

- LEVI LUSKO -

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THROUGH THE EYES OF A LION



THE LIFE-AND-DEATH POWER OF SEX AND ROMANCE

Praise for *Swipe Right*

“I believe with my whole heart that *Swipe Right* is going to inspire and challenge you, and not only that, but could redirect the course of your life and relationships. You might not be in a relationship, or maybe you’ve had many, but no matter who you are, my husband wrote this book for you. The truth, hope, and humor that drip from these pages are incredible. It’s a book that needed to be written, my husband poured his heart into it, and I’m excited for all that God has for you as you read it. Buckle up.”

—Jennie Lusko

“My friend Levi is an expert at presenting the raw truth in a relevant way. In *Swipe Right* he provides a refreshingly real approach to the new challenges our culture is facing concerning sex and intimacy. It’s a perspective I believe we need now more than ever.”

—Steven Furtick

Pastor, Elevation Church, and *New York Times* bestselling author

“One day, someday, there will be a day when you will need the down-to-earth wisdom in this book like you need oxygen. Because as Levi so aptly appropriates, our approach to sex and romance is of life-and-death importance—at least if you care at all about your soul, that hidden thing at the core of who we are that filters the way we experience everything we do in life and death, for better or for worse. And at the core of this book is a soul-watering desire to see yours be better, in a world that increasingly seems to be settling for worse. Levi makes the taboo seem candid; the old-school, the new-school; and the difficult, more than just possible but altogether lifesaving.”

—Joel Houston

Songwriter, Hillsong United, and pastor, Hillsong NYC

“I love that Levi is bringing to light the life-and-death power of sex and romance for such a time as this. I have two daughters, and there is a new level of crazy lately in the world. You should thank God that this book is in your hands. *Swipe Right* is a timely, wonderful, prophetic, and needed message for our generation.”

—Christine Caine

Founder of the A21 Campaign and bestselling author of *Unashamed*

“Helpful. Timely. Needed. *Swipe Right* does what few dating books can: it calls us to a life of purity, fidelity, and honor, not in hopes of earning the perfect mate, but because we already have the hope of heaven and perfection of Jesus in our hearts. I am so grateful God has raised up Levi Lusko to be a voice of truth and grace-covered conviction for this generation. If you are wondering what God’s plans are for your love life, or leading those in search of his plan for theirs, you need this book.”

—Louie Giglio

Pastor of Passion City Church, founder of Passion Conferences, and author of *The Comeback*

“Sex is wonderful. Sex is powerful. According to Levi, while sex is the source of great pleasure, it has the potential to cause great pain. In *Swipe Right* Levi leverages his past as well as principles from the New Testament to help readers make better decisions and live with fewer regrets.”

—Andy Stanley

Pastor, North Point Community Church, and author of *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend*

“When it comes to sex, dating, and marriage, most of us would agree things aren’t going well. We want something different, something better. Levi Lusko has written a game-changing book on pursuing the relationship God truly wants you to have. His book *Swipe Right: The Life-and-Death Power of Sex and Romance* is funny and engaging, while simultaneously practical and hard-hitting. It’s full of in-your-face truth that will empower you to love your future spouse in a healthy and God-honoring way.”

—Craig Groeschel

Pastor of Life.Church and author of *From This Day Forward: Five Commitments to Fail-Proof Your Marriage*

“I wish this book had been around in 1970. I wish someone had handed it to a fifteen-year-old kid in West Texas. I wish someone had said to him, ‘Lucado, quit listening to the locker-room lectures on sex. Listen to what God says.’ The book wasn’t around back then, but it is here today. And Levi Lusko has a good word, not just for fifteen-year-old boys but for all of us to suffer the consequences of a sex-saturated society. This is a good book. Study it, ponder it, and if you know a fifteen-year-old, tell them to read it.”

—Max Lucado

New York Times bestselling author

“I was raised in the home of a woman who married and divorced five times. I have seen firsthand the sadness and loneliness that come as a result of turning from God’s plans for relationships. God has his hand on Levi Lusko, and I believe that the word of God that Levi points to in *Swipe Right* is a much-needed drink of water in a desert of heartache.”

—Greg Laurie

Pastor, Harvest Christian Fellowship, and author of
Tell Someone: You Can Share the Good News

“Thank God for people like Levi Lusko who are dedicated to bringing light to the issues that we all face. *Swipe Right* is an inspirational look at love, sex, and romance and highlights what our generation so often misses. I believe this resource will help many to understand the true power and true beauty God intends for us in these important areas of life.”

—Ben Houston

Pastor, Hillsong LA

“The world begs us to view sex and romance through the distorted lens it has created. But Levi boldly approaches these topics with truth, honesty, wit, and biblical wisdom to point us back to God’s original plan for us. I really believe we need the *Swipe Right* message now more than ever before.”

—Lysa TerKeurst

New York Times bestselling author and
president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

“Levi Lusko is in touch with a generation searching for truth and moral clarity. In *Swipe Right* he makes the case for sexual purity in a way that connects the culture with God’s principles for relationships. Every page is written with authenticity and saturated with grace and power. If you want to live a fulfilling life without regrets and experience a future with promise, this book is for you.”

