



***FLESH***

*BY RICK JAMES*

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## PREFACE TO THE REVISED FLESH

I wrote *Flesh* about a dozen years ago, and while many books need a refresh at some point, anything written on lust and pornography before the advent of the iPhone is about as relevant as the Amish. That's a bit of an overstatement because sin is still sin and lust is still lust, but this refresh is more of a rewrite, requiring far more than a change in copyright to bring it current. And that's what I've done. Same biblical teaching but applied to a context different from the world that existed in 2003.

In this writing of *Flesh* you'll find most of the articles updated in one way or another, as well as the addition of five or six new articles. The devotionals have also been rewritten, though I stayed with most of the same passages. The only thing that didn't change is the Bible studies because there we are dealing with timeless truth that speaks to all humans, everywhere, at all times. I probably could have updated a few of the questions though, but felt my efforts being hindered by laziness and a pervasive sense of "good enough." Just being honest. That also hasn't changed from the original.

Oh, and just so we're clear: this book won't fix you. It will help you understand the problems and issues better; it will help you understand sanctification better; it will encourage you in your struggle; it will help you to persevere in your struggle; it will shed light on certain passages and teachings of Scripture; it will help you to metabolize the grace and forgiveness that is ours in Christ; but it will not fix you. God will fix us all someday, but in the meantime all we can do is grow and this book will help you in your growth, as you "grow with a growth that is from God" (Colossians 2:19).

Rick James



## INTRODUCTION

My wife and I live in creaky 1950's Cape Cod style house. Our house is an open door to all of God's creatures, but not in a good way. Stink bugs, mice, spiders: everybody finds their way in. Last year about this time we were dealing with a squirrel problem. I could literally hear the critters moving nuts around inside the walls. So how exactly do you get rid of squirrels once they've moved in?

I didn't know, but from nibbled food on the kitchen counter, I could tell that the first step was to clean the counter and keep it clean. A few days later I found evidence of the squirrels in the cabinets under the counter. So we cleaned out the cabinets. Then I found a bag of food in the pantry that had clearly been gnawed by some critter, so the pantry got cleaned and organized (while we were at it), but still the squirrels. Soon, I imagined, would come the circulars and bills in the mail addressed to Bob and Carol Squirrel.

So the vermin hunt took me outside the house so I could determine where to find the critters' entrance. Two locations seemed promising: a rotting piece of fascia board and a bent gutter. I fixed them both, if you consider smashing something with a hammer fixing it. I think all this really accomplished was sealing them inside the house because a few days later I heard their patter coming from the ceiling. So the attic got an inspection as did the cellar.

I know you're on the edge of your seat, so I'll cut to the chase. The 'squirrels' had nested behind the dishwasher, and they weren't squirrels, they were mice. True story. The story isn't very interesting *or* hard to believe, so I can't imagine why it wouldn't be true. Kind of like saying, "I went to the bank — true story."



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The mice, aka squirrels, in this story are a metaphor for lust and pornography, but I imagine you already knew that. The story isn't really about them; it is about my quest to get rid of them, how motivated I was and how, in the process, the entire home got cleaned and put in order. The perspective and path taken is laid out in these articles. Let me spell it out a little clearer.

However porn or lust or homosexuality or fetishism or sexting or whatever got into your life, it has gotten in if you're reading this book. As God's children, we don't want this kind of junk in our lives, so we're fairly motivated to get rid of it.

There are few leverage-able areas in our lives where we are miserable or motivated enough that we'd do anything to come to resolution. Finding a mate is one — we'd do just about anything to get that squared away. Squirrels moving in...that's another one. And then there are certain sins that sort of own us and we'd do just about anything to be free from them. Freedom and enslavement are highly motivating, and God leverages these for our greatest good. When I say "leverage," I mean he uses a particular issue to get to a whole bunch of others because we're consigned to doing anything to be rid of whatever it is. We're a captive audience (we're not going anywhere until it's fixed) and we are motivated pupils. Think of God's interaction with Israel. They had a million problems and almost all of them got addressed by parking an enemy army on their border. A captive audience equals a motivated pupil.

Cleaning and straightening the house is also a good picture of the inter-relatedness of spiritual issues in our lives — positive and negative. For example, a lack of Christian community, prayerlessness, too much time alone, struggles with anxiety and depression, a schedule that flips days and nights, all of these factors contribute to a struggle with pornography, and therefore, growth in purity will have ties to growth in other areas. We are whole, integrated people and there's just no way around that.

