

NEW LIFE

My Story of Overcoming Mental Illness



With Biblical Teaching About Battling Spiritual Strongholds

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Chapter 1: My Testimony of Battling Darkness

I can't remember a time in my life when I wasn't struggling to with having dark thoughts. I don't want to overshare, but I will say that since my toddler years, I struggled with sexual desires that were perverse. For all I know, I was born with them. I felt innately embarrassed and ashamed of these thoughts, and so I never shared them with anyone.

These desires led to me having a pretty dark fantasy life throughout my childhood. And there was a particular lie I believed that caused me to remain silent until I was an adult.

"You are the only one in the world struggling with these thoughts. Nobody else thinks the way you do. You are weird, and you are alone. Don't tell your mom or dad. And don't tell your husband. Don't let anyone know how weird you are."

I now know that this was a lie straight from the pit of hell, but this belief shaped my childhood and my self-esteem. Believing I was weird made me insecure throughout my life. I truly thought I was the only one in the world, and because I grew up so sheltered, it wasn't until college that I realized I was not alone.

In the midst of my struggle and false beliefs, there was a simple verse that gave me hope that maybe - just maybe - I was not the only one. Throughout my childhood, this verse always held a special meaning for me.

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

- 1 Corinthians 10:13 NIV

This verse promises us that we are never alone in temptation. No matter what you are struggling with and no matter how alone you feel, there is someone else struggling with the same thing. They may not talk about it because, like you, they are ashamed of their struggle. But this is why I'm so passionate about being open with my own story. I want others who struggle as I did to know that they are not alone. And I want people to know that they can find freedom - even if that feels impossible.

Seeking Out a Solution to My Struggle

I learned I was not alone in my struggle when I took a college course at a local county college. My sociology teacher really wanted to be teaching human sexuality, so often he would start talking about sexual things in class. I learned there that my desires were pretty common, and that many people didn't even view them as being wrong.

There were times in my college life where I believed these desires might be okay, but I could never seem to shake the feeling that they weren't coming from a good place. At some point, and I honestly can't remember when or how this happened, I started to explore the possibility that they came from demonic bondage.

Shortly after I started to explore this possibility, I had a pretty intense and scary experience. One night, I had a dream that a medium was calling up spirits. She thought she was speaking to the dead, but I knew she was interacting with demons. When I woke up, I sat up in bed to a terrifying vision: I saw a lake of fire filled with people. Hunched over my bed was a decrepit figure that looked like a demon. He was backlit by the fire, so I didn't work out exactly what he looked like. I thought maybe I was still asleep and hadn't woken up from the dream yet, but my scream woke up my parents downstairs.

This was the start of me having trouble sleeping at night. I was terrified of seeing another demon. I would often comfort myself by reading Psalm 91. I did this so often that I ended up memorizing the chapter.

"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

If you say, "The Lord is my refuge," and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.

"Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with

him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.”

- Psalms 91:1-16 NIV

Shortly after this first dream, I had another. This time, it was a friend of mine pointing to my rib cage area. “You have two demons,” she told me. “You need to get rid of them.”

A False Belief

When I had just recently turned 23, I started to believe something that really altered my thinking, and I believe set me on the path to the mental health episodes I experienced later on. I started believing that God had made me a promise that a certain Christian celebrity was going to be my husband someday.

At first this belief didn’t affect my life too much, but over time I started to believe more and more things about the future that weren’t true. I started to focus more on the future than the present. I was obsessed with dreams and prophecy, to the point where I focused more on the experience of God than the relationship. After a traumatic experience with a narcissistic friend in my later twenties, I became a bit paranoid and started reading up on conspiracy theories on the internet.

My First Episode

Around the age of 30, I had my first episode. It started with a belief that everyone around me was in a cult, including myself, my family, and most of the people I had known through my life. It included people I was friends with at church. I became paranoid about being watched. I started throwing out things in my apartment because I thought they were spyware devices.

I went into church for worship practice, which turned out to be a bad move. While on stage, something in my brain just snapped, and I ran around telling everyone they were going to wake up and that I would come back for them. I ended up running out of the building and walking around the neighborhood on foot. When I returned, a guy from my church had brought my things outside. They wouldn’t let me back in, so I took my things and drove home.

My parents were alerted by my friend that something was wrong and tried to visit me at my apartment. The cops came to do a wellness check, but ended up leaving. At one point, my mania dipped into some darker feelings of despair, and I believed that I was in hell.

Finally, I got in my car and started driving around, asking God to help me. I went back to church, and was met in the parking lot by some folks who wouldn’t let me back in the

building. I left and ended up driving around for a long time. Then I parked my car in a copse of trees and began walking.

At one point, as it was getting dark, I decided I wanted to go home. I was tired of walking and didn't want to sleep outside. I was trying to call my parents on the phone when I was greeted by a police car. They had been looking for me. They took me to a hospital, where I spent a week or two recovering on medication and attending therapy sessions.

