THE QUESTION

How did early Christians describe the struggle against lust and sexual temptation?

Asked by a THF member on August 15, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 11 numbered quotations · the 62 early Christian passages and 137 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/how-did-early-christians-describe-the-struggle-against-lust-and-sexual

The short answer *From the text: says what the passages say*

Early Christians described lust as a fire and a war inside a person. It starts with the eyes and thoughts, pulls the soul toward evil, and can take a person captive. They also taught that God limits every temptation, and that believers resist it with the fear of God, prayer and fasting.

LIBRARY ONLY	This study was written only from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed at the back, with a link to read it.
HOW IT WAS MADE	Compiled by machine learning from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible only. Every quotation was matched word for word against our stored text. Not yet reviewed by The Historic Faith.
SHARING WITH AN AI?	Every quotation here comes from The Historic Faith's library. If you paste this study into an AI, anything it adds beyond these pages comes from that AI, not from us.

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POINT 1 OF 8

The fight begins in the eyes and thoughts

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Theophilus says God's word forbids sin not only in deeds but in thoughts and lustful looks. Hippolytus adds that a person who looks at a woman with desire does not come away clean, even if he escapes the act.

1 “About chastity, the holy word teaches us not only not to sin by our actions, but not even in our thoughts.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Theophilus of Antioch,** *To Autolycus* 13 (c. 169–183 AD) **Source 9, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

2 “For he who looks upon a woman, even though he escapes the temptation, does not come away pure of all lust.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hippolytus,** *Exegetical Fragments* 1 (c. 200–236 AD) **Source 24, page 8** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 8

Desire is a fire held close

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Hippolytus compares desire to fire and the body to a garment that easily catches. Letting an impure thought stay in the heart is like carrying fire against your chest. Job's covenant with his eyes shows the wise way to guard against it.

3 “So that you may not say, "What harm is there in the eyes, when there is no necessity that he who looks should be perverted?" he shows you that desire is a fire, and the flesh is like a garment. The latter is easy prey, and the former is a tyrant.”

later in the same passage

“And, figuratively speaking, he keeps a fire in his breast who permits an impure thought to dwell in his heart.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hippolytus,** *Exegetical Fragments* 1 (c. 200–236 AD) **Source 24, page 8** Read it in the library ›
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POINT 3 OF 8

It feels like two laws at war

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Methodius, reading Romans 7, describes the inner struggle. One law in us agrees with the good; another, stirred by evil, pulls the soul toward lustful thoughts. Whichever side grows stronger carries the whole mind with it.

4 "Another law comes from the attack of evil, and it often draws the soul into lustful thoughts."

later in the same passage

"When what is naturally better is about to become stronger than what is worse, the whole mind is carried toward what is good. But when what is worse grows and outweighs the better, a man is instead pushed toward evil thoughts."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Methodius,** *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* (c. 270–311 AD) **Source 47, page 9** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 8

The soul can feel dragged along

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Athenagoras describes how bodily desires press on the soul, sometimes overpowering it and sometimes pulling it hard. The letter to Diognetus also pictures the flesh warring against the soul because the soul denies it pleasures.

5 "Sometimes the soul is overpowered and carried off. At other times it is drawn very violently."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Athenagoras,** *Resurrection of the Dead* 21 (c. 170–190 AD) **Source 11, page 7** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

6 "The flesh hates the soul and wars against it, though it suffers no harm, because it is prevented from enjoying pleasures; the world also hates Christians, though it is not harmed, because they reject pleasures."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Mathetes,** *Epistle to Diognetus* (c. 80–200 AD) **Source 2, page 6** Read it in the library ›

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POINT 5 OF 8

Being tempted is not the same as falling

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Dionysius of Alexandria draws a clear line. A person who is overcome is led away like a captive. But a person who resists and endures has been tempted without falling into temptation. Feeling the pull is not itself defeat.

7

"Well, if a person is overcome by evil—and he will be overcome unless he struggles against it himself, and unless God protects him with His shield—that person has entered into temptation and is in it, and is brought under it like someone led away captive."

later in the same passage

"But if a person resists and endures, that person is indeed tempted, but he has not entered into temptation or fallen into it."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Dionysius of Alexandria,** *Exegetical Fragments* 1 (c. 232–265 AD) **Source 32, page 8** **Read it in the library ›**

THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 8

God matches each struggle to our strength

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Origen says some sins rise from the natural movements of the body. Like a fair judge at the games, God sets each person against temptations suited to his strength. People differ in which temptation they fight and for how long.

