



more than single

FINDING PURPOSE BEYOND PORN

about this ebook



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**understanding
the struggle in
a sex-saturated
world**

why it's tough to be single

A few years ago, I found myself station-surfing in a rental car on my way to work when I stumbled across a polka station, run by a local high school.

Now, I absolutely love terrible things. Bad movies, bad music, you name it. So while I can't say I'd ever voluntarily buy a polka album, I did laugh hard enough to set it as a radio preset in the rental car.

Fast forward a few days. I was back at the rental lot, returning the car. As a single, red-blooded woman, I was a bit disappointed that I was not helped by the same cute, ringless guy who helped me the first time...but as I was being assisted with the return, I did watch that guy walk up to the rental car, get in it, and drive away.

And that's when I had the horrifying realization that the station was still set to polka.

Now, it's easy to laugh off this sort of #foreveralone story. Better to laugh than cry, right? Besides, Millennials—those of us in the 18-34 demographic—generally de-emphasize relationships in general and marriage in particular, putting long-term relationships on hold for

the sake of college and career.

And yet, despite this devaluation of romantic love, most of us still find our self-worth in relation to our dating and sex life.

Take Ted Mosby from *How I Met Your Mother*: his life, and the lives of his friends, revolve around hookups and the quest for “the one,” so much so that the entire series (spoiler alert!) hinges on him telling his teenage kids stories of all the times they all had sex with random people to the extent that they realize, at the end, he’s still hung up on an old flame from long before their own mother came into the picture. “Mom’s been dead for five years,” they tell him. Obviously, fatherhood wasn’t providing him enough meaning in life; he might as well continue to nurture an obsession with a woman he met 25 years earlier.

Meanwhile, Hozier’s “*Take Me to Church*” positions love, romance, and sex as a literal act of worship:

*My Church offers no absolutes.
She tells me, ‘Worship in the bedroom.’
The only heaven I’ll be sent to
Is when I’m alone with you—*

*Take me to church
I’ll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies*

We also theoretically believe in “female empowerment” now, but in practice female empowerment is better defined as “free-willed in the bedroom.” Meghan Trainor’s “All About That Bass” spent weeks

at the top of the Billboard charts; on one hand, she proclaims self-worth based not on physical appearance, singing, “Every inch of you is perfect from the bottom to the top,” but immediately clarifies that self-worth is still found in our sexual expression:

*Yeah, my momma, she told me, don't worry about your size
Cuz a boy likes a little more booty to hold onto at night [...]
I'm bringing booty back.”*

As much as we may say we don't need to be in a relationship to live a fulfilling life, the reality is, we still believe we need sexual activity. In fact, virginity is almost considered a fatal disease to be cured by sexy fun times. One of the plot points of HBO's *Girls*, for example, revolves around a young woman finding her first sexual partner. And in May 2014, Elliot Rodger believed this lie so strongly that he went on a shooting spree to take vengeance on those who ignored him and denied him his “right” to sexual activity.¹

Most millennials have adopted these attitudes. According to a *Rolling Stone* article, 90% of college students say they want to get married... but only 20% of 18-29 year olds actually are.² So what are the rest of them doing? *Rolling Stone* explained, “The [Center for Disease Control] study cited above also found that today's college students are significantly less likely to report having a regular sexual partner (77.1% versus 84.5%), while they're more likely to report having sex casually with a friend or random partner.”

If then, as Hozier sings in “Take Me to Church,” we are to “worship

like a dog at the shrine of [sex's] lies," what's a single to do? Certainly it is not to find satisfaction in life as a single person.

Culture's main solution to singleness? If you're not hooking up with people, watch porn instead.

And Christianity? It never seems to provide a satisfactory solution. Christianity didn't keep up with culture.

Or, more appropriately, the applications of scripture—the in-the-grind tactics—didn't keep up. Many mainstream denominations continued to teach biblical truth, of course: that we are called to a lifestyle of sexual purity, and that sex is an intimate act to be limited to married couples. And to be fair, this advice largely worked for centuries, when men and women frequently married at a very young age, and when having children meant having more people to help around the farm, and when adultery or divorce frequently meant social ostracism. When marriage has a distinct socioeconomic benefit, it's easier to keep sex within its confines.

Now, though, erotic love and self-fulfillment has taken center-stage in marriage (and, relatedly, in divorce). The Bible has plenty to say about both, but only rarely do we hear about them in the context of singleness and sex.

And these are important, because we live in a strange age, where individuality outside of an intimate relationship is validated but sexual purity is not; where women's rights are promoted, but so is porn, which objectifies women.

So where does this leave us? The church has held up a traditional view of marriage. The church has taught women to wait for men to ask them out, but the men aren't asking them out, and the women are "dating Jesus" instead. In the meantime, while we wait for "the one," the church tells us to hold off on what the world calls a biological imperative.

One man, commenting on the Covenant Eyes blog, lamented it this way:

I myself am a 27 year old virgin. You say there is something better at the end of these struggles, when a porn addiction is overcome. For those of us who have no other outlet, there really isn't.

His point, really, was this: God created us for companionship; the only part of His creation that God said was not good was Adam without Eve; and, following these truths to a logical conclusion, when God gives people a sex drive but not a spouse, He is unjust.

That's where many of us find ourselves. Trapped between the images of forbidden fruit given to our married friends, and feeling like we've been locked out of the garden, we allow temptation to take root and grow into poisoned fruit. Even knowing God's commands to abstain from sexual immorality, we falter and fail, whether through physical relationships or pornography.

The truth, though, is that singleness is a beautiful, valuable gift...but porn is one of Satan's tools to keep us from God's great blessings in our lives. And it's ubiquitous. Online porn, sexting, "artful"

nudity and sex in movies...it feels almost impossible to break free. In fact, many of us probably have been hooked since childhood, only falling deeper as we continue to long for romance and allow ourselves to be ruled by loneliness and bitterness.

So, as we stand at the brink of perpetual singleness, yet knowing that God's call for purity is important, how do we break free from porn? And, instead, how exactly do we experience the joys God has set before us?

what the Bible says about your sex life

Before we dive in, it helps to have an overview of the most basic premise of this book: sex is intended for marriage, and anything outside of that, like hookups or sexting or porn, flies in the face of God's beautiful plan.

If you're reading this, you probably know that—intellectually, at least. Maybe it's been hammered into your head as a sin issue for your entire life, or maybe you're just beginning to recognize it as a problem. Either way, it helps to review the basics, if only to remember why it's worth quitting.

So what exactly is God's plan for sex?

We get the first hints in the very beginning of the Bible. In Genesis chapter 2, God creates Adam, and then says (literally) it's not good for man to be alone, and from one of Adam's ribs creates Eve as his companion. At that point, there was no sin, and both of them wandered around naked, and without shame.

What does this tell us about marriage? First, that human

companionship was God-created. Second, marriage functionally reunites a piece of bone with the piece of dirt from whence it came. The two that were originally one flesh become one flesh once again in a new way. "Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," Adam says; and with that, the only couple in all of human history who were quite literally made for each other were married. (Now, in marriage, we don't have the same one-to-one pair-off with "the one," but we're united in a similar way.)

So what went wrong? God gave Adam the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil prior to creating Eve. At some point after she is created, Adam presumably tells Eve God's one rule, then a serpent shows up on the scene and introduces Adam and Eve to the concept of temptation. Paraphrased, it went a little like this:

Serpent: "Hey Eve, welcome to this whole 'existence' thing. By the way, did God say not to eat anything from trees?"

Eve: "Nah, it's not that bad. We're not supposed to eat or touch anything from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, or we're gonna die."

Serpent: "God's lying. He's just trying to hold you back from being like him."

Eve: "You know what? This fruit looks like tasty brainfood, and it's pretty to boot even without an Instagram filter on it, so heck yeah I'll eat it. Hey

Adam, remember that tree we weren't supposed to eat from? Have some of it!"

Adam: "Ooh, tasty!"

So they ate, got the world's worst case of food poisoning (one that got passed down genetically as sin and shame), and, after a bit of blame-shifting, got cursed with pain in various forms and were kicked out of the garden.

Satan's methods of temptation haven't actually changed much since then. Notice the pattern: he starts by making God sound more restrictive than He actually is, then he claims God is trying to trick you out of something. We, meanwhile, are tempted to misinterpret the actual command, much like Eve did. A modern conversation might go something more like this:

Satan: "Did God really say you're never allowed to have sex?"

Us: "Well, I mean, married people are supposed to make babies somehow."

Satan: "Sex is so much more fun than that! God's just trying to hold you back from an awesome experience."

Us: "Well, I guess porn isn't really sex." (Or: "Well, we're planning to get married, so I guess it's okay to sleep together." Or: "But we're in love!")

When we let go of biblical truth and start listening to culture's lies, we forget that our designer, God, knows what's best for us, especially when it comes to sexuality. When we warp His rules with legalism or, more commonly, ignore them because they seem too restrictive, we're creating problems for ourselves.

Marriage is a covenant of faithfulness designed to reflect Christ's faithfulness to the church. As such, marriage and married sex is intended as a very intimate bond for one man and one woman to share through one lifetime (for a fuller picture, read 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5, as well as Song of Solomon for a very intimate look at a godly enjoyment of your spouse's body). When you perform a sexual act outside of that bond, minimally you bring a bit of excess baggage with you into marriage. At worst, you're actually rearranging your own biology to destroy the oneness between you and your spouse. (We'll get into that a bit more in the next chapter.)

The Slippery Slope of Longing and Desire

All of that is to say that marital sex is a wonderful thing...but if you're not married, this beautiful truth can just make you bitter, like you're being deprived of the thing for which you were made. In the words of Miracle Max from *The Princess Bride*, "Why don't you just give me a paper cut and pour lemon juice on it?"

Many of us have been longing for (or at least expecting) marriage since childhood. We had friends "get married" on the playground in Elementary school; we played house and tried to convince our childhood crushes to be our spouse. This longing for a relationship is entirely natural. We were created to be in relationship with God

and people, and marriage is both a biological dictate and a divine gift to most people throughout history. Elizabeth de Smaele, in her talk "Holy Longing," says even our sexuality is Imago Dei, made in the image of a God who is relational and calls us into relationship.³ Marriage was created by God for humankind as a reflection of that longing, so of course, singles long for marriage. In Eden, mankind was whole. With sin came separation from our Creator and each other.

Unfortunately, unless we recognize God as the fulfiller of our desires, we become obsessed with trying to fill the emptiness with other things. A photography student once explained, "We are forced to dance to the whip of our internal emptiness, be it spiritual, physical, mental, or sexual, and sometimes it makes us do strange or irrational things."⁴

For many this longing is transformed into lust and obsession. It often has its origins in innocent thoughts: "What would it be like to date that guy?" "She's cute! I wonder if she's seeing anyone." But if you continue to feed those thoughts, they can rapidly degrade into sinful lust. Put it this way: if you started to be attracted to a nice, single Christian person, what would you do? Pray about her and seek opportunities to get to know her, regardless of any romantic outcome? Let your mind linger on what it would be like to share a home with him? Search for porn starring gals who look like her?

This is compounded when you realize that many singles find themselves locked in a cycle of "look, don't touch." Sometimes singles sabotage themselves in the dating realm (see also my polka

story; or, as one friend ranted, the theoretically-eligible bachelors in her area used online pseudonyms like “Starfader,” “Smoochielips,” and “Roadblock”). Others may find themselves surrounded by people who, for one reason or another, are off-limits: “the one” is already in a relationship, or doesn’t share the same values, or rejects you when you ask her out (a man’s curse), or never thinks to ask you out in the first place (a woman’s curse).

When all you have are thoughts, it doesn’t take much to bump those thoughts from the pure to the sinful, for the normal desire for a relationship to become a fantasy for self-fulfillment.

The Gray Havens, in their song “Sirens,” sing:

*One taste of the sound
Of the Sirens in the water
And I’m thinking I should get out
The sharpest sword and suit of armor
So I can be ready to strike
But I pause one more time
One last taste of the sound
Then I’ll cut these Sirens down
But as they sang, I forgot
They were death, so I brought
Them my heart to be filled
And I followed them.*

*No trace could I find
Of any joy the Sirens promised
They had found a way with a lie
To turn what's good and should be wanted
Into what's highest above
All desires and love
'Til my heart would obey
Whatever it wants, whatever it takes
To feel alive and set free
Only bound to the sea
Where the Sirens are leading me on...*

 [Click to listen to "Sirens."](#)

Once Satan has a foothold, he is going to do what he can to get you to continue taking steps toward sin. It's not long before that God-built desire for love and acceptance turns us to sinful sources for validation.

In *Delivered*, Jessica Harris explains that, after accidentally stumbling onto porn, she kept returning to porn and erotic fiction to experience love and acceptance. At first, she says, it was repulsive; but on the other hand, the porn stars were doing what the cheerleaders at her school did in the back seats of cars. Despite her Christian upbringing, she quickly equated sex with happiness, and followed a road to chatrooms and cybersex.⁵

Stephanie, telling her story in *Dirty Girls Come Clean*, transferred her anger at being deprived a husband to porn and, eventually, acting out physically. She writes:

I yearned to experience what I saw. I didn't just crave the visual, I craved the physical. I was in my late twenties, still single, and angry at God because he hadn't provided a husband to fulfill my desires. I decided it was time to start satisfying my cravings. And I became willing to do whatever it took to get it.⁶

Stephanie had a couple of problems. For one thing, she'd been training her brain on porn since middle school. For another, she viewed a husband as a solution to all of her physical lusts. While it's true that marriage does contain certain physical benefits, and in fact lust is one of the reasons Paul lists to get married ("It is better to marry than to burn with passion," he writes in 1 Cor. 7:9), she thought marriage would be the solution for all of her problems, and blamed God for not providing it.

Redeeming Singleness

Remember, though, that's how Satan works: he's reminding you that marriage is God-designed, and trying to convince you that, because you're not married, you're somehow a failure or a victim of a petty God. If the Bible spoke ill of singleness, that would be true. Instead, in a surprisingly counter-cultural stance, the Bible actually elevates singleness as a viable, valid life option.

