

REAL MINISTRY IN A COMPLEX WORLD

# Leadership

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## Breaking Point

*One pastor's story of pain, porn, addiction, and redemption*

Darrell Brazell

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It's 1:45 p.m. on Tuesday, and I'm logging on the Internet to check my email, read a newspaper article, and begin research for Sunday's sermon.

Well, that's what I'm trying to convince myself.

But I know exactly what I'm doing. When my secretary leaves at two, I will be alone in the building. I will check my email, and I may read an article or two. But as soon as the door closes behind her, I will do what I have done more times than I care to count: I'll type "sex" or "porn" or something worse in the search engine and spend the next three or four hours in the pigpen.

I will enter a trance that leads me to neglect important projects, ignore phone calls, and lose track of time. Eventually I will look at the clock and panic because my wife was expecting me home 15 minutes ago, and I have just started trashing files, clearing the search history, and doing what I can to put myself back together. I'll use every minute of my drive home to create an excuse for being late. I'll try to put on a good face even though I know pornography makes real connection impossible. Usually, I fail miserably and end up in a fight with my wife in my first 30 minutes at home.

On Wednesday, I'll go to the office committed to not answer the siren call of the porn sites. I'll start the morning in prayer, confessing my sin and begging God to give me a fresh start. I'll return the phone calls I ignored on Tuesday and work diligently on my midweek lesson. I'll do fine all morning, but when the secretary leaves, the battle will rage again. Most Wednesdays I'll win, though I'll still feel the shame of Tuesday when I stand before my evening Bible class.

Thursday is usually a nightmare; Friday is repentance day. Time and again Friday begins with tearful prayers, begging for God's mercy and promising next week will be different. I then scramble to write my sermon. Sunday mornings I arrive at the building early so I can beg God for a fresh start and finish my sermon. Standing in the pulpit Sunday after Sunday, I constantly hear the inner condemnation: Who are you to proclaim God's holy Word? and What would they think if they knew? One Sunday, Satan pounded me throughout the worship service so intensely that during the song before Communion, I seriously contemplated not partaking. Imagine what it would look like if the pastor on the second row refused the elements?

Thankfully, what I've described is now 12 years behind me. Its roots, however, go all the way back to my early childhood. I've heard alcoholics say they were addicted from the very first drink. I understand that feeling. When I was introduced to pornography at about 10 years of age, it was like throwing gasoline on a fire. The dysfunctions and neglect in my family left me hurting and looking for ways to numb the pain. I learned very quickly that sex is a powerful drug.

### The anatomy of addiction

At first, I shared magazines with friends, caught R-rated movies on cable, and occasionally acquired harder materials. My struggle escalated my senior year in high school when I realized I looked old enough to purchase porn. That's when I developed a binge/purge cycle. I would buy a magazine, use it once or twice, and then (the first time I was home alone) take it to our burning barrel and set it ablaze in a ritual of repentance.

The epitome of this cycle was the day I lit a magazine on fire and dropped it into the empty barrel. As it fell, the flame went out. I stared down into the barrel knowing I couldn't just leave it there. I finally changed into an old shirt, climbed halfway into the barrel and retrieved it so I could light it again. Unfortunately, in the time it took me to rescue the magazine, my conviction faded, and instead of burning the magazine, I devoured it some more.

This binge/purge cycle led to an incredible sense of guilt and shame. I wanted to tell somebody, but the terror of sharing my shame kept me silent. The whole time, I honestly loved God and begged him to take away my struggle. But I couldn't find freedom.

Graduation posed an important decision. I had felt a call to ministry since junior high. Some days I felt that my struggle with sexual addiction disqualified me from ministry. Other times I felt that if I made the commitment to pursue God's plan for my life, he would

take the struggle away. Ultimately I went to Bible college to become a pastor. My addiction didn't disappear at school. But it did change shape. I rarely gave in to pornography, but masturbation became so ritualistic I couldn't go to sleep at night without it. The cycle was the same: guilt, shame, and repentance culminating with a promise to God to never do it again.

My junior year, I talked an incredible young woman into marrying me. I naively thought getting married and having marital sex would solve the problem. It actually made the problem worse, as the fear of being found out by the one I loved most drove me to deeper levels of hiding. Sex was good, but it was never good enough, because I was never really there. I was always hiding in my shame.

I kept the problem at a "maintenance level" for many years, only acting out with pornography when my wife was out of town. Even then, I didn't view what most would consider "porn," but R-rated movies with sexual themes or content. However, when I got my first laptop with Internet access, the problem exploded. Suddenly I didn't have to risk someone recognizing me. I could download anything I wanted in the safety and anonymity of my home or office.

Twice I confessed my struggle to my wife. Both times it hurt her greatly, but she forgave me and believed my promise to change. But my resolve was always short-lived.

I wanted desperately to share my struggle with someone else. But whom? By now, I was a solo pastor. If I confessed to one of my elders or congregants, I could lose my job. More important, I was supposed to be the spiritual guide for my community of faith. What does it say when the "spiritual guide" is consumed by sin and shame?

