

When Men Get Real with God About Sex

HIDE OR SEEK

JOHN FREEMAN

Foreword by STEVE BROWN

“Of all the people we have met and all the organizations we have encountered in ministry to those who want sexual sanctification, John Freeman and Harvest USA are the ones we trust. The fruit of John’s experience in this book should be a help to many.”

Tim Keller, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY; author of *The Reason for God*

“We live in a hyper-sexualized culture, where porn is the norm and everyone is harmed by secret sexual sin. John Freeman is savvy about sexual temptation, sensitive to men who feel hopeless, and sold on the power of the gospel to bring real spiritual transformation. Before you give up hope for sexual healing, give *Hide or Seek* a chance to help bring the change you need.”

Philip Ryken, President at Wheaton College

“John Freeman has written a book for men who are sexual strugglers—in other words, he has written a book for *all* men! John relentlessly applies the gospel—the love of God for us in Christ—to our sexual dysfunction. The gospel frees us to open up our lives both to our heavenly Father and to one another and begin the hard but good work of purity. John’s gentle and generous heart jumps from the pages of this book and mirrors the heart of God for men who are struggling. Bridging the gap between theology and practice, this book is a call to biblical integrity, to wholeness, where the inner life matches the outer appearance.”

Paul E. Miller, Director of seeJesus; author of *A Loving Life*

“When Christian men talk about sex, I either feel the weight of sin or I don’t feel the weight of glory. This is not the case with John Freeman. Few hold the complexities of our struggle with sex with the compelling goodness of what God created. *Hide or Seek* is profound and compelling and invites us to taste the sweetness of God’s love in our brokenness and holy longing.”

Dan B. Allender, PhD, Professor of Counseling Psychology and Founding President, The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology; author of *The Wounded Heart*

“Here is what you will appreciate about John’s book: It’s the fruit of the work he has done in helping men for over thirty years. He was talking with men about sexual temptation while it was still taboo to make any sexual reference in most churches. You will find him to be an experienced, wise mentor who will guide you with both his words and his life.”

Ed Welch, PhD, CCEF Faculty; psychologist; best-selling author

“An excellent, easily readable, down-to-earth, grace-filled, and compassionate journey into the world of men’s struggle with pornography with a biblical diagnosis of the heart problems that lie behind the struggle and a prescription for hope and healing. John Freeman’s long experience of helping men who struggle with sexual brokenness is revealed in many stories of pain and shame. His compassion and love is demonstrated in his desire to help them (and his readers) know the depths of the forgiveness, love, and grace of God. He weaves a narrative of personal experiences, others’ stories, biblical character studies, and, finally, practical suggestions, to offer help on the road to discovering the truth about God and our need of his grace and help in breaking free from the chains of sexual slavery.”

Richard Winter, MD, Psychotherapist and Professor of Practical Theology and Counseling at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO

“Most books written to men with sexual problems leave readers feeling hopeless—hopeless because they feel shamed by the author or unsure if the ‘simple’ steps offered really work. Sometimes strugglers fear picking up a book like this for fear they will only feel worse when done. If that is you, I encourage you to pick up this book and to read slowly. On these pages John Freeman communicates something better than more shame and hopelessness. He exudes honesty and clarity about the nature of sexual struggles but in love, compassion, and hope for your present and future. As you read, you will know that John understands your sexual struggles, believes that you do not need to ‘slink back to the cross,’ and paints a picture of hope in coming out of the fog.”

Philip G. Monroe, PsyD, Professor of Counseling & Psychology at Biblical Seminary Graduate School of Counseling

“Finally, John’s book is out! For over a decade I’ve longed for the day when John Freeman’s love for the gospel, understanding of sexual brokenness, and compassionate heart would converge in printed form, and *Hide or Seek* is everything I hoped it would be. In over thirty-five years of ordained ministry, I’ve never met anyone with a better grasp of the spiritual issues, care-giving considerations, family dynamics, and the healing journey for those of us struggling with sexual brokenness than John. As a pastor, I have seen firsthand the fruit of John’s ministry, and that of Harvest USA. If you read this book, you will most definitely buy more for others.”

