

when football was king

FROM FRED: THE START OF MY STORY

Growing up amid the Iowan cornfields, I made football my god. The sport dominated everything about me, and I happily played and practiced year-round. I even liked two-a-days in hot, muggy August. Football was such a big part of my life that I let the noble sport dictate what I did off the field. After the games, I never joined my teammates at Lake McBride for the kegger parties. Drinking beer, I believed, would weaken my focus and soften my drive. As for girlfriends, I viewed them as high-maintenance commitments that would distract me from my goal—becoming an all-state quarterback.

Like any red-blooded football player, however, I had more than a passing interest in sex. I'd been hooked on *Playboy* centerfolds ever since I found a stack of the magazines beneath my dad's bed when I was in first grade. I also discovered copies of *From Sex to Sexty*, a publication filled with naughty jokes and sexy comic strips.

When Dad divorced Mom, he moved to his bachelor pad, where he hung a giant velvet nude in his living room. I couldn't help but glance at this mural-like painting whenever we played cards during my Sunday afternoon visits. On other occasions, Dad gave me a list of chores whenever I dropped by to see him. Once, while emptying the trash can in his bedroom, I came across a nude photo of his mistress. All this caused sexual feelings to churn deep inside me.

Hollywood movies filled me with lustful curiosity and burning passion. In one film, Diana Ross poured a bucket of ice on her boss's belly just as he orgasmed, which seemed to intensify the experience. My mouth dropped open. *What's up with this?* I pondered such scenes in my mind for days upon days. On those rare occasions that I went out on a date during the off-season, these deep churning often stirred and bubbled over. Too often, I'd push a girl's boundaries while I tried to get a hand under her bra.

Still, my passion for football kept my sexual yearnings in check. I performed well on the gridiron and was named "Athlete of the Year" at Thomas Jefferson High School—a 4-A powerhouse in Cedar Rapids. I received full-ride scholarship offers from the Air Force Academy and Yale University.

I had bigger dreams, however—PAC-10 football, even if it meant trying out for the team as a walk-on. I wouldn't settle for anything less. Soon I stood before my locker at Stanford University, staring in awe at the familiar white helmet with the red *S* and the name Stoeker taped across the front. Strapping on my helmet and chin strap, I proudly raced onto the field in my attempt to win a spot on the team. Before long everyone in the country would know my name when I tossed long rainbow passes into the end zone. I was living my dream.

In one afternoon, that dream shattered into a thousand pieces. I was one of eight quarterbacks warming up that day. From the corner of my eye, I saw Turk Shonert, a blue-chip recruit from Southern California, throwing thirty-five-yard bullets! Three other quarterbacks zipped the ball through the air as if it were on a string. These QBs were so good that all four would later start at Stanford *and* play in the NFL.

I, along with Corky Bradford, an all-state quarterback from Wyoming, and my dormmate at Wilbur Hall, stared in disbelief. There was no way either of us had the skill level to compete with these blue-chippers. When my football dreams died that afternoon, I turned my attention to... women. Pictures of naked women.

As I settled into normal college life without sports or dreams, my churning sexuality broke through every dike, and I was soon awash in pornography. I actually memorized the date when my favorite soft-core magazine, *Gallery*, arrived at the local drugstore. I'd be standing at the front door at opening time, even if I had to skip class to do it. I loved the "Girls Next Door" section in *Gallery*, which featured pictures of nude girls taken by their boyfriends and submitted to the magazine for publication.

While I waded into porn waters up to my neckline, I somehow kept sexual intercourse on some higher moral dry ground. From where I stood, making love was something *special* for when you were married. I still felt that way after I returned to Iowa following my freshman year. I got a summer job on a roofing crew to make some quick, big cash, and I began dating an old friend named Melissa, entering a relationship that quickly mushroomed into a heavy love affair. When I wasn't pounding nails on someone's roof, Melissa and I spent endless hours together. Just before I got set to return to Stanford for my sophomore year, we decided to spend a secluded weekend together at Dad's property on Shield's Lake in southern Minnesota.

