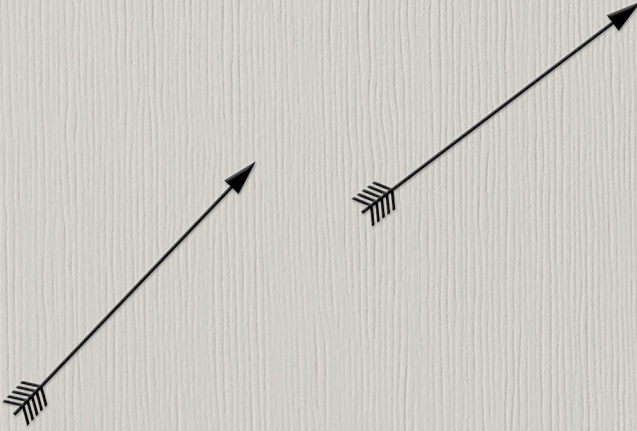


How to Experience Victory,
Freedom, and Healing from Lust



MORE THAN A BATTLE

Joe Rigney

Virtually all men I know experience both shame and hopelessness in their struggle with the rampant pornography pandemic in our world. Thankfully, Joe Rigney gives us all a clear, gospel anchored way to fight the fight and lay aside the weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us.

Bob Lepine, cohost, FamilyLife Today

Indulging in pornography is an international pandemic that will send you to hell. Is it worth it to pursue a fleeting pleasure that is God-defying, life-wasting, family-betraying, poison-injecting, mind-ruining, conscience-searing, and slavery-fueling? The wise advice in this book is a gift for two groups of people: those who are struggling and those who want to help.

Andy Naselli, associate professor of systematic theology and New Testament for Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis and a pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church

The problem is deeper than the problem. That's the message of *More than a Battle*. Joe Rigney explains how our struggle with lust and pornography is in fact an expression of our original good desire for love, success, fulfillment, and happiness, a desire now twisted and distorted by the Fall. To address the whole problem, Rigney argues that we must both starve the sinful cravings by denying the temptations of the flesh, and feed the original good desire, by pursuing our earthly vocation and our spiritual duty. And all must be done in the desire and expectation that God will satisfy our greatest desires. *More than a Battle* combines

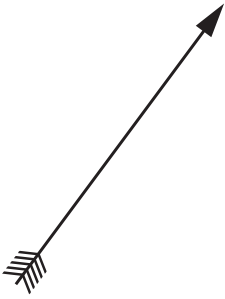
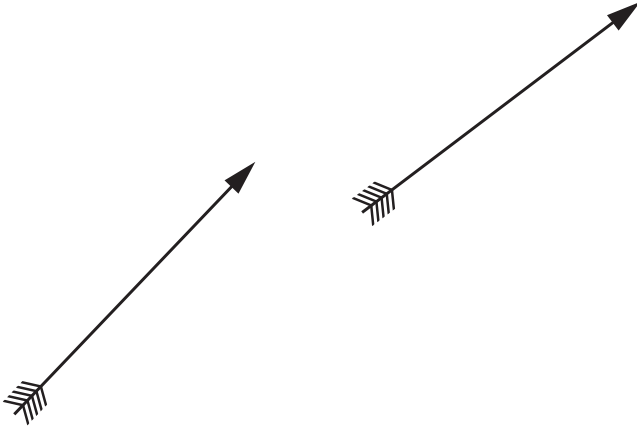
this theory with practice, as it offers concrete suggestions for developing practices and habits that form lasting virtue. This is a book for all Christians currently fighting the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Steven Wedgeworth, associate pastor
of Faith Presbyterian Church (PCA) in
Vancouver, British Columbia

To be confronted by one's sin is a severe mercy. There can be no repentance and no glory to come if we are not confronted by our sin, and yet the confrontation can be immensely painful. I hope that every Christian trapped in the mires of sexual sin has a mentor to guide them with the helpfulness, shrewdness, and graciousness Rigney displays in this book. *More than a Battle* is not just a helpful guide for Christians mired in sexual sin, though it certainly is that. It's also a perceptive study of the human heart that equips readers to understand their sin more carefully and to combat it more intelligently. It helps readers see that chastity is beautiful. And it's a remarkable application of the gospel to the lives of sinful people. This will be a go-to guide for pastors, campus ministers, and lay people alike.

