SEXUAL TEMPTATION

ESTABLISHING GUARDRAILS AND WINNING THE BATTLE

RANDY ALCORN

Sexual Temptation

Establishing Guardrails and Winning the Battle

by Randy Alcorn

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To my fantastic wife and best friend Nanci, who continues to bring unending joy and laughter to my life.

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Something terrible happened." The tense voice belonged to my friend, who was calling from across the country. "Yesterday our pastor left his wife and ran off with another woman."

I was sad, but not shocked or even surprised. I've heard the same story too many times.

Many years ago I spoke on sexual purity at a Bible college. Several students came for counseling, including three I'll call Rachel, Barb, and Pam.

Rachel got right to the point: "My parents sent me to one of our pastors for counseling, and I ended up sleeping with him." Later the same day Barb, a deacon's daughter, told me through tears, "My dad has had sex with me for years, and now he's starting on my sisters." Next day I met Pam. Her story? "I came to Bible college to get away from an affair with my pastor."

At another school, Toni, an eighteen-year-old girl, was guilt-ridden because she had had sex with her former youth pastor. "Have you confessed it to the Lord and cut off the relationship?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "His wife found out, and he moved to another church. But that's not all." She paused. "I can't believe it, but the church hired a new youth pastor, and I ended up in bed with him too!"

Toni said I could discuss her situation with the dean of students. "What's going on with Christian leaders?" he asked. "Last year our music minister was dismissed for adultery. Then we found out he'd done the same thing in his last church. And I just heard that a seminary prof was dismissed for immorality."

For every well-known Christian television personality or evangelical leader who commits sexual immorality, there are any number of lesser-known local pastors, Bible teachers, and parachurch workers who quietly resign or are fired for the same. Most of us can name several, some dozens, and some many more. Three Christian leaders I know of sat down together and between them came up with a list of 250 names.

The service of innumerable laymen and laywomen to the body of Christ has been eroded or abruptly halted for exactly the same reason. Much as we hate to admit it, the evangelical landscape is littered with the carcasses of lives and ministries decimated by sexual sin.

The inescapable conclusion is sobering and the implications far-reaching: there is among Christians, including Christians in ministry, a moral epidemic of enormous and frightening proportions.

The stories I've mentioned involved church leaders and lay people alike. Countless Christian men and women have fallen prey to sexual immorality, including the trap of internet pornography.

While the problem may seem more devastating to the local church when it involves a pastor or other leader, it's also destructive when it happens unnoticed among church members. Sadly, very few pastors deal with this problem head-on and even fewer members seek to be held accountable in this critical area. What follows in this booklet is a battle plan to help us wage war against this powerful and persistent enemy.

Addressing the Problem Head-on

Over thirty years ago, while researching and writing my first book *Christians in the Wake of the Sexual Revolution* (later revised as *Restoring Sexual Sanity)*, I discovered that a prominent earmark of the early church was its sexual purity. Christians were known to be Christians partly because they thought and lived differently when it came to sex. If we do not reclaim this lost ground, today's church and its leadership are destined to spiritual impotence. Why? Because an unholy world will never be won to Christ by an unholy church.

How much has our reputation as Christ's servants suffered? How much credibility have we lost as a result of the highly publicized immoral exploits of those in ministry? After hearing of yet another fallen Christian leader, a committed Christian woman told me in tears, "Every time I listen to a Christian leader now, I can't shake the thought that he's likely living in immorality."

Despite the toll, there is at least one positive development to come out of the shocking moral lapses of Christians: we can no longer ignore or deny the reality of moral weakness among those who serve Christ. The church has become acutely aware of the widespread moral crisis, the severe consequences of our sexual compromises, and the desperate need to shore up our sagging morality.

Much has been said in the past few decades about the need to care for and restore those who have fallen into sexual sin. While this must be addressed, the emphasis is corrective in nature. What we lack, and need desperately, are clear, preventive measures.

There are two ways to address the danger of falling off a cliff. One is to position ambulances and paramedics at the bottom. Another is to post warning signs and build a railing at the top. This booklet is intended as a warning sign and a railing, with the prayer that—important as it is to have them there—fewer ambulances will be needed at ground level. (To keep this booklet brief, I will assume that readers know what Scripture says about sexual morality. If you wish to explore the biblical foundation for sexual purity, see my small book *The Purity Principle.)*

I'll focus first on three critical facts we must understand. Then I'll explore the reasons Christians commit sexual sin and provide a number of practical guidelines that can help us fight and win the battle for sexual purity.

Critical Fact #1

We are targeted for sexual immorality. Some years ago there were weighty rumors about an international "hit list," a calculated plan for paid assassins to murder strategic world leaders. A terrifying thought, isn't it? Yet I'm convinced that the enemy, Satan, has maintained such a hit list throughout the millennia. And there's every reason to believe that mature Christians are at the very top of his list.

If you have a ministry of any sort—public or private—as a teacher, preacher, leader, helper, or as any kind of salt and light in the world (Mt. 5:13-16) —then take heed: you are a targeted man, a marked woman. The forces of evil have taken out a contract on you. There is a price on your head sufficient to make any bounty hunter salivate. Satan is out to get you. Why? Because he wants to nullify your ministry. Because you bear on your shoulders the reputation of Christ. The enemy scores a strategic victory in his assault on that sacred reputation if you lose your battle against sexual temptation.

Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers of darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in the invisible realm (Eph. 6:12). These desperately evil beings have vested interests in our moral collapse. They will do everything in their power to strike out at Christ and His church.

"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8).

Critical fact #2

We are vulnerable to sexual immorality. All Christians are susceptible to sexual sin. The myth that we are morally invulnerable dies slowly, even in the face of overwhelming evidence. But there is not and never has been some mystical antibody that makes us immune to sexual sin.

"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18). What level of pride is required to believe that sexual sin could overtake Lot, Samson, David ("a man after God's own heart"), Solomon, the Corinthians, and many Christian leaders today, but not me? Paul's warnings deserve a prominent place on our mirrors, dashboards, desktops, and computers: "But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (Gal. 6:1); "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor. 10:12).

