



MY STORY

How I Went from Living a Lie to a Life Worth Living

*This is the story all about how
My life got flipped, turned upside down...*

FRESH PRINCE OF BEL AIR

I am about to tell you my story for three reasons. First, to show you I am a deeply flawed human just like everyone else. The sin and pain I am capable of producing is astounding. Likewise, my ability to deceive myself into ignoring and justifying my issues is equally shocking. It would seem I have no business writing a book advising anybody of anything. Nonetheless, here I am.

Second, there is a lot of healing that comes from the honest telling of our stories, both for the storyteller and for the audience. I have found over the years of telling my story that we really aren't all that different. As you read the slow motion, instant replay of the highlights (and low-lights) in my journey, I hope you are able to see glimpses of your own story. The details will be different, but the themes will likely be similar in spots. Remember, you are not alone in this struggle.

Finally, I tell you my story to give you a sense of hope as you live out

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your own story, no matter what chapter you are living in today. If God can use a man such as me in His kingdom, not just in spite of my sordid past, but *because* of my sordid past, think of what He can do with you!

The Spark

I still remember the first time my eyes were opened to what became my drug of choice. I was no older than 12, exploring the woods on my bike with a few friends. We would frequently ride these trails behind the college football stadium and build jumps. Epic jumps. It felt like we were flying six feet in the air, though I'm sure it was only six inches, if that.

Even now I only want to talk about the bikes and jumps and steer the conversation away from the issue of the magazine. It's tempting to make small talk and never allow anyone below the surface—I think it's a guy thing. How about those Seahawks? That Russell Wilson looks like he may just work out for them, huh?

Anyway, we stumbled across a homeless camp one afternoon. No one was home at the time, so as any adventurous middle-school boys would do, we started to explore. Who knew what treasures we would find? There were empty beer cans, broken bottles, and a soggy sleeping bag sitting outside by a fire ring. But the end of the rainbow seemed to be shining upon the weathered orange tent. We cautiously unzipped it, scared that it might have somebody sleeping inside, but found it empty...almost. Just inside the door of the tent was the object that begins this type of story for many men of my generation: a *Playboy* magazine.

I'm not sure if any of us had ever seen a naked woman before we found the magazine. I never had. I had developed plenty of crushes and the normal adolescent curiosities, but I really had no idea what existed beneath the mysterious layers of clothing women always had on. I knew there was something I wanted to see but had never had the opportunity.

Somehow I ended up getting to keep the magazine. I think it was something similar to Gollum wresting the ring from the hands of Frodo, but that may be an exaggeration. All I know for sure is it ended up hidden deep within my closet, and a lifestyle of hiding, lying, deception, and lust had suddenly sunk deep roots into my soul.

Fueling the Fire

I look back now and can't see a moment where I wasn't addicted to porn. I believe for me it began the instant I laid eyes on that magazine. There are numerous reasons for this that are starting to make a lot of sense as I put the pieces back together in my mind. First, God has made me intensely visual. I am a designer by trade and have always been drawn toward visual beauty. I see colors, textures, details, and shapes on a deeper level than most people. You can imagine the effect this has on my appreciation of the female form. The other reason, which is subtler but more influential, was how I viewed myself during that moment of discovery.

I was an awkward kid—chubby, pimply, and nerdy. I would spend my lunch hours hiding in the school library reading *Black Belt* magazine even though I had no martial arts training whatsoever. I guess I thought if I could order the throwing stars from the catalog in the back I would suddenly be cool or something. I wasn't all that popular with the ladies. Maybe I would have been, but I had convinced myself that girls wouldn't like me, so I avoided them to eliminate any opportunities for rejection. If I never talk to them, they can't say no, right?

So there I was, lonely, intensely visual, pubescent hormones raging, scared of female rejection, and finally in possession of what I thought was a "solution." The women in this magazine would never reject me. They didn't care what I looked like. They didn't mind my nerdiness. They would be there to satisfy all my curiosities, my sexual needs, and even my deep desire for human connection. These were all lies of course—the magazine wasn't doing any of this—but I believed them...big time.

Fanning the Flames

Throughout the rest of my teenage years I would come across many more magazines and even a few videos. Usually these would come from friends with older brothers who could legally purchase them for us, but commonly through shoplifting as well. I always felt that porn was wrong, but I didn't really know why. I sensed it was something to keep hidden, knew it was unacceptable in our house, and knew God didn't want me to look at it. I ended up with a pretty good stash regardless, but I always felt

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like I needed more. I think I sensed from early on there was always something missing. Something better. I just needed to keep looking and eventually I would find it.