It seems that there's a pill for everything. I bet if I went to my doctor and told him that whenever I eat Mexican food my toes swell to the size of a baseball gloves, he'd have a pill for it. Somewhere someone makes a pill for swelling toes caused by Mexican food. I bet it's bright and purple and mediciney and has





a name that sounds like zenocab.

It would be great if we could take a pill for lust, a capsule just before bed, like Lunesta. Obviously we can't. What is not so obvious is this mindset of looking to a single, isolated solution. People seem supremely confident that if you just "do" this, or "realize" that, or "understand" who you are, or who God is, the problem will evaporate. And if that one thing, whatever it is, doesn't work, then the ultimate solution is clear: "Go see a counselor." We treat counselors like Lunesta too.

The following articles are written from a certain perspective about the way God works, a very biblical perspective. This is an approach that is cooperative with God (involving our participation), comprehensive (touching on many related issues), biblical (focused on sanctification and spiritual growth), and in concert with community and mission (other-centered, outward focused).

Each article in the series will deal with a different subject and each subject contributes in some way toward our growth in purity. I hope you find in them encouragement, wisdom, strength, and endurance for the battle against Flesh.

Rick James



## WORLDS APART

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### The difference between being forgiven and feeling forgiven

In the book, *The Emperor of Scent*, Guy Roberts explains how he came to create Chanel 22, Christian Dior's most famous and profitable perfume. Roberts received a call that a large quantity of ambergris — the critical ingredient of many perfumes — had just been spotted washed up on shore. Ambergris is the lyrical name for what is essentially whale vomit. A whale coughs the stuff up like a cat with a hairball. It then floats on the surface of the ocean for about a decade, decomposes, and the next thing you know, it's worth about \$100,000 a yard.

So Roberts shows up, fingers the ambergris to inspect its purity, and because no one wants whale vomit on their hands, he goes to the bathroom and uses the ten cent bar of bathroom soap to clean it off. Several hours later he smells his hands, and that's where got Chanel 22. Something magical happens when vomit and soap come together, and of course I'm talking about forgiveness: the meeting of our moral waste and God's mercy, and they met at the crucifixion of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Because Jesus died for our sins, we have been forgiven. Past tense. All of our sin — past, present, and future — has been forgiven — past tense. But as I'm sure you've noticed, being forgiven and *feeling* forgiven are two very different things.

This issue, this problem of *feeling* and *experiencing* forgiveness, is the focal point of the epilogue in John's gospel. Epilogues are about new beginnings, and John's epilogue is about the beginning of the church and a new beginning for Peter, and the two are by no means unrelated. On the night of Jesus' arrest, Peter denies even knowing him, and the days that follow are spent in





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the haze of guilt and regret. Seeing Jesus on the beach of Galilee, Peter's joy vanquishes his shame, and he runs to meet him. This "meeting on the beach" is orchestrated by Jesus for the purpose of helping his dear friend and disciple to feel forgiven; and I think it would be a good passage to read:

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "You know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

"I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.

Then he said to him, "Follow me!" Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?"

Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."

[John 21:15-24](#)

Everything that's said in this exchange is expressly for Peter:



for his restoration, and of course for ours. In John's epilogue, something new is going to happen in the history of redemption. For the first time in history, God's people are going to look back instead of forward for the sacrifice for sin. It's really odd that the sins we commit today were forgiven yesterday, but God's plans and purposes have to fit onto a one-dimensional timeline, moving forward like train tracks in a straight line. We're blessed to be on this side of the Cross, but challenged in a different way. Prior to the Cross, the practical issues were all about the sacrifice — what, how, who, and how many goats covered grand theft? On our side, the practical concern is *experiencing* forgiveness, quite removed from the effectual carnage. This is the felt need of this lesson for Peter, and for every Christian following. Here is what the lesson contains:

### Confession

Notice, first, that Jesus asks Peter "Do you love me?" He asks *three* times, so this clearly has something to do with Peter's three-fold denial, but what exactly?

On the surface it seems almost cruel, like berating a pet who has gone to the bathroom on the carpet. What did you do? But that's not what's happening here, quite the opposite. Jesus is giving Peter the opportunity to say "I love you" for every time he denied him; he is helping Peter to process, digest, and metabolize forgiveness through the act of confession.