8

"There has no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able.""

later in the same passage

"So one person fights against one temptation of the flesh, another against a second."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 2 (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 27, page 8** **Read it in the library ›**

THF's updated English

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POINT 7 OF 8

Resist it armed with the fear of God

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Hermas names desire for another person's spouse as an evil desire that kills. Those who give in without resisting perish. But when evil desire meets a believer armed with the fear of God, it runs away.

9 “Arm yourself with the fear of the Lord, and resist them.”

later in the same passage

“But if evil desire sees you armed with the fear of God and resisting it, it will flee far from you.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hermas,** *Shepherd* (c. 90–150 AD) **Source 3, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

POINT 8 OF 8

Watch, pray and fast for help

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Polycarp urges believers to keep watch in prayer, keep fasting, and ask God not to lead them into temptation, because the flesh is weak. An early liturgy admits our weakness and asks God for a way to stand firm.

10 “Therefore, forsaking the vanity of many and their false doctrines, let us return to the word which has been handed down to us from the beginning; watching unto prayer, and persevering in fasting; beseeching in our supplications the all-seeing God not to lead us into temptation, as the Lord has said: 'The spirit truly is willing, but the flesh is weak.'"”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Polycarp,** *Epistle to the Philippians* (c. 100–155 AD) **Source 6, page 6** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

11 “Grant that we may find a way by which we may be able to withstand temptation.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Early Liturgies,** *Divine Liturgy of St. Mark* 1 (c. 200–400 AD) **Source 23, page 7** Read it in the library ›

THF's updated English

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THE LIMITS

What these passages don’t tell us

- These passages describe the struggle in general terms and do not give step-by-step advice for a particular person's situation.
- Several passages speak of temptation or desire broadly, not only of sexual desire.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 62 early Christian passages and 137 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–62, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 63–67, in Bible order), then 132 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF’s updated English unless marked “1885 English” (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). “… [continues online]” marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *62 passages from 22 writers*

Didache, *c. 50–120 AD · source 1*

1 *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 1 “those who curse you, and pray for your enemies, and fast for those who persecute you. For what reward is there if you love those who love you? Do not… [continues online] **read ›**

Mathetes, *c. 80–200 AD · source 2*

2 *Epistle to Diognetus* **Quote 6, page 3** “flesh hates the soul and wars against it, though… [continues online] **read ›**

Hermas, *c. 90–150 AD · sources 3–5*

3 *Shepherd* **Quote 9, page 5** luxuries. For all luxury is foolish and empty in the servants of God. These, then, are the evil desires that kill the servants of God. For this evil desire is… [continues online] **read ›**

4 *Shepherd* (1885 English; on point 7) “then, sir, I said, if these men, being such as they are, repent and put away their desires after these women, and return again to the virgins, and walk in… [continues online] **read ›**

5 *Shepherd* (1885 English; on point 7) “wicked desire is wild, and is with difficulty tamed… [continues online] **read ›**

Polycarp, *c. 100–155 AD · sources 6–7*

6 *Epistle to the Philippians* **Quote 10, page 5** testimony of the cross is of the devil; and whoever perverts the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts and says that there is neither a resurrection nor a… [continues online] **read ›**

7 *Epistle to the Philippians* (1885 English; on point 4) “it is well that they should be cut off from the lusts that are in the world, since “every lust warreth against the spirit;” and “neither fornicators, nor effeminate, nor… [continues online] **read ›**

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Justin Martyr, *c. 130–165 AD · source 8*

8 *On the Resurrection, Fragments* (1885 English; on point 4) “true, say they; yet the flesh is a sinner, so much so, that it forces the soul to sin along with it… [continues online] **read ›**

Theophilus of Antioch, *c. 169–183 AD · sources 9–10*

9 *To Autolycus* 13 **Quote 1, page 2** “our thoughts. We must not even think any evil in our hearts, or look at another man's wife with lust in our eyes. So Solomon, who was a king… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *To Autolycus* 12 (1885 English) “even men of temperance abstain from all base pleasure and wicked lust… [continues online] **read ›**

