

Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

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A heavenly perspective

What was the legacy of Covid-19 for you? Did you get yourself a dog to keep you company in the absence of human contact? Did you find other things to do on a Sunday morning and find it difficult to get back into the routine of in-person services? Did your mental health take a knock and leave you anxious meeting people face-to-face?

Getting a bit more personal, did you find sexual temptation harder during lockdown? Or was it harder once you returned to regular human contact? Lockdown might have been challenging because of increased isolation, loneliness, lack of accountability and more time to go down rabbit holes with social media browsing and, perhaps, pornography. On the other hand, a

return to normality might have been tough as you once more came across attractive people in the flesh! So both Covid and 'normal life' had their challenges for many people.

Astronauts know what it is like to be cut off from conventional life for a season. NASA astronaut Christina Koch returned to earth on 6th February 2020, having spent 328 days in space. Hers was the most extended single stay in space for a woman. Just as she was returning to earth, the rest of the world was waking up to a global pandemic that would leave much of its population disconnected from their usual life for the coming two years. What can we learn from Christina's return to everyday life that might help us adjust after our experiences of multiple lockdowns?

Wasting away

Living in microgravity on the International Space Station (ISS) meant that up to 20% of muscle disappeared from the human body during the first week. To counter this, astronauts need to exercise for two hours daily to maintain their strength, as they miss the constant workout offered by the earth's gravity. Likewise, we should ask ourselves whether we've lost spiritual muscle as we've floated around over the last few years, away from the spiritual workout that church fellowship requires. The Message Translation says: "Exercise daily in God—no spiritual flabbiness, please!" (1 Tim 4:8). We might need to get back into good spiritual disciplines and ask others to hold ourselves accountable once more.

Different rhythms

The sun rises and sets 16 times each day as the ISS orbits the earth. In contrast, earth dwellers experience the sun rising and setting once per day, as God established in creation (Gen 1:14-19). So, coming back to regular church meetings and perhaps physically travelling to our workplaces again, has changed our rhythms. This can be hard if we've found that we quite like "doing church" in our pyjamas, or catching up with the sermon online after a Sunday morning run/lie-in (delete as applicable!)

But church is not just about us as individuals. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to "...consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another"

(Hebrews 10:24-25). As we re-establish healthy rhythms, this is an opportunity to let the Bible calibrate our daily and weekly patterns so that they align with our Creator's intentions and the needs of our fellow Christians.

More choice

Do you remember Boris Johnson's announcement on 23rd March 2020, "You must stay at home"? There was no choice, and it was followed by many rules we had to obey. Similarly, when Christina Koch was resident on the ISS, her schedule, food and clothes were all planned for her. Towards the end of her 328 days in space, the prospect of simple tasks back on earth daunted her, such as choosing groceries at the supermarket. However, she was also excited by the prospect of choosing her outfit for the day, as well as not having to eat food from out of a packet!

As we return to normality, we face choices that once seemed simple. With whom shall I sit at church this morning? Shall I invite people around for a meal? If I've got a cough, should I still go to work? Thankfully, our God cares about the daily concerns we have, and Jesus calls us not to worry but "Seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt 6:33). When we shift our focus to our heavenly Father, we find He takes care of the small details of our lives along the way.

Lost time

Clearly, Christina Koch had an enviable experience living on the ISS for almost a year. But she also recognised she'd missed out, "Time on earth has marched on without me. I've missed

anniversaries, birthdays, funerals, graduations, holidays.” We, too, may have missed out on special times with others. Nephews and nieces have grown up, and we have got older. Friendships may have drifted. Whilst we may have fond memories of times during the Covid pandemic, there may also be a sense of loss.

Thankfully, God’s Word reminds us that experiences and achievements that are purely of this world are meaningless in the light of eternity. Of lasting value is to “remember your Creator... before the days of trouble come” (Ecclesiastes 12:1). We will have all the time in the (new) world to enjoy God and His renewed creation, so we can relax about missing out on the things this world would prize.

Up to the heavens

Finally, we can take encouragement from the truth that our churches on earth are only one dimension of how we gather to worship. As well as meeting in local congregations, God has already “raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 2:6).

Christina Koch may look up to the heavens to glimpse the ISS, her former home. But, as Christians, we can look higher for our true home in the heavenly realms and rejoice.

Stuart is TFT’s Director and the editor of Ascend magazine. He considers himself fairly up to date with technology, but has vowed never to get a TikTok account!

This edition of Ascend is on the theme of life online. The focus is on practical measures we can take to ensure that our online interactions are healthy and godly. Jon reviews some accountability/filtering software. And, in my article on page 14, I set out various snares that we can fall into with technology – it turns out that pornography is not the only hazard!

We also look at sensibly reducing our dependence on tech. Tim shares his experience of a silent retreat with his phone turned off for four days. Richard reviews a book “The Common Rule” that (amongst other principles) advocates giving our Bibles greater prominence in our lives than our phones – which of us could honestly say that is currently the case...?

While much of TFT’s ministry is now available remotely and online, Jesus tells us that “where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). We still have our London day conference coming up in June and booking is now open for our National Conference in the autumn. It would be so good for many of us to gather together in Jesus name at these events.

By Stuart, TFT Director



He thinks he might be gay!

In this conversation, Jamie (a same-sex attracted TFT member) talks to his good friend Matt about how they have each encouraged one another through their friendship.

Jamie: Okay, Matt, we've known each other for 12 years. When did I first tell you I was same-sex attracted? I can't actually remember, but it might have been in our second year at university.

Matt: Yeah, I remember it clearly. We were at the Student Union café on campus. I remember you saying you had something to tell me, and clear as day before you said your next sentence, the word 'gay' appeared in my head. Then you said, "I think I might be gay." It was just that split second after the word appeared in my head. I'm sure it was the Holy Spirit preparing me to hear what you were going to say so that I would react graciously and with love, and not with shock!

We'd known each other for 18 months by this point and quickly

became good friends. I can't remember much after that except talking about how it must have been that summer after speaking to your parents and the minister from your old church. The phrase you used, "I think I might be gay," is an interesting one. I was talking to another gay friend of mine later that week, and I said, "I've got a friend who says he thinks he might be gay", and this friend said to me, "When he uses that phrase, it means he is gay! He's just trying to sound you out about what you might feel about it."

I then returned to you and told you what this friend had said to me. You were a bit more forthright and said, "Yeah, I am gay. It's not something I'm doubting."

Jamie: Did anything particularly change following that conversation? I don't feel like anything changed between us.

Matt: It was good to be aware of what was going on with you, and it was nice to talk to you about that

and get to know you in a deeper way. I was committed to this not changing what I thought about you, or how I treated you. In the back of my head I was thinking, “Oh, okay, Jamie’s gay.” But I recognised that we’ve all got stuff going on within us.

For me, as someone who isn’t same-sex attracted, the challenge that came was this question, “What does it mean to give up something big for Jesus?” This is one area where our friendship has been great, because I’ve watched you being committed to God’s standards about sex, relationships and marriage, and with you saying, “I’m going to live for Jesus, and that means denying myself.” I’ve then thought, “Wow, that is a level of commitment and a level of discipleship that I should aspire to.” So, you have been inspiring to me.

Jamie: I’ve failed on so many occasions, but I’m really glad that it has helped.

“What does it mean to give up something big for Jesus?”

Matt: That you set your heart and mind to wanting to live for Christ and not for yourself is a challenge to me, as it should challenge everyone. Every Christian who makes a significant sacrifice to follow Jesus is a great role model to someone like me.