—Dr. Jack Graham

Pastor, Prestonwood Baptist Church, and author of *Angels: Who They Are, What They Do, and Why It Matters*

“In a cultural climate that attempts to treat the sacred nature of relationship and sexual intimacy as casual, Levi Lusko has yielded his pen to God’s hand to share what is paramount on God’s heart. *Swipe Right* is the clarion call this generation needs in order to understand that God is not keeping you from a thing; he’s keeping you *for* a thing. The lie of the enemy is that we can easily recover from premature sexual intimacy without incident. A loving God knows otherwise. With love, balance, wit, and humor, Levi has crafted a book that will inform generations to come. This book isn’t about ceasing external behaviors that don’t honor God. It’s about living for God and loving God in a way where we honor his word—even regarding sex—when it is not convenient. And we do so because we love him!”

—John Gray

Associate teaching pastor, Lakewood Church,
and author of *I Am Number 8*

“Thank you, Levi, for speaking so plainly and powerfully to what is wreaking havoc among so many today. To say that *Swipe Right* is an important book for all of us would be quite an understatement. We all relate to the pages of this book. This is a word for right now, a warning sign for the days and culture we are now living. I appreciate the direct and honest way Levi approaches the power of temptation, lust, romance, and love. As I read this book, I kept hearing the words of Jesus: ‘The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy . . . but I have come that you might have life to the full.’ May this book spur you on to a full, abundant life instead of one that is empty and stolen. This is more than just a book; it’s a life jacket!”

—Chris Tomlin

Grammy Award-winning musician and author of *Good Good Father*

“I believe that if you want to know God’s way, you must learn to follow people who know and live God’s Word. Levi has faithfully walked on this journey, wherever God has led him. Through amazing triumphs and devastating valleys. Relationship navigation doesn’t have to be the scavenger hunt so many people make it. Levi shows that God will light our way, if we allow him to.”

—Carl Lentz

Pastor, Hillsong NYC

“In a time of relationships riddled with confusion and rattled by unnecessary heartbreak, I’m excited that Levi is sharing his scripturally founded wisdom with us. It’s my hope that whoever reads this will have their thoughts of the heart as seriously provoked as mine have been. Beyond Levi’s knowledge on the issues of relationships, his true heart for people is what drives him to help point us at not just the real and clear problems but the purely focused solution.”

—Ryan Good

Producer, writer, and entrepreneur

SWIPE RIGHT



THE LIFE-AND-DEATH POWER
OF SEX AND ROMANCE

LEVI LUSKO



W PUBLISHING GROUP

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*To my Jenniflower: Thank you for waiting
for me and giving me your key. You have
ravished my heart. I will love you all my days.*



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INTRODUCTION

Chapter Zero

I just broke my neck.

I was lying on my back in the snow, wearing a full-face motorcycle helmet. I could hear the snowmobile idling next to me. It sat upright and intact, waiting for me to hop back on, squeeze the throttle, and join my friends doing figure eights in the powdery wonderland that is Montana in the winter. But I couldn't jump up, and I would never ride a snowmobile again. My neck was broken.

The snap of the bone had sounded like a muffled gunshot in my ears. I remember seeing the ditch beyond the berm at the last second, followed by a vague sinking feeling as I processed that I was going much too fast to stop. I had felt myself rising out of the saddle the way you would if gravity were turned off, bringing me to a standing position in the air; and then, as though a dream were ending, the ground had come toward me much too quickly. The snowmobile met the earth on the front skis, and my body crumpled against the handlebars just before it was discarded onto the snow.

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I quickly tried to move my arms and turn my head and was relieved to find I could do both. As I continued my systems check and scanned the rest of my body, an alarm sounded in my brain. My left leg was pointing away from my body at a forty-five-degree angle, bent at a hinge halfway between my knee and my hip that had never existed before. Seeing it lie there so inappropriately, I somehow fought off panic. *I can fix this. I just need to get that leg straightened out,* I thought.

I willed my legs to move, and the right one responded as normal. The left one was a different story. From the new joint down, there was no movement at all. When I tried harder, I found a section of bone, about the length of a pirate's wooden peg leg, connected to my hip to be the only part paying attention. The rest of my leg was just a nonresponsive sack of Jell-O lying sideways in the snow while this tiny peg leg moved freely inside my thigh. It was then, with sickening clarity, I realized the sound of bone breaking had come from inside my leg. For some reason I worried about being able to climb the stairs to the stage at church next Sunday.

Those worries were short lived, as waves of nausea surged through my body. Suddenly I felt claustrophobic. I needed to get my helmet off.

I waved my arms in the air, trying desperately to signal my friends, who had been doing their absolute best to destroy all the pristine powder in sight on their own snowmobiles. It took some time to get their attention, but they eventually saw I had been ejected and was lying on the ground. They took one look at me and called 911.

We were in the middle of nowhere, thirty miles from the

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Canadian border. When the ambulance eventually arrived, volunteer paramedics carried me on a stretcher through waist-deep snow before loading me up for the bumpy ride.

“Can you give him some drugs?” my friend Greg asked a paramedic in response to my moaning every time we hit a pothole.

“Unfortunately, as volunteers, we aren’t authorized to provide medication,” the paramedic replied.

When we reached the city limits, another ambulance was waiting on the side of the road, and I was transferred into a vehicle full of people who were allowed to give me morphine. This is where my memory gets hazy, but Greg tells me I got really chatty and spent the rest of the ride inviting the paramedics to come to church with me sometime. Clearly I was no longer intimidated by the stairs.

The good news was that I had cleared the ditch. The bad news was that when I had landed in a standing position against the handlebars, my femur had snapped in half.