Let me give this a bit of cultural context. Patriarchal cultures (the Hebrews, the Greeks, the Romans) have always put a high premium on the need to be in a relationship, for the sake of both biological and cultural continuance. Marriage was crucial for child-bearing, but both men and women were permitted and sometimes even encouraged to find fulfillment in sexual pairings outside of wedlock (especially same-sex pairings). Festivals and worship acts often honored sexual relationships, and many temples employed prostitutes to help parishioners “worship.”

Starting with the reign of Augustus around the time of Christ, Roman law encouraged marriage to the point of imposing heavier taxes on single men and women, and gave inheritance-related incentives to widows who chose to remarry.

This was the world Paul wrote to in 1 Corinthians 7. “But to the unmarried and widows,” he writes, “I say to them it is well to remain unmarried as I am.”

Wait, what?

What Paul is doing, Tim Keller explains, is telling people, “You can lead a perfectly fulfilled life without sex.”⁷ At a time when significance was tied to the family and heirs, Paul and the church with him reaffirmed that life has significance outside a marital relationship.

In fact, according to Paul, unmarried men and women were better equipped to be concerned with the things of the Lord than their married counterparts. In Acts 21:9, for example, Paul spent some

time with Philip the Evangelist, who had “four virgin daughters who prophesied.” It is entirely possible that Paul had them in mind when he spoke of the unique ability of singles to focus on ministry. Certainly Paul’s own ability to travel would have been hampered if he’d had a wife and children.

Moreover, singleness better enables us to feel the temporal nature of this earth and draw contrasts to the Kingdom to come. Tim Keller says, “Through the Spirit we have a foretaste of the future, and the taste of our future love, and the taste of our future grace, and the taste of that future, now, radically frees us in this world from the things of this world.”⁸

Lore Ferguson, writing for *Christianity Today*, explores the pain of longing as a benefit, saying,

*Those who have wrestled deep with their prolonged chastity have experienced something of earth’s groans in wait for her Creator. A friend recently confessed struggles of waiting sexually for her upcoming wedding day. I was able to tell her the hunger pangs of longing she feels for her fiancé are akin to the hunger pangs we feel when we’re fasting. Those pangs teach us we’re waiting for a better feast. For the one fasting, the feast isn’t the break-fast, and for the virgin, the feast isn’t the wedding night. The feast is the marriage supper of the Lamb and an eternity spent with him. But those pangs are still real and felt, to pretend they’re not is ignorant.*⁹

Fanny Crosby, writer of over 8,000 hymns (including “Blessed Assurance” and “To God be the Glory”), was blinded in infancy. Rather than wallowing in bitterness over her situation, she instead said this (emphasis mine):

It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank him for the dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me.

If I had a choice, I would still choose to remain blind...for when I die, the first face I will ever see will be the face of my blessed Saviour.¹⁰

While it is indeed difficult to feel joyful when it feels we are being denied an earthly right to romantic companionship, we should rejoice like Fanny Crosby, for the ultimate fulfillment of our physical desires will be found in “the face of my blessed Saviour” as well, and we can rest in the assurance that they extend far beyond our humble imaginations.

Of course, this is all well and good to say in writing. In practice it’s much harder. Unless we’ve taken up singleness as a calling as some in vocational ministry do, we may or may not recognize our role (and all Christians’ role) as the bride of Christ. Instead, most singles instead spend their free time mourning their lack of a relationship, and attempting to fill the void with things like pornography.

why you need to quit porn—now

Mark was 10 when he first stumbled on porn. By the time he was 21, he thought of porn as just a normal part of the male experience. After college, he said,

Pornography was a dark fixture in my life. I had no real friends to lean on and no understanding of chastity and healthy relationships. Although left to myself much of the time, I did meet and date a couple of women; but neither relationship lasted more than a few months.

Because I was saturated with pornographic images, through the Internet and the purchase of videos, any relationship I did pursue that might have blossomed into something special was quickly dashed as a result of sexual sin.¹¹

Eventually, Mark figured out what we all need to understand: his pornography was running counter to God's original plan. His porn use was hindering him from building a lasting relationship.

If God has indeed designed sex to be sacred between one man and one woman for one lifetime, then anything that deviates from that plan must be understood as sin. That means one-night stands and friends with benefits and cohabiting and sexting. That even and especially means porn.

Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal—no matter what specific practices you follow or church you belong to, if you at all call yourself a Christian, you need to remember one thing: every time you watch porn, you are sinning.

Porn is sin against God, who has called us into a holy and perfect communion with Himself. Take what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: "But I say to you that anyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). What is porn if it's not looking at someone on the screen with lust?

Porn is sin against your body. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:18-20, "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

This isn't metaphorical either. Neuroscience has now proven porn hurts the viewer's own brain—but we'll get to that in a minute.

Porn is sin against the church—the viewer is joining church with a prostitute (mentally, if not physically). As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:15, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!”

Every video you watch, every sext you send—you bring them with you every time you walk through the doors of your church or sit down for a Bible study. They lurk, a barrier between you and corporate worship. The sense of guilt or shame may even be holding you back from serving to your fullest ability. Crystal Renaud, founder of Dirty Girls Ministries, remembers once hiding behind a merchandise table at a church concert she helped organize, feeling like a fraud and looking busy.¹² Even if you’re masking your sin with service, chances are good you’re withholding a piece of yourself, hiding behind an illusion, and unintentionally hurting your church in the process.

Porn is sin against your future spouse. It may not feel like it, but statistically, most of us will get married one day. Take two recent examples. One woman met her now-husband the day after her article on singleness was published; she is 34, he is 39.¹³ Or take Nancy Leigh DeMoss, a Christian writer and ministry leader famed for writing (among other things) books about living God’s calling as a single. Now, after age 50, she is engaged to be married.

Want to read more about why porn is bad?

Check out our free books, *Your Brain on Porn* and *The Porn Circuit* at www.covenanteyes.com/e-books/

I bring this up because marriage isn't a guarantee in life, but it may yet happen. And assuming you're part of that statistical majority, you're carrying expectations you've built up through your porn use to your future wife or husband—expectations of what your sex life will be, and expectations of finding personal satisfaction and fulfillment without a thought toward his or her needs.

Both Catholics and Protestants can learn a lot about sexuality and marriage from the Theology of the Body, a series of teachings by Pope John Paul II. It expands on the scriptural passages exploring how two become one. Mark Houck, a guest writer for the Covenant Eyes blog, uses Theology of the Body to explore porn's impact on your probable future marriage:

Pope John Paul II tells us that “the fundamental fact of human existence at every stage of its history is that God ‘created them male and female’ (Theology of the Body, p. 74). Man and woman were created for marriage, and “in the mystery of [this] creation, man and woman [become] a mutual gift” (p. 75). Pornography, and more specifically masturbation, represents a privation of the gift and therefore the exact “opposite of this ‘welcoming’ or ‘acceptance’ of the other human being as a gift” (p. 70).

*In its truest form, the conjugal act should always reflect the “reciprocal ‘acceptance’ of the other” (p. 70). **Pornography perverts the conjugal***

act because it reduces the mutual self donation of husband and wife to an object of lust. Pornography trains a spouse to look at his or her spouse as an object for their pleasure only. In other words, the conjugal act becomes an act of using and as a result spouses use one another for their own selfish objectives.¹⁴

Porn is sin against other relationships. Even if you never get married, your porn use is screwing up your relationships with people of the opposite gender in general. Guys, do you focus on womens' cleavage, and ignore women who don't meet pornographic standards of beauty? Ladies, do you ignore guys who don't look like they'd be good lovers, or focus on your physical qualities to attract male attention?

The truth is, porn makes us look at everyone differently. One study showed that men who watched porn 3 hours a week showed a 46% drop in support for women's rights compared to those who did not watch porn at all. Among women, it dropped 30%.¹⁵ Porn use makes us see each other as something less than fellow children of God. It makes us elevate the status of men and lower the status of women when, in reality, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Porn is sin against porn stars and exploited women and children. In addition to committing adultery in your heart with porn stars, porn is a major social justice issue. Even if you only

watch amateur porn and never spend a dime on it, porn is a feeder system for sex trafficking. More viewers leads to a need for more variety, meaning more porn stars, who are often drugged and abused for your viewing pleasure. Many hardcore porn users will even turn to human trafficking, whether by turning to prostitutes (many of whom are coerced into staying) or, eventually, going on sex tourism trips to places like the Philippines, where little children are sold or kidnapped into slavery as prostitutes. (You can learn a lot more about these issues in *Stop the Demand*.)

Porn as a Health Issue

If knowing the moral issues of pornography isn't enough, there are significant health impacts as well. Essentially, every time you view or participate in a sexual activity, your brain mixes up a gigantic health cocktail, wiring you to get turned on by your partner (whether your partner is physical or digital). Here are just a few of the chemicals in play (for more details, see *The Porn Circuit*):

- + **Dopamine** helps the brain remember what is interesting and how to respond to it. It focuses the mind on a specific task while others are ignored, saying, "Hey, do this now!" It provides a neurological reward that feels good, and assists in cravings for more of the activity.
- + **Norepinephrine** is a neurotransmitter often associated with stress and the fight-or-flight response, helping us to be more alert. It also acts as a hormone for sexual arousal and sexual memory, and it helps us burn emotional experiences in our minds. Whether it's a wonderful sexual experience with our spouse or a provocative sexual image, the information is stored for easy recall with the help of norepinephrine.

What About Masturbation?

We've often heard from people who have quit pornography use but still deal with issues related to lust and masturbation. We still have sex drives, after all, and that means sometimes we have urges that are hard to control. Walking down the street we may see an attractive person and have a biological reaction. Men often wake up in the morning with an erection. So, is it okay to masturbate?

One big question is, what's going on in your head when you masturbate? For most people, masturbation will still be an act of lust; it will be a reaction to the pornography in our heads. It will be about fulfilling our selfish fantasies, not about the sacrificial love that both husband and wife are to experience in marriage. And in that case, for most of us masturbation is roughly equivalent to watching porn, just without the videos or photos. (And by the way, men, my male colleagues have informed me that morning erections will go away without masturbating.)

The good news, then, is that many of the same solutions for freedom from porn will help us defeat sinful masturbation habits as well.

+ Oxytocin and vasopressin

also encourage the feelings of bonding and are released during sexual activity and at climax. Their release during porn viewing and masturbation works to cement a person's attachment to this behavior.

These and other chemicals work in concert to create a bond with your mate. In a marriage the way God designed it, where one husband and one wife are the only sexual partners each other ever has, these chemicals help strengthen that bond. Essentially, you keep training yourself to be turned on by your spouse, and only your spouse.

Porn, on the other hand, triggers the same chemical reactions, but they result in you bonding to images, not people. Additionally, these chemicals train you to require variety, not monogamy. Rather than forging a strong bond with one specific person, you're creating it with hundreds or thousands of different faces.

This may actually manifest physically. The NoFap group on Reddit, for example, is dedicated to helping men quit porn because they found they literally couldn't get an erection anymore without watching porn.

Marriage Won't Stop Your Porn Use

Why tell you this now? Because many people believe that if they just get married, the porn use will stop naturally. In reality, if you hope to get married one day, your continued porn use is just setting your marriage up for failure.

First, the modern church has a tendency to turn marriage into an idol, overly glorifying the role of wife and mother. Like all idols, even the idol of marriage will crumble when you discover that a marriage is composed of two sinners, attempting to live together, and the sexual sin you bring into it will make the idol crumble faster.

Second, if one or both of you is a virgin, you're setting yourself up for disappointment in the act of sex itself, which will probably be lackluster, confusing, or outright painful the first few times (and in fact, one phone survey estimated that 1 in 7 women had at least one instance of painful intercourse within a six-month period¹⁶).

Porn and TV, you see, have given us only the glamour and ecstasy of sex. Only rarely do they tell us the truth: that sex can be awkward, that you won't climax at the same time, that sometimes sex hurts. Obviously, most people figure it out eventually. But if you're expecting sex to be just like porn straight out of the box,

you're just going to be disappointed.

That brings us to the third point: once you're married, even after you've worked through the awkwardness, you'll discover that your spouse just isn't enough if your brain is warped by porn—because you've literally hardwired so many expectations about sexual pleasure into your own brain that one person literally cannot live up to them. Not to mention the blow it will cause to your spouse's self-worth when they realize that porn stars are the competition.

So if marriage and sex isn't the answer, what is?

*I know it's tough when you get what you want
But it's not what you need so it's never enough*

- Nick Flora

 [Click to listen to "Kick & Scream."](#)

changing the cage

life in rat park

Despite all my rage, I am still just a rat in a cage

- The Smashing Pumpkins, "Bullet with Butterfly Wings"

In the 1970s, with the research on drug addiction in full swing, one scientist decided to take a different approach.¹⁷ Dr. Bruce Alexander noted that drug experiments were being conducted on isolated rats in bare-bone cages—and rats, like humans, are social creatures. It seemed natural to him that, when isolated and unhappy, of course a rat would choose to numb the pain with drinks laced with heroin. But what if the choice were offered to happy rats? Would their choice remain the same?

Alexander and his colleagues created "Rat Park," a large plywood cage filled with creature comforts, like fresh cedar shavings and cans and boxes. Importantly, the rats were not isolated in Rat Park: a number of rats were allowed to interact in this rat paradise. Rat Park became the focal point of their experiments on drug addiction and withdrawal until they were de-funded in the early 80s.

Two of their findings stand out. First, unhappiness was the best predictor of drug dependency. Basically, rats that were isolated in plain cages were much more likely to turn to mind-altering substances than the rats in Rat Park. It's an unsurprising result, when you think of it; if you were locked up in Guantanamo but given unlimited access to mind-altering drugs, who *wouldn't* be tempted to wander around in a haze? Happy rats, on the other hand, preferred to keep their minds clear. They had all they could ask for in Rat Park, and they neither needed nor wanted the distraction of drugs.

Dr. Alexander and his team decided to take the experiment one step further. First, the rats were isolated and force-fed addictive drugs. Then they were placed into Rat Park. Would they continue to choose the heroin-laced water, or would they choose plain, drug-free water?

Contrary to popular addiction research at the time, the rats chose plain water over drugged water. Despite showing visible withdrawal symptoms, they preferred the clarity of thought to continuing in a drug-induced haze. The rats were *happy* in Rat Park, and they didn't want anything to interfere with that happiness.