Jamie: It was tricky at different points in our friendship because of being same-sex attracted. At the very beginning of our friendship, I had an attraction to you because you were such a good friend to me. So, I would ask myself, “How can I be friends with you when I have that attraction?” But, as we became better friends, started to pray with each other, and be in the same Bible study group, and as we got to know each other, we developed a sort of brotherhood. That sounds really insidious; we’re part of a brotherhood!

Matt: I want to burst into song!

Jamie: Maybe not! But over time, I came to see you not as someone who is to be sexualised, but someone who is made in the image of God and is my brother with whom I have shared so much of my life. It was my joy in time to be your best man, which meant a lot to me, and then be a godfather to one of your amazing kids.

There were things in my life that I had to put in place just to keep myself in check. Including at uni when I would stay over at your house. I remember one night when we were out late, and it was not good to walk back home at midnight or later because we’d been playing computer games for far too long. I needed to stay over, and you offered to top and tail in your bed, and I was like, “No, that would be so awkward!”

Matt: I think this goes back to me wanting to treat you like any other mate. But I probably could have been a bit more sensitive. I don't remember the exact situation, but I can imagine that happening.

Jamie: I remember you sleeping on the bed and I slept on the sofa. Then there was another time after you got married...

Matt: Yes, we had to share a bed. My wife and I were planning to go to another wedding. There was a last-minute change of plan because it was my mother-in-law's 50th birthday. We decided that, because I was a groomsman at this wedding, I'd have to go to that, and she would go down to her mum's birthday. That left you with the chance to come up to come to the wedding and share my room.

When we tried to change it into single beds, we found there was no option but to top and tail on a double bed together.

Jamie: I don't think that I would have felt comfortable with that when we were at uni together, but, by that point, I felt like that was absolutely fine.

Matt: It's interesting what you say about the thought process you went through, because that's something I've certainly struggled with, in my own way. As you explained to me and shared your own story of feeling same-sex attracted, it staggered me just how closely that story resembled

my own lusts and treating women in a sexualised way. I've wanted to look at things I shouldn't have been looking at, or allowing my eyes to roll for two or three seconds longer than they should have done. Most of the parallels are really similar. That you could share all this with me meant I could share with you some of what I was struggling with. Our friendship was really important to me, as we were able to support one another, keep one another accountable, and pray with one another.

“I would ask myself, ‘How can we be friends when I’m attracted to you?’”

Jamie: I remember another time when a church friend told me a same-sex relationship would fulfil me. I think she said to me, “I want you to be happy.” I remember her words being really discouraging, because I was trying to live my life in line with the Scriptures. Now I understand her sentiment, but I know in this life there are going to be struggles when happiness comes and goes. I need to remind myself that my joy is in the Lord.

My other friend thought that for me to be happy, I needed to be sexually active. Whereas to be a Christian is to follow Christ and to put Him at the centre. I may miss out on sexual satisfaction, but I'm looking ahead to the greatest marriage in the future of Christ marrying His church. So,

I'm not missing out on that. The most authentic life is to follow Christ and for Him to change us.

Matt: If you really want me to be happy, point me towards Christ and I will find deep happiness by denying myself, picking up my cross, and following Him. In a parable, a man who found a pearl of great value went and sold everything else he had to buy the pearl. We have a hard time believing this truth, whether we're gay or straight. And yet, that is the gospel. Jesus knows, when He's on his way to Jerusalem, that He has to go through this horrible, terrifying thing. But He knows that on the other side of it is His joy. He will be lifted to the Father, glorified. It's a genuine sense of something better coming, and that Jesus is the only one who delivers that. Will we trust Him or not?

Jamie: Thanks so much, Matt. It's been great to chat.

Matt: Yeah, thank you. It's been nice to have time today to put all this on the table and talk about God's grace in our friendship. I look forward to many more decades of friendship.

Jamie: Many more.

Jamie is the Youth and Children's Minister for a small church in Basingstoke. Nicknamed 'Captain Keen', he enjoys singing, socialising, board games, films and TV. He enjoys visiting friends and family, especially his god-daughter Cara.

Matt is a pioneering pastor living in Bracebridge Heath near Lincoln. He is passionate about telling people the good news about Jesus, reading books and supporting Bristol Rovers.



“He thinks he might be gay!”

The conversation above with Jamie and Matt is a shortened version of a much longer conversation between them. To listen to the whole conversation, you can subscribe to "Ascend Higher" on the major podcasting platforms. Alternatively, try listening directly from the TFT website using the link below:

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts



Accountability software

The Internet can be both a blessing and a curse. While it is an incredible tool to stay connected to others, helps us do our jobs and is a powerful educational resource, we can also use it in ways that are damaging to our wellbeing.

If you're looking for protection online, internet accountability software can be a fantastic tool to help you stay away from pornography or other unhelpful content. Accountability software will not necessarily prevent you from accessing certain material. Instead, it encourages good behaviour by giving someone a reason to take responsibility for their actions and decisions. It will monitor internet use, generate a report about the sites visited, and then send it to a chosen 'accountability partner'. There is also the option for filtering software, which functions by monitoring, filtering and blocking (where appropriate) internet traffic. If the filtering software's algorithms detect that the website being accessed is potentially objectionable, the software creates a 'digital wall' that will prevent the user from gaining access to that content.

Note that there are also some options out there for both filtering and accountability that have a free option, such as KasperskySafe Kids (www.kaspersky.co.uk/safe-kids).

Examples of Filtering Software

Some of the most notable filtering programs are Net Nanny, SpyAgent, and Qustudio. These programs typically have features, such as:

- email alerts when some sites are visited
- summary reports of all internet activity over a given period
- chat reports of dialogue that have taken place with other people online
- screenshots of Internet and computer use and activity.

Mobile airtime and broadband providers can provide automated parental control blockers, if requested, and the Windows Operating System comes with a 'Family Settings' function, whilst some internet browsers can have a similar capability. These tend to be very broad brush, and (because you control them), are not too difficult to switch off or circumnavigate.

Net Nanny (www.netnanny.com) is a software-based parental control filter that can block pornography and manage screen time. It does, however, cost about £65 a year for 5 devices (although discounts are available), and is best for a family setting. The cost increases to £105 a year for 20 devices. It works on all the major operating systems and phones.

SpyAgent (www.spyagent.com) is a more complete package, mainly for Windows computers, and is very expensive at around £65 a year per computer. Unfortunately, it is not available for phones.

Qustudio (www.qustudio.com) markets itself as an “all-in-one parental control and digital wellbeing solution” that works across all the primary computer, phone and tablet operating systems, and works by being downloaded on a ‘parent’ device, to monitor a ‘child’s’ internet activity. The cost ranges from about £40 for 5 devices to £65 for 10.

To gain the most from filtering software, you will need to ask a friend or family member to act as the ‘parent’, and they will review usage and make sure you don’t seek to circumnavigate the system by switching it off.

Accountability vs Filtering Software
Filtering deters accessing content by making it more difficult to access; however, it may not address the root

cause of the issue, which is taking responsibility for one’s actions and maintaining integrity. By contrast, internet accountability software cannot force a person to stop accessing certain content, but it encourages them to behave with integrity. Online accountability software puts more responsibility on the individual using the device to make healthy choices about their use of the Internet. It is a relationship-driven way of encouraging healthy and positive internet engagement, with the goal being an attitude of accountability that will also extend into other areas of the user’s life. Accountability partners can have productive conversations with the software user, a chance that might be denied if only using filtering. More than half of all pornography is viewed over a mobile device, so it is important for the software to serve mobiles in a way that maintains the functionality of the device. Most filtering options for mobile devices work by essentially limiting the device’s function and forcing its user to browse the Internet via a “safe browser”. Unfortunately, many of these can be circumvented by different browsers or apps that would allow unrestricted access to the Internet.