“Congratulations,” the ER doc told me. “You managed to break the biggest bone in your body.”

I have only flashes of recollection from the next couple of days. I hazily remember my wife and two daughters being at the hospital, and I recall being angry when I realized my favorite pair of jeans had been cut off of me. At some point my dad leaned over my hospital bed, looking concerned.

I spent the night in traction until a surgeon was available to turn me into Wolverine, putting eighteen inches of titanium into the two pieces of my femur and securing it with pins at the top and bottom.

As in almost all difficult circumstances, in the aftermath

there were blessings to count and reasons to be thankful. One of my doctors told me of someone who had broken a leg in the same way but had severed the femoral artery in the process and had bled out in the snow before help could arrive.

For the record, I am thankful. I am also woozy and have gotten light-headed several times as I relived this memory to share it with you.

YOU'VE GOT THE POWER

But this is not a book about broken bones or snowmobiles. It is a book about power and the way powerful things can be used to do great good or great damage. Channeled properly,

the same forces that can destroy you can propel you to places you never could get to otherwise. It's all in the application of strength.

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My physical therapist told me that the femur breaks he has treated are usually caused by either car and motorcycle accidents or football injuries. Broken bones require a collision. Power.

The snowmobile is an amazing invention. Humanity has figured out how to pack the power of five hundred horses into a vehicle so that moving from one place to

another is faster. Such an engine that propels a sled and its rider over snow would have dropped jaws one thousand years ago. In days gone by, dogsleds were the only option to get medicine to Nome, Alaska, but no longer. I imagine the snowmobile has saved many lives—but I can tell you from experience that it also has the power to break a bone as though it were balsa wood.

We are living in extraordinary times. More has changed on this planet since the Industrial Revolution (the 1700s to 1900s) than in all the preceding years of recorded history. And the exponential change in the last thirty years is mind-boggling. In my short lifetime, the Internet was developed, has become widely available, and can now be accessed by the cell phones of billions of people. That's a lot of power in a small device I can easily put in my back pocket.

I know of nothing more powerful on earth than the forces of love, sex, and romance. The potential for pleasure, joy, strength, and blessing is virtually immeasurable. With that great power comes the opportunity for not just beauty and blessing, but also great danger. It's like a Tesla in Ludicrous Mode that can go zero to sixty in under three seconds: it can feel amazing taking off but also has enough power to get you into trouble. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, said that you can't build a fire in your lap and not burn your pants (*Proverbs 6:27 THE MESSAGE*).

You can't
build a fire
in your lap
and not burn
your pants.

SCREEN TIME

For better or worse, interactions with screens are now irreversibly enmeshed into the fabric of our lives. We swipe right to answer calls, unlock our phones, respond to snaps, browse through photos, and reply to e-mails. With our fingertips dancing across devices, we navigate our lives. It is now estimated that the average American pulls his or her phone out to check it one hundred and fifty times each day. That's once every six minutes.¹

As a millennial, loosely defined as those born between 1982 and 2002, I am part of a transitional generation. I grew up knowing how to use a typewriter, I licked stamps, I rented movies at Blockbuster on Friday nights (and had to rewind them before returning them to avoid a fee), and I looked up information for projects in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. I called in to request songs I wanted to hear on the radio and made bootleg copies when they played on my boom box so I could listen to them on my Walkman. How violently things have been transformed. My daughters will never know life without Siri, Amazon Prime, and Wikipedia. They don't know the struggle of respooling a cassette tape with a pencil. They will never understand the pterodactyl-like sounds that emitted from a modem before the dial-up connection signed on to AOL. They won't recall what it was like not to be able to end arguments on Google while binge-watching a series on Netflix (not the Netflix that came in the mail one disc at a time but the one that is available at all hours on every screen in your life).

In so many ways the world is better because of all the

tech upgrades, but with this great power has come the ability to break a man’s bones and “by means of a harlot” reduce his life “to a crust of bread” (*Proverbs 6:26*). The Internet has brought porn and apps that make a casual sexual encounter as easy as swiping to the right. Dating apps such as OkCupid, Grindr, and Tinder have poured gasoline onto what was already a hookup culture.

Tinder alone has more than a *trillion* swipes now. You swipe to the left if you are not interested in the person or to the right if you are, and if you both choose each other, you can begin to communicate. It is no doubt that apart from the swiping function Tinder never would have become the behemoth it is, but “swiping right” has become so much bigger than the app that pioneered it. In an article in *Wired* magazine, David Pierce wrote, “In the . . . years since Tinder’s launch, the right swipe has become the prevailing signifier of our generation—shorthand for like, lust, and (possibly, hopefully, finally) love.”²

It is impossible to overstate what a gamechanger this all is.

Justin Garcia, a research scientist at Indiana University’s Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, noted that in the last four million years, two key transitions have changed how men and women mate: “The first was . . . in the agricultural revolution. . . . And the second major transition is with the rise of the Internet.”³

There are now more than one hundred million people on mobile dating apps; half of those are on Tinder.⁴ No-strings-attached sexual encounters are becoming increasingly convenient to arrange as fast as you can swipe across your

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screen. At the same time, fewer and fewer of the users of these apps are interested in marriage—or any kind of commitment—as the context for sexual experiences, because it is so easy to, in the words of one mobile dater, “hit it and quit it.”⁵

My generation and those following have stripped sex of any emotional or spiritual significance, and now it is simply viewed as a physical source of pleasure and enjoyment. A twenty-nine-year-old quoted in a shockingly honest article in *Rolling Stone* titled “Tales From the Millennials’ Sexual Revolution” claimed point-blank that sex is “a piece of body touching another piece of body—just as existentially meaningless as kissing.”⁶ My question is this: At what cost? The laws of the universe dictate that there are equal and opposite reactions for every action—or, to get biblical, we reap what we sow. Just what exactly is all this porn and recreational sex doing to us on the inside?