By my senior year of high school I had grown out of my awkwardness and girls started to show some interest in me. Because of my pornography habit, I had no idea how to relate to them outside of my self-focused sexuality, so most of my relationships quickly became physical. I had never developed an understanding of God's plan for sexuality, and just hearing "Don't have sex until you're married" wasn't going to cut it. In all honesty, even though I said I wanted to wait, my deepest desire was for sex. God was no longer controlling my life, my sexuality was.

Gasoline on a Dumpster Fire

The first big turning point in my struggle with pornography came when I left for college. It wasn't a turn for the better. Leaving for college ushered me into a new life of independence, a lack of accountability—and unhindered access to the Internet. When I was at home, I was limited to whatever magazines I could find and always at risk of my parents walking in on me. At college I could surf the Internet for porn whenever I wanted...and I did. I would find myself mindlessly surfing porn until three or four in the morning, having no idea where the time had gone. My desire to find the perfect girl or website consumed me.

My addiction had reached a point where I couldn't even make it through my shift delivering pizzas without stopping at the adult bookstore to watch a movie clip in the preview booth. I began pursuing girls I had no interest in having a relationship with outside of sex. Luckily, I rarely had the success in one-night stands I was hoping for. I can now see that God was protecting me from completely destroying myself during those days.

Deep down, I hated what I was doing. I hated how I was being controlled by this sin. I wanted to walk with God and be a "good" guy. I wanted to marry a great girl, be a godly husband, and raise my kids to hopefully love Jesus someday. But I also knew my life was not heading toward those goals—it was moving further away from them. I wanted desperately to be free from this addiction, but I wasn't willing to admit I needed help yet.

I still believed that if I tried hard enough, I could eventually get it under control on my own.

Led Astray from the Wife of My Youth¹

I met the woman of my dreams during my senior year of college. She was the pure, innocent, Jesus-loving girl I had always dreamed of. She made me want to be the kind of man she actually deserved. By the grace of God, she had enough willpower for the both of us and we dated without giving in to the physical temptations that had plagued my previous relationships. This gave us a beautiful opportunity to grow in our love for each other without the distractions and false intimacy that comes from sex outside of marriage...or so she thought. She was more than I ever could have asked for, and when I finally asked her to marry me, she said yes.

When we married in 2004, she thought she was marrying the man of her dreams because I only allowed her to see the parts of me that were good enough to fit within that image. I never told her about my addiction to pornography. I believed the lie that my addiction would go away when we were married. I believed it would no longer be an issue once we could be physical whenever we wanted, so why would I bring it up and stir the pot? Unfortunately, my addiction actually became worse once we settled into married life.

My wife kept trying to love me and be a good wife, but she had no idea our marriage was doomed from the start. She had married a man who didn't exist. As long as I was pretending to be "perfect Steve," the real me couldn't offer her my love or even receive love from her. Because of this, we never developed the deep intimacy that is required for a marriage to survive, let alone thrive. We continued to grow further and further apart.

I kept spiraling deeper and deeper into the pit of my addiction. I would sense continual rejection from her, not from anything she was doing, but from me secretly knowing she wasn't loving the real me. This imagined rejection caused me to become increasingly fearful of sharing my true self with her, which caused me to retreat into the world of my addiction, where I

1 See Proverbs 5 for an explanation of why I use this phrase.

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felt I was safe from rejection. After giving into my addiction again, I would feel so much shame and guilt, knowing that I was letting her down. I was scared of how much it would hurt her if she discovered what I was doing, so I continued to hide that part of myself from her.

My addiction drove me to become a pathological liar. When my wife would ask me what something had cost I'd tell her it was \$5 when really it was \$6, even though it didn't matter either way. I'd lie to my friends, my parents, my boss, everyone. I'd exaggerate things in conversations for no apparent reason. I even acted as if I was a bad liar with little things so my wife would believe I couldn't lie about the big stuff. If the truth might be damaging for me, I would lie about it without an ounce of guilt. It eventually became more natural for me to be dishonest than honest.

When my wife and I were together, I was present physically but distant mentally. I would frequently zone out, missing her questions and comments. It was as if I weren't even in the same room. I had developed a deeper sense of connection with the computer than with my wife. Ridiculous? This actually makes sense when you think about it. The computer was where I had been going to attempt to fulfill my desires for intimacy and connection, not my wife. Because of this, I would come home and retreat to the study to avoid connecting with her any more than necessary. Connecting with my wife meant the possible risk of rejection or discovery, both of which scared me to the core. So I would sit in front of the computer and surf Facebook or eBay, not looking at anything "wrong," but mindlessly killing time to avoid engaging her. I had put up these walls and barriers to protect me from having to risk myself with her.

