



Fighting Shadows

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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The Summary

Introduction: The Lie of the Shadows

In September 2021, Jon and I (Jeff) sat by a fire inside a cabin on a five-hundred-acre farm in Woodstock, Vermont. We had just wrapped up *The Art of Teaching* retreat for thirty pastors. As we debriefed, our conversation shifted to how much our hearts ache for men in this current cultural moment. So many men express confusion, shame, and fear daily. We realized that talking to men and about men hit on our core callings. That night, I said, “Jon, there’s so much here. We need to write a book on this.”

Three years later, here it is.

A low-grade angst has settled over the hearts of men today. As Henry David Thoreau noted, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” We feel torn, tempted, and paralyzed by shame. Our models and mentors have failed us. It seems the idea of being a Christian man in the world today has largely failed.

Faced with these shadows, men often overcompensate, shut down, or medicate. We become shadow men, spending our lives like shadows, confused about what’s good for a man. But you were not born for the shadows; you were born for the light.

As men we are called to be ruthless in our effort to get in—and stay in—the light. Light heals us and transforms us, but we must fight to stay in its radiance. If you recognize the struggle—the angst, the confusion—be encouraged. You are not alone. There is a way out of the shadows. Light is on the horizon.

Chapter 1: The Eclipse

On August 11, 2018, I (Jon) stood atop a building in NYC, observing what seemed impossible: the sun disappearing before my eyes. The moon was swallowing the sun, and even though I knew it was a natural phenomenon, it was surreal to sit in the shadow of a complete eclipse. Something came between the sun and me and distorted my reality.

As it turns out, the source of many of our struggles comes from another kind of eclipse.

In Luke 22, Jesus tells Peter, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.” The Greek word for “fail” is “ekleip”, the root of “eclipse.” Satan plans to position something between you and God so that you cannot see His light. He wants to eclipse God’s presence with problems and temptations by bringing them so close to your face that you cannot see beyond them. He wants you to think that God is gone, the problem is all there is, and you are destined to struggle in the dark. Satan’s vision is for you to fail and he’s at war to make sure you do. He is working toward the demise of men.

But take heart, hope is not lost. We can learn to fight in the shade. In the coming pages, we are going to reposition your eyes so you can see past the eclipse, and back to the source of light that frees you from failure and shame and lets you hold your head high with confident trust.

The shadows we’re talking about in this book derive their power from an illusion—no matter the fear or the

failure that seems to be eclipsing the light, the light is still there.

Many men today feel emotional, mental, and spiritual pain, and struggle to understand what’s wrong. And there’s no shortage of voices claiming to know why men are failing and what to do about it.

The reality is that the world can’t tell you how to be a man because it can’t even define what a man is. Without deeper, grounding truth, how can we discern whether our culture’s latest messages are true or setting us up for untold damage?

Let’s start fighting these shadows together—naming them, identifying the lie that gives them power, and dragging every shadowed part of our hearts into the life-giving light of God’s trustworthy, truthful diagnosis.

Chapter 2: The Shadow of Despair

The Lie: *There is nothing worth living for.*

The Truth: *Your hope is secure in Jesus.*

The Back to the Future movies are far and away the best films about time travel. In the film, a black employee at a diner in 1955 says he’s going to be the mayor someday. Such an idea was unthinkable to his boss. But we, as the audience, know that in 1985, his hope became a reality.

There’s an important lesson here. Hope and despair are all about how we see the future and what we believe about it. Genuine biblical hope is rooted in what we believe about the future and how we concretely let it affect our present.

Many men are in a state of massive despair because they have forgotten their future—their inheritance, their calling, their horizon.

There is so much despair among men today that we have a mortality category for it: “deaths of despair,”

which includes deaths by suicide, accidental drug overdoses, and complications of alcoholism. Men are killing themselves, sometimes slowly throughout their lifetime or abruptly through impulsive risk-taking, violent encounters, and suicide.

What can we do about it? How do we crawl out of the hole of despair in which we find ourselves?

I'll tell you one thing that won't solve the problem: telling ourselves to just be optimistic. Optimism is basically what I like to call worldly hope. It's not concrete. It has no surety. It's wishful thinking that says, "Maybe my future will be different."

