



Victorious Living

FIVE LIES FROM THE ENEMY

A BRAND NEW START

GET IN THE GAME

REAL PEOPLE | REAL STORIES

REAL HOPE



DAR VUELTA
PARA VER
EN ESPAÑOL

ALL MY HOPE IS IN JESUS

The
Julie Seals
Story



A magazine
on a mission:
see page 2

Victorious Living delivers a pathway to H.O.P.E.

Healing,
Opportunity,
Purpose &
Empowerment

by connecting
justice-involved persons
to C.P.R.



COMMUNITY

A place to belong. Be heard. Be seen.
Be encouraged and challenged.



PROMISES OF GOD

A firm foundation to withstand trials, resist
temptation, and prepare for successful reentry.



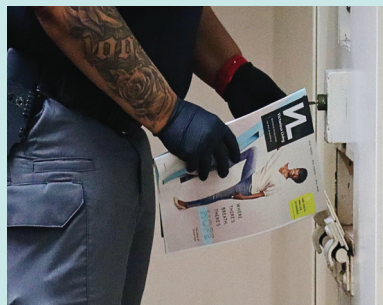
RESOURCES

National partnerships offering reentry support,
mental health and addiction recovery, life skills,
trauma-informed care, and faith-based discipleship.

Our **H.O.P.E.** outreaches
uniquely provide **C.P.R.**

THEY INCLUDE:

- ▶ *Victorious Living Magazine*
- ▶ Care Line
- ▶ Correspondence Program
- ▶ National Prison Events
- ▶ Broadcasts on Prison Tablets





Victorious Living

ISSUE 2, MAY 2026

"Come back to the place of safety, all you prisoners who still have hope! I promise this very day that I will repay two blessings for each of your troubles." Zechariah 9:12 NLT

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HOW TO REACH VICTORIOUS LIVING

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Victorious Living and You!

Victorious Living resources are designed to encourage, equip, and empower you in your faith and provide you with tools to do the same for others. Whether you are incarcerated, working in corrections, or living in free society, you can use our ministry tools in your daily ministry efforts. Here are a few suggestions.



DISTRIBUTE VLMAG

Order *VLMag* in bulk and share it as God leads. Our magazine provides an effective and easy way for you to share the life-transforming power of God with strangers and loved ones. Also, consider sponsoring a prison to receive regular shipments of our magazine.

CREATE A VICTORIOUS LIVING SMALL GROUP

VL Small Groups are simple—you need a Bible, paper, pen, *VL Magazine* or video, facilitator, friends, and a heart to learn. As you look up scriptures and dive into the following questions together, you will discover deep spiritual truths.

- *What is the theme of the story or video?*
- *Have I had a similar experience?*
- *What lessons did the story/video present, and how can I apply them?*
- *How is God speaking to me through the story/video and the referenced verses?*
- *What have I learned about God's character, and how does that impact me?*
- *How can I share what I've learned with others?*

BECOME A VL SMALL GROUP LEADER

Small groups led by trusted facilitators build community and provide accountability and a safe place for deeper study of God's Word. Write to us at PO Box 2751, Greenville, NC 27836, and request the *VL Small Group Leader's Guide*. Also check out our videos, *Tips for a Successful Small Group* and *Leading a Small Group Behind the Wire*, on PANDO, Edovo, Paytel, Westpond, Tech Friends, CypherWorx, ATG, ICS, ViaPath, Homewav, Turnkey, Securus, Smart Comm, and iT1.

SUPPORT VICTORIOUS LIVING MINISTRIES

Financially supporting our ministry is one way to carry out God's command to remember the incarcerated (Hebrews 13:3). Share our ministry with your church for consideration as a supported mission outreach. Volunteer opportunities are also available.

CONTENTS

STEPPING FORWARD 31

8 **More Than Survival**
BY JC ALMANZA

9 **You Are Never Forgotten**
BY CHRISTINA KIMBREL

13 **Five Lies from the Enemy**
BY LISA APPELO

27 **When Stupidity Becomes Wisdom**
BY ROY A. BORGES

TRANSFORMED LIVES

22 **What It Takes to Be a Champion**
BY KRISTI OVERTON JOHNSON
Drawing on her journey from world champion water-skier to prison ministry leader, Kristi Overton Johnson reveals how pain, negative voices, and tough circumstances become the training ground for lasting victory.

