Bob: For years, in his marriage and in his ministry, Tom Ryan had a carefully-guarded secret. It was an ongoing pattern of sexual sin that one day brought him to a breaking point.

Tom: I was outside of my car, sitting on a log. I prayed, “God in heaven, I cannot believe I’m in this place again! I cannot believe I’m relapsing. I cannot believe I’m in this park. I don’t care what You have to do. You have to do something. Please break this in my life.” Now, that wasn’t the first time I’d prayed that prayer; but it was the last time.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Thursday, April 11th. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. We’ll hear what made that day a different day in Tom Ryan’s life. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. I want our listeners to just imagine for a second—maybe, you’re on the deacon board or the elder board at your church—maybe, you’re just a faithful member at your church—but the pastor comes to you, one Sunday morning, or at a deacon meeting on Tuesday night—and he says, “There’s something I’ve got to let you know—something I’ve got to tell you.” He tells you about his background, his experience of being involved in sexual, compulsive—looking at porn—he’s been doing it for years. What do you do? How do you respond in that situation?

Dennis: Well, I know what the Scriptures teach; and I know that that group of people—the Church—a group of broken, depraved, sinful, selfish wretches—I know how they should respond. It should be a safe place for anybody to be able to come clean; but unfortunately, we’re much too like the woman who was caught in adultery. Everybody picks up a stone and gets ready to cast the stone.

Bob: Come clean, and keep his job, and preach again next Sunday?

Dennis: Well, you know, I’m not sure about that because I don’t know, necessarily, all the details of what you are talking about there; but it has to start somewhere, in terms of repentance, and the beginning of the road toward restoration.
Bob: I think our guest might be able to enlighten us a little bit on how a scenario like that can play out; right?


Tom: Thank you, Dennis. Thank you, Bob. Great to be here.

Dennis: Tom lives outside of Kansas City, Missouri. He is the proud dad of four children—four adult children—married to Pam since 1978. You, now, give leadership to a ministry where you’re hoping to help—not only pastors and men in ministry—but as far as that goes, anyone who’s struggling with some kind of sexual addiction; right?

Tom: That's right. Yes, a number of clergy as well as a number of lay people.

Bob: And all of this borne out of your own experience and your coming-clean moment. I guess you—you talk about 2008 as kind of the watershed year in your life; right?

Tom: Well, getting arrested will do that for a guy. I don’t mean to make light of that; but quite seriously, I got arrested. It was part of my addiction.

Dennis: Okay, before you go to that story in the park—okay?—backtrack, just a moment, and let our listeners know what had been your journey, through pornography, that got you to that park in 2008.

Tom: Somewhere, early in adolescence, I’d stumbled into the whole exploration of sexuality and found that fantasy and self-gratification were powerful experiences. What I couldn’t understand at the time—but since have learned—is that was a way in which I could cope with the chaotic environment. It became a repetitive behavior. Then, it became something that I depended upon.

We know, now, through the neurosciences, that there is a biochemistry to addiction. There is, certainly, a biochemistry to sex addiction or to compulsive sexual behavior, as I call it. I stumbled into that pathway. At the same time, I'm meeting Jesus. I'm growing in faith—

Bob: You go to seminary.

Tom: Oh, I go to seminary. I earn a couple of degrees. I earn a doctorate. I planted a church. I raised four kids—a lot of great ministry in the church—*great people* that I was a part of—but at the same time, I have this thing that I can't quite break. I start to tell others—a few others—a few *safe* others—and that was really hard. I went to a therapist, at first—that I thought was safe. Then, told my best friend, a few months later—then, my wife, a year later, and all that.
As I talk about it, in the book, *Ashamed No More*, there was a particular trajectory in my journey I needed to kind of get to an implosion point. I don’t believe that most guys need to do that. Dennis, I don’t think that needs to happen. I don’t think most clergy, who are struggling with this, have to blow up or have to leave. I *adamantly* do not believe that that is the case. In *my* case, I was stuck.

**Bob:** What—nothing could have happened earlier on to keep you out of the park in 2008?

**Tom:** That’s a fantastic question; and Jesus alone knows the answer to it.

**Bob:** But you never found—

**Tom:** I didn’t find it, and I don’t think so.

**Bob:** The counselor you were seeing wasn’t able to help you.

**Tom:** My therapist was brilliant; but what he started saying, after a few years, was: “There’s some hidden piece, and I can’t get to it. I’m afraid you’re going to have to leave ministry for us to find that. I don’t want you to leave ministry; but I think that’s what’s going to have to happen.” And he was right.

