

Fighting the Daily Battles

I have said that a man will be more likely to declare his immediate “No!” to slam the door shut, when temptation hits if his heart has undergone change. But what about now? What about the meantime—the months or years between when a man’s heart begins to change and when it actually has changed enough in the ways that will empower him to shut the door on temptation every or almost every time it knocks? Is that man destined to fail, destined to fall into sin, destined to get pounced and beaten up again and again by temptation and sexual sin? Does he just have to accept his sin as inevitable until his heart is finally changed enough?

The answer is no. No temptation will ever come your way that you must say ‘yes’ to. Our Father’s promised us that. Many of you are familiar with Paul’s words about this: *God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Okay, so what do these words mean to us practically? They’ve got to mean more than looking back after sinning and saying, “Yes, I can see the way of escape now. If only I’d done such and such, I wouldn’t have sinned. I should have never done it! I should have kept resisting the temptation. I should have turned my eyes away; I should have never done that Internet search. I should have . . .” Paul’s words have got to be for something other than Chris’s morning-after reflections when he asked questions like, “Why do I keep doing this when I know it’s wrong? Why can’t I get it through my thick skull that I feel terrible about myself after I do this stuff!?”

FIGHTING ON A DIFFERENT FIELD

This is not a book about doing A, B, and C to gain certain victory over sexual sin. In my years of ministry (and personal struggles), I’ve never discovered the A,B and C. But I want to offer some tested and true ideas about ways to win the individual bouts with temptation that men face on a daily basis. Some or all of these may work for you, some of them might only work some of the time. You may have other ideas that you’ll discover along the way that work well for you. The few I’ve included below all fit within the framework of this book. They not only often win battles, but they bring us advancement on the journey towards becoming God’s sexual man.

In my life, I find that I typically go through seasons when one or more of these individual strategies is a real help, but inevitably they lose their luster, and I need to take a step back and regroup. I think God allows this for many of us so that we don’t begin to mistake a method for a savior. So my advice is that you try these out, see how they work for you, tweak them if you have to—be creative. But find what works for you and use it while it

works. When it fails to work, try something else—no methods can bring you ultimate freedom, but they can sure help along the way.

JESUS, JESUS, JESUS

Growing up, many of you may have sung a song in Sunday school that has become so familiar to many of us over the years:

*Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,
There's just something about that name,
Master, Savior, Jesus,
Like the fragrance after the rain,
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,
Let all heaven and earth proclaim,
Kings and kingdoms will all pass away,
But there's something about that name. (by *****)*

I believe that the words have stayed with us because of their simplicity and for the profound truth they express. Even as a young boys or new Christians, many of us felt there was just something about that name. And there is. In the face of temptation, saying the name “Jesus” over and over again can make a huge difference. Whether shouted, sung, or even whispered under your breath, repeating His name in this way can be like spraying water on a fire—it may not remove all the temptation at once, but it can help bring you through until you are less likely to fall into sin. I am not talking about saying a magic word or a mantra, but I have to admit that even at times when my heart has not been in it, speaking His name does something. Sometimes when I repeat His name like this, I do so in a spirit of calling out to Him in desperation. At other times, I let my mind imagine His name filling the room (and filling me)—just as His Spirit truly does—as I whisper the two syllables again and again. I’m not entirely sure why this works. Maybe it’s because hearing His name in my ears helps to bring my mind and heart back into awareness of His presence. Maybe it’s because He hears my call and comes to protect me. Maybe it’s because demons hate the name and cringe away in fear, anguish or just irritation. Maybe it’s a combination of these reasons, or maybe it’s something else altogether. Whatever the reason, Scripture is clear that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord. There is real power in His name.

HOLDING A CROSS

The idea of holding a cross may call to mind old horror movies in which a person holds out a cross in defense against a vampire or other monster, as though the cross were a shield of some sort. That’s not what I have in mind—at least, not quite.

If we men are at all typical, there exists in us a serious gap between our heads and our hearts. This head and heart gap has been a big problem for me. I know in my head that God loves me and has promised to help me when I’m tempted, and I know in my head that lust and other sexual sins are wrong. But sometimes, the idea of sinning sexually *feels* exciting and good, while God *feels* distant and abstract. There’s a disconnect between my head and my heart.

