

When Porn Invades a Marriage

✖ There! I'd finally said it. The word I'd avoided for more than 20 years. "Divorce!" I screamed. "Count on it. You'll lose me, the children, everything! I'll divorce you unless you change once and for all!"

It was the only thing I had left to say to my husband, Paul, who had phoned me a few days earlier from the backseat of a police car to tell me he'd been arrested by an undercover policewoman posing as a prostitute. When I heard the devastating news, I was overcome with rage and the closest thing to hatred I'd ever felt.

I hung up the phone and spent the rest of the day mechanically going through the motions of caring for our children. That night, Paul called again and begged me to get him out of jail. "Stay there and rot," I told him.

The next few days, I playacted for the children's sake as I fought the fear of public disclosure. At that time, Paul worked in the United States but held a high-profile ministry position overseas.

He emerged from his jail stay looking like a hunted animal. Thankfully, God had shielded him from the courtroom cameras, which would have splashed his face all over local television.

But I was so fed up, I threatened divorce for the first time in years. Paul's long-term sexual addiction had caused a train wreck that threatened to derail all we had worked for in our marriage, family and ministry for more than two decades.

Early Struggles

When we married in 1977 I knew Paul struggled with sexual issues, though at the time the term "sexual addiction" was not used. He had told me about his childhood in the Bronx, one marred by physical abuse in his home and sexual abuse from

strangers, and had revealed that at age 9 he had turned to pornography as an escape hatch from the pain.

I naively thought my love would change Paul, in spite of his background, from who he was to who he could be. But months into our marriage, my dreams for a faithful husband became a nightmare of betrayal, failure and anger. Paul's entanglement in pornography stores, strip clubs and one-night stands tore at the fragile fabric of our relationship.

After years of suffering under his addiction, I finally reached what I thought was the end. I ran into our bedroom screaming: "I'll divorce you! I won't stand for this anymore!"

I determined to go. But while I was packing my bags in a storm of tears and anger, Jesus quietly spoke a word into my heart. He said: "Arlene, if you want to leave Paul, you can. But if you stay I will give you the kind of husband you always dreamed of. I will keep you whole in the palm of My hand."

A few months before, both Paul and I had recommitted our lives to Christ. I had failed the Lord so much during my prodigal years that I wanted to follow Him now no matter what the cost. And His word to me that day was unmistakable.

I didn't know then that the promise would be such a long time coming. Yet it was the thing that sustained me whenever I faced a new trial. I began to understand what the Old Testament prophet Hosea must have felt like when God asked him to marry Gomer, a prostitute. This was not the rosy role I had envisioned for marriage.

It became evident to me that I lived with two entirely different people. One man loved God, loved me and treated me like a queen. The other, who emerged only periodically, was tormented by depression, anger and lust. I simply couldn't comprehend how my gifted, bright, loving and dynamic husband was able to change so dramatically from one day to the next.

During the years that followed my encounter with the Lord, Paul and I consulted counselors who indicated he suffered from a personality disorder, but they offered no concrete solutions. We would appear to make progress in the counseling sessions, then a land mine of sexual acting out would explode on the landscape of our lives, leaving me emotionally shredded and Paul close to suicide as the shame and despair clamped down like a vise on his spirit.

I knew he desperately wanted to be well, but I wasn't sure how long could I live on the roller coaster.

Then in 1984, we joined a missions organization. We were so grateful that God was going to use us! We both prayed the nightmares were over.

In 1988 and 1991, God blessed us further by helping us adopt our two children. I knew Paul would continue to pursue wholeness for their sakes. I also knew that our children were safe with him because he'd vowed long ago to protect his children from the horrors he suffered in childhood. His addiction never manifested itself within our home through the Internet, magazines or movies.

Nevertheless, several incidents occurred during our missions years. Even though I knew without question that the illness rested on Paul's shoulders, I felt humiliated and ashamed.

I finally shared our problems with a few mature Christians in our missions organization and church. As a result, Paul entered a Christian hospital for a month. A year later we went to a therapeutic setting designed for missionaries with serious problems. Both therapies were a tremendous help, but Paul still couldn't look me in the eyes and say, "Never again."

All this time I alternated among three different states: desperately clinging to God's promise; thinking I was crazy for staying; and deluding myself into believing the struggles

were over. But I was determined to stay for the sake of the children. And I was determined that I would allow God to deal with the weaknesses in my own life and show me not only the cost of discipleship but also its eternal worth.

Over and over again I reminded myself of the promise God had made to me years before when I had wanted to leave. His grace strengthened me to dwell on the great aspects of our marriage while coping with the pain.

He consistently supplied me with endurance and fortitude. But my determination to stay finally crumbled when Paul was arrested, and at first I thought divorce was the only answer.

The Heart of the Problem

However, in the aftermath of the arrest, someone in our church told me about Esther Ministries, an organization founded to reach out to women in relationship with sexually addicted men. I attended their five-day retreat for wives of sexual addicts. Some were in ministry with their spouses, as I was with Paul.

At the retreat, I met a group of women who understood. I received healing and skilled help from the staff, who comforted me as I screamed and cried until I had nothing left. One of the counselors told me I was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

God moved in my life in a powerful way during the retreat. I left with a greater understanding of our problems. I also heard about a man named David Jones, a recovered sex addict and Christian specialist who counsels men caught in the same trap that had at one time ensnared him.

In the meantime, Paul attended court-ordered psychiatric evaluations. God worked in a mighty way through his secular counselor, the first person who was able to definitively diagnose Paul's condition as bipolar disorder. The terms he used to describe the primary characteristics of this

condition, “recklessness” and “self-destruction,” transformed our understanding of Paul’s problems.

The counselor helped us understand that the sexual addiction, which had medicated Paul’s lifelong emotional pain, was linked to the bipolar disorder. We were able to look back over the years and see how the bipolar disorder fed into the sexual addiction. When the psychiatrist prescribed the appropriate medications for the disorder, which we both consider part of God’s miracle, pieces of the healing puzzle began falling into place.

The next piece came from Jones, the Christian specialist I had heard about at the retreat. Before Paul met with Jones for three days of intensive counseling, he stepped down from ministry. This was a difficult time for us both.

I lost friends who couldn’t understand why I had stayed. But God hadn’t told me to leave. He had never changed His promise to us. He was still calling me to the “Hosea life.”

Yet when Paul drove away for his counseling session in another state, we both knew it was now or never. We decided that if he wasn’t healed, he wouldn’t return.

Three days later, the telephone rang. This time a jubilant Paul called me, not from a police car, but from his own car that was headed home.

“Arlene, it’s over. I’ll never go back to the old life,” he said.

God had supernaturally lifted the addiction out of Paul’s spirit and uprooted the embedded pain and loss in his life. The man I was talking with walked with God, loved me and wanted to be loyal.

The double-mindedness was gone. I finally heard the words I’d longed and prayed for.