The Aftermath of the Episode

While I realized that I had experienced psychosis, only some of the contributing beliefs were gone after I left the hospital. I still believed in my promise and many of the other false beliefs I held. The root of the issue was not gone.

At home, I started reaching out to friends to explain what had happened. I was ghosted by a few of them. Some of them I learned were saying pretty nasty things behind my back. People from my church were saying I was possessed and that I was not a real Christian. I found out from some friends who were still talking to me that the worship team had been told, "On behalf of Lauren's family, we ask that you respect her privacy during this time." But they hadn't talked to me or my family at all.

I texted a leader from my church, who was present on the day, to apologize and explain that I was having a manic episode. No response. I texted his wife the next day, also a leader. She simply told me to check my email, where they had sent a lengthy email listing everything I had done while sick and asking me not to come back. I texted her expressing my hurt and told her that this cold reply was not something I could cope with right now. No response.

It took me about two weeks to get in touch with someone from church, one of the pastors. I ended up chatting with him on the phone. I was brutally honest with him, and he promised to keep what I shared between us. I told him I was wrestling with the demonic. That I didn't realize something like this could happen. That I was non-violent and that my actions stemmed from the episode - not from something I really felt toward our church.

He asked me if I was really a Christian. He then told me that this stuff shouldn't affect me if I was a believer. When I told him I was non-violent, he simply replied, in an almost flippant tone, "Well that's good to know!" His tone implied that of course they would assume I was violent.

The entire time we were talking, I felt somewhat belittled and condescended to. I told him I was hurt by how the leaders wouldn't even respond to my apology, but he told me

he stood by what they did. I told him that they had no right to speak on behalf of my family when they hadn't spoken to us at all. He denied doing it. I asked him why they swept everything under the rug and moved on, without ever checking in on me to see if I was okay. He replied, "We asked the police if you were okay." When I told him I felt like I didn't receive love from them, he told me that they needed space, and sometimes space is painful.

We ended with him telling me to let him know how I was doing. Weeks later, I reached out one more time via email to that pastor specifically. I reiterated that I didn't receive the care that we normally give other members of the congregation when they are going through something. I let him know that I didn't appreciate them encouraging people not to reach out. I apologized again and tried once more to clarify that my actions were not a premeditated plot to hurt anyone, but stemmed from my episode.

The response did not come from that pastor. The response came from the entire team, which bothered me as I had shared some things specifically with him under the promise of confidentiality. They told me that they didn't believe what I had told that pastor. They denied telling people not to contact me. They told me that sometimes an outpouring of love for people looks different than we expect based on the situation. They also said we didn't need to be in agreement to pursue reconciliation. I decided at that point that I couldn't pursue reconciliation with them. I didn't know what part of what I told the pastor they didn't believe, but I knew that I had explained myself as best I could.

I really didn't like that this pastor wouldn't even respond to me as himself - he had to reply to me as a team. I didn't like that they still showed no signs of genuinely caring about how I was doing. And I didn't know how their method of reconciliation was going to affect my mental health at that point. I can't remember my exact reply, but I basically said, "I'm sorry that we disagree," and left it at that.

Moving Away and Forging a New Connection

After the episode, I made the decision to move closer to my job to cut down on the commute. After I moved away, I noticed that some of my close friends that hadn't left me yet became distant and didn't make an effort to keep in touch.

I loved my new apartment and my easier commute, but I started to feel lonely. I had a lot of individual friends from church and work that I truly cared about, but I struggled to find community that took away the lonely feeling.

A few times over the next year, a friend from my old church, Juan, reached out to me to see how I was doing. He was someone I was friends with, but we had never been close. He had stopped going to the church and moved to North Jersey. I found out later he

had heard about what happened from someone that was there. I was always pretty brief with him when he reached out, but at some point, I realized that here was someone offering support, meanwhile other friends had completely ghosted me.

One day, I was in New York City, staying at an Airbnb alone. I had booked this trip for myself so I could relax and write, but I realized that I had only booked one night, not two as I thought. I wasn't totally ready to leave, but I didn't know where to keep my bags if I decided to explore.

I remembered Juan and that he lived near the city. On a whim, I reached out to him via a message on Instagram, asking if he was around. He got back to me quickly. He had just finished work and was available. He knew where he could get free parking, so he came and picked me up. We parked, left my bags in the car, and explored the city.

We ended up going to Madam Tussaud's Wax Museum. I never would have picked something so touristy for myself, but it ended up being so much fun. We then had dinner and talked about what had gone down at church. He drove me back to the train station.

My Second Episode and Falling in Love

This was in February. In March, I had another episode, leading to another hospitalization. This time, my mom and my friend Brianna had to fight to make sure I got the care I needed. While I wasn't happy with them at first, I ended up so grateful to them, especially to Brianna, for the way she showed her love for me and stuck with me through the healing process.