The etymology of the Greek word for "confession" literally means "to say the same thing along with someone else," in other words, "to agree" with them. In context it means to agree with God about our sin, which seems strange because, like, why wouldn't we agree? Well if you think about it, when we rationalize or justify our sin, that's exactly what we're doing. Our conscience, confronted with our guilt, responds with a not-so-humble *Yeah... but: but it wasn't my fault; but my blood sugar was low; but I'm a middle child...* "Yeah, but" isn't really agreeing.

So in confessing our sin, we are, first of all, agreeing with God that it's wrong. Second, we are agreeing with God that our sin is



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forgiven, not because we deserve it or because we feel really bad about it, but because Jesus' death paid for it. The active ingredient of confession is not begging, or manipulating, or excessive sorrow, but faith; we choose to trust in God's forgiveness already given us in Christ.

I know faith can seem nebulous, but we can act upon it concretely. For example, when you've confessed your sin and you still feel that God is angry with you, you can take a passage like Lamentations 3:22-23 (*Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*) and say to the Lord, "I choose to believe the truth, Lord, that you are full of mercy, even though my emotions are telling me something different."

### Confessing Sexual Sin

There's an urban myth claiming chocolate is bad for a dog. Only this is not a myth because you really shouldn't. Dogs don't have an enzyme for digesting chocolate, so they don't, they get sick. Maybe we're missing an enzyme for sexual sin because it's ridiculously hard to metabolize forgiveness. I think I could confess robbing a bank and sleep rather soundly, but not if I visited [imagethatarebadformysoul.com](http://imagethatarebadformysoul.com). Maybe it's the shame or the repeated failure or the resolve with which I committed to never do it again; whatever it is, it's different.

The way the legal mind of our conscience handles guilt is to assign punishment: we beat ourselves up until it's paid off like doing community service or something. Then, and only then, when we feel the debt has been worked off, will we allow God's forgiveness. This is not what Jesus wants. He did the punishment part for us, so it doesn't make him happy to see us trying to pay the bill. In fact it's a bit of a toss-up as to what might make him sadder: our sin, or not accepting his payment for it. What he wants us to do is what he wanted Peter to do: confess.

Two, ten, twenty times per day; whenever your conscience prompts you, stop and confess. Don't keep going or make a mental note to try harder. Stop, pause, and confess. Agree with



God about your sin, agree with God that Jesus paid for that sin and that you are forgiven, and then get back to walking in fellowship with him. Confessing your sin throughout the day, when it occurs, as many times as it occurs, is revolutionary to the Christian life. You should really do it.

### Sin Beneath the Sin

Assuming you have read the gospels at one point or another, you'll remember that prior to Jesus' arrest, Peter declares to Jesus (and the other disciples) that even if "all will fall away because of you, I will never fall away (Matthew 26:33). This is not just a declaration of love or loyalty, though it certainly is that; it's a claim to *greater* devotion than the other disciples.

This is why, in their conversation on the beach, Jesus asks Peter: "do you love me more than these?" Clearly Peter felt guilty, but for what, exactly? No doubt for denying Jesus, but that wasn't where the evening went off the rails. The point of departure was clear back when Peter declared himself incapable of moral failure. Peter's denial was merely the result, and an inevitable one, because carrying the Cross is torture, and at some point everyone breaks. For Peter to arrive at restoration, he needed to get to the sin beneath the sin. And there usually is one.

As our focus is sexual purity, pornography is a great example of sin-beneath-the-sin. Sure, sometimes an image just catches your eye like a fish hook and click leads to click and that's all there is to it — just hunger for red meat. But the drive, the compulsion, the habit of turning to porn, has underlying causes: maybe you are not involved in fellowship, maybe you shouldn't be up so late, maybe this is how you handle negative feelings, or maybe you turn to it out of loneliness or detachment. Sometimes "God, I'm sorry I looked at pornography" is tantamount to Peter's "Sorry, I denied you." It's a problem, but it's not *the* problem. Under the habit is a heart.

Failure is not the worst thing in the world, you know. Not even close. Failure is how we grow, how we learn, and how we discover the holes in our hearts. Surface failures make us aware of empty



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cavities below, and as you confess your sin, make an honest inquiry with the Lord about what's really going on.

### Confessing to Other

Can you imagine how helpful it must have been for Peter to see Jesus: his face, his expressions, his eyes, his kindness? It's hard to feel forgiven when you're the only one in the room, the only one in your head.