Critical fact #3

We are fully responsible for our moral choices. It's often said that people "fall" into immorality. The expression is as revealing as it is faulty and dangerous. The very term *fall* betrays a victim mentality. It sounds as if we were walking down a street and someone tripped us or kicked our feet out

from under us. It implies that moral collapse comes out of nowhere, that there is little or nothing we could have done to prevent what happened.

We do not fall into immorality. We walk into it. Indeed, sometimes we run headlong into it. We must realize from the beginning that immorality is a choice. It is not something that happens to people. It is something that people make happen.

We may do everything in our power to achieve physical health, and prevent getting cancer, yet we can still get cancer. But this is not true of immorality. If we depend on our Savior and take deliberate and ongoing steps to cultivate purity and avoid immorality, we can avoid it. It does not choose us. We choose it—or we choose to avoid it.

Why Christians Commit Immorality

We are susceptible to sin because we are sinners. We have moral natures that draw us toward sinful acts (Romans 7:14-25). Paul says, "When I want to do good, evil is right there with me."

So we should start by realizing a large part of our problem is us. But there are also cultural factors that constantly work against us by appealing to our sinful inclinations. For example, there is an inordinate emphasis on youth, outward appearance, dressing attractively, flirting, and sexual innuendo. Television, movies, and novels often make affairs seem not only normal but also particularly attractive. We are

desensitized by this, and it makes immorality seem more appealing. Social restraints have broken down, and forces favorable to immorality have replaced them. We must not be deceived into thinking that Christians are immune to any of these forces.

Of course, people's reasons for committing immorality are more than social or circumstantial. Every sin is the fruit of a tree that has a long root system. Confession and repentance signal the beginning of change, but fixing the root problems can take time.

One of the dangers of allowing a leader to be restored to his position, soon after he confesses and is forgiven for immorality, is being restored to ministry before the root problems leading to immorality have been dealt with. In many cases there has not been enough time to re-establish a lifestyle of right thinking and right living. Such people are at greater risk for repeated moral failure.

Church members inevitably begin to think that sexually immoral acts must not be a big deal if a "man of God" can be restored to his position of leadership without much more than a slap of the hand (and in some cases, a paid leave of absence). This only perpetuates the problem, and makes people laugh at the church for its hypocrisy in claiming a higher standard than the world (whereas a public school teacher dismissed for sexual impropriety is unlikely to ever be given a second chance).

The church needs to discover ways to demonstrate greater grace and forgiveness than the world, and also a higher commitment to truth and the sort of integrity that engenders trust in its leaders.

Is Immorality Inevitable?

One woman said to me, "There's so much immorality among Christians now that I'm living in constant fear. It makes it difficult even to work with my associates in the ministry. It's happened to those more godly than I, so I keep thinking that it's probably going to happen to me. It almost seems inevitable."

God does not want us to be presumptuous, but neither does He want us to be paranoid. We do not have to live each day teetering on the edge of immorality or paralyzed by the fear of a sudden fall. In the specific context of seeking to be sexually pure and resisting sexual temptation, the wise man says this to his son:

> My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment,
> do not let them out of your sight;
> they will be life for you,
> an ornament to grace your neck.
> Then you will go on your way in safety,
> and your foot will not stumble;
> when you lie down you will not be afraid;
> when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.

Have no fear of sudden disaster
or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked,
for the LORD will be your confidence
And will keep your foot from being snared.

(Prov. 3:21-26)

If we walk daily with Christ, being alert to what's happening in our minds and implementing steps of righteousness and wisdom, then we can go our way "in safety" and "not be afraid." The next section of this booklet presents principles and practical steps for cultivating sexual purity, and avoiding and resisting sexual temptation.

Take Time to Cultivate Your Inner Life

Often, those who sin have neglected in previous weeks or months or years the regular practices of prayer, meditation, and worship. In doing so, they have foregone the healthy self-examination these spiritual disciplines foster. In our busyness we can neglect the care and feeding of our own souls. The battle for sexual purity is won or lost in the noisy trenches of the world's temptations, and at home, in quietness, on our knees.

An over-full schedule and constant activity erode the soul. Busyness wears down our ability to hear, to listen to the promptings and warning signals of God's Spirit, His Word,

and His people. Fatigue becomes disorienting, and it makes us oblivious to our soul's condition.

A daily quiet time is essential, but for me it isn't enough. I know Christians who have maintained their quiet times but have nevertheless made unwise choices which led them to careless indiscretions they might otherwise have avoided. I need my time in the Bible and prayer, but I also need time to read a good book, to exercise, to listen to worship music, to have a leisurely talk with my wife over coffee, to take bike rides and play with my grandchildren without glancing at my watch. The land needs rest in order to produce a harvest, and so do I.

God gave Israel not just one day a week, but several weeks a year, and even one year every seven to break the pattern of life long enough to worship and reflect and take stock. I've periodically taken overnight retreats by myself or with my wife. Sometimes I've been gone several nights, and in times of greater need I've been away a week, usually in a cabin at the Oregon coast. This isn't a normal vacation, but a time in which the fresh air, lack of immediate demands, and absence of noise give clarity to the still, small voice of God that is too easily ignored in the clamor of daily life.

Of course, time with God is not merely a means to the end of maintaining sexual purity, but is an end in itself. It is not a pragmatic instrument we use to resist immorality, but the fountain from which holiness flows.

Guard Your Mind

A Christian man once told me, "I fell into this adulterous relationship without warning. It came out of the clear blue sky." As I asked him questions, it became evident that he had actually cultivated a mind for immorality. His choices to feed his mind on immoral images made him an adulterer just waiting for an adulteress to come along.

Sexual sin never comes out of the clear blue sky. It is often the result of a long process in which a mind susceptible to sin is granted unguarded exposure to immoral input.

Years ago I heard a saying that captures the nature of life: "Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny." Our thoughts are the fabric with which we weave our character and destiny. We must actively fight off thoughts of impurity. But the key to doing this is not simply saying, "I will not lust, I will not lust"—that often has the same effect as saying, "I will not think of purple elephants." We must cultivate our hearts and minds with what is godly and pure. These better thoughts will displace the others (Phil. 4:8).

