

A DRAGON SLAYER'S LIFE

HOW TO STOP DOING THE THINGS THAT ARE DAMAGING YOU

JOHN HENDEE

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TO JAANZ

Jaanz considers me his dad. He lives in Chile, S.A. His earthly father and mother died when he was five, in a car wreck soon after they arrived in Chile from Europe. He is a gypsy, made it through the second grade, and he is very smart. I once wrote a paper entitled, “Lessons of Life I Learned from an Ex-Hit Man.” Jaanz entered jail for the first time when he was twelve. He became an assassin and was sent to prison. There he was known as “the angel of death,” and he eventually became the leader of a gang of thousands.

I met him on a visit I made to the prison where he was being kept. I was teaching a group of inmates how to live at peace with God, and Jaanz was in the group. He didn’t speak to me until a couple of weeks into the lessons, however. Apparently, my messages of the gospel were the ones he was waiting to hear. His life changed, and he became a strong follower of the Caretaker.

Jaanz gave up his life of violence and crime and became a dragon slayer. In fact, we are partners in killing dragons and encouraging others to do the same.

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NOTE FROM JOHN

Have you ever wondered what is going on when so many public figures get caught in scandals? Politicians, preachers, priests, entertainers, athletes, teachers, investors, bankers, even police—it seems like the list never ends. They are our public role models, or at least we think of them that way. Because of their position we hold them to a higher standard, but how many live up to any standard at all?

It is really quite simple to explain. They have dragons.

Some have all the fame, success, attention, money, sex, drugs, mansions, and fancy cars an average person could ever imagine. And yet they end up destroying themselves. They have dragons. And not just those on the top of the world—what about the ultra-critical, the perfectionist, the power-hungry, the greedy, the lazy? Or alcoholics, drug addicts, embezzlers, extortionists, the violent, murderers, controllers, abusers, manipulators, terrorists, the mean spirited, thieves (common or white collar), sexual violators? What about the millions in our jails and prisons across the country? Or think of the thousands upon thousands of marriages failing every year. All of these people have one thing in common. They have dragons, just like you and me.

We have a dragon epidemic in the world, and it is nothing new. Dragons damage, divide, discourage, and in the end destroy those they dominate. Do you have a dragon? What are you trying to hide in your secret place?

Read on.

John Hendee

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INTRODUCTION

She was about twenty-one, single, attractive, and addicted to drugs. I had met her before, but on this particular day, she came to visit me and my wife at our home. She told us of her challenges with drug addiction and how her efforts to get off drugs (in reality, the efforts of others on her behalf) had not worked. She had been hospitalized and put in recovery centers, taken to medical specialists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and pastors. Her parents wept over her.

I shared with her a simple, yet profound children's story called "Princess Amanda and the Dragon" (more on this later). She listened intently until I finished, and then I told her she had a "dragon" in her life.

"Have you ever made the decision to 'kill' your dragon?" I asked.

"It's so hard" was her only reply. I agreed and reminded her that no one ever said it would be easy.

"Nobody can make the decision for you to kill your dragon. Your doctor can't. Neither can your preacher, psychiatrist, or your parents. Only you can make that decision. And once you make it, then only *you* can do the killing. Others can help you recover, but only you can 'slay' your dragon. But make no mistake, a dragon is destroying you. You think he loves you? What a lie. Either you kill him or he keeps damaging you until he eventually kills you. That is exactly what is going to happen. It's up to you."

The story of that young woman's struggle basically is our story. The details will differ, but at one time or other we all face dragons in our lives. Some might not be so obvious. The older we become, the more dragons we might have and the more skilled we

might be at hiding them, or even denying they exist. They may have become a *normal* part of our lives.

In the end, however, we each have to choose whether to kill or be killed. I say “in the end” because in most cases, that is not our immediate concern. We would prefer coexisting with our dragons. We would like to be free of any negative consequences coming from them, but we don’t necessarily want to be free *of* them. Why not live in peace with them? After all, we enjoy many of them, don’t we? They give us immunity from restrictions, a sense of compulsion, fun, and freedom—at least for a while.

I am not writing to criticize, judge, or condemn any reader. Rather, I hope to challenge and encourage all of us to look deeper and deal a fatal blow to our dragons. He who is without a dragon experience can cast the first stone. I guess that just about leaves everyone I know out, including me.

In this book I include some sketches of real individuals who have their own dragon stories to tell, true stories of how they struggled and slew their personal dragons, whether materialistic, addictive, rebellious, pornographic, violent, spiritualistic, or whatever. They are meant to inspire you with courage and confidence and--this is my great hope--be the catalyst for a dramatic wake-up call for some of you.

Let me tell you about my own wake-up call. It came in the most unlikely and unexpected way: through the reading of a children’s tale, which I consider the most powerful story I’ve read in my life. I remember reading it for the first time years ago in Chile, South America. I was visiting a friend, and as I waited for him in his living room, I picked up *Tales of the Kingdom*, a children’s classic written by best-selling authors, David and Karen Mains. The book is a collection of intriguing allegorical stories, and I

opened the book in the middle to the story called “Princess Amanda and the Dragon.” *Such an incredible story*, I thought. After reading it, I met with my friend and then went on my busy way without giving it much more consideration.

A couple of years later, I was visiting another friend and ran across the *same* children’s book in his house. Well, I thought this was interesting, so I grabbed it off the shelf and searched for that one story. I read it again. This time, it absolutely nailed me. I had a dragon. I had been willingly deceived, and I had given life to a dragon I was feeding and nurturing and allowing to grow.

That day I began a battle ultimately resulting in my killing a dragon rather than waiting for it to kill me. It had gained ground, but the tide of battle began turning for me that day. That children’s story rescued me, and it can do the same for you. This book will not cover every aspect of this battle, but there is enough here for someone to see what is happening in their life and begin turning things around to get free. It is based on a children’s story, that is true, but *A Dragon Slayer’s Life* is meant for young and old, rich and poor, powerful and humble, famous and unknown, successful and failing. It is for those who consider themselves religious and those who want to avoid religion at all costs. In fact, people of faith need to read carefully because they aren’t immune to dragons. If anyone is under the impression that people of faith could not have dragons, I have this to say: Not so. Don’t be so gullible. Everyone is vulnerable to dragons.

Everyone is on the battlefield. We must be careful to not hide behind our titles, power, successes, possessions, money, talents, fame, positions, or religion and use them as cover-ups for the dragons that might be controlling and destroying us.

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PRINCESS AMANDA AND THE DRAGON

Once, tall grasses grew by Lake Marmo. Each spring, damsel dragons dropped out of the sky, trampled nests in the reeds, laid clutches of eggs, and buried them in the sand. And once they had given birth, the great reptiles flapped away.

Dragons in the sky are the first sign of spring in Great Park. The children come, baskets in hand, eager for dragon egg hunts. They shed their winter stockings and wiggle their bare toes in the warm sand. They race each other, laughing and breathless, to see who will reach a clutch of dragon eggs first. They yell and hoot when they find the treasure.

“Dragon eggs!” they cry. Soon the shout—“Dragon eggs!”—echoes back and forth from both sides of the lake.

Children know they are forbidden to keep dragon eggs, because a dragonet soon hatches from the egg and it achieves full growth six months later. The baby dragon’s scales harden. It begins to breathe fire. At first, there are short blasts of warm air, then later great searing torches of flame. The dragon has become cunning and cannot be trusted. So a sign on the shores of Lake Marmo reads: It Is Forbidden to Keep Dragon Eggs.

The two eggs Princess Amanda found one day many months after Hero’s arrival were bronze (Hero is a character revealed in earlier stories within the book, *Tales of the Kingdom*). They glowed like amber jewels in the sunlight. Perhaps she meant to carry

them to Caretaker. Perhaps she thought that they were old and shriveled inside. Perhaps she forgot. But she did not take them to Caretaker's cottage.

Instead she hid the eggs. She hid them in My Very Own Place, her den in the hollow of a mighty oak on the edge of Outpost Meadow, which was so far from Stonegate Entrance that few strangers walked to it. It was so peaceful here that Caretaker visited this area only a few times in his yearly rounds.

The spring sun reached the floor of Amanda's den and warmed her hiding place. Soon, one egg rattled when the princess picked it up to inspect it. Obviously, there was no life inside. But the other one began to crack. By midmorning a dragon hatchling pecked its way out and left the shell. The baby dragon squawked for food. Its long neck bobbed and weaved. Its feet pattered back and forth, running to keep up with its huge head. It bumped into the side of the tree. Amanda laughed.

"I must take you to Caretaker," she said aloud. "He will know what to do about surprise hatchlings."

The little beast turned its brown eye on her and a great tear dropped onto its breast. Amanda began to love the baby dragon. Though she knew it was forbidden, she kept the hatchling for a pet. *Just for a little while*, she thought. *Perhaps I can tame it.*

The princess fed the baby insects and wild roots. She kept it alive with hour-by-hour feedings. And because she nurtured the hatchling, she loved it all the more. The dragonet's bare skin soon became covered with soft scales, bronze and dazzling in the sun.

That summer was filled with dragonet games. The little beast and Amanda set up relay races with the butterflies. Lines of fluttering wings and one sweaty princess and one

growing dragonet raced through Outpost Meadow. Other days Amanda and the animal bounded over the meadow buttercups, seeing who could take the longest leap. Soon the dragonet won every time.

Sometimes Amanda tossed her ball as high as her arm could throw, and the dragonet would spring, almost to tree line, and grab it in his jaws.

“I have perfect aim. He has perfect catch. We must be a perfect match,” she sang as they played in the sun.

By the middle of summer, the dragonet was large enough for Amanda to wedge herself between the spikes on its back. Together they leaped above the meadow, flying in and out of the limbs and leaves of the old trees that bordered the open field. The dragonet let out a joyous “Cree-ee-el!” and Amanda laughed with glee.

Up and down, they soared. Up high into the tree branches and down low into the flowering meadow. Amanda hung on for her life while the dragonet flew, flapping its wings.

Amanda soon discovered that her pet hated to be left by itself. It wailed piteously when she left it to perfect her aim on the practice field, so she began to practice less and less. The dragonet particularly hated to be left alone at night. Since the princess dared not bring it to Inmost Circle—and even feared for its life should it be discovered—she began to stay away from the Great Celebrations.

One night she crawled into her den beside the beast, and he licked her face and hands. Gratefully, it stretched beside her, panting with relief that she had stayed. She could hear distant music from Deepest Forest and missed her friends. Raising a hatchling

was more demanding than she had thought. Amanda became angry at the law that kept her from sharing her pet with the others. *What harm is one small dragon?* she thought.

That same night she noticed a yellow gleam flickering in the beast's eyes as it looked at her. When it licked her face, she could feel that its breath was warm and dry.

After that, when Amanda returned from short trips to forage for their food, she would find the walls of her den scorched. The hollow was becoming more blackened. It smelled of charcoal. The dragon was always glad to see her, but she was careful not to stand directly in front of its nose and mouth.

More and more often, she had to be careful of its tail. A full-grown dragon's tail is deadly. Its powerful sweep can move boulders or knock down medium-sized trees or cripple a man. *Or kill a Princess.*

Once, when she wanted to hop on its back for a ride, the dragon leaped up without her. "Cree-ee-! Cree-ee-!" Its cry became defiant as it shot a flame in her direction. For the first time, it had willfully disobeyed her.

As each week passed, Amanda began to laugh less and less.

One day, after racing the dragon through the forest, she left it napping in a sunny glade and returned to the hollow tree just as Caretaker was backing out of it. His sapling hat pulled out of the hole like a cork out of a bottle.

"What is wrong with the inside of My Very Own Place?" he asked. "Amanda, you haven't been lighting fires, have you?"

"Oh, it's been that way a long time," she lied. "I don't know what caused that. Maybe Burners were here last winter."

Amanda wished Caretaker would stop wearing that ridiculous tree for a hat. How could she have ever thought it so wonderful!

Caretaker stared at the dirt in front of the den. He pushed it with his foot. “Ever see any dragons around here?” he asked quietly.

“Dragons?” answered Amanda, quickly. “Not now. The season for dragons is over.”

Caretaker didn’t say a word, but began to walk down Meadow Path. *You old fool*, thought Amanda. It was then that he stopped and turned and looked at her sadly.

“If you ever need me, Amanda, just call.” Caretaker gazed at Amanda for several long minutes, then turned around again and went on his way.

The next day, she hid the dragon in another part of the forest. When she returned, it was Mercie who sat outside of her den. *She’s the ugliest woman I’ve ever seen*, thought Amanda with surprise. She dreaded talking to her. *Why don’t they just leave me alone?*

“Amanda!” Mercie called with a sad smile. “I saw you coming before I heard you. Whatever has happened to your laugh?”

Amanda did not know how to answer. Had she changed? Everything looked different now. Was she losing her gift of seeing? Or were things appearing now as they really were? Maybe the Great Celebration was just a bunch of foolishness.

That same night, Amanda realized that the scales of the dragon sleeping beside her were very hard. She knew that its big body was crowding My Very Own Place, and that grown dragons were no laughing matter.

This was the last night she would allow the dragon to return from its hiding place to sleep with her in the den. The next day she took it deep into the forest and commanded

it to stay. Secretly, she hoped the beast would fly away. It had become too big, and Princess Amanda was afraid. Somehow, she had to get rid of the dragon. Trouble was ahead. She could feel it.

One morning a few days later she woke early. With her eyes still closed, she enjoyed the comfort of having enough room to stretch. It was a crisp fall day. She could smell the cool, dry air. And she could smell...fire! Amanda leaped to her feet. Fallen leaves had been pushed in a pile beside her hollow tree door. They were burning. Amanda rushed out, stomping and scattering. Her bare feet felt singed.

Looking up, she saw that an old stump was smoldering beside Meadow Path. Underbrush was smoking on the edge of the forest. Amanda could see something large and bronze-colored moving between the trees. She dashed in to put on her shoes and rushed back out.

“Wait! Wait!” she shouted. She began running along the path. “Wait for me!” She was terrified that the dry grass would catch and begin to flame from the dragon’s breath. In her mind, she could see the whole forest burning, the creatures running and—oh, how awful!—fire in Great Park! Fire because of her!

Suddenly, she knew. *Great harm could come from one small tame dragon. Small tame things grow into big wild beasts.*

Where, oh, where, was Caretaker now? Why had she not taken the hatchling to him right away? Why had she lied?

The beast finally heard her call. It stepped out of the trees into the meadow to face her. Amanda gasped. It had grown even more, and she had not noticed how much.

The huge beast sat waiting for her. Its long tail swept slowly across the ground behind it, then flicked, then swept back. The claws on one paw flexed, tearing the thatch and soil beneath it, then opened, then flexed again. A thin, wet trickle dripped out of its mouth, down its jaw. Yellow light gleamed in its eyes. The dragon had become cunning. Why had she not seen this?

Amanda drew herself to full stature. She ignored the throbbing in her feet. “Dragon,” she announced in her most majestic tone, “you must go. You are too big for my den. Grown dragons are not allowed in Great Park. Your breath is too hot. Fly away!”

The dragon leered at her. It hunched, like a cat on the prowl, and moved closer and closer to her. Finally, the huge beast was near. It swept its tail, which quickly covered the distance between them. Amanda hopped over the tip. The dragon swept the long jagged tail back, faster. She hopped again. It raised its head and blew hot flame onto the grass behind her. She could hear the vegetation crackling. She could feel it beginning to burn. She turned and stamped the fire out. The dragon breathed again. More fire.

Her heart filled with terror. *One small princess cannot put out all the fires this one large dragon starts!*

The dragon breathed again. The flames licked her clothes, her hair. She slapped at the fire with her hands. She rolled on the ground. She could see the great beast inching closer, flicking its tail, the yellow light growing brighter in its eyes. Amanda backed away. She knew it was useless to run. The dragon always won the races.

“Oh, help!” she cried. “Caretaker! Caretaker! I am too small for this terrible dragon. Help!”

Suddenly, she scarcely knew how, Caretaker was standing beside her. He must have come bounding the moment the flames had begun.

“Kill it! Kill it!” Amanda screamed. The great beast began to lurch. It raised itself on hind legs and roared. Flying flames filled the air.

“No, Amanda,” said the old man, “I cannot kill this dragon. Only the one who loves a forbidden thing can do the slaying. You will always hate me if I do it. Only *you* can slay this dragon.”

Caretaker pulled his woodsman’s hatchet from the silver belt around his waist. He held it erect before him. He lifted his eyes to the sky. “In the name of the King, Amanda. For the Restoration.... You must slay the dragon!”

Caretaker tossed the hatchet directly overhead. It flew high, then started to tumble down, end over end. The humming began that the singing the princess had always loved. The hatchet landed at her feet; its blade stuck firmly in the ground. Amanda reached down and gripped the wood. She felt the hatchet’s power as she pulled it from the soil.

By this time, Amanda had backed almost to the middle of Outpost Meadow, and Caretaker had moved out of the circle of mortal combat. Small fires were burning here and there on the grass. The princess must do this work quickly. She would only have one chance.

Suddenly, Amanda had a terrible thought. Her laughter was gone. Her seeing had disappeared. What if the gift of perfect aim had vanished as well?

The dragon was very close. She kept an eye on its tail. Though she had kept the beast alive, she knew it wanted to tear and devour her. The tail moved. Amanda leaped

over it. It swept back. This time Amanda was ready. She whacked the huge tail with her hatchet. Hurrah! A long piece wiggled on the ground, oozing green dragon blood.

Perhaps there is hope, Amanda thought. That was pretty quick aim.

The dragon cried a terrible “Cree-ee-el! Cree-ee-el! Cree-ee-el!”—not so much from pain as from rage. It reared back on its hind legs, opened its mouth, and let out a fiery blast that caught Amanda full in the face. She could feel hot flames licking her hair, her clothes.

“Now, Amanda!” called Caretaker. “Now or never!”

She took careful aim, raised the hatchet, sighted the bare white patch on the breast of the weaving dragon, which was the beast’s only vulnerable spot. “For the King!” she screamed. “For the Restoration!” Strength filled her arm. She let the hatchet fly.

At that same moment, the beast roared again. It caught Amanda’s leg with the bleeding stump of its swishing tail. She went down onto the grass.

But Amanda’s aim was true. Caretaker’s hatchet hit its mark, and the great dragon came crashing down upon the little girl. Green ooze splashed over Outpost Meadow and covered the princess.

I am dying, she thought. I will smother under this dragon’s heavy body.

Amanda felt Caretaker’s hand touch her arm. Slowly, ever so slowly, the old man raised the edge of the great dragon hulk, just enough so that Amanda could inch her way along the ground to freedom.

Then Caretaker cradled the child in his arms in the middle of Outpost Meadow and wept. Amanda’s hair and eyebrows and lashes were burned into crinkles. Her clothes

were charred. Her face and feet were all blisters and boils and soot. She was covered with dragon's blood. She looked like an outcast.

But the Princess Amanda had won the battle. She had slain the dragon she loved.

So the princess discovered that when one loves a forbidden thing, one loses what one loves most. This truth is a hard won battle for each who finds it and is always gained by loss.

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WHO OR WHAT IS THE DRAGON?

Suddenly, she knew. *Great harm could
come from one small, tame dragon.*

The tale of “Princess Amanda and the Dragon” has changed lives. I have told the story to large groups in prisons, with recovery groups, to offices filled with attorneys, to university students, to men’s and women’s groups, and to many individuals privately. I’ve shared the story with the wealthy and the poorest of our world, with the outwardly successful and those who have hit rock bottom.

Most get it. For those who don’t, they usually see how the story might speak to those who have really screwed up in an obvious way, say alcoholics, drug addicts, or felons—the ones who have sunk so low they have pretty much lost everything and everyone near and dear in life. But if they think they have no dragons in their own lives, they have another thing coming. No one is immune to a dragon’s appeal. Even someone with no idea how such a fantasy tale could possibly apply eventually comes to understand—often through great pain—how they too are vulnerable.

Unfortunately, for most of us it is just a matter of time. As I have already said, while details will differ, we all face dragons in our lives. Everyone is vulnerable. But maybe learning about dragons can help us avoid the unnecessary pain and suffering that comes from our giving life to dragons. And that is why I have written this book, to let readers know that no matter what our dragon happens to be, we can defeat it.

What is a Dragon?

What is a *dragon*? A dragon is any controlling activity, relationship, desire, or attitude that dominates or enslaves us. If “fed” and kept alive, the dragon will eventually weaken, damage, discourage, divide, and ultimately destroy us and our most important relationships in life. Further, a dragon is anything going on in our heads or our lives keeping us from being the best people we are capable of being.