Choosing Faith over Fear in Everyday Life

BY SHERIDAN CORREA

Courage doesn't always look like bold speeches or heroic acts. Sometimes it's seen in the smallest acts, when you refuse to listen to fear and choose to step out with God.

FEATURES

From Unwanted to Chosen: How Jesus Gave Me a New Life

BY SOLÉ WRIGHT

Born into rejection and raised in abuse, Solé Wright grew up believing she was unwanted and beyond hope. But a simple reminder that "Jesus loves you" broke through her darkness and began a powerful journey of healing, forgiveness, and transformation. Her story proves no heart is too wounded for God to restore.

Get in the Game

THE STORY OF CJ WILSON

From the sidelines of the NFL to the Super Bowl spotlight, CJ Wilson knows what it feels

like to doubt you belong. One defining moment taught him that when you trust God and step onto the field—even afraid—He provides the strength for victory.

COVER STORY

All My Hope Is in Jesus

THE STORY OF JULIE SEALS

Born with spina bifida and given little chance to live, Julie Seals's life spiraled from miraculous survival to addiction, prison, and devastating loss. Yet in her darkest moment—facing another amputation and a possible life sentence—she discovered a hope that changed everything.

Brand New Start

THE MIKE SEALS STORY

After the death of his wife, Navy Senior Chief Mike Seals collapsed under the weight of regret, grief, and a lifetime of broken choices. But God met him with mercy and a promise of purpose. Mike's story is a powerful testimony of repentance, restoration, and calling—showing how God can turn deep regret into a mission of hope for others.

The Knock That Changed Everything

THE STORY OF DAN EVANS

When a late-night knock from detectives shattered Dan Evans's carefully constructed life, he thought he'd lost it all. But in the wreckage of prison and regret, the unwavering love of God and his wife began a powerful work of restoration showing that surrender to God can transform even the darkest moment into a new beginning.

IN EVERY ISSUE

- 6 **Publisher's Note**
Transformation Is Worth the Cost
- 32 **Behind the Wire**
Relearning How to Live
- 33 **I've Accepted God's Salvation...Now What?**
- 34 **Resources/Ministry Info**

COVER PHOTO: CAPTURED MEMORIES BY ESTA



ON THE COVER

Mike and Julie Seals faced seasons where mistakes, loss, and pain seemed to overshadow their future. Yet through faith, perseverance, and the unfailing grace of God, their story became one of restoration. What was broken was mended, what was lost was renewed, and hope was reborn. Their journey stands as a testimony that God still restores lives today.



PHOTO BY DAYBREAK MEDIA

Transformation Is Worth the Cost

I've had the privilege of publishing this magazine since 2011. My goal is always to honor God and protect the integrity of His Word and the stories we feature.

People often ask how we choose our stories. They come from recommendations from people we trust or from people God highlights. Once a person comes to my attention, I add their name to a master list and pray over it. Some people are featured quickly, while others wait patiently for years. Others, however, are eliminated.

After the stories are chosen, a member of our content creation team conducts an interview with the subject and then ghost-writes the story. It's not easy to tell a life story in a few pages, and not every word gets to stay. It hurts to see days of work deleted with a single click of a keyboard.

Once the featured person approves their story, our editor-in-chief, Rachel, corrects grammatical and citation errors and polishes the material. She then reduces the word count further before sending the stories back to me for another review.

The articles then go to Lauren, our designer, who creates the lovely pages you see.

Rachel checks the design pages for error, then she, my assistant Carla, and I reread the stories to ensure we've caught any errors that still exist—and they do. Even now, after rounds of editing, you may still find a mistake in these pages.

Hundreds of hours are spent on the magazine before it goes to Ebert and Karissa, our Spanish translation team. They also participate in an extensive editing process to ensure excellence.

I'm not part of the Spanish editing process, as I don't speak or read Spanish. I quickly learned that my interference only slows things down. So I've had to learn to trust the team God has given me.