James 5:16 says to "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." To confess means to face another person, and that person is called to not only be Jesus' hands and feet, but in this case, his face. We need forgiveness incarnated. Jesus has given us his body because you need a warm body. Getting sin out in the open neutralizes its power, severing it from the self-absorption and self-condemnation that gives it life, long after the event.

Technology has come with a price, and with it, there's much to lament and whine about, but also with technology, it couldn't get any easier to confess our sins to each another. Feeling a whole lot better is a simple text: "Dude, I screwed up last night." It helps, it really does. And do it right away. Confess to God, confess to a friend, and regurgitate the sin right away so it doesn't make you sick.



### Comparison

There's something I want you see in the passage that might not seem related but kind-of is:

Then he said to him, "Follow me!" Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?"





Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."

John 21:19-22

We each have our own race to run in the Christian life, but it's tempting to watch and compare with the race going on in the lane next to ours. Peter, having been dealt with personally by Jesus, wants to know about God's plans for his friend, John. Jesus' response? It's none of your business.

Our experience of forgiveness is muted by our comparison to others' experiences. When we see others failing in the same area, with apparent immunity, we feel we can slack off when God wants us to feel conviction. Conversely, we can look at the lives of Christians around us and paste together a composite of the perfect Christian, causing us to be disheartened in our own growth.

No one knows what sin you have come out of, what stress you endure, what holes exist in your heart, the individual appeal of any particular temptation, and what area of your life God wants to change next. You have a unique race to run, very different from the person in the next lane over. Comparison steals from our experience of forgiveness. As Jesus says to Peter, your job is to "follow" and when you fall, confess, repent, and get back in the race.



### WHY WE ABSOLUTELY HAVE TO GET THIS

The human cell is a thriving community, boasting of a large indigenous population of mitochondria. The problem is that mitochondria have a really fast lifecycle, so they are dropping dead all over the place. The streets of your cells look like streets in the Bronx where cars are left abandoned wherever they stopped working: under a bridge, a parking lot, the middle of the road. Not to worry, our cells have a top-notch sanitation system. Day and night, autophagosome are out and about removing dead mitochondria and taking them to cell's garbage dumps, the lysosomes, where they're hacked up and used for spare parts within





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the cell.

But something strange happens when we get old. The autophagosome stop doing their job, or, more accurately, stop doing it well. They carelessly go right past the dead mitochondria with a mere shrug of their autophagosome shoulders, while murmuring, “Meh.” Basically, we die of a garbage strike. The dead mitochondria bodies just keep piling up and our cells look like the living room of a hoarder.

It’s not much different in towns and communities in many parts of the world where the sanitation runs like a river through the middle of town. Garbage is always the death of us. Actually, that’s not true; poor sanitation is always the death of us, and that’s true spiritually as well. The Cross is the ultimate garbage dump for spiritual garbage, as is Gehenna, for those who would reject the former. Gehenna refers to an area outside ancient Jerusalem called Valley of the Son of Hinnom. This is the cursed area where pagans sacrificed children to idol gods. This geographical area is the physical equivalent to the place where the sins of man are left to die.

So here’s where I’m going with all this: Two, three, four years from now, if you are not walking closely with the Lord, the reason will not be because of sin, but because of a failure to process that sin, a failure to metabolize forgiveness. The bodies pile up until we don’t want to be around other Christians or Jesus.

Dealing with sexual sin — past, present and future — requires a conscious effort to continually take out the garbage, confessing whenever you sin, confessing to other believers, not allowing it the chance to turn toxic in our souls.

### A Little Exercise

As I mentioned earlier, not actually feeling relief for our sin contributes to the struggle to feel forgiven. So sometimes doing something tactile can help. Try this: write all of your sins on a piece of paper. Then, send them to me (just kidding). Confess each one to God as you write them.

Then, write out God’s promise found in 1 John 1: 9 across the list:





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If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Now, crumple it up.

### Reflection

We are forgiven due to Christ's death for our sin. This is merely an exercise to help experience that forgiveness. When you are struggling to experience forgiveness, what's another practical thing you could do?

Is there someone with whom you can verbally process your struggle, your temptation, your forgiveness?







