

BECKY TIRABASSI

Sacred
OBSESSION

*What you chase
after, you
become*

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Sacred Obsession

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*With sincere gratitude and a deep regard for each friend
I have made at Tyndale House Publishers—both before
and after they became my publishers—I dedicate this book.*

“We are to be obsessed by God. . . . The total being of our life inside and out is to be absolutely obsessed by the presence of God. . . . If we are obsessed by God, nothing else can get into our lives—not concerns, nor tribulation, nor worries. . . . To be obsessed by God is to have an effective barricade against all the assaults of the enemy.”

Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

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Acknowledgments

MY FRIENDS AT TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS (Mark Taylor, Bonnie Cain, Mike Morrison, and Sharon Heggeland) have been just that—my friends for many years. Since my earliest days as a youth worker, Mark Taylor has gone out of his way and encouraged others at Tyndale to help me reach students and adults with outside-the-box prayer and Bible resources. I truly acknowledge how special those efforts have been on my behalf for over two decades!

Then in the spring of 2005, a Tyndale employee, C. J. Van Wagner, prompted Mark to invite me to share at a Tyndale chapel service. (As a student, over a decade earlier, C. J. had heard me speak at a Taylor University chapel service.) At the close of a very emotional presentation at Tyndale House, Ken Petersen, senior acquisitions editor, came up to me (in front of his boss, Mark Taylor) and handed me his card, saying, “If you ever want to publish a book with Tyndale . . .”

Over time, Ken and I began a conversation that absolutely captured the passion that burns within me to tell the stories you will find in *Sacred Obsession*.

My prayer—our prayer—is that *Sacred Obsession* will draw all men and women to the One who loves them.

Belvedere



unholy

PASSIONS

A decorative flourish consisting of several overlapping, swirling lines that resemble stylized leaves or a calligraphic flourish, extending from the right side of the word 'PASSIONS' across the page.

What you chase after, you become . . .

You will always gravitate toward that which you, secretly, most love. In your hands will be placed the exact results of your own thoughts. . . . You will become as small as your controlling desire; as great as your dominant aspiration.

FROM *As a Man Thinketh* BY JAMES ALLEN

If you have little desire to be alone with God . . .
If you crave those things that are forbidden by God's Word
more than you
crave the things of God . . .
If you are prayerless . . .
If you are powerless . . .
If you hide or run from truth . . .
If, over time, you have not experienced increasing levels of
positive,
moral change in your life . . .
If you regularly feel more shame and guilt than joy and
peace . . .
If you read the Bible as a record of God's voice in the past,
rather than His voice speaking to you right now . . .
If your affection for God has decreased with spiritual matu-
rity . . .
If you resist sharing the gospel with others . . .
If your heart is hard . . .
If you are rarely happy . . .
If your experience with God is not personal or relational . . .
If you continually struggle with doubt and unbelief . . .
If you have no desire to help the poor, oppressed, hungry, or
hurting . . .
If you cannot *feel* God's presence, His touch . . .

If you fear people more than God . . .

Then the Sacred Obsession is missing in your life!

WHEN YOU ARE CONSUMED, to the point of destruction, by the immoral and unholy . . . and then in an instant—not through education or by preaching, but through a prayer of confession—you are consumed by the holy . . . no one can take away or diminish that experience.

It is real.

Yes, I was visibly enthusiastic when I was changed by God thirty years ago. And I am absolutely fiery about Him today! (Sometimes I am even criticized for my childlike joy in Jesus, but I don't mind . . . I certainly wouldn't trade it for a more serious or sad countenance.)

But more than that, I have evidence that there is a compelling, real Sacred Obsession that can fill your soul with more love than you could ever imagine. I have proof.

Better said, I *am* evidence. I *am* proof!

You hold in your hands my most ardent attempt to explain what I've seen, tasted, and experienced . . .

which has *indeed*

stolen my heart,

indwelled me with overwhelming emotion, and

filled me with such divine enthusiasm that I

cannot stop being passionate!

