



Getting Your Feathers Back

Sometimes God brings gifts into our lives that make our hands bleed when we open the package. But inside we discover what we've been looking for all our lives.

—SHEILA WALSH

FBI RAIDS ESCORT SERVICE.

Shivers raced down my spine as I inhaled deeply. I never expected to see this headline on the front page of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. A major sting operation on a local prostitution service made big-time news because several well-known professional athletes were involved. The FBI had confiscated the owner's little black book, complete with names and intimate details of customers. My name was hiding in that little black book.

Instantly my worst fears came true. At only twenty-four years old, my secret immoral life, which I had worked so hard to conceal, was about to be exposed: My porn addiction and frequent trips to adult bookstore video booths. My promiscuity, including the club hopping that none of my friends or ministry colleagues had any idea about. The alcohol abuse that became increasingly necessary to numb my shame, depression, and self-hatred. The massage parlors. The strip clubs. The endless cruising for sex-for-pay on darkened streets. And finally, the escort services—an innocent

SURFING FOR GOD

sounding euphemism for high-priced prostitution services that I couldn't afford but also couldn't stop myself from using.

In utter panic, my imagination launched into overdrive. I thought about the legal fallout. I imagined my mug shot in the paper. I pictured myself in handcuffs and an orange jumpsuit, standing before a judge. I envisioned myself locked behind bars, cornered by a gang of angry, tattooed cell mates. Then I imagined my friends and family and all the questions they would shoot at me. Who is this Michael we never knew? How could you do such disgusting things? What kind of person are you, anyway? All these questions I asked myself as I projected my shame and anxiety onto those I loved.

Somehow, I mindlessly endured that calamitous day, although I knew that the burning nausea in my gut would never go away. I felt utterly isolated. I couldn't trust anyone with my story. But with the likelihood of this news going public, I knew I had to talk to someone. That evening I phoned my sister and asked her to meet me. Sitting in her car in an empty parking lot, I poured out my story as the tears flowed and my face burned with shame. After offering immense grace and kindness, she gave me the number of a Christian counselor. The next morning I phoned and made an appointment.

Fast-forward twenty-four hours. I waited in the counselor's lobby. Right at the top of the hour, the door to the waiting room opened and out stepped Mike. As I sized him up, I realized he didn't fit my expectations for a counselor. For one thing, he was tall and masculine—not like the mild-mannered, neurotic-looking TV shrinks. He motioned me into the inner sanctum of his office, where I nervously made a wisecrack about lying on the couch, Freudian-style. I expected at least a chuckle, or some kind of reaction, but Mike just sat in his chair, unaffected.

“How can I be of help?” he asked, wasting no time and looking right into me.

This guy doesn't mess around, I thought. *A little chitchat would be nice before I spill the beans*. But I wasn't there to mess around, either. So I took the plunge and told him things I had never told another human being. Over forty-five minutes I talked nonstop with an air of bravado and repartee that I had long ago mastered for situations such as this. With a smile on my face and in my best storytelling persona, I told him about the sexual abuse that occurred throughout my childhood. He learned about my early exposure to pornography and my addiction to porn magazines, videos, adult video arcades, and massage parlors. I confessed to him my history with prostitutes and escort services. Through all of this he just listened as if none of this shocked him.

I spoke as if Mike and I were old friends just having a beer together, cracking jokes and telling stories I thought would make him laugh. But I couldn't elicit any kind of response apart from his strong, kind, unwavering presence. After listening for nearly an hour, Mike conspicuously lifted his arm, looked at his watch, and spoke his first words since asking how he could help.

"We're almost out of time. I'd like to offer a few thoughts."

It's about time, I thought. It's pretty unnerving to talk for fifty minutes about stuff you've never told anyone without hearing any response. I listened for his verdict.

"I have a comment and a question," he began. "First, the comment.

"You strike me as a very lonely man."