Athenagoras, *c. 170–190 AD · sources 11–12*

11 *Resurrection of the Dead* 21 **Quote 5, page 3** “faults it committed after being urged by the body and drawn away by it to its own desires and movements. Sometimes the soul is overpowered and carried off. At other… [continues online] **read ›**

12 *A Plea for the Christians* 33 (on point 1) “you would find many among us, both men and women, growing old unmarried, in hope of living in closer communion with God… [continues online] **read ›**

Irenaeus, *c. 175–202 AD · sources 13–14*

13 *Against Heresies: Book IV* (1885 English; on point 1) “And for this reason did the Lord, instead of that [commandment], “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” forbid even concupiscence… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Against Heresies: Book V* forms the spiritual person. However, those who reject the Spirit's guidance and are slaves to fleshly lusts, living lives contrary to reason, and who recklessly pursue their own desires… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 15–20*

15 *Stromata* 4.8 (on point 4) “the flesh lusts against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh… [continues online] **read ›**

16 *Stromata* 3 created. Let both give thanks in the state in which they have been placed, if indeed they also know the state in which they have been placed. But others have… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *Instructor* 3.1 (1885 English) “lust becomes and fabricates all things, and wishes to cheat, so as to conceal the man… [continues online] **read ›**

18 *Stromata* 6.16 (1885 English; on point 4) “the flesh lusts against the Spirit, Galatians 5:17 and excites to disorderly conduct against nature… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Instructor* 3.2 (1885 English; on point 1) “Lust not; or, Travel not by lust into adultery… [continues online] **read ›**

20 *Stromata* 6.16 (1885 English; on point 4) “the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. Galatians 5:17… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · source 21*

21 *On the Apparel of Women* 2.2 (1885 English; on point 1) “that other, as soon as he has felt concupiscence after your beauty, and has mentally already committed (the deed) which his concupiscence pointed to, perishes… [continues online] **read ›**

Early Liturgies, *c. 200–400 AD · sources 22–23*

22 *Divine Liturgy of St. Mark* 1 (on point 8) in fullness of joy, health, safety, holiness, and reverence for You. But all envy, all fear, all temptation, all the influence of Satan, all the snares of wicked men, do… [continues online] **read ›**

23 *Divine Liturgy of St. Mark* 1 **Quote 11, page 5** “Lord, Lord, do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Your abundant mercy shows that, because of our great weakness, we are unable to resist it… [continues online] **read ›**

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Hippolytus, *c. 200–236 AD · sources 24–26*

24 *Exegetical Fragments* 1 **Quotes 2, 3, page 2** “he who looks upon a woman, even though he… [continues online] **read ›**

25 *Exegetical Fragments* 1 (1885 English; on point 2) “this, therefore, he compares the man who gives himself up to the harlot on account of his immoderate lust… [continues online] **read ›**

26 *Exegetical Fragments* 1 (1885 English; on point 2) “also sin, being one, contains within it many various lusts by which it lays its snares for men… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 27–30*

27 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 2 **Quote 8, page 4** “being able to be tempted by trials greater than human ones, since it is said of us, “There has no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man… [continues online] **read ›**

28 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 2 (1885 English; on point 6) “are we to suppose, then, in our appetite for sexual intercourse, or in the restraint of our natural desires, our condition is not something similar… [continues online] **read ›**

29 *Commentary on Matthew* 14 (1885 English; on point 4) “5:17 but in the case of those who have now become perfected, the spirit has gained the mastery and put to death the deeds of the body, and imparts… [continues online] **read ›**

30 *De Principiis (On First Principles)* 1 (1885 English; on point 5) “to take an instance, a woman who has appeared before a man that has determined to be chaste, and to refrain from carnal intercourse, and who has incited him to… [continues online] **read ›**

Dionysius of Alexandria, *c. 232–265 AD · sources 31–34*

31 *Exegetical Fragments* 1 (on point 8) “Again, He taught them to pray that they might not fall into temptation when He said, "And lead us not into temptation… [continues online] **read ›**

32 *Exegetical Fragments* 1 **Quote 7, page 4** “He did not drive him into temptation… [continues online] **read ›**

33 *Exegetical Fragments* 2 (1885 English; on point 4) “the flesh, when luxuriously nurtured, wars against the soul, and rises in revolt against the spirit… [continues online] **read ›**