In the aftermath of this episode, I decided to stay on my medication. I hadn't stuck with it the last time, so I determined this time would be different. I also lost another friend, one of my closest. She told me we could be friends again but that I had to get better first. This truly hurt me, more than any other friend I had lost.

But something soon revealed itself to be different. My friend Juan and I decided to hang out again. This time, I visited him in North Jersey. He cooked me dinner, and we walked around outdoors in a local park.

Although I still partially believed the lie about my future marriage, I was starting to see Juan differently, and this hangout really solidified that. I remember telling my good friend from work, "I think I like Juan as more than a friend."

The start of our relationship was challenging, mainly because of what I was going through. I was still reeling from the trauma, and Juan had to learn how to be there for me. Sometimes at first, he didn't believe me when I told him I had forgiven people or

that I was actually healing. Juan is a fixer, and he often felt that his good advice should make things better faster than it did. But as I healed, he realized that I just needed time. Once he understood that, he gave it to me.

We broke up and got back together a few times through our dating relationship. But in January of 2020, we got back together and knew we wanted to get married. And then, as you may recall, a major event changed our trajectory: the COVID pandemic.

Against the desires of my family, I quarantined with Juan. I just didn't think I would be happy if I was stuck away from him for months on end. My therapist supported my decision, but that was really the only person who did. We hadn't planned on getting married so fast, but we ended up engaged and searching for a house. My parents offered to pay money toward our wedding, but I decided to keep the wedding simple and asked to put the money toward a house instead.

Many people probably thought I was getting married because I was pregnant, but that wasn't the case (I did wait until marriage, even though it was a challenge). I knew I wanted to be with Juan for sure, and I wanted to stop living together outside of marriage as quickly as possible. While Juan and I didn't do everything perfectly leading up to our marriage, it ended up being a huge blessing. We bought our home at a low cost with a low interest rate, just before housing prices skyrocketed. We got married and moved in the very same week, and so began our life together.

One Last Episode: The Lies Come Unraveled

About a year into our marriage, something triggered me, and I had another episode of psychosis. I wasn't on my medication at the time, but the real cause was that I started revisiting many of the old lies and conspiracies from before. Since I was not living alone, this episode was caught quickly, and it didn't progress very far before I received help.

It was tough on Juan, but he stood by me. He snuck in my favorite Chic Fil A chicken minis when he visited me, and he talked to my doctors and got me released from the hospital quickly after he saw that I had recovered.

After this episode, I vowed to stay on my medication. However, even on the meds, I would get triggered and start thinking the same old thoughts. I had a few close calls, but I was determined not to go backwards this time. Any time I had a close call, I would take a step back from my thoughts and recenter myself in truth. I would tell Juan I was struggling rather than keep it to myself.

Over time, the lies started to fade. I stopped returning to them so easily. I was able to see why they were false and resist temptation to return to my old way of thinking.

For a long time, I was scared to have a close relationship with God. I felt like so much of my walk with God during the time I wasn't well was twisted by my false beliefs. It took time to be able to read the Bible and pray without feeling triggered or even just reminded of my old way of thinking. Over time, as my healing solidified, I was able to feel more secure in my walk.

I'm Living a New Life

In 2023, something amazing happened. I gave birth to our first child, a daughter who we named Alexa. During my pregnancy, I received some warnings about postpartum psychosis from my doctor. By the grace of God, I remained completely stable mentally throughout my pregnancy and afterward.

I can remember sitting on the couch nursing my daughter one night shortly after coming home from the hospital. I was just feeling so full of joy and overwhelmed by God's goodness. There was a verse going through my head the entire time:

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

- James 1:17

As of writing this draft, we are expecting our second child, a boy. Our hearts and lives are full of joy, and I truly feel like I'm living my best years right now. I am so thankful for the way that God delivered me from my struggle and put my life back together.

Chapter 2: Understanding and Overcoming Strongholds

If you read the Bible, you may have heard the term, “stronghold” used throughout the scriptures in various ways. It is often used in the Old Testament in reference to God, referring to him as a stronghold, or a place of safety. However, in the New Testament, it is also used in reference to Satan and his power.

What exactly is a stronghold? Let’s first look at the definition of the word itself from Oxford Languages. If you search Google, you’ll find Oxford provides two definitions:

1. *a place that has been fortified so as to protect it against attack*
2. *a place where a particular cause or belief is strongly defended or upheld*

With these definitions, you’ll see that a stronghold is not always a bad thing. When the Lord is called a stronghold, it means he is a fortified place of safety for the one who takes refuge in him. And as far as beliefs go, our belief in Jesus and his salvation can be a positive stronghold in our life, bringing us protection and security.

But what if the place of security or strongly defended pattern of thought is secured in something other than Jesus? This is where we get into spiritual strongholds, also commonly referred to as demonic strongholds.