Scotty Smith, Founding Pastor of Christ Community Church;
Teacher in Residence at West End Community Church; author of
Everyday Prayers: 365 Days to a Gospel-Centered Faith

“The last time we had John Freeman on the daily radio program (HAVEN Today) I lead, we had to offer an alternative program to the most listened-to Christian teaching/talk radio station in America. The station founder and the pastor of one of America’s most well-known churches would not allow the word ‘sex’ to be used on his airtime. Thankfully, that time has passed and, thankfully, John has written *Hide or Seek* . . . a book that addresses the biggest problem we face in the Christian world today. While primarily written to men, this book is long overdue and it speaks to women and men. If you subscribe to Sola Scriptura as I do, how can we not address the hidden sin that plagues all of us? I needed this book of hope. We all do. It oozes with grace that we desperately need to not just find our hope in Christ alone, but to overcome by the power of the gospel. *Hide or Seek* reminds me once again that grace trumps everything.”

Charles Morris, President and Speaker of Haven Ministries

“John Freeman’s *Hide or Seek: When Men Get Real with God About Sex* is an authentic look into the deepest struggles of masculine sexuality. It is a gift of hope to the Christian soul. Here you will find not just the sting of truth, but also the joy of grace, the light of wisdom, and the encouragement of a trusted counselor and friend. You need this book and so do the men in your life that you know and love.”

Dr. Peter A. Lillback, President, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA

“John Freeman has succeeded! And, in my opinion, similar written attempts to help in this area of sexuality rarely do! How has he succeeded in a sea of noble but failed attempts? Here is my answer. If you ask yourself two questions I ask whenever I read a book like John’s, you will see what I mean. First, how well does this book help me read and know my God and his Word? Second, how well does this book help me read and know myself? To be of any actual assistance, a work like this simply must do both—unveiling my King to me and unmasking myself to me. John’s work succeeds on both counts very, very well. Now I warn you! John’s work has a prophetic edge that cuts deep. It hurt as he showed me how I simultaneously need but resist the Holy Spirit’s ‘holy and wholly disruption!’ Thanks, John. This book hurts like heaven which seems worse than hell, because heaven wants me to change and hell hopes I never do!”

Joe Novenson, Senior Pastor at Lookout Mountain Presbyterian Church, Lookout Mountain, TN

“John Freeman has written a good and important book. *Hide or Seek* is easy to read, but not easy to experience. I think John has been reading my mail, or should I say he makes it plain that God is reading our collective mail as sexual beings. If anyone has struggled with overwhelming sexual lust, pornography, adultery, or same-sex attraction, then you should read this book, and my prayer would be that you would find hope in the gospel and rest for your soul. This will be a book that many pastors will not only want to have and read, but a book they will want to give away to those coming to them for help as they cry out for deliverance from sexual bondage.”

Randy Nabors, Pastor Emeritus, New City Fellowship (PCA)

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WHEN MEN GET REAL WITH GOD
ABOUT SEX

John Freeman



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*This book is dedicated to Ingrid, Eileen,
Carolyn, Barbara (my mom)—and to my wife, Penny.
As five godly women whose love and support
have helped me be the man I am and hope to be,
they, each in their own unique way,
have been precious gifts of God.*

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Foreword

A number of years ago, my friend Harold Myra wrote a little book, *Is There a Place I Can Scream?* It is an incredibly authentic book of colloquial prayers dealing with difficult issues. One prayer/poem called “Jet Sex Engine” poses the question: “Why did God put a jet sex engine in my Volkswagen body?”

Good question. I’ve asked that same sort of question myself.

Our sexuality and sexual desires are complicated, confusing, and a mix of joy, fear, and guilt. Not only that, they are powerful—so powerful that they are at the heart of how we define ourselves. Most studies show that we all spend a considerable amount of our time thinking about sex, fantasizing about it, and wondering about it, and then trying to pretend we aren’t.

If you’ve never asked why God made our sexuality so powerful or why we all struggle with our sexuality, then this isn’t your book. If you’ve never made promises about your sexuality you couldn’t keep, worked to put some brakes on your lust you couldn’t pull off, tried to “put it out of your mind” without success, or tried to rationalize your sexual desires knowing that rationalization was nonsense, you may be living as an outsider to the human race or, alternatively, living with

enough denial to skew everything else you think important. Be that as it may, take this book back to the seller and get your money back.