The Sacred Obsession I speak of is undoubtedly the most fulfilling and exhilarating experience of my life. And this statement comes from one who has shamelessly chased after *anything* that would give me—or at least get me closer to—that elusive, satiated “high” I ached to possess. At the end of every chase, I just wanted to *feel* something. And though I chased so hard after that which I thought could satisfy me deeply . . . I always, always found it empty.

On my journey, I discovered that passion knows no bounds. Once you let it in, it takes you prisoner—whether it is holy or unholy. And during my early years, I strayed so far from the holy that I found myself on the brink of a myriad of lifeless, hopeless, passionless pursuits.

I would have never guessed, never believed, nor could I have ever imagined that I would land in a worthless, despicable, self-loathing pile of rejection. So if you are reading this and find yourself in that very place . . . I know you were never expecting to find yourself there either.

In the last year, I’ve put my ear to the ground and listened to hundreds of stories. Actually they are really confessions from every type of person—eighteen to eighty—of every economic status, race, and religion. And it has compelled me to write this book because I ache when I see them tasting and touching the experiences they mistakenly think will bring them pleasure.

When I consider their surroundings, educational achievements and graduate degrees, material possessions, personal accomplishments, professional positions, financial status, or well-known acquaintances . . . they *should* be happy. They should be free. They should be bursting with excitement. They should be effective. They should be full of integrity, strong in character. They should be *in love* with God. They should be—but they are not.



You cannot imagine how many people I meet who say they know God but are . . .

broken and confused,
hiding their true selves,
addicted to a substance,
involved in emotional affairs,
extremely overweight and battling with food
every day,
defiantly bitter about something,
angry and easily able to wound with their words,
abused, trapped, and desperate,
obsessed with the illicit,
habitual liars,

too self-centered to love those who need them, and
consumed with chasing after the unholy.

They've believed the lie

that the sacred is not enough.

Instead of being obsessed with the sacred . . .

instead of loving God and others with intimacy and
intention,

instead of being free to dance on the inside *or*
outside,

instead of being able to laugh with pure joy and lift
their hands with extreme freedom,

instead of caring for the needs of others with selfless
abandon,

instead of being aware of God's presence when

His blanket of comfort or power comes over
them . . .

they are numb.

That was me. Is that you as well?

Then this book is for you.

OF THIS I AM SURE: What you chase after, you become . . .
whether it is holy or unholy.

She was unhappily married. She had been unhappily married
since the beginning.

Her expectations were shattered shortly after the honeymoon. Her extremely good-looking husband was, in fact, a very troubled man. He had struggled with numerous addictions at one time, although before the marriage they seemed to be under control.

But year after year, they grew more insidious. The hiding, the manipulating, the arguing, the lying became unbearable.

Her job was fulfilling. She could smile and enjoy working with healthy people; her work was an escape from her home life. Her boss was a fine man of great character. He was kind to everyone. He was the type of man she wished she had married.

It started with a touch. Her thoughtful, sensitive boss laid his hand on her shoulder to comfort her. She brought in some baked goods for the office. He offered a bit of counsel, innocently advising her on how to handle a disappointment. She worked later into the evenings when he needed an extra hand with an upcoming project. He seemed to welcome her kind words of encouragement rather than steer their relationship back toward a professional tone.

IF YOU THINK THIS CAN'T HAPPEN to you, think again. This is actually the story of a friend of mine. I thought it could never happen . . .

One night they were alone in the office. She stopped by his office and sat down to visit. The peace and quiet in a normally bustling office was oddly comforting. They laughed together. The emotional tension turned sensual rather quickly. He stood up and closed the door. They embraced.

There were so many times she could have stopped the chase. But she didn't . . . and she found herself swept into a terrible trap and a shameful situation, chased and caught by the illicit.

Her life became redefined by her secret passion. Her daily schedule would revolve around their private trysts. Her mind would no longer focus on the real and urgent priorities in her life but would always be swept into thoughts of him and when they'd meet again. Others noticed that she was different, that she had become a different person in some way, distant and private.

What you chase after, you become . . .

He had hidden it for years. Not days or months, but years.