I have known many people who are very successful in a career, talent, ability, skill, what have you, yet they are not the best people they can be. Maybe it is something in their character, or perhaps they are not making the positive difference in the world they could be making. They have dragons, too. Remember, great harm can come from one small, tame dragon, and no one is safe from them, not even the famous or the eminent.

Who can Give Birth to a Dragon?

Young, old, rich, poor, intelligent, the not so smart, the talented and those lacking abilities, the gifted, the beautiful as well as the ugly, the famous and the unknown, and the apparent along with the obscure—anyone and everyone can give birth to dragons. That means you, and that means me; everyone is vulnerable: professors, policeman, pastors, missionaries, priests, rabbis, lawyers, judges, politicians, physicians, nurses, scientists, garbage collectors, tradesmen, business persons, bankers, farmers, athletes, truck drivers, you name it. We are all open to dragon attacks because we can all become enslaved to bad attitudes and damaging actions. We can all blindly give sway to dragons in our lives.

Everyone is vulnerable, and that especially includes people of faith who for one reason or another sometimes think they are immune. *Why should I worry about dragons when I have the Lord in my life?* they think. But this is a dangerous attitude for two reasons. First, we are combatants in an active spiritual warfare that is not harmless. We can be taken prisoner. Second, because we are in a spiritual battle, the Enemy wants people of faith who have dragons to be seen by those who don't espouse a faith. When this happens, many reject faith because of the apparent hypocrisy of those of faith with dragons.

Some dragons rear their ugly heads in obvious and dramatic ways. We often read disturbing stories in the morning newspaper, or hear tragic reports on the evening news. Every day people fall captive to pernicious dragons. The divorce rate is disastrous. Rehab centers are chock-full, the jails are overflowing, gang life dominates in many cities, emergency rooms can't keep pace with the wounded, and everyday news stories cover corruption in business and politics. All of this is testament to this reality.

But before we sigh with relief that *our* name is not headlined across the latest local news page, let us look at some less visible, yet just as serious, dragons in our lives. They can destroy futures, fracture relationships, cost people their jobs, and cause untold suffering. Like a growing cancer, they slowly and insidiously eat away at our own happiness and then eventually our peace and purpose in life. Remember that in our story Princess Amanda hid dragon eggs in the hollow of an oak near Outpost Meadow in a spot she called "My Very Own Place." As you peruse the following list of things that can become dragons in one's life (and some of them can be good things in and of

themselves), see if any ring a bell. Have any of them taken up residence in your very own place?

Selfishness	Impatience	Need for acceptance
Perfectionism	Greed/Materialism	Arrogance
Shame/Guilt	Insecurity	Pessimism/Negativity
Unforgiving spirit	Obsession	Rage/Violence
Manipulation/Control	Hardened conscience	Resentment
Food addiction/Gluttony	Hypocrisy	Workaholism
Anorexia/Bulimia	Stealing	Pride
Racism/Prejudice	Internet addiction	Codependence
Stubbornness	Jealousy	Rebellion
Apathy/Indifference	Dishonesty/Lying	Astrology
Sexual addiction/Abuse	Critical spirit	Depression
Judgmental attitude	Drug addiction	Infidelity
Insecurity/Self-doubt	Lust/Pornography	Gossip
Self-justification	Fear/Anxiety	Loneliness
Gambling addiction	Verbal abusiveness	Betrayal
Self-righteousness	Spiritual blindness	Alcoholism
Cynicism/Pessimism	Hunger for power	Laziness
Sexual perversion/Impurity	Compromising values	Blaming
Bitterness	Adultery	Fornication
TV	Reading	Meanness/Nastiness
Controlling/Manipulative	Sports	Extortion
Witchcraft	Theological cults	. . . and the list goes on

This is certainly not an exhaustive list of the dragons that can affect our lives—far from it. A few might not be as common as others, but they all work the same way. And we

maintain them all the same way. Here is the most important thing to know about the dragons: No matter what form they take, they all have the same goal, which is to damage and destroy.

It would be bad enough if our dragons damaged only us. But they are far worse than that because they always end up hurting others who are influenced by our relationships, beliefs, actions, and attitudes. When we are weak and controlled by our dragons, the strength of others will be challenged and correspondingly weakened. They may become more vulnerable to their own weaknesses. But when we are strong and self-controlled, rather than dragon-controlled, most others will feel encouraged, empowered, and capable in facing their own dragons.

Some use the dragons of others to justify seeking and keeping their own dragons! “Hey, look at him. He’s doing it. So is she!” “Look at all they have. It isn’t hurting them.” Think of Hugh Hefner of *Playboy* magazine and of the millions who would give anything to have what he has and imitate his lifestyle. But not so fast. Look at this again: A dragon is any controlling activity, relationship, desire, or attitude that dominates or enslaves us. Sorry, but Hugh is a slave. If “fed” and kept alive, the dragon will eventually weaken, damage, discourage, divide, and ultimately destroy us and our most important relationships in life.

An addiction to pornography and the lifestyle of reckless sexual abandon will destroy you and your most important relationships in life, and so will any other unhealthy addiction. Let’s go a little deeper here. One way to identify some dragons is by asking this: “How do you treat the people in your life?” This is important because the way you treat others may in and of itself be a dragon.

Spotting a Dragon

The “Are you? . . . Or are you?” columns on the following chart will help you spot a dragon—or maybe several dragons—that might be in your life. Take an honest look:

Are you?	Or are you?
Abusive verbally, physically, emotionally, or sexually?	Not abusive?
Bossy, controlling, or power hungry?	Cooperative, willing to yield, helpful, humble?
Stingy, controlling people with money?	Generous, compassionate, understanding?
Perfectionistic?	Flexible, and don't sweat the small stuff?
Critical, judgmental?	A praiser and encourager who compliments?
Negative, pessimistic?	Positive, looking for the best?
Mean spirited?	Kind?
Unforgiving, holding grudges, bitter, or resentful?	Forgiving, compassionate, merciful?
Unfaithful, and don't keep your word?	Faithful, keep you word?
Never wrong?	One who confesses and asks for forgiveness when wrong?
Always the victim, always being let down, always blaming others?	Light hearted, not taking everything so seriously, and letting things go?
Always accusing others of something?	A defender who tries to defend others?
A user and manipulator of people to get what you want?	A giver who helps others?
Selfish, self centered, thinking the world revolves around you?	Unselfish, thinking of others and their needs?
Too strict and rigid?	Flexible?
Cold, stern, hard?	Warm?
Self righteous, arrogant, and always right?	Humble, not always having to be right?

Impatient?	Patient?
Over sensitive or easily hurt?	Capable of being hurt, but not taking everything personally?
A gossip, always talking about others?	Respectful of others lives?
Disrespectful, rude, a name caller?	Polite?
Mak fun of others, using them to get a laugh from your joke about them?	One who praises and encourages?
Ungrateful?	Grateful, always saying thanks?
Have expectations of others that are too high?	Encouraging, but reasonable?
What else would you add to this list?	

Which dragons have taken up residence in your “Very Own Secret Place”? What other dragons are you struggling with that aren’t on the list? In the next chapter we will consider a dragon’s strategy for making its den in our lives.

DRAGON DISCOVERIES

“Ever see any dragons around here?” he asked quietly.

“Dragons?” answered Amanda, quickly. “Not now. The season for dragons is over.”

Dragons enter our lives through subtle, gradual, seemingly insignificant modes of seduction. We are all vulnerable. The dragon seems harmless at first. It looks enticing. It looks benign. After all, how dangerous could it be? Remember how Amanda thought she and her dragon were a “perfect match”? *What harm is one small dragon?* she thought.

But dragons come in through deception--the lie that we will not be caused any harm. Anyone can buy into the lie, no matter one’s background, education, level of faith, or predilections. It all happens innocently and easily enough, especially in the beginning. Think about it. If a dragon’s main strategy is deception, then its greatest lie would be its nonexistence. *Why, this won’t hurt you at all. Quite the reverse. You won’t even realize it’s in your life because it’s an aid or a remedy and not a dragon in any case.* We become easy targets if we live in denial and fail to acknowledge the reality of a destructive dragon in our lives.

Sometimes we are fully aware of a dragon’s presence and influence, yet we become so accustomed to its activity that it seems almost acceptable and normal. Years ago, my family and I lived outside Los Angeles, California. During the summer months, the smog was terrible. For our family vacation one year, we drove to Arizona. When it came time to head back home, we took the scenic route through the mountains. Eventually the road overlooked the large valley where we lived. A huge, gray blanket of smog covered the area. “Ohhh, look at that!” we exclaimed to each other. “How ugly!

And to think we *live* in that!” We wondered why. Still feeling disgust, we arrived back home and unpacked, and soon returned to our daily routines. Though we took shallow breaths and frequently coughed, it wasn’t long before we became accustomed to our environment again. Rather than moving to a cleaner area, we accepted the pollution as a normal part of our lives—even though we occasionally complained about it. Honestly, most of the time we were blissfully unaware of the lousy environment and didn’t even think about it.

Accommodating Our Dragons

Our family didn’t think very much about the air we breathed in the LA area. What could we do about it? Almost nothing. In something of the same way, many of us put the dragons in our lives out of mind. We become accustomed to living with them. Sure, we complain when they cause us suffering, but we just sort of accept them. They may be killing us from the inside out, but we act as if they are just a normal part of life and nothing can or should be done about them.

Why do we not only accommodate but also sustain and even “protect” our dragons?

- They give us physical and/or emotional pleasure
- We have learned the dragon lifestyle from someone else, perhaps early in life, and it seems appropriate and normal
- Our dragon has become our habit, and we just don’t think about it anymore
- We have been deceived, and we think our dragon is the answer to our needs
- We are afraid to acknowledge our dragon, and our fear keeps us captive
- We feel guilt and shame, and we don’t want to be exposed

- We are ignorant (sometimes purposefully so) of how our dragon will bring harm
- We have lost faith in God, goodness, and doing what is right
- Maybe we just don't care anymore

The last one—just not caring anymore--is an especially dangerous indicator. We become so committed to our dragon we no longer even calculate how it will affect our marriage, family life, position in the church or community, acceptance at work, or our relationship with other key people with whom we rub shoulders. We are willing to risk anything so long as we don't have to relinquish our dragon.

Recognizing the Dragon

What are some indications we have a dragon? What are some reasons for keeping them? Consider these signs:

- We live in our “secret place,” whether real or mental
- Hiding what is going on from the key people in our lives
- Rationalizing and minimizing the true reality of our situation. This includes defending, excusing, and justifying ourselves, as well as blaming and accusing others for our actions. We blame our parents for our bad choices, or we can turn on our mate. We can blame our boss at work, the teachers at school, or the coach and our friends for leading us down the wrong path. We can blame the government, the police, or the criminal justice system. We can always find someone to blame for our having our dragons
- Lying to cover up what is happening
- Taking risks and living on the edge, with a foot on each side of the line
- We secretly or sometimes even openly mock or question others who disagree with our thinking or lifestyle
- We betray others and break our word or commitments

- We live in denial that we have a dragon, thinking “I’m fine. I’m okay”
- Living with fear, loneliness, and isolation
- Alienation from others while seeking justification for our chosen lifestyle or actions
- Being closed to listening to the inner voice of reason
- We stop listening to those around us who are warning us, who see we are going down the wrong path
- Other people ask what is wrong with us, what is going on, voicing their concerns
- Being obsessive with something, spending all our time thinking, dreaming, planning, daydreaming about it.
- Feeling we can’t live without our chosen dragon and being willing to give up anything for it
- Using our dragon to control or manipulate people to get our way.

Dragons Harden Us

To continue accommodating our dragons, we must harden ourselves to our conscience, to that inner moral dictate pointing to what is good, as well as to those who are watching out for us. When our hearts and souls harden like this, we become even more protective of our dragons. In our story “Princess Amanda and the Dragon,” even children know that just about as soon as a dragonet hatches his scales start to harden, and then he begins breathing fire.

Stages of a Dragon’s Growth

“Princess Amanda and the Dragon” can help us identify the key stages of a dragon’s growth in our lives. Specifics may vary from person to person, depending on the circumstances, but an overall clear pattern of development can be seen. This growth may happen rapidly, or it can develop over weeks, months, or even years.

THE TREASURED EGG

The two eggs Princess Amanda found . . . glowed like amber jewels in the sunlight.

Perhaps she meant to carry them to Caretaker. Perhaps she thought that they were old and shriveled inside. Perhaps she forgot.

Just as Amanda picked up the dragon eggs and was fascinated by their beauty, we too can initially be driven by curiosity, and then we are enamored with the beautiful aspects of that which is forbidden. Despite warnings from others, and even warnings from our own conscience, we find ourselves wanting to secretly take in our new, amazing discovery. At first we don't intend on keeping it, but soon we claim it as our own. Because we also might feel protective, we hide it in our most secret place.

THE HATCHLING

The little beast turned its brown eye on her and a great tear dropped onto its breast.

Amanda began to love the baby dragon.

After our dragon has emerged from its “shell,” so-to-speak, feelings overtake us that are new and exhilarating—almost euphoric. We are captivated. We “fall in love” with our dragon, and everything feels right in our world. We have to have it and will go to any lengths to get it. The monotonous routine of our days changes to an alluring life of excitement, tantalizing intrigue, risk-taking, and newfound sensations and satisfaction.

THE PET

Though she knew it was forbidden, she kept the hatchling for a pet. *Just for a little while*, she thought. *Perhaps I can tame it.*

This stage of a dragon's growth in our lives can bring a myriad of different emotions and experiences. We may feel accepted, important, wanted or needed, powerful, intelligent, rich, sexy, or a host of other feelings. Deep within, however, we maintain a comfortable control over our dragon. We're confident we can "tame" it. Our intention might be to eventually (in "a little while") give up our dragon, but now isn't that time. The thrill is still too rewarding. Maybe later.

THE LITTLE BEAST

That same night she noticed a yellow gleam flickering in the beast's eyes as it looked at her. When it licked her face, she could feel that its breath was warm and dry.

At this point, our growing dragon begins to seem somewhat demanding. Nevertheless, because of its importance to us, we still want to nurture it and please it. We invest a greater amount of time, attention, energy, and maybe even money to keep it alive *and* to keep it hidden. In doing so, we love our dragon even more and its power and control over our lives grows. As we give our dragon more priority, we begin noticing other aspects of our lives changing—and soon suffering. Our significant relationships, our jobs, and other meaningful areas get "scorched."

THE DEFIANT DRAGON

Once, when she wanted to hop on its back for a ride, the dragon leaped up without her.

“Cree-ee-! Cree-ee-!” Its cry became defiant as it shot a flame in her direction. For the first time, it had willfully disobeyed her.

Our times of joy, fun, and laughter with our dragon begin to disappear. Our dreams fade. We wonder how everything could be so different now. Others have noticed we’ve changed. Now we are wondering if they are right. We are disappointed and frustrated that our beloved dragon could become so unmanageable and difficult to control. We think, “But he promised me so much!” Despite this, we continue to protect it. Our dragon must never be discovered. When Amanda’s dragon grew and began disobeying her, she began hiding it in a different part of the forest. When we discover our dragon becoming defiant, we often try doing the same.

BIG, WILD BEAST

Amanda realized that the scales of the dragon sleeping beside her were very hard. She knew that its big body was crowding My Very Own Place, and that grown dragons were no laughing matter.

Once we’ve completely lost control of our dragon, we regret ever letting it into our lives. And yet we feel an overwhelming sense of fear and desperation to be free of the very thing we love. Negotiating with our dragon doesn’t work. We can’t command it to leave or hide it away. It has grown too big, too strong, too powerful. Just as Amanda

finally admitted to herself that trouble was ahead, so must we. As the dragon's scales get harder, so does the human heart. It hardens as we try dealing with all the obstacles we face in trying to keep a dragon alive and at bay. We have to hide and protect him while at the same time try to keep him from killing us.

FIRE-BREATHING KILLER

The huge beast sat waiting for her. Its long tail swept slowly across the ground behind it, then flicked, then swept back. The claws on one paw flexed, tearing the thatch and soil beneath it, then opened, then flexed again. A thin, wet trickle dripped out of its mouth, down its jaw. Yellow light gleamed in its eyes. The dragon had become cunning. Why had she not seen this? . . . The dragon leered at her. It hunched, like a cat on the prowl, and moved closer and closer. . . . "Kill it! Kill it!" Amanda screamed. The great beast began to lurch. It raised itself on hind legs and roared. Flying flames filled the air.

Now clear and present danger looms before us, and at last we come face to face with the perilous threat of our dragon. We see the trail of fire and destruction left in its wake. The dragon is not satisfied to stop there. What we fed, protected, and loved for so long now ferociously roars above, ready and willing to kill us.

DRAGON EGGS

A sign on the shores of Lake Marmo reads:

It Is Forbidden to Keep Dragon Eggs.

Escaping the Enticement

Why are forbidden things so fascinating for many of us? Why do they seem so harmless when they tempt us to cross the line? Why do mysterious things appeal to our curiosity? Peering over the edge of the proverbial cliff often doesn't seem enough to keep us from jumping off, and when we do, the free fall (for a while anyway) feels so liberating! That is, until we hit the bottom of the canyon.

The dragon eggs were the forbidden enticements discovered by Amanda in "Princess Amanda and the Dragon," and they come in many forms, all very colorful and appealing to our senses, emotions, and even our intellect. Temptations aren't necessarily first recognized as such dangerous lures. No, they are seen as solid opportunities, interesting possibilities, rare chances, ready access, and open doors. The attraction can be emotional, relational, physical, mental, or combinations of these. Dragon eggs cover an endless landscape, just waiting to be picked up and embraced. The warmth of our hands and hearts incubates them and brings them to life. After hatching, the rationalizations of our minds protects them.

What dragon eggs (areas of temptation) have been the most alluring in your life? (See page 21 for the list of dragon eggs.) How have they charmed and captivated you? What has been their compelling influence? In what ways have they acted as magnets, drawing you to them? Dragon eggs are not only the obvious ones, like drugs, alcohol, or

illicit sex, but they can be things like depression, perfectionism, anger, stealing, abusing, and so on.

Dragon eggs are as unique as the individuals who admire their beauty. What is appealing to one person may not be appealing to another. But each dragon egg is laid especially for you and for me, at just the time we are most open to its grand appeal. That, my friend, is what makes the temptation so hard to resist! *Dragon eggs are personalized...custom-made for the beholder.*

A Word of Warning

Have you ever wiped the sweat from your brow and thought, “Whew, I’m glad I don’t have a dragon. I don’t use drugs and I don’t get drunk. I’m not violent, I don’t rob people, and I’m not caught up in porno or extramarital sexual affairs”? Yet some dragons are more visible and obvious than others, and I would caution anyone from thinking even for a second they can’t or don’t have dragons. You aren’t a drug addict. That’s good. You don’t participate in adultery. That’s good, too. But do you ever get angry? Are you ever jealous? Or selfish? Do you have tendencies to perfectionism, workaholism, bossiness, control, manipulation, blaming, victimhood, revengefulness, or fearfulness?

We can be controlled by *many* things that damage and ruin our life and relationships. Don’t wipe that brow just yet. The point is not to make us sweat but rather help us assess whether we have lost control of our life due to the presence of a dragon. Figuring out that we were foolish enough to have been duped is not a pleasant experience. And it is never one we like to admit. But it is better to find out as soon as possible and fix it than to stay in that situation and suffer.

Every Temptation is a Lie

Can such enthralling enticements be escaped? The answer is a resounding and encouraging Yes, according to the apostle Paul:

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it (1 Cor. 10:13).

Temptations are inevitable, but our submission to them doesn't have to be. Once we recognize the dragon eggs for what they are, we can be alert to spotting them. We can be trained not to pick them up, and not to hide them in our secret places.

Behind every temptation are a false promise and a lie. Can you identify them? Benjamin Franklin once said, "What makes resisting temptation difficult for many people is that they don't want to discourage it completely." How very true. If we are safely harboring a dragon egg, we are not alone. But we do need help, and we can't afford to delay. Here is what to do:

Smash it on the ground. If your dragon is not such as can be smashed to the ground literally, smash it in your mind, in your thinking. Go ahead, visualize doing so. That's it. You have been fascinated by it until it weaseled its way into your psyche and life, but now you know it will torture you and kill you. This is serious. Smash it now.

Also, ask the Caretaker to help. Have you thought of carrying and surrendering your forbidden treasure to him? Amanda *meant* to take the glowing bejeweled dragon

eggs she found to the Caretaker, but she delayed until it was almost too late. We shouldn't make the same mistake. The dragon has a supporting cast; we need one, too.

