

## EXCERPT



### ***Sex and the City of God*** ***A Memoir of Love and Longing***

August 25, 2020 | \$17, 224 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4585-9

After studying at Oxford University and finding God, Carolyn Weber grappled with a new invitation: to think bigger about love. Through Weber's personal story of courtship, marriage, and parenthood, as well as spiritual, theological, and literary reflection, this memoir explores what life looks like when we choose to love God first.

## Premarital Sects

I had just celebrated my second Christmas as a Christian. An “unyoked” Christian, that is . . . married to Christ, true, but not dating or involved or committed to any son of Adam. I had taken a long, deliberate break from men. Sure, I had dated a few times since my breakup with my college sweetheart, but nothing serious. I realized that good men, let alone good Christian men, were indeed hard to find, especially in academia. The pickings seemed slim from the Tree of Life.

As a result, I had been drawn to men with “spiritual bents” at least. I reasoned to myself that there might be wiggle room to grow together, though wiggle into which room, who knew. Atheists were off the table: too certain about being certain, and no starting reference point, I found. I listened and listened all evening to one self-professed atheist I ended up going out with in a moment of weakness (it didn't help that he was easy on the eyes) . . .

Next, I dated a Mormon. He was a lovely guy; earnest and upright. We drank water at dinner. No alcohol. Not even caffeine. Despite the summer heat, he wore scratchy long underwear to remind him of his penitence. I found myself wondering, *Had Jesus not died on the cross for irritation too?*

A Buddhist took me for a beautiful outing on the river. We enjoyed a walk together along the bank. He was lovely and accepting; at peace with himself and at peace with me and with all about him. He trusted in karma, he told me, the law that every cause has an effect. This simple law, he explained, dictates why inequality exists; people bring on themselves their own shortcomings and struggles, their own successes and wealth. Karma underlines the importance of all individuals being responsible for their past and present actions. While I was drawn to the acceptance of others and the search for wisdom, I just couldn't reconcile myself to the notion of a cosmic boomerang ricocheting off multiple lives until we “got it right.” Grace seemed to me to trump karma, and trusting my eternal life to this hunch, I politely declined another date. I figured such charity would simply come back to me if I were misled.

As an unbeliever first looking into the Christian faith, I used to be bothered by the apostle Paul's teaching, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?” What right did this guy have to call people like me wicked or dark? How could it possibly be such a great iniquity to hang out with folks of all stripes? But as I grew to know Paul better—and through him, Jesus—I began to realize that they both hung out regularly with folks of all stripes. And as I grew in my faith, I realized, too, just what sinners we all are, and especially the darkness of my own heart. When it came to intermingling so that bodies and hearts and lives became one, wasn't it much better to at least start out on even spiritual footing, if you had the conscientious opportunity? Those who don't know any better simply don't know any better, and the Bible excuses them. But those who do, well, *do*. And the Bible holds them to a different accountability, and, if I am to be apologetically unapologetic, a higher bar.

At some point in each date with a believer of another religious stripe, this metaphor, as off putting as it may seem, did give me pause. The truth is not always comfortable. But it is a heck of a lot more comfortable than bearing an unequal yoke, and a lot less disorienting than going in circles. When we are yoked to Christ first, we gain our traction and purpose with peace

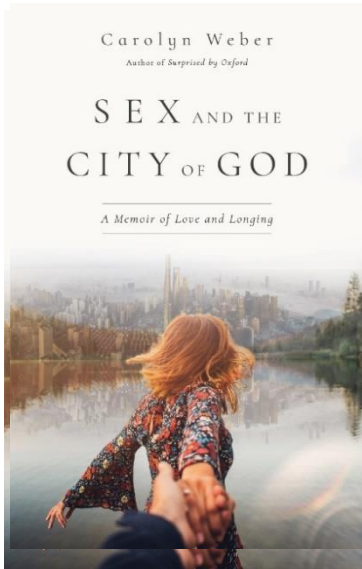


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(which is not the same as ease on this side of heaven, but it makes all the difference when you don't have it). Jesus says, "my yoke is easy and my burden light." But if I were honest, there was another niggling reason why these other men just didn't sit well in my yoke. It's because they didn't share their own yokes with Jesus, like I did. And for all the explaining, rationalizing, argumentation, and even well-intentioned kindness, they didn't live by the really real of Jesus.