Jake Meador, author of *In Search of the Common Good* and editor-in-chief of *Mere Orthodoxy*

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Freedom, and Healing from Lust



MORE THAN A BATTLE

Joe Rigney

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Acknowledgments

This book was born from relationships. It was born from conversations, counseling sessions, conference messages, pastoral interventions, small groups, friendships, and mentoring relationships. When I was in college, Bill Biggs played a pivotal role in modeling compassionate stability to me (before I even knew what that was). I heard David Powlison deliver a life-transforming conference message on “Making All Things New” at the 2004 Desiring God Conference for Pastors. In 2013, Bethlehem Baptist Church hosted the Pure Pleasure Conference for men. The conference was the brainchild of my friend Kempton Turner, who felt burdened over the devastation of pornography among the men at Bethlehem. Kempton delivered two powerful messages on fighting the pleasure of lust with superior pleasure in Christ. I was given the privilege of doing four follow-up sessions with men in which we sought to apply gospel strategies in the fight against lust. Those four sessions eventually became the heart of this book.

In 2016, I gave the same four sessions to the men at Cities Church. We incorporated the sessions into our discipleship structures in hopes of fostering a community of men who are able to help one another fight the fight of

faith. The feedback from those sessions led me to believe that there might be room for a book designed to help whole churches approach the struggle against pornography and sexual sin in a biblically grounded, holistic, and practical way.

As the book came together, a number of friends offered insights and feedback on how to improve it. Some of them gave extensive feedback and offered help on the structure of the book itself. I'm deeply grateful to Samuel James, Andy Naselli, Justin Dillehay, Clayton Hutchins, Zach Krych, Mike Schumann, Aaron Bryant, Devin Mork, Cody Sandidge, Josh Bremerman, Paul Poteat, Jeff Evans, and Greg Morse for taking the time to read through the project (in various forms) and help me make it better. I'm especially grateful for the feedback of Warren Watson. Warren's approach to counseling has profoundly shaped my own, and his interaction with the book has brought out additional dimensions of soul care that I never would have recognized on my own.

As always, I'm deeply grateful for my fellow pastors at Cities Church: Nick Aufenkamp, David Easterwood, Josh Foster, Kevin Kleiman, David Mathis, Jonathan Parnell, Mike Polley, and Michael Thiel. Serving alongside these men in ministry is one of the great privileges of my life. They have influenced all aspects of my ministry, and their fingerprints show up in a variety of ways throughout this book.

Finally, I don't have words to express my gratitude to my wife, Jenny. She was a powerful means of grace that the Lord used in helping me experience victory, freedom, and healing from sin. Her influence is everywhere in this book. Through her patience, grace, and wisdom, she has helped me know myself more deeply. More importantly, she has helped me know God more deeply. And that has made all the difference.

Introduction

If you're picking up this book, it's likely because you or someone you know has a problem. That problem goes by various names: Sexual sin. Pornography. Masturbation. Lust.

I don't know what led you to this book. Maybe you're fed up with yourself and looking for anything to help you overcome an addiction to pornography. Maybe someone recommended this book to you. Maybe they even gave you a copy. Maybe you're in an accountability group that is going to work through it. Maybe you're leading a group like that and want to be better equipped to help men who struggle. Maybe you're a pastor who wants to help the men in your church grow in holiness and obtain victory over this "sin that so easily ensnares" (Heb. 12:1).

Whatever the reason, if you sincerely want to be delivered from the chains of pornography and sexual sin, or if you want to help those who are bound by those chains, then I believe this book can help. I've used the strategies outlined here in my ministry for fifteen years. More than that, this book is the fruit of my own decade-long struggle with lust in my teenage years and God's grace in delivering me from it. Let me tell you a little bit about that.

My Story

My struggle with sexual sin began when I was about thirteen years old. This was the pre-smartphone, pre-Wi-Fi 1990s, back in the days when a boy's first exposure to porn often happened when a friend brought his dad's *Playboy* to school to show everyone. That's what happened to me.

