. In it, he sees his parents, who died when he was one. “Mum?” he whispers. “Dad?”<sup>3</sup> But when he tries to show his best friend, Ron, what he has found, Ron sees something else entirely. Later, Harry’s mentor, Professor Dumbledore, explains: the mirror “shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts.”<sup>4</sup>

I wonder what you’d see if you gazed into such a mirror.

For most of us, at least at some point in our life, what we most desperately desire is one particular relationship. Perhaps you’re in love, and you want nothing more than for that person to reciprocate your feelings. Perhaps you long for marriage, and you desperately desire to meet the man or woman of your dreams. Or

maybe you are married, but the honest truth is that you've started having feelings toward someone other than your spouse—and it's those feelings that the mirror would expose.

We all know the power of romantic love and sexual desire. We know the ache of longing when our desires go unfulfilled. Whatever our own patterns of attraction, we also likely know people whose feelings gravitate toward their own sex. Could the Bible really say that such desire is wrong?

Especially in view of the history of some Christians acting genuinely hatefully toward those who identify as gay, the claim that the Bible says a clear “No” to same-sex sexual relationships strikes many people in the West today as both offensive and unjust. In fact, it puts off some people from even considering the claims of Jesus. So it's understandable that Christians sometimes ask, “Can't we just label this as a second-order issue, set it to the side, and focus on the gospel?”

As we work through the questions in this book, we'll see that we must take with deathly seriousness the Bible's warnings about any sexual relationships outside of male-female marriage. These warnings are so serious that the question of whether the Bible allows for same-sex sexual relationships cannot be set aside as a secondary issue on which Christians can agree to disagree. But we'll also see that the Bible's boundaries around sex are not just arbitrary. They're charcoal lines



around a living picture of the most amazing love relationship we've ever seen—a love story so beautiful that it's been being told since the creation of the world. We'll see that rather than being a distraction *from* the gospel, God's design for Christian marriage is a pointer *to* the gospel. But to understand this story, we must trace our finger through the Bible from its first book to its last. So let's begin!

### Biblical Big Picture

Some years ago, a semiretired lawyer told me about a time when he was working for a vehicle manufacturer whose new car design had been copied by a rival company. At the beginning of the trial, the lawyer placed a scale model of the car in question on the judge's desk. Days later, he discovered that the judge had totally misunderstood. Instead of recognizing that the miniature was just a copy of the real thing, the judge had thought the trial was about a model car! Too often, we are prone to make a similar mistake when we consider marriage. We imagine it's the ultimate relationship. But according to the Bible, it's just a scale model.

Like my lawyer friend, the Bible starts by showing us the model. The first chapter of the Bible tells us that God made us humans “in his own image ... male and female” (Genesis 1:27). In the second chapter, we see God creating an individual man from the dust of the earth and a woman from his side. When God brings this

man and woman together, we discover that their union is a prototype for future marriages: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife,” we read, “and they shall become one flesh” (2:24). This husband and wife were naked and unashamed (v 25). So far, so “very good” (1:31). But in the Bible’s third chapter, this first marriage gets messed up. The man and woman break the one commandment God has given them. Immediately, they realize that they’re naked, and they try to hide from God. As Genesis 3 unfolds, we see that their sin has ruined their relationship with God and with each other (v 1-21).

This ancient story makes surprisingly good sense of our experience today. It tells us that our capacity for sexual relationships is part of God’s extremely good design, and indeed we know that sex can be exhilarating and can forge a deep connection, as two people experience physical oneness. But Genesis also shows that our rejection of God’s rule has blighted every aspect of our lives, not least our sexuality—and, yes, we can all sense that there’s something deeply broken here as well. While humans can experience the joy of sexual intimacy, we can also feel the crushing pain when things go wrong. The agony of unrequited love. The poison of betrayal. The devastating force of sexual violence and abuse.

As we read on in the Bible, we see instances of all these things, from loving, faithful marriage to the wrecking ball of sexual sin. But we also hear prophets

like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea using marriage as a cosmic metaphor. Time and again, they picture God as a loving, faithful husband and Israel (God's Old Testament people) as his all too often faithless wife. "Your Maker is your husband," declares Isaiah, "the LORD of hosts is his name" (Isaiah 54:5). God's love never fails. But his people are continually breaking faith with him and turning to false gods. "Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband," God says through Jeremiah, "so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel" (Jeremiah 3:20). This marriage between God and his people is in crisis. But then Jesus comes.