As Stuart McMillen eloquently explained it, "What if the difference between not being addicted and being addicted was the difference between seeing the world as your park and seeing the world as your cage?"¹⁸

What if breaking free from porn addiction was as simple as finding meaning and contentment in our singleness?

Now, there are more than a few caveats to all of this. First, there is ample evidence that porn impacts us neurologically. Second, we must not make the mistake of equating Rat Park with our own definition of personal utopia—e.g. the perfect relationship, the perfect career, endless recreation, etc.

Still, I suspect most of us can recognize ourselves in the Rat Park studies. Many people (myself included) tend to stress-eat; turning to food to numb the pain. We've also heard anecdotes of alcoholic authors and artists like Hemingway and Jackson Pollock; as more naturally depressed people, they relied (and rely) on chemical fixes to solve emotional problems. By the same token, many of us singles turn to porn when we're feeling especially lonely or bitter or tired or stressed.

Responding to a survey, one young woman put it this way:

I always asked myself, "Why can't I just be done with this?" I discovered something: My struggle with porn had nothing to do with porn.

In hindsight, I've looked back on the years of addition to porn and realized one thing: It was never about the porn. Porn was the symptom. Control was the issue. Too often we focus on behavior management when it has to be about an in-depth heart change. It's easy to cover up the true heart issues with porn: "I'll quit when I'm no longer single." "I'm lonely and this is how I deal with it."

"It's better than going out and having sex with a random person." ALL of those scream one thing at me: "I have a heart issue and I don't know how to deal with it, so I use porn."

So how do we turn negative attitudes into positives? How do we move ourselves from a lonely cage to a happy one?

There are four specific, concrete steps to find happiness and fulfillment: centering our lives on the Gospel; finding accountability; changing our emotions; and channeling our energy into productive projects. The rest of this book will center on these four steps.

how the gospel helps us overcome porn

Years ago, one husband had excitedly told us at Covenant Eyes how we had helped him reconcile with his wife and hold his marriage together. Recently, however, we learned he had quietly gotten a divorce. “It wasn’t the software, or even the porn,” he told us. “I stopped using the porn. The problem is, I never replaced porn with something else.”

That’s a real problem, isn’t it? Most of us turn to porn to fill some sort of need—the need for love, for comfort, for attention, for pleasure. The problem is, if we’re trying to quit our porn use, then it’s rarely as simple as quitting cold-turkey. The root problem, the reason you kept returning to porn in the first place, is still in effect. And if you don’t fill that need with something else, the desire for porn will often return.

Jesus speaks of something similar in Matthew 12:43-45:

“When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking

rest, but finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation."

You will find ways to fill the emptiness created when you quit porn. The question is, will you fill it with something positive or negative? If it's negative, it will often become much worse. Comedian Bill Engvall explains how he quit smoking: "I got off cigarettes by using the patches. I got off patches by smoking cigars. I got off cigars by doing crack. So I'm pretty much tobacco-free now."

That's the thing about porn or any vice: either you replace it intentionally, or it will replace itself. You can either leave porn no room to creep back in, or you can deal with the struggle again in a few years, months, or weeks.

The question then becomes what to replace it with. There are some who have quit porn completely upon getting married, and Paul even suggests getting married as a solution to lust in 1 Corinthians 7:9. But planning to replace porn with marriage will simply build marriage up as an idol, resulting in disappointment when marriage is delayed or fails to deliver. And, of course, replacing porn with things like wild partying or excessive video games or emotional eating will simply lead to other harmful outcomes.

There are two factors to replacing porn. Part of it is replacing the action (porn took up time, after all); we'll get to that in a later chapter. But porn use is also a function of our thought lives, a physical reaction to emotional turmoil. For that, for Christians, there's really only one solution: replacing porn with the gospel.

Easier said than done, right? I mean, what are we supposed to do—go read our Bibles every time we want to watch porn?

Not necessarily (though that's not a bad idea, if you can convince yourself to do it). This is more about your heart and mind—filling your mind with things above, and training your thoughts to run to Jesus instead of porn when you're stressed or tired or angry or lonely.

The good news is, for Christ-followers, this can be very practical. Even better: The Holy Spirit does the hard work. All you need to do is show up.

1. Read

Obvious statements are obvious, but the first step to replacing porn with the gospel is to know the gospel.

Some of you are tuning out already, I'm sure. Many of us have grown up in the church; we have sermons dripping out of our ears. We believe we know the gospel backwards and forwards.

When we rely solely on church as the source of our knowledge, though, we miss out on a lot, and we rely on what other people think is important.

Don't get me wrong: church is important. I highly recommend attending church at least weekly, and also getting involved in a small group Bible study. So I'm not trying to say that church isn't good or necessary. It absolutely is! I am saying, though, that to fully know the Gospel, we should also read it for ourselves, and read it daily.

Here's the thing. There are 1,189 chapters in the Bible (excluding the Apocrypha). If you belong to a church tradition such as Catholicism, it will only take you three years to hear the Bible—but only if you attend Mass daily. If you were to go to a church that preached through one chapter a week every Sunday, it would take you almost 23 years to hear the entire Bible. And, of course, most churches will focus on only a small fraction of the Bible, picking the topics they think are most relevant, ignoring wide swaths of scripture. That's assuming perfect attendance in either case.

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, correction, reproof, and training in righteousness,” writes Paul in 2 Timothy 3:17. That includes John 3:16, and that includes the long genealogies and divisions of responsibility in 1 Chronicles. But to feel its transformative power, we have to read it for ourselves.

By reading through the Bible ourselves—and I especially mean by creating a daily habit of reading a chapter or two—we are helped in a variety of ways. For one thing, it's God's word. Think about that for a moment: the Bible is how God has a conversation with us. We talk to Him through prayer; he responds through the Bible. And just like spending time with a friend makes us closer to that friend, spending time reading the Bible will bring us closer to God.

And God is the strongest ally we have in the fight against porn and other temptations.

The more we read the Bible for ourselves, the more it will engrain itself into our hearts and minds. “Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee.” Personally, having made daily scripture reading a habit for about 15 years or so, I’ve found that even without specifically focusing on memorizing particular passages, fragments of verses will often spring to mind, unbidden, when the situation calls for it. All I do is read a bit each day, sometimes fighting against sleepiness or struggling through a genealogy, but God through the Holy Spirit hides His words in my heart, and uses it to lead and strengthen me as a “lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”

I realize that scripture reading can be very painful, especially when you’re struggling with a personal sin. In my own Bible, I have a slip of paper from a college event I worked at several years ago. At the end of the weekend retreat, the other small group leaders were brought up front for an open panel discussion; I was handed a question to the effect of, “What do you do when you’re trapped in sin and feel like you can’t read the Bible or pray?” My answer: do it anyway. In my own life, I’ve found that periods of sin have correlated to periods where I wasn’t diligently reading the Word; it is when I am dedicated to the spiritual discipline of Bible study that I am strengthened and confirmed.

Read your Bible. Make it a daily habit. Read a chapter right when you wake up in the morning, or right before you go to bed each night. Sometimes it will be a struggle to keep your eyes open.

Sometimes you'll feel so trapped by sin that you just want to avoid every convicting word of truth, nearly crushed by the "godly sorrow that brings forth repentance." But again, that's the good news: by slowly filling your mind with the truth of the gospel as presented in the Bible, you're slowly sweeping clean your house, and more importantly, replacing your sinful desires with God's glorious presence.

2. Remember

One of the foundational ways to ground ourselves in the gospel is to remember that Christ is our Redeemer. He saves us, and leads us from death into life, and His mercy towards His people is great. As followers of Christ, we can call on God as our Father (Romans 8:15).

These are just some of the promises God makes to his people in the Bible:

- + "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments" (Zechariah 3:4).
- + "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18).
- + "The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life" (Revelation 3:5).
- + "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

It should be of infinite comfort to us that as much as we screw up on earth, God's grace is greater than our sin—that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:20-21).

But let's be honest. That really doesn't help us in the trenches much, does it? It may help me when there's yet another lonely Valentine's Day looming. I might be able to put the possibility of another 60 years or so of solitude into context (what's 80 or 90 years in light of eternity, after all?), but it's a little too lofty a thought when I'm the only one eating at a table for one—again—in a restaurant packed with happy couples and families. As Walter sings in the 2011 movie *The Muppets*:

*When you're alone, life can be a little rough
It makes you feel like your three feet tall
When it's just you, well, times can be tough
When no-one's there to catch your fall.*

This leads to the other thing we need to remember as we work to replace porn with the Gospel: we are not alone. I'm not talking about earthly friendships, although those are very important (we'll get into that in the next chapter). I'm talking, of course, about the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised us in John 15:15-17, the Helper who we know "because he abides in you, and He will be with you."

These are just some of the ways he'll be with us:

- + Our faith will be tested, but this testing will produce endurance, which produces character, which produces hope (James 1:3).

- + He who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it (Philippians 1:6).
- + Everything, including and especially our singleness, works together for the good of those who love God (Romans 8:28).
- + God will not allow us to be tempted beyond our abilities, but He will always provide a way to escape it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In practical terms, what does this mean for us? It means that, as followers of Christ, we are followers of a faithful God, One who will never leave us nor forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:8). We may not know what next week will look like, or whether we'll ever find "the one," but we do know this: God is faithful, and because of Him, we have a living hope

(1 Peter 1:3). And while that doesn't give us license to sin (Romans 6:1-14), it does mean we do not have to worry about what may or may not happen in our life (Matthew 6:25-34).

The trick, then, is to meditate on these truths, during both the good times and the bad. The more we focus on these truths, even by memorizing them, the more the Holy Spirit can bring them to mind, unbidden, when we're overwhelmed by loneliness and temptation—"And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Peter 5:10).

3. Reject

As we slowly fill our hearts and minds with God's word, one thing should not surprise us: Satan will do whatever is within his power to distract us from obedience. This distraction may come in many forms. We've just covered some of the feelings of guilt when we're trapped in sin that make it difficult to keep ourselves embedded in scripture. C. S. Lewis explains another of Satan's methods in *The Screwtape Letters*:

*The simplest way [to distract a human] is to turn their gaze away from Him towards themselves. Keep them watching their own minds and trying to produce feelings there by the actions of their own wills. [...] When they are praying for forgiveness, let them be trying to feel forgiven. Teach them to estimate the value of each prayer by the success in producing the desired feeling; and never let them suspect how much success or failure of that kind depends on whether they are well or ill, fresh or tired, at the moment.*¹⁹

As you work to break free from porn habits (or, really, any bad habit), Satan will work against you, telling you lies about who you are and how you should feel. The trick is to recognize them as lies... and respond with the gospel truth.

Here are just a sampling of the lies.

I need sexual contact.

As singles, it's easy to feel incredibly frustrated when we watch all the people around us hook up and get married. God has created us for intimacy and given us a sex drive. In fact, the first command God gives to humankind (even before the whole "don't eat from this one specific tree" thing) is "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). Or, in crasser terms, "Go! Have sex! Make babies!" But if you're trying to keep the commandments against sexual immorality, it's kind of hard to "be fruitful and multiply" when you're single, right?

That's where Satan starts tickling our feelings. Evolutionary biology says that survival of the species is the overriding biological imperative, and therefore sex and the pleasures thereof are our biological rights. Throw in the fact that a lot of popular movies (*The LEGO Movie*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, or virtually any *Bond* film) portray relationships as, literally, prizes to be won—a prize that the hero *always* wins—and it's very easy to turn to porn as a natural replacement for the intimacy of marriage. After all, modern America is highly focused on instant gratification. Loneliness feels bad, and porn helps us feel better, at least for a little while.

It's not true, though, that we're like cows, who get sick if they don't get milked. Nobody has ever died of chronic virginity. Negative feelings related to singleness may result in a lower quality of life with physical health outcomes, but that's an emotional issue, not a biological one.

In reality, we ought to treat each other first as brothers and sisters in Christ, and reflect on Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:13-14

(emphasis mine): “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food’—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.”

If you believe in a God strong enough to raise Jesus (and eventually us) up from the dead, then remember: you believe in a God who can help you get your lusts under control.

I am unworthy of being loved.

Porn use and other bad behaviors are sins, and we should feel “the godly sorrow that brings forth repentance” about our failings. However, sometimes this guilt turns into what Mark Gaither calls toxic shame. Normal, healthy guilt says “I have done wrong,” while toxic shame says “I am broken and beyond hope.” Guilt desires forgiveness and reconciliation; toxic shame calls for self-medication and avoidance. Toxic shame says, “I don’t believe I can be loved, so therefore I will keep reading the fiction of porn that says ‘I will do whatever you want.’”²⁰

It’s especially tempting for singles, and particularly those who grew up in a neglectful or abusive home, to translate these feelings into the belief that we are outright unlovable. When everyone else is partnering off and we’re single still (or yet again), our search for an explanation may lead to the conclusion that something about us excludes us from romance, and possibly even friendship. Again, this leads us to porn in an attempt to soothe ourselves. Literary criticism calls this “fear of intimacy” or “fear of rejection”:

we become terrified of “real” people, so we turn to the men and women of porn who will never reject us or our basest desires. All of this results in a vortex of sin-guilt-pain-sin...exactly where Satan wants us.

That right there—that toxic shame—is one of Satan’s lies. Not the “You’re horribly broken” bit: that’s one of the foundational truths of Christianity. “For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God,” says Romans 3:23. But just as the serpent twisted God’s truth in the Garden, so too he twists the truth of our brokenness. We stop at “The wages of sin is death” and never read on to “the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Or we read Psalm 139 and hear that God knows our inmost thoughts and feel condemned, and never realize that even the deepest of sinners is “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

That’s the truth we need to combat the lie: that we are loved by God, that we were made in His image. And because of that, we don’t need to turn to porn for affirmation.



I’m a failure because I can’t just stop.

Others of us may believe that just stopping is a simple matter of self-control—that the secret to getting past porn is to “just stop

watching it.” After all, it’s “just” a choice you make through your day, like the choice to order the same thing at a restaurant every time, or to check Facebook fifty times a day. Some of us may decide to quit cold-turkey without seeking outside help, and may even succeed for a week or two, but then we slip up again, and fall back into that cycle of guilt that keeps us turning to porn for comfort.