Accountability Software

The most significant difference is that Accountability Software rarely blocks or filters content, but reports the websites looked at. When it flags a website as explicit or dangerous, it sends a report by email or text to one or more of the accountability

partners that the user has chosen. The software is very clever, but can sometimes be over-cautious (which is better), meaning the partner could get a report flagging a newspaper story or article for having concerning content, where it can be easily explained. However, this keeps the conversation between the user and partner going, and so takes a 'better safe than sorry' approach! It can take a great deal of courage to admit the problem to one or more friends, and ask them to be accountability partners, but that is at the heart of the solution. Other positive points are that the software also monitors "incognito" browsing, and if you uninstall the software from a phone or computer, it informs your allies. Sometimes, you even have to contact the software manufacturer and ask for an uninstall code. Some limitations that are worth mentioning are:

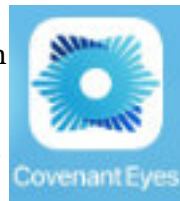
1. Covenant Eyes routes the internet traffic via their US-based servers. This means that streaming UK content (e.g. from the BBC or Sky) might not be allowed and Netflix can get very confused!
2. If you are using a corporate PC or mobile that a company or other organisation monitors, then the software or app might conflict with the supplied monitoring software. If this is the case, the software supplier might provide a solution.
3. Reports may contain page headers from websites visited, which could include contact information etc. So, there could

be privacy concerns if using the software on a work computer, for example.

Three accountability software options

Covenant Eyes (CE) is by far the largest company in this space and partners with churches and Christian groups. It works with Mac, iOS, Android and Windows operating systems. It is mainly concerned with porn use and, unlike some other options, doesn't seek to limit access to other sites such as gambling or chat rooms. CE continuously captures screenshots of your phone at random, analyses them, and sends blurred images to your partners through email. It also tracks the websites you visit, sends reports of them to your allies and provides a filter to restrict access to certain content. The Covenant Eyes accountability software supports a "panic button" feature that cuts off access to the Internet when pressed, if an individual is dealing with temptation. The program costs about £14 per month and includes 10 users and unlimited devices.

www.covenanteyes.com



Accountable2You was initially started by a Christian developer, who wanted an accountability tool that didn't negatively impact internet speed, as he found many others did. It



functions on Windows, iOS, Android, Chrome and Linux devices. The online program does not show website links in the reports, because the program creators have determined that doing so may tempt an accountability partner to click on the link. So, they typically only show the title of the webpage in question.

Accountable2You advertises its most significant advantage to be the reporting features. The program provides a large amount of customisable information to accountability partners about the activity of the device's user. There are instant alerts, both email or text, sent to the partner, to increase the immediacy of accountability. The cost is a lot less than CE, at about £6 per month for an individual (on 6 devices), or £10 for a family (covering 20 devices). You can try it for free. Accountable2you.com

Ever Accountable is an online accountability program that supports Android, iOS, Windows,



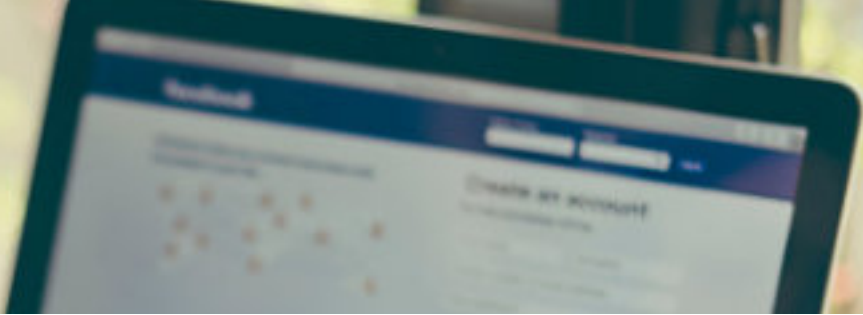
Chromebooks, and even Kindle devices, and is again aimed at dealing with pornography usage. The company also supplies meaningful articles, emails and guides to keep the user on track. The software has a free 14-day trial and the company gives discounts for those who pay up to a year in advance. This online programme can also monitor what is happening inside of YouTube, Facebook, Instagram or other apps. The programme can monitor activity done in a browser's incognito mode. The cost for an individual is about £72 a year (one user with unlimited devices) and for a family is £96 a year. everaccountable.com

Jon is an IT professional who now spends most of his time proofreading articles, books, documents and IT contracts. He begs that no one looks too closely at what he has written for grammatical errors, as it is far more difficult to find mistakes in your own work than others (Luke 6:42)!

Sponsor a Pastoral Conversation

Every week we have enquires from people needing pastoral support about their sexuality. Our trained staff and volunteers are able to listen, to signpost them to helpful resources and set out ways to get more involved in the TFT community. If you value the support and community provided by TFT, perhaps you could consider sponsoring our pastoral care. A monthly donation of £22 would fund the support provided to phone a new contact each month.

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/donate



Looking for online community

I've been flirting for the last couple of years. Don't worry, this isn't a confession. But, for the last two years, I've been flirting with getting rid of my Facebook account. Being a millennial, I joined in 2007, as it was taking off. It promised a way to stay connected, and an attractive way to retain a window into the lives of my friends, who were all choosing universities and heading off to different cities over the following year. But since then it's lost its shine. Whether it's owing to privacy concerns, or just that the level of relationship it allows you to maintain is often quite superficial, many of those friends that joined at the same time as me have left the platform.

I'm still there though and, beyond my contractual obligation to assist with maintaining TFT's various online assets, I think the reason for that is the numerous Facebook groups I am involved in. TFT runs several private groups on various platforms that enable people scattered around the country to connect, share prayer requests and encourage one another. It turns out we aren't the only ones, though. In fact, one thing that gave me the

confidence to contact TFT for the first time was that I'd joined a large private online Facebook group, based in America, for gay/same-sex attracted Christians who hold to traditional sexual ethics. Talking to some of those Christians, who were trying to live faithfully in obedience to the Lord, made me think, "Wow, it would be great to have a group like this close to home", and so I joined TFT.

In the wider Christian arena, there are groups for discussing theology, for ministers in training, for monitoring current issues affecting the church, and much more. Not a fan of Facebook? There are groups on platforms such as Discord too. The irony of the name Discord is not lost on me, as sometimes these communities can be far from harmonious. While I enjoy several of the groups that I'm part of, they have their pros and cons. Here are some things that I'm regularly reminded of as I use them:

We need to look up

It may seem obvious, but social media is a great place to procrastinate. I'm certainly no stranger to the endless scroll as I

consume more content. If you're in a large or busy group, this can be even worse. If you consume most of your social media on your phone and are an iPhone or Android user, you might like to look in your phone settings. You'll find information on how much time you spend using certain apps in a day. If you're someone who struggles to find time to pray or read the Bible each day, it can be eye-opening, seeing how it all adds up. It's important we don't allow social media to mis-prioritise our time.