We can't avoid all sexual stimuli, but we can keep them from taking root in us. In Martin Luther's terms, "You can't keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from making a nest in your hair." I like to put it another way: "If you're on a diet, stay out of the donut shop." Avoid

unrestricted access to the internet, movies, television programs, magazine racks, video stores, advertisements, images, people, and places that tempt you to lust. "Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18). Our first duty is not to resist but to run. Scripture is emphatic: "Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evil men. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way" (Prov. 4:14-15).

Take Precautions with the Opposite Sex

We need to be careful where, when, and why we meet with those of the opposite sex. Do you look forward in a special way to your meetings with someone? Do you cancel appointments with others to meet with him or her? Do you prefer that your spouse or coworkers not know you are meeting again? Or do you feel flattered when seen with him or her in public? Any of these can be warnings of an improper relationship.

One man found that his thoughts were continually drawn to a coworker more than to his wife. After months of rationalizing, he finally admitted to himself that he was looking for every excuse to have long lunches with her when a short discussion in the office would have done just as well. His rule of thumb became, "I will only meet with her when necessary, only as long as necessary, only at the office, and in

plain view of others." In time their relationship returned to its original healthy status.

Discern the Subtle Signs of Attraction

We must develop an early detection system to spot moral danger before we are too deeply entrenched in it. Remember: A relationship can be sexual long before it becomes erotic. Just because I'm not touching a woman, or just because I'm not fantasizing about erotic encounters with her, does not mean I am not becoming emotionally involved with her in an inappropriate way. Often the erotic comes at the end of emotional attraction that, if not decisively dealt with, leads into sexual involvement. In my experience, many Christians end up in bed with someone not just to gratify a sexual urge but also because they believe they've come to really love the person. They tell themselves this is not some cheap or tawdry thing, but a genuine and proven love. That, supposedly, makes it all right; never mind the law of God or the devastating consequences of violating it.

Beware of Cloudy Thoughts and Rationalization

When meeting one woman for our third counseling appointment, in what seemed like just a moment, I realized that she was inappropriately interested in me. What was frightening is that I also realized I had subconsciously sensed

this before, but had enjoyed her attraction to me too much to address the problem. And who's to say I hadn't sent off signals of my own? Certainly I hadn't said anything to discourage hers. Since I was not yet emotionally involved or giving her inappropriate attention, I was tempted to rationalize and dismiss it as unimportant, "knowing" of course that I would never get involved with her (famous last words, since every affair begins with the "harmless"). When the light cut through my clouded thinking and I realized that there was no way I should be meeting with her, I sent her to a female counselor. God knows—and I do not want to—what might have happened if I'd allowed the situation to continue unchecked.

Anticipate and Prevent Sexual Temptations

It's always easier to avoid sexual temptation than to resist it. As Joseph ran from Potiphar's wife, so we must run from the lures, baits, and hooks of impurity. When it comes to sexual temptation, God says, be a coward (1 Cor. 6:18).

Those who travel with their jobs or ministries are often subjected to considerable sexual temptation. Home, family, and community provide certain natural restraints that are removed while traveling (and, unfortunately, some travel so much precisely because their home lives are unhappy).

Anonymity and leisure time spell catastrophe for the weak, struggling, lonely, and hurting.

I know some godly men and women who travel frequently, yet consistently have victory in this area. But many others need to travel less or bring their families more, or stay in the private homes of Christian families they know.

When I spoke at a men's conference, I asked several of the men who travel to stand up and share what steps they had found helpful in resisting sexual temptation. One man who travels extensively told us that for years his spiritual life had been stifled by habit. He would stay in the same hotel three or four days, and late at night when he was lonely and bored, he would turn on one of the television movies that invariably featured immorality. After years of losing this battle, he did something about it. This is what he shared:

"Whenever I check into my hotel, I ask them at the front desk to please remove the television from my room. Invariably they look at me like I'm crazy, then say, 'But sir, if you don't want to watch it, you don't have to turn it on.' Since I'm a paying customer, I politely insist, and I've never once been refused. Immorality is no longer just one push of a button away. Having the television removed has been my way of saying, 'I'm serious about this, Lord.' I've done this now for a year, and it's been the key to victory against impurity."

This man taught us a great principle that I would summarize like this: *In moments of strength, make decisions that will*

prevent temptation in moments of weakness. Anticipating temptation and choosing to avoid it is often the key to fulfilling a contract of purity: "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31:1).

Cultivate and Guard Your Marriage

Communication is crucial. Every affair begins with deception, and most deception begins with seemingly innocent secrets such as, "she doesn't need to know this." If you're married, regularly evaluate your relationship with your spouse. Watch for the red flags of discontentment, poor communication, and a poor sexual relationship.

We live in a fallen world. Even Christian marriages can become filled with resentment, boredom, or hurt. This makes us more vulnerable to the intrigue and excitement of a new person. The answer, however, is not a new person, but a fresh appreciation of the "old" person. Boredom can be overcome, and attraction can be rekindled.

A man in our church shared with a group of men that he found his eyes wandering from his wife, who no longer seemed attractive to him. Realizing this was not God's desire, he committed himself to praying daily that God would make his wife the most attractive woman in the world to him. Within a month that prayer was decisively answered. After hearing his story, another man did the same thing and also saw dramatic results. Both of their marriages are better now

than they've been in years. (Perhaps their wives were praying the same thing, but I am convinced God answered the heartfelt prayers of these men.)

Sometimes our marriage problems need assistance from the outside. Yet many Christians are too proud to ask for help. They stubbornly refuse to admit their struggles and get counseling—until after they fall into immorality. If your marriage or personal life is faltering, get help now before greater damage is done. The long-term cost of not swallowing our pride far exceeds any short-term gain.

Avail yourself of books, CD's, videos, and seminars geared to improving your marriage. Go to a Family Life Ministries' *Weekend to Remember*. When we were newlyweds, my wife and I went on a Marriage Enrichment weekend, and were surprised to uncover feelings and discover differences in perspective that, though they weren't major, could have caused serious problems down the road if left unheeded. More recently, decades later, we attended a marriage conference at our church and found that while our marriage had deepened and was stronger than it had ever been, there were still things we needed to discuss. We thank God for the prompting to communicate offered by that conference.