Christians have been doing that for a very long time—taking the book back, as it were, and pretending we’re protecting our purity and that of our family and friends! But we are deceiving ourselves. Our lack of honesty about our sexuality is killing us and destroying our credibility. And more important, it’s causing us to miss an amazing demonstration of Christ’s love for us and the gifts of freedom and wholeness he would desire for his church and his people.

A while back, one of my students asked a pastor in his eighties when the struggle with lust got better. “Son,” he said, laughing, “it doesn’t get better until you’re dead . . . and have been buried for at least a week.”

Oh, yes it does!

It depends on how we define “getting better.” If you define *getting better* as never having to struggle, living without wounds, and “tiptoeing through the garden with Jesus,” you will end up being disappointed because that’s not going to happen. But if you define *getting better* as walking in the light and “kissing the demons” so they lose their controlling power, then there is hope and good news in the gospel. If you define *getting better* as getting loved, forgiven, and free from the debilitating power of the lies, prevarications, and shallowness, this book has some very good news about *getting better*.

I don’t care where your mind has gone, what you’ve watched on the Internet, with whom you’ve slept, what direction your desires have gone, how hard you’ve struggled and failed, whom you’ve hurt, or how ashamed you are. The good news is that, first, you haven’t surprised the God who gave us the “jet sex engine” and, second, he’s not angry at you but will show you a way to live in the light. Jack Miller used to say that the entire Bible could be summed up in two sentences: “Cheer up, you’re a lot worse than you think you are. And cheer up, God’s grace is a lot bigger than you think it is.”

I'm a cynical, old preacher who is less cynical because of John Freeman. He's been my friend for a whole lot of years and I've watched him speak truth when people didn't want to hear it, love people others would rather avoid, and stand in the gap that many Christians didn't even think exists.

We can't do that anymore. We've got to talk. We've got to talk about sex.

That's what this book is about. What you will read here is honest, true, refreshing, and so important and insightful that you will, with me, "rise up and call John blessed."

Steve Brown

Key Life Network

Preface

At one time, it was extremely difficult to find books and resources on the topic of Christian men struggling with lust, pornography, and sexual addictions. These were all taboo subjects. Historically, it's been easy to ignore the fact that many of God's people are struggling deeply, sexually speaking. Often they are a sexual "mess." Sadly, for too many of us, especially our church leaders, the "I'm-okay-you're-okay/don't ask, don't tell" mentality runs deep.

As for the shame-producing and crippling reality of Christian men struggling with same-sex attractions and homosexual pornography—well, forget it. I remember walking into a Christian bookstore years ago and asking the clerk whether they carried a new book on helping Christians struggling with same-sex attractions. The clerk looked at me with a grimace and said, "Well, I should hope not!" Even those who might be seeking a biblical solution to this dilemma were shamed and ostracized, it seems.

Things are different today. A multitude of books, teaching DVDs, and other resources on sexual abuse, pornography, homosexuality, and sexual addictions are now available. That's a good thing! But, many of these resources are technical in nature. Some offer simplistic answers and unrealistic solutions. Some give lots of advice and ten

steps to “work” or a host of things to do. I felt led to write a different kind of book.

This material comes from workshops I’ve presented to men’s groups for several years. When I spoke at one church in New York City, scores of men had to be turned away due to lack of space. At another church in the South, I presented a similar workshop at a men’s breakfast. The pastor told me to bring about twenty teaching outlines to hand out. He said, “That’s about all we get out to these things on a Saturday morning.” He was shocked when over one hundred men showed up. It’s evident, isn’t it? This is where many of our men, youth, and, increasingly, women struggle today. Is it any wonder that many have lost hope that anything will ever change in this life?

Dealing with this problem is much more complicated than following ten steps or learning formulas that ensure success. It requires facing and understanding what’s going on in the heart. I wanted to write about what happens to the heart when we neglect soul-care in these crucial areas. What do ongoing, unaddressed struggles with sexual temptation, pornography, and lust do to us relationally and spiritually? Why are we willing to go for years living in the dark prisons we forge for ourselves? What keeps us from walking in the light? How does Jesus meet us in the midst of it to enable us to live changed lives—now? What is the role of the body of Christ, the church, in all of this? Addressing these key questions is my passion in this book.

