

RAY ORTLUND

THE  
DEATH  
OF  
PORN

MEN OF  
INTEGRITY  
BUILDING  
A WORLD OF  
NOBILITY

Foreword by Thabiti Anyabwile

“It is rare that you find honesty and humility as well as honor in modern leaders. However, Ray Ortlund has exhibited such qualities and earned respect across multiple arenas. When a potential vacancy arose for the chaplaincy in the United States Congress, Ray Ortlund was first on our list. It is this level of trustworthiness that allows Ray to challenge the stronghold of exploitation endemic to pornography. Ray’s transparent approach cuts through the superficial layers, getting to the heart of the matter. This is a book that everyone should read, reminding us all of the value of being created in God’s image.”

**Mark Walker**, former congressman, North Carolina

“The subject of pornography tends to be embarrassing and can evoke feelings of helplessness and shame. Ray Ortlund refuses to pile onto that shame, and he wants you to know you’re not helpless. Like a loving and compassionate father, he calls us to freedom, to a better life, and to the death of porn’s grip on our imaginations that robs us of the true and beautiful intimacy our souls desperately hunger for.”

**Matt Chandler**, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Dallas, Texas;  
President, Acts 29 Church Planting Network; author, *The Mingling of Souls* and *The Explicit Gospel*

“In the pages of this book, Ray beautifully and compellingly calls us to be men of integrity building a world of nobility. He does this winsomely, graciously, and wisely in the form of letters infused with the tenderness and manliness of a father to his dear sons. I truly believe this book has the potential to be a culture changer. It will certainly impact, for the better, all who read and heed its wise and noble call.”

**Brian Brodersen**, Pastor, Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, California

“Over the last couple years, I’ve gotten to know Ray Ortlund on a deeper level. He’s struck me as a man of integrity and conviction, so when I heard he was writing a book to help Christians fight this evil thing called porn, I wasn’t surprised. His book is a great blend of theological depth and relatable, practical tools that I believe will help all people battle pornography use and addiction. Porn destroys families, relationships, and marriages, but most of all, it keeps us distant from God and near our shame. Thank you, Ray, for tackling this topic with such boldness and truth. Heaven is smiling at you.”

**Preston Perry**, poet; performance artist; teacher; apologist

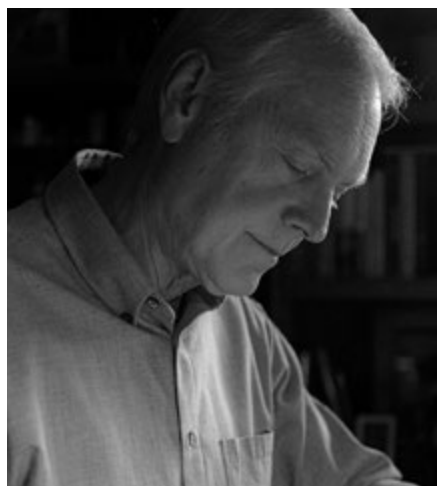
“*The Death of Porn* is the kind of book I want my sons and daughters to read. With sage counsel, Ray Ortlund tenderly leads and courageously calls us to envision a world free from the plague of pornography. This book inspires contrition over sin, instills courage against sin, and compels us to cast our hope fully upon Jesus.”

**Garrett Kell**, Pastor, Del Ray Baptist Church, Alexandria, Virginia;  
author, *Pure in Heart: Sexual Sin and the Promises of God*

“*The Death of Porn* is a magnificent work of hope. Ray Ortlund does not shame us or flatter us. He lifts us into a sense of our own destiny—not with his words but with God’s. This book deepened my resolve to avoid living beneath my God-given dignity and to carve out a world of nobility as never before. We allowed porn in. By God’s grace, we can drive it out. It’s what we were born to do. If I could, I would put this book into the hands of every man in my generation.”

**T. J. Tims**, Lead Pastor, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

*The Death of Porn*



Dear friend,  
My heart longs to  
reach your heart  
through these letters.  
Thank you for your  
openness.