Well, of course you can’t just stop. Porn use, like many things, is addictive. There are countless debates as to whether compulsive porn behaviors can be medically classified as an *addiction*, but regardless, neuroscience tells us that porn has been imprinting itself on your brain since the first time you saw it. And if you, like many, have been watching it since you were a kid it will not be easy to make the necessary life changes to stop porn.

I’m not trying to say it’s impossible to quit, of course. Remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:13: “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.”

Note who is doing the brunt of the work in that verse. God is the one who is creating the way of escape, not us. Or in Galatians 5:22-23: Self-control is a fruit of the *Spirit*. It’s a product of a relationship with God, not an intrinsic part of ourselves.

Although in some cases, we can just stop, if we are not filling our minds with things above as a replacement, our victory will feel meaningless and hollow. After a “white-knuckle” weekend that went

poorly as she sought freedom from pornography, Jessica Harris writes of a conversation with an ally:

Sarah stood eye-to-eye with me, and said, "Jessica, you have to love God more than you hate the sin."

It was a bit of a "duh" moment for me. I had already tried the whole "hate" approach. All it ever accomplished was a pile of ashes and a bad attitude. God had changed things for me, but I was misdirecting my focus. Instead of loving God, I was hating my sin for the love of God.

Like a knight in shining armor, I was saying, "Stay here, while I go forth and slay the dragon." All of my love for God was focused on the singular goal of getting rid of pornography. But if sheer desire to be rid of it were enough, I would have been free years ago. If I wanted there to be a change in the outcome, then I had to change the approach.²¹

This reliance on God's work for full victory may lead us to a secondary struggle: we may sometimes feel like we need to be clean before we can approach God and ask for help, believing the non-biblical mantra that "the Lord helps those who help themselves."

Goodness, no! We are meant to rely on God, to rely on his power

when we inevitably fail (whether through porn or some other sin). As it says in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Our hope—for freedom, for forgiveness, for strength to endure—is to live in Christ. This is especially true in our darkest moments. Andrew Peterson illustrates this beautifully in his song “In the Night”:

*Like the son who thought he'd gone beyond
forgiveness,
Too ashamed to lift his head—but if he could lift
his head
He would see his father running from a distance
In the night my hope lives on*

*I can see the crowd of men retreating
As he stands between the woman and their stones
And if mercy in his holy heart is beating
Then in the night my hope lives on.*

 [Click to listen to “In the Night.”](#)

God wants us—expects us—to come to him, jacked-up people that we are. “Cast your burdens on the Lord,” says Psalm 55:22 (NASB), “and he will sustain you. He will not allow the righteous to be shaken.” And in Psalm 32:5-7:

*I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,”
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*

*Therefore let everyone who is godly
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be
found;
surely in the rush of great waters,
they shall not reach him.
You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with shouts of deliverance.*

It is the very act of laying down our burdens, of admitting that we can't break free on our own, that allows God to do what He alone can do: protect us, preserve us, and deliver us from evil.

Of course, there are specific practical action steps that we can and should take in order to break free. The fact that we can't do it alone does not absolve us of our responsibility to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phillippians 2:12). Later chapters will focus on these practical steps, in fact. But by remembering "it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phillippians 2:13), we can focus not on our failures, but on God's good grace.

why we need friends in the fight

If I fall, I fall alone, but two can help to bear the load

A threefold chord is hard to break

All I have I give to you if you will share your sorrows too,

Then joy will be the crown upon our heads

My friend

- Josh Garrels, "Bread & Wine"

 [Click to listen to "Bread & Wine."](#)

Very late one Friday night in April 2014, I found myself in a Wal-Mart in rural Ohio. The next morning I would get up, don a flowery dress I never would have chosen for myself, and walk down the aisle of a small Nazarene church, the maid of honor in my best friend's wedding. It would be a long day, starting with a visit to a hair salon at 9 a.m., and filled with lots of laughter and dancing. But that was tomorrow. Right then, I had one goal: I was finalizing

my toast, and I needed to find the tackiest pencil sharpener I could possibly find.

Why a pencil sharpener? Two reasons, really. First, it was in honor of our visit to the Paul A. Johnson Pencil Sharpener Museum the previous year...but it was also the perfect metaphor for seven years of friendship.

Not long after I had started working at Covenant Eyes and Sally had moved a state away, we made the critical, if somewhat surprising, decision to be accountability partners for each other. When she and I had first met, we were both working towards our master's degrees. I was preparing for my final project and bracing myself for the very unstable job market of the 2008 recession, and Sally had just returned from two years in Eastern Europe and was in the middle of a bad breakup. Needless to say, it was a very trying time for both of us. Somehow, in spite of ourselves, our friendship survived our time as roommates. By December of 2010, in fact, we had realized we shared similar stress mechanisms and were in similar life places: single, at relatively new jobs, and in need of mutual support.

This relationship has continued to prove vital for both of us, in terms of physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Over the years, we've continued to talk weekly, confessing our weaknesses to each other, and singing hymns and quoting scripture to (and sometimes *at*) each other. And through it, I've become less sarcastic, less bitter, and much more content. Rather than looking on dating and married couples with mild resentment for what I've been denied, I've been increasingly able to "rejoice with those who

rejoice”—something that was especially important as a witty, single Christian man named Jeremy slowly entered into the regular cast of characters of Sally’s life. “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another,” and Sally has been the “pencil sharpener” used by God to sharpen me.

How much impact did this have on my life? Well, Sally’s wedding was one of four weddings I attended in 2014 (one of two that I stood in, in fact); as the last few of my friends are getting married and now buying houses and having babies (I know of seven babies born in July 2014 alone), it was absolutely essential to have accountability in my life—to have someone checking up on my emotional well-being, and to keep pointing me back to scripture for my foundation.

Accountability is especially valuable for those trying to quit porn or overcome some other specific behavior—but the truth is, a strong accountability relationship can (and should) be much more than that. I’ve become convinced that accountability is critical for singles in particular.

6 Ways Accountability is Critical

1. Accountability gives us a friend for the fight

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.”

– Ecclesiastes 4:9, NRSV

In some ways, Frodo and Sam from *The Lord of the Rings* are archetypal accountability partners. From the very beginning, Sam kept an eye out for “Mr. Frodo, Sir,” starting with eavesdropping on Frodo’s conversation with Gandalf in the Shire to (in the book) promising the elves traveling through the Shire to stick with his boss. He outthinks the rest of the Fellowship and catches up with Frodo when he tries to slip away. He keeps a watchful eye on Gollum, wisely realizing that his transformation and devotion may not be entirely sincere. When Frodo appears to be dead at the borders of Mordor, Sam picks up the Ring, and with it, the responsibility of destroying it; and when he realizes that Frodo isn’t dead, he immediately goes to his rescue. When Frodo loses the strength to climb Mount Doom, Sam picks Frodo up and carries him the last few steps. In reality, Frodo never would have completed his quest had Sam not stuck by his side every step of the way. Even presented with the opportunity for limitless power, Sam’s loyalty to his friend was unswerving.

Tolkien’s tale is not allegorical, but it’s safe to draw an analogy between Frodo’s journey and our own. More specifically, we all have our Rings, our “besetting sins” (Hebrews 12:1), our unique temptations that keep coming back to haunt us. For most of the people reading this book, that sin is pornography. For others, it may be an eating disorder. Or it may be an unhealthy obsession with online gaming, or with consoling yourself with material items, or one of a thousand other possibilities (and probably some combination of a few).

Whatever the struggle, the point is, we need a Sam. We need a friend for the fight. We need someone who knows our deepest

burdens and our secrets, and who can stand next to us, encouraging us and occasionally picking us up when we fail. As Crystal Renaud explains, “Just like confession means talking about the elephant in the room, accountability is about allowing someone to help you fight the elephant.”²²

Of course, it’s not like we’re fighting a literal, physical elephant, or carrying a literal, physical burden. We can’t just walk into Mordor and toss porn into a volcano. Nor can our accountability partner physically carry us. So, in practice, it can be hard to see what this looks like.

For me, this has played out a few ways. Sally and I still talk weekly, but we also got into the practice of calling each other in crisis mode—when something critical was going on, and we couldn’t wait until our next regularly-scheduled call. This helped us both emotionally, as well as prevented us from turning to the old standbys of Ben and Jerry to soothe our emotions.

Another friend and I have recently started keeping each other accountable for some habits we want to build. Simply texting each other at least once a day to check in and make sure we’re both on track has proven invaluable to both of us.

So as we work to break free from porn, something as simple as a daily text from our accountability partner along the lines of, “Stay strong, and let me know if you need to talk” could lead to the support we need.

2. Accountability puts a scalpel to our issues.

Toward the end of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, there's a scene where Harry, Ron, and Hermione are about to break the rules and leave their dormitory after-hours to stop the bad guy from stealing a powerful magic artifact. Before they leave, though, they must face none other than Neville Longbottom, a rather bumbling, ineffective student in their class. "You're sneaking out again, aren't you?" he asks. "I won't let you. You'll get [our classmates] into trouble again." He fails to stop them, and Harry and his friends manage to stop the villain...but at the end of the year banquet, headmaster Dumbledore gives the greatest honor to Neville. "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies," he explains, "but just as much to stand up to our friends."²³

Although Neville never becomes truly close with Harry, Ron, or Hermione, he still stumbled across two of the key traits of an accountability partner: the ability to recognize patterns of sinful behavior, and the courage to call the person out on them. Sam, for example, recognized Frodo's tendency to secrecy and his temptation to carry his burden alone; he saw it happen in the Shire, and he recognized it a second time when Frodo left the Fellowship at the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Or in real life, Sally has periodically seen things like my Facebook photo of a cart full of cheap post-Valentine's sale candy and rightly reached out to me in concern.

This, as Dumbledore points out, takes courage on the part of the accountability partner. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend," but even loving confrontation hurts. It hurts us when someone tells us

to stop doing what we know we need to stop doing; and it hurts our friends to have to continually tell us to stop and change course.

This is especially true in modern American society, which is very focused on the rightness of personal choice for your lifestyle. Want to sleep around on the first date? Go for it! Trying to pursue a sexual relationship with someone who's already married? Eh, not like there's anything sacred about marriage. Want to use porn? It's pretty widely culturally acceptable, so it *must* be okay!

We want to be accepted for who we are; but we forget that "who we are" is: "we are sinners, in need of grace." Left to our own devices, many of us are pretty awful people! We're selfish or lazy or rude, all under the guise of "who I am."

The band Muse sings, "I've had recurring nightmares that I was loved for who I am and missed the opportunity to be the better man." That truly is the job of the accountability partner: to recognize the sin in us, and to (lovingly) help us recognize it in ourselves and fight it. In Hebrews 12:11-13, it says:

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

Of course, our married partners have a form of built-in accountability with their spouse. When you rub shoulders with a person every day, your sins will be laid bare. But that just makes it even more important for singles to find someone to hold them accountable. Carolyn McCulley explains it this way:

As single adults, it's easier to be oblivious to our sins and so be cavalier about confession. It's also easy to withdraw when we're offended and not seek reconciliation. In effect, singleness seemingly provides the "option" of avoiding the hard work of self-examination, repentance, confession, and reconciliation that is required in a godly marriage. This is deceptive. Unconfessed sin has a destructive effect on a single adult's life, as well as upon the relationships within the church. So while we may have to work harder to practice this spiritual discipline, it's possible. One sure way to grow is to invite people to ask you questions about possible sins they observe. Another is to have an accountability partner with whom you meet regularly to reflect on your life and to confess sin.²⁴

3. Accountability reminds us we are not alone.

*With walls on every side you get accustomed to the view
A portion of reality, a fraction of the truth*

*All the while, a voice is calling you out of this tomb
When will you realize you are not alone?
No matter where you've been, you are more loved
than you know*

- Jill Phillips, "You Are Not Alone"

For those living in prolonged singleness, it's very easy to fall into the trap of self-pity and bitterness. We can look around a room and see mostly couples, and feel like the only singles in the world. One friend, for example, attended a wedding where there were only two unmarried men, and they both brought dates.

We're not alone, of course; we just need to find the other singles. In *The Big Bang Theory*, perpetual bachelors Raj and Stuart understand this, throwing a Valentine's Day party for other singles at Stuart's comic book shop.

As Raj explains:

We're all here tonight because we have no one to be with. But, this doesn't make us mutants. The only mutants here are in these comic books. We gotta stop defining our self-worth by whether or not we're in a relationship. You know what I see when I look around? I see a room full of great people. So let's give ourselves a break! We are a community, and as long as we have each other, we're never truly alone.²⁵

Granted, Raj leaves the party to go on a date with a listening woman who compliments him on his speech, but the sentiment still stands: we singles aren't mutants, and there are more of us out there than even we realize. Finding another single person of the same gender in particular means we have someone to turn to on those rough days. It means we have someone who understands.

4. Accountability keeps us healthy.

Did you know that single people die younger than married people?²⁶ Granted, that statement is a gross oversimplification – most studies only look at those who have never married in comparison to those married only once, excluding divorcees and widows. But it touches on the principle that accountable relationships, be they marriages or support groups, tend to result in healthier behaviors. Groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or Weight Watchers are founded on this concept. It also has a scriptural basis. We are to confess sins to God for forgiveness, and we are to also confess to each other “that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

I've found this particularly true in my own life. My impetus for accountability was weight loss; Sally and I each lost 30 pounds over the course of a year. For those of us tempted by pornography, an accountability partner can help us reframe our bitter and self-destructive thoughts and channel our energy into healthier behaviors instead.

5. Accountability keeps us involved.

First Corinthians 7:32 reminds us that “One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the

Lord.” However, most singles, when pressed, will confess that they “waste their singleness,” whether by playing video games or watching TV or becoming married to our job or obsessing over finding a spouse. Simply put, singles have more free time and flexibility than married people, but it also means we have more opportunity to be selfish with our time. Ideally, we need accountability partners who will encourage us to serve (or better yet, who will serve alongside us). Minimally, a regular reciprocal conversation with another single will get us involved in someone else’s story, and remind us that there’s more to life than what we personally face.