One of the most important things for overcoming despair is getting your *telos* right. What's *telos*? It's a Greek word that can be translated as "chief aim." In other words, if your life is an arrow, where is it pointed? And whether you like it or not, your *telos* dominates how you live. It fuels everything.

We see our true *telos* in Scripture. God is making all things new, repairing and renewing all the broken and dead parts around us—and he asks us to partner with him. What an ask! The calling we have in the here and now is wrapped up in the future God has planned in Christ. Now, that is a *telos* worth aiming for.

Chapter 3: The Shadow of Loneliness

The Lie: *Loneliness is part of being a man.*

The Truth: *Friendship is a superpower.*

"I can't feel anything."

I (Jeff) said this to my wife over a ten-minute morning coffee check-in at our kitchen island. I felt dead—no joy, no deep sadness. It felt like a deep fog was over my mind and spirit. Externally, I was doing better than ever—business thriving, family healthy. But I was losing touch, feeling like a zombie. I wanted my heart back.

My wife asked, "When was the last time you felt genuinely full and alive and joyful?" The answer surprised me: college when I was twenty to twenty-two years old. Why? *Friends*. I had deep, rich, life-giving friendships. We shared everything—the highs, the lows, the joys, and the sadness. *Brothers*.

A few days later, one of those friends called me. He said, "It feels like I've lost something since those days we were together in our twenties. I'm just so much lonelier." We both felt lonely.

Loneliness is the experience of unwanted solitude and disconnection. It has two facets: social isolation and emotional isolation. The negative feedback of loneliness freezes and dulls us.

Loneliness can kill. It can be as strong a predictor for illness and death as smoking, obesity, and high blood pressure. The real cure for loneliness is friendship—deep, enriching, beautiful, long-term friendship. But many guys don't have many friends; we don't know how to be good friends.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development, ongoing since 1934, shows that strong relationships matter more than anything else. Relationships affect our lives more than IQ, social class, and money. The key ingredients that make friendships strong are:

- Proximity
- Unplanned interactions
- Vulnerability

I realized I needed to invest in friendships. I texted every guy I was close with who lived nearby:

"Hey, guys. Saturday, my house, 7 pm. I'm firing up the hot tub, starting a fire, and will provide cigars and my homemade smash burgers. And more importantly, I'm going to pick one thoughtful question to guide the discussion. Would love to have you."

Fourteen showed up. Now it's a quarterly tradition, one of my most life-giving practices. Along the way, I've learned two principles:

1. **Create the hang in your own image.** Do what you love and invite others into it.
2. **Ask great questions.** Go deep. Don't waste time on stuff that doesn't matter.

Despite the looming shadow of loneliness and all its negative impacts, there's a simple solution: invest in relationships. You were created for the community. You were designed for friendship.

Be present. Participate in your own life. Care about a place. The kingdom of heaven will be found there—and the shadow of loneliness will have no power over your heart.

Chapter 4: The Shadow of Shame

The Lie: *I need to do everything possible to prevent people from seeing my failures and weaknesses.*

The Truth: *God delights in you, even though you aren't perfect.*

There's a villain in the Spider-Man world called Venom. He looks similar to Spider-Man but is dressed all in black with monstrous features. Venom isn't a person; he's a symbiote that needs a host to grow within. When it finds a host, it eventually takes over that person, exploiting their weaknesses and amplifying their worst traits.

Venom's grotesque takeovers provide an outstanding visual for understanding shame. That is what shame is. It's a slimy shadow trying to swallow us whole. Shame is not guilt. Guilt is the sense that I have done something wrong. Shame is the internalization of "*There's something wrong with me. I'm gross, dirty, bad.*" And the minute you give those thoughts power, shame settles over your heart.

I (Jeff) have felt shame in all kinds of ways during my life. The first time was when I realized it wasn't normal for my dad not to be around. A dark question crept in—*Am I not good enough to be a son?* That's when I first felt shame.