Let’s Talk About Demonic Strongholds

“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

- 2 Corinthians 10:4-5 NIV

A stronghold is any area in your life in which Satan has power over you. Strongholds occur in our thoughts and beliefs. When we are engaging in thinking that isn’t pure, hold beliefs about God that are inaccurate, or commit repeated sins, this gives Satan power over us. In other words, strongholds are places in our own minds that are not right with God.

Before I charge ahead, let me clarify something. Not every stronghold will result in a mental episode, like the one that I experienced. And having a stronghold in your life doesn’t mean that you are demonically possessed, especially if you do have Christ in your heart. There is a difference between being possessed (which means you are completely under the devil’s control) and oppressed (there are just parts of your life that

he controls, because they aren't surrendered to God). But as Christians, we want God to have control over every single area of our life. Any area that is not surrendered to God is under Satan's influence.

What does a stronghold look like? A stronghold is a sinful action or thought pattern that you find yourself repeatedly stuck in. Some sins may be more easily let go of. My dad always tells me that when he first got saved, it was easy for him to stop cursing. And some sins are like that – once we decide we don't want to commit them again, they are easily let go of. But strongholds are more challenging.

The Sin Issues Behind Strongholds

A stronghold could be an addiction to alcohol or pornography; a rageful temper that you take on when you are angered; a mental health struggle such as anxiety, depression, or psychosis; sexual struggles that go against God's design for sex; wrong beliefs about God; or unhealed trauma that affects the way you treat yourself or others.

Here are some underlying sin issues that can contribute to the formation of a demonic stronghold:

- Obsession with dark things (horror, dark themes in entertainment, gore, etc)
- Wrong thinking about God (trying to know future, disregarding parts of the Bible, adding to scripture)
- Sexual struggles (pornography, sexual desires that go against God's design for sex, dark sexual desires)
- Participation in witchcraft or divination
- Unhealed trauma that is not dealt with and surrendered to the Lord
- Unforgiveness leading to bitterness, anger, and rage that is not controlled
- Hyper focused on the devil rather than focusing on bringing glory to God

This list is not comprehensive. But you know yourself. What is that struggle that you seem to keep coming back to time after time? This could be where the devil has some power over you.

How Do We Overcome Strongholds?

In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes that strongholds are overcome when we "demolish any pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

It's not coincidental that right after mentioning strongholds, Paul talks about taking every thought captive - and about the knowledge of God. Strongholds are directly connected to our thought life. What we think and believe about God, the fantasies we entertain, and the things we dedicate our mental energy to have a very real impact on us. What we think about eventually flows into our actions and speech. What we think about becomes evident to everyone else by what manifests in our life.

I used to believe that my thought life didn't have much effect on me. But the years of perverse sexual thoughts that I wrestled with as a child ended up catching up with me. My interest in conspiracy theories ended up leading to my mental health struggles. You can't escape from the consequences of your thought life. You may think you can, especially if the consequences haven't shown up in your life yet. But one way or another, whether in this life or the next, you will be facing the ramifications of what you think about.

"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."

- Proverbs 4:23 NIV

Demolishing Strongholds in Christians: An Act of Warfare

In the Old Testament, you'll see strongholds referred to often in warfare. When soldiers want to overthrow a city, part of that involves destroying the strongholds, or fortified places that are built into that city.

"With a blinding flash he destroys the stronghold and brings the fortified city to ruin."

- Amos 5:9 NIV

When the Lord seeks to overcome Satan's influence over us, he must destroy the fortified places where Satan has established security and power in our lives. He must destroy every stronghold, or places where our wrong beliefs and thought patterns are so engrained in us that Satan holds all the power in that area.

The most complete guide to approaching warfare for believers is in Ephesians, where Paul talks about the Armor of God. We will be talking about that more in depth later on in this writing!

Demolishing Strongholds in Unbelievers: You Can't Be Free Without Jesus

For the believer, we are promised freedom from strongholds. We find this freedom when we pray for it, renew our minds, and put on the armor of God. But for those that

don't know Jesus, they cannot be free from their struggle. If you find an unbeliever who is struggling with a demonic stronghold, focus simply on leading them to the Lord.

Here's a passage that explains why we should focus on salvation first. These are the words of Jesus:

"When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first."

- Matthew 12:43-45 NIV

Jesus says in Matthew 12 that if people are set free without receiving the Holy Spirit in place of the demon, more will return. Freedom comes when they are saved and filled with the Holy Spirit, leaving the "house" (aka the person's soul) occupied and protected.

What About Generational Sin?

"You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me..."

- Exodus 20:5 NIV

We can inherit demonic bondage from our parents due to sins committed by our ancestors. A lot of people who talk about deliverance talk about being free from generational curses. This is something I wondered about when I was seeking freedom from my struggles.

There was a night in particular where I was sitting in my car reading a book about deliverance, and I wondered if there was anything in my family line I needed to pray about. That night, I had a dream about a specific ancestor of mine, and I just saw this darkness surrounding that person. At the end of the dream, I was cleansed in the ocean. In the dream, I heard the song, "Oceans" playing in the background. A few weeks later, another family member of mine informed me without any prompting from me that that person had actually done something pretty terrible in the past.