The Dragon's Supporting Staff

There are minor players or "lesser dragons" that perform a behind-the-scenes role, supporting the bigger dragon and allowing him to thrive and assume the spotlight on your life's stage. Though less obvious, this supporting staff is nevertheless foundational to the success of the dragon's work in damaging, dividing, discouraging, and destroying those they dominate. If we do not recognize and eliminate the support dragons, the giant dragon's work may well go unhindered. In fact, even though we have killed our giant dragon, these support dragons can give new life to the major dragon if they are not rooted out and destroyed as well.

What am I talking about? In order to allow our major dragon to survive we have to deceive, cover up, and hide. For most people, lying to others (and themselves) helps support their dragon. Additionally, cockiness and defensiveness give support to a major dragon. We mock and blame others while we excuse our behavior and protect our dragon. In the end, arrogance and willful defiance take over.

These underlying, supporting dragons must go, or we will be right back where we were, controlled by our dragon and hiding it away in our secret place to do the utmost damage to our lives and the lives of those around us. This is not rocket science, and the answer is clear: We have got to shed our pride, admit we have dragons, and be unmerciful in digging them out and eliminating them.

What dragons have had behind-the-scenes, supporting roles in your major dragon's play on the stage of your life

DRAGON LIES

Had she changed? Everything looked different now.

Was she losing her gift of seeing?

Or were things appearing now as they really were?

Discerning the Deception

“How could I have been so stupid?” Most likely these are words we’ve all uttered to ourselves at one time or another. Not a comforting realization. Maybe we are in a state of confusion, even chaos. Maybe we were deceived. Something slipped by. We weren’t watching closely enough. *How did this happen?* we wonder. *How did I get into this mess? How in the world can I get out of it?*

This sort of emotion is not foreign to most of us. We have felt used, betrayed, angry, scared, duped. The word *duped* stems from duplicity, “deliberate deceptiveness, doubleness of thought, speech, or action.” This double-dealing perfectly describes the dragon’s technique. Depending on the magnitude of the deception, we might have felt as if our world collapsed overnight. In most cases, however, deception is gradual—slowly tilting the axis of our lives until we find ourselves upside down. Few feelings are worse than those associated with discovering we have been the object of someone’s slow, methodical deception—the victim of someone’s “double-dealing.” It is even more humiliating to learn we have been the object of our *own* deception.

Famous recording artist, Billy Joel, lamented this reality in his 1979 Billboard hit song, “Honesty.” Joel called honesty “such a lonely word,” singing, “Everyone is so untrue.” We can agree with the pop star in that honesty today is indeed rare. Deceit is all

around us. We are susceptible not only to hearing and believing lies, but also lying to others *and* ourselves.

Wrestling with the Truth

The Dragon “was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). And he has many disciples.

Deception gives birth to confusion. When confusion covers us, discernment is dealt a heavy blow. We’re left wondering *What’s going on? Why can’t I tell what is true and what isn’t? Why does everything seem so twisted?* Our hearts and minds are caught in a wrestling match with warped versions of the truth. *What are the facts? Who should I believe? What should I do?*

Amanda wrestled with a dragon of distortion and deception. She felt confused inside—she experienced “duplicity” in her thinking, behavior, and speech. She was deliberately deceitful, just as she had been deceived. Her sense of discernment was weakened, and the line between right and wrong became so blurred that she wondered if she was “losing her gift of seeing. Or were things appearing now as they really were?”

What previously she knew as wrong she was now defending, ignoring the damage that would come. She just didn’t see it or get it. Her “gift of perfect aim” was in jeopardy of being lost.

The Foundation of a Dragon’s Existence

The foundation of every dragon's existence and activity is deception. The deception is twofold: the lies we hear and believe, and the lies we tell others and ourselves.

The prophet Jeremiah tells us that "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (17:9). Can we trust our own hearts when the primary path of the dragon is right through the human heart? Often the answer is no, not if the heart is deceitful above all things. That is a sobering thought in a world with a pleasure-seeking, "it's-all-about-me" society whispering in our ear, "Just follow your heart. If it feels good, do it." The lies we are most prone to embrace are those encouraging us to do what we want.

In light of all this, what are we left to do? If our own hearts can deceive us, how do we protect ourselves from being ensnared? Learning the art of discernment (seeing and knowing the difference between right and wrong) and guarding our hearts from the dragon of deception are the two primary steps to distinguish lies from undivided truth.

Every Dragon has a Keeper

The Keeper is the person feeding, protecting, hiding, and defending his or her dragon--and every dragon has a Keeper. One often hears something like the following self-defense responses when talking to Keepers:

- It's all in your imagination. Hey, I'm fine. There is no dragon. I don't know what you're talking about.

- You're exaggerating. You've got to be kidding! Good grief—this is absolutely harmless. Why are you making such a big deal of this?
- You're distorting this. You're trying to turn this into something wrong or bad for me. Geesh. What's wrong with you anyway? *You're* the one with the problem.
- Hey back off. It's my life and I don't care what you think.

The Keeper tells us we are imagining things. We are exaggerating. We are distorting the facts. Once confronted, Keepers use all of the best of the great red dragon's lies to defend themselves, and anyone standing in their way better watch out because they are going to get blamed, derided, and scoffed at. Keepers distance themselves from those who "have issues" with their dragon. They refuse to contend with those who do not approve of their dragon. Sometimes, Keepers will even band together with other like-minded, sympathetic Keepers of the same dragon for moral support and mutual "amending" to their cherished dragons.

Lies and Illusions

The biggest and most basic lie the dragon wants us to believe is that *he doesn't exist*. If we fall for that one, we'll fall for all the others. The dragon will have us where he wants us, for his power *comes from our disbelief in him*. What are some of the many lies we are prone to believe?

There is no God. There is no spiritual purpose to life. I'll never get caught. There are no serious consequences for having my dragon. I can stop this dragon whenever I want. I'm

in charge. I can't change. It's not possible, so why try? Don't worry about me, I'm doing just fine. I'm smarter and more enlightened than the rest; this won't bring me down. It's not my fault. Everyone is doing it, and they're all doing fine. I'm totally in control. This deserved pleasure is worth more than any potential suffering. I'm not doing anything wrong, and no one is getting hurt. I can't live without this (or him or her). I can't change who I am. No one understands me, and no one wants to help me. I can't be forgiven. I've gone too far. There's no turning back. The only way out is to kill myself.

What is the cost for believing one of those lies? What type of suffering must we endure? There is a proverb that says, "Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?" (Prov. 6:28). The implication is that he can't. But is that true? I have seen people walk on hot coals before—and without burning their feet. They psyched themselves up with meditation and chanting, and then they walked on a bed of hot coals about eight feet long. Yet the proverb is absolutely true. Someone might be able to walk on hot coals for a little while without getting burned, but no one can go for very long. I have never seen anyone walk on a bed of hot coals thirty feet long. Think of how painful proving this would be. For the long path no one would even try pulling this off, unless they were deceived by dragon lies.

Inviting a dragon into our lives and continuing to show hospitality to that dragon is tantamount to believing we can walk on hot coals without eventually getting burned. It is a dragon vision that will blind us to the reality of what lies ahead, and a dragon lie that will cause us pain and destruction.

FIRE-ROASTED CRAVINGS

A thin, wet trickle dripped out of its mouth, down its jaw. Yellow light gleamed in its eyes. The dragon had become cunning. Why had she not seen this? . . . Though she had kept the beast alive, she knew it wanted to tear and devour her.

A Dragon's Favorite Food

It would not do to forget that dragons can only come into our lives when they are invited. We must pick them up and give them life. It takes the warmth of our hands and our hearts for them to hatch, survive, thrive, and mature. And it takes food, which we must provide. They are totally dependent upon us for their food. Most people who harbor and raise dragons are more than eager to give them what they want.

What is a dragon's favorite food? Much of what we give provides nourishment for the dragon's fiery appetite, but the food they absolutely want to gorge on, the food that keeps them coming back for more, is the human ego.

The Human Ego

Ego is irresistible to a dragon. It is his favorite smell, and he can smell it from miles away. He's starving, like always. Once a dragon lifts his head and catches a whiff of ego, he starts salivating. A faint grin of anticipation forms at the corners of his mouth, and then he starts wildly yearning for it. He forgets whatever he's doing, and consuming ego becomes his sole focus. Nothing else is as important. Fortunately for him, his favorite food is plentiful. A faintest smell of ego brings out his craving in full force. His pulse increases as he lifts his wings into the air flying in the direction of his next meal.

The dragon has a high success rate on his hunts. Most of the time, his kills are as easy as snatching fish out of a barrel. Most people don't offer much resistance; consequently, the dragon always has a table full of delicacies to choose from.

Most of the time, his prey is rather dumb, often acting like rabbits on the side of a road at night. They sit in the dark, waiting for the lights of a car before running out in the road . . . in *front* of the car. A dragon's prey behaves this way. Blinded by the dazzling lights of a dragon's promise, they run out onto what they think is a new path of life. But this new path turns out to be a deadly detour, where eventually they are run over and smashed.

Age, race, religion, gender, education, nationality—none of it matters. A dragon's favorite food is any person controlled by pride. This is the conceited or arrogant person, the "self-made" person who has an excessively favorable opinion of themselves, someone who wants to live life "my way." This attitude for a man or woman is like the bright lights of a car for a rabbit, blinding us into thinking, "Run! I can do it! I can make it across the road. It's better over there!" And then the inevitable happens, and we become roadkill.

Every day the news is filled with the stories of people running out in front of the headlights when pride told them to go for it. They thought they could do it, take it, win it, ace it, and come out fine. Only they were caught by the dragon lights. It's very difficult dodging dragon lights. And as we make our way down the road of life, we see them there on the side, victims of the dragons. Roadkill. Road crews come out to clean them up.

"When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom," we are told in the book of Proverbs (11:2). And "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty

spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). Even before the world began, pride was the cause of the fall of the great red Dragon known as Satan. He had once been a magnificent angel in the kingdom of heaven, but in his pride he rebelled against his Creator. As punishment, he was thrown down to Earth. Pride was also at the heart of human rebellion in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. Pride came before their fall from a perfect existence in the Garden of Eden. Humankind has been morally corrupted ever since.

Pride Leads to a Hard Heart and Death

“Princess Amanda and the Dragon” is the story of a girl’s stubbornness and arrogance leading her to show disrespect and disregard for Caretaker’s wisdom and for the law of Lake Marmo. As her pride and sense of superiority grew, so did her resentment and anger toward others. Amanda’s once-respectful view of Caretaker changed to one of him being an “old fool.” In spite of his polite and patient offers to help whenever she was in need, she thought of herself as fully capable of handling any problems on her own. And remember her lady friend Mercie, the one who wondered what had happened to Amanda’s laugh? Amanda secretly looked upon her with disdain and thought, “She’s the ugliest woman I’ve ever seen.” Even the thought of having to talk to Mercie caused Amanda dread. “Why don’t they just leave me alone?” she thought. She wanted her friends to mind their own business. As for the Great Celebrations at Inmost Circle, Amanda began staying away, belittling those joyous ceremonies. She concluded, “Maybe the Great Celebration was just a bunch of foolishness.”

As we have seen, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18) Why is this true? Because pride leads to a hard heart. The proud

person has his or her mind made up and doesn't want to listen to advice. A self-centered rigidity sets in. Prideful people want to be in control, to be their own god. They can't be wrong. Their way is the best. Yet this corrective teaching is what we find in Scripture:

“Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: ““In the pride of your heart you say, “I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas.” But you are a mere mortal and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god” (Ezek. 28:2).

The prideful mindset keeps us blinded by the bright lights of pleasure, power, attention, or whatever it may be.

Ironically, this haughty stubbornness makes us vulnerable and easy prey for our hungry dragon. As we head full-steam toward imminent crisis, we hold our heads high! When crisis hits, pride keeps us in a cycle of not learning our lesson, making error after error, trying to make the unworkable work. Pride keeps us holding our ground, even when the ground is crumbling underneath our feet, guaranteeing our eventual fall. Pride keeps us from confessing, repenting, and changing our ways. “There is a way that appears to be right,” we are told in another proverb, “but in the end it leads to death” (Prov. 14:12). Our egos lead us right into the crafty dragon's grip of control, domination, and destruction.

Denial is not a River in Egypt

One of the signs of pride in our life as it relates to dragons is denial. When one has an inflated idea of his or her own value, denial is pretty obvious--to everyone other than the one with the hidden dragon of vanity and self-conceit.

I know alcoholics who deny they have a drinking problem. Sure, they drink “socially,” but it always seems to them they can handle their drinking. But notice I called them alcoholics, and so does everyone else who knows them.

I know workaholics in the business world. But I also know workaholics who are preachers, police, doctors, lawyers, builders, athletes, and entertainers. While they compulsively work, driven by some inner pressure to get ahead or, more correctly, not to get behind, they ruin their families and maybe their own health. Yet they deny they have a problem.

I have known perfectionists who are always telling others how to live and how to achieve top-drawer excellence in all they do. They are always redoing what others accomplish. They seem to have no idea that in telling others what to do and how to do it they are causing problems. Once this is brought to their attention, they deny it.

And the list goes on.

Why do these people deny the problems? I call it *dragon cataracts*. Dragon cataracts blur one’s self-vision and blind us to the reality of what is actually going on in our lives and the lives of those around us. Others see it. They don’t. And they go on denying it. Others suffer, but the person just keeps on keeping on with their dragon, sure that all is just fine with the world.

Just like Amanda. If someone points out that something must be wrong somewhere along the line in our lives, we just consider them fools and belittle them, at least in our mind. We have to in order to protect and justify our dragon.

Remember, ego is irresistible to a dragon. Where in your life does ego have a stronghold? In which of your relationships does ego show itself the most? Is it with your

parents? Your employer, boss, or employees? Coworkers? Husband or wife? Your in-laws? Your children, or your friends? What about your church?

Test yourself to see if you are inclined to have problems with the ego:

Do you often have to do most things *your way*?

Are you bossy most of the time?

Are you condescending, critical, or judgmental of others on a regular basis?

Do you always have to be right?

Do you enjoy listening to the opinions of others?

Are you usually patient with most people? Are you polite and courteous toward others (are you well-mannered)?

Do you easily become angry or defensive or feel like you always have to justify yourself or make excuses?

Are you quick to admit when you are wrong, to confess your mistakes, and to ask for forgiveness?

Do you readily point out when others are wrong?

Are you the only one you really trust?

If you give yourself glowing marks, maybe you aren't the best one to be asking these questions of yourself. Maybe you should ask those with whom you live and work.

Putting Ego in Its Place

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time (1 Pet. 5:5-6).

The longer we wait to humble ourselves, the longer we hide, protect, and nurture our dragon, the harder it is to clothe ourselves with humility. The more we deny the dragon exists and that it is a problem, the longer we ignore or reject pleas from God, our friends, and relatives, the harder it is to put things right. The more we neglect our own conscience and the pain we feel inside, the harder it is to put ego in its place. And here is the reason:

Anything short of killing our dragon means we are still feeding it.

We can fool ourselves into thinking we aren't feeding the dragon, that it is permanently "hibernating," or is hidden away in a private cave forever. But that is just another one of those lies we've been tricked into believing. We have got to kill the dragon outright; coming up short of this is not going to help in any way. *Anything* short of killing it means we are still feeding it.

In light of the truth of this reality, we have two choices: We either kill the dragon, completely and without reservation, or we continue feeding it. If we decide not to kill it

(for whatever reason), or to postpone making a decision on killing it, that decision alone constitutes enough food for the dragon to sustain itself, continue growing, and eventually to gain control over us. Then, it will not be long before a complete transfer of power follows. We lose, he wins. We die, he lives.

Make No Mistake, There is a Real Dragon

After I became acquainted with the story of “Princess Amanda and the Dragon,” the thought popped into my mind about what the Bible had to say, if anything, about dragons. In fact, I was surprised to find out it had quite a lot to say.

The Bible has a name for the dragon whose lifeblood is deception. In the third chapter of the New Testament book of Revelation, he is called “an enormous red dragon,” and he is described as ready to devour. This dragon is known as “The great dragon—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him” (Rev. 12:9). His mission is international in scope, for he is the deceiver of the whole world, although he works especially effectively one-on-one. He gives us personal attention and our own especially tailored promises, which are actually lies. Make no mistake, there is a real dragon with the real goal of deceiving us and leading us to believe in him and surrender our life to him. He has been fighting from the start. When war broke out in heaven and Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, “the dragon and his angels fought back” (Rev. 12:7).

Despite his worldwide popularity and unmatched expertise, he wears a mask to hide his true identity. The Bible says he is a hunter, stalking us. He disguises himself as an angel of light—“And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of

light” (2 Cor. 11:14). In reality, “He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). He tries to outwit us with his schemes (2 Cor. 2:11).

Decision Time is Here

The Dragon wants to be god in our lives. The Dragon is a liar and a deceiver who lost his place in heaven. “The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him” (Rev. 12:9). He wanted to be God, but he isn’t and can’t be God, because there is only one God. The Scriptures are very clear on this: “Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard” (Mal. 2:15). “For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Cor. 8:6). . “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

The dragon knows this as well as anyone, so he is happy settling for second best. If he can outwit us with his schemes, he can enter our lives, enslave us, drain us empty, and become god (with a small g) over us. It is even better, in the bargain, if he can destroy our faith in the real God or keep us from following him.

There are many ways the dragon tries to destroy our faith. He can use a crisis in our life by making us question how such a thing could happen if God were a God of love. He can use the hypocritical lives of those professing faith in God as a way for us to

justify dismissing faith. He can use the slick-sounding, gimmicky lines of false preachers and teachers, café philosophers, atheist professors, crackpot scientific theories, corrupt politicians, simple-minded singers and entertainers to deceive and detour us from the right path of life.

We do not have to take it. We are empowered to plunge a sword deep into the heart of our dragon. But we need to understand exactly where the battle is being fought. The apostle Paul wrote to believers who lived in the city of Corinth and said, “I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3). Eve was deceived by the dragon. Her mind was led astray. And that is where the action takes place. The battle zone for the dragon is the human mind, and our ego makes it easy for him to claim his prize.

How long can any of us fight to keep our heart and mind impenetrable? Decision time is near.

SECONDHAND SMOKE

“Wait! Wait!” she shouted. She began running along the path. “Wait for me!” She was terrified that the dry grass would catch and begin to flame from the dragon’s breath. In her mind, she could see the whole forest burning, the creatures running and—oh, how awful!—fire in Great Park! Fire because of her! Suddenly, she knew.

Great harm could come from one small tame dragon. Small tame things grow into big wild beasts.

Collateral Damage

We can suffer from other people’s dragons, just as they can suffer unjustly from ours. One great danger we must guard against is giving birth to our own dragons in response to being a victim of someone else’s destructive tendencies. We are all vulnerable to doing this.

I visited with a man recently who said he had lived a majority of his adulthood struggling to overcome the physical and emotional wounds of his childhood and early adolescence. He had suffered in silence most of those years, doing what he could to simply get through the day-to-day demands of life. As he matured and the years passed, he suppressed many of his memories and sometimes felt close to convincing himself he had never even been a victim at all. Still, the past abuses he suffered would periodically come back to haunt him, returning with black clouds of suffocating depression and waves of crushing self-loathing, anger, and weakness.

This unfortunate man had been a victim of someone else's dragon. Although he suffered years ago, the toxins from that dragon's secondhand smoke were still poisoning him. The smoke was still burning his eyes and clouding his vision, preventing him from clearly seeing the life of freedom he so desperately wanted yet felt paralyzed to find. This is a tragic story, but it is not unusual. His own present-day dragons of depression, anxiety, and self-hatred developed long ago from his being a victim of another person's dragon. Yes, he was an innocent bystander, but dragons don't care about that. At his young age, he began allowing the damage of secondhand smoke to give birth to his own dragons.

Remember Amanda's reaction when she looked out into Outpost Meadow, where small fires were burning on the grass? Her heart filled with terror. She knew that because of her own dragon, many innocent lives were in jeopardy of being hurt. Many blameless people could suffer. *Great harm could come from one small tame dragon. Small tame things grow into big wild beasts.*

We have all suffered at the hands of dragons nurtured by others. Victims of a dragon's secondhand influence are not to blame. No one is accountable for dragons belonging to someone else. And while secondhand dragon smoke can be lethal, no one is responsible for killing another person's dragon. But we are responsible for not giving birth to our dragons through our response to someone else's dragons. As the Caretaker said, "Only the one who loves a forbidden thing can do the slaying. . . . Only *you* can slay this dragon." I am responsible for my dragons, and you are responsible for yours.