Eight simple words. But they knocked the emotional wind out of me. My body language and facial expression didn't change, but a swirl of unpleasant emotions rose inside of me. I wasn't sure why, but I wanted to get out of that room. Then Mike continued.

"And now my question," he said with complete gentleness. *"Are you ever at a loss for words?"*

If his comment knocked the wind out of me, his question wrapped its hands around my windpipe. Suddenly I couldn't breathe.

SURFING FOR GOD

Isn't that totally socially inappropriate? I thought reflexively. But deep down I knew he'd nailed me. After less than one hour together, this stranger uttered two sentences that exposed my bruised and stubborn heart. With uncanny accuracy he summed up something about me that I knew was true but couldn't admit. Hiding beneath the veneer of a finely crafted Christian image was a profoundly lonely boy-man. I was as uncomfortable in my own skin as any poser who ever existed. I was a broken man.

My life proved author Gerald May's assertion that self-deception is one of the chief characteristics of addiction.¹ You may find it strange to know that in all the years of my struggle with sexual sin, I never saw myself as a broken man. But brokenness was the very thing I couldn't acknowledge and tried to avoid by relentlessly working harder and harder to conceal the cracks in my soul.

In fact, shortly after becoming a Christian, I wrote a phrase attributed to Charles Spurgeon on the inside cover of my Bible: "A Bible that's falling apart is usually owned by someone who isn't." Right there, in large print and all caps, I established the cardinal rule for my fledgling faith. No falling apart. No weakness. Hold it together whatever the cost. Spurgeon's message was clear to my mind. A broken life—a life that's falling apart—and a life of intimacy with Christ were incompatible. So I set out to read my Bible until it was dog-eared and falling apart with the hidden hope that my very broken life would hold together. But then I lost my feathers and discovered I could no longer fly.

I will never forget the first time I made a serious effort to get my feathers back so I could fly again. One day in my junior year of high school—with utter sincerity and a genuine desire to honor God—I made a decision: porn and compulsive masturbation would no longer be a part of my life. As a brand-new follower of Jesus, I made the decision to clean house. When no one else was home, I grabbed my stack of hard-core porn magazines from under my mattress and

carried them down to the basement incinerator where we burned our garbage.

With a strange mixture of anxiety and pride, I opened the incinerator, placed the magazines inside, and said good-bye to my struggles with lust, masturbation, and pornography. I lit a match and held it to a centerfold that burned with the fiery intensity it used to ignite in me. As I closed the lid, I imagined my compulsive sin going up in smoke with the paper those illicit images were printed on. A little while later I checked to make sure they had completely burned, not wanting anyone to discover my shameful secret. All that remained was a pile of gray ash. Feelings of relief and hope rose inside me in a way I had never experienced. This was the end.

You can probably guess what happened next. Months later I repeated the same pattern, except with a new stash of porn. I hoped to get my feathers back. Instead I discovered once again that I couldn't fly.

ALL OF US SHARE A BIPOLAR STRUGGLE

In listening to thousands of men—friends, acquaintances, students, clients—I have heard a thousand variations of sending our struggles up in smoke, only to discover that after the smoke has risen, the struggle still lies hidden in the ashes. In the old PC (pre-computer) days, men tried throwing away videotapes or burning magazines. Today they delete their porn-saturated hard drives or shred their hidden stash of DVDs. Their efforts come from deep and meaningful commitments of genuine surrender—only to return to masturbation and porn. Then follows the onset of increased shame, self-contempt, distance from God, loss of confidence, loss of intimacy, and loss of passion. Finally, they give up.

Their passions swing like a pendulum. First they swing toward the familiar pattern of lust that leads to sexual sin. The power of

SURFING FOR GOD

erotic beauty becomes so irresistible that they risk anything and everything for its pursuit. Then they swing toward a genuine desire to walk with God and follow His ways, to be better husbands and fathers, men worthy of respect. Back and forth it goes.