-Ray

# The Death of Porn

*Men of Integrity Building a World of Nobility*

Ray Ortlund

Foreword by Thabiti Anyabwile

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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*For my grandsons—  
may you thrive as men of integrity.*

*And for my granddaughters—  
may you flourish in a world of nobility.*





# Contents

Foreword by Thabiti Anyabwile 11

Introduction: The Backstory 15

## PART 1 REINTRODUCING THE CHARACTERS

1 You Are Royalty 23

2 She Is Royalty 39

3 He Is Royalty 55

## PART 2 REIMAGINING THE FUTURE

4 We Can Do This 71

5 We Can Work Together 87

6 We Can Make a World of Difference 103

Acknowledgments 121

Appendix: A Man's Identity 123

*David Powlison*

General Index 129

Scripture Index 133



# Foreword

EVEN TO SOME OF US OLDER CATS, Ray Ortlund is a father figure. He gained that status not through assertion, position, or power but through encouragement, exhortation, empathy, and a seemingly boundless energy for Jesus. He's the kind of man you admire because you have the unshakeable sense that he loves you. And not just you. Everybody.

This is why Ray is an ideal choice for addressing one of the biggest scourges of our time—pornography. Right now, in homes, offices, and cars across the country, pornography is attaching its tentacles to the eyes, minds, and hearts of men, women, boys, and girls. It's sneaking into the lives of innocents through click bait and thirst traps. Pornography is attempting to tighten its grip on teenagers exploding with pubescent change, married men and women courting wanderlust in joyless as well as joyful marriages, and Christian leaders trying to maintain double lives of outward success and inward corruption. What used to be confined to magazines has made its way into the mainstream of society and the church.

Ray Ortlund understands that defeating the porn monster will not come by white-knuckle, jaw-clenched grit individually willing its way to victory when all other soldiers have fallen. Victory can be had, but only in the loving community of the local church with

saints covenanted together to stand against the wiles of the enemy in the truth of Jesus's gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Ray understands that a teammate's hug is a much stronger weapon than a fan's pat on the back with a "dat a boy." That's why he writes about this most sensitive and dangerous subject with the tone and warmth of a fellow traveler.

In this book, Ray uses words to God-glorifying, soul-edifying effect. It's not that he's being clever or flattering. His words are simply devastating—in a good way. It's the effect of his sincerity! If out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, then deep in the wells of Ray's heart is a reservoir of fragrant balm and strengthening sweetness. Not the off-the-shelf sweetness of sugary snacks cheapened by additives and preservatives. These pages give us the mature sweetness of aging, like fine maple syrup, tapped with humility and experience, oozing from his heart to the reader's.

As you read this book, you get the sense that this is what the apostle Paul meant when describing his ministry among the Thessalonians:

But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. . . .

For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. (1 Thess. 2:7, 11–12)

I don't know what kind of book on pornography you expected to read. But I suspect this book will surprise you with that strength of Christ that comes from love. It will remind you of who you are in Christ, of who the men and women around you are in God's image, of the fact that you are not alone. There is help. There is victory.

FOREWORD

There is a way to regain the regality of being royalty, because God in Christ is renewing you and me in his image.

This book speaks to the discouraged and distracted, the suffering and sullen, the unbelieving and the unsuspecting, the haughty and the halting. It's for everyone who, even for a moment, thinks victory over pornography is not possible. It's for you because victory is not only possible—victory has been accomplished for us by Jesus the risen Savior.

Come, let Ray introduce you to this Jesus and shepherd you to the freedom and joy found in him.

*Thabiti Anyabwile*  
*Pastor, Anacostia River Church*  
*Washington, DC*



## Introduction

# The Backstory

THANKS FOR PICKING UP THIS BOOK. I hope it helps. I hope it changes things. A lot of things.

I hope reading it messes with you. Writing it sure has messed with me.

Here's all you need to know about me:

- I am a Christian pastor.
- I love my wife.
- I am not looking at porn.
- I am a sexual sinner.

I wish that last one weren't true. But there's a brothel in the neighborhood of my mind, and I've wandered in there a time or two. It's a big part of why I'm thankful for the grace of Jesus. Never once has a stop-off at that Fantasyland made my life better. And never once has Jesus refused to take me back and clean me up.

If you're a sexual sinner too, this book is for you. Not the outwardly okay you, but the inwardly messy you. The real you, like the real me.