In my case, God helped me see specifically where my bondage was coming from. But I think freedom from generational sin is actually pretty simple. You don't need to have any special knowledge about the sins that were committed before you, and you don't need some special, powerful prayer to be free.

If we believe in Jesus and choose not to commit the same sins as our family members, we will be free from the generational curse. I don't believe we need to know everything our ancestors did in order to be free. We need to focus on the sins that we have made our own by participating in them. A simple prayer of repentance is enough for your freedom!

Wrong Thinking About Deliverance

Over the years, I've been witness to a lot of wrong thinking about dealing with the demonic. In my own search for freedom, I believed a lot of wrong things about how to get free. Jesus eventually brought me to a place where I found simple, uncomplicated freedom.

Here are some truths about deliverance to combat many of the lies that I've seen and believed over the years.

We don't need to know demon names to find freedom.

I've read a lot of deliverance books that emphasize knowing the names of the demons we are up against. Jesus did this sometimes in his ministry – he would ask for the name of the demon before he cast it out.

If you are praying for deliverance and something manifests, there's not necessarily anything wrong with figuring out the name. But I don't think it's absolutely necessary for freedom. It's simpler than that. We just need to repent of the sin and ask God for deliverance. He will take care of the aspects of this that we humans don't understand.

Any Christian can pray for deliverance.

There are some people that act as "deliverance ministers," and they focus their entire ministry on setting people free from demons. Some of them feel that they are specially gifted to do this. Still others will claim that you need to have special authority in Christ to cast out demons.

I believe that there is no special gift for praying for deliverance. If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior, you can pray for deliverance for yourself and others. However, before you pray for others, I recommend that you have a good understanding of scripture and that you are firm in your faith. If you have hidden sins that you haven't surrendered to God, I would make sure you get those things set straight before you offer prayer to someone else.

When you pray for deliverance, the enemy may try to attack you. If you have hidden sins in your life that aren't dealt with, you will be open to these attacks. But if you are living a

holy life, you will be protected and you will be able to resist temptations and attacks that come your way.

We don't need to cause demons to manifest to set someone free.

I've watched deliverance ministers put on a huge show of casting out demons, allowing them to manifest wildly in front of people. This disrespects the person struggling and also glorifies the devil, not God.

Sometimes when you are praying for deliverance, it is possible for something to manifest. If this is the case, don't be afraid. Simply pray in the name of Jesus for the demon to remain quiet and continue with your prayer.

I think in most cases, if the person you are praying for is willing to be prayed for, you probably won't see anything too extreme occur.

Remember who you are bringing glory to.

Overall, deliverance is something that should bring glory to God. We should not handle it in a way that draws more attention to the devil. Our focus should be on the miracle of freedom and on praising the Lord for what he can do!

What If My Prayer for Deliverance Doesn't Work?

If you pray for deliverance and it doesn't come, you likely haven't repented of whatever root sin is causing the problem. For me, I kept seeking deliverance from my sexual struggles and my nightmares while I was still believing wrong things about God. I kept struggling with the demonic, and I couldn't figure out why the struggle was still ongoing.

I found freedom after I understood what I was doing wrong. I changed my thinking about God, repented fully, and began guarding my thoughts more carefully. When I did this, I stopped having nightmares, I left my sexual struggles behind, and I stopped feeling like I could have another mental health episode at any moment.

How to Pray for Deliverance for Others

Before we pray for deliverance for people, we need to focus on leading them to the Lord, as I mentioned before. In the most extreme of cases, there is something Jesus always did that we need to emulate: he responded with compassion, and not with fear or condemnation. We do not need to fear the work of the enemy. We need to respond in love and offer others the freedom we have in Christ.

If you have Christ as your savior and you know scripture and know the truth about God, that means you have authority over the enemy. Rather than casting out demons in some

wild and showy fashion, we can have conversations with people who are struggling in this area and point them to truth.

I had the opportunity to do this once in my life. I met a girl who confessed to me that she was wrestling with a demon having power over her. We talked together about God and what she believed about him. In many areas, her thinking about God was wrong, so I opened my Bible and read to her the truth, combatting each lie she believed. We then prayed a simple prayer for freedom, after which she told me she felt "lighter." This stuff doesn't have to be rocket science. It's as simple as presenting truth to those who need to hear it.

Chapter 3: The Armor of God

The most in-depth guide to the spiritual warfare that we must wage against the devil is in Ephesians, where Paul writes about the Armor of God.

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.”

- Ephesians 6:10-18 NIV

Yes, our battle is against the dark spiritual forces that come up against us. But it’s important to remember that the battle is also inside of us - in our own will. Satan knows the areas of our lives where we have desire for sin, and these are the areas he will attack us in. Fortunately, the Lord teaches us that when we use this spiritual armor, we will be able to overcome both the devil’s temptation and our own evil desires and thoughts.