**Bob:** Your elder board knew nothing of any of this.

**Tom:** They didn’t know anything. My accountability group said: “Don’t tell your elder group this. Don’t do this. If you weren’t working on this, if you weren’t struggling mightily with this, if we didn’t see the progress that you are making and the effort that you are putting forward, we’d tell you just to get out of the ministry,” because Pam and I kept asking: “Shouldn’t we get out of the ministry? Isn’t this wrong?” I felt so hypocritical.

**Bob:** Your wife was aware that this was a regular—

**Tom:** For a number of years, she was aware of my struggles. And I’d go periods—*you* know—of being sober; but then, I’d relapse. It was a nightmare.

**Bob:** Did she never come to you and say, “Look!”—

**Tom:** Oh, yes.

**Bob:** —“Enough is enough. Either you fix this thing”—

**Tom:** She didn’t come to me like that, but she asked the question—we were on our knees together. She could tell you that she felt guilty herself: “Shouldn’t I go tell the elders? Lord, are we doing the right thing?”
But we were a part of the same accountability structure. The same accountability group was saying to her: “You guys are working on this. Tom’s working on this. You guys do really great ministry. Tom will be a better preacher, a better pastor, when he gets to the other side of sustained sobriety. So, keep going.” I mean—each phase, each time—we kept asking that question—the word that came back to us was: “Keep going. Take the next step.”

**Bob:** If you were in the accountability group, for a guy like you today, would you give the same counsel that your accountability group was giving you?

**Tom:** Yes, I would; and I’ll tell you why. Because there really was, in my particular trajectory, this hidden little, weird piece from my mother and the way ministry insulated it. I did have to blow up—but I had to blow up in a certain way—and I wrote about this in the book—for that to become detectable. And another piece of that was my mother needed to be gone, unfortunately.

It’s complicated. I’m not trying to make excuses, and it’s really important—and you know this from the tenor of the book—the way I write the book. I don’t write this with any sense of: “Well, my problems are somebody else’s,” or, “It’s my parents…” or, “It’s my upbringing.” No, my sins are my sins. It’s my responsibility, and my recovery is my responsibility.

**Dennis:** I liked the way you handled that. When you did mention, ever so slightly—you didn’t really reveal, in the book, what took place—but you grew up in a home where your dad suffered from Asperger’s Syndrome?

**Tom:** That’s—it wasn’t diagnosed then; but that’s what we would say now. Yes.

**Dennis:** A mild form of that.

**Tom:** He really lacked social skills and emotional closeness. He was just a very vacant person.

**Dennis:** Your mom, on the other hand, struggled from an emotional disorder.

**Tom:** Yes, she was bipolar. She was an unhappy person.

**Dennis:** And a part of the dark side, that marked you, involved her; right?

**Tom:** Yes. Yes. She had deep needs that were never met. She lived a terribly unhappy life—and too much of the responsibility for her emotional well-being—I think, put on me. Again, I don’t say that to say, “Well, then, it’s not my fault,” or, “It’s not my responsibility.” Of course, it’s my responsibility. My life is my life.
But for some of us—and for some who are listeners—pulling apart some of that history is going to be important. The more intelligent a person is, the harder it is to deal with this addiction. Sounds counter-intuitive, but it’s not because we need to understand. We have to know why. That leads us to the place where—and not all Christians want to hear this—but sometimes, it’s okay—sometimes, it’s even going to be necessary to have a trained professional help us.

**Bob:** Or to have a train wreck.

**Tom:** You’re going to have one or the other.

**Bob:** Which is what wound up happening—you had a trained professional helping you.

**Tom:** Yes, and I still had a train wreck. In retrospect, I had the lightest, easiest train wreck you could have.

**Dennis:** Tell us what took you to the park on that day in 2008.

**Tom:** I was just in a bad—I had been coming apart for several years. I was really losing my edge—my ability to hold a lot of things together, to perform, and to make life work. I was cycling more and more with depression, and anxiety, emptiness. We had gone through several transitions at the church. The church was doing relatively well; but I was just coming apart, trying to keep it all together.