Scripture addresses this bipolar struggle with stunning clarity. The apostle Paul gave us an honest description of our battle with sin. Though he wasn't directly referring to sexual sin, his description of the pain, shame, confusion, and powerlessness resonates universally:

What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary.

But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? (Rom. 7:15–24 MSG)

Paul may as well have been reading our e-mail. Actually, by drawing from his own struggles, he brilliantly captured the inner workings

of the human soul: the battle between flesh and spirit, the old man and the new man, right and wrong, and the difference between what we long for and what we settle for. The struggle was not unique to Paul; nor is it unique to anyone struggling with pornography and sexual sin. But Paul's authentic and vulnerable confession assures us that such a struggle doesn't automatically mean we're unbelievers or spiritually immature. The intensity of our struggle, which feels overwhelming, does not invalidate our faith.

In fact, identifying this struggle and acknowledging our failure to manage it gives us the hopeful building blocks of a growing belief and true maturity. Of course, we can remain stuck in this place Paul described. But no one wants to stay tied to the bungee cord of acting out and trying harder to do better—we end up with emotional whiplash. No, according to Paul, we are created for more than this snap-back-and-forth cycle. And he was only describing three-quarters of the message in the passage I just gave you. His critical point offers the heart of the good news: we can be free “through Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 25).

YOU WERE DESIGNED FOR MORE

Have you ever wondered what makes a certain act sinful and another not sinful? Why is it wrong to lie? Or kill? Or commit adultery? Who says viewing porn is wrong when our culture tries to reassure us that it's natural and normal—in fact, based on popular consumption and the ten-billion-dollar industry it generates, you're abnormal if you don't view porn!

One way of thinking about why something is sinful is to respond, “It says in the Bible that it's wrong.” While true, God put dos and don'ts into the Bible because they reveal something much deeper about us. When God tells us not to commit adultery, He is telling us that doing this goes against our design. “Do not commit adultery” is

SURFING FOR GOD

God's version of "Do not brush your teeth with a toaster" or "Do not grill steaks on a block of ice." It just can't accomplish what it was designed to do. Like sailing the seven seas in a Chevy pickup—it doesn't get the job done, and you put yourself at great risk.

Or consider porn this way. Wouldn't it be rather odd if a trained fighter pilot never left the hangar for fear of not knowing how to fly the jet? Or consider a gifted sculptor who never picked up his hammer and chisel because he couldn't find the perfect block of marble. What if a major-league baseball player didn't show up for practice because he spent all his time playing baseball on his Xbox? Or a master shipbuilder never sailed the open waters because his fantasy of the perfect seaworthy vessel kept him on dry ground?

This is what porn is like. It allures us with the image or fantasy of being with a woman, while preventing us from being able to actually engage with a *real* woman. Porn keeps us from flying the jet, getting in the game, or sailing the high seas. All because we settle for something that doesn't exist and will never satisfy us.

So how does porn go against our design as men and sabotage God's dream for us to live out our true identities? C. S. Lewis spoke to the heart of this question when he wrote about the soul damage caused by sexual fantasy (whether through masturbation or pornography) and what he called "imaginary women." Lewis described these imaginary women this way: "Always accessible, always subservient, calls for no sacrifices or adjustments, and can be endowed with erotic and psychological attractions which no real woman can rival. Among those shadow brides he is always adored, always the perfect lover; no demand is made on his unselfishness, no mortification ever imposed on his vanity."²

Lewis began with the assumption that sex is good, not bad—a gift to be enjoyed within God-designed boundaries. He also framed his words against the backdrop that "the main work of life is to come up and out of ourselves." Lewis assumed that God designed us

to mature and become less focused on ourselves and more focused on loving others. When we fixate on porn, we choose to remain selfishly anchored to our own pleasure above all else. When we preoccupy ourselves with meeting our own needs and ignoring the needs of others—in this case, our wives, flesh-and-blood women, and not some Photoshopped model—then we stifle our spiritual growth. Lewis summed up the problem with pornography this way: “In the end, [imaginary women] become the medium through which he increasingly adores himself. After all, the main work of life is to come out of ourselves, out of the little, dark prison we are all born in. . . . All things are to be avoided which retard this process. The danger is that of coming to love the prison.”³