34 *Exegetical Fragments* 1 (1885 English; on point 5) “and pray, lest you enter into temptation… [continues online] **read ›**

Gregory Thaumaturgus, *c. 240–270 AD · sources 35–36*

35 *Metaphrase of Ecclesiastes* 7 (1885 English; on point 4) “being seized with a fatal passion, I knew woman— that she is like a snare or some such other object… [continues online] **read ›**

36 *Metaphrase of Ecclesiastes* 2 (1885 English; on point 1) “when I yielded myself to every allurement of the eyes, and to the violent passions of the heart, that make their attack from all quarters, and surrendered myself to the… [continues online] **read ›**

Cyprian, *c. 248–258 AD · sources 37–40*

37 *Treatises* (1885 English; on point 4) “there is a daily strife as they disagree one with the other, so that we cannot do those very things that we would, in that the spirit seeks heavenly and… [continues online] **read ›**

38 *Treatises* (1885 English; on point 1) “presents to the eyes seductive forms and easy pleasures, that he may destroy chastity by the sight… [continues online] **read ›**

39 *Treatises* also adds and says, "For those who are Christ's have crucified their flesh, with its faults and lusts" Galatians 5:24. And she who claims that she has renounced… [continues online] **read ›**

40 *Epistles* (1885 English; on point 4) “2:15 And similarly Peter exhorts: As strangers, says he, and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul, having your conversation honest among the Gentiles… [continues online] **read ›**

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Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 41–44*

41 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) “when you have committed lewdness with one man, and beginnest to despair, you will again turn away from your duty, and follow others, and grow past feeling… [continues online] **read ›**

42 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) “from fleshly and worldly lusts. If any one gives you a stroke on your right cheek, turn to him the other also… [continues online] **read ›**

43 *Apostolic Constitutions* (on point 1) “of adultery with you. Yet you are not as guilty, because you did not send for her, though she was ensnared by you, nor did you desire her. Since, therefore… [continues online] **read ›**

44 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English) “again: Do not hearken to a wicked woman… [continues online] **read ›**

Commodianus, *c. 250–300 AD · source 45*

45 *Writings* (1885 English; on point 7) “precipitates you, there is war; fight with it… [continues online] **read ›**

Methodius, *c. 270–311 AD · sources 46–48*

46 *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* (on point 3) “in the law of the devil according to the lust… [continues online] **read ›**

47 *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* **Quote 4, page 3** the law of the mind. Another law comes from the attack of evil, and it often draws the soul into lustful thoughts. He says this law wars against the law… [continues online] **read ›**

48 *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* (on point 3) “was not a life without a body, but a life with a body, as we showed above. For we lived without lust, being completely unaware of its attacks. For when… [continues online] **read ›**

Lactantius, *c. 290–320 AD · sources 49–52*

49 *Divine Institutes* 25 (1885 English; on point 4) “we have one great and principal struggle to maintain with the flesh, the boundless desires of which press upon the soul, nor allow it to retain dominion, but make it… [continues online] **read ›**

50 *Divine Institutes* 1 (1885 English; on point 4) “rather, in chains and fetters they are enslaved to the nod of desire, their mistress, which has ensnared them with inextricable bonds… [continues online] **read ›**

51 *Divine Institutes* 20 (1885 English; on point 4) “being enslaved to its desires and lusts, they contract an indelible stain and earthly blot… [continues online] **read ›**

52 *Divine Institutes* 24 (1885 English; on point 4) “when men have tasted sweet pleasures to their destruction, they can scarcely be separated from them: they would more easily follow right things if they had not tasted their attractions… [continues online] **read ›**

Peter of Alexandria, *c. 300–311 AD · sources 53–55*

53 *Genuine Acts of Peter* (1885 English; on point 3) “in the law of the devil according to the lust which dwells in the flesh… [continues online] **read ›**

54 *Genuine Acts of Peter* (on point 3) mind. Another is the law that comes from the attack of evil, and it often pulls the soul toward lustful thoughts. This, he says, wars against the law of the… [continues online] **read ›**

55 *Genuine Acts of Peter* (on point 3) “he may justly be approved or blamed, he is considered free from accusation. Because no one can lust after things from which he is not restrained; and even if he… [continues online] **read ›**