Fortunately for the man I just mentioned, eventually he did come to recognize the deadly fire encircling him and chose to get the help he needed to face his own personal dragons. He came to see that the dragon of another person and the circumstances of his

young life paved the way for dragons of his own to enter and wreak havoc. With this understanding he was able to free himself.

Identifying Secondhand Smoke

Be on guard to opportunities for someone else's dragon to gain entrance and control of your own life through your response. It is especially important to watch out for the disappointing and adverse circumstances of other people's dragons so they don't gain a foothold.

I listened to the story of a woman from Australia who was abandoned at birth by both of her parents. They left her at the door to a hospital. She never knew them. Her birth certificate has no child's name, no parent's name—nothing. She was adopted, only to be sexually abused from the age of three to eight by four men. It wasn't until this woman was in her thirties that she found out she had been adopted.

Some women would have spent the rest of their lives angry, bitter, hating men, failing in marriage, abusing their own kids, drinking, using drugs, and hating God for letting the abuse happen. But this woman chose not to let those events be the controlling force in her life. At some point (or maybe it was over a long period of time), she decided not to sit in a corner feeling self-pity, anger, bitterness, unworthiness, and lack of love. No one would have blamed her had she gone that route, but she chose instead to rise up. She didn't allow the circumstances of her life, the failures of her birth parents, or the dragons of others to transform into dragons of her own. What could easily have been a sad life story of victimization turned into a life of victory. Today she is a successful

author, traveling and speaking around the world. She has a good marriage and is the fulfilled mother of two children.

Living, working, or studying with someone with nasty dragons that result in our suffering is tough. Of course if physical, sexual, or emotional abuse is involved, one needs to seek help immediately, if not sooner. If something less heinous is involved, however, we need to learn how to survive with them. We might have a friend who is very immature and controlled by a dragon. It could be a parent, mate, child, brother or sister, boss, fellow worker, whoever. They might have a rotten attitude, be domineering, bossy, critical, negative, or blaming. They might be an alcoholic or a drug addict. Perhaps they are egotistical. Maybe they are out of control with eating, spending, sports, gambling, stealing, or sexual compulsions. There are hundreds of possibilities.

Our challenge is to make sure that our reaction to their dragon doesn't create new dragons in our life, which in turn will damage, discourage, and, in the end, destroy us.

In the final analysis, we can be and often are the innocent victims of secondhand smoke. We can be hurt by other people's dragons or devastating situations that are beyond our control. We can be abused, robbed, hurt by debilitating accidents, betrayed, lied about, divorced, demoted, fired, and abandoned. But we must be careful not to let our response to such toxic smoke be one that breathes life into a new dragon of our own.

Responding to the Dragons of Others

What are some unhealthy ways of responding to the dragons of others? Consider these self-destructive reactions:

- Suppressing our feelings
- Self-hatred
- Self-deprecation
- Withdrawal
- Becoming bitter or vengeful
- Living for retaliation
- Refusing to forgive and harboring hate
- Self-pity
- Trying to be perfect at everything
- Rebelling and letting anger take over
- Seeking attention through negative behavior
- Blaming others for our dragons

If we respond in any of these ways we have only ourselves to blame for our dragons. We alone are responsible for our reactions. We must not seek to justify any of them by saying something like, “But look at what was done to me!” That won’t do us any good, and it will only cause further harm.

PERFECT AIM

“No, Amanda,” said the old man, “I cannot kill this dragon. Only the one who loves a forbidden thing can do the slaying. You will always hate me if I do it. Only *you* can slay this dragon.”

How to Kill Your Dragon

Each time I read the story of “Princess Amanda and the Dragon,” I am struck by its powerful and convicting message. Its meaning goes much deeper than a mere children’s tale. Anyone like me who has faced the need to kill a dragon will understand exactly what I mean, and parallels between Amanda’s feelings and ours are probably very much the same.

If my readers have been struggling with full-grown dragons in their lives and come as far as this chapter, I imagine they are weary and worn out, to put it mildly. But I hope that also means they are motivated and ready to put an end the suffering. No one can do that for anyone else; only *you* can resolve finally to be free, to live with integrity, and to assume responsibility for making the most difficult and most painful decision of your life. It will be a never-forgotten, defining battle--a game changer, to say the least. In no way is this a game. It is a war, and someone is going to die. Better the dragon than you.

To be truly successful in dragon slaying requires every ounce of courage we can muster. In spite of our fears and weaknesses, we must achieve a perfect aim. This is one time we cannot afford to deviate from the mark that is the dragon’s heart. If we miss, we might never be given another chance. Merely wounding the dragon won’t be enough. As

Caretaker announced, “Now, Amanda! Now or never!” The only way to look at this is that the death of our dragons means our freedom.

Mental Preparedness

To ensure a perfect aim, you first must be mentally engaged and fully committed to killing your dragon and living free. If you find yourself wavering, remind yourself often of these important principles regarding you and your dragon:

- Hiding your dragon will not work because eventually it will raise its ugly head
- Coexistence with your dragon is impossible; complete eradication of the dragon from your life is necessary
- No “peace agreements” can be made because dragons don’t make truces
- Negotiation for a possible future reconciliation with your dragon is not an option
- You cannot have a close relationship with God and a dragon at the same time. You may be living under the illusion that you can, but your relationship with God will be superficial at best. Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. No servant can serve two masters” (Luke 16:13)

Mental preparedness is absolutely essential to successfully killing your dragon because the dragon has been the very person, relationship, attitude, behavior, lifestyle, activity, or substance you have loved and been devoted to for so long. Your dragon has

been (at least early in the relationship) your friend, literally or figuratively, your confidant, and your source of attention-getting, approval, acceptance, love, power, control, pleasure, and security. Despite your enslavement and accompanying fear, this bond between the two of you is what makes slaying your dragon so painful and difficult. Keeping your dragon alive has required a great investment of heart, body, and mind.

Because of this strong bond of affection, only you can be the one to kill your dragon. No one can force you to do it, either. Remember what Caretaker told Amanda? He could help by providing her with what she needed to do the slaying, but he said, “I cannot kill this dragon. Only the one who loves a forbidden thing can do the slaying. You will always hate me if I do it. Only *you* can slay this dragon.” Asking someone else to kill your dragon for you shows you are not ready to do it. You are still in love with what the dragon does or provides. If it were possible for someone else to kill it, you would blame them for having killed what you loved. Then you would always run back to your dragon. Wanting someone else to kill your dragon also shows a lack of commitment to getting rid of it for good. You gave life to the dragon, and you must take responsibility for putting a end to it.

I have said this before, but it bears repeating: Our dragons are only given life when we pick them, and alternatively, they only die when we take them down. Unfortunately, they don’t die due to old age, illnesses, accidents, or by the hand of anyone other than ourselves. We are the only ones who can kill our dragons.

Nothing Changes if Nothing Changes

People with dragons never really free themselves from that bondage unless they truly want a new life. They must really desire in their mind and heart to change.

Rehabilitation programs, pleas from friends and family, losing jobs, going broke, or spending time in jail usually do not bring about a *lasting* change. What makes the ultimate difference? It's when the change comes from within, from inside.

A popular phrase can be heard at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings: "Nothing changes if nothing changes." Another way of saying this is, "Nothing changes if no one changes." A keeper can talk to counselors, parents, or friends until they are blue in the face, but nothing is going to change until they engage themselves fully—100%—toward killing their dragon. Anything else is half-hearted and will fail.

The Sword of the Spirit

With what will you kill your dragon? In Amanda's case, she was offered a woodsman's hatchet by Caretaker, which he took from the silver belt around his waist. For our purposes, let me suggest a sword. In the Bible, we are introduced to the full armor of God:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition

to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:10-17).

This armor is given to us by God for use in our spiritual battle against the great red dragon. The pieces of armor are a belt, a breastplate, footgear, a shield, a helmet, and lastly, a sword. This sword, as defined in Scripture, is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Interestingly, of all the pieces of armor we are to use in the spiritual battle, the sword is the only weapon of *offense*.

When Amanda reached down and gripped the wood of Caretaker's hatchet, she felt the weapon's supernatural power, and strength filled her arm. "She took careful aim, raised the hatchet, sighted the bare white patch on the breast of the weaving dragon, which was the beast's only vulnerable spot. 'For the King!' she screamed. 'For the Restoration!' Strength filled her arm. She let the hatchet fly."

In the same way, when we choose to take up the sword of God's Spirit, raise it high in our hands, and sharpen our aim, we feel the surge of inner strength rising from within for having made the right decision. We also feel the strength of God's supernatural aid. As we raise the sword, we might feel a sense of terror or at least panic. That is natural. Our dragon will be blowing its fire down upon us, trying to blind us and threaten us with its violent roars of rage. But this is no time for paralyzing fear or hesitation. This is no time to let him scare you. It is time to kill the dragon.

Indeed, the battle will be bloody, because it is a battle to the death. But choosing valiantly to raise your sword by faith and trusting God for strength, you cannot and will not lose. No matter what your dragon is, you can defeat it. You will suffer and be burned,

bruised, broken, and blistered, but do not be controlled by fear because God will stand with you, empower you, and faithfully restore you (more on the restoration process later).

What does Slaying your Dragon Really Mean?

Most of what I have said to this point on killing one's dragon has involved symbolic language, such as armor and sword. I have also used graphic word pictures, like the battle being bloody and fiery. But now let's put aside the symbolism and consider a more personal, practical scenario. What does slaying your dragon really mean to you? What does it look like to you? What does killing your dragon involve?

I can't write about that for you; it is your situation and your dragon. Details differ for everyone. Think about your dragon carefully, and the more specific the better. If you can't name your dragon, you will never defeat it. If you continue feeding it and keeping it alive, it will ultimately destroy you and your most important relationships in life. What is it in your life that has caused you unnecessary pain and suffering? What activity, relationship, desire, or attitude dominates or enslaves you? What dragon in your head or life is keeping you from being the best person you can be?

Is it substance abuse, sex, pornography, or greed? Is your dragon materialism, fame, success, or attention? Are you too critical, a perfectionist, power-hungry, or lazy? Is your dragon violence, rebellion, murder, control, terror, or mean-spiritedness? Whatever your dragon is, if you don't kill it, it will kill you. This is your wake-up call.

Take into account your own personal situation and follow these guidelines in your quest of killing your dragon. After you've made the decision to strike a fatal blow against your dragon:

Pick up your weapon, the sword.

Talk honestly and humbly to God, the real Caretaker of your heart. Talk to him about how you *really* feel about your dragon. What do you want to say to him as you prepare to go on the offense to take control of your life?

God knows your heart. He has known it from the very beginning. Still, confess to the Lord that you have blown it. Tell him you are scared, spent, and sapped of all strength.

Tell God you want to change, that you are done with being enslaved, trapped, used, and abused by your dragon.

Tell the Lord you want to live in peace and to please him, not yourself.

Accept God's invitation to help you. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Now tell God you love him and thank him for the sword.

The Lord's invitation is "Come to me." His promise is "I will give you rest." Our choice to trust in and follow Christ is a specific choice to leave the dragon or dragons that dominate our lives. If a dragon is weighing us down with guilt, discontent, insecurity, and failure, we can turn to God to give us the strength to rid ourselves of its influence. Our Caretaker is always watching out for our best interests, not from a position of

condemnation, but from a position of love. God *wants* us to kill our dragons so we can experience his peace, joy, and blessings. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30). God is gentle and good, and the yoke he has designed for us is tailor made to fit.

After Amanda killed her dragon, as she was lying wounded and lifeless on the ground, did Caretaker look upon her as an outcast? Did he condemn, question, belittle, or get angry with her? No, the story says, “Caretaker cradled the child in his arms in the middle of Outpost Meadow and wept.” The warm and tender embrace Amanda received can be yours. Caretaker wants to cradle *you* in his loving arms and offer rest, hope, and healing.

Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. . . . Put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him (Ps. 103:2-5, 7-13).

Confront your Dragon Unwaveringly

What do you tell your dragon? Clearly envision your addiction, your idol, your selfish compulsion, your bad attitude, your illicit relationship—whatever it may be—standing before you in the form of a dragon. Get a good mental picture of it. Now, speak to the dragon:

Dragon, today it's *over*. Today, you are going to die in my life.

I won't believe your lies anymore.

You don't love me, you never did. You're not my friend. In fact, you're my greatest enemy.

You aren't going to control me, use me, deceive me, or damage my life any longer. You are finished.

I'm no longer devoting myself to you. You are dead to me.

I have chosen to not surrender my life to you any longer.

I'm putting my trust in God, and changing my allegiance to him.

I'm fighting for all that is good and right in my life.

I'm accepting God's help, freedom, and forgiveness.

You have told your dragon what you are going to do. Now do it. Put action to your words. Do exactly as you have said. Raise your sword, aim for the heart, and throw

it with all your might. Obviously, this is the most challenging yet most vital step. After you have delivered the fatal, final stab to your dragon, you will initially feel unstable, depleted, and empty. You may question yourself and what you've done. Your dying dragon may cry out to you, "You can't do this. You are too weak, and you can't live without me. You'll be back. You need me."

You must not listen. You will be feeling deep pain, but the peace and sense of relief from finally breaking free will outweigh your pain. Leave the dragon dead on the ground. Turn and walk away. Don't look back.

You are to be greatly commended for your courage in confronting and defeating your dragon. Your heroic choice will be life changing. Now, turn around in your mind, look into God's eyes, and give thanks to him for your victory in this battle. Thank him for his unfailing patience, forgiveness, direction, and unconditional love.

Feet of Freedom

If you already haven't done so, find a trusted, wise person with whom to share what you have done. This may be a spiritual leader, a friend, a counselor, or a parent. Choose someone who is fair-minded and honest, and one who will take these matters seriously and not lead you off course. Validation and positive affirmation can make a big difference when you are feeling unsteady on your new feet of freedom.

Seeking godly support and encouragement will help reinforce the action you have taken, and you will gain additional strength to remain firm in your resolve.

And don't forget to seek the counsel of Scripture, which says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Let King David's

Psalm 103 comfort your wounded, battle-worn heart, and let it bring real peace to your soul:

Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him (Ps.103:1-13).

TURNING LOSS INTO GAIN

So the princess discovered that when one loves a forbidden thing, one loses what one loves most. This truth is a hard won battle for each who finds it and is always gained by loss.

Recovery and Restoration

How do you rebuild your life after your dragon's death? After you have slayed your dragon, you will feel a mixture of positive and negative emotions, such as freedom and fear, peace and turmoil. Let's go back and read the ending of "Princess Amanda and the Dragon" where she successfully lands Caretaker's hatchet in the heart of her dragon. What did she go through after killing her dragon? What did she endure? What was her emotional and physical condition afterward? Following the battle, was it a time of exuberant frivolity and celebration?

Caretaker was standing beside her. He must have come bounding the moment the flames had begun. "Kill it! Kill it!" Amanda screamed. The great beast began to lurch. It raised itself on hind legs and roared. Flying flames filled the air. "No, Amanda," said the old man, "I cannot kill this dragon. Only the one who loves a forbidden thing can do the slaying. You will always hate me if I do it. Only *you* can slay this dragon." Caretaker pulled his woodsman's hatchet from the silver belt around his waist. He held it erect before him. He lifted his eyes to the sky. "In the name of the King, Amanda. For the Restoration.... You must slay the dragon!" Caretaker tossed the hatchet directly overhead. It flew high, then started to tumble down, end over end. The humming began that the singing the princess had always loved. The hatchet landed at her feet; its blade stuck

firmly in the ground. Amanda reached down and gripped the wood. She felt the hatchet's power as she pulled it from the soil. By this time, Amanda had backed almost to the middle of Outpost Meadow, and Caretaker had moved out of the circle of mortal combat. Small fires were burning here and there on the grass. The princess must do this work quickly. She would only have one chance. Suddenly, Amanda had a terrible thought. Her laughter was gone. Her seeing had disappeared. What if the gift of perfect aim had vanished as well? The dragon was very close. She kept an eye on its tail. Though she had kept the beast alive, she knew it wanted to tear and devour her. The tail moved. Amanda leaped over it. It swept back. This time Amanda was ready. She whacked the huge tail with her hatchet. Hurrah! A long piece wiggled on the ground, oozing green dragon blood. *Perhaps there is hope*, Amanda thought. *That was pretty quick aim*. The dragon cried a terrible "Cree-ee-el! Cree-ee-el! Cree-ee-el!"—not so much from pain as from rage. It reared back on its hind legs, opened its mouth, and let out a fiery blast that caught Amanda full in the face. She could feel hot flames licking her hair, her clothes. "Now, Amanda!" called Caretaker. "Now or never!" She took careful aim, raised the hatchet, sighted the bare white patch on the breast of the weaving dragon, which was the beast's only vulnerable spot. "For the King!" she screamed. "For the Restoration!" Strength filled her arm. She let the hatchet fly. At that same moment, the beast roared again. It caught Amanda's leg with the bleeding stump of its swishing tail. She went down onto the grass. But Amanda's aim was true. Caretaker's hatchet hit its mark, and the great dragon came crashing down upon the little girl. Green ooze splashed over Outpost Meadow and covered the princess. *I am dying*, she thought. *I will smother under this dragon's heavy body*. Amanda felt Caretaker's hand touch her arm. Slowly, ever so slowly, the old man raised the edge of the great dragon hulk, just enough so that Amanda could inch her way along the ground to freedom. Then Caretaker cradled the child in his arms in the middle of Outpost Meadow and wept. Amanda's hair and eyebrows and lashes were burned into crinkles. Her clothes were charred. Her face and feet were all blisters and boils and soot. She was covered with dragon's blood. She looked like an outcast. But the Princess Amanda had won the battle. She had slain the dragon she loved.

Even after Amanda slew the dragon she loved, it was definitely *not* a time of exuberant frivolity and celebration. What happened to the great dragon after Amanda delivered the fatal blow? Where did the beast fall? The story says “the great dragon came crashing down upon the little girl.”

I am dying, she thought. *I will smother under this dragon’s heavy body*. After Caretaker raised the dragon’s body just enough for her to inch her way to freedom, what was the state in which she found herself? Our story says the princess was not only covered by the dragon’s green ooze, but she looked like an outcast. “Amanda’s hair and eyebrows and lashes were burned into crinkles. Her clothes were charred. Her face and feet were all blisters and boils and soot. She was covered with dragon’s blood.”

What a symbolic picture of brokenness. What an honest description of our raw, immediate state when we first emerge from under our dragon’s dead hulk. On the one hand, we feel the relief and release from the slavery we have been under. On the other hand, we feel the emotional crush of having killed something we once loved. We feel the crush of having been so blinded and foolish, not to mention the fact that we know some serious challenges lie ahead. It is true he is dead, but many consequences may yet lie ahead for having given life to this dragon. It can be overwhelming. But for now, you can enjoy the freedom, the joy of knowing you have taken a step of freedom. You have done the right thing, and you are free. Soon you will start preparing yourself for the issues that lie ahead.

The Truth about what Lies Ahead

I can confidently say that recovery and restoration from killing your dragon may be more difficult and painful than killing the dragon itself. Killing your dragon is a major step in the process of finding real peace and freedom in life, but it is not the only step. I do not say this to discourage you, but to prepare you for what lies ahead.

What is at stake here? Recovery and restoration from dragon domination means pushing on until arriving at the point in our lives where we experience lasting

Relief

Peace

Freedom

Integrity

Fulfillment

Self-respect

Inner joy

Contentment

Better relationships with others

Correct priorities in life

None of this means you will be forever free from complicated, difficult, and painful moments and emotions--but it does mean that in the midst of whatever comes, you will have these things present and growing in your life. There is no way to sugarcoat this: You can experience joy, peace, real love, acceptance, and purpose, but you must never forget you are in a battle till you leave this earth.

I can tell you that for me, as well as for many of my fellow dragon slayers, the complete emotional liberation achieved in the recovery process took not weeks, not

months, but years. You may deal with some issues for the rest of your life. Why? Our attachments to our dragons ran deep, and the accompanying habits and attitudes we developed to keep them alive run even deeper. Some still have to fight against old habits, memories, feelings, and desires of the past. We have to keep fighting against them until all appeal fades. Emotional chains that link us to the past must be completely broken.

I remember talking with a friend after I killed a dragon years ago. I told him it was probably going to take a couple months to recover from killing my first recognized adversary. He responded it would take me a couple of years. I was shocked. But he was wrong. It took many more years than that, and in fact it is still an ongoing process. Yet I bear witness that it is far better to be free and struggling than to be a controlled, conquered slave.