He was a leader in his community. Not a follower, but a leader. He was in charge of uniting others on the campus; he was known by all, seen as a spiritual force.

He knew he struggled, but at this point, to reveal his secret would undermine his image as a spiritual leader. He

continually fought the battle in his mind but daily lost the fight to abstain. He felt shame and guilt and helplessness, yet he could not stop returning to the dark place in the late hours of the night where he would satisfy his most unholy passions.

Very smart—in fact, extremely intelligent—he was absolutely aware that living a double life would never allow him to accomplish his goals. He stayed back from the spotlight, though urged by many to step up. He could not step up because he lacked confidence; he feared exposure. The darkness was so alluring, he could not leave it for the light. Though his heart begged him . . . his mind would not stop the voyeuristic night-hour adventures.

In time, it became more and more obsessive, desiring to consume more than the dark, late hours of his nights. Even during his days, he began to think differently, his mind focusing on the illicit images and thoughts and words of his private darkness. There seemed to be no escape.

What you chase after, you become . . .

How could something so natural become so destructive?

It started simply as a quick way to melt away sad feelings. Then it became a method of controlling her environment, of becoming more perfect in her own and others' eyes. It was her way of feeling comfort. It was an unconscious way to call for help without calling.

I DON'T TOTALLY UNDERSTAND the dynamics of every addiction, but I do intimately understand the relentless pursuit of that which gets a hold on you—almost to the point of complete destruction. And I'm guessing that you understand addictive, compulsive obsessions too. You've felt their impact on yourself or someone you love. And you know if you don't do whatever it takes to get the addiction out of your life, it will consume everything you love. Everything you are.

Eventually it became a competition with others and even a way to feel “better than” other women. So many people would give her compliments about how terrific she looked that she strived to hear more by eating less.

She didn't see it as harmful to herself—or for that matter, to anyone else. It was her business. It was her body. It made her happy inside to feel attractive. But it took a lot of effort to eat when people were looking, without gaining weight.

At first no one noticed . . . at first. But when people began to question her about when she last ate, why she was cutting her food into such small pieces, or how much she'd eaten for lunch . . . she got frustrated with all of them. She had wanted them to notice her before—but they were too busy with their lives. And though it wasn't the kind

of attention she wanted, she was starting to get attention now.

Unfortunately, it was never satisfying. Eating food or going without food produced the same result—either choice left her feeling empty and wanting more. It was a vicious, unending circle, and she could not find a way out. Debilitated, humiliated, obsessive, and compulsive, she landed in a heap at a doctor's office.

Whatever you chase after, you become . . .

HER FIRST DRINK was a six-pack, actually. She drank more than anyone else that night. And this became a pattern that would emerge over the next few days, weeks, and months. She proceeded to drink—passing out and blacking out every time she drank—all within the first few months of taking up her new social hobby. The history of alcoholism went deep into her past—father, aunt, grandfather—but it never registered with her as having any relevance or connection to her young life.

SHE WAS JUST HAVING FUN. She just wanted to be popular.

What started as a fun pastime grew into a lifestyle. She was certainly not alone—everyone was doing it. Everyone enjoyed a drink on the weekend.

Then she hit a car while drinking and driving. Convincing the juvenile authorities that this wasn't a habit, she talked her way out of any legal repercussions and graduated a year early from high school to get away from all the strict, controlling people in her life.

College life was exceptionally fun . . . at first. Drinking every night became a ritual. It didn't matter with whom or where or when . . . soon it was every day, not just every night. By spring quarter, she drank with the biggest of drinkers. Statistics show that girls who drink more are more likely to be involved sexually. And she was . . . although not intentionally. At first it was innocent teasing, but later it turned into almost being gang-raped. That was enough of a scare for her to leave school . . . but not to stop drinking.

Nightly drinking escapades almost always turned into sexual encounters . . . first with dates, then with friends of friends, and finally with strangers. It eventually took its toll. One addiction turned into another—drugs entered the picture. And a downward spiral into shame and self-hate and depression, aided by anesthetizing drugs and alcohol, ended in another, more serious car accident, a hospital visit, and a court hearing—all by the age of twenty-one.