There existed, to use Sheldon Vanauken's illustration, a "shining barrier" between us—that line in the sand that Augustine identified as separating the two cities of all humankind. Without Spirit calling to Spirit, or deep to deep, between us, there would always be the lack of something between us. Believers and unbelievers are not necessarily at odds, as Augustine identified long ago: "The earthly city, which does not live by faith, seeks an earthly peace, and the end it proposes, in the well-ordered concord of civic obedience and rule, is the combination of men's wills to attain the things which are helpful to this life. The heavenly city, or rather the part of it which sojourns on earth and lives by faith, makes use of this peace only because it must, until this mortal condition which necessitates it shall pass away." We all use the same earthly means. What varies, however, is the heavenly end. Teleology makes all the difference. As a result, as J. Richard Middleton put it, "Ethics is lived eschatology."

I found myself thinking of the many long conversations about such faith-related topics back in my Oriel College dorm I had enjoyed with Theology Man, whom my father had asked about, and who still, I had to admit, haunted my thoughts, though I was pretty sure I would never see him again. TDH (Tall, Dark, and Handsome) epitomized someone truly trying to follow Christ. He treated me, and women in general, with respect and dignity. Of course, he was far from perfect, but he spoke honestly with me about his struggles to remain committed to Christ first, especially in his sexual desires, and how he had to trust that God's design for sexual purity and for singleness or for marriage, if it should happen, had a very specific purpose.

He was *different*—profoundly different—from any other man I had hitherto known. Along with other Christian friends I made, TDH and I discussed works such as C. S. Lewis's enduring *Mere Christianity* together. What was this "abundant life" I kept hearing about? The phrase rang of one of those empty Christianese clichéd terms, like "blessed assurance." *What on earth?* I used to wonder as an unbeliever. Sometimes life stinks, true, and anything by comparison would seem better. But sometimes life skips along pretty comfortably. Things are, well, good enough. And if, for instance, I have to admit there is something to this Christian life, but my significant other is not that interested, who cares? Live and let live. But what is living?

TDH used to say that the question mark sums up faith, since we are called to live in the mystery. Answers in and of themselves will never be enough. Proverbs 3:5-6 had been my Bible study group's chosen verse for the past academic year: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." Faith and obedience. The two are often interchangeable forms of each other. We answer to God's faithfulness with our own, or at least our trying. But one day we will see God face to face, all will be put right, and every tear will be wiped away. The question mark will be replaced with the exclamation mark, and all will be glory!

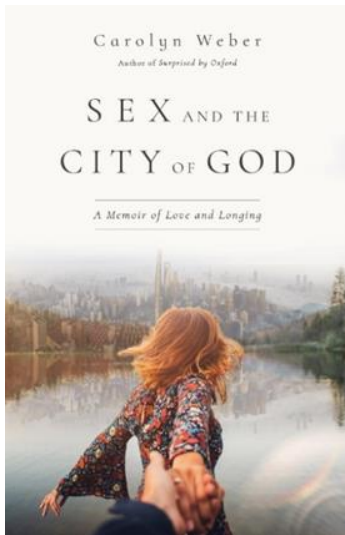


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The reality, and beauty, and grace of the abundant life promised and modeled and offered through Christ hit me like a ton of butterflies, not bricks.

Speaking of butterflies, I found myself studying the card emblazoned with a monarch butterfly that I was using as a bookmark. I love butterflies, which the sender knew. Inside the card was a single question mark. Since TDH had left Oxford to pursue his career back in the United States, such beautiful cards had periodically found their way to me, always with the same message, a simple question mark.