Once the Spanish editing is finished, Lauren designs that side of our magazine, and it is returned to the editorial team for a final review. Only then is the finished product sent to the printer, who prints and ships

this magazine to prisons and jails, as well as to our supporters.

I share the above process for two reasons. First, I want you to realize how much attention goes into this free publication. The Lord showed me that those who read our magazine—over 98 percent of whom are incarcerated—deserve my best. I am to give my all, just like He gave His all when He sacrificed His Son, Jesus, for you and me (Romans 8:32). Doing what God wills does come with a cost—but oh, it's worth it.

Second, I share to illustrate the process of transformation. You hold a beautiful, finished product. But it took countless hours of unseen, often unrecognized work by our team for this issue to reach you in this form.

We persevere with integrity and do the jobs we've promised, when we promised. We trust one another, humbly accepting suggestions and help. The trimming-away process can be painful! Creating this magazine also requires a huge financial investment every time. But because we're all willing to do all of that, something beautiful is born.

It's the same with our lives. Transformation doesn't just happen. It starts with a desire and a willingness to lay our lives before God, asking, "Lord, what do I need to trim away? What do I need to add? Who should be with me on this journey?"

It takes hard work, humility, trust, and perseverance. There will be days when it seems your hard work is "deleted" right before your eyes. You might even think, "What's the use?"

Friend, don't give up. Keep humbling yourself before God and others as you take wise advice and trim what God reveals. Not everything or everyone can go with you on your transformation journey.

Yes, it will cost you. But the finished product of your life is worth it. Your life will be a beautiful display of God's grace for the world to see.

May the following life stories spur you on in your own transformation journey. †

Kristi

Kristi Overton Johnson
Publisher & Executive Director

VLMag is primarily circulated in the corrections community. However, it is available in free society to our ministry partners for a suggested gift of at least \$25.00. Visit vlmin.org and click the "donate" tab. Every dollar you give sends one copy of VLMag into a corrections facility, where it will deliver hope to many people for years to come.



“**THANK YOU FOR COMING TO OUR JAIL. YOUR VISITS ARE THE HIGHLIGHT OF OUR WEEK. THANK YOU FOR CARING AND REMINDING US THAT WE AREN'T FORGOTTEN.**”

LADIES at Pitt County Detention Center, NC

Victorious Living Testimonies

Through the stories of Victorious Living Magazine, men and women behind bars meet the God of another chance.

“Your videos and podcasts pull me out of dark places and bring me closer to the Lord. Your words always hug my heart. I want the whole VL Team to know how much I appreciate what you do for us incarcerated individuals. We know that you love us!”

JAMAREO
Maury Correctional Institution, NC

“I picked up a magazine a couple of weeks ago. Even though it was ripped and incomplete, two articles remained intact. I’ve read them several times, especially since my mind takes me into the depths. The articles bring me out of the darkness and help me keep going.”

BILLY
Gib Lewis Unit, TX

“Thank you for filming your programming from different locations. The places from which you spread your messages bring the feeling of home and freedom into my cell. The scenery reminds me that I am a human and am meant for more than this reality I find myself in.”

WESLEY
Stiles Unit, TX

“When I got arrested this time, I thought I’d reached the end of my story. But through Jesus and your team’s faithfulness to send me scriptures and just to be here for me, I’ve got hope for my future.”

SHERMAN
Middle River Regional Jail, VA

MORE THAN SURVIVAL

BY JC ALMANZA

▶ **LONG BEFORE I ENTERED PRISON,** I lived in a war zone. I grew up surrounded by gang members, drug dealers, cartel guys, and street soldiers.

Violence was my norm, even in my home, where abuse was rampant. Fear was my constant companion.

I quickly developed survival skills. Some emerged naturally; others I worked on so that I'd be prepared for whatever came my way.

My survival skills sharpened when, at 16, I entered a Mexican prison. I experienced things there no human should ever see—lynchings, stabbings, rapes.

For years, I fought to secure my most basic needs. I was so relieved the day a representative from the US Consulate visited and told me I'd be transferred to a US prison.