When I was in seventh grade, a friend brought the magazine, and a group of us stood around in a circle in the alley behind the school, wide-eyed and fascinated by the glossy pictures of naked women. Compared to the way most kids today encounter pornography, it could be considered tame. But it still had a profound effect on my hormonally charged mind and body.

In eighth grade, I saw my first pornographic video at a sleepover. After the parents were in bed, one of the guys turned on HBO's late-night programming, and we sat there in the dark, again wide-eyed, fascinated, and aroused by what was happening on screen. From there my interest grew and expanded. I acquired my own stash of magazines. And though we didn't have HBO, there was still plenty of sexually charged material on late-night TV to enflame the desires of a teenage boy.

And then the Internet happened.

All of a sudden, I had access to all kinds of images on the World Wide Web. And when I was home by myself, I took advantage of that access and learned how to cover my tracks. Later, on a school trip in high school, a group of us were staying in a hotel room, and I got my first exposure

to hard-core pornography, the kind you have to pay for. The images impressed themselves on my mind, and the memories lingered in my imagination for years.

My enslavement grew through high school and into college, as I learned to navigate the various corners of the Internet, seeking more and more videos and images to gratify my desires. And through it all, the arousal and addiction were wedded to a deep sense of shame and guilt at what I was doing. As a Christian, I knew God called me to purity and holiness, but my

life was marked by the opposite. Lust and pornography had me by the throat, and I felt powerless in the face of the raging desires that would awaken in my heart, mind, and body.

Don't get me wrong. I tried all sorts of methods to break free. Accountability groups in high school, conferences and special events devoted to pursuing purity, books on how to fight sexual sin—I tried them all, repeatedly, with varying measures of temporary success. But it wasn't until I was engaged to my wife that something finally broke. Over the course of a year, I experienced a fundamental shift in my life and my fight with sexual sin. God broke through in a powerful way, and the struggle was never the same. Not that I'm completely



As a Christian, I knew God called me to purity and holiness, but my life was marked by the opposite.



free from sexual temptation and sin—that will have to wait for glory. But since that time, I’ve been delivered from pornography and masturbation (even as there were lingering emotional effects on my first year of marriage from the decade of bondage).

Looking back, I can see a number of factors the Lord used to accomplish that fundamental transformation. For starters, marriage raised the stakes. No longer could I pretend that lust was only about me. There was another human being involved, one I deeply loved and cared for and who would be devastated by my continued failure. By raising the stakes, marriage provided a crucial motivation for pursuing holiness.

In a similar way, my acceptance into seminary and my call to ministry played a key role in motivating me to fight in a way I never had. I knew that pornography use would not only wreck my marriage, it would disqualify me from ministry. So, in that window of time, the Lord provided two real and concrete motivations to pursue purity with a fresh zeal.

But increased motivation wasn’t enough. I also needed greater measures of wisdom in knowing myself, how I worked, and what was underneath my struggle. The Lord provided that as well. The pastor who did our premarital counseling proved invaluable in unearthing layers and depths in my own heart and mind. His wisdom and counsel helped steer the newfound motivation in a fruitful direction. He helped me gather up much of the wisdom from

all of those books and conference messages over the years and put them to better use. With his help and the grace of God, I had a fresh resolve and determination to grow in wisdom and knowledge of God and myself—to learn how the gospel met me with my particular history, temptations, and patterns. And though it wasn't easy, the change was real and unmistakable.

Since that time, I've continued to grow in my understanding of the struggle with lust and pornography as I've taught and mentored students and pastored and counseled the men of my church. Over the last fifteen years, I've added more tools to my tool belt, filling out the biblical, theological, and psychological foundation beneath the strategies and practices I use in my own life and commend to others. This book is an attempt to describe the gospel-grounded principles and practices that enabled me to gain victory over lust, to break free from addiction to pornography, and to heal the wounds of my sexual failures. Because the fight against lust and pornography has never been more difficult.

Three Lenses

We live in an age of unprecedented access to sexual sin. Of course, sexual temptation itself is as old as dirt. Debauchery, immorality, and temptation have been around since the fall of man. But they haven't always been so easy to access.