This book is *not* about you just getting polished up a bit here and there, making yourself more socially presentable. It's about your heart finally daring to believe in your true royalty. It's about the "real you" gaining traction for new integrity, especially in honest brotherhood with other men. It's about you, with other magnificent young men like you, building a new world of nobility, where both men *and* women can flourish.

What got me started on this book was a letter written over two hundred years ago. In the final days of his life, John Wesley, a minister in the Church of England, wrote a letter to a young politician named William Wilberforce. Wesley had urged him to use his political clout for opposing the slave trade in the British Empire. Wilberforce did. He made that fight his life mission. He was bitterly opposed by powerful people. But with God's help, Wilberforce and his allies finally defeated the slave trade and made the world a better place.

Here is Wesley's letter. And please overlook the old-fashioned style! Just notice what Wesley was asking Wilberforce to do—to take a bold stand against a successful evil that many people accepted as no big deal.

Dear Sir,

Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as Athanasius *contra mundum*,<sup>1</sup> I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the

1 Athanasius was a fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, in Egypt. He opposed the widespread heresy known as Arianism. He was so outnumbered, he became known as "Athanasius against the world."

opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.

Reading this morning a tract written by a poor African,<sup>2</sup> I was particularly struck by that circumstance that a man who has black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress, it being a law in all our colonies that the oath of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this!

That He who has guided you from youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things is the prayer of,

*Dear Sir,  
Your affectionate servant,  
John Wesley*

BALAM

24 FEB. 1791<sup>3</sup>

I love that. The dignified “Dear Sir,” the inspiring “glorious enterprise,” the blunt “execrable<sup>4</sup> villainy,” the realistic “opposition of men and devils.” Sign me up!

Anyway, this old letter got me thinking: *What about us today? What if not just one man but a whole generation of men takes a bold stand against the new slave trade of our time—pornography? Slavery*

2 Wesley is referring to Gustavus Vassa, born in Africa in 1745, kidnapped and sold as a slave in Barbados, and brought to England in 1757.

3 Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation adapted from the digitized manuscript of Wesley’s letter, Methodist Library at Drew University, December 6, 2005, <http://methodistlibrary.blogspot.com/2005/12/as-promised-more-digital-wesley.html>.

4 “Execrable” means “deserving damnation.”

is not gone. It's still going strong, but in a new form. Multitudes of men and women are in bondage to the degrading slavery of porn.

Which makes porn a *justice* issue. And Son, I know you're not okay with injustice! You know how God's heart breaks when people are oppressed and vandalized and dehumanized. But did you know he's calling you—just as he called Wilberforce—to do something about it? And you *can* do something about it, because God himself will help you.

Yes, the human odds are against you. The porn industry has dug in. It won't loosen its grip easily. Many people in our day just accept it—the way people accepted racialized slavery back then. That's why Wesley mentioned “Athanasius against the world.” Athanasius was a heroic man who went up against impossible odds, confronting a major wrong in his time for the sake of future generations. And he won, because God was with him—the way God is with you today.

Yes, *you*. Almighty God above is *with* you.

Don't tell yourself you're into your own sexual sin too deep to get free, much less to set others free. You have a future worth reaching for. I want to help you get there.

Here's what I ask you to remember all along the way. Your battle against porn isn't about porn. It isn't about sex. It isn't about will-power. Your battle is about hope. It's about your heart believing that in spite of your many sins—like my many sins—God *rejoices* to give you a future you can scarcely dream of. You'll win your fight by believing that *God's love for you is too great to be limited to what you deserve*.

If you see yourself living under a grim law of crime and punishment, with you always getting the karma you deserve, your hope will die. Your despair will sink you down into resignation, and from there you'll spiral down into porn and shame, then more porn and more shame, and on and on. You know what I mean.

But I'm asking you to *defy* all despair, because God gives his best to men who deserve his worst. I'm asking you to believe the Bible: "But God shows his love for us in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). I'm asking you to reject the hell your sins deserve. I'm asking you to sin against your sins. I'm asking you to receive, with the empty hands of faith, a future so magnificent it can only come from the grace of God. When your heart grabs on to that hope, porn's spell is broken, and your freedom is dawning. So maybe you *are* a mess. But with Jesus, you're a messy *winner*, because you're *his* mess. And so am I.