Triggers

Before addressing the vacuum left in us after killing our dragons and the issue of old habits setting off recall of “the good old days,” I will let my buddy Jim Larsen tell the story of one of his friends. This story illustrates the two parts of the restoration process related to “triggers” of old memories:

The difficulty with killing a full grown dragon is the cavernous hole he leaves in a person’s heart. My friend had flown from Phoenix to Mexico practically every week for three years. There he’d be met at a small landing strip by a beautiful girl who sped him to her home where they had sex and otherwise enjoyed each other’s company. I remember the day he entrusted his story to me. He said that however adventurous and sensual his life had been, there was an enormous hole in his heart. Increasing his flights to see her didn’t fill the void. He said that it was as if he poured more and more into his inner

reservoir, but it had a leak in it. Every day he'd wake up running on empty. It became an endless, futile effort trying to keep the reservoir full. Spiritually bankrupt, he finally confessed the whole lurid story to his wife. What he was not prepared for was the hell that followed. It wasn't his wife's reaction or the guilt that coursed through him, however. What haunted and terrorized Randy was the emptiness that followed. Every passing airplane had his mind abuzz with thoughts of those dark, yet delightful, forays across the border. Mexican music did the same work on his mind. And he missed his illicit lover. Doing the right thing by stopping his affair didn't suddenly result in amnesia.

Randy's story is so very common. Names and details vary, but the gnawing emptiness inside is a common condition, and this is true no matter what the dragon is. Trying to fill the void in life with new, innocent-looking dragons leaves one empty also.

Fortunately, God stepped in before Randy became totally unraveled. I walked alongside him for the next two years and invited him to accept the Lord in his life. I told him it wasn't a matter of "going to church" but of going to God, of entering into an experiment with him. He read a brief passage from the prophet Malachi where the Lord invited people to test him: "'Test me in this,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it'" (Mal. 3:10). God beckons us. The example of Jesus is amazing. He had compassion and patience with people who were destitute, confused, and even sliding down a slippery slope. He invited them to find rest in a relationship with him. How many desperate and wayward men and women must have taken heart at his words, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

Randy entered into a relationship with God that patched the leak and started filling his reservoir with permanent, good things. This left him less and less time for the lifestyle he once dedicated to his dragon. With time, dragons get pushed out. The time can vary from person to person, and depends of course on what their dragon was.

Emotional, mental, or physical chains weigh you down, weaken you, and slow the recovery progress, but push on and don't be ashamed. You are on the road to recovery, and this is all part of the process. Don't try doing this alone. Find someone to stand by your side, perhaps a trusted person with whom to share and counsel. You might need to consider seeking professional help. And YES, God is there to help you, too. No man and no woman can do for you what the sovereign Lord can do. Your recovery will depend on it.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (Jer. 29:11).

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (John 14:27).

In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:37-39).

And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19).

The body of Christ in local churches everywhere can offer encouragement in the form of support groups, so avail yourself of these great opportunities to receive stimulation and hope. Check out *CelebrateRecovery.com* to find programs and support

groups nationwide that focus on getting back on track after moving away from habits and hang-ups. Surrounding yourself with people who have successfully conquered the same dragons can help you maintain proper focus and stand strong.

Steps to Lasting Restoration

If you don't want more of what your dragon gave you, then you must change your ways. Painful consequences are the price most of us have to pay for giving our dragon safe haven. The good news about these negative consequences is that if we let them, they will motivate us to change, teach us valuable lessons, and serve as excellent reminders to keep ourselves free. The pain is never worth the temporary and false promises of fulfillment, thrills, and happiness made by a dragon. Remember, he "was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

What are some essential components that make up a healthy and lasting restoration? Restoration means to bring back or to put back into a former condition or original state. It has the idea of rebuilding or renewing, regaining possession of something.

That is what we need to do. We need to recapture, repossess the life we almost bequeathed to the dragon. We need to seize back the soul our dragon tried to steal. We now refuse to pay the price the dragon demands, and we want to take our life back. We want to renew ourselves and restore our lives and any damaged relationships caused by holding on to our dragon.

It is interesting what some people do in restoring antique cars. Properly restored older cars can be worth ten to one hundred times more than they cost originally. Likewise, once we are restored, life can have a much greater value than before we surrendered to the dragon (and certainly much greater value than while we were under his control).

OLD WAYS OF THINKING

Old ways of thinking, old attitudes must be successfully replaced with new ways of thinking and new attitudes. The first step to complete restoration is that your mindset must undergo a radical shift. As Proverbs warns us, “Be careful what you think, because your thoughts run your life” (Prov. 4:23 NCV).

We need to redo our way of thinking so we can approach life as Dragon Slayers, not as Dragon Keepers. Jeremiah told us that “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). That means your heart and mine--and the hearts of all others are deceitful as well. We *know* dragons are deceitful. Maybe the time has come for us to trust the only One who isn’t deceitful: The God who has revealed himself in the Bible.

The apostle Paul offers a prayer in his letter to the Philippian Christians that goes like this: “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:9-10). That is a prayer for our dumping the old ways of thinking and for having a new way of thinking, one based on true love and not selfish, misguided interests. Paul talks about our being able to discern

what is best, right, truthful, good, and pure. Dragons have an entirely different perspective on this. The dragon perspective on life must be rejected if we are to regain our freedom.

SOUND REASONING AND CLEAR THINKING

Sound reasoning and clear thinking based on truth must replace looking at life by rationalizing, excusing, and self justification based on lies. This is the most foundational area of change and the most necessary. It is also the most difficult because of the overwhelming control the lies and deceptions controlling your thinking and the decisions you were making had on you. The dragon's philosophy is always to get people conforming to the pattern of this world and not to discern what is best and pure and blameless. These lies need to be identified, and you need to acknowledge them as lies and replace them with the truth. Work on this and weed them out. It is essential to your recovery. Ask yourself, What lies have I fallen for, and what truth needs to replace each lie?

Dragon lies you have fallen for:	What truth needs to replace each lie?
I won't get caught.	
I can control this or stop it any time I want.	
I don't care what happens because it's worth the risk	
The consequences won't be that bad.	
This is not hurting anyone but me.	
This is good for me.	
I can't stop it.	
I can't live without it.	

There is no way out.	
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Talk to your friend or counselor in **this first step of recovery** to help you sift out the old, negative, and destructive thought patterns of the lies. There is a verse in the Bible that really gets to the heart of this where the apostle Paul writes, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2).

What is the point? It is that we need to transform our minds, our way of thinking. We have believed in and trusted dragon’s pattern of thinking. We built our life, our actions, and our attitudes on lies. Now that must change. *Without that change, there is no change.* Once we adopt and embrace God’s way and build our life on his truths, we will find out by our own experience that doing things God’s way is good, rewarding, pleasing, fulfilling, and really the only way to live. The divine way is the way of truth leading to peace and joy!

DESTRUCTIVE HABITS AND ACTIONS

Destructive habits and actions must be identified and rejected and thrown out in exchange for habits and actions that are beneficial. Old ruts and routines must be given up, and the gears need to be shifted from the low road to the high road. Tough decisions need to be made and carried out. Unhealthy actions and habits usually do not become binding lifestyles overnight. Reinforcement comes with repetition. We practiced the dragon lifestyle until it became comfortable and we got it right--until we perfected it. We were pros. For us it became normal and acceptable. The more we sharpened and defended

our dragon skills, the stronger destructive habits and attitudes became in our lives. And the more the dragon controlled us.

So too, the development of healthy habits and attitudes is a day-by-day process involving repetition and positive reinforcement. Long-term success is achieved through small, daily victories. There is nothing magical about it. We need to think and choose. We need to intentionally reject the lies and consciously decide to act differently. We have to do what is positive and right regardless of how we feel. Good feelings will come later. Too many former dragon keepers make the mistake in waiting until their feelings change before changing how they act. But that is backwards. They will never become dragon slayers that way. The good feelings will come later.

Remember the Alcoholics Anonymous slogan. “You get what you got when you do what you did.” If you want to change and stop getting what you got (the bad consequences), what do you need to do differently? What habits, actions, routines or habits need to be thrown out? What new, healthier ones should be put in place of them?

Wanting to change is not enough. Having good intentions is not enough. You must make changes and act differently.

What has dragon life done for you? What negative consequences are you experiencing due to your dead dragon? What did you get for what you did (health issues, relationship issues, work issues, economic issues, church or organization issues, legal issues)? How is it affecting you right now? Are you still “getting” something? What do you need to do to successfully deal with these consequences?

OLD HABITS AND NEW ROUTINES

Now we need to identify the things to *stop* doing and the things to *start* doing in order to gain and maintain freedom. Use the box below to explore what old habits, actions, or routines have to go? What new routines, actions, or helpful habits need to be developed in order to replace the old ones? What do you need to start doing in each of the areas listed below in order to restore your life? Be specific and write them down.

What must I stop . . . ?	What must I begin . . . ?
Reading . . .	
Watching . . .	
Going to . . .	
Listening to . . .	
Surfing the Internet for . . .	
Eating . . . drinking . . . smoking . . .	
Hanging out with . . .	
Friendships with . . .	
Talking to . . .	
Buying, shopping . . .	
Working at . . .	
Volunteering for . . .	
Attending . . .	
Living at . . .	

Once you identify what needs to change, then change it. I like the way talk radio host Laura Schlessinger often ends segments of her national radio program by saying, “Now, go and do the right thing!”

Remember that each specific change can be multifaceted. If you stop reading this magazine, or going to that place, it might lead to your no longer watching a damaging program or listening to a negative group. If you stop hanging out with that person, you might not be tempted to run back to your dead dragon. Saying this another way, a certain change may be related and even dependent upon a critical change being made in another area. An extreme makeover in one area of your life might not be achieved until a remodeling occurs somewhere else.

A NEW FUTURE IS POSSIBLE!

Such significant changes take time and involve intense effort, but *they absolutely are possible! Your future freedom depends on it.*

If, in a moment of weakness or fear, you ever feel tempted to run back and resuscitate your dragon, here is the best and wisest advice I can give you: Don't. In the end, the long road to full recovery will be worth the tears and struggles. Don't back up and don't give up. When you begin making positive changes, you will receive fulfillment, affirmation, inner peace, and the kind of joy that is true and lasting. It is sometimes punishing work and the victory is hard-won, but it will be victory.

Remember, your dragon lifestyle became a mind-set, a mental perspective, a philosophy, a way of living built around old, unhealthy, unconstructive habits. It may take some time to permanently change those destructive habits. The key is that we have to be thinking about what we are doing and what we are thinking hour by hour. And to do that, we need always to be alert. This is war, not a game.

Years ago we changed houses in California. We lived in the first one for several years. I would leave my office, get in my car, drive home, pull in the driveway, get out of the car and go in the house without ever having to think about it. I had done it so many times it was habit. On the way home I could be thinking about many other things and still get there without losing my way. I didn't have to tell myself, "Okay, John, take the keys out of your pocket, put them in the ignition, put the car in reverse, . . ." and so on. It was all automatic.

Then we moved. There was an entirely different route to the new house. A couple of weeks after changing houses, before my drive home became reflexive, I finished my work for the day and headed home. I was thinking about something related to work, and all of a sudden I woke up as I was pulling into the driveway of the old house. Immediately I realized my error, felt embarrassed, looked around to see if anyone was watching and laughing at me, backed up, and quickly headed for the new house--feeling rather foolish I might add.

And that of course brings up the challenge before us in killing dragons. When we live with and give sustenance to dragons, we develop reflexive habits. It is like we are on autopilot. Then we decide to move, to adopt a new lifestyle, in short, to put the dragon to death. If we aren't careful, if we don't keep thinking about what we are doing, out of past habits and without thinking we will drive back to the old house, do things the way we used to, and end up someplace we didn't bargain for.

We are human. If this happens to you, back up and get out of there. We need to retrain our brain and heart.

RECONCILIATION AND RESTITUTION

The restoration process would not be complete without focusing on reconciliation and restitution. Killing your dragon was a one-on-one encounter. It was between you and him, and you were the victor. But reconciliation and restitution, both essential parts of the restoration process, go beyond that. They are steps that may involve a lot of other people. And usually they are not easy or pleasant steps to carry out, but you must be willing to pay the price in order to restore freedom and integrity in your life. No former dragon owner is ever totally free until they have dealt with these steps to restoration. While God will forgive those who come and surrender to him, other people aren't always so quick to forgive. Their hurts may run deep.

I have already recommended sharing what you have done with a trusted, wise individual. Now I recommend talking with that person about restoration and restitution. Ask them to coach you as you think through the process of identifying everyone you have failed, hurt, let down, or betrayed because of your dragon. You will have to think of most of them, but your friend or counselor can push you to think harder and deeper until you have everyone you can think of on your reconciliation list.

All right, what do you do for the persons on the list of those wounded by your dragon? You want to rebuild your fractured relationships and right your wrongs, but the steps for making restitution will probably look different for each person on the list. For example, do you have a financial debt you should repay to someone? In that case, you need to pay it back or figure out a way you will do it. The point is to give all those on the list your honest consideration and evaluation, and make every effort to come up with a realistic and practical restoration plan you can successfully carry out with each one.

Beginning today, seek to make amends. Work to make things right. Humble yourself before those you have hurt and, at the very least, take responsibility for your lies, actions, and the damage you have done. Ask forgiveness from those you have wronged. Don't forget people you have belittled, neglected, slighted, or injured secondarily. Take whatever steps are necessary to reconcile and move forward with those you might have betrayed in one way or another.

Don't skip this! And don't rush this step or let pride blind you. It might take weeks, months, even years to make amends for the damage you have done. You are restoring your life, so don't do it halfway. If you want the best, go whole hog.

Maybe a chart such as the following will help you get to the bottom of things:

Who . . . ?

How . . . ?

What . . . ?

... have I hurt?	... did I hurt them?	... is the current state of my relationship with those I have hurt? ... do I need to do to make things right with them? ... wisdom and time will it take to rebuild my fractured relationships? ... can I do to right my wrongs with friends, parents, children, the boss, work partners, club associates, team members, church family, public officials, school leaders, students, and others? ... is the best way to confess my failures against them and ask for forgiveness?
... have I betrayed?	... did I betray them?	
... have I let down?	... did I let them down?	
... have I failed?	... did I fail them?	
... have I robbed (of time, money, position, reputation, love, peace, joy, attention, support, security)?	... did I rob them? ... did I cause them to suffer (emotionally, economically, physically, spiritually)?	
... have I lied to?		
... have I lied about?		
... have I taken advantage of?		
... have I exploited?		
... have I belittled?		
... have I mocked?		
... have I mistreated?		
... have I shut out?		
... have I avoided?		

Are there situations where you can't or shouldn't approach someone to ask forgiveness? Yes. A person might be deceased, for example. It is possible you might be prohibited by law from approaching some people. Or their current state of mental or physical health might make it unwise. They might have totally cut you off, or you simply don't know where they are. You would not want to find someone to ask for forgiveness if it could cause them serious problems seeing you or talking to you. If talking to someone you have wronged might cause others a serious problem, the same thing may apply. Think this through with your counselor. Many of these decisions are difficult at best and deciphering the honorable way is not always clear or easy.

But if it is possible and appropriate, it always is good to seek them out and ask for forgiveness in order to establish restoration and restitution. When it is done, keep it simple. It is best to do this face-to-face if that is possible; otherwise, using the phone is the next best thing.

Accept responsibility for what you did and be specific. If you hurt someone, say something like, “I want to ask you to forgive me for having hurt you and failed you by not spending time with you.” Say it and then stop and wait for an answer. They might say yes, and if they do, thank them. They might say they are not sure or they are not ready to forgive you. Give them time. They might say no, or that they need more time to deal with the issue. Some people want to see if you are sincere and really are going to change before forgiving you.

Many will tell you that you don’t need to ask for forgiveness, but for the purposes of your restoration process, you do. You might want to say something like, “I know it might not seem like much to you, but I would like you know you have forgiven me.”

Your job is not to make sure everyone actually does forgive you, but it is to ask for their forgiveness and to show them you have recognized your errors and you are sincerely trying to change.

Going Public with Your Dragon?

Does all this mean that you should confess your explicit dragon experience to the world? In some cases, that is not wise, and “going public” is not always the answer. It could cause damage to others, and it could open a Pandora’s Box with unknown and far-reaching negative consequences for others. The last thing you want to do now is to

perpetuate the damage your dragon once caused you. So in some instances, the best action might be to simply leave the matter between you and God, and your confidant.

This process requires a lot of wisdom. Talk your options over with your counselor or friend and seek his or her mature advice. What questions do you need to work through?

- Should I share my dragon story?
- With whom should I share my story?
- With whom should I *not* share it?
- What are the advantages or disadvantages of coming forward with my dragon story?
- What happens if someone shares my story with others?
- Who will be helped by knowing my story?
- Who will be hurt by knowing it?
- In what ways can innocent people be hurt if my story goes public?
- What are my motives for sharing it? Is it that I don't want to go down alone? Do I want to see others suffer with me? Do I want to hurt or to help others? Do I want to get sympathy or attention? Is it for revenge, blame, or self justification? Do I want to humble myself and show a repentant heart, or show I accept responsibility for my actions? Is my motive to encourage others with a dragon to kill it as I have done?

- To whom do I need to confess my dragon? My husband or wife? My children? My boss or employees or fellow workers? My pastor, rabbi, or priest?

- Do I need to seek legal counsel? Do I have any legal obligations? Have I broken any laws? Am I going to live under the fear of being caught some day?

- What consequences might I face by confessing to others?

- Is it important that I confess despite the consequences?

The answers to some of these questions are not always black and white. I venture to say, however, that even if the loved ones in your innermost circle have not become aware of your dragon(s), a certain amount of trust or confidence in your relationship has been compromised. Perhaps trust has been completely severed. If so, rebuilding and restoring that trust must be one of your primary goals.

FILLING THE VACUUM LEFT BY A DEAD DRAGON

Vacuum:

emptiness of space;

not occupied, vacant, deserted;

a space absolutely devoid of matter;

a state of isolation from outside influences.

Why have I called this chapter “Filling the Vacuum Left by a Dead Dragon”? Because killing your dragon created a hollow spot, an emptiness in your life. It happens to all dragon slayers. That emptiness is a space formerly filled by the dragon. That space was run or controlled by it. We allowed the dragon that control by cutting off outside positive influence and by supporting it in a myriad of ways. This is different from the story of Randy my friend Jim shared earlier. He tried filling the reservoir, but it emptied out faster than he could fill it. A dragon’s appetite is demanding beyond our ability to meet it. And the bigger it is the more food it demands.

This is a different perspective. Our mental, emotional, and even physical lives are consumed with our dragons. We give them our time, dreams, visions, and imaginations, and all this is controlled by the dragon. Our emotions are charged, stimulated, and empowered by the dragon. Our money and possessions are used for the dragon. Our skills, abilities, and personality are committed to the dragon. Our relationships are affected by or determined by dragon. We are blinded to the damage he is creating, and at times we just don’t care

In all likelihood possessing our dragon seems like something good to us. (In actuality, the dragon possesses us.) In some cases, it may seem like the fulfillment of our dreams, the most rewarding and agreeable thing that ever happened to us. Maybe we were just curious at first, but before long we like what we are getting.

But looking back, we see our dragon drove us to the pits with depression, discouragement, and disappointments. We were immobilized, imprisoned, and enslaved by negative feelings. We might have even used these negative things to try coping with life and controlling and manipulating others.

We were even able to justify, defend, and excuse our dragon's presence in our lives. We attacked, rejected, avoided, and belittled those who tried to tell us we had a dragon and that it was doing damage. *Fools! What do they know? They are the ones with the problem, not me*, we thought.

All we did was focus our attention on the dragon. We were blinded. Some people are blinded by love, so wrapped up "in love" with someone they don't see all their defects and shortcomings. We were blinded in the same way to the defects and problems involved in "loving" our dragon too. Everything about the dragon was acceptable and good, no matter what others said. Even if there was a problem or two, better to keep the relationship going rather than bring it to an end.

The Father of Lies

When a dragon lies, which is always, "he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). The dragon deceived us with many false promises of acceptance, belonging, popularity, love, purpose, coping power, control over others,

importance, fulfillment, happiness, pleasure, and success. We believed him and maybe we lived under the illusion that he really gave us some of these things. But they were short-lived, empty promises. Living for lies doesn't last for the long haul.

We became convinced disciples, followers of the dragon. We believed in him and his promises. We surrendered ourselves to his leadership and his way of life. We acknowledged him and his important place in our life. We may have tried to hide him from some in the beginning, but with time and a hardening of heart we "came out" and defiantly let the whole world know of our chosen way--whether they liked it or not. We were proud of our association. We were proud to be under the thumb of the dragon. He was in control and we kept digging ourselves a deeper and deeper hole; the noose kept getting tighter. Becoming his disciple led to our being arrogant, deceitful, secretive, doubting, hard-hearted, anxious, rebellious, and reckless.