Had a meeting cancel—I knew this park where men exchanged porn. I’d put Covenant Eyes on my laptop, years before, so that had locked me out from internet porn; but when you’re a drunk, you’ll go drink the radiator fluid if you have to when you’re wanting the buzz. So, I thought I’d go out to this park; and I got arrested.

**Dennis:** Well, before you get to the arrest, explain to me this whole concept of men going to a park to exchange porn.

**Tom:** Well, not every park has this feature; and not every place where men gather do they exchange porn. This is just one of the wrinkles. I’d been around recovery circles enough that you hear stories about this happening and other things. So, I knew about this particular park—there were just a few guys who had print porn—and they liked to swap it. That was a simple story on this particular park.

**Dennis:** So, it was a place you could go to get something in print?

**Tom:** Yes. My understanding is there’s not a lot of that going on anymore. Now, I haven’t been back since April 17th of 2008. I haven’t been to any park, doing this, since April 2008.

**Dennis:** It seems to me that it’s just a click away today. You don’t have to go anywhere.
Tom: Exactly. That’s my understanding.

Bob: So, April 17, 2008, you go, “I’m just going to go down there.” You needed something.

Tom: I needed a buzz. I needed something.

Bob: And—

Tom: I needed to just fill the hours. I needed to distract myself. You can numb-out and dumb-out with compulsive, sexual thinking, a myriad of ways—just distract yourself—just waste time, just get away, just stop thinking, stop feeling, just numb-out.

Bob: So, what happened?

Tom: Well, what happened was—I, actually, was accused of something that I didn’t particularly do. It’s not important because, as far as I’m concerned, relapsing is relapsing. So, I’m guilty of all of it; right? And there was an accusation—a phone call made to the police—I got arrested. I was so ashamed when the squad car pulled up. You know, I’m a pastor—a great church. You know, I’m relapsing, I’m struggling, and I’m worn out. I’m emotionally-fatigued, spiritually-empty. I’m, at that point now, where I’ve lost hope, Dennis. I have not lost faith—still believe in God, believe in His Christ, believed in the truths of the Gospel—but I lost hope. There was something about me that was so deficient that God wasn’t reaching through.

And just before this had actually happened, in the park, I was, outside of my car, sitting on a log. I prayed, “God in heaven, I cannot believe I’m in this place again! I cannot believe I’m relapsing. I cannot believe I’m in this park. I don’t care what You have to do. You have to do something. Please break this in my life.” Now, that wasn’t the first time I’d prayed that prayer; but it was the last time.

Bob: God answered it that day.

Tom: He did answer it—not the way I would wish, I suppose. But I have to be honest, looking—I’m still somewhat ashamed I got arrested. I mean, who—

Bob: Who wouldn’t be; right?

Tom: —likes that idea. And I spent—

Dennis: Of course.
**Tom:** —and it wasn’t two hours, like the officer told me. It was twenty-six hours, and it was overnight. My depression hit rock bottom. I mean, I was put in a cell by myself; and I started thinking about how I could take the exit ramp. I had a strategy.

**Dennis:** You’re speaking of suicide?

**Tom:** I am, and I was ready to go there. Except that, as a pastor, I’d buried suicides. I ministered to their families, and I saw their faces. The Holy Spirit put my kids’ faces and my wife’s face on the faces of those grieving ones left behind to say: “Why? What didn’t we see? What could we have done differently? Why?” I thought, “Okay, that’s the one thing left to me that I can do that’ll make this worse,” because I was sure this was going to be in the papers—I’m sure this is going to come out. It never did come out.

**Bob:** Really? It was not in the papers?

**Tom:** It wasn’t in the papers, no.

**Bob:** Pam comes and picks you up from jail?

**Tom:** She does, the next day. That was a terrible afternoon and a terrible period for both of us. We both knew our marriage was over, at that point, because she’d been with me through these cycles. I was going to resign ministry. We thought it’d be out in the paper.

When I called her on my one call, she called my therapist, she called my sponsor, and she called my friend, Joe. Joe began to pray, “Lord, would You please keep this from the papers to protect the church—protect the Ryan kids?” The Lord did. It didn’t come out in the papers. I resigned the next board meeting—it was ten days later.