### The Bridegroom

When asked why his disciples do not fast, Jesus replies, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?" (Mark 2:19).<sup>5</sup> The response is surprising. Jesus never married in his life on earth. So how is he the bridegroom? This is one of many moments in the New Testament Gospels when Jesus steps into the role of the Creator God of the Old Testament. Jesus claims he is the rightful husband to God's people.

John the Baptist (who was sent by God to get his people ready for his Son) also pictures Jesus in this way. When John is told that people who once followed him have started following Jesus, he replies:

*The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears*

*him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice.*

*Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.*

*(John 3:29)*

John is just a groomsman, helping at the wedding. So he's delighted when Jesus comes and claims God's people, like a bridegroom claiming his bride.

In the Old Testament, God's everlasting love and faithfulness were central to the marriage metaphor. God made a covenant with Israel, binding them to himself with promises. He pursued, protected, and provided for his people. In the New Testament, we see a shocking turn of events, as Jesus the bridegroom comes with love to take on flesh and *die* to save his bride. Now God's people includes anyone who puts their faith in Jesus—that is, the church.

So, what does this cosmic metaphor of a marriage between God and his people have to do with earthly marriage for believers now?

### Model Marriage

Like the model car resembling the real vehicle, the apostle Paul presents Christian marriage as a scale model of the marriage between Jesus and his church. "Husbands, love your wives," Paul writes, "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). This call is drastic. Jesus loved the church by dying on a Roman cross. His people all together are his bride. So Jesus' love for his people becomes the model

for how Christian husbands are to love their wives. Paul continues:

*He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (v 28-32)*

According to Paul, the “one flesh” union between a husband and wife in Genesis 2:24 was always meant to model the oneness we can have with Jesus. Right from the beginning, when God made humans male and female—when he created sex and sexual desire and instituted marriage—he was building a scale model so that we could get a sense of just how passionately Jesus loves his church and just how intimately we can be united with him.

We see this marriage metaphor returning in the Bible’s last book. Revelation pictures Jesus as “the Lamb who was slain” and describes a deafening shout going up: “The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready” (Revelation 5:12; 19:7). The bride is the New Jerusalem—a double picture of God’s people—and this great wedding happens at the center of God’s new creation (21:1-3; 22:17). So Jesus’

marriage to his church brings heaven and earth back together, as all God's people are made one with him and with each other.

To sum up: Christian marriage is designed to help us to wrap our minds round Jesus' exclusive, sacrificial, neverending, flesh-uniting, life-creating love for us. Marriage, rightly understood, is not a distraction from the gospel—it's a declaration of it.

### So What?

This metaphor of Jesus' marriage to his people has two huge implications for how Christians must relate to marriage. First, it means that sexual and romantic love is not the gem-encrusted goal of life. Too often, Christians talk as if getting married must be every Christian's top priority and have no real vision for a faithful single life. But when we act like marriage is the thing we cannot truly live without, we make it an idol (or fake god) and undermine the gospel. Marriage is designed to be extremely good. But it's not ultimate. It is a scale model, not the real thing.

Second, because marriage is a model of a greater thing, it's vital that we stick with God's design. Just as Jesus' love for his people is a love across deep difference, so Christian marriage is a love across the deepest physical difference between humans: the sex difference that is written into every cell of our bodies. Jesus is both like us (human) and not like us (God).

Likewise, man and woman are both fundamentally alike and deeply different. Our relationship with Jesus is not one involving two interchangeable partners but a relationship of oneness across difference. So, male-female difference in marriage is not incidental to the model. It is an essential feature. Strikingly, it's union across this difference that makes it possible for humans to join God in his creation of new humans.

So can't Christians just focus on the gospel? Yes. We must. The gospel message of Jesus' love is at the heart of any truly Christian vision of sexuality. But just as everything that my lawyer friend was trying to argue made more sense when the judge realized that the case was not about model cars, so when we train our eyes on Jesus' love for his people, we'll find that what the Bible says on sexuality and marriage makes a whole new kind of sense.

A few weeks ago, while I was working on this book, my friend Rachel pointed out to me that "Erised" is "Desire" in reverse—just as a mirror flips things from left to right. I felt stupid for not seeing it before. The way this magic mirror works is coded in its name. Likewise, when we hold our longings for romantic love up to the Scriptures, we find they point to a meaning we might not at first have recognized. Our deep desire to be both fully known and unconditionally loved points us to the one true love relationship that none of us can ultimately live without: the neverending love that Jesus has for us.