That was how it came about that we committed ourselves to the control and enslavement of the father of lies. That is how we allowed the dragon to dominate, weaken, divide, and destroy us and our important relationships. That is how we were kept from being the best people we are capable of being.

Filling the Vacuum

Then we woke up. We saw the light of day. Maybe we suffered the reality of the emptiness or pain the dragon brought us. Maybe we just got caught. In any event, we came to our senses.

We killed dragon. We did the right thing. But in killing our dragon we created a vacuum in our life with the space left from the previously domineering occupant. That is

the natural and normal result of removing such an all-consuming influence. That needs to be understood. And so does this: *A vacuum created by a dead dragon will not remain a vacuum.* We can't live with a hole in our lives that has demanded our time, energy, passion, commitment, acceptance, love, purpose, money, thoughts, and emotions. Something must and will fill the newly created void.

If we don't fill the vacuum or rebuild our life on a legitimate basis or purpose that gives us real love, acceptance, fulfillment, and peace, then the vacuum left by the old dragon will most likely be filled with another dragon probably more powerful than the last one. How many have tried filling the void with work, sports, exercise, family, friends, religion, politics, hobbies, scholarship, romance, sex, marriage, social work, social causes, volunteering, drugs, drinking, or whatever. Some of these things are better than others, but none of these is the final answer because they cannot fill the vacuum in life in a permanent way. In most cases what results instead is another dragon.

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

I know of nothing, and I mean nothing, else to recommend that will fill the human vacuum other than a personal relationship with the God of the Bible. I have tried. I regularly see others trying. I read their stories, I see them on the news, I read of them on the internet. I meet them every week in my travels. I have heard the stories of those who have tried every kind of dragon imaginable and finally, as a last resort for many of them, they look to God and start reading the Bible. And the story I hear so often goes along these lines: "What was I afraid of? Why didn't I look to God sooner? Why was I so blind,

so hard-headed, so obtuse for rejecting God for so long?” Or “Why didn’t anyone ever take the time and make the effort to set me straight about this before now?”

It would not do for you to kill your dragon only to be taken over by a stronger one. And anything other than God simply won’t fill that void.

In his famous book *Pensees*, the French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.” We try and fill it with many other things, including dragons, but it doesn’t work. Millions of Christians throughout the generations would encourage you to take a close look at the Jesus who appears in the New Testament. The New Testament was written so “you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). The gospel of John tells us that “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The apostle Paul wrote “Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

My best friend in Chile is Jaanz. Jaanz is a gypsy, and I met him in a prison. He was a hit man. That’s right, a killer, and professional assassin. His nickname in prison was “the angel of death.” Jaanz had killed dozens of people over the years, and in prison he was a major gang leader. During his stay in prison he had heard many preachers, priests, and evangelists who came to speak to the prisoners. Then one day he heard a series of talks about how to be at peace with God, and heard about Jesus in a different way. He asked Jesus to fill the void in his life and rule there in place of his dragons. Jaanz

became a changed man. While his life circumstances are very difficult, he continues in his walk with Christ.

I also met Claudio in Chile. He was violent man, a punker, drug addict, alcoholic, womanizer, and a self-described evangelical terrorist. Claudio learned about the dragons of life, and he became a dragon slayer when he discovered something wonderful and liberating in Jesus.

I had hours of conversations with Francisco. He was an atheist and a very mean man. He killed his dragons when he learned of Jesus Christ and invited the Lord into his life. Now he is a man who will tell you he has found joy and peace in his life with God.

My own father, Wayne Hendee, was a skeptic until he was seventy-nine. He spent nearly his whole life rejecting God. But what a blessing it was for him to have gotten close to Christ before the end of his life.

Years ago I had no interest in God. I really didn't know much about him, and what I heard turned out to be misconceptions and distortions. I believed the God who was taught in the Bible was only interested in judging and condemning me. I believed he would ruin my life and take all the fun out of it if I got involved with him in any way. I pretty much bought into his way of seeing things when I was young. I didn't think I needed to be concerned with things of God. I just wasn't interested.

I had been fooled by a dragon's lie that there was no God who was interested in me, no God who loved me. That is the furthest thing from the truth. What I discovered through reading and searching was that Blaise Pascal was right. There is indeed a God-shaped vacuum in our life that only God can fill. We were created that way.

Frank Morrison was an English journalist and diehard unbeliever who tried as hard as anyone to disprove the story of Christ as found in the Bible. After exhaustive research, what he wound up proving was the truthfulness of the resurrection of Jesus. He came to faith and wrote, among other things, *Who Moved The Stone?* an excellent defense of Christianity.

Josh McDowell was a college student and agnostic who loved destroying the faith of Christians. While in college he began writing a paper to discredit and disprove the historical evidence of the Christian faith. As he delved into the research, he converted to Christianity after what he found was evidence for and not against it. He later wrote *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. He tells of his journey to faith in his book *More Than a Carpenter*. McDowell now travels the world speaking on college and university campuses about Christ and the proofs for the Christian faith.

Lee Strobel is an author and former atheist, having rejected God in high school in a science class after hearing the so-called “irrefutable proof” of evolution. In books like *The Case for Christ*, *The Case for Faith*, and *The Case for a Creator*, he tells of his journey to the actual truth about evolution, which led to his faith in God through Jesus Christ.

C.S. Lewis was an atheist for much of his life. He was a formidable intellect and polymath scholar who taught medieval literature at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. After decades of rejecting Christ, he came to find life and joy in a life-changing encounter with Christ as he became a Christian. His massive influence has endured because of his writing. He wrote *Surprised by Joy*, *Mere Christianity*, and many other books, including the Chronicles of Narnia fiction series.

What these men found was that there is a God who is interested in you, who is approachable, and with whom you can have a personal relationship. Besides, McDowell, Lewis, Morrison, and Strobel, I could list hundreds of authors who have written about their experience with Christ or about a defense of the Christian faith. If you see books on these topics done with a popular approach by such people as Kenneth Boa, William Lane Craig, Os Guinness, Gary Habermas, Timothy Keller, John Warwick Montgomery, J.P. Moreland, J.I. Packer, Francis Schaeffer, Philip Yancey, or Ravi Zacharias, among others, you will want to be sure to get them.

A Story God Told on Himself

I want to tell you a story that God told on himself. It's found in the gospel of Luke, and it's a story that really shows who God is, what he is like, and how he loves us and anxiously awaits us going to him. This is really a story about God and you and me.

There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, "Father, I want right now what's coming to me." So the father divided the property between them. It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

That brought him to his senses. He said, "All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I'm going back to my father. I'll say to him, Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't

deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.” He got right up and went home to his father. When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: “Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.”

But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, “Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!” And they began to have a wonderful time.

All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day’s work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, “Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.” The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen. The son said, “Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!”

His father said, “Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he’s alive! He was lost, and he’s found!” (Luke 15:11-32 MSG).

This story is the story of all who have been deceived by a dragon and who, despite the odds, wised up, learned their lesson, and came to their senses. We threw off life with the father and rebelled. We wanted the good life, but we didn’t know what the good life really was. What we got was empty, shallow, phony--a painful life of wearing

masks and using and being used. Real life was to be found with our father. We know that now.

The son in the story didn't learn this lesson the easy way. The father complied with the sons wish for an early inheritance, and he gave his son his chosen "freedom." The son took the goods and left home, traveling to the big city. Something convinced him he was missing out living at home and that the good life was to be found in the city. And what a life he found and lived. He became a party boy, and what parties he had. He was loved by everyone who benefited from him. He became quite a ladies' man, and he didn't hold back from enjoying the new found pleasures with loose women. He was living in a phony world along with others who were all surrendered to dragons.

Then the unforeseen happened when he ran out of money. Who would have guessed he would wind up with no money, no parties, no ladies, and no friends, not to mention no rent, house, food, servants, or anything else he enjoyed at his father's home. Now what was he going to do? We can only imagine what he was going through and the crush of emotions pushing in on him. Things got worse for the young man. He was totally broke, financially, socially, and spiritually. The only job he could find was working on a farm feeding pigs. What an embarrassment. He went from living high on the hog to literally feeding the hogs. He was even tempted to eat the pig's food. He could go no lower.

It must have been painful, embarrassing, and humiliating to even think about going back home. But maybe he could go home and plead to his father to allow him back as a servant? That would be much better than the way he was suffering now. He headed home. I wonder how many times he stopped on the way, not sure if he wanted to

continue. But one thing drove him on, and that was his father and the love and respect he had always shown to others. His inner doubts and fears were overridden by his remembering what his father was really like.

Meanwhile, the father patiently waited at home. I'm sure that not a day or an hour passed when his son was not on his mind and heart. The story tells us that "when he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him." After having nervously approached his father, the son fell at his feet begging for forgiveness and the opportunity to be a servant in the household. He confessed, "Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again." Talk about immediate forgiveness, for the father threw a party for his son who had returned. He later told the son's older brother, "This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!"

We think someone else or something else will bring us the love, acceptance, importance, status, purpose, and pleasure we want in life. But that can only come from the Father. We run off after the glittering lights and lose the best of all we had. Until we lose it, we don't understand that we had it all. And yet the Father waits patiently for us to return. We can have it all again, all we need is at home with the Father. Life doesn't end when we turn our back on our dragons; it is renewed. God has compassion and love for us. He will welcome us back, receive us, and forgive us. He will embrace us. He will celebrate our coming to our senses and choosing the right way, the responsible way. He is not awaiting our return with condemnation but with compassion. God's mercy and grace is all about getting what we don't deserve. Instead of getting what we deserve, God gives us love, forgiveness, acceptance, joy, and peace.

The dragon says “No, I can give it all to you. Name it, you’ve got it.” And we believe the dragon and end up feeding slop to pigs, or worse (and there are worse things like when we end up feeding ourselves to dragons). We can live our life with love, joy, peace, and fulfillment, but the dragon has to die and be replaced with God. That is why I have been writing about killing our dragons. Our Father God wants us home. The way home is through killing our dragons. The only way to fill the vacuum left by dead dragons is with our heavenly Father, God.

NOW THAT YOU'RE FREE: LIVING AS A DRAGON SLAYER

Princess Amanda had won the battle.

She had slain the dragon she loved.

We know Amanda had a lot of emotions when she slayed the dragon, good and bad. The lights must have been flashing, and the sirens must have been sounding Danger! Dragon warning! You may have recently killed one or more dragons yourself, and you may have a mix of emotions that include relief, fear of what is to come, hope in knowing the dragon is dead, and shame for having had it in the first place and doing what you did with it. You might feel remorse over the people you have hurt, as well as peace and integrity for knowing you have done the right thing, or determination to not let it happen again. Whatever you feel, I have this warning: Dragon slayers beware, because the dragon is not finished with you just yet.

The Dragon Isn't Finished with You

You killed a dragon. But the dragon isn't finished with you! He lost a loyal follower, and he is not happy about this. Do you ever wonder why public leaders (politicians, broadcast personalities, entertainers, priests, pastors, athletes, bankers, professors, and so on) get caught in so many heinous acts of theft, sexual infidelities, homosexuality, abuse, lying, misusing public funds, graft, and what not? It is because the more visible the person, the greater the prize for the dragon. The more "important" the person is in the public eye, the greater PR value the dragon gets out of it. As they say, the bigger they are the harder they fall.

Dragons use us for their ravenous self-interest, gaining more disciples, getting more people to throw in the towel and quit or give up. Nothing could give a dragon more pleasure than hearing someone say, “Well, look at them, they are all a bunch of lying hypocrites. If that is all it means to them, I’m calling it quits.” That would be an especially satisfying victory for the dragon if someone was saying that about the church. Many dragons use another line of attack: “Well, look at them. Everybody is doing it. If they are doing that, why can’t I?”

Dragon slayers are a prize target for the dragon. In fact, the dragon is even more challenged to recapture you now than when you were just a common foot soldier under his control. He either wants you back under his command, or he wants to bring you down, shame you, ruin you, and destroy you like never before.

Dragons keep laying eggs. They continually bring us temptations and tell us lies. Sometimes they pile so much on us all at once we feel we can’t even use our brains anymore. The bad news is that we will always be curious about dragon eggs, and our vulnerability to them will remain with us until we die. The good news is that every day we can renew our commitment to being a dragon slayer, and living the good and positive life God intended for us. Yes, we killed a dragon, but it isn’t over. So we better prepare ourselves.

The Battle for Freedom Continues

The battle continues, but we have just changed sides in the war. As the apostle John told us, “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Overcome

them? The dragons. We have overcome the dragons because Christ is greater than all of them put together.

When is freedom most enjoyed? When it is *lasting*. Walking in freedom on a continual, daily basis brings about a sense of well-being and serenity like nothing else. Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10 NASB).

Steps to Winning the Battle Come through Having:

A PASSION TO DAILY SEEK AND KNOW GOD THROUGH PRAYER

The path to lasting freedom begins with an active prayer life, asking God to stand beside you in your effort to remain free.

Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb. 4:16).

A PASSION TO DAILY SEEK AND KNOW GOD THROUGH BIBLE READING

God’s Word provides us with guidance and instruction. Make reading from the Bible a daily priority. The books of Psalms and Proverbs are excellent places to begin. In the New Testament, the letters of the apostle Paul are especially encouraging and valuable in their teaching. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us about the life of Jesus, our Caretaker. They are must-reads. Read some Scripture every day. Use a marker or a pencil to highlight verses that touch you and give you direction for growing closer to Christ.

How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands (Ps. 119:9-10).

So that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience . . . For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. . . . Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant (Col. 1:10-11, 13-14, 21-23).

A PASSION TO LIVE A HOLY, MATURE, CHRIST-CENTERED LIFE

Dedication to living a holy, mature, Christ-centered life requires us to keep aware of temptation's calling. When it comes, we must make the conscious decision to refuse to submit. Once again, we are reminded:

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in

the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters (James 1:14-16).

This awareness of our ever-present vulnerability should help to create and maintain a humility of heart within us, and this will deprive any potential dragon of the food it loves the most: our ego. This recognition will also help you to keep a watchful guard on our heart.

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. . . . Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. . . . You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (Col. 3:1-3, 5, 7-10).

A PASSION TO LIVE LIFE RESPONSIBLY, HUMBLY, AND PEACEABLY WITH OTHERS

When you place your focus on the welfare of others above your own, little opportunity will be left for you to feed a hungry dragon. Your relationships will flourish

in a way God designed, and your sense of contentment will rise to a level you perhaps haven't known before.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others (Phil. 2:3-4).

A PASSION TO USE YOUR GIFTS, TALENTS, AND TIME IN SERVICE

I have had the pleasure of knowing countless dragon slayers who have found the most amazing and gratifying ways to serve the Lord. What have they done? They've allowed God to use their dragon-slaying testimonies for the good of others. I've often heard it said that "God never wastes your pain." I believe that is true, and I can't think of a more befitting way for victorious dragon slayers to serve the Lord and turn their loss into gain than by helping others who are fighting the same battles they've already won.

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving (Col. 3:23-24).

In our final chapter I want to introduce readers to some dragon slayers who, by sharing their stories, have used their gifts in service to the kingdom of God.

DRAGON SLAYERS PAR EXCELLENCE

There are as many dragon stories as there are people on the planet. Actually there are many more, because most people battle with more than one dragon. You have your dragon stories. I have mine. Everyone does. Some see their dragons, and others are so deceived they are still living in denial. Either that, or their dragon is still in a state of infancy in their lives. Just wait. It will grow. Who knows how long they will need to suffer and tire of it all before they take serious action?

Remember my definition of a dragon?

A dragon is any controlling activity, relationship, desire, or attitude that dominates or enslaves us. If “fed” and kept alive, the dragon will eventually weaken, damage, discourage, divide, and ultimately destroy us and our most important relationships in life. Further, a dragon is anything going on in our heads or our lives keeping us from being the best people we are capable of being.

Anything or anyone can become a dragon in one’s life. If something is controlling us, dominating us, and destroying our most important relationships with God and with other people, we are dealing with a dragon.

I suffer with those who have been seduced by dragons. It saddens me to see those under the control of a devious and cunning force; many of them don’t even seem to realize it. It is normal life to them. They don’t seem to comprehend that life could be better. I celebrate and congratulate the courageous dragon slayers who smash the dragon eggs on the ground, break the necks of their cute little dragons, or put the sword in the heart of their grown dragons. We ought to stand alongside anyone who acknowledges

they have a dragon and are willing to kill it. There are many who worship and adore dragons these days. I kill and encourage others to kill dragons. That might not sound nice, but dragons are not nice. They want our souls. If someone wants to kill their dragon, I'll be there to help, even if others are condemning, judging, and doubting them. I'm still battling dragons myself.

I do not share the stories that follow, some of which are publicly documented, to condemn anyone. As I have said, we all have our dragon tales. The names in most of the stories have been changed, except in the few that have come out already in public reports. I have chosen a small number of dragon stories, but there are millions of them. Not a day goes by without news reports of people controlled by dragons. In fact, it is most of what the news is all about--dragon story after dragon story. There are public figures, politicians, athletes, and movie stars whose dragon stories are part of the meat and potatoes of the news industry in print, cable, and TV. Dragon stories sell, because so many are enthralled about the dragon battles of others. I hope we are learning the real lessons of it and not admiring, idolizing, and worshipping those enslaved to dragons.

Learning to Live with Smog

Part of our problem living with dragons is that we get used to them, and we come to believe they are just part of life. We become accustomed to the pain and discomfort they bring to us. Years ago we lived in the valley about thirty miles east of Los Angeles. One year we drove out the valley to go on vacation for two weeks. We will never forget driving home because as we came into the valley from the north, and as we approached the valley from a distance, we saw a large dark, grey cloud hanging over where we lived.

We starred in amazement. “Look at that. What is it? Is that smog?” Well, it was. We drove on in shock at what we saw. This was nothing new; it was typical LA smog, the kind that is there every day. As we continued approaching our neighborhood, our eyes started burning, and we could see its grime and smell the smog’s cruddy odor.

We asked ourselves why we lived there! We had just experienced two weeks of living in a healthy environment. When we got home we had smog on our minds, in our lungs, and burning our eyes. Yet as each day passed we thought about the smog less and less, and noticed it less and less. The girls got back into school. Carla and I got back into our routines.

Sometimes we have to step back and take a look from outside to really see what is going on in our lives. That is hard to do because, so often, we are so enthralled in what we’re doing that we just can’t see the reality of our situation. We became accustomed again to living in smog; after a while, it was again just a part of normal LA life. It wasn’t good for us, but we tolerated it rather than move. That was easier than doing something about it and freeing ourselves from it.

And that is how it can be with dragons. Living with dragons is not good for any of us. They deceive us, and when we allow them to take control, they damage and destroy us. Given time, they will kill us. Meanwhile, we become accustomed to them. We tolerate them. That is easier than doing something about them, easier than moving to another environment and getting away from their influence. We start thinking dragons are just an unavoidable part of life. There is nothing we can do about them, so we might as well get used to it.

I remember some friends who lived in the same city we did. They had four kids, all with asthma. One day the man told me they were moving farther to the south along the coast, even though he was keeping his job in our city. I asked him why, and he told me their doctor said that living in our town was killing their kids. He said they had to get them out of this area with stale smog and move them to another place with “fresh smog.”

Wow. Fresh smog. I’ll never forget that. That is what we often do with our dragons. Rather than trying to rid ourselves of them, we try limiting their damage in our lives. We don’t want to kill them. We want to co-exist with them, rather than ending their damage to us. We are living in dragon smog. Wouldn’t it be better to kill them, breath free, and live in peace again?

LIES

Oh the tangled webs we weave with our lies. When the dragon speaks, he lies. And when he lies, “he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). The dragon knows we are vulnerable to lies, and he is the master of them. They are so innocent, so easy. They temporarily help us save face, escape confrontation, shift responsibility, blame others, protect our reputations from being tarnished, and so many other helpful things.

Here is the true story of a man who was trapped by one lie. We’ll call him Mark. Mark applied for a job at a bank towards the end of his time studying in a major university. He filled out the application, and to his surprise he was called back for an interview. Later he was hired, and he was ecstatic.

In the years that followed, Mark married and had two children. Life happened at a rapid pace as he was involved with his work and taking care of his family. During these years he became more aware of his spiritual needs and sought out and found a deeper relationship with God. This seeking brought to life his spiritual, moral, and social consciousness.