John Chrysostom, *c. 386–407 AD · sources 56–62*

56 *Homilies on Romans* (on point 3) “yet if the flesh were evil, the Law would be good… [continues online] **read ›**

57 *Homilies on Romans* (1885 English; on point 4) “again, he does not mean flesh absolutely, but such sort of flesh, that which was in a whirl and thraldom of passions… [continues online] **read ›**

58 *Homilies on Romans* or acting with evil intent. And he does not even place this weakness on the Law, but on the flesh, as he says, "in that it was weak through the… [continues online] **read ›**

59 *Homilies on First Thessalonians* (on point 4) “what foolishness is this—not to think that the present time is a season of war—when Paul cries out, "Yes, and all who want to live godly in Christ… [continues online] **read ›**

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60 *Homilies on Acts* (1885 English) “he comforted himself, that for chastity's sake he had fallen into it: there he had been in dread, lest he should receive a death-blow to his soul: for… [continues online] **read ›**

61 *Homilies on the Statues* 15 (1885 English; on point 1) “has become already an adulterer according to the declaration of Christ… [continues online] **read ›**

62 *Commentary on Galatians* 5 (1885 English; on point 4) “17. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, for these are contrary the one to the other: that you may not do the things… [continues online] **read ›**

THE BIBLE *5 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

63 **Job 31:1** I made a covenant with my eyes, and I will not think upon a virgin. **read ›**

64 **Matthew 5:28** but I tell you that everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. **read ›**

65 **Matthew 26:41** Watch and pray, that you do not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” **read ›**

66 **Romans 7:23** but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members. **read ›**

67 **1 Corinthians 10:13** No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humanity. But God is faithful, and he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able to bear. With the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, so that you may be able to endure it. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *132 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Deuteronomy 30:15

Proverbs 2:16 · 4:25 · 6:27

Ecclesiastes 2:16

Jeremiah 21:8

Matthew 5:17 · 5:26 · 5:29 · 5:31 · 5:32 · 5:39 · 5:40 · 5:41 · 5:42 · 5:44 · 5:45 · 5:46 · 6:13 · 7:12 · 7:14 · 10:5 · 10:28 · 12:36 · 18:6 · 18:7 · 19:3 · 19:5 · 19:9 · 19:12 · 19:19 · 20:28 · 22:37 · 22:39 · 26:24 · 27:5

Mark 10:11 · 10:43 · 12:30 · 12:31 · 12:32 · 14:38

Luke 6:27 · 6:29 · 6:30 · 6:31 · 6:32 · 10:27 · 16:9 · 16:18

John 1:8 · 4:3 · 10:11 · 12:6 · 17:11

Acts 1:18 · 20:38

Romans 2:24 · 4:11 · 7:7 · 7:8 · 7:9 · 7:12 · 7:13 · 7:14 · 7:15 · 7:19 · 7:22 · 7:25 · 8:2 · 10:10 · 13:9 · 13:14

1 Corinthians 3:11 · 3:23 · 5:7 · 5:11 · 6:9 · 6:13 · 6:16 · 7:3 · 7:5 · 7:10 · 7:14 · 10:24 · 11:1 · 11:3 · 13:5

2 Corinthians 5:1 · 10:5

Galatians 2:19 · 5:14 · 5:16 · 5:17 · 5:22 · 6:7

Ephesians 2:3 · 4:22 · 5:5 · 6:12 · 6:13

Philippians 1:27 · 2:4 · 2:7 · 4:8

1 Thessalonians 5:23

1 Timothy 3:2 · 3:8 · 4:1 · 5:9

2 Timothy 2:12

Titus 1:6 · 1:15

Hebrews 1:3 · 5:14 · 10:33 · 11:1

James 4:1

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1 Peter 1:14 · 1:21 · 2:11 · 3:13 · 4:7

2 Peter 1:20 · 2:4

1 John 1:1 · 1:8 · 2:22 · 4:2 · 4:3

2 John 1:7

Jude 1:3

Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

A THF member asked “How did early Christians describe the struggle against lust and sexual temptation?” on August 15, 2026. The Historic Faith answered it as a public study on November 9, 2026.

Library only. This study was written only from The Historic Faith’s library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed above, with a link to read it.

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