Be Honest with Your Spouse

After I addressed some of these issues at a conference, a woman shared her story. A year earlier her husband had come

to her in tears, confessing his attraction to a Christian woman he worked with. He was under constant temptation and felt himself slipping. He committed himself to backing off from the relationship and asked his wife to please understand and pray for him. She was initially hurt but realized she needed to help him rather than feel sorry for herself.

The result? Not only did he get out of the relationship, but through his wife's support they drew closer than ever before. In tears she told me, "Two months ago my husband died without warning. I know that if he hadn't been honest with me that night, he would have ended up in an affair with the woman, and perhaps would have left me. He would have died in sin, unready to meet God, and I would have lived the rest of my life grieving his affair. But that isn't how it happened. His last words to me were, 'I love you,' and I know it was true—he had proven it by his actions. I thank the Lord every day that I think of him with complete respect and admiration for loving God and me enough to be honest about his struggles."

Lust thrives on secrecy. There is nothing that defuses lust as effectively as exposure. Honest communication between husband and wife makes them allies, not adversaries. When discussing sexual temptation, there is both initial pain, and some immediate relief. And while sharing specific names is not always necessary, spouses can better understand their

mates, pray more effectively, and be more sensitive to each other's needs—all of which will draw the couple together.

Share Regularly with Those Who Will Hold You Accountable

Nothing is talked about more and acted on less than being "accountable." Some fear accountability—others imagine they're being accountable, when all they're really doing is eating breakfast and socializing, with an occasional spiritual discussion.

Many years ago, in 1986, when I was still a pastor, our church had seven full-time and several part-time ministers. Realizing that we were too busy going over agendas and not staying in touch with our spiritual lives, we started committing the first two hours of our weekly all-day staff meeting to sharing personal struggles and joys. In the process we often told each other where our spiritual lives were at and the struggles for which we needed prayer and help. We made sure no one was left out. We asked, "How are you doing?" and if the answers were vague or something seemed wrong, we probed deeper.

This is risky—it involves entrusting our reputation to others and opening ourselves to examination and even criticism (though, in fact, what comes out is usually positive encouragement). But the risks are small compared to the rewards. After working at it deliberately, eventually we no

longer felt alone in pastoral ministry. We learned each other's imperfections, and gradually had less to prove to each other. These hours of weekly accountability became weekly therapy, and no matter how full the agenda, we committed ourselves to keeping in touch with each other's inner lives.

After several years of doing this, though, I determined that for me it just wasn't enough. Our staff meetings were large enough that we could fake it, slip through the cracks, or otherwise escape real accountability. Consequently, I started two accountability groups—one with three other pastors on a Tuesday afternoon and another with four laymen on a Saturday morning. We began each week with a passage of Scripture we'd memorized. Then each of us in turn answered several key questions: How are you doing with God? With your mate or the person you're dating? With your children? What temptations are you facing, and how are you dealing with them? How has your thought life been this week? Are you consistently living for Christ in your workplace? Have you been spending regular time in the Word and prayer? Who have you been sharing the gospel with? How can we pray for you and help you?

After just a few of these meetings, men in both groups expressed that this was the most meaningful 90 minutes of their week. For some it was the first time a brother in Christ had ever asked them these questions. One said, "Why, for so many years, have we talked about sports and hunting and

business and everything else under the sun, and not talked about the most important part of our lives?" Another said, "I've gotten to know you men in one month in a way I don't know people I've been with for ten years." Our key verse was Proverbs 27:17: "As iron sharpens irons, so one man sharpens another"—and we have seen its reality over and over again.

Every accountability group has its own personality and will sometimes make changes to avoid stagnancy. But the key is always to get back to the basic questions. You or your group may wish to come up with some of your own. Often the best questions to ask in an accountability group are the very questions we least want to answer! Write those questions down and put them on the top of the agenda each time you meet. Howard Hendricks suggested that the last question on the list be this: "In your answers to any of the previous questions, have you lied?"

Even simple and spontaneous attempts at accountability can produce amazing results. Once I was undergoing hours of sexual temptation, and finally I called a brother I was to have breakfast with the next morning. I said, "Please pray for me, and promise to ask me tomorrow morning what I did." He agreed. The moment I put down the phone, the temptation was gone. Why? I'd like to say it was because I was so spiritual, but the truth is there was no way I was going to face my friend the next morning and have to tell him I'd

sinned! If this is a crutch, fine. When it comes to battling temptation, I'll take all the help I can get!

Be Quick to Confess and Repent

A Christian man struggled with homosexual temptation. He had come out of a background of immorality, but walked with Christ in purity for two years. Then he became careless, allowing his thoughts to wander. Within a month he was browsing in a pornographic bookstore; six days later he walked into the wrong part of town; finally, weeks later, he found a gay bar and a sexual relationship. The process took two months, but at no time did he overtly recognize and confess his sin and plead for God's grace and strength. He'd avoided the only two things that could have broken the downward spiral he had stepped into: confession and repentance.

We must keep short accounts with God. When we sin, we must confess it immediately. Otherwise, we'll become desensitized to it and be able to go one step further before our dulled conscience objects. Delayed confession is the next worst thing to no confession. "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Prov. 28:13).

All sins should be confessed to God, some to others—"confess your sins to each other and pray for each other" (James 5:16). Whether or not a sin is confessed to others is

dependent on who is affected by the sin, who is aware or suspicious of the sin, and who is in a position to help you avoid repeating the sin. Any Christian's immorality has a significant effect on the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 5:6). If others have been aware of my sin, they may have been hurt by it or even worse, desensitized to sin themselves. When a sin is public, confession should also be public.

While my spouse may be unaware of my sin, she has nonetheless been deeply affected by it. If I do not confess it, I cheat her twice: first in the sin itself, and second by not allowing her to forgive me or respond in the way she chooses. If I have violated my marriage vows, it is she who must decide if she will forgive me. Anyone who lives in fear that his spouse will someday discover the truth is not walking with God.