On two occasions I mustered the courage to confess my struggle to a fellow pastor. One of them said, "You know it's wrong, so don't do it anymore." The other said, "I'm in it deeper than you. All we can do is depend on God to work in spite of our sin." Neither answer offered much hope.

In 1999, we moved to a different church. It was harder than I anticipated. We left a grace-oriented church for one that was struggling and had little understanding of real grace. External appearances were especially important there, so my wife and I both felt immense pressure to smile and project the "everything is wonderful" persona.

This heightened my insecurity. Worse yet, my marriage was in trouble. I had distanced myself so much from my wife and daughter that they chose to make life good without me. The way we ate our meals illustrated my isolation. We often sat at the breakfast bar with my daughter on one end, me on the other, and my wife in between, feeding our child with her back to me.

Despite all this, I felt I was gaining control of my struggle. I had vowed to go a year without viewing pornography. I figured that once I had a year behind me, I could safely speak of my addiction in the past tense and everything would be fine.

So I white-knuckled it. However, one way I "controlled" it was by using masturbation as my drug. If my wife and I did not have sex, I simply took care of myself. I had heard Christian "experts" say that there is nothing inherently wrong with masturbation because it doesn't hurt anyone else. I didn't find any direct condemnation of the practice in the Bible, so I thought I was on the right track. In my addictive fog, it made sense.

A few months after the move, my wife went out of town, and I binged again. I was devastated beyond description. I contemplated suicide. I wondered if this was the end of my marriage and my ministry. I wanted desperately to tell someone. I felt ashamed, worthless, and trapped.

## Hope for healing

For two months I fought for the courage to tell my wife. I needed her to change the password on the Internet filter, or I would return to the pigpen as soon as I was home alone. But I honestly feared that this time she would leave and not come back. By the grace of God, however, I told her and she didn't leave, but we knew we had to find an answer.

The next week, I went to a pastors' retreat where a man shared his struggle with pornography and described how he found freedom. I also picked up the book *Pure Desire*. Together with the testimony of someone who found a way out, this was the beginning of my recovery.

But I was still alone. After the retreat I began asking God to send someone to walk the journey with me, someone with whom I could safely confide, someone who was also determined to find victory.

Shortly thereafter, God sent a young man who confessed his struggle with pornography to me. I'm quite certain he received the last thing he expected when I replied, "I guess you are the one for whom I've been praying." He looked at me in shock as I continued: "I hope you are ready to see your pastor's feet of clay." I then told him my story and about the resources I had found. That morning we covenanted to meet weekly, talk on the phone, and work through materials together.

What followed was the most painful year of my life. Many nights I was still awake at 3 a.m., sitting on the bottom step to our basement sobbing and asking God when the pain would subside. Most of the time I didn't have a clue what hurt; I just knew it was excruciating. My mind kept screaming to go online, turn on the TV, do something—anything—to numb it. But I learned that whenever I stood in the pain long enough, I always discovered God was enough. Meeting with him was worth the struggle.

My marriage continued to suffer. I wasn't looking at pornography or engaging in solo sex, but in my addicted core, I still believed sex was like oxygen, and that I could not survive without it. As a result, I put incredible pressure on my wife. The nights we didn't have sex, especially the nights we fought, often sent me to the steps crying out to God.

I danced on the edge many times, yet somehow, by God's grace, I refused to give in to the powerful pull. Even if it meant not sleeping all night, I refused to give in. God always found a way to see me through the battle. Day by day he taught me that he could get me through anything, that I was not defined by my sin but by my Savior. He revealed his delight in me even when I was a sobbing mess on my bottom step. He comforted me and showed me that what I really needed wasn't pornography, a sexual release, or even my wife's body, but him.

Because my primary confidant during this first year was a young, single man in my church, I held many things back. I experienced moments of grace through him when I shared what I could. But I too often allowed my role as his pastor to give me an excuse to not be fully transparent. Fortunately God began bringing other men into my life and giving me the courage to share more completely with them.

Eventually I told my story to a pastor in my community. He offered another glimpse of grace and a second point of accountability. A few months later, I told my story to a half dozen pastors at a luncheon. I found that every time I shared my real struggle with others, I grew stronger and more able to resist temptation.

**I still believed sex was like oxygen, and that I could not survive without it.**

I became a student of sexual addiction. I read everything I could find, both secular and Christian. I read all of Patrick Carnes's books. Other authors, including Mark Laaser, Harry Schaumburg, Douglas Weiss, Steve Arterburn, and Ted Roberts, put words to my feelings and helped me make sense of myself. Much of what they described went beyond my experience, but I identified with the people in their books nonetheless. I began to glean from them specific strategies for walking away from my addictive behaviors. Every book insisted that it is crucial to share this struggle with others, which confirmed my need for the community of men God was establishing around me.

Later in my journey, John Eldredge's *Wild At Heart* materials became like water to a thirsty soul. His *Field Manual* guided me to deep places in my heart, to wounds that were the core roots to my struggle. Finally, I stumbled onto Jim Wilder's *Life Model* and his other writings. In them I began to learn about real maturity, what it takes to move from being a child to being a man. He also introduced me to some powerful brain science that gave credence to what we were doing in our recovery groups.