The paint is still wet. It is impossible to know what the additions of text messaging, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pokémon have done to our lives, attention spans, and intelligence. God knows they haven’t helped us to become better drivers or conversationalists. Emoji have become a way of life. *Pizza is bae. Winky face. Laughing until I am crying.*

I am not suggesting you delete your social media accounts, buy a butter churn, or try to find a Blockbuster video store. I am eagerly awaiting the delivery of packages by drones, Uber beats a taxi all day long, and I don’t know what I would do without Waze. What I *am* suggesting is that when it comes to love, sex, and romance, perhaps the best approach is not new-and-improved but old-school. And don’t get me wrong: it’s not connecting with people over the

Internet or the swiping of screens that is the problem. We just need to swipe right—to live *up* in a left/right world.

I'M SORRY, YOU'RE BREAKING UP

Integrity, purity, fidelity, monogamy. Although these words might sound as if they belong in a museum, I believe they are God's plans for our relationships—plans that are not only the paths to our greatest pleasures but the keys to our greatest power. And believe me, God wants to use you powerfully. He is all about you enjoying the awesome gift that is sex—that's why he thought of it. He's not holding out on you. It's actually quite the opposite: he has much he wants to give you. Unfortunately when you take a bite from what God has told you not to eat, it can keep you from experiencing what he wants you to have (Genesis 2:17). Father knows best.

Are you still with me? Or are you thinking I'm going to squeeze your finger into Joe Jonas's purity ring? Are you worried I'll suggest you buy your daily latte only at HeBrews coffee shop, watch videos only at GodTube, and reject all friend invitations unless they came from Faithbook? (Insert Ned Flanders-y laughter.) You might be ready to chuck this book across the room now that I've tipped my hand and shown you that, in an ever-evolving world, I'm peddling what you likely consider to be outdated, outmoded, and irrelevant relationship advice.

If you feel that way, then nothing I am going to say here will change your mind. I won't try to argue that women

experience far fewer orgasms in non-committed sexual encounters⁷ or lecture you about the invisible emotional scars caused by abortions.⁸ No data I give you on third marriages doing worse than second marriages, or second marriages failing more than first marriages,⁹ is going to dissuade you if you have already decided that times are a-changing and you are changing with them.

Just do me a favor: don't throw this book in the trash after you close it. Banish it from your thoughts if you must, but keep it. Stick it in that shoebox on the top shelf of your closet or under the socks in your dresser, and then proceed with the disposable relationships that are rampant in our culture. Feel free to spend as many years as you need in the spin cycle of hooking up, shacking up, and breaking up . . . and repeat as necessary. Do whatever you feel like doing. I just want this book tucked away somewhere safe, so that if you ever come to a place of sadness and regret, if there is ever a desperate emptiness over what porn and casual sex have brought into your heart, if you ever feel somewhat numb and broken on the inside—it'll be there waiting for you. I will be there too. Not to rub your nose in your mistakes, but to have a chat about a different strategy for harnessing the powerful gift that is sex—and then about where exactly it is you should go from there.

(If it *is* now fifteen years in the future, and your heart *has* been busted into smithereens, and you've *just now* dug this dusty copy out of a shoebox, might I suggest you jump straight to chapter 8 to read about Samson's hair growing back? You'll find some good news there before doubling back to the beginning. Just please tell me there

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are finally *real* hoverboards like the ones in *Back to the Future II*, because the things that went by that name while I was writing this book did not deserve to use the word. *Winky face.*)

The day I broke my leg was the first time I set foot in that particular emergency room, but it wouldn't be my last. Five years later I would find myself there once more. Again it was winter, and I was with my wife, Jennie, and our daughter Lenya on the night Lenya unexpectedly went to heaven. I wrote my first book, *Through the Eyes of a Lion*, about that experience, because no matter who you are or where you live, you will go through tragedy and loss. I felt burdened to help prepare people for trials they are not yet in, to see the power that exists in the midst of pain.

I am writing this book, *Swipe Right*, to help you train for the relationship you are not yet in, and to help you see God's plans for it. I write because of the power you have right now to bring about a future that thrills you or one that crushes bones and reduces your life to a crust of bread. I write as a father of four daughters, to share with you the same basic stuff that my wife and I spent last night discussing with our oldest daughter. Over a candlelight dinner at a fancy restaurant, we did a lot of listening and talked with her about sex, romance, marriage, choices, and the power of the present to impact the future. You might be old enough to be my mom, but maybe no one has ever told you how valuable and special you are, and that you don't need to pimp your body for the worth you crave but already have and can never lose. Ultimately I write so you can never ask, with sadness and regret, "If you knew I was heading full

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speed toward a ditch, why didn't you say something?" Sex and romance are not peripheral to your life; they are of life-and-death importance.

I'm going to level with you here: I'm no expert. I don't have this all figured out. I want to ask questions, not just give answers.

My goal is for you to make progress, not to achieve perfection. That would just set you up for disappointment when you fall short.