“Online groups can remind us we're not alone, that we're part of a wider family and that we serve a greater God”

We need to look out

Online groups are great places to turn to for advice. In early 2020, as we entered the first lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic, church leaders had to rethink how to do church overnight. I saw many threads as people discussed how various churches were managing the response. How does one even set up a live stream anyway? Online groups give us access to people with experience and giftings that we might not otherwise have available in our local context. As you're helping people out with advice on a pastoral situation or talking about new resources, you can't help but feel as though you're part of something bigger.

We need to look on

Online groups can be a great focus for unity in the face of opposition. Christians who adhere to traditional biblical ethics face this both within and outside the church. Whenever something happens in the news that might challenge the church's historic teaching, groups can be places that encourage prayerful consideration of the matters at hand and can even be where some responses we see in the media are formed. They remind us we're not alone, that we're part of a wider family and that we serve a greater God.

We need to look like Christ

Seeing people help one another in order to advance the kingdom of God here on Earth reminds us of the best of ourselves, but groups can remind us of the worst too. Sometimes discussion and engagement can be far from gracious. So often it is in community that our sin is revealed to us, and online communities are no exception. I've seen people lash out in anger, put one another down and discredit those around them. Online, just as in real life, we have to work to ensure our conduct is befitting of someone living for Jesus. Online groups remind us of our brokenness, but also our great need for the saviour that makes us whole.

Simon leads TFT's Speaking & Teaching ministry, but also helps maintain the ministry's online presence. He recently looked back through 15 years of Facebook photos and couldn't remember ever looking that young.



Avoiding tech snares

This article describes several snares we can fall into when using technology, whilst remembering all the positives it can bring into our lives. I'm using the term 'technology' to describe the electronic channels we use to consume media and connect with others. This list includes social media, news channels, TV (broadcast and streamed), Apps and video streaming sites.

Here I have sought to identify six snares, show what the Bible says about them, suggest some practical ways to escape them, and then stay away from them in the longer term. One of the best practical principles I know for changing bad habits long term is to replace them with something better. For example, if I try to give up sweets for a season, I'll probably spend that whole time missing sweets. But if I replace sweets with peanut butter sandwiches (or whatever satisfying healthy snack you prefer!), I am much less likely to gorge myself on Skittles!

Similarly, if we are filling ourselves with Tweets, newsflashes, social media posts and car-chase videos, we need to reflect on what needs we are seeking to satisfy

in ourselves and find a godlier way of satisfying them.

Snare #1: Judging others

Do you find it easy to make snap judgements about others on social media? Sometimes this might be judging the person making the post, or maybe they are encouraging you to judge someone in the public eye. It is so common, even amongst Christians, for us to be judgemental about politicians and celebrities that it's easy to forget Jesus' words, "Do not judge or you will be judged" (Matt 7:1). Instead, we are to "bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another" (Col 3:13). They should know us for our grace rather than our judgementalism.

Escaping this snare

- Avoid/reduce social media altogether or particular elements (e.g. newsfeed)
- Block/hide people on social media who trigger unhelpful judgements in you

Staying away

- Only post kind or encouraging comments
- Resolve not to respond immediately

- to annoying posts
- Aim to follow up in-person rather than online
- Ask God for grace in your heart and mind
- Mute particular subjects or words that are likely to annoy you or lead you to responding negatively

Snare #2: Coveting what I lack

Do you look at perfect-looking photos of happy families or idyllic holidays on social media and covet what you do not have? Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO) is a modern malady, but the airbrushed and curated images that seduce us are often shallow and false.

The last of the ten commandments tells us not to covet “anything that belongs to your neighbour” (Exodus 20:17). Instead, “Be content with what you have” (Hebrews 13:5). We might think that contentment with our lot in life is hard to find, but the writer to the Hebrews immediately reveals the secret to true contentment in the same verse, when he reminds us of God’s promise in Deuteronomy 31:6 – “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” Freedom from covetousness comes through finding satisfaction in the promises and presence of God. The Apostle Paul suggests practical steps for the Thessalonian church to achieve this: “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Escaping this snare

- Avoid/reduce social media altogether or particular elements (e.g. newsfeed)

- Block/hide people on social media who trigger your envy
- Commit to a phone/screen sabbath once per week to help with freedom from FOMO

Staying away

- Remind yourself that this is the curated image of a person
- Pray for the person and be thankful for what they have
- Get to know the real person, and see their flaws/insecurities etc.
- Recognise your loss, and ask for help with grieving/releasing it
- Give thanks to God for what I have and how God has made me

Snare #3: Lusting with my eyes

Do you struggle to keep your eyes away from online material that leads you to lust? It might be something obviously seductive for some, such as pornography or erotic stories. For others, it might be content that is harmless to most people, such as TV adverts or sports footage. Apps such as YouTube do not wait to be invited before enticing us with tempting videos to watch. Jesus calls us to be ruthless with anything that causes us to look at another person lustfully, even calling us to amputate a hand or gouge out an eye that leads us to sin in this way (Matt 5:27-30). But, of course, He really means that we must amputate anything that might lead us to sin. Practical examples of this might be cancelling a TV streaming subscription, removing an app, or even getting rid of your smartphone or broadband access for a season. Instead, we are to displace unhelpful thoughts and images from our minds by thinking about whatever is noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy (Philippians

4:8-9). You might do this with Bible reading, prayer, conversation with a Christian friend, or choosing to relax with a Christian podcast or worship music.

Escaping this snare

- Avoid TV/YouTube/websites/internet altogether or at certain times
- Find better things to do with your time than look at a screen
- Set up internet accountability or filtering software
- Limit tech use to shared rooms where others can see your screen

Staying away

- Clear your browser/viewing history and cookies after a lapse, so that apps don't prompt you in the future with unhelpful suggestions
- Appreciate the beauty in others to God in prayer
- Listen to radio/podcasts instead of looking at content on a screen

Snare #4: Passive consumption

Do you live in an “echo chamber” online where your newsfeeds and social media reinforce your personal viewpoints? When you put your feet up and turn on the TV, does the critical part of your brain turn off? Unfortunately, our online consumption can simply reinforce all our biases and fuel our outrage when we adopt this posture. The Bible tells us to “let no one deceive you with empty words” (Ephesians 5:6). After all, “The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps.” (Proverbs 14:15). Instead, we are called to keep our minds active, think critically about what we see/hear online, and pray for insight,

as the Apostle Paul does, so that we can “discern what is best” (Philippians 1:10).

Escaping this snare

- Avoid media/feeds that fuel your bias, anger or outrage
- Pray that God would give you discernment

Staying away

- Watch a range of media, including ones that challenge you
- Watch and discuss programmes with others
- Use Christian critics to help balance, critique and curate your viewing
- Limit your intake – be discerning

Snare #5: Time wasting

Do you sometimes go to bed much later than planned, having failed to stop the TV from going on to the next episode and then the next...? Is it hard to stop checking your messages or scrolling endlessly through social media posts? God knows we need refreshment after a day's work, but the Bible calls us to appreciate this life's fleeting nature and know that our lives are “but a breath” (Psalm 39:4-5). It's easy for us to excuse hours of wasted time online because what we are looking at is not sinful. But God calls us to, “be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity” (Eph 5:15-16).

Escaping this snare

- Avoid binges – turn off “Autoplay next episode” on streaming sites
- Set limits (e.g. daily/weekly hour limit; no screen time after 10pm; look at scripture before phone in the morning)
- Pray for self-control

- Leave the phone or tablet downstairs at night and, if you wish to read something, look for a ‘proper’ book!