—Adapted from chapter four, “Premarital Sects”



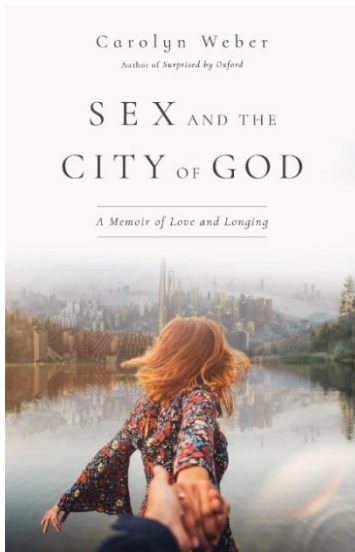
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## Q & A



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## A Memoir about Love, Longing, and Intimacy

What inspired you to write *Sex and the City of God*?

**Carolyn Weber:** We are defined by longing. I believe that longing is the most universal human condition on this side of heaven. We long for our spiritual home, we long for reconciliation with our maker, we long to be loved, and we long to be fulfilled. In a culture that looks toward everything but God to meet that longing, I wanted to remind readers, without judgment but with simple sincerity, that there is another way.

Describe the main theme in your book.

**Carolyn:** This book explores how we are in relationship to everything, as reflected in the relationship of the Trinity and God's relationship to us. This is the oldest truth there is, but truth always bears repeating. In that sense, there is nothing "new" about my message. What is distinctive about this book, however, is its fresh approach to thinking about love, longing, intimacy, and all relationships as paths to grow closer to God. When I think about what I want my children to understand about the commandment to love one another and to love ourselves as God has loved us, I want them to experience the freedom and encouragement to pursue the authentic adventure and specific rewards of a life of faith, no matter how countercultural that may be.

What lessons or messages do you hope readers take away from *Sex and the City of God*?

**Carolyn:**

- I want people to consider sex specifically, and relationships in general, differently as a result of this book. I wish to open up looking at sex within a bigger picture or eternal plan.
- Contrary to what our culture says about relationships, intimacy, and sex, there is another way.
- The Lord redeems through relationship.
- We cannot always see where our actions lead—we must indeed live by faith. Obedience is one way of choosing light when you cannot see in the dark; knowing your values and having them illuminate and lead your decisions is another.
- We have absolutely no idea about the holiness of God. It is just too awesome to comprehend. And so we are often playing with fire, or desolately underestimating or overlooking what pathways of love he has created through others back to himself. Looking to his Word, his commandments, and his promises for unequivocal guidance and gracious wisdom opens up just how precious we are in his image.



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BIO



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## **Author of *Surprised by Oxford***

An award-winning author, popular professor and international speaker, Dr. Carolyn Weber holds her B.A. Hon. from Huron University College, Canada and her M.Phil. and D.Phil. from Oxford University, England. A Commonwealth Scholar, she was the first female dean of St. Peter's College, Oxford University.

Carolyn has been an associate professor at the University of San Francisco, Seattle University, and Westmont College. She now teaches both at her alma mater, the University of Western Ontario, and at Heritage College and Seminary.

Carolyn speaks regularly on the intersections of faith, literature, and culture at campuses, churches, and organizations ranging from Billy Graham's Cove to national and international academic and mainstream conferences. She has been a guest on numerous radio interviews, television shows, and podcasts such as *100 Huntley St.*, *Context with Lorna Dueck*, *Family Life*, *Focus on the Family*, and *Cardus*. She teaches across a wide range of venues from the classroom to retreats, workshops, and invited lecture series.

Carolyn's critically acclaimed memoirs *Surprised by Oxford* (Thomas Nelson/HarperCollins) and *Holy is the Day* (InterVarsity Press) were both shortlisted for the Grace Irwin Prize, the largest award for Christian writing in Canada. *Surprised by Oxford* received this award in 2014.

A poet, essayist, and featured contributor to such publications as *Faith Today*, Carolyn also delights in writing children's literature and participating actively in children's education. Carolyn currently resides in a Canadian farmhouse with her husband, four spirited children, and grandma, along with their animal menagerie.

Visit her website at [carolynweber.com](http://carolynweber.com).

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