I continued to fight to survive until the day I was transferred from a maximum-security prison to a low-security prison in California. When I stepped off that bus, I couldn't believe my eyes.

There were palm trees, green grass, and nice buildings. People were smiling and playing basketball in gray sweats. I felt like a kid on a field trip. But what excited me the most was the workout equipment.

Leg press machines. Squat racks. Dumbbells up to 200 pounds. Was I in heaven?

I threw my bag on my bed and ran to work out. *I could do 20 years here*, I thought. I felt happy and at peace for the first time. But by nightfall, fear crept in. When you've lived in hell long enough, happiness and peace feel suspicious.

I put on my steel-toe boots before taking a shower. I was going to be prepared for the

war I imagined was coming. That is what survival looked like where I'd come from.

But as I headed to the shower, someone stopped me and said, "JC, I'm going to tell you something, but don't get mad. Look at everyone's feet."

I glanced around the dorm. Everyone was wearing sandals—everyone but me.

Embarrassment swept over me. I felt stupid like a clown.

Nobody here lived the way I was trained to live. What was I supposed to do now? Being a survivor had been my identity. But now that danger didn't exist anymore, confusion swept in. Who was I to be if not a survivor?

I waited for those "South Side" guys to laugh at me. But instead, they took me in and taught me a different way to live. With time, I began to rest. To talk. To breathe. And to think about my future. I'd never thought about my future before.

I left prison for the last time in 2017. Shortly after, I came to know the love of God. Since then, He's been helping me lay down my remaining survival skills.

Relearning how to live when surviving is all I've known is not easy. It takes time. Some days look better than others. God's love is patient and keeps covering me, as does the love of those He's placed in my life to help me. (See 1 Corinthians 13; 1 Peter 4:8.)

God and others have chased me down when I've run, drawn me out when I've

hidden, and calmed me down when everything in me wanted to fight. Slowly but surely, I'm learning to live in peace and be a man of peace.

I still react in my old survivalist ways at times. But when I do, I am quick to seek forgiveness from others and forgive myself. I learn from my mistakes and try again.

Are your survival skills no longer working for you? Lay them down. Be patient with yourself. And let God teach you a new, better way.

Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29 NLT). †



CONSIDER

What survival skills have you developed? Do you run? Control others or push them away? Hurt others before they hurt you? Do you trust the calm or secretly prepare for something to go wrong? Why? What might it look like to thrive rather than survive?



JC ALMANZA is on a journey of learning and growing, experiencing mental, emotional, and physical healing along the way. He is committed to helping others find the peace and joy that

transformed his life. For more information, go to WrongtoStrong.com.

You Are Never Forgotten

BY CHRISTINA KIMBREL

► **I HAD ONLY PLANNED TO WORK** for a couple of hours, but before I knew it, the day was over. I gathered my things and headed to the car, checking my phone as I walked. That's when I noticed several missed calls from my husband, which made me anxious.

I had barely sat in the car when David called again. I could hear the frustration in his voice when I answered.

"Honey, what is Peanut doing out of the house?"

Confusion set in. Peanut, my emotional support dog of eight years, and my other dog are always inside unless I am walking them on a leash. I couldn't wrap my head around how Peanut could be outside.

David explained that a man had rung our Ring Doorbell, which allows us to see and talk to whoever is at our front door, even when we aren't home.

David answered the doorbell on his phone and saw a man standing there holding Peanut. The man explained that he'd found her and knew where she belonged because he'd recognized her from our walks in the neighborhood.

I managed to keep it together until David told me this had happened hours earlier. That's why he'd been blowing up my phone. Panic surged through me.

"Did you get his phone number? Do you know where he lives? Did he say he was coming back?" I asked David. His reply? No. No. No.

Fear gripped me. I couldn't bear the thought of never seeing my sweet Peanut again.

I went home, prepared to canvass the neighborhood. But before I even got out of the car, a couple of kids approached

me and asked. "Are you looking for your dog?" I told them yes.

"I'm gonna go tell our dad. He has your dog," one of the kids said as he sprinted toward the apartment complex across the street.

Minutes later, a man appeared with Peanut. She ran toward me the moment she saw me. I picked her up and sobbed in her fur.