Staying away

- Log what you watch and how much time it takes up
- Combine screen time with something wholesome (e.g. washing up!)
- Download a podcast and go for a walk/run
- Get recommendations from godly friends for wholesome material to watch

Snare #6: Chasing the ‘latest thing’

Do you feel you have to be ‘in the know’ on the latest Twitter storm? Are you a news junkie, always hungry for updates on the latest political feud? A small minority of people have a valid reason for being plugged in like this. But, for most of us, it merely fuels distraction, destroys our focus, and breeds an unhealthy preoccupation with matters that we are powerless to change. Obsession with novelty is not a new thing! The Bible notes it was a common mindset in metropolitan Greeks at the time of the early church: “All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” (Acts 17:21). Instead of attuning ourselves to every latest twist and turn (“there is nothing new under the sun” Ecclesiastes 1:9-10), we need to search for the old treasures about God that we will only find when we seek God wholeheartedly (Jeremiah 29:13), and recognise that we are not going to “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Eph 3:18), and other profound riches via a Tweet or a

newsflash!

Escaping this snare

- Recognise that there is “nothing new under the sun”
- Reduce the frequency of your news intake
- Turn off push notifications on your device

Staying away

- Find a recommended book, podcast or video about the wonders of God
- Learn something that is new to you, but not necessarily the latest fad

In conclusion

I hope that describing these six snares has helped you identify a few habits to change in your use of technology. I would encourage you to note what you intend to change and hold yourself to account with a friend. Often, we fall into these snares because we don’t really know what we are looking for. We might turn on our device because we feel an emotional pull and are hoping for a boost. You may find it helpful to talk this article over with a Christian friend, small group, or therapist to better understand what drives you to seek fulfilment in an app, website, or box set. May each of us be able to say, like the Psalmist, that,

“We have escaped like a bird from the fowler’s snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”- Psalm 124:7-8

Stuart originally presented the material in this article in the “Apps, Macs and Tech Traps” seminar at the 2021 TFT National Conference.



My retreat from technology

One of the best things I ever did to nurture my relationship with God was to attend a four-day silent retreat. Let me explain.

I signed up for a retreat with Chemin Neuf (meaning “New Way”), a stream of the Catholic Charismatic tradition. The retreat was to be held at Sclerder Abbey in Looe, Cornwall. The four other retreatants and I were hosted by Father Sebastian and Sisters Laure and Jacqueline, wonderful people of the Lord. On the first evening we had dinner together (talking permitted) and looked forward to the four days where we would observe silence for much of the time. We also took a break from online technology.

The daily pattern started in the morning with a short period of prayer and worship led by our hosts in the chapel. Then we had breakfast in silence, where we learnt to anticipate others’ needs, such as passing over the milk or sugar without mentioning a word. We devised a system of nods and signals!

Mid-morning, we had a teaching session led by our hosts. This involved them speaking to us and we could ask questions and engage in discussion. From there we left in silence and then spent some time in solitude practising the Daily Examen.

Over lunch, we didn’t enter conversation. However, we took it in turns to read Mother Teresa’s autobiography out loud. What an impressive life of service she led! During the afternoons, there was time for prayer and the opportunity to volunteer in the Abbey’s grounds. We also had a one-to-one spiritual direction session, and I met with Father Seb. Obviously, this involved conversation! Over the four sessions, we covered a great deal, and I was able to be very open about my life story. Father Seb was a skilled listener; he had some tremendous insights and I found the times we had together to be a significant support. It gave me thoughts about my future direction in life.

Before dinner, we had another time of prayer and worship. Over dinner,

we continued our pattern of listening to Mother Teresa's autobiography. During the evenings, we sat together in the lounge and read. The daily pattern continued until the final evening when we chatted over dinner together and discussed the things we had learned from the retreat.

For me, it was a great way to draw closer to the Lord and hear His voice. As you will appreciate, we were not in silence all the time, but the usual small talk of daily life didn't take place, nor access to technology, and it gave God space to speak. We also developed a better awareness of others. As a celibate person living alone, I really appreciated the company, even in the silence. I didn't miss using my phone since my focus was elsewhere.

It was a memorable few days and I would definitely do another silent retreat.

Tim planted a small wildflower meadow last summer and loved observing the bees bobbing from flower to flower.

The Daily Examen

The Daily Examen is a technique of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God's presence and discern his direction for us. The Examen is an ancient practice in the Church that can help us see God's hand at work throughout our entire experience.

This is a version of the five-step Daily Examen that St. Ignatius practised:

1. Become aware of God's presence.
2. Review the day with gratitude.
3. Pay attention to your emotions.
4. Choose one feature of the day and pray about it.
5. Look towards tomorrow.

How can we serve your Church?

Can we help your church think through the pastoral implications of the orthodox teaching on sexual ethics? Perhaps you'd like to feel better equipped to welcome LGBT+/SSA people into your church? TFT speakers are available to assist on these and other topics related to sexuality and gender. For more information on how we might be able to serve visit:

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/speaking

Or call 0151 653 0773 for an informal chat





God's love blew gently upon me

I was born a good number of decades ago in Surrey. In those days, new mothers spent at least a couple of weeks in hospital rather than being sent home at the earliest opportunity. My mother didn't have enough milk for me and, before each feed, she had to weigh me, try to breastfeed me, then weigh me again and make up what was lacking with formula milk, which was a somewhat disruptive start in life for me! She swapped to just using a bottle when we got home. Physical nutrition was considered much more important than emotional nutrition in hospitals then.

When I was getting on for 4, they rushed my mother into hospital with acute appendicitis in the middle of the night. One of my grandmothers was drafted in to look after my baby sister and myself so that my father could continue going to work. I gather Nanna was very taken with my sister and cooed all over her, while I was emotionally shoved to one side. Mum said that when she finally got home, after having been in a convalescent home following

her operation, I had changed and was very different in my behaviour, especially towards her.

When I was 5, I remember really enjoying wrestling with the boy up the road and, from then on, I wore trousers and boys' jumpers etc. as often as I could. By the age of seven, I was a real tomboy. I really wanted to be a boy, although I don't ever remember thinking that I actually was one. I even tried going to the loo standing up but rapidly gave up that practice! When puberty hit me, I realised I was going to have to be a girl, and I rejected my tomboy side.

Teenage crushes

I had teenage crushes on boys at school, though I only got asked out by the unhandsome, unpopular ones! I went out with a boy in the sixth form from another school but remembered going to the cinema and seeing very little of the film because of being snogged the whole time. I also remember feeling very bored during the snogging. However, a new girl, Jill, joined my school in the 6th form, and we

quickly got pretty close. Looking back, I can see now that I was in love with her and was also totally emotionally dependent on her, although I didn't recognise either. There was one time when we'd gone on a residential language course together and shared a bedroom. I was upset about something, and she held my hand across the divide between our two beds. And I remember feeling strongly, and with some shame, that I wanted something more to happen at that moment, but it didn't. We went to sleep eventually, and I never told her of my feelings for her, although we were best friends.

“When puberty hit me, I realised I was going to have to be a girl, and I rejected my tomboy side”

Slightly earlier, when I was 16, I went to a service at what was probably a Brethren chapel, and I responded to an old-fashioned altar call to give my life to the Lord. After moving from Surrey, my family essentially stopped going to church, as the Anglican one in their town was pretty high and pretty dull. But someone must have invited me along to that service, and I opened myself up to the Lord and prayed the prayer. Then I was given a magazine that gave me the rather unhelpful message that I couldn't go to parties and discos now that I'd become a Christian. This, understandably, made me slam the

door in the Lord's face. However, He had heard my prayer of commitment and wouldn't leave me. I called myself an atheist, but actually had arguments with Him. I was aware of His presence, but wasn't comfortable with it then.