Belt of Truth

The very first piece of the armor is the belt of truth. Before you even can head into battle, you need to know the truth about God. The belt of truth shows us that having correct theology is very important. We need to know what is true about God and what isn’t. If we don’t, we will have no success against the enemy.

We learn truth by studying the written word of God, the Bible, and by relying on the Holy Spirit to help us correctly understand it. Before you embark on a journey of studying scripture, invite the Holy Spirit to guide you. He will help you interpret things correctly. So many people read the Bible and twist things into whatever meaning they

like the best. You cannot study scripture without the Spirit's help. Recognize your dependence on him and ask for his help to guide you.

Breastplate of Righteousness

The most important thing to remember about the breastplate of righteousness is that it does not belong to you. If you are relying on your own goodness, you will fail. Jesus died on the cross so that we might become his righteousness. We need to acknowledge that our breastplate of righteousness is a gift from Jesus.

If you think you are a good person, you won't be able to use this breastplate properly at all. If you are broken about your sin and relying on the sacrifice of Jesus for your goodness, that's when you will succeed in battle. I love the line from the song "Nothing but the Blood of Jesus" that reads:

For my pardon, this I plead, nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This is all my righteousness – nothing but the blood of Jesus.

I like to sing this song as a reminder that my right standing with God is a gift. This gift is one that comes from Jesus' sacrifice. The breastplate of righteousness is about being dependent on Jesus for our right standing with God.

Ready Feet

In high school, I played centerfield in softball. In softball, something we talk about when you're fielding is having the right stance. You need to position yourself in such a way that you are ready to run to the ball, no matter which direction it goes. Ready feet enable you to respond to anything that comes your way.

In spiritual warfare, you need to have ready feet. This means that you are on alert, prepared to respond to any temptation or struggle that the devil brings to you. We can't be complacent believers, unprepared or unwilling to go into battle. Being ready means that we are in consistent connection with God, working on our relationship. We need to be preparing ahead for battle, prepared to obey him when he asks us to do something. We must go from passive believers to active ones.

This one has always been a struggle for me. When I was younger, I would experience challenging spiritual battles with anxiety or depression, and I would grow tired of resisting these feelings. I would start to resent the fact that I had to be consistent in fighting these things. As I've grown stronger in my faith, I find that resisting has gotten easier, and I don't often face the same struggles I used to.

If you are in the middle of a spiritual battle and growing weary of resisting, remember that it will pass eventually. Trust God to help you through it and ask him to make you steadfast in your resistance to temptation.

Shield of Faith

The shield of faith, “extinguishes the fiery arrows of the evil one.” This is the piece of the armor that doesn’t just block the arrows, but it puts out the fire. Faith is more than just knowing the truth about God – faith is when we *believe* the truth about God and believe that he will do what he says.

Perhaps you struggle with having faith. Perhaps you wrestle with doubt. No matter where your faith is right now, it can always grow and increase.

The Bible says in Romans 10:17 NIV that, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.” When we listen to the word of God, through reading scripture and through allowing the Holy Spirit to speak to us, that is how our faith starts to grow.

Helmet of Salvation

Before I had my first episode of psychosis, a girl at my church prayed over me, led by the spirit. Something she prayed over me was that I would wear the helmet of salvation. I now understand that this meant that I needed to be guarding my mind.

It’s important to guard your mind against thoughts that are not from God. In my case, it was thoughts that led to psychosis. For you, it could be fear, anxiety, depression, or something else. When we put on the helmet of salvation, it means protecting our mind by thinking the thoughts that God wants for us. We need thoughts that align with truth.

If we don’t have salvation, we are a slave to our sin. It is much harder to guard our minds in this state. But if we do have Jesus as our Savior, we have the ability to control our thoughts. We can fail to use this ability, and that can put us in some challenging situations.

Don’t believe the lie of the enemy that you can’t control your thinking. With God’s help, you absolutely can. Sometime it takes a little practice to wear the helmet. Getting your thoughts right is about putting good habits into place through learning the truth about God from studying the Bible. This does not always yield an instant solution – it takes practice and sometimes, help from others. But in the long run, it produces real results.

Sword of the Spirit

The sword of the Spirit is the only offensive weapon in the armor of God. All of the other pieces are about protection, but this one is about overcoming. Paul says that the sword of the spirit is the Word of God. Many people believe that this is about quoting scripture to overcome temptation – and that's true, but it's not the whole picture.

Let's read John 1:1, where John talks about the Word of God.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

- John 1: 1-5

The Word of God is not just the scriptures. John writes, "the Word was with God, and the Word was God." When the phrase, "The Word of God" is used, it's not just his written word. It's the living and active Word of God, God himself, which we have access to through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Does the Holy Spirit have control over your speech? Are the words of your mouth in line with what God is saying, or are they misaligned? Do your words bless or curse others? Are the words that you speak about God and others in line with truth? Do you give in to gossip, or do you speak life into people?