## YOU'RE FULL OF SOMETHING

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### EXPERIENCING THE REALITY OF GOD'S INDWELLING SPIRIT

**Valdez Watchstander:** I've got the Exxon Valdez hard aground Bligh Reef.

**Coastguard:** Are you serious?

**Watchstander:** I'm serious as a heart attack.

At just past midnight on March 24, 1989, while sailing over the sharp reefs off Bligh Island, the voluminous oil tanker known as the Exxon Valdez popped like a balloon, deflating 1,264,155 gallons of thick, black, Alaskan Crude into Prince William Sound. The damage took more than three years and two billion dollars to clean up, and the toll on Alaska's wildlife was apocalyptic. Numbered among the casualties: 2,800 sea otters, 250 bald eagles, 250,000 birds, and 22 killer whales.

The ship's captain, Joseph Hazelwood, had twenty-one years of experience, an IQ of 132, and had been awake and alert in the ship's wheelhouse, as several crewmen later testified. While there were a million unanswered questions, one point was clear from the investigation: the source of the shipwreck was floating in Hazelwood's bloodstream, not the Prince William Sound. The captain admitted to drinking three glasses of vodka before the Valdez left dock. Still, had the Coast Guard warned the Valdez, the collision could have been averted, but that wasn't going to happen because the two men on duty that night both tested positive for alcohol and marijuana. What sunk the Valdez was not a lack of attention, but a lack of perception.

In his book *Are You Experienced? How Psychedelic Consciousness Transformed Modern Art*, art critic Ken Johnson





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describes what I imagine we already knew about the 60s: cultural perceptions changed radically and drugs played no small part in the revolution. Johnson writes:

I think psychedelic experience makes you think that there are multiple realities, that there isn't just this one normal real world to which we're supposed to conform, but that the reality changes depending on the state of consciousness that we're in when we're experiencing it.

It's common to take note of it in pop music... Bob Dylan's music changed in the mid-60s and The Beatles changed, and many of them have publicly acknowledged that they were changed by sampling marijuana and LSD.

I think the main thing is the idea that in psychedelic experience, people start thinking about their own perceptions. They don't take their perceptions for granted, but they start thinking about how our perceptions work and how interesting it is the way we think about the world.



But with or without drugs, perceptions would have changed in the 60s and that's because ideas, philosophies, politics, media, and culture also influence perception. Alcohol and drugs are just the most obvious, most pained examples of perceptual influence, which is why Paul uses alcohol to talk of perception: "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18).

### Guy Walks into a Bar

Interestingly enough, Ephesians 5:18 is not the first time that alcohol and the Holy Spirit are contrasted in the New Testament. In Acts 2, when believers filled with the Spirit are accused of being drunk, the church is faced with a public relations nightmare, which Peter averts by a swift, public rebuttal: "Men of Judea... these people are not drunk, as you suppose" (Acts 2:15).



But whenever two things are contrasted there has to be some baseline of comparison. You wouldn't say, "Never wear a sombrero, but instead be filled with the Spirit"; however, maybe people say this in Mexico all the time, I don't really know. The basis for comparison between alcohol and the Holy Spirit is the idea of influence and how they both affect and alter perception. God's Spirit leads to ever-increasing knowledge of God and apprehension of the truth, and alcohol leads to greater impairment and delusion.

Like a DVD of *Ironing Man* or *Lets Miserable* that sells in Shanghai, alcohol is the cheap knock-off of Spirit-filled transformation, but there are surface similarities between the two. Drunkenness, for example, progresses in degrees, as does the influence of the Spirit. Affection, joy, empathy: inebriation can at least momentarily create such sensations. There is also confidence and courage that comes from the Spirit and we see that in the disciples as they go around boldly proclaiming the gospel. There is a similar loosening of the tongue in someone drunk, as they go around boldly proclaiming... I don't know... songs from the 90's, I guess.

So that all makes sense, but here's what seems odd: the strict either/or choice, as if there were only two possibilities in the world — being drunk or filled with the Spirit. I mean, can't you simply not be under the influence of anything? No, frankly, you can't.

There is no such thing as a "blank slate" (tabula rasa) of perception. Our perception is deluded from the get-go, already distorted through sin, through the flesh, through evil, and through an endless string of other influences (greed, lust, ambition, jealousy, pride, anger, etc.). Deluded is our natural state.

And what this means is being drunk with alcohol is paradigmatic. That is, you could substitute, "do not be drunk with greed" for "do not be drunk with pride." The point is, you're going to be filled with something. No one is sober apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. You don't get to choose whether your perception is influenced, only what influences it. That's the madness of living in a fallen state, in a fallen world.



