

Stay Holy Stay Strong

An increasing number of Christian leaders have resigned because of inappropriate sexual behavior. The regrettable result of these highly publicized sins has been one of two mindsets that have developed in many leaders in His church:

- “This is unavoidable, and will I be next?”
- “I would never succumb to such a sin as that!!”

Both responses are faulty. Neither fatalism nor arrogance will safeguard you from sin, so how can you avoid Satan’s traps?

Pastor Trey Smith (not his real name) was beloved by his congregation. The church had taken off and was steadily growing, and by all accounts, Smith was succeeding as a man of God. He consistently prayed, he loved God, and it was beautifully obvious in his life. His passion for worship and the Word of God was almost tangible. His marriage looked happy and successful on the outside, and he and his wife even spoke about marriage and sex at their church.

But Smith had a secret: He had been captured in a web of lust. He first viewed pornography as an 11-year-old boy, and he never got those images out of his mind. One glance, and the enemy buried his hooks in Smith’s heart. He carried an insatiable thirst for sex, and his mind was easily distracted by images, imaginations and schemes. He pictured old images, he imagined acts with his wife or strangers, and he schemed how to have more and more sex.

Finally, he got sloppy. Out of his desperate need for more pornographic stimulation, he became careless in his viewing and was eventually caught in the act. No more secrets. Smith’s story was out. Would being caught be enough to keep him free?

A Universal Problem

This story is repeated hundreds of times over and over again by both male and female leaders all over the planet. According to the Recovery Village, porn use in America is at epidemic levels:

- 40 million U.S. adults regularly visit internet pornography websites.
- 10% of U.S. adults admit to having an addiction to internet pornography.
- 17% of all women struggle with porn addiction.
- 20% of men and 13% of women admit to accessing porn while at work.
- 70% of women admit to keeping their cyber activities secret.
- 1 of 3 visitors of all adult websites is a woman.

Unfortunately, the statistics in the church are not any better, as illustrated in Steve Farrar's *Finishing Strong*:

A number of years ago a national conference for church youth directors was held at a major hotel in a city in the mid-west. Youth pastors by the hundreds flooded into that hotel and took nearly every room. At the conclusion of the conference, the hotel manager told the conference administrator that the number of guests who tuned into the adult movie channel broke the previous record, far and away outdoing any other convention in the history of the hotel.

Not only are Christian leaders addicted to pornography, but many have had an emotional and or physical extramarital relationship. The wake of destruction is huge, but it most definitely doesn't have to be. God has the plan to help us overcome every temptation, even sexual temptation.

We must all establish the following inner foundational truth: We can be tempted. The apostle Paul tells the young church in Corinth, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to

be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13, NKJV). There are four principles here:

- Everyone is tempted.
- Temptation is not sin. Jesus was tempted but never sinned (Matt. 4; Luke 4).
- God is faithful.
- There is a way of escape.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, also gives us a passage on temptation: "Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren" (James 1:12-16).

This apostolic wisdom is both foundational and encouraging. James teaches us:

- There is a blessing for enduring temptation.
- God does not tempt us. Evil (Satan) tempts us.
- Temptation grows as it feeds on our selfish, sinful desires.
- Yielding to temptation births sin.
- Sin always produces death. Death can be spiritual, emotional, relational or even physical.
- To ignore these truths is to succumb to deception.

An Enduring Role Model

I love the Scriptures. The Bible is a real book full of the stories of real people relating to a real God. God doesn't edit the stories of His people to make them look squeaky clean. Instead, we see their hang-ups, moral hiccups and sins.

Abraham, Jacob, Judah, Samson, David and Solomon all had serious issues with their marriages.

More importantly, the Scriptures give us examples of leaders who maintained their sexual integrity and moral fidelity, maintaining integrity under the pressure of the highest levels of authority. Our greatest example of purity is Jesus, who “was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin,” (Heb. 4:15b).

I also want to draw attention to Joseph, the son of Jacob. Let’s start with a little context to better understand his story, which begins in Genesis 37.

Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob, was the eldest son of Rachel, Jacob’s wife, whom he deeply loved. Because of his love for Rachel, Jacob favored Joseph so much that he made him a tunic of many colors.

A gifted young man, Joseph kept having vivid dreams about the leadership roles he would ultimately fulfill. One night, he dreamed that his entire family, including his mother and father, would one day bow before him.

Displaying an obvious lack of wisdom, Joseph shared these dreams with his family members. In an incredible moment of irony, Jacob rightly interpreted the dreams but rebuked Joseph. His older brothers spurned their brother’s revelations, but Jacob pondered the 17-year-old’s dreams.

After some time had passed, Jacob sent Joseph to check on his brothers, who were watching their father’s flocks. Seeing the object of their scorn approaching from a distance, the brothers conspired to kill him and throw him in a pit. His brother Reuben interceded for his life but eventually, Joseph was sold to Midianite human traffickers.

At that point, the traffickers led Joseph down to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar, an officer in Pharaoh’s employ. This is

where we derive our lessons on purity in leadership.