Early steps of faith

In 1973, I went to University and found myself in the annexe of a girls' residence hall, living alongside some keen Christian Union (CU) types. They soon got to work on me despite, or perhaps because of, me frequently getting drunk, smoking and going out with lots of boys! On November 4th that first year, I was on my own and again prayed a prayer of commitment, but nothing seemed to happen. However, the next day, I told Amanda, one of the CU types, about it. At that split second, I felt the Holy Spirit flood through me and wash me clean, and I shook for several hours afterwards. I joined the evangelical Anglican church in the city and started going along to CU meetings myself. I was aware of the feelings that I had had towards my friend Jill and went to my vicar for prayer. He was the kind of guy who didn't get shocked by anything, and he laid hands on me and prayed for my healing. The Lord put a large, metaphorical sticking-plaster over my feelings of same-sex attraction, and it went underground for a long while. Towards the end of my first year, I even got engaged to a guy called Mark.

Not too long after truly becoming a Christian, the Lord asked me to forgive my father. I did not want to do this as I hated him because he was always moaning at me, disapproving of everything about me and blaming me for everything. There was also something ‘creepy’ about him, as my sister described last year when we met up. He was physically too affectionate, sometimes inappropriately. And this, coupled with the fact that my mother wasn’t physically affectionate, had an adverse effect on me. Anyway, the Lord backed me into a corner, and I eventually forgave my father and released him from everything which, of course, released me too. We never talked about it but, because my attitude towards him changed, his attitude towards me changed too.

“The Lord put a large, metaphorical sticking-plaster over my attractions to the same sex, and they went underground for a long while ”

Growing and healing

Another type of release and healing occurred after being a Christian for about 18 months. In those days, the 70’s, people talked about ‘Baptism in the Holy Spirit’ and speaking in tongues and so on. I decided I wanted in on this, so I pestered the Lord for several weeks until, eventually, the Lord answered my prayer. What I hadn’t expected was

feeling the Holy Spirit, who was, of course, already inside me, expand within me. I’m a very visual person, and I saw an image of an upper storey in a house, which was me, an upper storey that I didn’t know existed. Then the Lord opened the doors to rooms that I didn’t know were there and flung wide open the windows! A lot changed in me then, I felt protected spiritually, which I hadn’t done much before, and a striking difference was that my body started responding physically to my fiancé Mark, although we weren’t actually sleeping together. I thought, “Wow!” when I realised what I’d been missing! However, we drifted apart and broke up after my 3rd year abroad. Where was my same-sex attractions in all this? Well, it was manifesting itself in that I sometimes had crushes on my friends who were girls, though I was never aware of any physical attraction, and it stayed pretty well underground, biding its time.

After I graduated in 1977, I did a PostGradCertEd at what turned out to be a small Catholic college. I hadn’t realised it was Catholic until I went down for an interview and saw the statues of Mary in the garden! In the CU culture I was raised as a young Christian, we saw Roman Catholicism as almost heretical, so going there was quite a shock to my system. As there was no CU in the college, I started going to meetings run by a para-church organisation that specialised in evangelism, follow-up, Bible Study and Scripture memorisation, all of which were

very helpful and foundational for me, even though I was rebellious at times. I also joined in some prayer times at college, which were organised by one of the students. These were some quiet, meditative times of prayer. They also persuaded me to go to a retreat over the New Year, at which someone mentioned a way of praying that I have found life-changing. In a nutshell, it comprises taking a section of narrative from one of the Gospels, imagining the scene and putting yourself in it, either as yourself or taking the role of someone in the scene. You could even imagine watching it like a film. That was all I was told, but it has made a huge difference ever since, both to my prayer life and to my relationship with the Lord.

After college, I moved to London and taught in a middle school for 3 years. I hated it but gave it my best shot. During this time, I went out with a guy from the church, but also had a bit of a crush on a girl from the same church. I really admired her self-confidence, especially since my own had taken a severe bashing from not doing well at teaching.

Ongoing struggles

After giving up teaching, I moved to Surrey as I'd got a job working in the UK office of a Christian charity, in their finance department, which handled the staff's gift income. I also got involved in an outreach ministry in London, which was where I met my husband. When we were engaged, I told him about my

previous/lurking same-sex attractions, though he wasn't particularly interested in hearing about it, which suited me as I didn't particularly want to talk about it! We got married not too long afterwards and had three children. In those years, I just had the occasional crush on women I admired, not helped by life sometimes being difficult.

“My husband wasn't particularly interested in my same-sex attractions, which suited me!”

Then sometime in my 40s, I started noticing an acute inner pain, and I eventually asked our vicar's wife, who has a gift of healing, to pray for me. In my mind's eye, I saw what looked like an old submarine that had a rusty metal panel with corroded screws holding it down. The screws were loosened, and the panel came up and down. Below, I saw what looked like a furnace burning. I knew immediately that this was another picture of my inner state, and I soon learnt that the Lord was removing the metaphorical sticking plaster over my same-sex feelings that He'd put on when my first vicar prayed for me. I was also going to see a spiritual director and taking part in a long retreat in daily life, partly using the type of meditative, imaginative prayer that I mentioned earlier, which was very healing. Also, at about the same time (I forget the exact order of events), my lovely neighbour across the road

was training in massage therapy and was looking for guinea pigs to practise on. Rather naively, I agreed to it and promptly fell in love with her, including feeling a lot of physical attraction, though I never told her about this, or anyone else.

Support from TFT

I contacted TFT and corresponded with the founder Martin Hallett, by actual snail mail, which I found helpful. Another valuable thing was seeing a counsellor weekly for about 4 years; she provided a safe, though painful, place for my same-sex attractions to come out. In the 20+ years since then, I have had other forms of counselling and lots of prayer, all of which have contributed to what feels like a great deal of healing. These days, I don't feel any same-sex feelings for a while, then something happens, or I see someone that makes me realise I mustn't get complacent or let my guard down.

Two prayer sessions stand out in particular; one was when Jennifer Rees Larcombe, a popular women's speaker with a gift of healing, prayed for me in the 10 minutes during the lunch break of a woman's day. Straight after that, the Lord gave me a kind of brief, interactive vision that showed that He knew and understood my deep inner needs. The other time was when I was at a healing meeting held by a local church. I went forward for prayer for a virus that had been lingering for a long time, but when they laid hands on me, I realised that what I really

wanted was the Lord's healing for those deep inner needs. The Lord answered then in part, and still continues to answer that prayer.

I stopped getting crushes on women during this time but found that I missed them a bit as they had added something to my life!

So, that is something of my journey so far, a journey that is still ongoing. In summary, I guess the things that have helped me most with my same-sex feelings have been counselling, prayer-ministry and my relationship with the Lord, aided by contemplative, meditative prayer, which has been an ongoing help.

When I was on an extended silent retreat several years ago, I heard the Lord say that He loved me, then the wind blew gently, and He said, 'Every time the wind blows, remember that I love you.' A wonderful aide-mémoire from the Infinite One for His infinite love.

Ann is married with 3 children and one granddaughter. She has been a TFT member since the last millennium. Her hobbies include painting and watching Star Trek movies, series and offshoots.