Every time we came together physically, I felt immense guilt and shame, which kept me from connecting with her without feeling as if I was doing something wrong. The shame from my sin had penetrated my heart to the point that something which God created as good was distorted in my mind into something that felt shameful. I could no longer distinguish the redeemed, holy sexuality between me and my wife from my sinful sexual addiction. I would desire to be close to her and would flirt with her throughout the day, but once we ended up in the bedroom my shame took over and I would find excuses to pull away. She often asked what was wrong, but because I

wasn't willing to admit I knew what the problem was, she assumed there must have been something wrong with her. After all, it was only natural for her to blame herself in the absence of any real answer from me.

You would think that seeing the terrible effects of my sin on my wife would cause me to turn from it, but that unfortunately was not the case. I had reached a point where the most important thing to me was my own protection, even at the risk of hurting others. I had been justifying, lying, hiding, and manipulating for so long that I had completely lost the ability to sense or care about anyone's emotions but my own. I no longer had the ability to feel empathy. I could sit and watch my wife cry herself to sleep and think "she's just being irrational," or "she'll get over it." Every now and then I would wonder if there was something wrong with me because I didn't feel emotions, but I would quickly brush it off. I had no idea how destructive my life had truly become.

The First of Many Turning Points

The first real turning point in my journey came when we found out we were going to have a daughter. Although the thought of hurting my wife wasn't enough for me to seek help, for some reason the thought of hurting my baby girl was. I was listening to a podcast on being a godly father and the preacher was talking about the effects of pornography on a family. He warned that if a father has a porn addiction, he will most likely pull away from his daughter once she reaches puberty because he will feel dirty and shameful if he gives her affection after she starts to mature physically. This pulling away often causes the daughter to feel rejection and start looking for affection elsewhere—often in the arms of a teenage boy who is noticing how she is changing physically as well. I immediately thought of how many of the girls I had dated over the years had absent or distant fathers, and the kind of physical relationships we had. This scared me to death.

A few months after my daughter was born I came across a book called *The Bondage Breaker*. I was skeptical about it at first because it was different from all the other books I had read on the subject. I continued to read it, though, and started to believe what the author was saying might actually be true. I began to understand how my addiction was the result of me

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not understanding what it meant to have Christ living within me. I had believed lies about my sin—and myself—and these lies were contributing to my bondage. If I would allow God to clear up those lies and show me the truth, freedom would come.

I came to realize that the true nature of my addiction was spiritual, not physical, and I would never be able to find freedom by myself. I followed the prayers of repentance in the book as they guided me through a process of handing my sin over to God and trusting Him to break the chains that had shackled me for so many years. It took many hours as God brought to mind countless acts of sin that had contributed to my bondage. It was the first time I reached out to God for help with my addiction using His power, not my own.

The moment I finished praying, something felt different. I really can't explain it. I started to realize that I no longer felt drawn to the computer in the same way as before. I'd go check my e-mail and Facebook, but even though my wife was gone and I was alone, I didn't feel the urge to look at porn. When I'd wake up the following morning, I would still have no desire to look at porn, even though my usual pattern was to go straight to the computer first thing. I started to believe this *Bondage Breaker* thing might have actually worked. I gave it a few more weeks to be sure my addiction was truly gone and could hardly believe it when I realized it was.

The best part of all of this, or so I thought, was now I would never need to tell my wife. In my mind, the problem had now been taken care of. God had another plan, though.

My Internet History Hits the Fan

With my newfound freedom, I apparently let my guard down. A few weeks later my wife discovered some questionable things in my Internet history. I believe God had nudged her to start digging, as it had been well over a month since I had last viewed porn. He knew He couldn't let me coast along in life from that point and never fully deal with everything that needed to be addressed in my life. There were still a lot of things He needed to teach me, and I was only just beginning to trust Him with parts of my life.

When my wife confronted me about my Internet history, I finally decided

to stop hiding. I confessed my addiction to her. It was an odd moment for me because I was excited to be experiencing this new freedom and wanted her to be excited along with me—but it didn't go over as well as I had hoped. My confession was like a bomb going off in her heart. Everything she thought she knew about me—and our marriage—had been a lie. She felt hurt, betrayed, blindsided, and angry. She asked me how I could have lied to her for so many years knowing full well the damage it was causing. I didn't have an answer for her.