I thanked the man repeatedly, asked his name, and offered him money as a reward for returning my precious girl. His response left me speechless: "No need for any of that, Ma'am. My name is Jacob, and I'm just doing the Lord's work. When I saw her running loose, God helped me remember seeing you with her. I'm happy she's back in your arms. You have a nice day, and God bless you."

And with that, he turned and walked across the street with his kids in tow. I've not seen him again since.

Losing Peanut would have devastated me. The Lord showed me such kindness that day, providing help through a stranger who was "simply doing the Lord's work."

Have you ever felt a similar surge of panic when life spins out of control or when something precious seems lost? In those moments, remember this truth: God sees you. He knows every detail of your life, and He cares deeply about what matters to you. Just as He guided Jacob to return Peanut, He is working in ways you can't always see.

Luke 12:6–7 NIV says, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

Through this experience, I realized how true those words are. God cared about my fear, my tears, and even my little dog.

Friend, if God remembers sparrows, how much more will He remember you? You are worth more than many sparrows. The One who counts the hairs on your head will never lose sight of you. You are never forgotten. †



CONSIDER

When something precious feels lost, where do you turn first—panic or prayer? Can you recall a time when God showed His care for you in a small but personal way? How might God use you to do His work and help someone today?



CHRISTINA KIMBREL develops content for use on VL's many platforms. Once incarcerated, she now ministers hope to those held captive by their past and current circumstances while sharing the message of healing she found in Jesus.

From Unwanted to Chosen:

HOW JESUS GAVE ME A NEW LIFE

—
BY SOLÉ WRIGHT

The earliest emotion I recall is the cold, deep pain of not belonging. I didn't feel this way because I hadn't been chosen during gym class or because I'd had a bad day. The feeling was rooted in the knowledge that I was an unwanted child, so much so that my mother tried several times to abort me.

But even before I knew that horrible truth, I'd felt like I didn't belong.

Looking back, I can understand my mother's desperation. My father had already moved on to another relationship when she discovered she was pregnant with me. A fourth child would only add grief to her already difficult life, so she looked to abortion to solve the problem.

Obviously, I survived her attempts. But being raised by a woman who didn't have the emotional capacity to bond with me left a painful void where security should have been.

My mother named me Solé, a shortened version of *Soledad*, which means "solitude" or "alone" in Spanish. My name was a constant reminder, a whisper of the loneliness

that I, and perhaps she, experienced daily.

An abusive stepfather entered my life when I was a toddler. For years, this controlling man sought to break me by convincing everyone that something was wrong with me. Any time I showed emotion or expressed childlike creativity, he crushed it by labeling me crazy.

I lived in a constant flow of abuse and rejection, and became convinced that my life had no value. I felt dead inside. All I could think was, if the people closest to me didn't want me, why should I care about myself?

That feeling of being *dead inside* wasn't just a mood; it was a heavy weight I carried daily. And it wasn't just sadness either. It was a profound numbness that led me to more than one suicide attempt. I was desperate to end my inner pain and silence my mother's haunting screams, the result of violence in our home. Those screams played on repeat in my mind.

The desperation to end my life only worsened in my teenage years. I attempted suicide again. When that failed, I coped by numbing the pain with drugs and alcohol. I dropped out of high school at 16.

I lived without hope, totally convinced that life had no meaning. A future did not exist in my mind.

I worked hard to destroy myself, unconsciously trying to finish what my mother had failed at years before. I became lost in the chaos, certain that no genuine love—the kind that truly heals—would ever find me. But I was wrong.

Significant life-changing moments don't usually come with bright lights or grand announcements, but through simple acts of courage and kindness from those who yield to the Holy Spirit's prompting. For me, that moment came through a stranger on a day I will never forget.

I was working my shift as a hostess when



PHOTO BY BEN LAW PHOTOGRAPHY

a customer ordered a coffee to go, then told me that Jesus loved me. I dismissed what he said. I didn't want to hear about Jesus.

But God used that man's voice to cut through the darkness threatening to destroy me. Later that night, those simple yet penetrating words, "Jesus loves you," awakened my soul.

Jesus loves me?