Online groups offered by TFT

TFT currently has two hidden Facebook Groups – **Men of Faith** and **Women of Light**. They provide forums to network with other same-sex attracted strugglers, share experiences, offer support and prayer and recommend resources etc. We are always open to more members of TFT who would enjoy some lively posting to help achieve these ends.

Before COVID struck us, we had already ventured a little into online technology using Skype for a Barnabas (same-sex attracted support) Group for those beyond the reach of our score of local groups around the country. During the early lockdowns, we ran several short-term Barnabas Groups, of course, using the amazing Zoom. Almost all of our local groups kept up their important contact and support during those times by using Zoom – and this also allowed for more people to join, including from overseas. This meant that, by the time in-person meeting was possible again, we had many people wanting to continue to meet by Zoom. To cater for this demand, we now have two entirely online groups for women, two for men and two mixed sex. These groups typically meet for 60-90 minutes, focus on personal

sharing and praying for one another, and often also discuss relevant aspects of same-sex feelings or study an appropriate book, chapter by chapter. More recently, we have been running two online *Women's Book Clubs* which focuses specifically on the in-depth study of a book.

As our more specialist groups have developed in the last couple of years, we have found great value in using WhatsApp to keep in touch, share experiences, prayer needs, etc. Hence, we now have a group for *Married Men*, a group for *Wives* and a group for *Parents*. As they find the benefits of networking in this way, these groups then develop further and meet by Zoom somewhere between every month and every three months. Ruth (Women's worker) and I take responsibility and run many of these groups, but we are grateful to many of our *Voluntary Workers* who have also stepped up to help with this growing need.

You have to be a TFT member in order to join any of these groups; I am always happy to hear from you if you would like to receive more information or find out how to join any of these groups.

By Paul



Book Review

“The Common Rule” by Justin Whitmel Earley
£11.99 paperback, £8.49 ebook. 208 pages. (IVP, 2019)

Who sets our agenda, God or our smartphone? This is the challenging and timely question that Justin Whitmel Earley asks in his book, ‘The Common Rule’ tagged as a program of habits designed to form us in the love of God and neighbour. Earley writes the book as a response to the endless business of modern life and to fight back against the dominance of technology that seems to be all-encompassing in this day and age. He argues that our schedules rub off on our hearts, driving us far from God and the people we love; essentially, it is a call to change our way of living and fight back if we wish to honour God and build His Kingdom. The book starts with Earley’s personal story and then describes the daily practices, such as kneeling in prayer and looking at your Bible before your phone. The weekly practices follow this, such as observing the Sabbath, fasting and having an hour-long conversation with a friend.

I should say straight away that I have found reading this book to be incredibly exciting, both to read but also to try out! It was refreshing to read the book and come across habits and practices which are simple and don’t induce guilt. Earley writes clearly and with creative vibrancy. I loved reading his

description of prayer, and his thoughts on hospitality have given me much food for thought (pun intended, I’m not sorry!). His description of his marriage and mental health are told with honesty and authenticity, a challenge to those of us who are easily jealous of our heterosexual married friends. Earley roots his habits in scripture and takes time to explain how they fit within the biblical narrative. I was pleased to read that these habits are about love and not legalism, and his argument of finding freedom in limits, using Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as an example, definitely rang true to me, as did his challenging words on how our sense of worth often hangs on performance and not on faith. In many ways, this sums up the book’s essence - choosing Jesus through these simple habits and rooting our identity in Him rather than in the agenda our technology and media can sometimes give us. I also wanted to give special credit to his chapter on friendship, a subject that Earley clearly holds in high esteem. To find a writer who will advocate for the importance of friends in a marriage-obsessed Christian culture is deeply gratifying and refreshing. Despite the simple nature of the habits, Earley is not afraid to lay down some challenges. Some of us may

baulk at the idea of limiting our Netflix time like this reviewer!

Of course, the book is not without flaws. It struck me that the habits Earley advocates for work best when practised in his own lifestyle (a family man with a demanding job, living in a city). With this in mind, I was a little disappointed by the lack of flexibility described in practising the habits. For example, not everyone will be able to kneel in order to do their kneeling prayer, and the alternative suggestion of just opening your hands seemed thoughtless. Whilst I laud his commitment to physical friendship, I couldn't help but think of the many isolated TFT people that I know who rely desperately on technology for connection and community; what is possible in Richmond, Virginia, may not be possible in rural Britain. Sadly, there is also a level of assumption about people's social status, namely that we will all have friends who wish to spend an hour with us. Unfortunately, this may not be true, and I could see people reading this chapter with a feeling of disappointment and loneliness.

All of which is to say that this is a 'pick and mix' book. I believe that if you read it, you will gain simple, easy habits that will make you more like Jesus, but not every habit will suit every situation. Choose which habits work for you and your circumstances and discard the ones that don't. For my part, I have found myself excited to try these habits out for myself and have certainly

benefited from them over the last few weeks. Simple acts like reading a chapter of Proverbs before looking at my phone have given me a sense of peace and closeness to God. Even switching off my phone for an hour (although terrifying!) has been highly beneficial. So, taking those critiques into account, I'd highly recommend this book to you, and wish you well as you make yourself and your technology obedient to Christ.

Richard is a media professional who lives somewhere in the western hemisphere. He enjoys TV, reading, and glaring at people who get in his way.





Porn-spoiled lives restored by Christ

Let's look at the practicalities of finding freedom from porn and sinful masturbation. One man whom I worked with to help him escape a very long-standing porn habit said this:

"However much I tried it, the willpower of 'just don't look at it' never worked for me. I could go for a few days, and then the hole left just had to be filled. But then God made me realize that my choice was not simply between looking at porn and not. It was between desiring Jesus who would satisfy or desiring something else which wouldn't. The struggle didn't become easy then, but it did become winnable, because I realized I had to choose not just to walk away from something, but to walk towards Someone."

That is our starting point. To realize that we have been unfaithful to Christ, that we have betrayed him, that we have sought pleasure and release in the wrong place, not in him and the means he gives us.

We need to admit these things, walking towards him, not away,

receiving his forgiveness and opening ourselves to what he wants to do to set us free. Here is a list to help you or whoever you are helping. I have drawn on my own experience of counselling others and from the wisdom of the plentiful resources now available in this area.

1 Disclosure

Talk to someone suitable. Yes, people do become porn-free on their own, but not many. Almost all need help from another person, so the first step is to tell someone suitable. Two experts in this area make this comment: "I have a problem with porn and I want to quit." When a porn user first says words like these out loud to another person, he takes a significant first step in climbing out of the porn trap.

They go on to say: "Former porn users... were passionate about the importance of self-disclosure in breaking free of a porn addiction."

2 Abstinence

Before you take that step of starting to abstain from using porn, it might

feel as though you need to do a hundred and one other things first. The problem is that porn can get such a grip on our minds that it creates a kind of fog there. Set yourself a target of a minimum of sixty days and start right now.

3 Education

Read about the way porn works, how it creates dependent and even addictive habits. Many people find it helpful to understand the cycles of behaviour that are typical.

4 Analysis

Look at your habits. When are you vulnerable? Why? What circumstances make porn possible? Work it out and be specific.

5 Action on opportunity and access

Remember how Jesus talks of taking drastic action with sexual sin:

“If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matthew 5:29-30)”

Work out your access points to porn and take drastic action in order to deal with them.