**Bob:** Did you tell them what had happened?

**Tom:** No, I said to them—again, I was guided by accountability—my accountability circle said: “God hasn’t brought it out in the papers and in the public. Don’t you trump Him! Don’t you do that yourself. You need to get out. It’s time. Yes, take the next step of therapy. Get out of the ministry. Tell them you’ve got to leave.”

So, what I said to them was literally this—and I think this is verbatim—“I’m engaging in self-destructive behaviors. You guys know I’ve been in therapy and struggling with anxiety and depression. I’ve got childhood issues I can’t resolve. I’m engaging in self-destructive behaviors. They’re going to take me down, and they’re going to hurt the church if I don’t leave. I have to leave.”

The board never asked, “Well, what are your self-destructive behaviors?” You know, again, there was a level of transparency in my preaching that they got the fact that I was
struggling and that I had an element of brokenness in my life that was pretty severe. They got that.

**Bob:** They try to talk you out of it?

**Tom:** They did. They said, “Would you like a sabbatical—how about a sabbatical?” “No, I’m leaving ministry;” because as far as I was concerned, my marriage was over—ministry was over. I had blown up everything—destroyed life, as I knew it. I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to continue on.

**Dennis:** Did you and Pam talk about a divorce after you left—

**Tom:** Yes.

**Dennis:** —the jail cell that day?

**Tom:** Yes. My wife has uncommon common sense. One of the things she realized was that, “If we divorce right now, everybody will know that.” I mean, Kansas City is not a big town. Then, the questions will flood in as to why. She was very sensitive to the church. She loved the church—cared about the people of the church. “Eventually, in God’s time, we’ll handle this.”

The other piece of wisdom that Pam operated with was, “Unless you’re absolutely in crisis in a moment—in fact, in crisis isn’t a good time to make radical decisions—but unless it’s a life-preserving crisis, a life-threatening crisis—no decision has to be made immediately.” You know? None of the kids were in the house. We separated within the house. She would bide her time and wait for the Lord to lead in a clear path that would make sense.

**Dennis:** How long did that separation—that physical separation—occur?

**Bob:** Was it weeks? Was it months—

**Tom:** Oh, it was months. It was a long time!

**Dennis:** —while you were processing with your accountability partner, with your counselor?

**Tom:** Yes, my therapist. See, what happened with me was I had to unplug the acting-out life. Well, when I got arrested, that unplugged—when somebody, who’s compulsive, gets a shock to the system, the addictive personality kind of goes into a little bit of a coma. It just—it’s like a bad little boy that slinks behind the sofa in the living room and says, “I better stay out of sight.” Mine did for a lot of months because getting arrested will do that. It did for me.
I left ministry which, as we would find out, was a real insulating covering because every time I did competent ministry—and I did a lot of it by God’s grace, mercy, and call—every time I did this ministry—it was, unfortunately, both hiding the provocation of my compulsive behavior and my disease and fueling it.

**Bob:** Compulsive guys I’ve talked to—when something like that happens, there is a prolonged period before they drift back—

**Tom:** Right.

**Bob:** —but they eventually drift back.

**Tom:** Often; often.

**Bob:** You didn’t.

**Tom:** I didn’t.

**Bob:** Haven’t.

**Tom:** Haven’t—yes, exactly, because I’m maintaining. You know the big book of AA is prescient wisdom, I think. It says, “In recovery, what we’re basically granted is a reprieve, based upon the daily maintenance of a spiritual condition.” Well, guys, that’s the Christian life! We are granted a reprieve of who you would be, apart from Christ—of where our sins would normally take us—and our sin nature—of the consequences of our sin and judgment. We’re basically granted a reprieve.

So, for me, what happened was—in the plugging-in of this therapy, during this vacuum period—we were able to pull apart some of the subterranean pathways, if you will, in my soul—and start to develop better and healthier ones—and cobble together a different way of thinking, a different way of living. Because I had an advance of the addictive provocation in my soul, it worked for me.

Now, in a different way, but in a similar way—everybody that’s compulsive—needs to do something along those lines because we do tend to drift back. This becomes our default status until we develop a more preferential one.