What a message of pure, unconditional grace from a man who didn't see a dropout, a drug user, or a broken life. Instead, he saw a soul that needed a Savior.

But could Jesus love me in my filth?

Yes, He could—in fact, He had already proven it years before on a cross. (See John 3:16–21 and Romans 5:8–10.)

That night, I accepted the love of Jesus and, for the first time, experienced something real, powerful, and true. It was as if Jesus called me out of a cold, dark grave, just like He had done for Lazarus (John 11:43).

Solé, come forth!

I answered His call, and in my bedroom on that Friday night, I fell to my knees in complete repentance and surrendered every broken piece of my life to Jesus.

I found the love I had spent a lifetime searching for, a love that desired and accepted me and wanted to heal my deepest wounds. And to think, God wanted nothing from me in return, except to love Him.

As I grew in my faith and knowledge of Him, I slowly learned to love and trust Him (Matthew 22:37–38; Hebrews 11:6).



When I accepted the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, I was given what the Bible calls a new birth. (See John 3:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 Peter 1:3–5, 23.) Now, I could live with hope.

I started reading the Bible to uncover God's plans for me. He spoke to me through His Word in powerful ways. When I came across Psalm 27:10, it was as if God were speaking directly to me: "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me" (NIV).

Through this verse, God acknowledged my pain of being unwanted. He validated what I had experienced and then gave me the certainty that I am accepted and welcomed. God's promise brought healing to my broken heart.

God's acceptance changed how I saw myself. No longer was my identity rooted in the rejection of my earthly parents, but in the acceptance of my heavenly Father. Suddenly, my life, which I had thought was a mistake, was redefined.

But while I did experience that new birth when I put my faith in Jesus for salvation, I still had wounds that needed healing. The healing and transformation of a person's soul—their mind, will, and emotions—isn't a one-time event. It's a slow and often painful process that some aren't willing to embark upon.

Many people say a prayer for salvation but refuse to allow the Holy Spirit access to their wounds so His healing can take place. As a result, they stay stuck in their pain, thinking the same old way, doing the same old things.

But the gracious love of God comes with a personal responsibility to engage in the daily work to grow spiritually, so that we can be transformed into His image.

My childhood pain and struggles didn't disappear overnight. The truth is, problems like that rarely do. But I have been on this journey of healing and transformation with the Holy Spirit for years now, and

*Solé shouldered pain no child should bear
in her silent battle with rejection and
unworthiness.*

**A future did
not exist in
my mind.
I worked hard
to destroy
myself.**

I know, He gives me freedom every day.

I had to choose to fill my life with God's good things—to read my Bible, journal, pray, and be in a community that encouraged my spiritual growth. I had to engage in the hard work of counseling to learn how to release my old, negative thought patterns and replace them with God's way of thinking (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 10:5).

But as I did these things, the love of God began to replace the shame and worthlessness that had filled me for so long. It brought light and life into previously dark, dead places, filling the void of my heart and silencing the tormenting voice of my abuser.

It took me decades to forgive my stepfather. Learning the true meaning of forgiveness helped.

Forgiveness didn't mean I had to maintain a relationship with my stepfather or excuse his behavior. It didn't mean I had to forget the offense either, which seemed an impossible task. What it did mean is that I was to leave my stepfather in the hands of my heavenly Father.

It wasn't easy, but forgiveness came when, with the help of the Holy Spirit, I realized that I was also a sinner (Romans 3:23), and that the Bible tied my forgiveness from God to my forgiveness of others (Matthew 6:14–16). I didn't want not forgiving my offender to come between me and God (Psalm 66:18; Mark 11:25–26).

So I chose to forgive my stepfather. Doing so was a daily struggle between



Solé shares a message of freedom from pain—turning her story of rejection and abuse into hope, helping others heal, rise, and discover their worth.

wanting justice and surrendering him to God's hands (Philippians 2:13)—but it was worth it.

It led to freedom.

Today, the pain of my beginnings—the things said and done to me, and even the things I've done—no longer define who I am. The chains of unforgiveness no longer bind me. I am free and defined only by what

my heavenly Father says of me—I am loved, victorious, forgiven, and redeemed. These truths have given my life a new, eternal purpose.