You need to know that this is not the last word on pornography and lust. It is simply my take on the topic, based on my experience and my understanding of the Scriptures. It’s my desire that you as a reader will see God’s amazing love for you and for other trapped people—and be led to Christ in a new way, as the One who rescues and redeems. I also hope it speaks to church leadership about the crucial need to stop pretending. Most of us—well, we’re all messes, sexually speaking. The sooner we realize that, the sooner we will, in

mercy, offer the hope of the gospel in clear and observable ways to those around us who are silently withering away.

I believe there is real hope and help for sexual strugglers. I've been in a mentoring and discipleship ministry with churched sexual strugglers for thirty years. I want to tell you about what happens when God breaks through in hearts that have been deadened by years of pursuing false idols and false intimacy—what happens when men begin to come alive emotionally and relationally, biblically speaking. The gospel is all about seeing what happens when you quit hiding and start to discover the love of the Savior for you—in the mess!

So, who is this book written for? It's written for men who know they are dying on the vine internally, spiritually, and relationally, but can't seem to do anything about it. It's for men who are paralyzed with fear and stuck in isolation and secrecy. It's for men who have given up hope and are ready to throw in the towel. It's also for pastors and leaders who have been remiss in pastorally addressing these issues in men's lives. I want them to be better equipped to fearlessly approach these matters. Thus it is also a great tool for leaders and pastors to give to men in their church (for those who admit they struggle and for those who have not yet acknowledged it). Finally, this book is for any struggler who needs to be reminded that the gospel is much bigger than we are—and that God is always calling broken, fallen people to himself to start again.

John Freeman
President
Harvest USA

P. S. Please note that I often use illustrations and examples from ministry situations, but I am careful to change locations, details, and names to protect identities.

Acknowledgments

Over the last several years, I've had many opportunities to speak at men's breakfasts or workshops giving a talk I call, "Keep Yourselves from Idols: Living as Men of Integrity in a Sex-Saturated World." Increasingly, more and more men have come up to me and asked, "Does this material exist anywhere in print form?" After telling them that it doesn't too many times, I took the question as encouragement to begin putting my thoughts about this subject into print. This book is an expanded version of the original talk.

This venture would not have been possible without many collaborators and cheerleaders who offered their time, expertise, and skill to get it completed. Of course, I am so indebted to the New Growth Press team, especially Barbara Juliani and Cheryl White. My editor, Sue Lutz, also believed in this project and was such a great encouragement to me. What a delight and honor to work with each of you!

Nicholas Black, our Education and Resources Director at Harvest USA, took what was really a very rough draft and offered his skill and heart, spending many hours helping me to shape the message I wanted to convey. I couldn't have done this without him and his careful eye. Thank you so much, Nicholas.

I also wish to thank my ministry colleagues at Harvest USA. Much of this content is the result of working with each of you as part of our team, as we challenge and sharpen one another towards gospel clarity in all we do.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Penny, who has been beside me over thirty years in ministry. You are, and have been, my principal cheerleader. You often express much more confidence in me than I have in myself. Thank you for believing in me and what Christ is up to in me.

John Freeman

Chapter 1

No One Escapes Our Sexualized, Pornified Culture and Its Consequences

I recently had to ask my husband of twenty years to leave our home due to an unrepented and therefore undealt-with pornography problem. Our twenty-year-old son called us this week from another state to tell us he's gay. Our sixteen-year-old daughter has been in counseling for some time now for cutting and self-mutilation, after frequenting some very explicit cyber-sex sites for several years. It had become an overwhelming secret in her life and she just didn't know how to handle the shame, guilt, and feelings of being out of control with it. Then, just recently, my brother's wife left him to pursue a lesbian relationship with another woman.



I had just finished preaching at a church in Florida. Afterwards, as I was shaking hands at the door of the sanctuary, I felt a tap on my shoulder. A lady, probably just a few years younger than I, asked, "Mr. Freeman, can we talk for a moment?" I walked her over to a corner

of the sanctuary so we could speak privately. She then related to me the situation summarized above. I was stunned by her candor. It was the utter frankness of her last statement, however, that rendered me almost speechless. She said, “Sexual sin and brokenness of one type or another has impacted every significant relationship in my life.”

LIFE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Welcome to life in the twenty-first century. Or more bluntly, welcome to the increasing “norm” of life in our churches! This is the reality of our over-sexualized, no-holds-barred culture today. The combination of our own fallen hearts and a world that wants us to embrace its fallenness—along with the Evil One who is working behind the scenes in all of this—is what pushes us into the sexual chaos that is now a part of everyday life, even for believers.