Beneath a bright, full moon on a crystal-clear night, we lay down to sleep with a cool breeze blowing gently over us. The setting was romantic, and I was getting more excited by the minute. I quietly reached for Melissa, and she knew exactly where I was headed. Melissa looked up at me with a deep sadness in her big brown eyes, the moonlight framing her innocent face. "You know that I'm saving myself for marriage—hopefully ours," she said. "If you push forward with this, I want you to know that I won't stop you. But I will never be able to respect you as much as I do right now, and that would make me very sad for a very long time."

Laying her virginity on the line, she had delivered the ultimate pop quiz. How would I answer? Who did I love most—her or me? My head spun. My desire and passion pounded away as I gazed into that sweet face

glowing softly at me. We became silent for a long time. Finally, I smiled. Snuggling in next to her, I dozed off to sleep, passing her test with flying colors. Little did I know that it was the last test I'd pass for many years.

When I left Melissa behind on my drive back to Stanford University, a deep loneliness settled in. Far from home and with few Christian underpinnings, I wandered aimlessly through my days, feeling sorry for myself. Then one day during an intramural football game, my eyes caught sight of a female referee. She looked like a grown-up version of my childhood sweetheart, Melody Knight, who had moved to Canada when we were in the third grade.

I was in love! Since there was nothing holding us back, it wasn't too long before we were in bed making love. I justified it because I was having sex with the girl I *knew* I would marry. It seemed like such a small step away from my values. Sadly, the flame of our relationship burned out as quickly as it began, but sadder still: This small step led to many more steps down the hill.

The next time I made love, it was with a girl I *thought* I would marry. The time after that, it was with a good friend that I thought I could love and *maybe* marry. Then came the pleasant coed I barely knew who simply wanted to experience sex before she left college.

Within twelve short months, I'd gone from being able to say no in a secluded camper on a moonlit night to being able to say yes in any bed on any night. Just one year out of college in California, I found myself with four "steady" girlfriends simultaneously. I was sleeping with three of them and was essentially engaged to marry two of them. None knew of the others.

Why do I share all this?

First, so you'll know that I understand the fiery draw of premarital sex. I know where you're living. Second, if you're already sleeping around but know that you shouldn't, I bring you hope. As you'll soon see, God changed my whole mind-set about having sex before marriage.

distance from God

Even as I bounced from bed to bed during my single days, I didn't notice anything wrong with my life. Oh, sure, I attended church sporadically, and from time to time the pastor's words penetrated my heart. But who was he? Besides, I loved my girlfriends. No one was getting hurt, I reasoned.

But my stepmother noticed something was wrong. My dad had eventually remarried, and when I visited back home in Iowa, she occasionally dragged me across the river to the Moline Gospel Temple in Moline, Illinois. The gospel was preached in that church, but to me the whole scene was ludicrous. I often laughed cynically, just thinking of the people there.

After graduating from Stanford University with an honors degree in sociology, I took a job in the San Francisco area as an investment adviser. One day in May, I stayed late at the office. Everyone else had gone home, leaving me alone with some troubling thoughts. I swiveled my chair around and propped up my feet on the credenza to gaze into a typically grand California sunset. As the sun dipped beneath the horizon, God somehow interrupted the scene with the horrible revelation of what I had become.

TAKE A LOOK AT... YOU!

This was a different experience for me. Oh, I knew who God was and had even prayed on occasion that I wanted Him closer in my life, but nevertheless I'd be right back in bed the following evening with the French graduate

student—or one of the others. I never really meant those prayers. Then again, my word never meant much back then, and I knew it.

My friends understood this as well. Corky, one of my buddies, had coined a slang term for this character flaw of mine. To “Fred-out” was to promise to be somewhere and then not show up, and this colorful phrase became part of the vocabulary in my circle of friends. After those earlier prayers, I’d simply “Fred-out” on God.

But not this time.