I haven't lived out everything I think you should do.

My goal is for you to make progress, not to achieve perfection.

I need to read the truth in this book as much as I need to write it. I echo what C. S. Lewis said: looking inside myself I find "a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions . . . a harem of fondled hatreds."¹⁰ Divorce goes back as far as I can search in my family tree on both sides, and I desperately want that to end with me. I am not immune to the temptations I am bombarded by, and if I compromise and put myself in the wrong place, I could do in minutes what I would regret for decades.

The truth is that I'm a hot mess, but I believe what I am going to tell you with all my heart, and I feel strongly enough about it that I think it would be sin for me not to write this book.

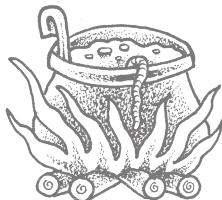
This won't all be easy to read; these are complex, emotionally charged issues we are going to talk about. There be sharks in these waters, matey.

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There might be moments when you don't like me very much. That's okay. I'm not here to coddle you—I am here to fight for you.

Let's go.

CHAPTER 1



You Don't Want What the Devil's Got in His Crock-Pot

In the Lusko household, the sound of the garage door opening is the starting gun for a flurry of activity. Tabasco, our miniature poodle and the only male in the house besides me, begins barking from his perch on the couch. At least one or two of my daughters hide somewhere in the house, and sometimes Clover, the youngest, barges out to greet me and carries my backpack inside. It's key that I finish my work before opening the garage door. I once made the mistake of initiating the routine before wrapping it up and ended up disappointing some little hearts. They had done their hiding, but I didn't do any seeking.

This tradition started when it was just Jennie and me living as newlyweds in an apartment in Albuquerque, New Mexico. We got a discount on the normal rate because it had a scenic view of the community Dumpster. “Look on the bright side,” I told Jennie. “We won’t have far to walk when we take out the trash!”

We gladly accepted the reduced price because it fit our budget. I was a youth pastor, and she worked as a waitress at Romano's Macaroni Grill, where she perfected both writing her name upside down with a crayon and singing "Happy Birthday" in Italian. Because she had mainly lunch shifts, I would usually arrive home from work after her. For some reason she began hiding from me, and I would have to find her. There weren't many places to look: the pantry, the linen closet, the spare room that doubled as an office. Her hiding place would change, but what happened when I found her did not. We were newlyweds, after all, and we couldn't keep our hands off each other. (Still can't.) It is somewhat ironic that once we had kids, our daughters adopted this game of hide-and-seek, as more likely than not, at least one of them was conceived as a result of it.

My other favorite thing about coming home is the smell that meets me when I walk in the door. Jennie does an absolutely wonderful job of creating an atmosphere, and she usually has candles lit, music playing, and something delicious cooking. In the winter, often something hot and bubbling has been cooking slowly in the Crock-Pot for hours: a delicious chili, a spicy Thai curry, or some hearty and filling shepherd's pie with ground turkey (instead of beef) and sweet potatoes.

I'm making you hungry, aren't I? As I write this I'm sitting in a hotel in downtown Los Angeles. It's 9:00 a.m., but I'm craving soup!

There is nothing quite like walking into a warm, cozy house, with a fire roaring, a puppy yipping, little girls screaming and running, candles dripping wax on the table, and something rich and savory simmering in the kitchen. Life is good.

When I was a teenager I always wanted to go out and do something. Staying at home was the worst. I pretty much feel the opposite these days. I've been out and done stuff. I'd much rather stay in. Plus I wear sweats as a uniform in my home, and no one is there to judge me. (Although it might have gotten a bit excessive: the other day I put a pair of jeans on, and my five-year-old daughter, Daisy, looked at me and said, "Are you preaching today? You only wear real pants on preaching days.")

That's what I want to talk to you about in this chapter, and to be honest, it's the reason I wrote this book. Not sweatpants—something cooking slowly in a Crock-Pot. It isn't a delicious home-cooked meal either. This Crock-Pot belongs to the devil, and trust me when I tell you that you don't want what he's got inside his electric cauldron. It smells delicious, and just the scent of it will drive you, like Edmund in the Chronicles of Narnia being offered Turkish delight, into a frenzy. But you need to know that Satan is slow cooking the death of your calling.

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WAY BACK WHEN

There was a steamy stew brewing for Esau. To understand what was at stake, we have to go all the way back to Esau's grandpa Abraham, one of the most famous dudes in the

whole Bible. His nickname is the Father of Faith or just Father Abraham. Ironically, for someone who went down in history as a dad, old Abram (as his name was at the beginning of the story) and his wife, Sarai, had a really difficult time having kids. To make matters worse, the name Abram meant “exalted father.” Imagine his embarrassment when introducing himself, as people constantly asked how many kids he had, only to learn he had none—in a culture that equated a barren womb with the judgment of God! That would be like having the unfortunate name Anthony Weiner and then being caught up in a sexting scandal.

Abram and Sarai grew old and eventually gave up on the idea of having a family. He accepted that his servant Eliezer was going to be the beneficiary of his considerable estate. Then God showed up with an amazing, ridiculous promise: “Abram, you and Sarai are going to have so many descendants that they will be more in number than the stars in the night sky. Out of your family will come great nations. Through those nations, kings will be born who will bless the whole world” (Genesis 15:2–5, 17:4–6, author’s paraphrase). Eventually a messiah would come from Abraham’s descendants, crush the head of the devil, and destroy death.