Have you ever noticed how hard it is to strive for sexual holiness these days? It’s almost impossible. In today’s sex-saturated culture, sex sells! It sells products and services, but, even more damaging, it sells our hearts a bill of goods contrary to God’s design for us. This is extremely toxic for the soul. Movies, television, music, and advertising discovered the power of sex to sell their products long ago. The result? Everywhere we turn, we’re bombarded by hundreds of sexually seductive images many times a day.

The billboard said it all. A beautiful woman peered at me seductively as I passed by, and printed above her photograph were the bold words, “Satisfy Lust.” I couldn’t tell you what product she was supposed to be selling, but advertisers know that our hearts can be enticed in seemingly countless ways. Maybe it’s the abundance of soft-core porn magazines at the supermarket, located at eye level above the candy and newspapers, their covers designed to spark the desire of those who struggle with lust. Similar kiosks are on almost every corner of any large city, at the train station or airport. You can’t avoid them. But these traps for the heart can appear in seemingly innocent

locations as well. I once picked up a map/brochure at my local mall as I looked for the location of a particular store. There on the cover, in full color, was an extremely attractive woman smiling at me over her shoulder. Her back was bare down to the curve of her waist, her lips perched in a suggestive smile. She was twisting a string of pearls around her neck seductively. I immediately thought, *What does this have to do with finding the cell phone store?* Sadly, for men struggling with pornography or sexual addiction, that image alone could start a process that could spiral down into sexual sin later on. It's called a "trigger." And wherever we turn, this kind of imagery is built into the very fabric of life today.

Most of us now know the dangers of computers. Strike the wrong key or enter a word or phrase by mistake and you get something you didn't ask for. My wife learned this the hard way several years ago when she took our twin girls, then eight years old, to see the Broadway play *Annie* when it came to town. The girls wanted to buy Annie sweatshirts at the theater. My wife knew she could probably get a better deal by shopping online, so she innocently typed in something like "Little Orphan Annie," thinking she would get a list of products and stores selling the merchandise. She immediately got a product alright—a disturbing sexual image she hadn't asked for.

I know she is not alone in this experience. It is easy to type in the wrong web address and wind up on the front page of a pornographic site, or put in a search term and see dozens of pornographic sites listed as part of your search results. This is why every household should have some kind of porn filter or accountability software on their computers and mobile devices. At times I'm still amazed at the pushback I get from men who are reluctant to install a filter or accountability software on their computer. For men, youth, and even women who struggle with pornography and lust, that laptop, tablet, or cell phone is like carrying around an adult bookstore all day long. You have to make a decision, sometimes several times a day, as to whether to go

into that “bookstore” or not. Sometimes it’s all too much for one person to handle alone. I’ll talk more about that later in the book.

Do you see how easy it is today to get caught up in this “web”? Everywhere we turn, we encounter opportunities to pursue illicit sexual things. We often don’t even have to look for it. To borrow biblical language, “sin is crouching at the door” and “its desire is for you”; in other words, to scar your heart sexually (Genesis 4:7).

IS SEXUAL INTEGRITY POSSIBLE WHEN YOU’RE BOMBARDED BY LIES?

How do we consider God’s call to holiness in light of what we have to face these days? And don’t be mistaken, holiness *is* a crucial issue. Hebrews 12:14 tells us, “Strive for . . . the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Likewise, James tells us to “keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27). I think every Christian would affirm the difficulty of keeping oneself holy and unstained, given what assaults our souls daily. The world, the Evil One, and our own sinful hearts continually tell us lies. What do those lies sound like? Most of the guys I’ve ministered to report being bombarded with all kinds of lies. “A little porn won’t hurt anyone.” “No one will ever know.” “It’s been a hard day; you deserve a mood-booster.” “Your wife doesn’t understand your need for sex.” “You just have a higher sex drive than other men.” “Everyone struggles with this stuff.” “You can always repent later.” Have you fallen for any of these excuses and rationalizations? Perhaps they’re among those little “voices” you hear daily.