What had begun innocently enough as an athletic, smart teenager's desire to lead a fun, exciting life had become—in

only six short years—a sad, suicidal-plagued existence hanging by a thread. Chasing after alcohol had turned her into an alcoholic.

What you chase after, you become . . .

I KNOW THIS TO BE TRUE because this last story is my story.

I chased after a “high” to escape the pain of my reality. I found it first in one substance that led to another and ended in a combination of drugs and alcohol. My thirst for excitement still unquenched, I pursued security and love by living with a boyfriend. To get to deeper places and higher highs, I had to turn away from what was good, true, and right to chase after what I thought would make me happy, fulfilled.

OF THIS I AM SURE. What you chase after, you become—whether it is holy or unholy.

I made intentional decisions to chase, pursue, go after what I wanted. But to do so . . . I had to leave my family, experiment with the forbidden, and risk my reputation. All to possess what I thought would fill my needs for pleasure and excitement . . . anything that would make my nerve endings tingle . . . and make me *feel* passion.



THOSE OF US WHO WIND UP in a heap at a doctor's office, in a court hearing for doing something illegal, or ostracized from our families because we've shamed them don't ever really *think* about where the chase will end. In fact, it is as if we consciously choose to turn off the part of us that thinks . . . to follow that which feels.

Perhaps you don't buy the idea that what you chase after, you become.

Then just look at how much time you spend doing it, or even more telling—how much time you spend thinking about it, strategizing, manipulating or hiding the truth from others, even lying in order to protect . . . your very own unholy passion.

Perhaps there is a lie you do buy? You believe you are entitled to chase after that which you think will make you feel alive—full of real, living, passionate feelings.

But *you* know, just as *I* knew, that these things or persons—pornography, illicit sexual relationships, greed—don't make you more alive . . . they make you numb. They actually *steal* from you. They steal your joy, your peace, even your money! They *use* you. They *take* from you. Eventually (sooner, rather than later) they will ruin your reputation, smother any affection you might have for God, and ultimately destroy your purpose for living.

These things take *you* from *you*. They change you—they transform you—into what you are chasing!

Alcohol transformed me into an alcoholic. What a shock, eh? Yet I could not see it or identify myself with it. I refused to believe it possessed me. I would not call myself by that name . . . because I did not want to give up that which brought me a certain measure of escape and pleasure . . . though oh, so temporary.

I honestly believed I would miss out on something exciting or soothing or sensual if I stopped drinking. In reality, I was attempting—hourly—to escape, hide, and anesthetize my pain. I thought I was chasing after pleasure, but I was really running from pain.

It's crazy. It doesn't make sense logically, but by the time you are consumed by something, you don't think logically. Others can see you acting stupid or placing incredible importance on something unrealistic. Others can see you reaching for nothing or protecting your right to something so insignificant, yet to you—it is worth losing everything for . . .

Take pizza, for example. There is no need whatsoever to eat a whole pizza—or to eat more than a few pieces. You can always buy another pizza tomorrow. But most of us, alone with a pizza—a really good, tasty, cheesy pizza—find it almost impossible to stop eating when we are full. Yet the initial satisfying taste in our mouths eventually turns into a

full, too full, upset stomach from the very same pizza that we loved at first bite.

PERHAPS YOU DON'T THINK you are chasing after that which is dangerous or even deadly.

Same with a drug, a forbidden relationship, a vile image—they seduce us with their promise of pleasure, only to take us to a place of remorse and shame. Yet remorse and shame are not enough to stop the repetition. We come back for more . . . though we know how it will end.

Can you see? We are all enticed toward that which is forbidden—the illicit, the immoral, the unholy. They are determined to have a strong, strange hold on anyone who will give them attention. They almost have a voice. And as they call you to come to them, deep inside there is another voice begging you not to listen, not to pay attention.



MY WITTY, BRILLIANT YOUNG PASTOR recently taught on the subject of Money, Sex, and Power, challenging those of us in the infamous OC (Orange County, California) with this question, “What has your affection and attention more than God? Is it money or sex or . . . ?”