6. Accountability provides eternal perspective.

Often, the aforementioned selfishness with our time is accompanied by a false humility. This may manifest itself in a belief that because we are unloved, there is something wrong with us that makes us unlovable. Alternately, we may believe we are somehow better than others because we don’t need other people

Accountability to the Community

This chapter—and this book—is pretty focused on the need for person-to-person accountability. It’s also important to note that we are accountable to our local church community. We don’t need to tell everyone at our church about our very personal struggles, but we do need to be plugged in to a church community for mutual encouragement (Hebrews 10:25), for teaching and correction (Colossians 3:16), and for growth and use of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12). Highly personal accountability will result in a great amount of growth, but the accountability that comes from being connected to a local church community will foster a different and equally important kind of growth.

in our lives, unlike those married schmucks. Both of these lead to a lack of trust in God's work, either that He can use us in spite of ourselves or that we need to rely on His provision.

The reality is that, as Galatians 3 states, as Christians "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." God is at work in all believers, and an accountability partner will be able to look at your life from outside and see where He is moving when we can't see it ourselves.

Accountability and Pornography: Your Part of the Relationship

Hopefully by this point, you understand why accountability is a good idea. But what does it look like when you're working to break pornography temptations? Even if our accountability partner is our roommate and coworker, they can't look over our shoulder 24/7.

That's the other key part of the accountability relationship: providing your partner with the tools and information they need to support you in your recovery.

Part of this means developing patterns of openness and honesty. Your accountability partner can't help you if they don't know when you struggle. If you do nothing else in your accountability relationship, you need to set up a system where you tell your partner when you have slipped up.

Learn more about Screen Accountability and sign up at www.covenanteyes.com

A better option, though, is to install software on your computers, smartphones, and tablets to send a report of your Internet use to your partner. Covenant Eyes tracks your Internet usage by taking regular screenshots of your devices and compiling a sampling of those images into a report. Screen Accountability provides more holistic insight into what we actually look at on our screens. For some of us, just knowing that someone else will see where we go online is enough of a deterrent to stop us from going to porn in the first place.

More importantly, this information is helpful as a starting point for a conversation. When your partner knows you had a date at 7:00 on a Friday night and sees a porn binge at 7:30, they can probably infer certain things about how the date went. Or if they see a tendency of going on porn sites at 1:00 a.m., they can start texting you at 11:30 to suggest you go to bed. It means they can be specific when they counsel you and pray for you.

What about filtering?

Many people are familiar with the concept of Internet filters—some of us may even have grown up with a filter in place. The problem is, filtering addresses behaviors, not hearts—and many of us keep justifying our return to porn because of our lovesick hearts. We need better support via interpersonal relationships, not a fence.

Of course, some people will still choose filtering. That's fine; it works well as an extra layer of protection. We suggest using Covenant Eyes Blocking. The Covenant Eyes blocking service is simple. It automatically blocks known pornography domains and provides protections most people desire, like Safe Search on Google and Bing and YouTube Restricted Mode.

Getting Started with Accountability

1. Who to Choose

If you're truly fortunate, you've got a face floating in your mind right now as an ideal Accountability Partner. When Sally and I decided to move from friendship to accountability, for example, it was an obvious choice: we were both single and wanted to be healthier. We came from similar church environments and even grew up reading the same books and listening to the same kids' shows on Family Life Radio (*Jungle Jam and Friends* for the win!). Perhaps most importantly, we knew we both cared deeply about personal growth and health (spiritual, emotional, and physical).

We both met the following qualifications:

- + Godly—We are both heavily involved in ministry and want to grow closer to Christ.
- + Trustworthy—Sally and I have proved, over and over, that we could talk deeply about personal struggles and the other person would keep them confidential.
- + Challenging, not condemning—We didn't shy away from (proverbially) kicking each other in the pants when we needed it...but we also empathize through the struggle.

Choosing a Partner

This brief video explains how to choose a good Accountability Partner



[Click to watch the video](#)

- + Mature—We aren't necessarily always completely put together... but we know where to look in scripture for answers, and that counts for a lot.

Those were perhaps the most important characteristics that led to successful accountability. But there were a couple of secondary qualifications that were extremely beneficial:

- + Single—We understood the trials of being single women.
- + Same gender—We are both heterosexual women, so we didn't have to worry about becoming romantically entangled with each other. (Seriously, be extremely cautious about close friendships with singles of the opposite gender, even if you have no romantic interest in that person; it's a recipe for miscommunication and outright heartbreak.)
- + Similar interests—Sally and I were both part of the same hobby-based group of friends and have a similar sense of humor (see also our visit to a pencil sharpener museum). This natural rapport isn't strictly necessary, but makes an accountability relationship significantly easier.

Peers or Mentors?

I was extremely fortunate to find a peer as an accountability partner. Many people are not so fortunate. Porn is such a prevalent problem that, even if you find someone who at least superficially meets these criteria, they may try to justify porn use, or may be trapped themselves.

For example, one young man commented on the Covenant Eyes blog, "I have also told a close friend of mine (who is also Christian)

about this addiction I have had, and he told me he is not perfect either and that he has also viewed pornography before but that he has discipline to not view it as a person who would be addicted to it would view it.” Based on this comment, this friend would be a poor choice as this man’s accountability partner; he does not understand porn as a sinful activity, and therefore cannot be expected to combat sinful tendencies with scripture.

Regardless of whether you have a peer who fits the criteria, you may want to consider asking an older, mature Christian to hold you accountable as a mentor. This is especially true if you’ve been using porn for a long time, or if the friend you asked admits to the same struggle. Mutual accountability will help both of you, but having a third person act as a mentor will help both of you find healing, whereas the two of you alone will be more prone to failure.

Please note the implicit statement: **you may need more than one accountability partner in the struggle, possibly serving different functions.** Another single may help you address the emotional aspects of singleness. A married accountability partner may be your best cheerleader. A mentor may be ideal for spiritual growth, and provide guidance about whether you should pursue a relationship with someone or not.

(By the way, depending on how long you’ve been struggling with porn, you may need to seek expert advice from a licensed therapist. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t seek peer-to-peer accountability too.)

2. Inviting An Accountability Partner

Once you've picked the person (or people) you want to hold you accountable, you need to take the step of actually talking to them. If you're already close to this person, it should be a relatively easy step to take; the hard part is to admit you're struggling and need help. Sally and I had both made noise about wanting to be healthier, but even so, taking the step of holding each other accountable about healthy eating still involved a bit of research and a long conversation about what accountability would mean for us.

Don't be surprised if starting that initial conversation feels incredibly difficult and scary. I once remember sitting down with another friend for a meal at her request. I could tell something was on her mind, but it took a half hour of chit-chat before she felt like she could broach the idea of me being her accountability partner on emotional issues related to singleness. (She has since gotten married.)

Before talking to your potential partner, try writing out your goals. The obvious one is "stop watching porn," but other goals may include "growing spiritually" or "finding hope in God and not relationships." You should also write down a few questions you want your partner to ask you on a regular basis. Here are some suggestions:

- + How often are you being tempted to look at sexually provocative material?
- + What is your greatest weakness online this week?
- + What was the most tempting thing you encountered since we last spoke?

- + Did something happen this week that was particularly frustrating or depressing?

You may also want to think through what an ideal accountability relationship looks like. Is it a couple of texts a week and an occasional coffee? Is it a weekly phone call? A biweekly dinner?

Finally, download our book *Coming Clean*, which will help paint a picture of what good accountability looks like, and bring it to your accountability partner as well.

This is a lot of work before you even talk to your potential Accountability Partner, but it should set your accountability relationship up for success.

3. Getting started with your technology plan

Once you have an accountability partner and a plan, the obvious step is to enact it. Your first step is to sign up for Covenant Eyes, and actually follow through by installing it on any computers you use, as well as your smartphones and tablets. You also need to digitally invite your accountability partner to receive your reports, and your partner needs to take time to adjust settings for your reports.

You may want to make your first accountability meeting with your partner entirely focused on setting up technology solutions cooperatively. Take some time one afternoon or evening and manually walk through your technology use. This includes Covenant Eyes, of course, but you may need to go deeper.

How does Covenant Eyes work?

For one monthly fee, Covenant Eyes monitors and reports your Internet use across major devices—no limits on how many devices you can install it on.

Covenant Eyes Screen

Accountability software regularly captures screenshots on your devices. It analyzes those screenshots to determine whether they contain explicit material. Then, images are blurred to hide private information and graphic imagery. A handful of these blurred images that are representative of your Internet usage are then selected and sent to your partner.

Screen Accountability provides more holistic insight into what we actually look at on our screens. Experience accountability online with Covenant Eyes right now at www.covenanteyes.com.

Depending on your stage in life, you may or may not be able to install Covenant Eyes on every device you use to go online. For example, many people are ditching personal computers and laptops in favor of using only phones and tablets, but for writing projects you may use a computer at the library or a computer lab. Obviously, you can't install software on a public device. Or, if you're a gamer, you may use a game console to go online.

You and your partner should discuss use cases like this and enact plans. For example, you may not be able to install Covenant Eyes on your work computer due to technological restrictions and regulations, but you may be able to arrange your work station such that the monitor is facing public areas at all times; you won't be tempted to surf for porn over lunch break (or spend excessive time on Facebook) if you know that your boss or colleagues could walk past at any time.

4. Keeping the conversation going

I used to think I was bad at friendships, but as I've gotten older I've discovered that it's not just me; it's really hard to be good at friendships. Facebook has made it easy to stay in touch with old friends, but it's also made us lazy about having actual conversations with even our closest friends. As my own friends have started moving away or started having kids (which seem to be distracting and time-consuming, for some strange reason), I've found that the friends I've kept are the ones I've intentionally tried to keep. For instance, about a dozen of my friends, scattered across three states, get together every six months or so to play games and hang out at what amounts to a weekend-long grown up slumber party. We're geographically distant, but because we've created a tradition, we've stayed pretty close.

Intentionality, then, is key for any friendship, and it's absolutely vital for an accountability relationship. If you want healing and growth, then you need to build space for this.

Sally and I, for example, have scheduled time to talk every Sunday. When either of us has another commitment, we don't just let it pass; we reschedule. It's part of our routine, and it's the reason we've remained accountability partners, and, heck, friends over the last few years.

For the first few meetings, it's especially important to create an intentional plan. Step one is to put it on your calendars and make it a priority. Reviewing and periodically revising your key questions is also key.

It's also often helpful to make reciprocity part of your accountability relationship. As already stated, you probably shouldn't get a fellow porn-struggler as your sole accountability partner—you're encouraging further temptations for both of you—but there may be something the other person needs help with. Is your accountability partner bad about eating out too much? Bad about doing a daily quiet time? Forget to floss? One friend and I poke each other about drinking more water and doing a daily quiet time respectively.

Of course, you can't force reciprocity, but you can encourage it. Start by suggesting that your accountability partner also signs up for Covenant Eyes and sends you their reports. Your partner may not have specific online concerns or struggles, but it can be a starting point for you to see healthy online habits, and for them to start opening up about their own concerns.

handing God our emotions

Learning to rely on God and building up support through accountability are both very good long-term solutions for overcoming temptations and finding contentment. However, they are just that: long-term solutions. Contentment doesn't come in a day. And while it would be foolish to give up on personal Bible study or accountability when we don't see immediate results, it would also be foolish to expect immediate results in the first place.

This means that for months (if not years), many of us will continue to deal with the emotional turmoil that has kept us turning to porn in the past.

Nobody is immune to emotional turmoil, of course. But as singles, there seem to be a few specific emotions that come up time and again. To find joy and contentment instead of turning to pornography, we *must* prepare ourselves to handle them when they come.

Dealing with Loneliness

One of the groomsmen at a relative's wedding was also an old

college acquaintance of mine. We hadn't kept in particular contact over the years, but we made sure to set aside a few minutes for as much conversation as was permitted by the dance music blasting over the loudspeakers.

We had the usual conversations—oh, what are you up to these days, that sort of thing. Both of us, it turned out, were still single, lived alone, and lived fairly far from our respective jobs. At one point, I mentioned to him I loved my long commute.

"How can you stand it?" he asked, shocked.

Personally, I find joy in solitude. Even though I live alone, my daily drive allows me to refocus from work and reset for my personal commitments. And even though I have no housemates, only rarely do I ever feel alone. Between Covenant Eyes' surprisingly social environment and my close-knit group of (mostly married) friends, rare is the time that I feel truly lonely; and when I do, my friend Sally is only a phone call away.

Of course, not many people are like that. Loneliness is perhaps the most pervasive feeling for singles. In fact, it may have been one of the first emotions in the garden; Adam without Eve was the only thing God created that he declared not good.

When you're feeling lonely, it's not long until you attempt to self-medicate. Materialism and over-busyness are big traps for lonely people. Porn is another, especially since porn was, in many ways, designed for the viewer to imagine themselves as a participant.

See, singles are often tempted to feel like the prophet Elijah. One of only two men in the Bible who are recorded to have escaped death, he was extremely close to God in a land where there were very few believers. Shortly after demonstrating God's power on Mount Carmel, Queen Jezebel threatened to murder him (1 Kings 19). Elijah promptly fled and fell into a great depression. "They've killed your prophets," he said. "Only I am left."

Sometimes we are particularly vulnerable to spiritual warfare. Weddings can be incredibly difficult times, especially when we attend alone yet again. "Only I am left," we may cry, then turn to self-medicating behaviors like porn. But remember, with God you are never alone...and usually the support will be physically available, not just the nebulous spirituality of "relying on God." "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel," God says to Elijah, and instructs him to anoint Elisha as prophet in his place—Elisha, whose loyalty was so great that he refused to leave Elijah even when he was told to stay back at the end, and was allowed to see Elijah taken up to Heaven.

Unless you've been trapped on a deserted island for the last 10 years (and if that's the case, how are you reading this?), you are not alone. People become single for any number of reasons, including death and divorce. Singles are everywhere—and not just singles, but others who want to open their homes and share their lives with you, if you open your eyes and look.

So for many, the question isn't simply, "How do I stop watching porn?" It's actually more, "I watch porn in part because I feel lonely. How do I stop feeling lonely?"