Let's start this journey together by you and me choosing to flat-out *believe* the most repeated verse in the Bible—that our Lord is "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). His personality profile is not balanced but biased—in favor of grace for the undeserving.<sup>5</sup>

Everything I'm going to say flows from this bright certainty about who God *really* is.

And once you've settled in your mind that you do have a future worth getting excited about, then you can help form a rebel movement—defiant young men who will someday dance on porn's grave, multitudes of men no longer groveling but standing tall and loving life again. And all of it, thanks to God.

That old letter from John Wesley is why I've written each chapter here as a letter—from me to you, from an older man to a younger man, calling you to give your life to this sacred cause of liberation. But it isn't just me. *God* is calling you to grow a counterculture where countless men and women can get their lives back, better than before, and forever.

5 Sam Allberry, "The Most Repeated Verse in the Bible," Desiring God (website), October 3, 2018, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-most-repeated-verse-in-the-bible>.

## INTRODUCTION

That's why I wrote this book—to start a movement. Because you matter, and everyone matters. And when *God* gets involved, we stop limiting how much good we can receive from him and how much good we can give to the world.

I don't expect to live many more years. But if this book helps you bring some healing to our injured world, I'll come to my dying day a happier man.

PART 1

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REINTRODUCING  
THE CHARACTERS



# You Are Royalty

DEAR SON,

You matter. You matter more than you know. That's what I want to talk to you about—your dignity before God, what it's worth to you, and how it empowers you to change the future.

Do you believe in your own nobility? Yes, you're a nice guy. But being a nice, likeable guy hardly rises to the stature of your true destiny.

Long ago a Christian leader named Irenaeus got right to the point: "The glory of God is a man fully alive."<sup>1</sup> I believe that. I believe it about *you*. And what I'm saying is this: I see a new you not far off in the distant future—a you with sparkle in your eye and spring in your step and steel in your spine, a you more fully alive than you've ever been before. And the more this new you shows up now, the more alive the whole world will be.

Can we think that through together?

<sup>1</sup> This is a paraphrase of Irenaeus's literal wording "The glory of God is a living man." See *Five Books of S. Irenaeus: Against Heresies*, trans. John Keble (London, 1872), 369.



First off, I *have* to say this: I want you to become a better man than I've been.

I still remember a painful moment from over fifty years ago. I was doing some modeling in Hollywood. Suntan lotion advertisements. Teenagers in swimsuits. (Go ahead and laugh!) But a girl was in the photo shoot with me. She was sweet and kind.

During a break in our workday there at the studio, I wandered into the room where the makeup guy was set up. There was the girl, standing on a chair, with him in front of her, daubing some makeup on her body. Her face was turned aside, burning with shame. Instead of her swimsuit top, she had a scarf stretched across her breasts, one end under each arm, barely covering her. The predatory makeup guy had somehow gotten her top off, and she was trying to cover up as much as she could. But he had taken power over her. He had violated her dignity. And she had to stand there, with him right in front of her, touching her over and over with his makeup brush—and maybe with more. I get angry every time I think about it.

But at that moment, as I walked in and the scene broke upon me in an instant, I was shocked. I had never imagined such evil. I had no idea what to do. So I did nothing.

I turned around and walked out.

My thought was *I'll minimize this embarrassment*. I didn't want to make a bad situation even worse. But I should have stood up for her!

To my dying day, I will regret that moment. When that girl needed help against the bad guy, I let her down. Not because I despised her. Not at all. I was just oblivious. I had *zero* awareness of the actual grandeur of *my* royalty and *her* royalty. It had never dawned on me that God himself was leading me into every moment to help more people experience their true grandeur. I didn't know to wake up every morning mentally prepared to bring God's

kingdom of royalty into whatever the day might reveal—like protecting a girl over in Hollywood who was getting pushed around.

I was an immature, fun-loving guy with a problem. My life was about me—not her. Where's the nobility in that?