If you simply quote scripture in the moment when temptation strikes, but there are areas of your life in which your speech does not align with God, quoting scripture will not be as effective. If you allow the Holy Spirit to control your speech, this will give your words power and authority. This power and authority does not come from you. If you are speaking the truth about God, the power comes from the fact that you are speaking *his* words.

Again, there is nothing wrong with quoting scripture to combat the enemy. Jesus himself used scripture when confronted by Satan. But you need to be sure that *all* of your speech is in line with the Holy Spirit and that he is speaking through you in order for your words to be effective in battle.

Pray in the Spirit

As Paul concludes the portion he wrote about the armor of God, he reminds the reader to pray in the Spirit. What does this mean? Praying in the spirit means that we are praying and allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us in prayer. This means surrendering our

prayers to him and asking the spirit to intercede for us when we don't know what to pray.

He also writes to be alert, always praying for others. Don't just pray for yourself – pray for your friends, your family, and your community. I believe that when he tells us to be alert, he is actually inviting us to allow the Holy Spirit to prompt us to pray throughout the day as he moves us.

For me, this means that I will often be prompted to pray for people while I'm scrolling and see them in my feed on Facebook. Or someone will randomly come to my mind, and I'll take that moment to pray for them. The Holy Spirit knows when people are in need of prayer, and can prompt us to pray for others when they need it.

Chapter 4: How to Think Better Thoughts

Getting rid of strongholds and dark patterns of thought is just part of the battle. When we focus on trying to stop thinking about something, that can prove difficult and lead to us returning to old thought patterns. We need to replace the old bad thoughts with something new and better.

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

- Philippians 4:8 NIV

In this passage, we are encouraged to think about things that are good. God knows that we need good things to think about to keep our minds from wandering to dark places.

What to Think About: Your Relationships

I think it's no coincidence that my husband, Juan, came into my life while I was healing from these episodes. Getting married gave me emotional stability and gave me something to praise God for.

Even though I did end up having one more episode after getting married, I think that overall my relationship has helped me to get mentally stable. It gave me a consistent friendship, accountability, and a reminder that I am worthy of love, even when I'm still struggling. Juan didn't wait until I was better to fall in love with me. He chose me knowing what I struggled with, and that was a powerful display to me of what God's love looks like.

I think that getting married and starting a family was, for me, a great replacement for my old way of thinking. My thoughts turned to ones of gratitude, and I no longer had idle time to ruminate on bad things.

If you aren't married, you can still benefit from relationships. Focus on building solid friendships that are centered on the Lord and on getting closer to your family, if they are a positive influence.

What to Think About: Gratitude and Reflection

Something else you can do to remain focused on positive things is to prioritize gratitude and reflection. Take some time at the beginning or end of your day to think about what you have in your life to be thankful for. Reflect on the events of the day and recall the positive, funny, or sweet moments that God gave you that day.

A good practice to help you with gratitude and reflection is to journal. You don't have to write paragraphs every day – just jot down a few moments from the day that made you smile, or write one thing you are thankful for. I keep a journal of funny things that my daughter says. Reading back over this fills my heart with joy, and I hope that one day she can read through it and laugh at some of the things she said as a child.

What to Think About: Hobbies and Creativity

Something else that really helps to replace negative thought patterns is to pick up a creative hobby. When I was recovering from my episodes, something I really threw myself into was decorating my apartment. This brought me joy and relief from the intrusive thoughts I was experiencing after the episodes.

Decorating my home became a refuge for me when I didn't have as many friends and felt under supported. Having a creative outlet can really change your whole outlook on life! I am a huge advocate for everyone having a positive, productive hobby in their life.

These days, I still do the occasional decorating project, but my house doesn't need to be endlessly decorated. When my daughter was born, I took on baking as a hobby to help fill my time when I didn't have decorating to do. But my main hobby these days – that has truly become my favorite thing – is blogging and writing.

Revisiting my passion for writing is what led to me writing this book. I love to write in the notes section of my phone while I'm caring for my daughter during the day. After she goes to bed at night, I revisit those notes and organize them on my computer.

I love having a variety of interests to engage in - from decor, to DIY projects, to baking, to crafting recipes, to writing. I credit my stable mental health partially to how I've been able to fill my mind with good things that are productive and prevent me from focusing on negative thoughts.

Chapter 5: My View on Medication for Mental Health

Although I believe that freedom from mental health struggles ultimately comes from God, I still take my medication.

When I first started on medication, I was warned that it was not a guarantee that I couldn't have another episode - and I've found that to be true. Even on meds, I wrestled with my wrong thinking coming back and feeling like I was on the verge of an episode. When that happened, I would take some time to recenter myself in truth and remind myself of reality.