One trick to prevent loneliness is to seek out opportunities to spend time with others. Jesus, the ultimate Single Man, was rarely alone; in fact, he had to seek out solitude to commune with God the Father. Andreas J. Köstenberger writes:

[Jesus'] inner circle was made up of three of his followers, and he was accompanied by the twelve apostles as well as a group of devoted women followers (Luke 8:1-3). Jesus also maintained close friendships with others, perhaps most notably the family of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary in Bethany near Jerusalem (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-12:19). As an itinerant preacher, Jesus enjoyed the hospitality of others and came in close contact with many who had need and ministered to them.²⁷

Your accountability partner, then, is a key solution for loneliness. Sally and I, for example, intentionally scheduled a weekly phone call, but we also realized fairly quickly as accountability partners that when we were in emotional distress, we should call each other. This was especially true before her now-husband came on the scene. As two single women, we could understand each other in ways that others could not.

It's also important to get plugged in to a good social group. This group does not necessarily have to be all singles; in fact, it most likely won't be. The idea is less one-to-one interactions and more about building a vibrant social life—a challenge for all post-college

adults. Getting involved in a small group at your church is one key step, especially if you can find one with common interests. If your community has a calendar for local events, it's worth looking for regular meetups for any interests you have. My own city has a monthly board game meet-up group, and a number of us (an amalgamation of friends from grad school, church, the local group, and other spots) have spun off to do a weekly game night in people's houses. Book clubs, art courses, and classes at the gym are also good places to go to start building communities. Feeling lonely? Retrain yourself to think about the next time you'll all hang out, and invite one or two of your closest friends out for a meal.

Another solution to loneliness is to stop looking inward and look outward instead. Look around you and count up the number of singles and other people you know. Carolyn McCulley writes,

Even in your greatest trials, hasn't God provided companionship? In my experience, every time a friend marries or I've moved or someone leaves, He shortly ushers a new friendship into my life. No, it's not always the same; nor is it always at the same depth as before, but I've never been left completely on my own. I'm teaching myself that whenever I feel alone in a crowd, I should look around for someone else who may be feeling the same way—so that I may be used by God to extend grace and kindness instead of being consumed by my own feelings.²⁸

Dealing with Bitterness

A few years ago, I prayed one of the most significant prayers of my life: “Lord, help me stop being bitter.”

In spite of a loving home, a series of pretty mild circumstances had twisted me entirely inward, leaving me grumpy and depressed when someone (again) misjudged and excluded me; something was (again) denied to me; when something (again) didn’t go my way. Time and maturity had improved my life, but I still turned to bitterness as a defense mechanism to the point that my bitterness was almost a joke among my friends.

And, of course, this did not produce healthy behaviors in me. As a child I retreated mostly to books; later it was video games and junk food.

In a lot of ways, bitterness is just evidence of a lack of faith. Carolyn McCulley explains using Naomi (a.k.a., the other single woman in the book of Ruth):

When Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, they were greeted by the women of that town, who marveled that Naomi had returned. But to Naomi, overcome by self-pity, their greetings were hollow. “Do not call me Naomi [pleasant],” she said. “Call me Mara [bitter], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi,

when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (Ruth 1:20-21). [...]

But how many of us have stopped at this point in the story and considered how relevant Naomi's words are to our own lives? Here we have two single women, one of whom has evaluated her present unhappy condition and decided that God was always going to be dealing bitterly with her. Naomi assumed that her future was as barren as she was, but that wasn't true. Even as she uttered her complaint, God was quietly orchestrating the circumstances that would lead not only to the redemption of Naomi's family line and property, but also to the ancestry of Jesus Christ.²⁹

Many of us look at our singleness and never look much farther than ourselves and our own circumstances. We fail to understand that God's sovereignty isn't just a global phenomenon; it's as detailed as our personal life and choices. Yes, sin from both ourselves and other people impacts our circumstances, but if we serve a God who can and will raise the dead, then we serve a God who can work even our biggest screw-ups to "the good of those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

To start killing bitterness and building faith, I cannot overemphasize the importance of personal Bible study. If Jesus was "the Word made flesh" (John 1:14), then it follows that the Bible is essentially

Jesus in printed form. You want to start trusting a person, you have to get to know them and realize they are trustworthy. Do you want to trust God and stop being bitter about your circumstances? Get closer to God through His word. It's full of stories of His sovereignty, like that of Ruth and Naomi, and when you hear enough stories of God's faithfulness you begin to believe it.

It's also worth periodically reviewing your own life for hints of God's work. I can pinpoint a couple of chance incidents over the course of my life that have led me to a stronger faith. My previous car was a total junk heap, for example, and there were many instances where I wished I had a husband to deal with the mechanics for me. But through God's mercy, all of the breakdowns either happened locally, or a lot of friends were around to help take care of me. I might not have liked the frequent breakdowns, but God never abandoned me. So what reason do I have to be bitter?

Finally, remember to look around you. You're not the only single out there; you're not the only one dealing with similar problems as you. In fact, you probably know people who have worse (if different) troubles than you.

In order to counteract bitterness at weddings, for example, I've started to pray for the other singles I can see. Usually I can find at least one person whose pain is probably greater than mine. In one wedding where I was a bridesmaid, I spent the entire time praying for the newly-divorced groomsman standing on the other side of the couple. I don't know if it helped him get through the ceremony, but it certainly helped me.

Really, this point holds true for virtually anything we singles feel: look around and remember that others are there with you. Don't rejoice in others' miseries, of course, but do look at them as reminders that you are not alone...and use it as an opportunity to share God's goodness.

changing the cage: creativity's role

*The sin of sloth wants my every day
Rose tinted glasses I use every way
Now we're crying out
We need some purpose guiding all our days*

*It's the temptation of nothingness
That weighs my weary soul*

- Adam Wedd, "The Temptation of Nothingness"

 [Click to listen to "The Temptation of Nothingness."](#)

I was only five when my mother began what would become a formative tradition: she read *The Chronicles of Narnia* aloud to my family. I remember little of that first experience. I remember the sweltering heat of a Michigan July. I remember being confused and scared by *The Last Battle* (an odd experience after the sheer delight of many of the other books). And I remember falling in love with Narnia and Aslan, who I already understood to be an allegory for Jesus.

On the same bookshelf as the C. S. Lewis collection were other important authors. We'd read Corrie Ten Boom's *The Hiding Place* a few years later, when I was 10 or so; and other books on the shelf would include classics like John Stott's *Basic Christianity*.

On the radio in the background, Mom would have played a blend of classical and contemporary Christian music. Rich Mullins remains a favorite:

*And if I stand, let me stand on the promise that
you will pull me through
And if I can't, let me fall on the grace that has
brought me to you
And if I sing, let me sing for the joy that has borne
in me these songs
And if I weep, let it be as a man who is longing for
his home*

- Rich Mullins, "If I Stand"

 [Click to listen to "If I Stand."](#)

There are two common denominators among these people. One huge one: They were all single for almost all their lives. John Stott and Corrie Ten Boom both died in their 90s and never married. Rich Mullins was still a bachelor at his tragic early death in his 40s. C. S. Lewis did marry—in his 50s, and he became a widower just four years later.

The other common denominator? They did not sit around moping about their singleness. Rather, they used their time as singles to advance the kingdom of God. In a 16-year period, Rich Mullins released one musical and nine albums, and was working on a tenth when he passed away. Corrie Ten Boom set up a rehabilitation center and traveled the world as a speaker, telling her story. John Stott wrote over 50 books. And C. S. Lewis wrote 74 books (including poetry and essay collections), ranging from medieval literary analysis to science fiction to Mere Christianity, widely considered to be one of the most important works of Christian apologetics published in the 20th Century, if not ever.

These and other great single Christian men and women simply reflect Paul's sentiments in 1 Corinthians 7:32-33, 35 (emphasis mine):

*I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife... I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, **but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.***

While we're single, we have two critical advantages over our dating and married friends: time and focus. When I get home from work, my time is usually my own. I can eat when I'm hungry; I can make as many plans as I want in the evenings. I can drop everything for

coffee with a friend. I can even pack up and leave for the weekend on a whim if I want. Any time commitments are entirely voluntary. I'm not worried about getting the kids to soccer practice on time, or feeding a husband and children, or dealing with a sick toddler at 2 a.m. This also means I can focus on my own projects without fear of interruptions. I can plan my Monday evenings around writing and editing my church's blog, or practice my piano without embarrassment or distraction.

The Dual Role of Creativity in a Single's Life

Of course, having this time and focus doesn't mean we necessarily use it well. My own proclivities are to play marathon sessions of video games rather than, say, write or play music. There's a reason highly productive people like John Stott and C. S. Lewis are so rare.

Our singleness just makes it all the more important that we don't waste our lives. Parenthood, for example, is an inherently meaningful occupation, even when it doesn't feel like it; parenting means pouring time and energy into a tiny life. By contrast, there is no lasting value in me playing through *Mass Effect 3* for the fifth time. There's nothing wrong with enjoying leisurely pursuits, of course, but it's very easy for singles to be gluttons for free time. Is that why God planted us on this planet? To binge on porn and whine that we're alone? Or to do something with lasting value?

Steve Taylor & The Perfect Foil sing in "A Life Preserved":

| *Bobbing for air, been up and down*
| *Once renowned, dangling for another act*

*Another tactical advance to who knows where
You found me there
I heard you there*

*Calling me out of the shallows of my world
Called to something graceful and true
Gratitude's too cheap a word for all you've
reassembled
From a spirit broken and unnerved
A life preserved*

 [Click to listen to "A Life Preserved."](#)

An artist friend once told me that even in the act of sitting in front of the TV with a pencil and sketchbook in hand, she felt like she was giving something back to the world. She was honing a skill, one that she has used to beautify others' lives. Finding a creative hobby—drawing, music, acting, wood carving, writing, knitting, designing an app, whatever—allows us to do the same.

But that's not the only benefit. There are tremendous emotional benefits as well. Art (or other creative work) is often an effective method for dealing with stressful circumstances. It has the power to speak deeply into our hearts, to bring a wave of healing and chase away the demons, at least temporarily.

This power comes from experiencing art, but it especially comes through creating it. Author Neil Gaiman put it this way in a commencement speech:

Life is sometimes hard. Things go wrong, in life and in love and in business and in friendship and in health and in all the other ways that life can go wrong. And when things get tough, this is what you should do.

Make good art.

I'm serious. Husband runs off with a politician? Make good art. Leg crushed and then eaten by a mutated boa constrictor? Make good art. IRS on your trail? Make good art. Cat exploded? Make good art. Somebody on the Internet thinks what you do is stupid or evil or it's all been done before? Make good art. Probably things will work out somehow, and eventually time will take the sting away, but that doesn't matter. Do what only you do best. Make good art.

Make it on the good days too.³⁰

Transforming pain into art is a well-documented phenomenon. Artists like Frida Kahlo and Vincent Van Gogh famously painted their way through extreme physical and emotional pain, for example. And C. S. Lewis channeled his pain on the death of his wife into *A Grief Observed*. A.S. Peterson was single when he wrote the books *Fiddler's Gun* and *Fiddler's Green*, two tremendously lonely stories about a young woman during the American Revolution who is struggling to find her place (a path leading to and through

piracy, for the record). He has since said that he never would have been able to write the books if he were married; he needed the loneliness of solitude as fuel for his craft.³¹

One of my personal favorite stories is from Rich Mullins. Despite being a highly influential Christian artist, he struggled deeply with the temptation to sexual sins, including watching pornographic videos alone in his hotel rooms.

One night on tour in Amsterdam, with a bandmate in the next bed over, he lay awake, trembling and overwhelmed with the desire to just walk through the Red Light district—“because sometimes it’s nice to be tempted.” Finally he picked up a notebook and wrote:

*And I wake up in the night and feel the dark
It’s so hot inside my soul
I swear there must be blisters on my heart*

*So hold me Jesus, ‘cause I’m shaking like a leaf
You have been King of my glory
Won’t You be my Prince of Peace³²*

 [Click to listen to “Hold Me Jesus.”](#)

Scriptural examples abound as well. Significant portions of the book of Psalms are the poet’s responses to external circumstances. Psalm 51 is an easy example: it’s David, grieving over his adultery with Bathsheba and begging for God’s mercy. Even Jonah, after three days in the belly of a giant sea creature, ultimately responds to God through a prayerful poem (Jonah 2).

Our God is the Creator-God, and responding to Him (and our own emotional burdens, and our own sins) is a natural part of being human, of being created in the image of the Creator. As the poet Luci Shaw says, "We are created to create. We are distinct so that we can leave a distinct imprint."³³

Getting Started: Ditching the Bad Art

One of the perennial problems of modern society is that we forget how to be creative. Most of us stop coloring at age 7 or 8 (around the time that we start getting good at it, coincidentally). Schools stop requiring students to take music or art courses in Middle School. Boring academic assignments kill the love for writing. And this all assumes an early exposure to artistic work in the first place.

Regardless of whether you feel any personal creative inspiration, one thing everyone should do is to become judicious about entertainment choices. This especially includes TV, video games, music, and books. **All art and media, whether you're creating it or simply experiencing it, is a mood regulator; it has the power to make you happy or unhappy, to turn you on or make you calm.** That's why it's important to be incredibly choosy about what we watch or listen to. We've already talked about how these entertainment forms lie to us about the importance of sex; it goes to follow that we should stop listening to the lies.

Shortly before the movie *50 Shades of Gray* came out, a fellow Covenant Eyes employee got into a debate with her sister about whether she should see the movie. To us here at Covenant Eyes, it's poorly-written smut at best and outright pornographic at worst;

to my coworker's sister, though, it's a compelling story. Debates about its relative literary merits aside, my coworker refuses and will continue to refuse to watch *50 Shades of Gray* or its already-ordered sequels. As she explained, "I don't want either the sex or the violence in my head. I don't want them to change who I am."

My coworker was exactly right, of course. She was echoing what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:31: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

This doesn't mean becoming puritanical in our entertainment choices. It simply means being cautious about what enters into your heart and life. Proverbs 4:23 says, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." Fill your heart with garbage, and from it will flow garbage. Fill your heart with obnoxious platitudes, and from it will spring obnoxious platitudes. Fill your heart with thought-provoking work or clean hilarity, and from it will spring thought-provoking work and clean hilarity.