As insanely, improbably bizarre as it was to hear such a thing, Abram believed God on the spot, and God “accounted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). In other words, God opened an umbrella called grace over Abram’s life, and from that moment forward, not one drop of wrath would ever splash onto his skin. That’s faith, by the way: triggering grace by taking God at his word. Latching onto the words that come from his mouth—no ifs, ands, or buts. In this

ancient story, Abraham modeled for us what God has asked of us from the beginning: faith.

We mistakenly think that going to heaven is based on *doing* something, but it's based on *believing* something: God's promises. Author and pastor Jentezen Franklin put it this way: "You don't get good to get God, you get God to get good."¹ So it's not about what you can do; it's about you believing what God did and will do. Ephesians 2:8–9 tells us that "salvation is by grace through faith" (author's paraphrase). Abram's experience became the prototype for how we are saved today—by putting our faith and trust in Jesus.

I like to imagine that Abram went home, put on a little Drake in the tent, chilled a bottle of champagne, and surprised Sarai with some roses. As you do.

But they didn't have a baby.

Years went by. It seemed as if God had completely forgotten about them and failed to keep his word, but God again reminded Abram of his promise. God even went so far as to change Abram's name to Abraham, which means "father of many nations," and Sarai's name to Sarah.

At this point, Abraham was ninety-nine years old, and Sarah was about ninety. Speaking about it afterward, the book of Hebrews says God waited until Abraham's body was "as good as dead" (11:12). In case you are wondering, that's not a compliment. I don't imagine many Tinder profiles have that as a description:

My name is Tim. I am in banking. I like cooking and playing soccer, and my body is as good as dead. Swipe right for a good time . . .

But once the sitch was several levels beyond impossible, God intervened. Sidenote: it ain't over till it's over, but even when it is over, God can add time to the clock.

HAIRY AND HEEL-CATCHER

The stork finally showed up. It wasn't clean and tidy by any means; there was a lapse of faith when Abraham and Sarah had a baby with a surrogate, thinking God needed help. But he didn't. In God's perfect, impossible time, Abraham and Sarah conceived and named their baby boy Isaac, which is fitting because it means "laughter." I'm sure this geriatric couple got plenty of laughs as they pushed the stroller around when they weren't far from needing wheelchairs themselves.

Isaac grew up and married Rebekah, a wonderful girl with a nose ring. After Rebekah struggled with infertility for twenty years herself, she and Isaac finally got pregnant—only it was a buy-one-get-one-free deal, because she had twins. This is where it gets tricky and murky. There was a forked branch in the family tree. God's promise to Abraham was that through his seed all the people of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). After God made it clear his blessing was to go to Isaac and not Ishmael, it was easy to identify his chosen people. But now that Danny DeVito and Arnold Schwarzenegger were candidates for God's blessing, there was some question as to who would inherit it.

From an ancient historical perspective, the mantle should have gone to the firstborn. Whichever twin came out

first would take the lion's share of Grandfather Abraham's promise into the future.

The due date finally arrived. First out was a hairy baby whom they named Esau (a creative name that, in the original Hebrew, means "hairy"). The second baby was born holding onto Chewbacca's foot, so they called him Heel-Catcher. We know him today as Jacob.

The two couldn't possibly have been more different: "Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents" (Genesis 25:27). They were like Bass Pro Shop and Williams-Sonoma. Esau liked to cover himself in elk urine and go bow hunting. Jacob sat around customizing his Blue Apron orders and drinking espresso with his mom. They didn't have a whole lot in common—except that they were vying for their father's attention.

You won't believe what happened next.

Genesis 25:29–30 says, "Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, 'Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.'" The men had spent the afternoon each doing what each liked best—Esau had tried to kill wild animals, and Jacob had loafed around the house, tweeting and trying out a new recipe for bean soup that he had found on Pinterest. When Esau arrived in the tent exhausted and starving, the whole place smelled amazing because of this big, bubbling pot of stew his homebody brother was cooking. The scene was like one from Looney Tunes: the aroma from the stove reached out to grab Esau by the nostrils, and he floated across the room absolutely intoxicated by the smell.

I can just imagine Jacob pulling a tray of steaming

biscuits out of the oven in front of a drooling Esau and saying matter-of-factly, “Sell me your birthright as of this day” (Genesis 25:31).

I should pause right here and acknowledge that “birthright” doesn’t exactly ring a bell in our day, but four thousand years ago, it was a huge deal. As the name suggests, the birthright belonged to the firstborn male, and it gave him three things:

1. A double portion of the inheritance. It caused the firstborn to be seen in the will as though he were two people. So if there were two sons, the firstborn would get two-thirds of the estate and the sibling would get one-third.
2. A leadership role. The firstborn became the chief executive officer of the family business. In the event of a disagreement in how things should be run or done, he had the deciding vote, and his brothers and sisters had to defer to him.
3. Last, and most significantly, a spiritual blessing. He acted as the priest of the home. In Abraham’s family, this would also mean receiving the promise from God and propagating his chosen people and ultimately the Messiah.

In other words, having the birthright was a really, really big deal. And because he was born first, it was Esau’s. No one could pry it from his fingers.

Keep that in mind as you picture Jacob saying, “If you give me your birthright, I’ll totally let you have some of my

stew.” I’m sure his proposition seems as ridiculous to you as it seems to me. It’s obviously not a good deal. (By the way, it’s always easy to know how other people should respond to their temptations because we aren’t the ones standing there light-headed and with low blood sugar, smelling the stew on the fire.)