Some years ago, I learned something that has proved tremendously helpful in bridging that gap and fighting sexual sin: Although our minds can be valuable tools for monitoring what goes into our hearts, they are frequently not the best tools for *accessing* our hearts. This is where symbols, like a cross or a crucifix, can be very effective.

Day and night I wear a small cross around my neck. Many times when I feel sexual temptation coming on, the first thing I do is reach for that cross. Especially when lying in bed at night, the times when I am most vulnerable, reaching for the cross has become almost second nature to me. When I touch the smooth silver of that little cross, I feel like I am immediately coming in contact with THE CROSS, the cross of my Savior whose death and resurrection made it possible for me to be free. Often I am put in remembrance of the terrible price He paid to give me this freedom, and I start to imagine that I am rejecting His enormous suffering on my behalf, to grab for a trivial few moments of pleasure.

It is not just my thoughts that come to play here. In a similar way, the cross draws my *heart* to Christ when I need Him. And we all need Him when we are tempted. When my mind cannot convince my emotions that the Father is present for me to cling to, a cross held tightly in my grip can. When my head cannot convince my heart that my Creator understands the allure of temptation or the vice-like claws of sin, an image of Jesus suffering on the cross can. When my mind cannot convince me deep down inside that I am forgiven and loved, the feel of a cross in my hands can.

Sometimes I have looked at or touched the depiction of Christ's body on a crucifix that hangs over my desk to help my heart know that there is Someone whose flesh has been torn just as I feel torn by temptation to sin. How the Holy Spirit works through the cross (or other symbols like this) is a mystery, but my heart has come to know Him better this way.

CALLING A FRIEND

Of all the recommendations made in this chapter of practical ways to resist temptation when it knocks, this is perhaps the most difficult to do . . . and one of the most immediately effective. In Regeneration's group for men overcoming sex addiction, the men are encouraged to call another group member at least once during the week for support and prayer. They are also encouraged to use the phone list as a resource when tempted, but most of them seldom do. In my personal struggles, seeking the help of a brother is often put off until all else has failed.

Given the ideas in this chapter and elsewhere, why would this one be the last one most of us would choose? There are likely two reasons. First, it is a vulnerable and humbling thing to call another man and say, "I need help." Every man's heart has the desire to be the hero, not the damsel in distress. We want to be the rescuer not the rescued, Superman not Lois Lane. This desire is good, even God-given. Men were made to defend, protect and fight for others. But our unwillingness to ask for help is not just about the good desire to be a hero, it's about pride. Pride can keep us from asking for help when we're

tempted, and it can keep us from asking for help to deal with our overall habits of sexual sin. So we keep trying to fight on our own, and we keep failing on our own. Do you see the sad irony here? Because we want others to *believe* that we are sexually pure, we ultimately never *become* sexually pure. In truth, we value more highly the appearance of purity than sexual purity itself.

The second reason I think calling someone is so difficult when we're tempted is because deep down inside, we know it will work and we don't want it to. Who wants to trade a pleasure-filled sexual experience with a tailor-made fantasy woman for a voice on the telephone of a guy who gets on my nerves sometimes and has a truckload of his own problems? He just can't compare. What a letdown. What a turn-off. And that's a part—albeit only a part—of why calling him will work to snap me out of the fantasy world I'm in (or tempted to go in) at least a little. In addition, a Christian brother can pray for me if I ask him, and the prayers of a brother can rouse the armies of heaven to come to my aid (James 5:16) in ways rarely paralleled. Lastly, it will work because talking with a brother in Christ means talking with a *real* person about what's really going on inside, and that leads us away from counterfeit intimacy (trying to connect with someone who isn't real or in a way that isn't real) and brings us into the light of real relating and real connecting.

WORSHIP

We were made to worship, made to bow ourselves down to Another and glorify Him with our whole beings. Or perhaps more clearly stated, we were made to bow down to only One Other and to glorify Him only. Remember when Christ said, *No one can serve two masters, for he will either hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other* (Matthew 6:24). Lust can become our master! Jesus was stating a spiritual truth. Just as it is impossible to worship both God and money too, in the same way, its impossible to worship the illicit object of our sexual desire and God at the same time. This doesn't mean we can't feel tempted or feel ambivalence towards God while we worship. We can and we do. But it does mean that our hearts just aren't good at worshipping two things at once. So when we're feeling tempted, worshipping the Father can pull our hearts away from the allure of sin and place them on the One they were truly made to love and adore.