First-century Christians had to deal with temple prostitution. Victorians faced brothels. But not every person had a brothel in their pocket. Nor did they have to face life-size, crystal clear, photoshopped images of women in lingerie any time they wanted to pick up some milk at Target. Our society's obsession with sex, coupled with the technologies that make pornography so accessible, means it's never been more difficult to flee sexual immorality and pursue

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holiness. The result is that our families, our churches, and our society are being devastated by a pornography epidemic.

But what should we do about this epidemic? How should we address the challenge of pornography and lust in our own day? In my experience, approaches to this struggle can basically be broken down into three categories. Think of these as three lenses for viewing the fight.

1. **Sexual sin as immorality.** This approach accents our culpability and wickedness in pursuing sinful pleasures, as we are willingly led astray by our sinful desires. Our aim in the struggle is to renounce evil desires, repent of

shameful actions, and put to death the deeds of the body. The fundamental call is to fight a war against sinful passions.

2. **Sexual sin as addiction.** This approach accents the bodily and enslaving dimension of the struggle, as chemicals and hormones hijack and rewire our brains. Our aim is to unmask the lies of sexual addiction, to seek freedom from destructive patterns, and to break the habits that enslave us. The fundamental call is to struggle for liberation from sin's mastery.

3. **Sexual sin as brokenness.** This approach accents the deep wounds sexual dysfunction reveals. We pursue short-term sexual pleasure as a way of coping with unmet needs, family dysfunction, trauma, and abuse. Our aim in the struggle is to pursue renewal and transformation by renarrating our stories and repairing the ruins of past pains and sorrows. The fundamental call is to heal the wounds of our sexual brokenness.

Most books on this subject at least acknowledge the value of each of these lenses. However, usually one lens is

taken to be more fundamental and, as a result, the other two are neglected.

Frequently, counselors and pastors will issue warnings about the lenses they view as less important. For example, those who view sexual sin through the lens of brokenness are sometimes wary of emphasizing the evil and shame of sexual immorality, since the increased guilt prevents the individual from pursuing healing for the true causes beneath his or her broken desires. On the other hand, those who see sexual sin fundamentally as immorality worry that emphasizing the addictive element blames the sin on the body and the brain and lessens the responsibility for repentance and sin-killing.

For my own part, I think we ought to see significant value in all three lenses. All three can be of enormous help for the struggling sinner. My own tendency is to default to the language of war, violence, and struggle. This is partly because the Bible regularly uses this sort of language (Matt. 5:27–30; Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5) and partly because it's how I've grown accustomed to resisting the pull of sexual temptation in my own life. But, as the title of this book indicates, I am convinced that this is more than a battle, more than a war. Thus, I don't want to ignore the bodily and addictive element or the role of brokenness, trauma, and pain in fueling sexually immoral desires and behavior. I've seen firsthand that the language of war, battle, and violence has a tendency to create the wrong kind of pressure in the fight, often leading to more shame and guilt. I've also seen

that wise warfare often involves de-escalating situations and pursuing indirect assaults. (More on all of this later in the book.) But my fundamental point is that each lens brings something valuable to the table and that the more holistic our approach to this struggle, the better we'll be able to fight sin in our own lives and to help others break free from bondage to unwanted sexual desire.

I mention these three lenses here because the banner I wave over my entire approach to this struggle is Galatians 5:16: "I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh." That's what we're after: walking by the Spirit. And the Spirit of God addresses us in our immorality, in our bondage, and in our brokenness.

- We are called to put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit (Rom. 8:13) and so we *wage war* by the Spirit.
- "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17) because the Spirit is the one who sets us free from the law



The more holistic our approach to this struggle, the better we'll be able to fight sin in our own lives and to help others break free from bondage to unwanted sexual desire.



of sin and death (Rom. 8:2); and so we are *set free* by the Spirit.

- In the book of Isaiah, the Spirit is the one who anoints the Messiah to bind up the brokenhearted, to comfort the mourning, and to give them a garment of praise instead of a faint spirit (Isa. 61:1–4), so we are *healed* by the Spirit.

Therefore, in the struggle with sexual immorality, addiction, and brokenness, we must learn to walk by the Spirit, who kills our sin, sets us free, and heals our wounds.