Shame causes chaos. It's a spirit of disintegration. It rips apart things meant to be unified. Shame introduces cracks—it separates us from our hearts, from other people, and from God. It's an anti-creation, a force used by the Enemy to attack and wound God's creation.

Pause for a moment and ask yourself, Where is shame showing up in my life right now?

Many of us hide parts of ourselves—often in the name of "masculinity." We've been taught to believe we need to be tough and never show weakness. Vulnerability feels like death for many men. But moments of sharing are when you tend to find mending and healing.

You have to face it. And you have to eat it. Eating your shadow is a very slow process. Just because a shadow is quiet doesn't mean it can't engulf you in darkness. While God can do miraculous works of healing in a flash, I've found more often than not that it takes doing the very hard work of facing your demons and working through them with His help.

Here's a wild truth: God isn't ashamed of you. He isn't disappointed in you. He delights in your presence. When you take that difficult first step into God's presence and allow yourself to experience His delight in you, shame dissipates. His delight needs to seep into your soul.

In practical terms, you need to come to God with the parts you hate most about yourself—the struggles you wish you didn't have, the parts of your story and life you wish weren't there. When you bring those things into His presence and lay them at His feet, all you will find is love.

Chapter 5: The Shadow of Lust

The Lie: *I am a slave to my sexual desire.*

The Truth: *Faithfulness is a key to my formation.*

I (Jon) am eight years old and laid out before me are dozens of images of naked women. I cannot turn my eyes away. A stranger has strewn pornography across the public bathroom for all to see. This is the first time in my life I have seen pornography. I did not ask for the shadow to fall on the innocence of my life. Yet I will never unsee these images. Something has been awakened.

...

I am fourteen years old and standing in front of a bed covered with Penthouse magazines. I am at my friend's house after school and the temptation is too much, so I pick up a magazine and begin to look. I close the magazine but the images are in my mind, and I do not know how to get them out.

...

I am eighteen years old and now a follower of Jesus. I am holding a Playboy magazine. Every part of my body is awakened and focused. I look at these images for several minutes and then close the magazine and put it back on the coffee table. I feel a deep sense of guilt because this is something I have chosen, something I could not resist.

As hard as it may seem to those who grew up with laptops and cell phones, that was the extent of all the pornography I saw growing up. Porn was something you couldn't get your hands on easily. Just a few scattered moments, but neurological pathways were formed.

Fast-forward a couple of decades and everything has changed. Sex has come out of the bedroom into every part of our lives.

Lust is one of the dominant shadows falling across the hearts of men today. Men seem to instinctively know sex is something sacred, a gift from God, yet they are also hyperaware that sex is prone to distortion and abuse.

There have been two main reactions to the battle for human sexuality:

Reaction #1: Repression

The first response has been to shut down our sexual desire. The church has been the main proponent of this response. Purity culture gained traction, promoting sexual abstinence before marriage. But over time, this framework became a formula not for holiness but for embarrassment and disgrace.

Reaction #2: Unrestrained Indulgence

The second reaction has been to release any control over desires. The world promotes sex without shame, consequence, or commitment. But this approach reduces sex to a mere commodity, leading to disillusionment and deformation.

The way of Jesus is not about repression or indulgence; it's about the redirection and transformation of our desires. Sexuality should be about routing our longings into that which will deeply satisfy us, transforming us into the men we aspire to be.

Rather than asking, "*Is what I am doing sinful?*" we need to ask: *Who am I becoming by what I am doing with my sexuality?*

We must rediscover that our quest for sex is ultimately not a quest for pleasure; it's a quest for union, a quest for belonging, a disguised search for God. Though we struggle to say it out loud, what we ache for is to be vulnerable and accepted, known and loved.

Chapter 6: The Shadow of Ambition

The Lie: *Ambition is fuel for personal success.*

The Truth: *Ambition is a gift for kingdom impact.*

We know of no word that causes greater confusion in the hearts of men today than the word ambition. For some, it touches the deepest passion of the heart and shakes them out of bed in the morning. For others it's a word that invokes shame and obligation, naming another thing they lack.

What exactly is a man to do with his ambition? What do you do with yours?