Esau should have been outraged by this offer. He ought to have swiped left so fast it would have made Jacob’s head spin. He should have thrown his hands up in the air and said, “Are you kidding me? You want me to trade all that God wants to do in my life, and all that he has promised to do through me generations from now, for a bowl of stew?”

I heard pastor Andy Stanley preach on this text once. He said that if he could have called a time-out, he would have sat Esau down and explained to him that from that moment forward, God would introduce himself to ultra-significant people, such as Moses, as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Esau”—but if Esau made this deal with his brother, the saying would become “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”² God always gives us a way of escape when we are tempted. The key is to slow down. You can’t see the escape route as well when you are hauling.

But Esau took no time to think about introductions or chosen people or double portions. All he could think about was how delicious that stew would taste as it passed briefly through his mouth: “And Esau said, ‘Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?’” (Genesis 25:32). Translation: “I’m starving *now* and will probably die if I don’t eat this food, so what good is a promise of what I might get *someday*? ”

Let's be clear about something: Esau wasn't starving to death. Maybe he was really, really hungry, but he had walked in there, hadn't he? He'd said "please." Esau's response is hyperbole at its finest. But in that moment, nothing mattered to him more than having a full stomach.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Red pill, blue pill. Swipe left, swipe right. Two options were on the table: Would you like this meal right now, or would you like to see God do great things through your life down the road? Genesis 25:33–34 says,

Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day."

So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Just like that.

Esau chose the stew. He traded his calling for a can of Campbell's. He gave up his inheritance for something that made him feel good for an evening. He could have been a part of a chain of events that led to Christ coming to the world, but he wrote himself out of the story.

It seems that Esau was a man of intense physical desires. He did whatever he felt like doing, no matter what, and it kept him from reaching his potential. Like Paul warned the church at Philippi, Esau's god was his belly, and it led

to destruction (Philippians 3:19). His highest good was to feel good.

But the next morning, he was hungry again. Within twenty-four hours he had digested and eliminated the meal he just had to have. In the end, he lost everything.

Because hindsight is twenty-twenty, and the fog has cleared and the dust has settled, you and I can sit here shaking our heads at Esau for being so shortsighted. A better use of our time would be for me to tell you that somewhere, in some kitchen, there is a big, simmering pot of stew that the devil will serve up to you at just the right time—and it will be just as tempting to you as Esau's was to him. When that day comes, whatever is being asked of you in return for a taste will seem so far off and uncertain that all you'll be able to think of is how delicious and happy the stew will make you in that moment. If you're not careful, and if you don't keep a cool head, you'll be tempted to take a bite.

WATCH OUT FOR THE ESAU SYNDROME

Trust me when I say this: you don't want what the devil's got in his Crock-Pot, where he's slow-cooking the death of God's highest and best plans for your life. Satan knows what you desperately need to understand: desires can keep you from your destiny. That's why Scripture warns us, "Watch out for the Esau syndrome: trading away God's lifelong gift in order to satisfy a short-term appetite. You well know how Esau later regretted that impulsive act and wanted God's

blessing—but by then it was too late, tears or no tears” (Hebrews 12:14–17 THE MESSAGE).

You and I are joking if we think we are immune to this temptation. In fact, instant gratification is the norm in the world today. People are lovers of pleasure, and they want it now.

We have all sorts of desires—the desire to eat, the desire to have sex, the desire to be liked, the desire to win, the desire to prosper and be rich, the desire to be known. In and of themselves, none of these desires are bad; in fact they’re all God-given. However, since Adam and Eve bit into the banned fruit, sin has influenced our desires. Like them, we can satisfy good desires in the wrong way.

A powerful warning is tucked into a book Jesus’ little brother James wrote: “Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (James 1:14–15). When you sneak a sip from a Crock-Pot, you move away from God’s best for your life:

- the beautiful, fulfilling, and selfless intimacy he has destined for your marriage,
- the life-giving and healthy home your kids are supposed to grow up in,
- the remarkable, innovative, and creative things God wants to do through your ministry or your business,
- and the souls you are meant to reach.

The calling God has on your life can be silenced by the desire to feel good in the moment. The desire for sex can

cause you to look at porn or have an affair that will wreck your home, make your kids hate you, and discredit your witness. The desire to succeed in business can cause you to cut corners and make unethical decisions, give people a bad impression of Jesus-followers, and possibly cost you your job or put you in prison. You can end up trading what God wants to give you for a bowl of stew.

The *ultimate* for the *instant*.

Forever can be eclipsed by *for a moment*.

Your physical desires can derail your destiny, if you let them. Because if you don't understand your calling, you'll undervalue it.

One of my favorite TV shows is *Shark Tank*. Aspiring entrepreneurs or inventors pitch their businesses or products to a group of billionaire investors in order to get venture capital. They explain why their new potato peeler, light bulb, or grass-cutting device deserves an investment, and then they haggle over the terms.

As the investors—the “sharks”—respond to the opportunity to own a piece of an entrepreneur’s company, they often say something like, “Your valuation of your business is too high. You’re saying your company is worth a million dollars. I’ll offer you a hundred thousand dollars for fifty percent ownership, because your company is really worth only two hundred thousand dollars.” Then the entrepreneur either agrees with that value and accepts the offer or rejects it.