Joseph's Keys for Victory

Joseph, no longer clothed in honor and favor, is now the servant of the leader of the Egyptian Secret Service. Here are four vital lessons about how to overcome temptation that we can derive from his godly example.

Choose humility over entitled victimization. Humiliating circumstances come to all our lives, but we have the opportunity to choose how we respond. Rather than submitting to the pressure of his crushing, Joseph served as unto the Lord and found higher favor (Gen. 39:2-4).

Believing you are entitled to your desires is a sure pathway to yielding to temptation. Satan tempted Jesus to get the bread, the worship and the protection He deserved, but Jesus quoted the Word of God, humbling trusting His Father's timing (Matt. 4, Luke 4).

Leaders who yield to temptation often do so by surrendering to the lie that they deserve to satisfy their desires. During the seasons of my life when I have felt sorry for myself and thrown a pity party, I have become more influenced by temptation.

If anyone could have played the victim, it was Joseph. He had grown up as the favored son of Jacob the patriarch but was now a slave serving in a foreign land. But Joseph chose to humbly resist temptation, and so can we.

Set your own boundaries. Joseph also withstood the temptation by building his own boundaries when there were none placed on him by others. Potiphar's wife sought to tempt Joseph to commit adultery with her, yet Joseph clearly said no and called her offer an act of sin. Living in a foreign land, away from the traditions and customs of His family, Joseph nonetheless said, "no thank you" to her seductive offer.

Here's the truth: This act of holiness occurred 380 years before Moses receives the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20). Even before the Law was given, Joseph chose the pathway of holiness as unto the Lord. He chose to be holier than he must be.

Years ago, my friend, Alice Edison, gave me the old Wesleyan holiness brochure, "Others May—You Cannot" by G.D. Watson. Watson urged his readers to pursue a heart-holiness based on God's Word and not society's shifting standards.

Modern culture looks for loopholes and ways to presume upon God's grace; Joseph and today's wise leaders understand that grace empowers you to live in freedom and not hide in darkness. Titus 2:12 (NIV) says this about empowering grace, "It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age." You are only as accountable as you want to be.

Live a life without secrets. The third way Joseph stood firmly against temptation was that he lived his life as though there were no such thing as a secret. Potiphar's wife, unlike Joseph, had no foundation of the covenant, so day after day, she continued to make sexual advances toward Joseph.

Similarly, our society has drifted away from its Judeo-Christian foundations, so the temptations toward all manner of perversion continue to speak to us daily. We must resist the constant "Watch this, feel this, taste this" messages thrust before us by our culture.

Joseph found himself alone with Potiphar's wife. Many a leader has come face to face with this seemingly irresistible lie: *No one will ever find out*. But Joseph thought and acted as if everyone—Potiphar, the other servants and especially God—would find out. Small wonder that 4,000 years later, we are still talking about this incident.

When tempted to yield to sin, I ask myself, "How will I feel

when my wife, my parents, my children and my mentors hear this story?" Another way I live without secrets is that my wife has all of my passwords. I don't have any secrets on my devices, and this added level of accountability helps me stay free.

Joseph began with the fear of the Lord and wisely lived without secrets. I highly recommend the use of internet filters and giving full access to your devices to your spouse if you are married and to a trusted mentor or friend if you are not. Proverbs 27:12 (NKJV) says, "A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself;" we can choose to be prudent and live without secrets.

Run away. Finally, Joseph overcame temptation because he ran from it. Scripture encourages us to stand against the wiles of the devil (Eph. 6:11), to resist Satan and he will flee (James 4:7). These principles are true for every temptation, but when we face one type in particular, part b is always needed. The way we stand against the devil's schemes and sexual temptations is to run away. We must run as far and as fast as we can.

In an amazing act of New Testament grace, Joseph fled sexual temptation (1 Cor. 6:18), an act of humble dependence upon God. His running away was humble because he had to admit to himself that he was not strong enough to continually resist Potiphar's wife's bold advances with no audience present.

His fleeing temptation also revealed dependence because it was a costly act of obedience. Running away cost Joseph first, his robe, and second, his freedom. Over the course of our lives and ministry, my wife and I have worked with many people who have not wanted to pay the price of limiting their freedom to access anything on their computers and mobile devices or to pay the price of humility and transparency through confession to their spouse or mentor.

Anything worth having in life is costly. You either pay the

price of discipline or the price of regret. Joseph chose freedom with God over freedom in Egypt. He valued favor with God over favor with Potiphar. Bottom line: Which will you value most?

Like Joseph, we are living in a society that has no moral underpinnings. If we intend to overcome temptation and live in the victory Jesus won for us on the cross and provided by the Holy Spirit, we must learn from Joseph's success. If he successfully overcame temptation in the Old Covenant without the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit and the Bible, how much more can we who have both the Word and the Spirit overcome these very same temptations?

As we, like Joseph, prayerfully pursue purity through every season of our lives, we, too, will be vessels of wisdom, revelation, leadership and provision that shake nations for the glory of God.

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