The next few months were really hard for both of us, but for different reasons. My wife was figuring out how to live with and process this new pain, and I began wrestling with God. We began counseling and attempted to find a way to repair the damage I had caused. Our counseling sessions were all the same, though. I would play the part of the victim, saying how I was better now and had come clean. My wife just needed to forgive me so we could move on and live happily ever after. She would respond that she couldn't trust me, didn't see any changes in me, and felt trapped because she didn't know if she was supposed to stay with me or not.

The truth is, she was right about not trusting me. I hadn't built up the courage to face the full extent of my problem yet and was still hiding the worst details of my sin from her. I had cheated on her, but was too much of a coward to confess it to her, so I continued to lie. I told her over and over that I had confessed everything even though I hadn't. I think she wanted to believe me, but God wasn't going to let her. He loved her too much to let her return to a marriage built on a foundation of dishonesty and lies. We eventually decided to stop the counseling because it didn't seem to be making any difference. We had been attempting to fix the symptoms while I was ignoring the much deeper issue. Until I chose to come clean, stop lying, and confess everything to her, nothing was going to change in our marriage.

During this time, I plugged in to a pornography recovery group at a local church as an attempt to show my wife how serious I was about moving toward God and recovery. Even though my motives for joining were wrong, God used the group to keep drawing me closer to Him. I began to realize I wasn't the only man who struggled with sexual sin. I found a community of men who loved me and accepted me even though I still had

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all sorts of junk in my life. I never felt as if I needed to pretend to be anyone other than who I really was with these men. It was amazing. I would often break down and cry in front of them, and they would do the same in front of me. In all my years of attending church I had never experienced community and fellowship quite like this. Through these relationships, I began to realize that God viewed me this way as well. I had bought into the lie that my sin had continued to separate me from Him and I needed to get it under control before I could have a relationship with Him. In reality, He was right there all along, waiting for me to accept the freedom only He could bring.

Although God was drawing me closer to Him, I continued to dig in my heels on confessing everything to my wife. I still believed that I could lie or bluff my way out of any situation, and with enough time, it would all just be swept under the rug. I figured if I held out long enough, things would finally blow over and get better. This feeling of being in control of my life was completely shattered when my wife finally asked me to move out. It was the moment I knew there was a good chance our marriage wasn't going to be patched up so easily this time.

Breaking Point

By this time, I had been wrestling with God for months about a full confession to my wife. I continued to lie even though I knew I needed to tell her everything. I frequently tried to pray about the situation, hoping for a different answer, but every time I closed my eyes to pray I only heard, *Tell her. Tell her. Tell her.* The still, small voice of God had become a shout—a ringing in my ear that wouldn't go away. I argued with Him—*If I tell her everything, she will leave me.* I would never have said it out loud, but I felt I knew how to manage this situation better than He did.

The breaking point for me was when God showed me how my wife would never be free from the spiritual bondage in her life unless I confessed my adultery to her. Because we were “one flesh,” the sins I had committed with my body had also created bondage in her as well. She needed to be made aware of the full truth behind the pain I had caused her so she could know what she needed to be healed from. Something was robbing

her of her joy. She needed to know what it was. Even if it meant she would leave me, I knew I had to confess everything to her for her own good. For the first time in our marriage, I was starting to consider putting her well-being above my own desires.

The next morning, my pastor preached on how God is often calling us to do one specific thing at any moment, and walking in holiness is choosing to respond to His call in that moment. I began weeping in church that morning because I knew exactly what I needed to do. God had orchestrated this moment. It was a kick in the pants to get me to stop delaying and to do what I knew He was calling me to do. As I walked out of the sanctuary, I told my pastor I needed to confess some things to my wife, and I made an appointment to meet with him that afternoon so he could make sure I went through with it. I went home and wrote a letter outlining everything I had held back and delivered it to her that morning. I told her how much I loved her, how sorry I was for all the pain I had caused her, and how I knew this would most likely be the end of our marriage. It was the hardest thing I have ever done.

I was convinced that handing that letter to my wife would be the end of all happiness for me. Instead, it became the act of submission that opened the floodgates of God's freedom and mercy in my life. As hard as it was to finally face the full extent of the pain I had caused my wife, it was that moment when I laid my entire life upon the altar and told God, "Whatever you ask of me, whatever you want from me, it's yours. I cannot control things in my life. I am incapable of doing anything good on my own. Even if it costs me everything...I'm all in." I had reached the end of my rope, and God was there to catch me. In that moment, God became real to me for the first time in my life.