Count Sin's Cost

I met with a man who had been a leader in a Christian organization until he committed adultery. I asked, "What could have been done to prevent this?" He paused only for a moment, then said with haunting pain, "If only I had really known, really thought through what it would cost me, my family, and my Lord, I honestly believe I never would have done it."

Years ago my fellow pastor and friend, Alan Hlavka, and I each developed a list of all the specific consequences we

could think of that would result from our immorality. The lists showed sin's potential devastation, and to us spoke more powerfully than any sermon or article on the subject.

Periodically, especially when traveling, or during times of temptation or weakness, we read through our list. When we begin to think unclearly, reviewing it yanks us back to reality and the need both to fear God and to heed the consequences of sin. In a personal and tangible way it brings home God's inviolate law of choice and consequence. It cuts through the fog of rationalization and fills our hearts with a healthy, motivating fear of God.

What follows is an edited version of our combined lists. I've included the actual names of my wife and daughters to emphasize the personal nature of this exercise. I recommend that you use this as the basis for your own list, adding those other consequences that would be uniquely yours. The idea, of course, is not to focus on sin, but on the consequences of sin, thereby encouraging us to refocus on the Lord and take steps of wisdom and purity that can keep us from falling.

Here's how my list looked when I wrote it many years ago:

- Dragging Christ's reputation into the mud.
- Having to one day look Jesus in the face at the judgment seat and explain why I did it.
- Untold hurt to Nanci, my best friend and loyal wife.
- Loss of Nanci's respect and trust.

- The possibility that I could lose my wife and my children forever.
- Hurt to and loss of credibility with my beloved daughters, Karina and Angie. ("Why listen to a man who betrayed Mom and us?")
- Shame to my family. ("Why isn't Daddy a pastor anymore?" The cruel comments of others who would invariably find out.)
- Shame and hurt to my church and friends, especially those I've led to Christ and discipled. (List names.)
- An irretrievable loss of years of witnessing to my unsaved father.
- Bringing great pleasure to Satan, God's enemy.
- Possibly contracting a sexually transmitted disease, passing it on to Nanci.
- Loss of self-respect, discrediting my own name, and invoking shame and lifelong embarrassment upon myself.

This is less than half of the items from my list. I'm much older now. My daughters are grown, with children the age that they were when I first made my list. I'm grateful to say that my father came to faith in Christ at age 85. Four years later he died. But the list of immorality's consequences is larger than it's ever been. I have two sons-in-law and five

grandchildren. Millions of people have read my books, so the circle of people I would be letting down has grown.

It would still break my heart to betray my Lord Jesus and my wonderful wife. That's why I am more careful than ever to avoid the little compromises and indulgences that could lead to moral disaster. Instead of letting down my guard as the years go on, I have sought to raise it higher.

We all need to read and reread Proverbs 4-8, and recommit ourselves to walk the path of wisdom that recognizes the utter destructiveness of sexual sin. If only we would rehearse in advance the ugly and overwhelming consequences of immorality, we would be far more prone to avoid it.

Prepare to Win the Battle

In J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit,* there was no one more seemingly invincible than Smaug, the mighty dragon. But there was one small chink in the armor of his underbelly. Unaware of his weakness and underestimating his opponents, Smaug failed to protect himself. Bard the hunter, a skilled marksman, learned of the presumptuous dragon's weakness. His arrow pierced Smaug's heart, and the lake people were saved.

An exciting story, with a happy ending. But when it's a servant of Christ felled by the evil one, the ending is not happy. It is tragic. Satan knows only too well the chinks in the

armor of the most mighty Christian warriors—not to mention the rest of us! He isn't one to waste his arrows, bouncing them harmlessly off the strongest plates of our spiritual armor. His aim is deadly. Our points of greatest vulnerability are the targets he will most certainly hit.

As I take a close look at myself and my Christian brothers and sisters, sometimes I'm alarmed at what I see. Some of us have grown presumptuous and morally soft. At times we are frighteningly weak in our exercise of sexual purity. We watch, listen to, and are amused by suggestiveness and immorality, and we subtly adopt the world's values instead of the Word's. We begin thinking like the world—no wonder we end up acting like it.

We are in a battle far more fierce and strategic than any Alexander or Napoleon ever fought. It's time to take a close look at our minds, our speech, and our actions. Like the Greek warrior Achilles, we may appear unassailable to ourselves or to the many who respect us, but one arrow to our heel proves us otherwise.

Ephesians 6 tells us to prepare for battle by putting on the whole armor of God.

No one prepares for a battle he isn't aware of.

No one wins a battle he doesn't prepare for.

Think honestly and carefully—is susceptibility to sexual impurity your Achilles heel? Is it the chink in your armor? If so, following the guidelines of this booklet may be more than

a nice precaution—it may actually save your life, family, and ministry from ruin. It may save you from having to hear what haunted *The Scarlet Letter's* Arthur Dimmesdale and has haunted countless thousands of others in ministry—Satan's laugh.

Appendix A:

A Message To and About Pastors and Christian Leaders

Among the moral land mines littering a Christian leader's path is the position of power and influence inherent in any ministry. The more prominent the ministry, the greater the power and influence. In pastoral ministry, for instance, there is a strange blend of ego-feeding flattery and debilitating criticism that can fill leaders with either pride or despair. Like our Lord, pastors tend to be either worshipped or crucified, sometimes both in the same day. In this up-and-down process, our perspective gets warped, and our resistance to temptation lowered.

Each of us must learn to take responsibility for every choice. Those of us in ministry—whether full-time or part-time, paid or unpaid, in the church or parachurch—must take even greater responsibility for our choices concerning our interactions with those whom we minister both to and with. This puts upon lay people and especially lay leaders in the church the importance of respectfully holding pastoral leadership accountable for their actions. As a member of the

local church, you must not only pray for your pastoral staff, but also be willing to confront them when there is an appearance of not living above reproach (1 Tim. 3:1-7).

Speak Up!

Time and again when a pastor ends up in an affair with a staff member, people will nod knowingly and say, "I could see that coming" and "It was bound to happen." Then why didn't they do something about it? If there were signs, these people should have gone directly to the pastor with their concern, and if it didn't change, they should have gone to another leader and asked to confront the pastor together (Matt. 18:15-17).