How to Use This Book

This book is designed for two different groups: men who are presently struggling with lust and pornography and men who want to help them. Many books on the fight with sexual sin are targeted at the first group. My approach is a little bit different. It's birthed out of our church's philosophy of ministry: to equip the saints for the work of ministry. Given the challenge posed by pornography in our culture, it's crucial that men support and challenge one another in the fight rather than relying exclusively on pastors to address the issues. So at our church we've sought to provide teaching and resources to our men that will foster a growing culture of wisdom and godliness, enabling them to help and exhort one another in this struggle.

Thus, I've written this book as though I were addressing a group of men who are seeking to grow in wisdom and godliness together. This group is made up of those who are presently struggling and those who are seeking to help them. Sometimes I'll address the mentors directly—it'll be clear when I'm doing this, marked off as "A Note to Mentors." Other times, I'll address those who are in the thick of the fight. Often, I'll simply address the group as a whole.

The best way to use this book is to read the chapters individually and then come together with a group to discuss what resonated with you. After that, you can develop strategies and applications for your own situation.

Additionally, I've written this book primarily for men. As a man, I have a better understanding of the temptations and struggles of men than I do of the struggles of women. As a result, most of my ministry in this area has been to men. Nevertheless, I pray that women who struggle with pornography and lust will find this book helpful as well.

This book will be helpful for women who want to understand the struggles facing their husbands or their sons. In fact, there are certain sections I would encourage husbands and wives to read together and discuss. And given how widespread pornography is, and the simple fact that children are encountering it at such a young age, it's vital that fathers and mothers have a shared understanding of the fight their sons (and daughters) are facing and that

they are able to offer them wisdom and strategies in resisting temptation and dealing with failure.

However you use this book, I'm just glad you're using it. I hope it will be a helpful tool in your tool belt. My prayer is that the Spirit of God would use this book to grant you victory, freedom, and healing or that the Spirit would use this book to bring victory, freedom, and healing through you to someone you love.

A Note to Pastors and Church Leaders

I've tried to design this book with congregations in mind. My hope is that it can be part of a long-term strategy for men's discipleship in your church. Think of the good that would come if, over time, dozens of men in your church are capable of providing counsel and wisdom to other men. Think of the impact on the families in your community. Think of the devastation you might spare the next generation. Therefore, I want to encourage you to take Jethro's advice to Moses in Exodus 18:18: *if you try to do it alone, you'll wear yourself out*. Instead, identify capable and godly men in your midst and train them to handle the basics, leaving you to handle the heavier cases. Throughout the book, I've included sections called "A Word to Mentors" that go into greater detail on some of the theological foundations underneath the strategies. At the end, I've included an appendix with resources for further study. As you have

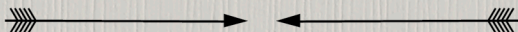
more men available to mentor others, you can direct them to these resources for further equipping. Personal holiness is a community project, and men must lead the way.

It has never been more difficult to flee sexual immorality and pursue holiness.

We live in an age of unprecedented access to sexual temptation. Previous generations faced adultery, prostitution, and brothels. But not every person had a brothel in their pocket. Our society's obsession with sex, coupled with the technologies that make pornography so accessible, make it more challenging than it's ever been.

The result is that our families, our churches, and our society are being devastated by a pornography epidemic.

In *More than a Battle*, pastor and author Joe Rigney offers hope for Christian men who are seeking to live with integrity and faithfulness in the face of the sexual temptation around them. Drawing on the Scriptures, his personal experience, and his pastoral counseling, Rigney frames the struggle with lust beneath the banner of Galatians 5:16: "I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh."



Joe Rigney (PhD, University of Chester) serves as assistant professor of Theology and Literature at Bethlehem College & Seminary. He is the author of four books: *Live Like a Narnian: Christian Discipleship in Lewis's Chronicles* (Eyes & Pen, 2013), *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Crossway, 2015), *Lewis on the Christian Life: Becoming Truly Human in the Presence of God* (Crossway, 2018), and *Strangely Bright: Can You Love God and Enjoy This World?* (Crossway, 2020). Joe is also a pastor at Cities Church in St. Paul and lives in Minneapolis with his wife and three sons.

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