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### Testing Influence

Sitting in our closet is an enormous box of drug tests. We have a lot of young adults who hang out at our home with addiction issues, so we finally bought in bulk.

The tests are simple enough. Fill the cup and five minutes later you get a color-coded toxicology report. Unfortunately, the Internet now spreads knowledge that once-upon-a-time you could only learn from your cellmate. And so there are websites devoted to mentoring nascent drug users in the chemistry of test manipulation, showing them how to use a drop of Visine or Clorox to get a false negative. It doesn't matter because in the end the most reliable indicator is not the test but the request for a sample. "Dude, I just went" or "Dude, I can't seem to go right now" doesn't bode well; any statement that begins with "Dude" doesn't bode well.

Even still, the drug culture is a world of lies, and tests are indispensable for cutting through the excuses, the denial, and the self-righteous protestations to determine what's really going on. It would be helpful if we could do something similar with our perceptions. Given the stark categories of "being drunk" or "filled with the Spirit," it's natural to assume we're the latter, but I'm not sure that's a good assumption. Maybe we're "drunk" on pride or "filled" with iTunes. How would we know?



### The Salt Water Test

When Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit's influence within the heart of a believer, he also placed it in contrast, but not with, alcohol:

Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" By this he meant the Holy Spirit whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

[John 7:37-39](#)



The phrase “living water” sounds mystical, like a location on Tolkien’s Map of Middle Earth. But it’s not so enchanted. In fact, it was a common designation for “fresh water” in ancient times. The Arabian Peninsula is a seashore of sand and ocean, and that makes fresh water “living water,” the only thing that can grow crops, keep animals living, and broadly sustain life. The power of the analogy is that the alternative to “living water” is not dead or stagnant water, it’s salt water. And if there’s a better metaphor for sin than salt water, I can’t imagine what it is.

Salt water is something nearly identical to fresh water except that drinking it makes you thirstier, drinking it actually de-hydrates you. Think about that. Salt water plays the same sick joke that sin plays on us: promising to satisfy our thirst only to increase it. You could float atop an entire ocean of salt water and still die of thirst. Likewise, you could possess the whole world and lose your soul. So where do we go to satisfy our thirst? That’s the question, and thirst is the clue.

Throughout the day we experience pangs of thirst and if we aren’t conscious of those pangs, and most people aren’t, we miss the request our body is making for rehydration. Just watch smokers. Whenever they feel a need (thirst), they light up. If they feel lonely, they light up. If they’re nervous, they light up. If they need confidence or motivation, if they’re bored or dissatisfied, need clarity or concentration . . . they light up. That’s not to single out smokers. Smoking is paradigmatic the way alcohol is paradigmatic: You can do the same thing with music, texting, Facebook, energy drinks, or E\*TRADE. The point is, we experience incessant thirst: thirst for comfort, wisdom, strength, encouragement, direction, companionship, stimulation, motivation, etc., and we sip from some canteen all day long.

So there are grotesquely personal questions we need to ask ourselves:

- When you feel the thirst of loneliness, do you turn to the Lord for intimacy? “Lord, I need you; I need to feel connected to you . . .” or do you turn to Netflix or Facebook or pornography to fill the loneliness?



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- When you feel the thirst of insecurity do you turn to the Lord and to prayer and to his Word or do you go to the gym, or brag, or put others down, or pretend to be someone you're not? Does insecurity move you to humble dependence or image management? Do you talk to God or is it just self-talk, self-soothing, self-analysis?
- When you feel bored, dissatisfied, or depressed do you fill the vacuum with iTunes, or sleep, or stimulants, or fantasy, or video games, or pornography, or ESPN, or travel, or do you turn to God with your thirst?

All day long we're drinking something and that something is "filling us," and what's filling us is either increasing perception or distorting it. That's the point. To be filled with the Spirit is to be sipping-drawing-drinking-inhaling God's presence to meet those thirsts — a pack a day, maybe more.

We are most susceptible to lust when we are under the influence of something and not fully sober in our judgment. Alcohol can do that but so can staring at football or playing a video game for three hours or having ear buds in or headphones on for hours at a time. These things take us outside ourselves. A day walking in the Spirit is one where you are trying to remain awake and alert to God, constantly connecting with him, mentally grounded, perceptually sober, aware and guarded toward other perceptual influences.

\* Some content taken from *Up All Night* (Rick James, NavPress, 2015)

## Reflection

What are those things that have the most influence on your thoughts?