There is a higher standard for those in ministry, and public exposure is a price that must often be paid (1 Tim. 5:20). One of our pastors had this to say about the importance of public confession: "If I ever commit immorality, I want to know that I will have to face our church body. I want to know my reputation will be ruined. I don't want any deterrent to be removed." Having seen the purifying effects of public confessions by two lay leaders in our church's history, I'm all the more convinced of the importance of such actions.

Pastoral Counselors, Beware!

We in ministry usually have people-centered personalities. We care and we listen, and that draws others to us, and us to them. We get wrapped up in the lives of people, sometimes in unhealthy ways. Studies show that over half of those with emotional or mental struggles go first to see their pastor or spiritual leader. Most pastors are men, and yet as many as 75 percent of those who come to them for help are women. Often these women are coming precisely because they have deep emotional needs and relational voids. There is a natural bonding process in counseling that can lead to a sense of intimacy on the part of both counselor and client. This situation is compounded because pastors and lay people alike are rarely trained to understand the sexual dynamics involved in ministry. The role of a pastor or leader involves authority and power which must not be abused.

I am all for healthy relationships between brothers and sisters in Christ. For instance, my wife and I have a dear friend who lived with us when she was a teenager. Though I'm in my fifties and she's in her forties, she is both like a daughter and a little sister to me. The very idea of inappropriate behavior with her sickens me as much as it would if she were my literal daughter or sister. But unless we have a well-defined familial relationship (meaning that a person is a "parent" or a "sibling" to us in the sense of 1 Timothy 5:1-2), we need to be very wise and careful about our meetings with the opposite sex and take precautions.

Find a qualified person of the same gender to meet with the person. A man who needs to meet with a woman can include his wife in the meeting.

If despite all this you choose to counsel alone with those of the opposite sex, burst the illusory bubble that you are alone and unaccountable: have your office near main foot-traffic areas, keep your office door ajar, or at least have a window installed in your door. And realize that even then you are running a risk that could be averted by having women counsel women and men counsel men.

Even the secular counseling profession considers it the highest breach of ethics to enter into a romantic and/or sexual relationship with a client. Indeed, sexual involvement with one who has come to seek emotional help or spiritual guidance should not only be considered fornication or adultery—it should be considered sexual abuse.

Sexual activity that comes out of a ministry context is comparable to child sexual abuse, where the supposedly mature and stable adult figure takes advantage of his or her authority and credibility to initiate or allow a sexual encounter with the immature and vulnerable. In such cases, the person in ministry is not a victim but a predator. And it is all the worse because we are trusted representatives of Christ.

There is a disturbing tendency in the church to blame the adulterous relationship of a male leader on the woman he becomes involved with. She is often automatically regarded as

the seductress, with as much or more responsibility for what happened than the man. On the contrary, although they are both guilty, it is the partner in the position of authority that is most to blame.

Often those in ministry justify flirtations with sin on a rational and even spiritual-sounding basis. For instance, one Christian worker didn't tell his wife about his frequent meetings with a particular woman on the grounds that he shouldn't violate counseling confidentialities. Besides, he sensed that his wife would be jealous (without good reason, of course), so why upset her? Under the cloak of professionalism and sensitivity to his wife, he proceeded to meet with this woman secretly. The result was as predictable as it was tragic.

A pastor had been struggling with lustful thoughts toward a college girl in his church. Rather than dealing with his struggles alone with the Lord, or with a mature brother, or with his wife, he actually took the girl out to lunch to talk with her! Citing the biblical mandate to confess our sins and make things right with the person we've wronged, he told her, "I've been having lustful thoughts about you, and I felt I needed to confess them to you." Embarrassed but flattered, the girl began to entertain her own thoughts toward him, and eventually they became sexually involved.

Remember that all this came from what the pastor told himself was a spiritual and obedient decision to meet with the

girl! To misuse Scripture in this way and violate every rule of wisdom and common sense shows how incredibly cloudy and undependable our thinking can become—and how much we need the righteous and wise counsel and admonition of others. "For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin" (Ps. 36:2).

Our Sacred Trust

Ministry is not just a task. It is a sacred trust between the under-shepherd and the flock that has been entrusted to him by God. To misuse and violate that trust to achieve sexual conquest, or even emotional dependence, is a particularly deplorable behavior. Every time a Christian leader's sexual sin is passed off as "an unfortunate indiscretion that came at a vulnerable point in his life," responsibility is avoided or denied, and others— especially the members in the local church—are taught that emotional needs and inadequacies justify immoral entanglement.

Though I've not been a pastor since 1990, I have met with various men over the years who have helped me uphold high standards in my walk with God. We knew we would be honest with each other, and challenge each other. In such groups, each man raises the bar for the others, and helps them to jump it, in the power of Christ.

You're Not Alone

We in full-time ministry sometimes set our own schedules and lack the built-in accountability of most secular jobs, creating isolation and allowing considerable freedom to pursue an unhealthy relationship. Prime candidates for sexual sin are those who keep long hours away from home, are gone evenings and travel frequently. Since these very things can become characteristic of successful Christian leaders as they come into more public demand, it's no wonder so many have fallen.

There's a mystique about spiritual ministry that breeds fascination in some people. Their respect for a pastor, for instance, can border on awe. It's flattering for the pastor (especially when nursing fresh wounds from the last board meeting) to receive attention from an attractive woman who obviously admires him and hangs on his every word. Unless there is a clear awareness of human nature, a subtle but powerful process of bonding can occur. This can range from slowly developed infatuation to an "instant intimacy" that accelerates at an alarming pace.

Many Christian leaders move so freely in the world of great spiritual truths that, unless they take pains to communicate daily, their spouses get left out. This development of two separate worlds leads to two separate lives and is often the first step toward an adulterous affair with "someone who understands me and my world."

Those gifted and active in ministry can be notoriously proud and independent. The more prominent leaders become, the more they need accountability, but ironically the less they get it. In several cases involving Christian leaders who've fallen, it's remarkable how many people around them were aware of their immorality, or at least the obviously indiscreet and unwise actions leading up to it. Yet those closest did not have the conviction or courage to confront these leaders. They think, "He's a godly man; who am I to ask if this is a wise choice he's making?"