The truth is, the Evil One tailor-makes our temptations, speaking lies into the secret places where we struggle most intensely. Trying to walk the road of obedience and holiness today, sexually speaking, isn’t for the faint-hearted. For most men I know, the idea of walking in truth, honesty, and freedom from the power of lust and the accompanying misuse of sex, is a pie-in-the-sky, wishful-thinking notion

they've given up attaining in this life. I'm increasingly amazed at the resignation regarding persistent sexual sin that I find in many men in our churches today. And, what's worse, when our leaders have this mentality, it's a real tragedy. That resignation to powerlessness is often due to hopelessness that has set in, an attitude of unbelief and despair that reflects hundreds of broken vows to God to never give in again. And the reality of our unbelief that God could actually break into our hearts and defeat these temptations and sin patterns is heartbreaking in a struggler. It's so sad when men, both young and old, feel this way. What's even more heartbreaking is when a church leader feels this way about his own sexual sin.

PAYING ATTENTION TO THE HEART

There is a plague raging in our hearts, our families, and our churches. It's a plague that demands acute care and heart-monitoring. One of my favorite authors, the noted Bible teacher J. C. Ryle, once wrote of the devastating impact of inattention to one's own heart:

Let me counsel every true servant of Christ to examine his own heart frequently and carefully as to his state before God. This is a practice which is useful at all times: it is specially desirable at the present day. When the great plague of London was at its height, people remarked [noticed] the least symptoms that appeared on their bodies in a way that they never remarked them before. A spot here, or a spot there, which in time of health men thought nothing of, received close attention when the plague was decimating families, and striking down one after another! So ought it be with ourselves, in the times in which we live. We ought to watch our hearts with double watchfulness. We ought to give more time to meditation, self-examination, and reflection. It is a hurrying, bustling age; if we would be kept from falling, we must make time for being frequently alone with God.¹

It might surprise you to know that Ryle was writing in 1881. Even then, he was calling for close heart examination and care. Now, apply his warning and challenge to the epidemic of sexual temptations and sin today—things that you may be dealing with. Continued neglect here will only lead to more loss of spiritual health. We have to understand that, in our porn-is-the-norm culture, few escape the devastation of the lust and pornography trap. Christians are not exempt. We’ve got to realize that whatever is impacting the culture out there is also impacting those in the pews—especially our teens. We don’t like to admit it. After all, we’re Christians and Christians aren’t supposed to struggle with those things. Really? The Bible tells us otherwise.

If we were to remove from the Bible all the passages that speak of God’s people dealing with sexual sin, especially in the New Testament epistles, then we’d be cutting out a significant portion of Scripture. Let’s face it: even though God’s people are called to live holy and blameless lives, the Scriptures presuppose that the conflict with the flesh and its accumulated desires and habits will be a major issue for us, even many years after conversion. Does that sound defeatist? I hope not. It’s realistic. While the desire for obedience may be a new desire and often an automatic response, especially among new believers, many of us have to *learn* how to say “no” to ungodliness and worldly passions. We’re told that it’s the work of the Spirit to “train” us to say no to accumulated X-rated desires (Titus 2:12).

SEX IS A GOOD GIFT

Part of the power of sex is that it is something God delights in having his creatures enjoy. Sex was God’s idea. I can’t think of any other major world religion where God’s first recorded words to man and woman were, “Have sex and lots of it!” (Genesis 1:28). (Actually, that’s my paraphrase, but look it up—it’s true.) I once started a talk to university students with this truth and someone later said to me, “You know, that’s sounds like a God worth getting to know.” You bet!

But because of the fallen nature of things, we now take a gift like sex, which God meant for good and for blessing, and we turn it into something destructive. Something that was meant to reflect God's love as part of our life, in the right context, comes to dominate our lives and hearts. Teacher and author Paul David Tripp talks about this: "If you allow your heart to be ruled by sex or sexual pleasure or sexual power or whatever other things sex gets you, you will not only misuse this good gift of God but also end up being controlled by it. Sexual distortion and sexual addiction do not exist because sex itself is bad but because we have put it in a place that God never intended it to be. . . . My sex life will be shaped and directed by whatever is my street-level master. And I will only ever stay inside God's wise boundaries when he is the functional ruler of my heart."²

Just what or who is our street-level master? It's that thing we give our allegiance to, that thing we bow and submit to. The truth is, when we become followers of Jesus Christ, intent on submitting our lives to him, ready to call him "boss," we can expect struggle. We can expect World War III to break out in our hearts and lives. This is especially true in areas where we've looked to someone or something else besides Christ to bring us a sense of life. We often remain vulnerable to these things even after becoming a Christian. However, that's not really the main dilemma.