Then somewhere along the line, it hit him. The lie. It was such a little thing, but nevertheless it raised its ugly head. It started eating away at his conscience. He knew what the lie meant. It meant he got the job for which he might have otherwise been passed over. It meant he was receiving a pay scale he otherwise wouldn't have qualified for. He had lied and deceived the people at the bank.

The lie? When he filled out his application for employment at the bank, he failed to mention--or chose not to reveal--that he was one class short of finishing his baccalaureate course and graduating. He had actually written on the application that he had graduated, and he was taken at his word. And now about eight years had passed and his lie was coming back to haunt him.

Mark could have thought to himself, *Hey, no one knows. And who will ever know? What difference does it make? Besides, I'm doing a good job. I'm a great employee, and they are getting what they wanted and are paying for.* But he couldn't get it out of his mind. He knew he had to come clean. Until he did, his conscience wouldn't leave him alone. The dragon had raised his head. It came back to haunt him. That's how dragons work. He had Mark by the neck and wanted to play with him, watch him suffer, like a cat playing with captured mouse. Dragons want to damage and destroy any way they can.

After suffering internally for a few months, Mark couldn't take it any longer. He had become a man wanting to live with integrity. He wanted to be a model for his kids and wife. He knew what the implications were, the price he might pay, but he had to make amends in order to live with himself. So he raised his sword and threw it at dragon.

Mark went to his boss at the bank and confessed what he had done years earlier. His boss didn't take it well. Mark was fired immediately and the bank began prosecution to collect all past wages and even interest on the money he was paid.

What a mess. Why hadn't he just kept his mouth shut? But he knew he had to do something, for he lived in fear of this dragon coming to life and biting him. He wanted to kill his dragon. There he was, with a wife and two kids, being prosecuted and facing the possibility of going to jail for his lie. The bank would make sure he couldn't get another job in the industry.

In fact, he was convicted. Mark had to pay a lot of money back to the bank, but he didn't go to jail. He suffered great embarrassment, shame, and fears about the future, and his family probably suffered more than he did.

I talked to him a couple years after his confession and asked him how he was doing. He told me, "John, I have never felt better. It has been really, really hard, with all I have gone through. But you know something? I sleep in peace at night. I don't live in fear of being caught or found out. I took responsibility for my error, and I'm happier than I was before." Mark had killed a dragon. In the end his family was better off for it because they lived with a man who was less likely to lie.

The point of this is not to say that your dragon story solution has to be the same as Mark's. The reaction of one dragon slayer may differ from another. But the point is that

lies are so easy to tell. We are pros at using them for our apparent benefit, but they are dragons that control us, and they can do a lot of damage. Smash the egg of lies. If it has hatched, break it's neck. If it is an adult size now due to your protecting and feeding it, lift your sword and aim for its heart.

DEPRESSION

I had met him before on other visits to his city. When I arrived at the meeting place he was there, but I noticed he was in the background, quiet, withdrawn, and sad looking. This was not the Michael I had come to know. In previous visits, he was always smiling, upbeat, in the center of everything going on. He was so likeable, friendly, and full of energy. Not this time. Something was wrong.

After the event finished on my first night in town, I didn't see him again until the end of the week. The last night I was there he showed up again. Michael showed up late, hung back, and was far from friendly. But that night when I had the chance to speak to him, we when went outside and sat on a cement wall to talk. I asked him what in the world was wrong. He was not the same person I had known on many other visits.

Michael told me about the way his dad treated him. He said he was depressed due to this and all the other things going on in his life. The issues he shared with me convinced me he was indeed going through a rough patch. I told him he had a dragon, and I explained he was being controlled by emotions that would damage him and, if he didn't rid himself of this dragon, ultimately destroy him. His dragon of depression was keeping him from being the best Michael he could be. I told Michael there can be physical issues that cause depression and that he might need to find out some day if that

is the case, but right now I believed it was something else. Michael was letting his dad's demeaning treatment of him create a dragon in his life. The dragon of depression had changed him and was controlling him. I told him, "You are not the person I have known you to be. You need to face that dragon, kill it, and not let it control you anymore."

We finished our conversation and I left town the next day. Months later I returned. At the first event where I spoke, there he was, smiling, and in the middle of everything going on. He was doing very well, and Michael had returned to being himself. Afterwards he asked to talk with me. He told me how our last conversation had awoken him to the fact that he had a dragon. He was tired of letting it control him and he decided to kill it and take control of his own life again.

In fact, he went on to graduate school, married, and had children. He took a job with a nonprofit in his own country helping fight for the cause of children's rights.

VIOLENCE, POWER, AND CONTROL

By blood Juan Carlos was a gypsy. His parents were killed in a car wreck when he was five and he was passed around from family member to family member from then on. He ended up living with a gang of kids under a bridge in a large city. Juan Carlos quickly learned how to hurt people, and he went to jail the first time when he was twelve. He was a hit man and he was known as the "angel of death." In the penitentiary he had men standing around his bed at night protecting him while he slept. Violence became his way to control people and get what he wanted, and he was very good at it.

Violence, power, and control were his dragons. But he didn't control them; he was controlled by their consequences. By the time he was nineteen he was in a federal prison

and had become the leader of a gang of two thousand thugs. They were called “The Good Gang.” One day he initiated a war against another in-house gang and the prison was shut down for three days. When the internecine war ended after three days, Juan Carlos sat on a bench looking at all his dead friends lying on the floor. He was holding his sword and the thought came to his mind, *There must be a reason I’m still alive.*

Years later he was in another prison and he attended a session I was teaching. What I didn’t know at the time was that all the men present were members of his gang and he had ordered them to attend. As a result of our meetings, Juan Carlos came to a major life decision. He decided he wanted to make a dramatic change. He was tired of the life he had been living since he was a child. He saw there was an alternative, that there was hope. This was a decision he knew would cost him down the road, but nevertheless he asked me to help him get closer to God. His decision dramatically changed his life because he had an enormous amount of dragons to kill. Did he ever.

So he started killing them, one by one. The biggest one he had to kill was his violent way of life. He told God he never wanted to use his hands to hurt or kill again, and in this he was severely tested many times.

Although he had a 38 year sentence at the time, for some unknown reason to him, the Captain of the prison showed up one evening and told him he would be released at mid-night. He had to sell his shoes to take a bus to the city. Thus began a long series of stories of his life outside again. We were in regular contact from that point on.

One day Juan Carlos called me and there was panic in his voice. He said he had gotten a call from the family of a man who had been his good friend for five years in

prison, years back. His friend had been killed by another prison gang. The dead man's family called Juan Carlos and asked him to lead them in revenge against the killers.

Blood revenge was the prison code, something Juan Carlos would have been the first to exact. Before. But not now. In the end he met the family and told them he was no longer a street warrior and no longer involved in hurting and killing people. He told them he was a changed man--a warrior for God. The family didn't take it well.

A couple of days later I had to leave the country for a number of weeks. When I returned I couldn't find Jaanz. A few days later a man called me and said I had to go see Juan Carlos. He said Juan Carlos was in terrible condition physically and mentally. He was in extreme pain from a back injury, and emotionally he was in such a state of affairs that he wanted to kill himself. He couldn't deal with the pain any more.

The man and I took Juan Carlos to a hospital emergency room, assuming they would inject him with some painkilling drug and let him go. The doctor, however, said his back was broken and they had to operate, which they then did immediately. The day after the operation I went to see him and I found out how his back was broken. The family of the man who was shot and killed in prison hunted Juan Carlos down for betraying them by not leading them in revenge against the murderers. Several men attacked him and one of them hit Juan Carlos in the back with a pipe, breaking his back.

This is what Juan Carlos told me: "John, the day they attacked me was the first time in my life that I had lost a fight! I defended myself, but I promised God I wouldn't use my hands to kill again. I lost the fight, and I've never felt better. I kept my word." Make no mistake, Juan Carlos was a killer, and he could have killed the men who attacked him with his bare hands. He had been in those kinds of fights before. But he was

no longer *that* Juan Carlos. He was now a child of God, and he made a promise. I am still amazed to think he was lying there, recovering from major back surgery, telling me how great he felt. He was again in control of his life. He had other dragons to deal with, but he had killed the really big one, and for that he was feeling a lot freer in the midst of his suffering.

TORTURE AND BRUTALITY

Jeffrey Lionel Dahmer still appears in the news when the anniversary of his death comes around. What a bizarre story. In Wisconsin, a naked young boy was found wandering through an intersection crying. People came to his aid, and there was even a policeman present. But Jeffrey Dahmer showed up with some kind of explanation and the boy was released to him. It wasn't long after that when the whole sordid story unraveled. Jeffrey had been taking young boys, torturing them, and then cutting up their bodies and keeping them in refrigerators and freezers in his place. It turned out that Dahmer involved his victims with rape, dismemberment, necrophilia, and cannibalism. He was a serial killer and sex offender who was convicted of murdering seventeen men and boys between 1978 and 1991.

After he was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison, he did an interview. In the interview he was asked how he ever got to the point of doing incredibly sick acts. He was smart, good-looking, and could have done so many good things in life. Why this? Dahmer said that as a young boy he started torturing small animals and dissecting them. This gave him a surge, a sensation, a feeling he had never had before. And he kept on doing it. Then the animals started getting bigger. When that wasn't

enough, he advanced to people, specifically little boys, in order to get a bigger charge. And it kept growing and growing, and it got worse as time went by. He liked the sensation and the thrill. He was curious, and he was lost. His behavior devolved to the level of the demonic.

We are told that while he was in prison he became a Christian through the teaching of a preacher who visited him. Perhaps he was sincere in this; let us hope so. If he was, he had many dragons to kill.

Later Dahmer was killed by another prisoner when he was beaten to death with a broom handle.

DRUGS

I told you briefly about this young woman at the beginning of this book. She was twenty-one, very attractive, from a good family. And she was a drug addict. I don't remember when I first met her. We will call her Susan.

I saw Susan walking alongside the road one day and I pulled up and opened my window. She looked at me, and it was obvious she was really drugged out. I asked her if she needed some help, whether I could drop her off anywhere. It was hard trying to carry on much of a conversation with her. Before I drove away, I told her, "Susan, I long for the day to see you free from drugs."

I went on my way, but a few months later she came by our house. She told me more about her battle with drugs. This was a great chance to tell her about the story of "Princess Amanda and the Dragon." She listened attentively. When I finished the story, I told her she had a dragon and that it was killing her.

Susan told me how she had been taken to doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists, who all tried to get her off drugs. They took her to preachers and faith healers to pray for her. Her parents cried over her. She had been hospitalized multiple times and was sent to an addiction recovery center. Then I asked her, “Have *you* ever killed your dragon? Have you ever said ‘Enough dragon, you are through controlling me. Today you die. It is over!’”

She answered me, “But it is so hard!” I responded, “Yes, but that’s not the point. Have you ever done it? Until you do, until you make the decision and follow through with killing your dragon, the doctors, preachers, psychologists, and even your parents can’t help you. Once you have made that decision, though, all of them can support you. But just like Amanda, Caretaker can’t kill your dragon, only you can.”

We talked a while longer and then she left. Weeks later, alone one day, she sat down and decided once and for all to kill her dragon. She did it. She got more help. It was a struggle, but from that day to this she has been free of drugs. The killing happened in a moment, but the recovery is always ongoing. She was a dragon slayer. It can be done.

PORNOGRAPHY AND PROSTITUTES

I met him on a men’s retreat out west a while back. I was a speaker and after one of my sessions he asked if he could speak with me in private. He said he needed to share his story with me in order for me to be able to share it with other men down the road to maybe help them. Here is what he told me.

When he was a boy he was introduced to pornography when his dad kept bringing it home and leaving it where his son could easily find it. He became fascinated with it and

became absorbed in it as much as his father. Eventually he got tired of the porno and he wanted something more “real.”

When he became a teen, he started dating girls. He became a “hunter,” looking for girls with whom he could have some freedom to play around with. Then he became a “charmer,” winning the hearts of girls so he could do what he wanted. As a “conquistador” he tried conquering as many girls as he could sexually. When he got tired of the girls he knew because they were too tame, he started going to prostitutes. He got more of what he wanted and faster, and he didn’t have to play games.

Along his life journey he married and became the father of two kids. He became a leader in his community, president of his business club in town, elder in his church, and teacher of the church adult Sunday school.

But he never stopped with the porno, and he continued his secret life with prostitutes. He realized his problem was out of control when he started treating his wife like a prostitute. His life unraveled from there on when things eventually became not-so-secret. He was arrested on a credit card problem. He had built up a huge debt of tens of thousands of dollars on prostitutes and drugs on his business trips out of town. His wife divorced him and his kids hated him. He had a dragon ruining his life.

He had suffered enough and decided to stop it. It wasn’t easy, but he sought help and support. He was still on the road to recovery, but he was winning. Just like Amanda, he found out that grown dragons hurt a lot of people.

There is a plague of pornography in our world, and millions are addicted to it. Pornography is a shockingly attractive evil dragon that damages, destroys, and kills.

ATHEISM

He was a self-made man, liked attention, and always had an opinion to share in a loud voice. He was a good-looking and friendly engineer and a hard worker. He served in the Navy during WWII, and most of his time was spent in Brazil. Pretty positive about life, he like helping people and was the little league coach of his son's team. In many ways this man was a good father to his son, teaching him responsibility, how to work, and how to play.

But he had a harder time with his marriage. At their surprise fiftieth wedding anniversary, everyone wondered how they made it fifty years. It was a marriage plagued with arguing, name-calling, insults, and, for his part, accusations of infidelity. One day, as adults in their forties, the man's daughter told her brother that their dad had abused her as a little girl. She spared her brother any of the details.

This man was pretty good about taking the family on camping trips, fishing in the lakes, and to all the family reunions and the like. His son remembered hearing his dad puking at night when they came home from family parties. They tended to drink a whole lot more that was good for them. The son learned the trick of getting sick on Saturday nights or early Sunday mornings so he could stay at home with his dad instead of having to go to church with his mom.

At one time he bought a large business. He found out later that the previous owners had doctored the books showing profits where there were none. The business couldn't make it and it went under, and that was a great blow, because he was a proud man. It was almost too much to handle. They lost their home, and moved to a mobile home park.

The dad never talked about God and he never went to church for anything other than a wedding or funeral. He always liked to point out the failures of public religious leaders when they fell in some sin or ran off with the choir director or something like that. His typical comment was usually about them being hypocrites and that they were no better than anyone else. If that is what living for God meant, he reasoned, what did he need God for? He didn't believe in God. He claimed he was an atheist.

Throughout his life he had a number of serious operations, including one for kidney stones and heart valve replacements. Then in his late seventies he learned he had colon cancer. He fought it valiantly, but in the process of his battle he realized an error he had made for seventy-nine years: Shutting out God. He had believed a dragon's biggest lie, that no God loves us and no God waits for us. Facing death, he now realized he didn't have all the answers, couldn't fix everything, and didn't have control of everything--especially death.

That was about to change. He realized either he or the dragon of atheism had to die. He chose to live, and he killed his dragon of unbelief. Seventy-nine years lost, closed, cold, rejecting the one who could have helped make such a positive difference in his life. But it wasn't too late. Far from it. He learned how to get close to God, how to live with him in his remaining time, and how to die in peace with the hope of eternal life. His daughter had forgiven him, and actually got close to him in his last couple years of life here on earth.

That dragon slayer was my dad.

CONTROL, PERFECTIONISM, AND SELFISHNESS

Marie is the character of the mom on *Everybody Loves Raymond*, the television sitcom. She is Raymond's mother. Why discuss the dragon of perfectionism and selfishness by referencing a fictional character? Well, whoever wrote the part for Marie apparently lived with a real Marie while they were growing up. They knew her kind really well, and you can only know this if you have lived in the presence of Marie's dragons. Marie was a funny character in the show, and she made many viewers laugh, but her controlling behavior brought pain to others—and that is no laughing matter.

Others don't like being around Marie because she is always telling them how to do everything, and always criticizing, judging, blaming, and suffering. Poor Marie. She doesn't get much sympathy because her actions and attitudes turn others off. She is not only a backseat driver, she is a back-life driver, always telling others how to live, what to do, and letting them know when they don't measure up to her standards.

The dragon of control, perfectionism, judgmentalism, and selfishness can capture men as well as women, and these dragons can lead their keepers to do significant damage to their children, their mates, and to everyone who spends much time with them. When a person is controlled by the dragons of selfishness, everything revolves around them. Even when they give gifts, or try helping someone, it is really for themselves, not for others. They don't do anything or give anything because it is the right thing to do. They need to be thanked beyond reason, or the other person will pay a price. It is all about them. They are pros at controlling, manipulating, criticizing, and creating guilt to get their way.

Marie's compliments are hidden criticisms, and her questions can be judgmental comments in disguise. This is typical of those who host this dragon. Others can never do things good enough for them. They always have to fix what others do. Any little irritation

others might create for them deserves a comment letting them know how their action, inaction, or words caused them physical or emotional pain. There is no pleasing them.

It usually doesn't help to confront people with this dragon. They don't hear, don't listen, and don't get it. They quickly turn things around on others and go into their suffering mode. They have a basic problem of denial. Others are always the problem. Others make them suffer. They are always innocent. Most people decide that confronting someone with the dragon of selfishness just isn't worth it.

In *Everybody Loves Raymond*, others live in a field of emotional land mines when Marie is around. The slightest little thing can blow up in their face. They walk with great nervousness, never knowing when they will step on a booby trap and pay the price for it. People avoid Marie, and she wonders why others don't call her or invite her over. And she thinks she is normal. She thinks she is just fine. She thinks all problems originate with everyone else. People who nurture this dragon learn how to defend, justify, and excuse themselves in all they do. They don't get it.

You will never find Marie drunk, with needle marks in her arms, popping pills, or sleeping with her husband's best friend. But the damage she does to those around her is demonstrable. This is a most insidious dragon. Dragons associated with drinking, drugs, sex abuse, and violence are so obvious. But the dragon of selfishness is easier to cover up and explain away. Nevertheless, while it is more subtle, it does just as much damage. It is not one of the quick, aggressive cancers that take one down quickly. Rather, it is one of the slower, hard-to-detect ones that grow over years. Yet in the end it is deadly.

SEXUAL AFFAIRS, SEDUCTION, AND FLIRTING

No one thinks this will happen to them, and Steve was no exception. He wasn't looking for it. He was a good husband and a good father, and a leader in his community and church. People looked up to him, and everyone who knew him would have told you he was a good man.

Steve wasn't particularly good-looking, but he was kind and generous. He certainly wasn't like the many "conquistadores" out there who are daily on the hunt for others to take down and conquer sexually. He had been faithful in his marriage.

And then she came on the scene one day. Steve met her through his work and he was totally unprepared for what was to come. He was caught off guard and vulnerable, and, like so many other men, he had no idea how weak he would be before this dragon.

They were talking about some of her problems and he just listened and gave a few responses. She told him he was different from the other men, that it meant a lot to her that he listened and understood, and how he was so kind. She laid her hand on his, and she wasn't even looking at him when she did this. But that's all it took.

Praise, touch, a look, and he was hooked. She didn't say any more and didn't suggest she wanted any more.

Steve woke up the next morning with something like a rock in his stomach. He was smitten. He didn't know what to do. He hadn't sought this. He hadn't experienced anything like it, and he wasn't prepared for it. He felt trapped by the feelings.

He wanted to fight it but didn't know what to do, how to stop the feelings, or who to talk to. He didn't want to mention this to his wife because he feared she would not understand it. He felt he couldn't go to his boss—he sure wouldn't understand. How stupid this all was. He hadn't done anything wrong! And besides, these were just feelings.

Feelings are feelings, not decisions or actions. And so while Steve had many opportunities to nip this in the bud, he didn't.

He didn't talk to anyone. He let this feeling grow and hid it. Before long it brought incredible ego and feelings of emotional and sexual excitement. If he went further, it could destroy his marriage, his work, his reputation. But like a moth drawn to a light, he was drawn in. He liked the praise, the looks, the words, and the touch; and it all continued. And it became reciprocal.

They never had sex, but they had an emotional affair that messed them up for some time. It was exciting for him because it was a distraction he liked. He thought he could just play with it with one foot on each side of the line and control it, even though he knew it was wrong and destructive. It was a dragon, an illicit relationship.

Dragons create fear, paralyzing fear, fear of doing what should be done to avoid getting sucked deeper into the morass. The dragon is playing with his victim, like a fisherman trying carefully to reel in a fish...to its death.

Steve loved this emotional affair, but it was tearing him up. He knew no good could come of it in the long haul. Yet he pushed the guilt aside until it got too big to handle. Then the day came when he knew it had to end. He had to kill his dragon.