As church and parachurch workers, we may become so busy with our tasks that we stand shoulder to shoulder with our coworkers, but seldom face to face. Many pastors in small churches feel isolated, and even those in large churches with multiple staff members are often on their own when it comes to facing their moral struggles.

Realizing we are all called to be holy because God is holy (1 Peter 1:15), we should all seek to help our brothers and sisters in Christ to live above reproach, to His glory.

Appendix B:

The Perils of Internet Pornography

When speaking about sexual purity at my church, I told parents that if they are going to let their children have internet access in the privacy of their own rooms, they may as well buy thousands of pornographic magazines and stack them in their children's closets and then say, "Don't ever look at those." It amounts to the same thing.

After my message a sincere Christian mother came up to me. She was offended by my warning to parents to not allow their children to have unmonitored, unrestricted internet access.

"I can't believe you said that," she began. "My son has internet access in his room, and I trust him! He's a good boy."

I told her, "I used to be a seventh grade boy. I'll tell you right now, you think you're honoring your son by trusting him, but you are setting him up for a fall. You could hand him a gun, and his life would likely turn out better than if you just hand him over to the internet like that."

If this strikes you as an overstatement, you simply do not understand the devastating effects of pornography. Though it would be irresponsible to simply hand over a gun to your son, many boys, perhaps out of fear, would not play with it or harm themselves or others. But the great majority who are allowed access to pornography will view it, and many of those

will become addicted to it, ruining their lives and in many cases ruining their future marriages.

In my own large church, it's safe to say, tragically, we have *hundreds* of men who began pornography addictions when they were in junior high or high school and have never broken free. The consequences are tragic. And in many cases, "loving" parents who "trusted" them when they were teenagers ended up exposing them to temptations that have devastated their lives and their families.

Explicit images are far more readily available than ever before. It used to be that in order to acquire pornographic magazines or videos, you actually had to purchase or rent them. But now, with just a few key strokes or moving a fingertip on a computer, laptop, or cell phone, anyone has instant access to thousands of pornographic images and videos.

Numerous studies have shown that a majority of men who profess to be Christians view pornographic images in any given week. Countless believers are in bondage to this sinful behavior and many feel hopeless about being able to overcome it. We're in a battle—big time—and we need a strategy to have victory in this area of sexual temptation. This is a spiritual battle (Eph. 6:12), but as children of God, we are equipped to win it (1 Cor. 10:13).

Choosing Obedience

Scripture says that Satan goes around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. He wants us in bondage; Christ wants us free to live in obedience. Disobedience is contagious, but so is obedience. The more we do it, the more it becomes the pattern of our lives.

We must call upon the resources of Christ granted to us, and depend upon Him, while decisively making the choices to remove temptation. If internet access, even on a cell phone, is a source of temptation, then we need to cut it off. Internet access is not a biblical mandate. To a person who goes to pornographic sites, having them just a double click away is utterly foolish. It's like keeping explicit magazines on our bookshelves, waiting for us to come to them in a weak moment. If purity is optional, we will never experience it.

Right now, in moments of strength, we must make choices that will serve us well in moments of weakness. If we don't radically cut off the sources of the temptations that pursue us, then we are just playing games, and have no intention of obeying Christ. (Yes, some of these temptations we can't cut off without being hermits, but many of them we can.) We can take decisive actions by getting rid of anything in our homes and workplace that draw us to sin—including books, magazines, pictures, posters, movies, TV, and internet access. We can't expect God to call the cable company and cut off our service, if that's necessary to avoid temptation. That's our job.

Scripture says to "Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18). This is not a suggestion, it's a command. We disobey it to our own destruction. We must not just walk away from temptation; we must turn and run from it. It's a good idea to write out this verse and put it where you will see it: "Turn my eyes from worthless things; renew my life according to your Word" (Ps. 119:37).

I highly recommend that those struggling with pornography get involved with a recovery group for accountability. In addition, there are many quality books and resources about battling sexual immorality, and specifically pornography (see the list of recommended resources at the end of this booklet).

God is ready and willing to do a work of grace and cut through the blindness and the old habits and patterns that enslave us. He wants what's best for us; the evil one wants what's worst. Let's choose what's best: life, not death (Deut. 30:19). Through the power of His Spirit, we can do this.

Changing Our Behavior

We must realize it is possible to control our behavior and choices no matter how vile or persistent the temptations. I know many men who face temptation toward pornography, but they consistently resist both the thoughts and the actions.

The existence of a desire does not justify or necessitate succumbing to that desire. We live in a hedonistic society that

tells us desires are meant to be fulfilled. But every desire need not be fulfilled, and indeed, in many cases, should not be. We are not animals blindly compelled by desire. We are human beings, created in God's image, with the capacity to choose. We are not victims. Every action is a choice. Every sin is a choice. Every right behavior is a choice.

If we feel our desires are so strong that we "must" look at pornography, we should ask ourselves the question, "Would I still do this if someone pointed a gun at my head and promised to fire it if I did?" If the answer is no—and of course it is—it demonstrates that we don't have to make this choice, but merely that we want to and choose to. (Once we're in Heaven with Christ there will be no more sin or even temptation. Until then we have to face temptations, but we don't have to succumb to them.)

We must actively resist and refuse to give in to the evil desires and fantasies that push themselves upon us. "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:5). This isn't impossible. God is not cruel. He never commands us to do something without giving us the power in Christ to obey Him. We can call upon Christ for that power.

It is possible over time to redirect and change our hearts. Jesus said sexual sin begins in the heart—"I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already

committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). All evil resides and is cultivated in the heart, and outward behavior is the product of this inner evil. That means that we need a heart transplant, a mind reprogramming, a change in our inner beings.

Cultivating Our Inner Lives

1 Peter 1:13 says we are responsible for the way we think. We are to take charge of our minds and focus them on what is right, not wrong: "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed." Romans 12:2 says, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

How do we renew our minds? By filling them with what's right and true, especially God's Word. Psalm 119:11 says "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Note this verse says that sin is prevented not simply by restraining the body, but by retraining the heart, from which actions flow.