Our problem is that we walk in unbelief. We fail to believe that God cares or that he desires to enter into our struggles with the sins of lust, pornography, and sexual temptation. After all, our history of failure is proof that this is just our cross to bear in life. For many men, "white-knuckling it" and enduring it until heaven is the strategy they've come to accept. Is this the attitude you've adopted about your struggles with sin?

Companies today are spending tens of millions of dollars on technology that enables one to sit at a baseball game and watch a porn movie on the cell phone tucked under one's sleeve. Do you think they

care whether the user is a Christian or not? It's time for Christians to be honest about how pornography impacts everyone and how we all too often live failure-filled, shame-filled, and guilt-ridden lives. Reticent to admit our sexual temptations and struggles, we hope they will somehow just all go away. But wishing away or ignoring your struggles never works; it just leads to more delusion and faulty thinking. Chapter 5 discusses why we're often so reluctant to be honest about these aspects of our hearts.

Just how prevalent is this war in hearts and lives? Consider these staggering statistics regarding pornography usage.

A SOBERING LOOK AT THE PROBLEM

- “In 2000, as many as 25 million Americans spent 1 to 10 hours per week viewing Internet pornography, and as many as 4.7 million spent over 11 hours per week viewing Internet pornography.”³
- Pornography usage and online behavior is now a significant factor in two out of three divorces.⁴
- One survey said that as many as 50% of Christian men and 20% of Christian women are addicted to pornography.⁵
- More than 25% of men admit to accessing porn at work, risking their careers and livelihood.⁶
- One out of three visitors to adult websites is a woman.⁷
- Romance novels increasingly contain porn in this \$1.4 billion-a-year industry. Romance novels account for 55% of all popular mass-market fiction sold, and psychologists are increasingly concerned that romance novels are emotionally and sexually distorting the way women view relationships.⁸
- 54% of pastors admit to viewing pornography at least a few times in the previous twelve months; 18% admit to visiting explicit websites “between a couple of times a month and more than once a week.”⁹

- In a *Christianity Today* Leadership Survey, almost 60% of pastors said pornography addiction is the most damaging issue in their church.¹⁰
- Among children between the ages of 8 and 16, 90% have viewed pornography on the Internet.¹¹
- 80% of 15- to 17-year-olds have viewed hard-core pornography multiple times.¹²
- The average age of first exposure to Internet porn is 11 years old.¹³
- In the U. S., mobile phones are now the preferred way to access pornography, making porn usage and addiction more likely because of its increased accessibility and anonymity.¹⁴

You'll note that some of these statistics are over ten years old. Nonetheless, this is the most recent data available because Internet pornography statistics become outdated very quickly. Today, I believe you could safely add an increase of at least ten to fifteen percent to any of these statistics. I could have listed another twenty similar statistics, but you probably get the picture. For the most part, pornography statistics are no longer really necessary to convince people of the size and extent of the problem. It's that widespread an epidemic! This sad reality was confirmed by an article I read recently, which talked about a porn research study that had to be scrapped because the researchers could find no control group of young men that had not looked at porn.¹⁵

Against this backdrop, it's unbelievable that many pastors and church leaders are still reticent to initiate discussions about sex and sexuality in their congregations. In some cases, the willingness to address these struggles as a church is nonexistent. Our efforts to help our people don't come close to the depth of struggle and its impact among our people, which means that something is terribly awry.¹⁶

I remember speaking to the intercessory prayer team at a church in the Philadelphia area. These good-hearted people had met regularly on a designated weeknight for about six years in order to pray for members of the congregation who requested prayer regarding practical heart concerns. The leaders said something to me that was very telling. “John, over the years we’ve had people come for prayer about job situations, troubles with children, chaotic issues within the extended family, financial issues, and even marital conflict, but never, ever, has anyone come for prayer regarding sexual struggles or situations.”

I was shocked and speechless—well, for a moment or two. I said to them, “That’s amazing. I’d be asking myself why not? Why *hasn’t* anyone ever come with cries for help and healing?” That church had a problem that is common to ninety-five percent of churches today. Somehow they had been very successful at communicating, intentionally or unintentionally, that they weren’t really equipped to deal with sexual sin. So many churches communicate, whether by word or deed, “We’re fragile here and we can’t handle *that*.” I went on to explain that most churches don’t give messages that encourage people to talk about these matters, nor do they offer practical, redemptive hope to those whose hearts are in trouble sexually.