Lewis calls us to remember what a man is made for: our deepest longing is to know God in the center of our being, and out of that place to offer ourselves for the sake of others. Augustine⁴ taught about the theological idea of *incurvatus se*—a life turned in on itself. Porn successfully accomplishes this—it causes our soul to turn in on itself in self-absorbed isolation and shame. It diminishes our souls. It seduces a man to use women to meet a need in himself—without meeting any of her needs. And this act of “using” comes not only at her expense but also at the devastating cost of his own heart. We don’t realize the price we pay until we feel empty and bankrupt inside.

You were created for something bigger than yourself. You were created for *excurvatus se*—a life lived outward. Not outward as in codependent or being a martyr. Not dying to self in a way where legitimate needs are neglected. But a life that flows from a deep source. A life that bears fruit. A life lived outwardly enhances, builds up, and causes the heart to flourish. Donald Miller has suggested that we are trees in the story of a forest. And that story of the forest is better than the story of the trees.⁵ Pornography perverts and upends this idea with titillating images that invite us to live as if

SURFING FOR GOD

the story of the trees were the only story, and the story of the forest doesn't exist.

The purpose of this book is to go beyond the common “Just don't do it” strategy of sin management. Together, we will explore the truth of how you were meant to live and how you can get there so you can enjoy a new and better life in the forest. I invite you to stop looking at pictures of F-18s in combat and ships on the high seas, or playing baseball on your Xbox instead of eating the dust of a real baseball diamond. We'll do much more than that. You'll discover the thrill of getting into the game, flying the F-18, and sailing the ship so that pornography and lust lose their grip on your soul.

Please read closely: the deepest truth about you is that you *are* the F-18 pilot, created for combat. God designed you to be a hero—to focus your strength and courage on behalf of something and someone bigger than yourself. You *are* the major-league ballplayer, created with the offensive and defensive abilities to get in the game with a team of others on a common mission. God uniquely fashioned you to win games. To hit home runs. To steal bases. God chose you to play on His team.

DISCOVERING A DEEPER DESIRE

On a cold winter night in 1994, my addiction to porn and illicit sex still held me firmly in its grip. That night, obsessed with my next fix, I began my typical ritual of acting out sexually. I sat in a familiar parking lot of a XXX bookstore, troubled by the routine I was about to perform even though I had carried it out too many times to count. I had a beautiful wife at home, but she was the last thing on my mind.

Less than a block from the porn store sat the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, a spectacular edifice that hosted Pope John Paul II earlier that year. Without warning, an impulse to set

foot in that house of worship overwhelmed me. I walked toward the cathedral, hiked the tall steps, and opened the monolithic oak door. The cathedral was empty except for a custodian mopping the floor near the altar.

In the cathedral I sat in the back row of pews. The space and silence were terrifying. I couldn't remember the last time I had been alone and given any thought to the world within me. After a few minutes of struggling to pray, I stood and walked to the back corner, where dozens of votive candles were perched on a table. Mustering what little faith I had, I struck a match and lit a candle. I felt no magic and certainly no expectation that my simple action would make my struggles suddenly disappear. But I reconnected with something I had lost—my better self, my true self. As I raised the flame toward its mark, I voiced a prayer that came straight from my true heart: "God, I want more. I want more. I want more."

Then I returned to the pew and scribbled some thoughts in my journal. The building at that moment represented a metaphor for my soul—something empty, dimly lit, disconnected from others. At the same time the structure was glorious. Its buttresses and stained-glass windows pointed upward to something bigger, something beyond. Maybe I was like this cathedral—broken *and* glorious all at the same time. Maybe it wasn't too late for me to hope.