It is never easy killing a dragon of sexual affairs, seduction, and flirting. It can become an emotional wipeout. But living with it and the terror of being caught is no answer.

It would take years for him to free himself from the memories of having given life to this dragon. He had fed, protected, enjoyed, and loved it.

ADULTERY

Adultery can be very complicated. I will not complicate this story by sharing many details. This will be very simple and to the point, but it is a clear illustration of the power of recognizing our dragons and doing something about them.

A friend introduced me to a woman he met at the precise moment she was prepared to commit suicide. He talked her out of it. Weeks after this we went to visit her, and that is when I met her for the first time. We spent some time visiting about her life and the situations that led her wanting to kill herself.

During the visit I told her the story of “Princess Amanda and the Dragon.” Weeks later she called me to tell me that the day after our first meeting and her hearing the story of Amanda, she was with her best friend. Her friend was a principal of a school of about one thousand kids. She was married and had two children. Two years earlier she had gotten into an adulterous relationship. The first lady told this lady the story of “Princess Amanda and the Dragon.” Then they sat there looking at each other in silence. It stunned the principal.

That night the principal made a major decision to kill her dragon. She realized the trap she was in and the damage being done. And she knew it would only get worse. She saw her dragon for the lies it was, and she saw her deceit in feeding it. She had many fears of the consequences, but she put them all aside and slew her dragon.

That same evening she ended the affair. She burned the hidden letters she had been hiding from her lover, and she threw the jewelry and other gifts he had given her into the trash. (She had lied to her husband by saying some of her girlfriends gave them to her.) It was over, and it ended faster than it has started. She raised the sword and

pierced the heart of the dragon of adultery. At this point, she didn't care what the fallout might be, or how anyone else might respond. She just killed it.

When one realizes the terrible damage they do to themselves by entertaining dragons, and the very real damage they do to others, they know the right thing to do. It takes courage to do it, but it must be done. They have to kill the dragon. This woman knew that if she didn't kill it, it was going to kill her. She did the right thing.

SUICIDE

Many people consider killing themselves, and many of those actually attempt it. Many succeed. A young man who lived only a block away from us committed suicide in his home. After I heard about it, I went to visit the family and his parents told me their son was twenty-six, single, and a drug addict. One morning the mother opened the son's bedroom door and he was hanging by a belt from the light fixture, his tongue hanging out.

This suicide dragon is so clever. I'm not claiming insight into all suicides, but I do know dragons are involved in a lot of them. One of his great lies is convincing the vulnerable that there is no way out, no escape, no hope. He tells those who tend him that no one understands them, that they are no good, and that they can't go on. "No one can help you, and the only way out of this mess is to kill yourself." Unfortunately, this young man bought into the lie, and took the dragon up on his offer.

The dragon is fiendishly, perversely diabolical. He paints such a bleak, hopeless picture that the only way some people see out of their mess is to end their lives. But it is the dragon that needs to die! It is either him or us. So he builds a case that there is no

other way of escape for us. He is full of lies. But there is always a way out. There is always hope. Every single person reading this page right now is infinitely worthwhile. We are all treasured creations of the God of the universe, and he loves each one of us.

If you harbor the dragon of suicide, you must raise your sword and penetrate and pummel the dragon until he lives no more. Then accept the help from those around you who are interested in your well-being, and despite the lies of the dragon, there are people who will help you.

MATERIALISM

Materialism is a powerful dragon, and a devious one. It is devious because most people who have this dragon never understand it, and many don't even know they have it. (Or if they do know, they refuse to acknowledge it as a dragon.)

A man I know was raised poor. He always said growing up poor helped him appreciate all the more what he had accumulated. And what he has accumulated a lot. He didn't take any of it for granted. He worked hard for it all, and he feels he earned it and deserves it. He has a wife and children, and he says his pursuit of more and more is for them, not him. From the outside looking in, it is obvious how his possessions rule his life and dominate his thinking. But he has no idea how materialism is so all-consuming and controlling.

He is also generous, and he does give a lot to others. But his giving seems to be more out of ego than generosity. First and foremost is his interest in acquiring more things. This obsession runs his life. He has way more than he needs. While he has more than most, he is not happier because of it. He is a prisoner to it, and it controls most of his

waking moments. Some would say money has become his god. I would say it has become his dragon.

He spends more time trying to get more and more and more than he does enjoying any of it. The quality of his day, week, month, and year is measured by him in how much more he accumulates and how much bigger the pile has become. He never learned to be content with what he has, and he never has enough. That is when you know a dragon is involved. A dragon needs more stuff than all the others. He needs better homes, cars, clothes, vacations, clubs, and gadgets than all the others. The dragon entices us to feed on our egos and self-esteem by convincing us we need to have the most, the best, the biggest, the newest, the most popular, the rarest, and the most expensive. That is what has happened to this man. He has a dragon and it is slowly killing him.

When people have the dragon of materialism they come to the place they are willing to sacrifice anything to get more and keep what they have. Some are willing to lie, cheat, cut corners, take the best for themselves so they can have more. They start bending the rules, twisting or abandoning their long-held morals and beliefs. What does it matter? Look at all they have and all they have become?

ACCEPTANCE

We long for acceptance. Some never get it, from parents or anyone else as they are growing up. They are never good enough, smart enough, pretty enough, athletic enough, rich enough, or talented enough to please others. In an effort to fit in and find acceptance, I have seen people submit themselves to all kinds of destructive dragons.

They get involved in the wrong groups, adopt questionable lifestyle choices, date dangerous people, and take up bad habits. These things take them down a dead-end road.

People join gangs to be accepted. They kill, rape, and rob to be accepted. Some get involved in illicit sexual exploits in the hope of being accepted. The same applies to drinking and doing drugs. To feel a part of a group, some people join extreme political groups, and religious cults. Others think they have to have the perfect body, be beautiful, be the best athlete, musician, or singer, or have wealth, fame, or talent to be accepted.

What are they all trying to find? A sense of family. A sense of acceptance. The relationships seldom last, but the feeling of being accepted, of being approved, is the feeling that makes all the difference to them. They work so hard to please those with whom they want to gain acceptance, and in very many cases they find themselves being used by them.

We all understand the need for acceptance, for we all want it. But whenever we desire acceptance to the detriment of our most important relationships with God, family, or work, we are giving our lives over to a dragon.

SEXUAL ABUSER OF KIDS

A man abused his children years ago. Apparently it was a onetime thing with each of his two kids. I don't know if it involved touching or intercourse or what. But something happened that shouldn't have happened when they were little children. That doesn't excuse it or make it acceptable, but it came in a moment of weakness and stupidity.

Fast forward to when his kids were teenagers. He had been working in a business, and was active in his church. At one point he decided he wanted to go to Bible college and prepare himself for some kind of ministry. In the process of studying Scripture for some of his classes, an old dragon raised its ugly head. He remembered the time he had abused his kids sexually.

He couldn't get what he had done off his mind, and it was eating away at him. He made a decision. He had to get it off his chest, out of his mind. He went to his wife and his kids and confessed everything and told them he couldn't live with it anymore. He said he had to confess it to the authorities and plead for mercy. They didn't want him to do this. After all, apart from those bad moments, years ago, he was an exemplary husband and father. His kids begged him not to go to the authorities.

But this man had to kill a dragon he had birthed years before. The dragon was lying somewhat dormant, but it was there, still alive, and the memory and guilt were in the back of his mind. He wanted to live in peace and be free from it. He wanted to be responsible man of integrity.

Against the wishes of his family, he did go to the authorities. And he didn't find mercy from them. He was arrested, prosecuted, and sent to jail for a number of years. Believe it or not, the man said he had peace in his life for the first time since he had committed his act against his kids. This was because after many years his dragon was finally dead. He felt he was being a good example to his kids, and he knew they and his wife were paying a heavy price for what he had done. But he also believed he had done the right thing for them and for himself. He had a job in the prison and was sending the

money home. He was sharing his story with other prisoners, and encouraging them to get their lives in order and do the right and responsible thing in life.

Grown dragons do a lot of damage to a lot of people, and sometimes getting rid of them is a tough and painful thing to do. But this man testifies that in the end, it is worth it.

A MAN WITH MANY DRAGONS

Roberto was a handsome young man, a womanizer, porno addict, alcoholic, and a drug addict. He was into heavy metal and punk, and for long periods of time he wore long, colored, spiked hair, and nothing but all black clothes. He studied the martial arts, and he like hurting people. He had an excess of tattoos. He considered himself an “evangelical terrorist”: “I wouldn’t think twice about sitting and drinking in front of a church, and then make a Molotov cocktail, light it, and throw it over my shoulder to burn the church down. It was a kick.”

Roberto told me he was a Satan worshipper. He was often in trouble with the police. He had a young son and daughter who lived with their mother, whom he never married. At the time I met him, he was living with his mother, who would have given anything to get rid of him because he was a major pain in the you-know-what. But she was afraid to throw him out.

I’ll never forget the first day I met Roberto. He was standing near a gymnasium we were building in South America. He knew who I was, but I had never seen him before. A number of the workers were standing around waiting to begin work on the gym and Roberto was off to the side, leaning on a tree. I went up and introduced myself, and it

was very obvious he was either drunk or stoned, or maybe both. Soon into the conversation he wanted to make it perfectly clear he had no interest in God or religion. I hadn't even mentioned God. Anyway, we had a good talk and I invited him to our dragon slayer recovery group after introducing him to our leader. I said good-bye and went on my way.

Roberto only lived a block away, so I decided to visit him the next day. I knocked on the door and he was very surprised to see me there. It took a few moments, but eventually he invited me in. We sat and he told me more about his mother and his life. He invited me into his tiny room to show it off, and there were satanic drawings and porno pictures all over the walls. I almost jumped out of my skin when Roberto showed me the weapons he kept under his bed. Yowzer. We went back to the table in the kitchen and he brought out a box of pictures of his mom and himself over the years. His dad was not in his life. His mother was a sweet woman with a messed up son on her hands.

Roberto looked at me and somberly said, "You know, if you had shown up at my house yesterday, before we met, I have no doubts I would have beaten you to a pulp and thrown you down the stairs. But I'm so glad you came. I really can't believe you came, especially knowing what you must have learned about me." Well, it was easy being there with Roberto, and I actually liked him. But I was under no illusions: I saw a man totally dominated by dragons.

He was definitely not a happy man. He was suffering, and he was dying. When I think of men like Roberto, I recall the verses in Proverbs: "Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, 'But we knew nothing about this,' does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your

life know it? Will he not repay everyone according to what they have done?" (Prov. 24:11-12).

In my work I see people being led away to death all the time--death by dragons. I don't think I have ever met anyone with as many dragons as Roberto, but even Roberto must be given the chance to be led away from death and presented with the possibility of accepting Christ in their lives. How could I not try to help him? The last thing he needs is condemnation; he needs direction and care. I can't kill his dragons, but I can be there to let him know about dragons, know there is help, and know there is an escape. I can be there to encourage him and stand with him as he works at recovering from killing his dragons.

Over the next several months, some of us started working closely with Roberto. He came to a place where he wanted to start killing dragons. He was more than tired of them. The first one he killed was his Satan worship. He found out who God really was and what it really meant to live in peace with God.

Roberto had a lot of other dragons to kill, and I'm sure he is still working on some of them. The alcoholism was the hardest. He had good days and bad days. I left his country several years back, and I don't know how he is doing. I hope he is still killing dragons and recovering in the grace and mercy of God.

FOLLOWING DRAGON (SATAN) OR FOLLOWING CARETAKER (JESUS)

It's our choice. It's up to us.

Some time ago I saw a painting of Jesus and Satan sitting at a small table across from each other. They were arm wrestling. I was wondering what it was all about. I don't know what the painters' idea was, but I made my own application. They are arm wrestling over us, and whoever wins, gets us--our body, spirit, and soul.

Now we know that at Judgment Day the Dragon will be thrown into a lake of fire for eternity. But in the meantime, there are millions of smaller skirmishes going on, one life by one life. Dragon and Jesus are fighting for the soul of each person, arm wrestling to win us. And although we know that Jesus is more powerful, do you know what determines which of them wins in our lives? We do. We give power to the one to whom we give our love, loyalty, and allegiance. Neither of them can force us to surrender to them. Jesus is more powerful without a doubt, but in the daily battle for our soul, the balance of power rests with us. The question is, who do we surrender to?

For the most part, this wrestling match is a mind game. Whoever wins our mind, wins our allegiance. The Dragon doesn't play fair because he lies. It may appear he makes us promises, but all he says are deceitful lies. The Dragon's biggest lie is about Caretaker. He wants us to believe Caretaker doesn't exist. The psalmist tells us plainly, however, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 14:1). The Dragon wants to be our god.

If the Dragon can't get us to believe his biggest lie, he will try fooling us into believing he (the Dragon) has a better deal. He promises more fun, pleasure, freedom, power, success, fame, you name it. They are all sugarcoated lies.

Part of the the Dragon's line is to get us to believe we can do whatever we want and not face the consequences. Some years ago, when Richard Halverson was the chaplain of the U.S. Senate, he told the senators that "The Devil's greatest deception is 'I won't get caught.'" How many have gone down in flames because they believed that lie? We will be caught, sooner or later, with our dragons.

The Dragon entices us to become his slaves, imprisoned by foolish thinking and living. Never forget that our war with the Dragon is a mind war. He wants to deceive us and make us close our minds to the things of God. He wants to bring darkness, to shut us out of the light of God. The apostle Paul wrote, "I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed" (Eph. 4:17-19).

But Caretaker is at our side and on our side. We must call out to him, and when we do, he will come to us no matter who we are or what we have done. We are made alive with Christ "even when we were dead in transgressions" (Eph. 2:5). God sacrificed himself to rescue us, and it is by God's grace that we are saved.

The good news of God's redemption is really good news. We all have a huge debt we owe to God for having rejected him and his laws and surrendering to the dragons that rule our lives. And yet God still loves us and wants to give us abundant lives. The Dragon comes to kill and destroy us, but Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). And he also said, "Come to me, all you who are weary

and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). That is an incredible invitation. It is our choice.

We have no life when we are surrendered to the Dragon. The Bible says, “Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:25-2). God is willing to gently instruct us when we have been taken captive to do the Dragon’s will. If that has happened to us, we must repent of having done that and accept the truth of God rather than the lies of Satan. Like the Prodigal Son, we must come to our senses and *escape*.

And what are we escaping? God has determined the future of those who reject him and who chose instead to side with the dragon. That is a choice left up to us, but before we make it, we better know the Dragon’s future: “And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). That is his destiny.

And what is the destiny of those who believe and follow him and his lies?

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and

Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10-15).

But God has provided a way of escape for us:

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24).

We can be sure of crossing over from death to eternal life, and we can be sure of escaping the problems and the suffering brought to us by the dragons of our lives. What is required is belief that God sent his Son to give light and life to the world and that eternal life comes to us through our believing God and approaching him through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. There is no Dragon that anyone has ever hosted in the history of the world that is worth risking eternal life for. Life with the Dragon will come to an abrupt end at death. But life in Christ goes on forever and ever and not a moment less.

In the following passage John describes what heaven will be like for followers of Jesus, those who have accepted his invitation to eternal life and accepted that his death on the cross was payment for the debt we owed to God for our rebellion:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be

no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”
(Rev. 21:3-4).

It is our choice. The story of Amanda shows us how we become a slave to the Dragon. The Bible shows us how to surrender ourselves to Jesus and become his follower.

How to Become a Disciple or Follower of Jesus.

What do you need to do to cross over from death to life? What do you need to do to cross over from dragon domination to new life, eternal life, and freedom with Jesus?

There are four natural steps in making a sincere commitment to Jesus. They are steps to building a relationship with him. (And it is all about building a relationship with him, not becoming religious.) These steps parallel similar steps in leading up to and initiating a marriage.

1. A successful marriage starts with someone finding “the right person,” the one they have been looking for or hoping for. When they *believe* they have found the right one, they are willing to proceed to the next step.

Your relationship with Jesus begins with believing that he was God in the flesh and that he came to save you from the condemnation for your sins so you can have a restored relationship with him now and for eternity. The gospel of John tells us that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). That is referring to Jesus, for Jesus was God in the flesh. The amazing theme of Christianity is that God came to pay the price for your sins.

Becoming a disciple or follower of Jesus means believing that Jesus broke into human history when he was born, died a sacrificial death for the sins of the

world, and was raised from the dead on the third day. God the Father accepted the death of Jesus as payment for your sins. The Scripture says, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). And, “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24).

In Jesus, you have found what you were looking for: a relationship with God and your salvation for eternity.

2. The second step leading to a marriage is that one of the two people has to propose marriage to the other, and the other has to accept the invitation. That is obvious. That proposal and acceptance is a commitment from one person to the other person. It is saying, “I found the one I’ve been looking for, and I am committing myself to an exclusive, limited relationship. I will commit myself to one person for the rest of my life. I will reject all previous romantic relationships or any new ones that offer themselves to me down the road.”

The second point in becoming a disciple of Jesus is that God says you need to tell him you are grateful for what he did for you and that you are willing to accept his offer, follow him, and serve him for the rest of your life. What this means is you must turn around or repent from having shut him out of your life to inviting him into your life and entrusting your life and your future to him. That is turning from having surrendered to the dragon in whatever form and then surrendering to Jesus to trust and obey him for the rest of eternity, knowing that is for your best interest.

This is an exclusive relationship. It is limited. It means that you will reject all previous illegitimate commitments you have made in the past and you will reject all illegitimate commitments in the future, too. It is Jesus. Nothing more or less will work.

This second step with Jesus is *accepting* his proposal to be saved from your sins and committing yourself to him for the rest of your life, believing that Jesus and the life he offers is without a doubt the best future for you. It also means rejecting the Dragon and all his false promises and seductive opportunities.

3. Once a person has proposed marriage and the other person has accepted it, the couple can hardly wait to tell others about their decision.

It is the same with Jesus. The third step in establishing your relationship with Christ is that you need to confess what you believe in your heart, because you can't live your life as a secret Christian. The Bible says, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved" (Rom. 10:9-10).

This is letting others know of the decision you have made. You have already told Jesus you want him in your life. Now you need to let others know. It is like when getting married you let all others know you are no longer available. You are "spoken for." You are now committed to an exclusive relationship, and the Dragon has no part in it. This confession solidifies the commitment in your mind and heart.

4. In a marriage, the wedding is the time when the relationship is legalized and made binding or official before the world. The couple exchanges their vows before others and they sign the dotted line. They are now married and have the rest of their lives to live out their commitments.

The fourth step with Jesus is the same. You enter your New Covenant relationship with God in Christian baptism. God commands you to be baptized. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20). Being

baptized by immersion in water unites you with Christ: “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Rom. 6:3-4).

After Jesus was raised from the dead, Peter preached, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Obeying God in this act of Christian baptism is the final step in establishing your relationship with God forever. You are God’s child. You are forgiven. You receive his Holy Spirit, your destiny is heaven, and your name is written in the Book of Life.

The Family of God

As a Christian you are part of the family of God—called the church. The church is the body of Christians who have chosen to live under the authority of Jesus Christ. “God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Eph. 1:22-23). God’s plan is that we live together with others who are part of the family to encourage, guide, teach and correct each other on this new journey with Jesus. Through reading the Bible, praying and fellowship with other Christians, you will continue growing as a Christian until God calls you home. The Holy Spirit will work in your life to help you mature and grow spiritually.

This is God’s plan for your salvation and mine. But it is our choice. We are free to reject it all. God won’t force us into any of this, but there are consequences for rejecting life with God, as we have seen in our study of dragons.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:1-13).

God wants to bring us very near to him, and the way he does that is through faith in Christ Jesus and what he has done for us. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). God does not want to condemn us but rather save us from the mess this world is in by following dragons. Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Living with a dragon is no way to live life. It is a life of lies. Really, it is no life at all because we get nowhere with dragons. Salvation is not found there. In fact, “Salvation

is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:1). The only name under heaven that brings salvation is Jesus. Nothing else works. He is not far away. We can eliminate all the distance by believing in him and becoming a follower of Jesus, his disciple.

I encourage you to take the steps I have outlined in becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. But, as I have said, it is a choice. And the choice is yours. The time we all have left is too short to continue missing out on something so good. Choose to end your submission and slavery to your dragons! God is waiting for you.

If you would like to learn more about God’s offer of salvation, what it is and how to accept it, go to www.apecetreatywithGod.com. Thousands have gone through the four lessons offered online and found hope and new life.

GO KILL YOUR DRAGONS, AND GIVE YOUR LIFE TO THE CARETAKER