What I now know is this. I am a knight in service to the King of kings here in a brutal world. The age-old ideals of chivalry—courage, justice, loyalty, courtesy toward women<sup>2</sup>—my King lived and died that way. I'm learning how to live his way. Can we learn together? If you embrace your high calling earlier in life than I did, you'll do so much good. You'll be ready for anything. Even at a moment's notice. Especially at a moment's notice.

So let's think about who you really are.

Well, before that, let's settle the question of who you *aren't*. This world has no idea what you're really worth. Around here you are, at best, useful. You fit into a market niche or a voting bloc or some other impersonal category, to be manipulated for someone's selfish agenda.

But that is *not* who you are.

---

The truth is, you are *royalty*.

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Britain has its royal family, with the pomp and ceremony. I respect that. But you belong to a royal family from beyond all this world. So how crazy is it that you might feel like God is up there rolling his eyes at you, thinking what an idiot you are! The God who is actually out there respects you. To him you're not a pawn, not a loser. In God's eyes, you have royal dignity.

2 O. B. Duane, *The Origins of Wisdom: Chivalry* (London: Brockhampton, 1997), 86 et passim.

Here's why I'm so sure about it. The Bible says that, long before target marketing and voting blocs and all the rest of it, your story began here:

God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

You didn't pop into existence by mere chance. You didn't bubble up from the primordial goo. You were created by the King of the universe. Which means you have stature here in his world.

The heavens are the LORD's heavens,  
but the earth he has given to the children of man. (Ps. 115:16)

As a God-created man, you have every right to see yourself as "crowned with glory and honor" (Ps. 8:5). You don't have to *make* this true. It *is* true. Your creation was your coronation.

The Hebrew word translated "image" in Genesis 1:27 is used elsewhere in the Bible to mean a statue.<sup>3</sup> You aren't a literal statue of God. He has no form, no edges, no limits. But you do "image" God as you think like him and love like him and stand up for him. You can think of it this way: "Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God's image as God's sovereign emblem."<sup>4</sup>

Your identity—who you really are—is found in the King you represent. You are his royal ambassador to our broken world.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Amos 5:26.

<sup>4</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 60.

Do you see now why I believe your life counts for so much? God sure isn't asking you to settle for mediocrity. He designed you to reach for nothing less than your own personal grandeur, for the display of his glory.

Way down deep, you know this. When you were a kid and someone asked you, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" you never said, "When I grow up, I'm gonna be *wishy-washy!*" No way. You said, "I want to be a fighter pilot" or "I want to be a Navy SEAL" or something else big and bold. Even in your boyhood, your God-created nobility was already longing to be fulfilled. God himself put into your heart a sense of destiny.

So, what's happened to that? How did a man created for greatness become disappointed with his life? Why does a man—a man like you, with your God-given stature—ever feel bogged down and held back?

Let me tell you one thing, in case your mind goes here first. It's not because you aren't religious enough.

Religion says, "Do better, try harder, pedal faster." Religion says you've got work to do if you ever hope to get back on God's good side. But that's not what God says. The defeatist message of religion, shaming you as a failure, is not God talking to you. It's your own guilty conscience pretending to be God. And no one is helped by being scolded.

What does help? When your heavenly Father breaks through the noise of who you *aren't*—the cheap lies in your mind, the exhausting clutter in your life—and he speaks his truth to you. And you start believing him. You start accepting your mission to "image" his glory in your generation.

And that's how you start getting traction for a new you—when you dare to believe that God your King created you for a purpose of greatness.

Think of the glory of your manhood—the capacity of your mind, the range of your emotions, the potential of your career, the beauty of your relationships, the mystery of your sexuality. And God wants to squeeze all that amazingness down into a tiny prison cell of boring religiosity? That’s the God-denying craziness that destroys the future you want before it’s even had a chance.

Here is the truth about you, Son. Your foundational, God-created self—the *you* that you are—is not a problem you’re stuck with. Not at all.

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Your God-created you is a strategy he wants to unleash.

---

Your human totality is a *gift* from your Father. You are a brilliantly created and fully equipped man, just right for your mission here in his world. Long ago, God formed a plan to bring evil down and to lift freedom up. *You* are part of God’s plan. Why not give yourself permission to believe it?