Some argue that your ambition should focus on making an impact—you should seek to make the largest difference possible for the greatest number of people. But often, when you look behind the scenes, there is a trail of wounded hearts and buried bodies as the price of success. In our desire to do great things, we can do great damage.

Others suggest we should focus on none of these things. Ambition is toxic, they say. It's the driving factor in so much of the brokenness and pain in the world. History is the battlefield of ambition, and success is written with the blood of losers. And it seems there is some truth to this.

With so much damage done by worldly ambition, it may seem wise for Christians to banish it from our lives. Maybe we should focus on other virtues that don't cause so much damage. But this kind of over-reaction can do its' own kind of damage: The opposite of ambition is not humility; it is sloth, passivity, timidity, and complacency.

All of us draw a line around our interests and affairs. We determine who we are responsible for and tend to ignore the rest. But when Christian men stop caring about God's kingdom and mission and reduce their vision to personal well-being and wealth, the church is doomed.

Our vision of holy ambition is rooted deeply in what it means to be a disciple because Jesus was a man seized with holy ambition. Worldly ambition can be a curse. It feeds our egos, compromises our integrity, damages our relationships, and fills us with pride. But holy ambition is a gift. It's an advantage for men in our world today. It clarifies our vision, stirs our passion, activates heaven, and disrupts the brokenness of our world.

Our vision is to see you rise into your full calling, to reach your redemptive potential. May God help you ask better questions. May God lift your vision beyond the horizon of your concerns. May you push back the shadow of worldly ambition and leave a legacy of brilliant light.

Chapter 7: The Shadow of Futility

The Lie: *My work doesn't matter.*

The Truth: *You have a calling to serve and heal the world.*

According to an article in the *New York Times*, "Hundreds of thousands of men in their late thirties and early forties stopped working during the pandemic and have lingered on the labor market's sidelines since."

In a world like that, identity, meaning, and purpose can feel hard to come by. And it can be especially tough to believe that the work we do is genuinely meaningful—which is when the shadow of futility starts to fall over a man's heart. As men, we need to see our work as meaningful and substantive. We want to believe that we're making a difference in the world. But when so much of the modern world is geared toward disconnection, abstraction, and systems that seem like they will carry on with or without us, an overwhelming sense of futility is always lurking.

There are levels of mastery in a man's life, and if he tries to skip a step, it implodes the next one.

There are four levels of ruling. Think of them like concentric circles:

1. Ruling yourself
2. Ruling a small team (marriage)
3. Ruling a tribe
4. Ruling a city

You can't, or rather shouldn't, level up to the next without first mastering the one before. If you don't learn to rule in the domain of the season you are currently called to, you will bring destruction into the next one.

Work sits right in the middle of all this. It's our way and place to rule, to bring order and beauty out of chaos, to defend the boundaries of light, and to take ground one inch at a time over the borders of darkness. That's what your work is for. Do you see it that way?

If you are battling feelings of futility in the work you are doing, your first move should not be to look for another job. Instead, check those levels of rule. Have you learned to rule yourself, or are you being dominated by your passions and by other's perceptions of you?

Too many men today overemphasize their specific job's role in bringing meaning and purpose to their lives, and they underemphasize the importance of the code they live by. But we need men with codes. You need a North Star to define your direction, and a purpose to dedicate yourself to. You don't get the luxury of finding a code when disaster hits. It must already be there, embedded deep in your soul, if it's going to have any effectiveness in a moment of crisis.

Chapter 8: The Shadow of Apathy

The Lie: *There is nothing worth giving yourself for.*

The Truth: *You were born to live a life of consequence.*

We recently surveyed four hundred women, asking what they believe is wrong with men in the modern world. The answers were fascinating, but one theme seemed to stand out from the replies we received: *Apathy.*

Without vision, people perish. Without vision, men get stuck. It seems to the watching world that the hearts of a generation of men are perishing. Many men feel there is nothing worth rousing themselves for. Men today lack purpose and drive, direction in life, and initiative in relationships. The shadow of apathy is standing over a generation of men.

These days, the mere suggestion that men are struggling is often met with strong emotional pushback. While there is some truth and validity to claims about male privilege and the patriarchy, many men today feel enveloped in an apathetic haze. Haphazard and detached—these two words describe so many men we meet today.