I even started writing my own book, *New Hope for Sexual Integrity*. Because of God's miraculous work in my life, I can humbly proclaim that I have walked in freedom (no pornography or masturbation) for almost 11 years now. I now know I don't ever have to go back. My flesh is certainly capable of returning; but God has given me a redeemed heart that is stronger than my flesh. God continues to rebuild my marriage, as well. My wife and I enjoy being together, and God is showing us real intimacy and the kind of joy he intends for marriage. Thankfully, I am a living testimony to God's ability to transform, heal, and deliver.

## Lessons learned

A few of the important things God has taught me through this process:

1. God does not intend for us to be alone. The most important thing I did to start walking in freedom was the very thing I was most terrified to do—tell others the truth about my struggle. Sin, especially sexual bondage, is too powerful to fight through alone. We find our way to freedom when we start being honest with others.
2. We must allow God to use our external struggles to show us the wounded places in our heart. I learned that my addiction was a symptom of deeper problems. I didn't enjoy my sexual sin; I used it as a drug to numb inner pain. When I stopped taking the pain medication, I had to face many painful things I had run from all my life. For example, I was forced to face painful memories about my father and see the ways I had allowed difficulties in that relationship to drive my addictive patterns.

I was forced to face the memory of an older boy asking me to perform oral sex on him and being propositioned by a grown man when I was seven. These encounters had a significant impact. Remembering the events and recognizing the wounds was intensely painful; I wanted to retreat to the comfort of pornography. However, as I waited for God, as I allowed myself to weep over my pain, I experienced his healing power flow through me. I heard him speak his truth in place of Satan's lies. I began to discover there was good in me, that God's Spirit was working in and through me, and that discovery gave me power and hope for each new day.

I also began renouncing vows of self-protection. I had convinced myself, *You're on your own; don't let anyone see your weakness*. Letting that go freed me to begin asking others for help rather than keeping them safely at a distance. I had vowed to myself, I will be seen as successful and significant. I let that go, too, which allowed me the freedom to fail and even to share my failures with others. It opened my heart to realize that even if I lost my job, even if my church imploded, even though I drove a vehicle that was falling apart, I was still a beloved son of the King of Kings. My worth was not connected to my performance. I discovered my identity in Christ.

3. We must be willing to see the true impact of our sin on others. Sexual bondage leaves a person emotionally numb and unavailable to those around him. Satan used my emotional disconnection to do incredible damage to my wife's heart and soul. I see this repeated over and over when I meet with new couples. The pain a husband's sin brings on his wife is profound.

One wife shared her story of growing up with an alcoholic father and of being raped when she was a teenager. When she described the day she found her husband looking at porn on the computer, she broke down in tears saying, "This hurts so much more than being raped." My heart broke for her, for my wife, and for every wife that day.

Some men struggle to understand how this pain could compare to the trauma of rape. As I understand it, God designed sexual intimacy to create a primary relational attachment. In fact, the verb Paul uses in [Ephesians 5:31](#) for "unite" can literally be translated "glue together." Hearts glued together do not separate without great pain. Pornography detaches sex from love, and that separation causes the pain of betrayal and emotional distance.

The pain is also intense because any unhealed sexual and relational pain your wife might have prior to her finding out about your sin naturally comes flooding back in the moment of discovery. She feels the betrayal and the unprocessed pain of her past. In the moment, however, it is mingled together and all she can see is your betrayal. You have wounded her where she was already deeply wounded. Don't, however, use this as an excuse to not come clean with your wife. Disclosure will be painful; but the real source of pain is what you have done, not telling her the truth.

4. God can redeem our addiction to bring glory to himself, blessing in our lives, and encouragement to others. I will never forget hearing my wife pray, "Lord, thank you for his addiction and for the journey of healing it has put us on." There were many broken places in both our hearts that we would not have faced if my struggle had not been so abhorrent to us. After all, in ministry, being a "workaholic" is generally rewarded. However, because I hated my particular sin and had a glimpse of how much it crushed my wife, I was willing to do whatever was necessary to find healing.

**"This Hurts so much more than being Raped." My heart broke for her.**

Thankfully, God also continues to use our healing journey to equip us to minister to individuals and couples on the road of recovery. We have seen lives transformed and marriages resurrected—first ours, and then many others. It puts [Romans 8:28](#) in an amazing new light.

No, the path of recovery and healing will not be easy. But I can honestly tell you there is no comparison between life in bondage and life in freedom.

Darrell Brazell is pastor and director of recovery ministries for New Hope Fellowship in Lawrence, Kansas.

#### Resources for Recovery

1. New Hope For Sexual Integrity by Darrell Brazell, available at <http://www.newhope4si.com>
2. [Pure Desire](#) by Ted Roberts (Regal, 1999)
3. [Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction](#) by Mark Laaser (Zondervan, 2004)
4. Restarting by Ed Khouri & Jim Wilder [DVD series] available at [www.lifemodel.org](http://www.lifemodel.org)
5. [In the Shadows of the Net](#) by Patrick Carnes, David Delmonico, Elizabeth Griffin (Hazelden, 2007)

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