This brings up an obvious question—how can a guy who is tempted switch gears like that? My suggestion would be to just begin, “Praise you, Lord. Praise you, Jesus. Praise you, Lord.” Just like repeating Jesus' name in the recommendation I mentioned earlier, keep repeating these (or similar) words of praise. The words may start out as just an exercise in obedience, but as we go on, and as the Holy Spirit moves in us, they will turn into authentic worship from the heart. It might help to think about the attributes of God that have been particularly appealing to you at other times while you speak your words of praise. If you have been amazed at the Father's willingness to forgive you over and over again, then you might begin there. If you appreciate His generosity as shown by the gift of your family, or His power as shown in nature, or whatever else typically strikes you, then begin there. Likewise, don't use this occasion for considering something like His triune nature or His judgment—there will be plenty of other times for musing on those attributes. For now, begin where you can more easily begin to gain some momentum for

refocusing your heart on worship. Sometimes for me, even though it felt dry to start with, beginning to praise Him in this way eventually seemed to open a dam of adoration, which kept me worshipping long after the temptation had subsided.

One more note here: I mentioned that it is not the words but the heart that we're seeking to engage in worship here. And, like I said before, the heart is not easily accessed simply through the mind. So when we speak of worship here, I encourage you to worship Him out loud if possible. Use your voice. Raise your hands to Him if you are in a place where you can do so. Clap, jump, dance! I have heard a number of Christians say, "We sin with our bodies, why can't we worship with them?" Our bodies were made to worship Him, too. If our bodies—our minds, hearts, voices, hands, arms, feet and legs—are worshipping Him, then they will have less recourse to worship another.

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIP

One of the primary purposes of using these strategies when faced with daily temptations is that they can help in the process of heart change, even if the temptation ends in sin anyway. Here's why: These strategies are all relational—they each express movement towards the Father or another person or both. Remember, a primary need that lies beneath our sexual desires is the need to connect. Man was made for relationships with God and with others. Sexual sin is the antithesis of relationship because it is about a man's relationship with himself, not anyone else (and this is true whether another person is involved or not). Fighting the individual battles confronts the sin of pseudo-relationship, or false intimacy, both in the moment and on a larger scale. We may not see the larger scale here and now, but we can only if we continue to fight the individual battles.

SCRIPTURE MEMORIZATION

Most Christian books dealing with men's sexual temptations would put memorizing certain appropriate Bible verses at the forefront of the things we need to do to win our battles with lust. I agree that Scripture memorization needs to play such a role, and I have experienced countless victories in my own struggles by calling to mind or speaking aloud one of the promises or truths from God's word. However, I left this for last for a specific reason. I believe that God's word can be much more powerful in our lives *if we make it relational*.

It is good and right to meditate on certain truths. Most men are fairly good at this, but they are also fairly good at making truth abstract and theoretical. What I suggest is that you bring the Father or the Son and yourself into the Scriptures. The Bible is God's revelation to *us*. He is speaking those words to *us*. Hearing, "Alan, I have provided a way for you to escape from this temptation," and picturing the Father saying those words to me, can have more impact on me than just reciting the words—as valuable as that might be.

At the end of this chapter, I have listed a number of Scripture memory verses that the men in our Rescue (sexual addictions) program use. Pick one or two for yourself now, ones that seem most appropriate to your situation. Memorize them, and every time you

bring a verse to mind, picture either Jesus or the Father speaking those words directly to you.

ABOVE ALL, FIGHT THE BATTLES

We must fight the individual battles against temptation. After all, the alternative is simply to give in to sin. So whether you ended up winning the last battle or not, whether you think you can win this one or not, fight! Even if the enemy is still standing and you've lost to this foe a thousand times, fight! If you barely resisted temptation last time or didn't resist at all, fight this time. Let it be known this day that you are not an ally to sin anymore. Warriors are made in hours like this, and heroes are sometimes found among those least expected to win at all.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSES

From the following, select two or three verses that you believe might help you when you first face sexual temptation. Memorize them.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

1 Corinthians 10:13

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:13

Et al.