Let's take video games for a minute, as an example that's near and dear to my own heart. Obviously, I'm not going to suddenly say that all video games are evil. There are, however, certain lines that I've had to draw for my own mental health. For example, I physically broke my copy of *The Sims 3* when I realized I was increasingly using it for essentially voyeuristic purposes (and even when I wasn't, it was consuming all of my free time). Another friend has periodically had me pre-approve games or optional cut-scenes based off female characters' clothing (because, let's face it, sometimes female fighters are ridiculously underdressed).

And really, why waste my time and brain cells on games like that when there are other, better options? The Portal series, for example, has witty dialogue and features puzzle-solving, not violence. *The Mass Effect* trilogy is rated Mature for good reason, but it also provides a nuanced look at morality and consequences. And the *LEGO* games are great for cheesy entertainment.

The line between worthless and worthwhile entertainment will differ for everyone (most people won't have problems with *The Sims*, for example). You'll have to choose your own boundaries for yourself. One thing I would advocate, though, is that, as you break free from pornographic temptations, you become extremely choosy when it comes to movies and TV shows with sexual situations. To paraphrase Mark 9:27, "If Game of Thrones causes you to stumble, cancel your HBO subscription. It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God without knowing what happens to the Lannisters than, with full spoilers, be cast into Hell."

Surrounding Yourself with Good Art

The corollary to ditching bad art is to surround yourself with good art, especially when you're feeling stressed and depressed. If we're craving porn, the first thing we need to do may be to turn on the radio or pop in a movie—do something to give us a sensory replacement of watching porn without the sexual aspects. When I'm feeling lonely, something goofy like *Shrek* will remind me that everyone is lovable, even ogres and dragons. When I feel like I've screwed something up epically, *The LEGO Movie* reminds me that I am special, created in the image of God. When yet another guy is uninterested, *27 Dresses* is a stand-in for every daydream I have

for the future. And when I'm angry or frustrated, well, sometimes there's nothing better than watching dinosaurs chomp people in half in *Jurassic Park*.

Again, there's a biblical basis for this. Saul, the first king of Israel, suffered from literally demonic bouts of depression. When the then-unknown David came and played the lyre for the king, "Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him" (1 Samuel 16:23).

One of the reasons this book has been seasoned liberally with song lyrics and pop culture references is that these songs and movies have helped me on my own journey. They have helped me name my emotions and needs; they have helped me weep when tears wouldn't otherwise come. There have been seasons where I've put a particular song or album on repeat, because that particular music has helped me channel and interpret my circumstances. In some cases, the songs have reminded me that my own struggles aren't unique.

*Music, it makes you feel good,
makes you feel understood,
like you're not alone,
you're not a rolling stone,
not the only one on the road.*

- Drew Holcomb and the Neighbors, "Here We Go"

 [Click to listen to "Here We Go."](#)

Over the years, some favorites have made it onto mix CDs and playlists, often revolving around some form of life change. One such playlist centered around my rocky transition from grad school to the professional world; nearly all the songs included a theme of uncertainty and instability (such as Ben Folds' "You Don't Know Me"), but the CD ended with Switchfoot's "This is Home" from the *Prince Caspian* soundtrack; every time I listened to it, it brought me on a musical journey from doubt and fear to faith and belonging—a journey that roughly mirrored my own, and led me to deeper trust in God.

The trick is to actually pay attention to the message of the music you listen to or the movies and TV shows you watch (you internalize them, even if you don't actively listen to them). Then surround yourself primarily with the messages you want to hear. Let the music reflect your own self-doubt, yes; but let it lead you to a place of hope.

Journaling for Healing

The next step, beyond just consuming entertainment, is to start creating things yourself, and using your creativity to interpret and process your thoughts and circumstances. Erwin McManus explains in *The Artisan Soul*, "Art is an interpretation of life. At its essence, reduced to its most simple expression, art is our translation of all human experience."³⁴

For the non-creatives among us, using art as a way to deal with emotional turmoil seems like a cause for more emotional turmoil, not a way to heal and do meaningful work. Many of us probably

stopped pursuing artistic endeavors around 6th grade, when schools stopped requiring it as part of their curriculum. Some of us may sing in church or occasionally doodle during a work meeting that runs long, but we have no idea where to begin even as a hobby, let alone for therapeutic purposes.

Journaling is an excellent place to start. Journaling is not a public art form; the only audience for our journals is us. As such it gives us the opportunity to write our thoughts and fears in an unedited, unfiltered manner. In *Breath for the Bones*, Luci Shaw explains it this way:

A journal offers a way of entering into the process of personal reflection; discovering insight; and growing in maturity, self-understanding, and God-awareness. I feel that keeping a consistent, personal journal is a form of prayer; as I write, honest and transparent to God and myself, I may become conscious of the divine presence directing my thoughts and conclusions. I sense that God is with me in the intimacy gained on these private pages. I can deal with emotional difficulties as I write from the inside out. I can also grow artistically and spiritually as my secret thoughts find their most compelling and honest avenues of expression. [...]

Journal writing is central to helping us see how we've grown, where we've come from, if we have

learned from our mistakes and successes, or if we see ourselves repeating the same cycle of futility—of not moving on, not processing things. We can discover a great deal by reading back in our journals. [...]

If I am in pain, feeling lonely or depressed or just downright miserable, writing in my journal offers comfort. I write it all down, and somehow it is cathartic. Much of that pain inside me feels chaotic. I can't analyze it. As I write it down on the page, it is drawn out of me, and I can see it with better perspective. There is pain on the page!³⁵

Journaling, you see, is *not* an exercise best left to prepubescent girls. Rather, it forces you to think through and write out your pain, and also chronicle your triumphs. This could fall in the category of multi-page epics, or it could be a simple sentence or two: “Wanted to watch porn today. Called my friend instead. Feeling better about life now.”

A closely related idea is to carry around a “commonplace book”—essentially, an old-fashioned hodge-podge of interesting information and quotes (Pinterest is fundamentally a modern electronic equivalent). I keep a small notebook with me, where I copy meaningful book quotes or song lyrics, take notes, or jot down ideas. There's some evidence that the act of writing things down by hand bolsters memory,³⁶ so copying down a verse of scripture or meaningful quote could help you recall it when you're struggling

and need it. Minimally, you can flip through it again for inspiration and encouragement.

Moving into the Creative Space

Remember, for us singles in particular, part of breaking free from porn is to find a better, more lasting use for our time. I can fill my hours with video games, sure, but as a rule they will do no good to anyone but me. Each of us has some sort of God-given skill or ability, so we need to use them.

The parable of the talents comes to mind. To summarize Matthew 25:14-30, a man gives several servants different amounts of money (“talents”) to invest; when he returns, he rewards the servants who invested theirs and got a return, and punishes the servant who buried his money in the ground, not even taking it to the bank. In this parable, “talents” are a specific monetary denomination, but the meaning easily extends to talents as we know them—skills or gifts.

Everyone has some degree of talent; invest it. One (single) friend enjoys photography; she may never sell a single print, but she blesses her Facebook friends with her photos, often paired with song lyrics or scripture (trust me, it’s much less cheesy than it sounds). Another friend channels her energy into knitting gifts for friends; it allows her to decompress by marathoning *Doctor Who* while also enriching the lives of those around her. Two other friends spent their single years participating in a community handbell choir. We’re talking beyond the average church level; we’re talking a touring group. Their singleness allowed them

to more easily travel on weekends while honing their skills and experiencing catharsis from music. Still another friend participates actively in community theater, ranging from acting to directing to working on sets and costumes. And yet another friend got his friends together for musical jam sessions.

These friends could wallow in self-pity (and probably have), but more often they use their time and talents to bring joy to others.

Again, these creative endeavors can help us process personal turmoil. Erwin McManus explains, “The creative process is far too often inspired by our most painful experiences rather than our most inspiring ones. It would not be a stretch to say that for many artists, authenticity and tragedy are inseparable. The darker you are, the more honest you are” (74-75).³⁷ Our pornography use stems from the blackness of our hearts; art helps us bring our darkness to the light of day, where it can be healed.

It may require some experimenting to find your artistic niche. I highly recommend setting aside some cash for lessons or continuing education courses. Want to learn guitar? Check your local music store for info on lessons. Want to write better? Your local library may offer writing workshops. Photography? Wood carving? Jewelry making? Check with your local parks and recreation department. And your local community college or university may similarly offer a wide variety of evening continuing education classes—no college degree required.

Taking a class will let you experiment under professional tutelage while also inspiring further creativity and building community. The

latter aspect is especially important. First, interacting with people with similar goals helps break the feelings of loneliness. From a creative standpoint, getting feedback is also vital to making our own work better. After all, very few people could write symphonies at age 6.

Remember to give yourself room to experiment. The first thing you try may not be the thing you enjoy doing. (For example, I enjoyed playing with clay in grade school, but did not find it cathartic as an adult.) The point is to find something you enjoy that can eventually be honed into a skill that allows you to give something back to the world.

“But I’m just not creative!”

I do want to acknowledge what many of you are thinking: you’re not artistic. That’s fine! Not everyone can be a warrior-poet-politician like King David. Each of us is wired differently. The idea is not that you must mold yourself into the next master artist or bestselling novelist, but rather that you do something that helps you deal with personal pain and serve others.

Volunteering in general can be a great low-cost way to not waste your singleness. Something simple, like volunteering at your church, can be a great place to start. My church is large, so volunteering there can be as simple as opening doors and shaking hands as part of the Welcome Team. If you attend a smaller church, it could be as simple as offering to show up early to turn on the coffee pot, or learning to run the sound equipment. These small activities help serve the church as a whole, and over time they will

help you develop a godly attitude of humble service as well.

Remember, skills that seem basic to you may not seem basic to everybody. For example, I know many guys consider an oil change to be a basic life skill, but it's not for many people; my church has a "Guys' Stuff" ministry that offers periodic oil changes to needy people. If you're mechanically-minded, you could be the on-call guy to help fix maintenance problems around the church building, and you could help organize maintenance projects for the elderly folks in attendance.

Whether you like kids or sports or working with animals or whatever, find something creative to do with that talent—something that gives back to your community. If you long to be a parent, that may mean joining a Big Brother/Big Sister organization. If you're an athlete, maybe that means organizing a softball league at your church, or volunteering as a coach in a Little League team. Love to bake? Bring in a loaf of homemade banana bread for church volunteers, who often come in an hour before service and stay an hour late.

Think outside the box! One single friend is a programmer and goes rock-climbing; he is using his free time to write an app that measures stats related to grip and climbing height.

The ultimate point of all of this is to not just sit around, filling our hours with porn, waiting for life to start. Each of us has some sort of gifting (spiritual and skill-set); like John Stott and C. S. Lewis and Corrie Ten Boom and Rich Mullins, let's use them to bring light and joy to others.

bringing it together: priests and princes in the kingdom of God

Sally's wedding had been a very long day. Between insomnia, early rising for wedding prep, and staying until very close to the bitter end of the reception, I was beat and exhausted. I was absolutely happy for my friend...but the usual lingering self-consciousness and loneliness was creeping in. Then, music on shuffle, I heard:

*It's so easy to cash in these chips on my shoulder
So easy to loose this old tongue like a tiger
It's easy to let all this bitterness smolder
Just to hide it away like a cigarette lighter*

*It's easy to curse and to hurt and to hinder
It's easy to not have the heart to remember
That I am a priest and a prince in the Kingdom
of God*

– Andrew Peterson, *Fool with a Fancy Guitar*



Click to listen to "Fool with a Fancy Guitar."

Whether or not our singleness is by choice or by circumstance, our reaction to it is our own responsibility. We can mope and fall into bitterness and porn, or we can remember that, as Christ-followers, our identity in Christ extends far beyond our relationship status on Facebook.

God longs for us to trust in Him and draw near to Him. Stacy Conville writes:

Fifteen years ago, God convicted me that I had made that dream [of marriage], common in Christian culture, an idol. I was thinking about, praying for, and waiting for that husband while delaying certain steps in my calling. God clearly spoke through His Spirit that He had to be enough. If that husband and family never happened, would I still choose to trust Him, His plan, His provision, His sovereignty? Be satisfied in God and God alone? When I answered yes, I honestly didn't think I would still be single today or even imagine that I would be completely satisfied and content as such.

I've learned to go to Him in everything. He sometimes leads others in my life to walk me through or lead me to decisions. More often than not, He answers me through His Word, through a devotion, a sermon, song, or just in the quietness of His Spirit as I sit in His presence praying through the situation.³⁸

Singleness is definitely a struggle at times. It's the gift that most of us wish we could exchange. But it is nevertheless a gift, and one that allows the opportunity to draw even closer to God.

What will you do with it? Will you keep watching porn, or will you let God transform your heart?

*But if it's true that you gathered my sin in your hand
And you cast it as far as the east from the west
If it's true that you put on the flesh of a man
And you walked in my shoes through the shadow of death*

*If it's true that you dwell in the halls of my heart
Then I'm not just a fool with a fancy guitar
No, I am a priest and a prince in the Kingdom of God.*



Click to listen to "Food with a Fancy Guitar."

**appendices:
practical answers
to tough questions**

dating and opposite-sex friendships

I once attended a “hijacked” session at a creative conference called “Meeting Your Match: More Likely than Finding a Unicorn or a Leprechaun.” Unfortunately, this session was attended entirely by single women (with the exception of one married woman whose poor husband had the misfortune of wandering in at the end); if any of us were hoping to meet our future husbands there, or for that matter catch a leprechaun or unicorn, we were sorely disappointed.

If you read this book looking for dating advice (or a leprechaun or unicorn), you may be equally disappointed right now. The truth is, if I had any significant dating experience, this would be a vastly different book. Still, many people asked about it, so I decided to conduct an informal survey within the Covenant Eyes office, which revealed these highly practical tips:

- + Don't talk only about yourself.
- + Don't drop the F-bomb multiple times during the first date.
- + Don't spend the entire evening picking your nose.

- + Don't assume the Thai restaurant is still any good if you haven't been there in three years.

With those pearls of wisdom out of the way, there are a few pieces of concrete advice:

1. Cultivate opposite-sex friendships very, very carefully.

In my early to mid 20s, I developed a series of crushes that lasted approximately 6 months each and usually ended with the guy dating someone else. This, for the record, includes my one ex-boyfriend. After six months of me crushing on him and one month of dating long-distance, we broke up (my choice, and, it turned out, my heartache). I spent the summer getting over him. He spent the summer dating someone else in our group of friends.