The sharks will almost always try to undervalue the company and get it for a deal. Their goal is to own as much as they can for as little as possible. There is one shark who calls himself Mr. Wonderful. He is notorious for being a

scoundrel and says all kinds of loving things like, “You’re dead to me,” and, “You’re going to get crushed like the cockroach that you are.” He cares about only the money and is ruthlessly vocal about his desire to get more of it at all costs. He will not only attack those entrepreneurs in the tank but even turn on his fellow sharks.

The devil works in the same way. He is the ultimate predator. He’ll always try to rip you off by offering you much less than you’re worth. If you let him, he will get you to trade all your spiritual power for a bowl of SpaghettiOs. And if you don’t understand your true worth, you will settle.

Hear me loud and clear: you might feel ordinary or common, but you’re not. You matter more than you know. If you are a believer in Jesus, you are a son or daughter of the King of all kings, saved by God’s Son and sealed with his Holy Spirit. Your name is already on an assigned seat in heaven. As God’s child, you have a birthright and an inheritance, and you are a named beneficiary in his living will. In other words, if God has it, you have it!

You are destined to rule and reign with Christ, to overcome and sit with him on his throne one day. And in the meantime, he wants you to take part in the family business—to live on earth as it is in heaven so that it may be below as it is above.

Maybe you’ve seen angry, red-faced preachers wag their fingers in your face and yell about the commandments you’ve broken, and so you don’t understand how much God loves you. If so, let me tell you a little bit about how *very* much God loves you. Yes, you—the person holding this book and reading these words.

He has great plans for you.

He intends for you to flourish and thrive.

He wants to give you a future full of hope.

He wants your marriage to be a source of joy and fun.

He wants you to have amazing sex.

He wants your sons to “be as plants grown up in their youth”;

your daughters to “be as pillars, sculptured in palace style”;

and your children to be arrows in the hand of a warrior shot out.

(I'm not making this stuff up; check out Jeremiah 29:11, Psalm 144:12, Psalm 127:4, and the entire Song of Solomon.)

He is a fisherman, and he caught you for a purpose. He didn't get stuck with you; he specifically went out looking for you, and through your life, he wants to do exceedingly abundantly above all that you could ask or think (Ephesians 3:20).

I intentionally belabor this point because the easiest way to get ripped off is to not understand the power of your potential.

The devil loves to make you insecure about your calling. He tries to persuade you that God wouldn't want to use you, in the hopes that you'll leave the shark tank having given your entire company away to Mr. Wonderful in a terrible deal that makes him rich while you work your fingers to the bone. The devil is a shark who never sleeps. He knows that if you are a believer, he can't take you to hell; but if you let him, he *will* keep you from living for heaven. If you are in Christ, you have already crossed over the Red Sea and left Egypt, so his goal is to keep you from

entering into the promised land. (Translation: You are at Disneyland with a Park Hopper ticket, but it's up to you how many rides you go on before the park closes. The devil wants you to keep spinning in the teacups and riding It's a Small World so you won't notice the Matterhorn. He definitely doesn't want you setting foot on Space Mountain. The price of your ticket has been paid in full, so I say you milk it for all it's worth!)

He knows that if you
are a believer, he
can't take you to hell;
but if you let him, he
will keep you from
living for heaven.

up, take your place, and change the world. It's your calling, and you were born for this. But full disclosure: it's not going to happen apart from following God's plans for your life—and that includes your love life.

Too often sex is treated as an end unto itself, but all the pieces of our lives should be viewed as part of something more. This concept of looking for something beyond the mundane or trying to find a metanarrative is probably something you would expect to hear from a pastor, but it's

This is a book about sex, dating, marriage, and romance. But it's also about so much more than that. I didn't carve out the time to write it so I can tell you, "Don't sin." That's not what causes my heart to race as I type these words and imagine you reading them. The message that fills my bones with fire is that God wants you to rise

also advice the CEO of one of the biggest companies on earth included in his memoir. Nike cofounder Phil Knight wrote, “I’d tell men and women in their midtwenties not to settle for a job or a profession or even a career. Seek a calling. Even if you don’t know what that means, seek it. If you’re following your calling, the fatigue will be easier to bear, the disappointments will be fuel, the highs will be like nothing you’ve ever felt.”³

Pulled from the bigger context, God’s plan for sex and romance isn’t going to be any fun. It will actually suck sometimes. But when you think follow-through, you aren’t stopping at the ball; you are hitting past it and unlocking great power along the way.

That’s why the devil wants so badly to get you to trade all your spiritual power for a casual encounter—for you to think you can “hit it and quit it” but then not be transformed by the action. And if you’re trapped in a prison of porn addiction, you won’t be out on the battlefield, defeating the kingdom of darkness.

Don’t you dare trade your calling for something that’s one-and-done. Don’t let the devil determine the value of your life for you. He’s a liar! He will whisper that sleeping with someone will make you feel loved—but you are already loved by an almighty God. He will whisper that looking at porn is normal, harmless, and will satisfy—but you will be hungry again. He will whisper that you are missing out by not doing what your friends are doing—and that one’s true! By following God’s plan you are missing out on heartache, regret, guilt, and a whole lot of sadness.

When Chef Boyardee calls, let it go to voice mail.

Now yells
louder, but
later lasts
longer.

Instead, decide that when he tempts you, you're going to throw the stew off the table. *Now* yells louder, but *later* lasts longer. Resolve to stand up and take the place in the kingdom of God that you were born to inherit.

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