The battles that are waged every day in our minds and on our computer screens take their spiritual toll. By cultivating our inner lives, we are more likely to experience daily victories.

We can build our relationship with Christ by praying, reading God's Word and meditating on it, reading great

books, listening to Scripture and audio books and teaching from God's Word. We need to fill our lives with the best things, those that glorify God. Then when we see how satisfying they are, it will be easier to resist the things that tempt and destroy us. "In your presence is fullness of joy. At your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11).

As we eliminate the garbage, and replace it with what honors God, we will find it easier to obey Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

When we choose to feed our righteous desires and starve our unrighteous ones, by God's grace we will program our lives for righteousness. We will begin to think and live like the new creatures God has made us in Christ. We can experience victory in the war against pornography.

Resources from Eternal Perspective Ministries (available at www.epm.org/store)

The Purity Principle

Some people have given up on purity. Some have never tried. Author Randy Alcorn shows us why, in this culture of impurity, the stakes are so high—and what we can do to experience the freedom of purity. Impurity will always destroy us; purity always leads to higher pleasures! Choose wisely. Let the insights of this book—written for old and young, married and single—help you gain your footing on the party to truly lasting joy.

The Purity Principle Study Guide

This study vividly portrays the choices you must make between purity and impurity—and the serious consequences of those choices. Includes four weeks of Bible study for individuals to complete in five daily segments. A leader guide at the back of the book provides plans for a four- or five-session group study.

DVD of Randy's Sexual Purity Messages

This DVD includes two of Randy Alcorn's messages on sexual purity: "Sex Is Not the Problem" and "The Sweet Taste of Freedom: Enjoying Mental and Sexual Purity."

Some Recommended Books and Resources for Sexual Purity

Sex in Marriage

Intimate Issues by Jody Dillow and Lorraine Pintus

Love Life for Every Married Couple by Ed Wheat

The Intimate Marriage by R. C. Sproul

A Biblical Guide to Love, Sex and Marriage by Derek and Rosemary Thomas

Sex, Romance and the Glory of God by C. J. Mahaney

Sexual Purity for Men

Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave by Ed Welch

False Intimacy: Understanding the Struggle of Sexual Addiction by Harry Schaumburg

Sex Is Not the Problem (Lust Is): Sexual Purity in a Lust-Saturated World by Joshua Harris

Sexual DeTox by Tim Challies

Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain by William M. Struthers

Sexual Purity for Women

No Stones: Women Redeemed from Sexual Addiction by Marnie C. Ferree

Dirty Girls Come Clean by Crystal Renaud

Help for Wives of Husbands with Sexual Addictions

Hope After Betrayal: Healing When Sexual Addiction Invades Your Marriage by Meg Wilson

Living with Your Husband's Secret Wars by Marsha Means

The Sexual Man by Archibald Hart

Through Deep Waters: Letters to Hurting Wives by Kathy Gallagher

Undefiled by Harry Schaumburg

When His Secret Sin Breaks Your Heart: Letters to Hurting Wives by Kathy Gallagher

For a list of recommended online resources, see
www.epm.org/resources/sexualpurity

To browse articles and resources on sexual purity from EPM, see
www.epm.org/purity resources

About the Author

Randy Alcorn is an author and the founder of Eternal Perspective Ministries (EPM), a nonprofit ministry dedicated to teaching principles of God's Word and assisting the church in ministering to the unreached, unfed, unborn, uneducated, unreconciled, and unsupported people around the world. His ministry focus is communicating the strategic importance of using our earthly time, money, possessions and opportunities to invest in need-meeting ministries that count for eternity. He accomplishes this by analyzing, teaching, and applying the biblical truth.

Before starting EPM in 1990, Randy served as a pastor for fourteen years. He holds degrees in theology and biblical studies and has taught on the adjunct faculties of Multnomah University and Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon.

A *New York Times* bestselling author, Randy has written over fifty books, including *Happiness, Heaven, The Treasure Principle,* and the Gold Medallion winner *Safely Home.* His books have been translated into over seventy languages and have sold over eleven million copies. Randy has written

articles for many magazines, including EPM's issues-oriented *Eternal Perspectives*, and for online sites such as The Gospel Coalition and Desiring God Ministries. He is active on Facebook and Twitter and has been a guest on more than 700 radio and television programs and podcasts including Focus on the Family, FamilyLife Today, and Revive Our Hearts.

Randy resides in Gresham, Oregon, with his wife, Nanci. They have two married daughters and are the proud grandparents of five grandsons. Randy enjoys hanging out with his family, biking, underwater photography, research, listening to audiobooks, and reading.

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About Eternal Perspective Ministries

Eternal Perspective Ministries (EPM) is a Bible-believing, Christ-centered nonprofit organization with two goals:

- to teach the principles of God's Word, emphasizing an eternal viewpoint;
- to reach the needy in Christ's name, calling attention to the needs of the unreached, unfed, unsupported, unborn, unreconciled, and untrained.

EPM is the recipient of the author royalties from Randy Alcorn's books, and 100% are given away for ministry purposes: 90% to other worthy Christian organizations and 10% to EPM to help offset the costs related to the writing/researching/editing of the books, as well as to help facilitate the giving away of our books to people all over the world. We love the fact that God uses Randy's books to change people's lives in two ways: through the reading of his words and through the giving away of his royalties.

You can order all of Randy's books and products through EPM's online store at www.epm.org/store. (The EPM website also has many free resources, including articles, audio, video, pastors' kits, and more.) When you purchase Randy's

books from EPM, the profits go directly to support the work of the ministry and fund our operating expenses.

Twice a year, EPM produces *Eternal Perspectives*, a full-color magazine filled with thought-provoking and informative articles, most authored by Randy, on a variety of subjects related to Christian living, Heaven, giving, missions, and much more. EPM also sends a periodic email newsletter with the latest news about Randy's books, projects, and speaking events, as well as special promotions from EPM. You can subscribe at www.epm.org/subscribe.

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So we fix our eyes not on what is seen,
but on what is unseen.
For what is seen is temporary,
but what is unseen is eternal.
— 2 Corinthians 4:18