If you still suspect I’m trying to recruit you for more religion, I don’t blame you. We pastors can be hypocritical. That’s on me. But your problem is *not* that you haven’t obsessed enough about how religious you should be. Your problem is that you haven’t stared transfixed at the grandeur of God’s lofty purpose for you.

You drift along in your nice-guy blah whatever. You experience some highs and lows along the way. Maybe even more highs than lows. But how on earth can some above-average existence possibly satisfy you? The you on whom *God* has put a noble calling!

It’s not as though you’ve failed to live your dream. It’s that your dream is too small. That’s why sometimes you hate your life, why you feel angry and moody and frustrated. Not royal. Not fully alive.

Your ideal dream life is like air. When a guy is hungry, it doesn't matter how much air he inhales. Air *cannot* satisfy hunger. When you settle for less than your true dignity, you're like a starving man in a world of air. Your hunger will never stop gnawing at you as long as you keep gulping down the airy nothings of this world's fraudulent categories.

How could it be otherwise? If you trivialize God, you inevitably trivialize your God-created self. Don't hold at arm's length the very One who understands you better than you understand yourself. You risk losing your one chance at life.

*It's your lack of God that explains your lack of grandeur.*

How else can you explain why you, created for mastery, grind out the treadmill of your job? Or why you, created for dignity, grovel before degrading porn sites? Or why you, created for destiny, settle for mere popularity? Or why you, created for authority, can't control your own moods?

Jesus got right to the point: "Everyone who sins is a slave of sin" (John 8:34 NLT). We know sin is bad. But Jesus helps us admit where sin takes us—slavery. We men, born to be kings, aren't even in command of ourselves.

In the classic film *Lawrence of Arabia*, Lawrence finally has an honest conversation with his friend Ali about what he's really facing deep inside:

LAWRENCE: I've come to the end of myself. . . .

ALI: "A man can be whatever he wants." You said.

LAWRENCE: I'm sorry. I thought it was true.

ALI: You proved it!

LAWRENCE [opening his shirt and grabbing the flesh of his chest]:

Look, Ali, look. *That's* me! . . . And there's nothing I can *do* about it.

ALI: “A man can *do* whatever he wants.” You said.

LAWRENCE: He can. But—he can’t *want* what he wants. [He touches his chest again.] *This* is the stuff that decides what he wants.<sup>5</sup>

We’re told in our world today that we can succeed by making good choices based on good information. Really? It’s that easy? Sometimes we tell ourselves we can sneak up close to the line between right and wrong and play there a while without actually crossing the line. And we can easily turn back before we go too far or get caught. But hasn’t our own experience proven this a lie? Again and again?

The truth is, sin is as unchosen as hunger, as comfortable as sleep, as inevitable as gravity, as lethal as poison. Sin offers itself as an option, but it takes over as a master. How can we rise to our true royalty when our deeper impulses keep dragging us down as slaves to resignation, exhaustion, apathy?

The next time you hear a college graduation speaker tell everyone they can be and do whatever they put their minds to—if that were true, we’d have found our way by now, don’t you think?<sup>6</sup> The real reason we keep falling on our faces is so serious that it demands plain language. You and I have a problem: *evil*.

Man, I hate that. But it’s real. We’re not good men who mess up now and then. We are bad men who prove it every day. What’s more, this grim assessment is equally true of everyone: “For *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We’re all

5 Robert Bolt, *Lawrence of Arabia*, [http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/Lawrence\\_of\\_Arabia.pdf](http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/Lawrence_of_Arabia.pdf), part 2, scene 163.

6 David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), 14: “We hand [these speeches] over like some great, awesome presents. And it turns out these presents are great big boxes of nothing.”

like Jason Bourne. We're trying to figure out who we are. But the more we discover, the less we like what we find.

Think of it this way. If evil were the color yellow, like police tape at a crime scene, then everything about us, all the time, at all levels, would show some shade of yellow. Even our "good moments" glow yellowish—far from the radiance God created us for.

The brilliant author G. K. Chesterton was asked the mega-question "What's wrong with the world?" His answer? "I am."<sup>7</sup> We all need it that blunt. Then we can stop believing in our own quick fixes.