One man whom I worked with tended to watch sexually explicit material in period dramas on the BBC iPlayer website. So, he had to

admit this to his wife and let her control the password for the account. Another knew that certain apps on his phone were dangerous for him, so he gave a friend control of the password for installing new apps. Another started leaving his laptop at the office (where he knew he was unlikely to watch porn) rather than taking it home (where he might). There are all sorts of things that we can do to limit access.

Many find accountability software a good deterrent or a way of alerting accountability partners to a lapse.

These different actions will all tend to feel irksome, may mean embarrassing conversations, and will feel like cutting something off that belongs to you. Do them anyway!

6 Accountability

Find at least two trusted accountability partners. At least one needs to be someone older than you and not already using *you* as an accountability partner: too many try to manage with reciprocal peer accountability, using a friend who has the same struggles. Too often they simply end up excusing each other's failures. You need a spiritual senior whom you trust – a pastor, church worker, house group leader, mentor. Then have peer accountability with one other person or perhaps a group (which can be very powerful).

7 Action on mood management

All approaches to porn addiction point to the importance of better

mood management, as this is the heart of the problem.

- Jason feels anxious and seeks out porn to distract him.
- Mary is feeling happy but tired after a successful week at work. She looks online for something that will give her that little bit of extra reward that she deserves.
- Frank is just miserable and bored. Life seems so grey on Saturdays. He opens up a book with some explicit sexual description in it to find a kind of pleasure life denies him.

Non-Christians and Christians alike need to find better ways of managing their moods, whether bad or even good. This means alternative ways of finding soothing, distraction or even joy.

- Jason needs to learn a better way of dealing with his anxiety.
- Mary needs to find an alternative reward or settle for the sense of accomplishment that she has already.

- For Frank, Saturdays are clearly a tricky time, so he would do well to plan some colour for them.

Living with less than perfection

The more insightful approaches don't only try to fill holes or replace pain, but give us ways of living with boredom, emptiness and anxiety. Jenni Russell wrote in *The Times* that we are too often miserable because of unrealistic expectations:

Alain de Botton's "The School of Life: An Emotional Education" is here to remind us that life is made up of constant and inevitable dissatisfactions, that all humans are muddled, inconsistent, difficult to understand and intrinsically flawed, and that our contemporary belief that it's possible to be enduringly happy is a destructive myth that's driving us to collective rage. What de Botton hopes to free us from is the tyranny of expecting perfection, happiness or fairness to be our due, to accept that melancholy and disappointment are natural and inevitable, to take delight in lives that are good enough, with moments of joy. We should cultivate realism, humour, forgiveness and politeness as essential virtues.

There is great wisdom here, not just about our sexuality, but also about our careers and families and holidays. We should not neglect the practical tactics which both believers and non-believers can use to achieve change (for example, a workout at the gym rather than masturbating, or ten to fifteen minutes of deep

If you enjoyed reading this article, why not consider coming along to our National Conference, where Julian Hardyman will speaking?

Jesus, Lover of My Soul

National Conference 2022

slow breathing rather than searching for stuff online).

Above all, Christ

However, the greatest power and the holiest approach is found in seeking more intimacy with Christ. Our porn habit is spiritual adultery - seeking pleasure, distraction, soothing and love in the wrong places. Jesus is remaking our inner garden. He himself wants to come into that garden repeatedly, especially when it feels cold and empty and grey. He wants to come in to give us himself in tender, personal and passionate love. That is where the spaces and emptiness help us.

Our experience of anxiety feels ghastly, but it is Christ showing us that we can't make it on our own so that we will turn to him. No one, but no one, likes feeling lonely. But Christ changes loneliness into a solitude with him. Again and again, I have talked with widowed people in their nineties and asked them about their lives. Again and again, they have told me about an enhanced sense of the living presence of their Lover, Christ; sometimes they have said this almost forcefully, as if it was of course the case.

8 Refuse to give up hope

Here are some encouragements:

Hank: *"For 30 years from the time I started using porn compulsively until I hit bottom with it, I was completely unsatisfied, undeveloped and unhappy as a*

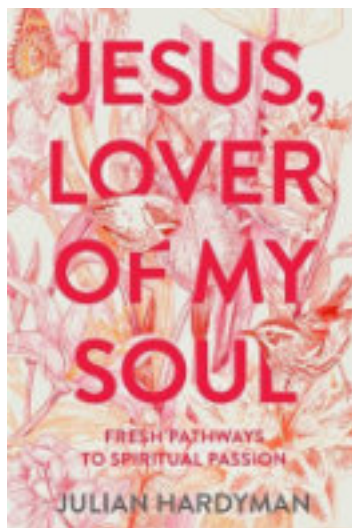
human being. Since I quit porn three years ago, my whole life has changed."

Mitch: *"I feel spiritually renewed. My life is no longer a contradiction."*

It will be worth it, and you can have this freedom and victory. I could point you to many guys I have worked with for whom porn is no longer a part of their lives. It can be the same for you.

There is no hole so deep and dark that sinful hearts won't fall into it if we let them. There is no hole so deep and dark that Christ can't reach down and lift us out if we ask him. He is recreating the ruined garden of your soul.

This article is an extract from "Jesus, lover of my soul: fresh pathways to spiritual passion" by Julian Hardyman, copyright 2020 by Inter-Varsity Press Publishing



Women's Conference review

In February 2022, I attended my first TFT Women's conference. It was a great day of worship, teaching and fellowship. Our speaker was Jeanette Howard, who spoke on the topic "My Beloved. My friend". Her talks had so much wisdom in them that I have struggled to make this just a brief review.



Her first message was from Song of Solomon 5:9-15, in which the friends ask the bride why her beloved is better than others and she responds without skipping a beat. Jeanette took the question and asked it of us... "How is Jesus better than others?" She asked us to consider how convincing our answer was, not just to others, but to ourselves. She continued by saying that Jesus wants us to call Him "our Beloved" and, more than that, He calls us "His Beloved". She challenged us to seek more than just knowing Jesus as a disciple or friend and to embrace Him as "our Beloved", grasping more fully how wide and long and high and deep is Jesus' love for us.

Jeanette's second message focused on the five love languages. I love the five love languages; they have been so useful in my relationships. But I had never previously considered that God might use love languages or that, as Jeanette challenged us to spot, reading scripture could display ways God has demonstrated them on every page. She also cautioned how unmet love languages could leave us vulnerable to looking for them, often in destructive places; we could turn to God for those very real unmet needs. We were "Painfully Privileged": our struggles and sacrifices might at times seem great, but so too was our ability to see how deeply God loved us and how fully He could meet our needs. Jeanette finished with a powerful prayer: "Lord, expand my capacity to receive your love, so that I may live from a place of fullness."

In the afternoon, we split into breakout groups. And while I loved the teaching, this was the part of the day that did my heart the most good. To share my story and thoughts with a group of women who understood my struggles was like a breath of fresh air. My life since becoming a Christian has felt like walking a tightrope between two identities. When I became a Christian, I lost many of my close LGBT friends. My new Christian friends, while deeply loving, have never quite understood my struggles and sacrifices. Sitting at the table with those seven other women felt like I had found my people, my tribe. This was backed up in many interactions with women throughout the day that I felt a quick connection to and an ease of conversation. My day at the Women's conference left me with a renewed passion for Jesus, a deeper understanding of myself and a feeling of being really seen by fellow women. I can't wait for next year.

Nat loves leading worship at her church, home-educating her three daughters, putting the world to rights, playing board games and devouring books in every spare moment.