I am in a really good place right now - it's been at least three years since I have felt an episode knocking at my door. However, I don't believe I am immune to falling back into old patterns. Just like with any struggle, there is always temptation to return.

And when I am sick, I don't do things that keep me safe. I put myself in harm's way, and as a mama, I can't risk putting my child in an unsafe situation. I would never do anything purposefully, but I know that I could do so accidentally when my mind is not right.

Being on medication is not my favorite thing, and I credit God with my freedom more than meds. However, it does provide a safety net for me. I am not going to do anything that puts me at the slightest risk for having an episode while caring for my children, so for me, staying on medication is a no brainer.

If I were ever to get off my medication, I would want to be under the constant care of a doctor that supports my decision and could monitor my wellbeing. I would also want my children to be grown and no longer under my care.

If you use medication for a mental health struggle, I don't think you should stop using that medication, especially if it's working for you. But I truly believe that medication is not a full solution. It's something that can help you find your equilibrium while you work on whatever the underlying issue is.

I believe that we are in control of our thoughts – our thoughts and feelings do not control us. If you struggle with anxiety, the underlying issue is not brain chemistry – it's that something in your way of thinking is making you feel anxiety. It's the same with depression and other struggles. I truly believe that there is always an underlying issue to resolve.

Take the medication so you can feel better in the moment, and don't feel guilty for doing it. However, allow God to work through whatever your underlying problem is so that you can find real freedom – not the kind that comes from a pill.

Chapter 6: The Church's Response to Mental Health

The ironic thing about the day I had my episode at church was the song that we were singing at practice. That song was "Reckless Love" by Cory Asbury. It's a song about how Jesus would leave behind ninety-nine of his sheep to rescue just one who was lost. When we are lost, he doesn't just let us go as if nothing ever happened. He pursues us until we are found.

While my church failed to show me this kind of love, Jesus did not. He gave me friends who did love me and stuck by me. He brought me closer to my family. And the biggest display of his love was how he put Juan in my life to care for me, even in the middle of my struggle.

I can look back and see Jesus' hand all over my life. He protected me during my episodes. He gave me a new life to live and brought me back to truth. He gave me a new church family and friends. The people that remain in my life today are truly meant to be there. I am confident that should I ever return to this struggle, I will be supported.

When it comes to mental health, and any other struggle for that matter, the way the church responds is so important. We need to show love and compassion, even in tough situations that we may not feel we understand. If someone is looking for love and support during a trial, we need to offer that.

We can lovingly and kindly lead them to truth if they are believing something untrue or have done something wrong. But to cut them off without even attempting to understand the situation is not how Christ would respond.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger

and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’”

- Matthew 25:31-45 NIV

I have been the least of these. I know what it feels like to be looked past and ignored in my time of need. I needed community to surround me as I healed and recovered from what happened. But instead, I was abandoned. What I was going through was viewed as too difficult to deal with, or too much.

Sometimes I struggled with wondering if I deserved to be abandoned during this time. Maybe it was just too hard for some folks to understand what I was going through. Maybe it really was too much. There were times when I really tried to justify their actions.

“I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.”

This line really stands out to me. When I was hospitalized for mental health, hardly any of my friends from my old church reached out to see if I was okay or were concerned about my wellbeing. I felt lonely and overlooked. When I tried to reach out afterward to make things right, the response was really disappointing.

But Jesus saw me. He was at work in my life, and he never abandoned me in my time of need. And this passage is a reminder to me that when I was truly the least of these, he cared about how I was treated. I think some of my friends blamed me for what I went through and thought that this justified their decision to abandon me.

But the word prison really stands out to me. You don’t get in prison by doing something right – you get there by doing something wrong. Even in that moment, Jesus expects

believers to rise up and show love and care. Even if what happened to me was 100% my fault, it doesn't justify being left behind by other believers.

I mattered to Jesus when I was wrestling with my mental health. He wanted for me to be surrounded by the love of fellow believers. That did not happen, not at first. But reading this passage, I trust he will make it right. He hasn't forgotten about how I was treated.

However, this is no longer in my hands. I forgive them, and I will allow God to make it right. In case anyone misunderstands my intent, I wasn't drawn to this passage because I'm seeking revenge against people who hurt me, nor do I hope that any of them will face condemnation over it.

I think the main reason why this passage resonated with me is because it reminds me that I matter to God, even when people look right past me. He will not forget about what happened to me, and whether in this lifetime or the next, he will stand up for me.

How About You?

If you are struggling with mental health, or with a stronghold in your life, I hope you realize that you are not alone. Even though it's not often talked about, these struggles are so common. I pray that you find the freedom in Christ that I have found thanks to his grace. I am not a trained therapist, but if there is any way I can pray for you or encourage you, don't hesitate to reach out to me.

If you are not struggling with these things, I hope this simply opens your eyes to what others may be going through. If you know someone struggling, I hope you are inspired to show them the love of God, even in the middle of their battle.