Sadly, parents often put their heads in the sand as well, thinking, *Surely not my child!* Yet I can’t tell you how many times parents have called me, shocked to discover a child looking at porn. As they begin to investigate, they usually find it’s happened multiple times, maybe for several years. Routinely, however, parents resist having an Internet filter on the computer because of their naiveté. In actuality, many young people begin to develop addictive habits by the time they’re ten years old. The amazing paradox is that parents fight against shielding their kids from learning how to deal with this and think about it biblically!

A few months ago, I was asked to preach in a church. The topic was “The Gospel in a Sexually Broken World.” As I sat next to the

pastor, within just a minute or so of getting up to preach, he leaned over to me and said, “You might have noticed that about one-third of the sanctuary is empty today.” I had. He then explained, “I received lots of calls and e-mails from concerned parents telling me they weren’t coming today. They didn’t want their kids hearing about this.” Something is dreadfully wrong here.

But that wasn’t the only time I’ve run into this. Harvest USA, the organization I work for, has had several scheduled assembly talks and other opportunities to speak to groups of students cancelled suddenly, too. How sad, especially when statistics show that most parents do not talk about sex or sexual issues with their children at all. (That’s another talk I do for parents: “Why you won’t or can’t talk about sex with your kids.”) What a catastrophe for our vulnerable kids! Unfortunately, there are hundreds of other voices out there who will fill in the void created by the silence of their parents! A television commercial I saw recently says it all. A mom was entering her teenage daughter’s room. The daughter, who looked around sixteen, was lying on the bed looking at her laptop. The mom, bringing in a basket of folded clothes, stood at the edge of the bed and said, “Oh, I really want to talk to you about your use of the Internet—but that might lead to a conversation about sex, and I’m not ready for that yet.” At sixteen! Something’s surely amiss!

For men, how do years of inattention impact our besetting sexual temptations and sins? It isn’t pretty. It disfigures the image of God in us. It can even alter our psyche and distort our character. Unless God intervenes and we are exposed or until we come to our senses, we can live for many years in three distinct, heart-damaging façades that we will explore in this book.

I first realized this several years ago when our ministry began to develop a strategic plan to improve our services to those who come to us for help. Now, you need to know that words like “strategic plan” cause people like me—random, abstract thinkers—to quake in their

boots. It's just so opposite to how my brain operates. But at one point I had to set aside half a day to think about how people have characteristically come into our ministry over the last thirty years—people, primarily men, who have roamed the sexual wilderness alone, hoping that it would someday, somehow, work itself out. Three categories came to mind almost immediately regarding the men who have come into our ministry. Most often, they've become *God-haters*, *idol-makers*, and *game-players*. In the next several chapters, I'll show how this can happen even to believers, and what these different personas look like.

HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS

But first, are you feeling hopeless? Let me encourage you: This is just the kind of stuff Jesus loves to deal with in our lives. And you aren't alone. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man" (1 Corinthians 10:13). None of what holds our hearts in bondage is new. While many people decry the state of our culture today, these are actually the very same problems that have been around since man was created. Sex run amok is part of the fall and our brokenness. It always has been. But take heart: neither is it new to the Lord!

Do you not feel, at some level, the impact in your life from all the years of hiding, pretense, and soul-neglect? How it powerfully tempts you to give up? Hang on. God wants to do a new work in your life, but it begins by seeing, much like the Prodigal Son, the pit you've gotten yourself into, how you got there, and what it's done to your heart. That's when you'll see and appreciate what God can do even more! So if you're a struggler (and few among us today aren't), be encouraged.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How does it affect you (intellectually and emotionally) to learn that the Scriptures treat the brokenness of sex as being a routine part of the fallen nature of life for everyone, including

believers? Does that help you deal with your own sexual struggles? Yes/no?

2. Name the ways you have been inattentive and neglectful of your sexual struggles. Where have the temptations you face been most persistent, and where have you been most neglectful?
3. Given the difficulty and challenge of maintaining sexual integrity today, what kind of lies does the Evil One speak into your heart about all this? Where are the places, right now, you're most likely to believe his lies?