This seems to be one of the biggest tendencies for us singles. We meet another single we like and promptly spend the next week/month/year hanging on, hoping they notice us.

Proverbs 4:23 tells us, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." Obsessing over "that person" will simply make you create your own false fantasy. It may make you change who you are, trying to attract that person's attention. In reality, we are to treat each other like sisters and brothers "in all purity" (1 Timothy 5:1-2). This means being diligent about how you are around people of the other sex.

In short: cultivate friendships, but be clear about your intentions,

especially when it comes to one-on-one time with someone of the opposite sex. If you enjoy someone's company but don't intend to date them, make sure you're not leading them on. Conversely, if you're hanging out with someone a lot, hoping they will ask you out on a date, it may be wise to take a step back (or just ask them on a date yourself). If you do find yourself spending a lot of time alone with someone, I highly recommend clarifying your own intentions, asking for theirs, and if necessary restricting yourselves to only hanging out in group settings.

2. Know which standards are important.

I broke up with the aforementioned ex-boyfriend because time and trusted acquaintances finally reminded me of what I knew to be true: he wasn't a Christ-follower, and therefore I should never have been in a relationship with him in the first place. Even though I've only been asked out once since then, I don't regret it. In observing my friends' marriages, I've learned that relationships are hard enough even when you share a belief system.

So it's important to have a set of standards for a relationship—no point in wasting time with someone with whom there's no possibility of a future—but it's also important to know when those standards are unreasonable. For example, you probably envision that your ideal spouse has certain physical traits. But those have possibly been warped by our sexual media diet, and even if they haven't, people get older. They lose their looks.

So more important are personal characteristics. The question shouldn't be "Is she hot?" It should be, "Does her appearance reflect

that she cares about how others view her character?" It shouldn't be, "Is he a star athlete?" It should be, "Does he care about his reputation?"

Physical traits, and even personality things (like hobbies and sense of humor), will change with age. Character, however, will carry you through the hardest times.

Put it this way. My great aunt passed away from Alzheimer's. At her funeral, most of the stories revolved around her perennial cheerfulness, even after the disease had robbed her of most of her memory. At her assisted living home, she would tell visitors, "Oh, it's so good to see you! Now, who are you again?" Now that's character.

3. To the men: If you're interested, ask her out.

At various points through my teen and young adult years, I remember being segregated into groups by gender and hauled off to talk about modesty and dating. Not being a guy, I've always wondered what they were told. Most specifically, were they told that we were waiting for them to ask us out? Because we were told to wait for the guy to ask us out. Or, in the words of a southern friend, "Fellas, be a mayun."

Granted, this was also between approximately 1995 and 2005, the heyday of purity pledges and *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. That's right: at the same time that people were discovering that there was porn on the Internet for free, Christians were being told to wait until they were certain they wanted to marry a person before they even tried dating them.

Guys, if you're in a context where courtship works—where you can easily get to know the girl's family and her character before you actively pursue a relationship—then go for it. But if you were a late-90s teen who is currently paralyzed from asking a woman out because she doesn't meet some ill-defined characteristics of your perfect Proverbs 31 wife, then it may be time to man up and just invite a woman out for coffee.

To bring this back to point 2, it's okay to be a little choosy about who you date. There's no point in dating someone who you don't think you could ever marry. But it does bring me to my final piece of dating advice...

4. To everyone: It's just coffee.

Personal observation (and an advanced degree in Basic Rocket Science) has shown that the people who tend to date tend to be the ones who get married.

Shocking, I know. But the truth is, if you don't risk going out on a date or two, then you're probably not going to find the person you want to spend your life with. Guys, this means asking out the girl who doesn't look like the porn star but who does love Jesus. Girls, this means setting aside your "date with Jesus" and giving that one guy from small group a chance. One friend (now in a serious relationship) had the policy of giving a guy three dates before making a decision about the viability of a relationship. Because, let's face it, maybe you two just needed to give each other a chance.

So go out and take that chance. If nothing else, you'll learn not to go back to that Thai place again.

on godly manliness

First, a brief tip for the ladies. If you're looking for advice on how to be a godly woman, go read Carolyn McCulley's *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?* Preferably buy a copy and scribble notes in the margins. Few other books have impacted my spiritual growth like that one.

Now to the guys. In recent years, partly due to misinterpretations of feminism, there has been something of a cultural backlash against men and what has been interpreted as the glorification of women. Observationally, this has led to the rise of websites like The Art of Manliness (<http://www.artofmanliness.com/>) and the resurgence of beards. But you also get the Barney Stinson/James Bond/Ron Jeremy pornified brand of manliness, where it is directly related to a man's ability to bed a number of women. I suspect this latter type of manliness is what has led a number of guys to ask Covenant Eyes what biblical manliness means instead. More specifically, if you're a single dude and your faith is telling you that you can't express your manliness by having lots of sex or at least watching porn, then it may be hard to feel like a man.

My favorite description of manliness is found in the list of qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Here's a partial list:

- + **Above reproach.** A manly man doesn't cheat and steal and lie, even if he doesn't feel like anyone else will be affected.
- + **The husband of one wife.** A manly man is faithful, even if he hasn't met his wife yet. That means not sleeping around and not watching porn.
- + **Sober-minded.** A manly man isn't a man-child. He knows when to take things seriously.
- + **Hospitable.** A manly man knows how to keep his place clean so he can have people over without embarrassment. He has more than three cans of beer, a pack of American cheese, and an unopened bottle of ketchup in his fridge.
- + **Not a drunkard.** A manly man is more likely to be the designated driver on a bar crawl than to crush beer cans with his head.
- + **Not violent but gentle.** A manly man doesn't go picking fights. He remembers that "a soft answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1).
- + **Not quarrelsome.** A manly man knows how to keep debates respectful. He's not an Internet troll.

Now, I do want to call one thing out: these are aspirational. If you're in the middle of a struggle with porn, then of course you're going to have a hard time facing down the "husband of one wife" characteristic. But by the grace of God, this is the man you can be.

porn and your dating relationships

If you're single and struggling with pornography, you're probably wondering when it's okay to start dating. After all, you don't want to burden a significant other with your sin, but you also don't want to miss out on the opportunity to cultivate a relationship with a potential future spouse.

Your exact circumstances will dictate your decision, but there are two main guiding principles.

1. Don't date if you're still frequently struggling against porn temptations.

Research on willpower indicates that if you're trying to exercise self-control in one area, your willpower may be depleted in another area. One experiment presented participants with a tray of chocolate and radishes; those who were given the choice of what to eat performed better on a subsequent test compared to those who were only permitted to eat radishes³⁹ Basically, choosing to eat only radishes depleted their mental energy.

How does this apply to your dating life? Well, let's say you and your girlfriend (or boyfriend) got into a fight. Your energy may have been depleted, along with your willpower. You'll be more likely to go back and fall into a porn habit. Or the opposite may happen; you've successfully fended off the urge to masturbate all day, but the time you get to date night you may be too exhausted to make wise decisions and may get into a fight.

You're also already showing poor character traits to your boyfriend or girlfriend. Kristen Clark of *Girl Defined Ministries* explains:

Why would you want to move down a road towards marriage with a man who is already struggling to be faithful to you? Why would you want to enter into a union to become "one" with a man who is committing virtual adultery on a regular basis? I know what I'm saying isn't easy and will require a lot of prayer, wisdom, and grace...but in the end it does not seem wise or healthy for you to stay in a relationship with a guy who currently struggles with porn.⁴⁰

The long and short of this is, if you're not yet dating, it's best to hold off for the time being. If you're in a relationship, you and your significant other should pray and seek council about whether or not you should take a break for a while.

2. Be honest, but not explicit.

At whatever point you enter a more serious relationship, you should start talking to your significant other about your areas of struggle in general. If you think you may want to some day marry this person, you should already be talking (at least occasionally) about details like money management and lifestyle choices; if you've got student loan debts, you'd disclose that before you get married, after all.

Disclosing your porn struggles should be a part of these more serious conversations. Approach this issue with care, of course. You probably don't need to tell your significant other the gross details about your pornographic preferences, for example. Rather, you may want to focus on some of the historical trends. Were you exposed when you were a little kid doing homework? Was it your retreat when you were bullied at school? Was it a way to fit in?

By focusing on these aspects, your goal should be to make it clear that you know why you struggled and that you don't want to continue with your porn habits. That may be who you were, but that's not who you are or want to be.

3. Make it obvious that you're taking steps.

Closely related to this, show your boyfriend or girlfriend that you are taking active steps to protect yourself from porn. One is to have Covenant Eyes installed on your computers, smartphones, or tablets, and talk about why Screen Accountability is so important to you. You probably shouldn't make your boyfriend or girlfriend your

Accountability Partner, but you should tell them who is holding you accountable. In addition, be careful about your gaze in general and especially if you're on a date. Make sure your gaze doesn't linger on that cute waitress. Bounce your eyes from billboards. I once hung out with a guy friend who spent an entire scene during a movie with his eyes averted because of how the women were dressed in it.

Surrendering even this level of control may seem awkward. But so is your history of viewing porn. By actively showing your significant other that you're protecting yourself and your integrity, you will help to build trust and reassure them that your past porn problem is just that: a past one.

singleness and homosexual desires

Alfred Kinsey and the sexual revolution may have begun the process of validating alternate sexual identities, but particularly since Ellen DeGeneres came out of the closet in 1997, homosexuality has been increasingly in the public eye. In 2003, six years after Ellen's announcement, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize homosexual unions. As of this writing (2015), 37 states have legalized them. Of the remaining 13, gay marriage bans have been overturned in eight, but the decision is still being appealed.⁴¹

Culture seems to be settling on homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle, but it's still a highly contentious issue among many Christians. Worst off are those who experience same-sex attraction but also believe the Bible when it calls homosexuality a sin.

If you find yourself in that position, first, remember, your sins have been washed clean by Jesus. You are forgiven, and you are a child of God.

Second, it's true that the Bible calls same-sex activity a sin. But it also calls male-female sexual activity sinful when it happens outside of wedlock. And in Revelation 21:8, even liars are condemned to Hell. Because homosexuality is the sin under public debate, some churches may put unfair pressure on your leanings, treating them as somehow worse than anyone else's sin. When this happens, cling to Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Third, for the time being, you may want to consider yourself as another single: for one reason or another, God has seen it fit that you are not able to pursue a relationship right now. Hopefully this e-book has helped you see that singleness is not a harsh punishment, but rather a blessing of God, giving you an opportunity to pursue creative endeavors.

Finally, consider pursuing counseling. For example, Counselors Joe Dallas has extensive experience in this area; he will be able to provide counseling, comfort, and relief from a biblical basis. With the help of a licensed therapist with a biblical background, you will have the professional support you need to determine how best to approach your situation.

when you're single again

Almost nobody walks into their marriage planning on its end. On occasion you'll get the celebrity divorce after a month, or you'll read the heartwarming stories about the terminal cancer patient's wedding, a week before they pass away. But I'd venture a guess that most people expect their marriages to last—to be that cute little couple who die at age 97 within days of each other. You didn't expect the marriage-ending affair or the overwhelming fights and dissatisfaction. You didn't expect the heart attack or car accident. And you certainly didn't expect to find yourself single again.

If you're experiencing a "second singleness," the emotional fallout of singleness and the struggle against sexual temptations may be even stronger than for those who have never experienced the intimacy of marriage. Fortunately, many of the strategies and tactics described earlier in this book apply regardless of the reasons for your singleness, and certainly many of them apply to everyone (such as learning to draw close to God). There are a few additional tactics that may be particularly applicable.

1. Look for signs of God at work.

Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” That includes the circumstances that led to your second singleness.

If your marriage has ended in divorce, I recommend starting with John Greco’s *Broken Vows: Divorce and the Goodness of God*⁴². The author explores how his wife’s adultery and their subsequent divorce brought him closer to Jesus. Your pastor or mentor may have additional resources on divorce or widowhood.

This may be an opportunity to ask God to reveal where you can grow, and praise him for the goodness he has brought. Ask yourself questions like:

- + Has God illuminated anything in my life? Who can help me become a better person, or strengthen a future marriage before it begins?
- + What can I do to better serve my family (parents, siblings, children)?
- + Are there any skills or hobbies that I can develop during this time? What other opportunities are available to me?

2. Invest in the relationships you already have.

With singleness comes additional free time and flexibility. If you have children or grandchildren, consider how you can use this free time to develop deeper relationships with them.

Obviously, there will be limits on how you can build these relationships, especially if you're divorced and share custody of your children. It's harder to build a relationship when you don't live with them day in and day out. Try to think of ways you can make them aware that they're still in your thoughts. One thing to consider is keeping a visible prayer journal for them. When you see them, ask them what you can pray about for them until you see them again. Write these prayer requests down while they're watching. Then pray for them, and ask how things went the next time you see them.

If you have grandkids, especially ones who live close by, you have a special opportunity to develop a relationship with them. My own widowed grandmother and I built up a tradition of periodically going out to dinner and catching up on life. In her I witnessed an eternal optimism in the face of tough life circumstances, a life lesson that I have not yet completely personalized, but which will, Lord willing, remain in me the rest of my own life.

Don't forget to build bonds with siblings or others in similar circumstances. My grandmother was about 70 when my grandfather passed away. She and her widowed sister took the next 10 or so years to travel as often as possible, visiting Hawaii and Norway and Switzerland and Australia until health concerns finally kept them at home. Although both mourned their husbands until the end of their lives, they did not let their singleness keep them from living.

3. Seek out wise counsel about whether remarriage is an option for you.

The Bible only says a few things about divorce and remarriage. Before you choose to pursue another relationship, I recommend reviewing those scriptures (especially Matthew 19:1-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:12-16). Then seek wise guidance from a pastor or mentor. They will be able to look at your exact circumstances and help you determine whether remarriage is currently a wise course of action for you. They will also be able to help you find healing and growth, and prepare your heart for any future relationships.

If you are widowed, there is considerably more freedom in remarriage, but it would still be wise to seek guidance, especially if you have children who are still adjusting to life without the other parent.

discography

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The Gray Havens, "Sirens," Fire and Stone. © 2015 by The Gray Havens Music.

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