**Bob:** And you still have a whole congregation of people going, “What happened?” Speculation’s got to be running wild—people coming up to you going, “Tom, what gives? What did you—”

**Tom:** Well, they didn’t actually. Isn’t that stunning?

**Bob:** Really?!
Tom: Yes. Yes.

Bob: You just—

Tom: The board asked me to stay three months. Again, there was a level of transparency. I mean, there were some Sundays when Pam came home and said—because we had a ton of recovery alcoholics in our church. We had the second largest AA Chapter, in the state of Kansas, in our church.

She said: “There are so many recovering people. They’ve got to know you’re an addict. They’re probably guessing it is sex because you don’t manifest what drug or alcohol addiction would manifest”—and because of things that I would say in terms of talking about my own brokenness. So, people got brokenness. I think what they figured was that it was a massive burn-out, and I was just flamed-out. I think that’s what—and I know that’s what some of them thought.

Bob: And you go to work at Domino’s or what did you do?

Tom: No, I had severance for about seven months, for which I am grateful. At that point, a really good friend from Pastor Serve, Jimmy Dodd, came alongside and cobbled together kind of a low-grade ministry to pastors. There were some faithful, loving people that supported that ministry through Pastor Serve. That’s morphed into the Shame No More Project.

Dennis: What I want our listeners to hear and take away from this story, first of all, is that pornography is a predator—preying upon us—whether male or female. We used to think this was just an exclusive male problem; but it’s not.

Tom: No.

Dennis: One-third of the users of pornography on the internet are women.

Tom: Right.

Dennis: Secondly, we need to realize that we are the prey; and we need to be on-guard about this.

Tom: Right.

Dennis: When we’re travelling alone, we need to be careful about channel surfing. When we’re on our computer, it needs to be in a public place. We need to be honest and truthful with our spouse about what’s taking place in our lives.
And then, thirdly, our children—I’d love to say, “...need to be protected,” and wishfully, hopefully, I’d like to think that my grandkids would never experience this—but that’s not the lay of the land today. The nature of pornography, being so predatory today, is it’s going to find a way to weasel into your children and your grandchildren’s lives. So, as parents, we have to develop a relationship that is safe—that doesn’t condemn.

**Tom:** Right.

**Dennis:** And as you’ve been talking, Tom, the passage in Romans 8, which you talk about in your book, has just been echoing in my mind. Romans 8:1, which says, “There is, therefore, now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”

**Tom:** Absolutely.

**Dennis:** Jesus Christ offers the forgiveness that the soul longs for, and it’s the solution to the shame that you talk about in your book.

**Bob:** And I appreciate the fact that you provide the steps that you took—the steps that led you from bondage to liberation—they’re in your book which is called *Ashamed No More*. And we have copies of the book available in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com for more information about Tom’s book.

There is also information about other books—available for wives of men who have struggled with sexually-compulsive behavior—to help wives understand how you can process and deal with and support your husband in his journey to liberation, as well. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com for more information; or call us if you need any help at 1-800-FL-TODAY, 1-800-358-6329. That’s 1-800- “F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then, the word, “TODAY”.

I want to take just a minute to say, “Thanks,” to those of you who make the ministry of *FamilyLife Today* possible—those of you who share our concern about issues facing marriages and families and want to see strong, healthy, godly families emerging in our culture, starting at your house, and spreading out from there. We appreciate your partnership with us and your financial support of this ministry.

In fact, this week, if you can make a donation to help support *FamilyLife Today*, we would like to say, “Thank you,” by making available a CD that has a conversation on it that we had with Dr. Ed Welch from the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation about the issue of addiction—whether it’s the kind of compulsive behavior we’ve been talking about today or whether it’s addiction to alcohol, or drugs, or other substances. At the core, Dr. Welch says, “Addiction is ultimately a worship disorder.” We talk more about that on this audio CD.

We’d love to send the CD to you as our way of saying, “Thank you for your financial support of the ministry of *FamilyLife Today*.” All you have to do is go to
FamilyLifeToday.com. Click the button that says, “I CARE”, and make an online donation; or call 1-800-FL-TODAY. Make your donation over the phone, and just ask for the CD on addictions. We’ll be happy to send it to you, and we do appreciate your support of this ministry. It’s always great to hear from you.

And we hope you can be back with us tomorrow. We’ll introduce you to a woman who was preyed upon, sexually, and was harassed by one of her high school teachers. You’ll hear Lisa Troyer’s story tomorrow. Hope you can be with us for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I'm Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

*FamilyLife Today* is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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