Like when we say to God: "Okay, Lord, I'm going to change. And this time I really mean it. I'm going to *prove* to you how serious I am." And we do try. But we can't make it stick. Pretty soon we're back in the same old mess. Why? Because we're a complicated mix of two opposites:

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We are *royal*, and we are *evil*.

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Yes, it's that dire. That's what we're up against—a battle raging right inside us. But still, God's whole heart is *for us*. I love how Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it:

You are a sinner, a great, desperate sinner; now come, as the sinner that you are, to God who loves you. He wants you as you are; He does not want anything from you, a sacrifice, a work; He wants you alone.

7 "What's Wrong with the World?," The Apostolate of Common Sense, April 29, 2012, <https://www.chesterton.org/wrong-with-world/>.



You can hide nothing from God. The mask you wear before men will do you no good before Him. He wants to see you as you are, He wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and your brothers, as if you were without sin; you can dare to be a sinner.<sup>8</sup>

What use is some patching up here and there, with better polish and manners, when evil lives within us like a dirty squatter in a once-grand palace? But you can “dare to be a sinner,” because God can re-create you in his image all over again.

Here’s how we face our extreme need: by realizing God himself has already faced it.

An African child asked her mother, “What is God doing all day long?” Her mom’s wise answer was “He spends his whole day mending broken things.”<sup>9</sup> What else does he have to work with? He specializes in turning hopeless cases into stunning successes. But not through any religious do-better-try-harder. God does it through Jesus, who now comes into the picture, center-stage.

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Jesus renews our royalty.

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When everything was on the line for us, with our dignity hopelessly damaged by our recklessness, God simply changed the subject. He changed it from us and our shame to Jesus and his grace. Not Jesus as an inspiring example we should imitate but Jesus as the better self we’ve never been. Our King lived for us the royal

8 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper, 1954), 111.

9 Richard H. Schmidt, *Glorious Companions: Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 320.

life we should have lived and died for us the shameful death we should have died.

This magnificent man—“the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), the “exact imprint” of God’s nature (Heb. 1:3)—we didn’t welcome him into our world on a red carpet. We blamed him for our misery and humiliated him at the cross.

The whole point of crucifixion was not just to kill a man but to demean him while killing him. Never more than in Jesus’s death. The nakedness, the mocking, the spitting, with the crown of thorns and the purple robe—it was the humiliating “inversion of his kingship.”<sup>10</sup> The cross was like a lynching in the Old South—white rage vented on a scapegoat.<sup>11</sup> Jesus understands shame.

But the cross was more. Amazingly, the cross was where God started bending our evil around to restore us. We thought we were getting rid of Jesus, but God made sure we’d get ourselves back. At the cross, we proved how bad we are to God, but God proved how good he is to us. In C. S. Lewis’s story *The Magician’s Nephew*, Aslan the lion—the Christ figure—makes this promise about our evil: “I will see to it that the worst falls upon myself.”<sup>12</sup>

At the cross, God didn’t sweep our evil under the rug but exposed it and paid for it. The love of God is not a cheap compromise. His forgiveness is noble forgiveness. That’s why when *God* washes you clean of all your sins in the blood of Christ, you can allow yourself to *feel* forgiven. Feeling new is the *right* response to the cross. Freedom is what God *wants* for you. The cross was the price he was willing to pay. You can accept his grace with a clear conscience.

10 Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 96.

11 William Edgar, “Justification and Violence,” in *Justified in Christ: God’s Plan for Us in Justification*, ed. K. Scott Oliphant (Fearn: Mentor, 2007), 132–36.

12 C. S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew* (New York: Collier, 1972), 136.

Maybe you look at your mess and think: *If God has any self-respect at all, he must despise me. He'd be wrong not to despise me.* But that despairing thought keeps you hanging back from God. Self-punishment doesn't make you more forgivable. It blocks your way to forgiveness. He is *inviting* you to come out of hiding and stand tall again. He's not at war with you. Why? Because you aren't really all that bad? No. Because in one blinding moment of painful atonement on the cross, the dark energy of your evil forever lost its bid for supremacy.