I don’t know how He did it on that evening in my San Francisco office, but God showed me how hopelessly ugly I’d become through my sin. Tears of sorrow and despair streamed down my face. Where once I was blind, now I could see. Instantly, I saw my deep, deep need for a Savior. Because of the Moline Gospel Temple, I knew who to call upon. My prayer that day flowed from the simplicity of a certain heart: “Lord, I’m ready to work with You if You’re ready to work with me.”

I stood up and walked out of the office, not yet fully realizing what I’d just done. But God knew. In the first two weeks, it seemed as if the heavens moved everything in my life, and in no time I had a new job back in Iowa and a new life ahead of me. And I left the girlfriends behind!

But it wasn’t the new life *ahead* of me that would transform me...it was a new life *in* me. Though I still didn’t know it for sure, an event on my trip home to Iowa revealed that God had moved in. I stopped in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, to visit a couple of Stanford buddies. The father of one owned a ranch just outside Steamboat, so I was looking forward to grabbing a few days of relaxation and Rocky Mountain high as I passed through.

When I arrived, I needed to make a pit stop, so I headed straight for the bathroom. When I opened the door, I found the walls papered with *Playboy* centerfolds, and I was instantly repulsed.

I stood there shocked.

Shocked by the centerfolds? No, I was shocked by my revulsion. *Where*

in the world did this reaction come from? I wondered. After all, we're talking Fred Stoeker, the guy who'd memorized the dates when porn magazines hit the local drugstore. The one who skipped class to lust over the pages. The one who *lived* for centerfolds, saving them for last like some sweet dessert. I'd never been repulsed by a centerfold in my life.

As I mused over this development for several days, I didn't put two and two together and connect this "new me" to the prayer in my office, but I should have. Looking back, I can see that it clearly was a sign that my heart was changing. When you're saved, God gives you a new heart for Him. He lives in you and gives you the strength you need to do everything and anything He calls you to do, including His call to sexual purity. This new life flowed with no effort from me, and the new inclinations to do God's will came without any attention on my part.

As I recall, during the two weeks between my sunset prayer in San Francisco and that moment when I stepped into the *Playboy*-decorated bathroom, I hadn't prayed again, attended church, or read my Bible. The Holy Spirit simply took me at my prayerful word and began working with me right where I was.

THE DESIRE TO DO RIGHT

It took a second event a number of weeks later to finally confirm to me that God had indeed transformed me by giving me a new heart that beat with a desire to do right and to live holy. After I settled into an apartment in Ankeny, Iowa, my nights were monotonous and long. A man accustomed to entertaining four girlfriends isn't used to having his nights free!

In no time, thoughts of Janet began to swirl in my imagination. She was an old friend from high school, and I'd been enamored with her for years. Back then, I'd been too busy with football to start a relationship with her, but I'd often dreamed of sleeping with her.

I soon tracked her down and—what luck! She was still single and living

in Omaha. I called her and, after some cheerful banter, she invited me to meet her at her favorite dance bar. Need I say more? After closing time, we found ourselves alone in her apartment. One thing led to another, and we slipped out of our clothes and slipped into her bed. We began kissing, but a strange thing happened: I couldn't get an erection! *That* had never happened before. Deeply humiliated, my head spinning, I slunk out to the parking lot and slumped into my car.

Then I clearly heard the Spirit whisper into my heart, "By the way, I did that to you. I know it hurt you, but this practice can't be tolerated anymore in your life. You are Christ's now, and He loves you." He didn't have to say it twice—on the spot I recommitted myself to staying pure! (I was glad I did, because a few months later I met Brenda, and we committed to saving intercourse until our wedding night.)

Wide-awake now to my salvation, I wasted little time finding a church home. A proper fear and respect for this new life in me had taken root, and I immediately fell in love with the Spirit's whisper in my life. I wanted to grow in Christ and experience the abundant life of joy that He had waiting for me.

Before I continue with my story (in chapter 5), let's take a time-out and explore some important principles of sexuality that I think you'll find interesting and immediately applicable to your life. We'll begin with a discussion of God's view of our sexuality.