Handing My Life Over to God

It has now been over three years since I stopped fighting God and finally allowed Him to take control of my life. It hasn't all been rainbows and kittens—there have definitely been a lot of hard moments—but I wouldn't trade this new life in Christ for anything. By handing over the reins of my life to God, I began to experience what Jesus meant when He said, "My

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yoke is easy and my burden is light.”² I’ve realized that God has always been in control—I was only wasting energy and exhausting myself whenever I tried to wrestle the control from Him. There’s something about knowing I don’t have the power to actually change anything—and being able to trust that He will take care of things for me—that brings an unbelievable amount of peace and freedom to my life.

I felt Him leading me to start a recovery group in my own church and to come alongside other men in their struggles. I honestly felt like I had no idea how to help other men, but God kept making it clear to me it was what He wanted me to do. Our group has now been meeting for a few years, and I am constantly humbled at how God continues to bring men into my life to walk beside. It’s a frequent reminder of how I am not now, and never was, alone in this struggle. Seeing these men start to experience their own freedom in Christ and allowing God’s light and love to shine on them is one of the greatest blessings in my life.

As I study the Scriptures and seek after God, He continues to give a deeper understanding of what led to my addiction. He also has shown me why He didn’t free me from it when I was in college and first started to see the problems it was causing in my life. If He had rescued me while I was still relying on my own power, I would have attributed my recovery to my own abilities. Being the stubborn man I am, it took me almost 20 years to come face-to-face with my own inability, and God had to let me come to the point of complete brokenness before I would look to Him alone for the answers.

My wife eventually did file for divorce, which was no longer a shock to me at that point. I knew she had no choice. I lost the majority of my savings because of the divorce, as well as through the desire to make amends with people I had stolen from over the years. To top it all off, I also lost my job. I wondered why God was taking everything away from me even though I was following Him fully for the first time in my life. I felt like Job at times, but now I understand what he meant when he said:

“I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes” (Job 42:5).

2 Matthew 11:30 NIV.

By taking everything from me, God was helping me recognize that all I ever needed was Him. He was allowing me to experience what He means when He says He will never leave me. I could lose everything in my life, but I would never lose Him. He was stripping my life down to its foundation so He could rebuild me exactly as He wanted. His peace was always with me through all of this, and it was amazing how relaxed I felt knowing He was still in control.

New Life in Christ

In that moment of surrender, I finally stepped aside and allowed God to change me into the person He wanted me to be. Once I got out of His way, the changes were astounding. I still have the same personality and mannerisms, but the deepest desires of my heart have been transformed. I no longer have to fight the constant temptation of sin because sin is no longer my greatest desire. It has been replaced by a desire to love others with the love of Christ. My default reaction is to pray for those who hurt me and respond to them in love, not anger or any of the other negative emotions I would have had in the past. It's real, honest love for them. And it just happens naturally. I no longer see money as a means to comfort and security, but see it as a tool to meet the needs of others. I don't need to force myself to read the Bible or pray out of religious duty. Because I have experienced God's deep desire to have a relationship with me, I cannot wait to spend time with Him any opportunity I get.

It's also because of this new life within me that I continue to love and pray for my wife. If I were still the same person as before, but with a shiny new coat of paint, it wouldn't make any sense to wait for her. Why would we attempt to rebuild a marriage that failed so miserably? Wouldn't we just be setting ourselves up for more heartache? The reason I have hope things could be different now is because I know I am no longer the same person. The two of us would be the same people on the outside, but completely new people on the inside. I believe that God can someday show her that I am a new person and heal her heart to a point where she might be open to trusting the work of Christ within me. As much as I desire to be reconciled to my wife, though, I also see how God is using me in this season

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of singleness. I've come to trust that God knows what's best for me and always has me exactly where He wants me.

I could tell you many stories of how God has provided for me financially, emotionally, and spiritually in these past few years. His blessings continue to blow my mind daily. It becomes easier and easier to trust Him because of the myriad of ways I have seen Him consistently come through. When I look at the frustration of trying to control life on my terms and compare it to the peace and rest that comes from trusting His plan and direction for me, I cannot comprehend how I resisted Him for so long.

No Regrets

I've found that going all-in for Christ is a lot like taking the red pill in *The Matrix*. You suddenly wake up and realize the world you thought was real was actually a lie, and you now get an opportunity to experience real life for the first time. Unlike in *The Matrix*, though, the real world is not dark and depressing, but full of life, love, and joy. One thing is the same—the only way to experience this is to commit to it fully. You have to be all in or it will not work. And once you're all in, there's no turning back.

But I believe you won't want to.