Do you really think, after the cross, your shame drives God away? Nope. Your shame is precisely where he can re-create you the most gloriously. You think you're disgusting to him? Wrong again. The worst things about you are where he loves you the most tenderly. God *welcomes* high-maintenance men who keep coming back to him for more mercy and more mercy and more mercy, multiple times every day. He isn't tired, and he isn't tired of *you*.

He proved his commitment long ago. At the cross.

So now you know why you can have your glory back. Not because you have what it takes, but because he does. Not because you haven't damaged yourself that badly, but because Jesus restores your dignity that decisively, "bringing many sons to glory" (Heb. 2:10). Your evil cannot have the final say over you once you've handed it over to him.

*He* is why I have such high hopes for you—and for other guys like you.

He's not angry, not sulking, not holding out. He's got skin in this game—literally. He is personally invested in seeing you flourishing in your full royalty again.

When you come to Jesus for the forgiveness you don't deserve and the re-creation you can't cause, how does he respond? He is downright

happy to give you his royal best. Don't worry that he might change his mind later if you screw up again—and then again. The actual Jesus you're dealing with knows only one way to love—*his* way. Which means not just grace but “grace upon grace” (John 1:16)—endless grace. It is his exuberant love for you, not your feeble love for him, that will lift you all the way to your eternal crown (1 Cor. 15:49).

Bottom line: “If anyone is in Christ, he is *a new creation*. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

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Son, come back to your royalty.

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Here's why you can: “He sides with you against your sin, not against you because of your sin.”<sup>13</sup> Don't try to figure that out. His big heart makes no sense to our puny brains. But here's the great thing about hitting rock bottom. All we can do then is receive his grace.

Your true royalty as your certain destiny—why not sign up? All you stand to lose is what you hate about your life anyway. So here is a simple prayer *any* man can pray: “Lord Jesus, I need nothing less than a new me. Please? I'm open now.”

Well, that's enough for one letter. I'll close by asking you to take two decisive steps right now.

*One, accept that Jesus considers you worth fighting for.* You don't have to clean yourself up first. He'll reinstate you as his warrior for his kingdom because of who *he* is. I love how this Lutheran pastor said it:

<sup>13</sup> Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 71.

We are justified freely, for Christ's sake, by faith, without the exertion of our own strength, gaining of merit, or doing of works. To the age-old question, "What shall I do to be saved?" the [Christian] answer is shocking: "Nothing! Just be still. Shut up and listen for once in your life to what God the Almighty, Creator and Redeemer, is saying to his world and to you in the death and resurrection of his Son! Listen and believe!"<sup>14</sup>

*Two, prepare for battle.* As a newly re-created image of the King, you will hear his call to take a stand in many battles in your generation. And here is one cause that *really* matters to him, and it *really* matters to you from your own experience: the evil oppression of porn. Your King is calling you not only to stop looking at porn but also to start pushing back against the industry that creates it. He is calling you to stand up as a liberated man liberating others.

My other letters will explain further what you, and other men with you, can do to serve his cause of "proclaim[ing] liberty to the captives" (Isa. 61:1).

Maybe you remember this scene from the film *Braveheart*. William Wallace, on horseback, has just called his ragtag band of Scottish troops to fight for their freedom. The massive English army is on the opposite side of the field. Wallace is with two friends, out in front of his army. The dialogue goes like this:

IRISH FRIEND: Fine speech. Now what do we do?

WALLACE: Just be yourselves. (*Turns to leave.*)

SCOTTISH FRIEND: Where you goin'?

<sup>14</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 22.

WALLACE: I'm going to pick a fight. (*Rides off to the enemy.*)

SCOTTISH FRIEND: Well, we didn't get dressed up for nothin'.

You aren't getting "dressed up for nothin'" either. Jesus is picking a fight with the world of porn, and he's recruiting you to fight alongside him. It will not be easy. But human dignity is a winning cause, because he is in it. If I could somehow speak to your whole generation, here's the question I'd ask:

Where are the young men of this generation who will hold their lives cheap, and be faithful even unto death? Where are the adventurers, the explorers, the buccaneers for God, who count one human soul of far greater value than the rise or fall of an empire? Where are God's men in this day of God's power?<sup>15</sup>

*Because you matter,  
Ray*

15 Howard W. Guinness, *Sacrifice* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1947), 59–60.