I (Jon) have been a pastor in New York City for nearly twenty years. During that time, I have repeatedly heard women lament the lack of godly men in the church. Congregations are filled with wonderful, mature, and thoughtful women who cannot seem to find their equal among the men. Men seem like they are stuck, paralyzed, drifting through life on autopilot.

The movement of Jesus is called to be a movement of visionaries. It's meant to be a movement of young men seeing visions and old men dreaming dreams (Acts 2:17). It's meant to draw men out of their self-absorbed lives and into the cause of Jesus in their time.

God is a general. He is mighty in battle and skilled in war. Yes, you are a sheep; yes, you are a branch; yes, you are a child; but you are also a soldier. You are in a fight. The context of our faith determines how we live that faith. We are in the middle of the story, and it is a war.

We have an enemy who hates men. Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). He wants to steal your vision and dreams, kill your integrity and relationships, and destroy your future and your hope.

God gives men strength to serve others. We are called to use it to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, and to defend the rights of the poor and needy (Proverbs 31:8–9). We fight because we love.

Jesus was both violent and gentle. He fought against evil but was merciful and kind to people. We are called to be like Jesus in this way. “Be violent with the spirit, but gentle with the person.”

Reject apathy. Free yourself from civilian affairs. Level up. It’s time for you to reenlist. That’s how you will please your commanding officer.

Conclusion and Call: Becoming Light

So many men today never reach their redemptive potential. They stop fighting the shadows and start accepting them. They get numb, settle, or collapse inward to medicate their quiet desperation. Being willing to examine the forces coming against you and resist them is something you should be proud of.

So many men allow these shadow forces to direct their lives. They are run by a shadow government they cannot name, hindered by a shadow calling they didn’t choose, and blocked from seeing all God has for them. Then they never see the glory of God and the glorious future he has for them. This is what the Enemy wants—for you to stop trusting, start striving, and manage your anxiety and disappointment until you die.

But this is not your fate.

You have been willing to take what’s been hiding in the shadows of your life and examine it. You have dragged

out what’s lurking in the darkness and called it to account. You have learned to:

- fight the shadow of despair with hope,
- fight the shadow of loneliness with community,
- fight the shadow of shame with vulnerability,
- fight the shadow of lust with faithfulness,
- fight the shadow of ambition with a kingdom vision,
- fight the shadow of futility with calling, and
- fight the shadow of apathy with a cause.

But as you move forward into the light, you must not get complacent.

James Hollis noted that every morning two forces stand over a man’s life to stop him from making progress. They appear every day and threaten and intimidate us. He called them the enemies of life. These enemies are *fear* and *lethargy*.

Fear tells us...

- You are not going to be able to do this.
- You are going to shrink back into your old habits.
- People will reject you.
- Others will think you are self-righteous.

Some of this may be true, but none of that matters because it is the affirmation of heaven that counts, not the acceptance of the world. The “well done” of the Father will drown out the clamor of the world.

You are a man of the light. Fear not. Move through shadows with confidence.

The second enemy of life is lethargy. Lethargy tells us...

- You don’t have to do this now. You can do it later.
- Stop being so intense.

- You probably won't make a difference anyway.
- You are not missing out on that much anyway.
- Mediocrity is safe; risk isn't worth it.

Refuse to go out like this. The story you are in is a story of awakening. It is a story of being called out of your sleep.

We need men who are defined by a biblical vision of manhood. We need men who see themselves as image bearers and sons of God—those entrusted with power and responsibility to create, cultivate, care, and defend our world for God's glory, their joy, and the good of others—men like the one Jesus is forming you to become.

Jesus went into the heart of the shadows, becoming a sin for you. He took on your shame, rejection, isolation, and futility so that you could have His grace, power, authority, and kingdom.

C. S. Lewis said, "The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God."

You are free from having to try and live up to some idealized Christian standard. You are living out your God-given inheritance and identity in Him.

Brother, hear these words from the apostle Paul:

"The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:12).

Face the shadows. Fight the shadows. Walk into the light. We will see you there.