Because of Jesus, I can now see that my past wasn't just a series of painful experiences; it was preparation for the future. Every scar, every mistake, every moment of feeling unwanted now serves as a thread

to connect with others who are suffering in a silence that screams.

My life's purpose is to share this light that now lives in me, to tell the next person who feels overlooked and lost that the only voice that matters has already claimed them. Maybe that's you. If it is, I need you to know this: *Jesus loves you.*

If you struggle with the devastating sense of not belonging or with the thought that your life is a mistake that should end, please know that if Jesus could meet me in my darkness and call me out of the cave of addiction, shame, and despair, He can absolutely meet you where you are.

Your circumstances—what has been done or said to you, or what you have done—do not define you. God alone defines you, and He will fully receive you right now, just as you are. He will give you a new life—a new birth. You can be born again.

All you have to do is repent, ask God for forgiveness, and commit to going in a new direction with Him. God will forgive you for anything—just ask (1 John 1:9). Don't live without hope any longer (Ephesians 2:12–13).

In God's hands, your life can be redefined, healed, and transformed. So turn to Him. Give Him every broken piece. He will restore your life. Give Him every empty place. He will fill it. Believe Him. Accept Him today and receive your new life. †

“All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay.”

1 PETER 1:3–4 NLT



CONSIDER

Have you believed the lie that you were unwanted, forgotten, or a mistake? What shaped that belief in you? Do you truly believe that Jesus loves you—not a future version of you, but you as you are right now?

SOLÉ WRIGHT is an author and life coach who guides women in overcoming personal challenges. She understands the impact of unresolved trauma on personal and spiritual growth. Her approach to health and wellness is to care for the whole person—body, mind, and soul.

Five Lies from the Enemy

BY LISA APPELO

▶ **ARE YOU AWARE** that there's a 24/7 battle raging against you? Most enemies carry weapons you can see, things like guns, knives, fists. But not this enemy. Satan's weapon is far more subtle.

A lot of times, we don't recognize when Satan has taken aim at us. His age-old strategy? Lies. And while styles, languages, and technologies have changed, his tactics have not. He is the father of lies (John 8:44), and based on Genesis 3, here are five lies he uses to trip us up.

1. THE LIE THAT GOD'S WORD ISN'T TRUE. "The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the LORD God had made. One day he asked the woman, 'Did God really say...?'" (Genesis 3:1 NLT).

Satan's first move was to question what God said. Satan knew that if he could wedge even a sliver of doubt between Adam and Eve and God's Word, he could win.

Satan knows God's Word has the power to defeat him (Ephesians 6:17). It provides protection for the believer (2 Timothy 3:16–17), gives wisdom and direction (Psalm 119:105), and so much more.

Of course, Satan still works this same angle today, tempting us to question scripture, dismiss hard passages, or treat truth as optional. But Jesus said God's Word is truth (John 17:17). And when we stand firmly on it, we stand on solid ground.

2. THE LIE THAT GOD ISN'T GOOD. Everything God created was good because God is good. He made Adam and Eve in His image and placed them in a garden overflowing with beauty and provision. They were surrounded by His goodness.

But Satan twisted God's one restriction to make it seem unbearable. He slyly insinuated that a good God wouldn't withhold something so desirable.

We hear that lie too—especially when

we're waiting, hurting, or watching others get what we want. But scripture reminds us to "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever" (1 Chronicles 16:34 NLT).

God's goodness does not fluctuate with our circumstances.

3. THE LIE THAT GOD ISN'T GENEROUS. Satan exaggerated God's restriction. Adam and Eve could eat from every tree except one. It was abundance by any measure. Yet Satan painted God as stingy.

He still whispers that God is holding out on us. And when we believe that lie, we cling tightly to money, relationships, and control instead of trusting Him.

But God is a God of abundance, not scarcity. He supplies all our needs from his glorious riches (Philippians 4:19).

4. THE LIE THAT SIN HAS NO CONSEQUENCES. Satan downplayed the seriousness of Eve's sin. "'You won't die!' the serpent replied" (Genesis 3:4 NLT).

He still suggests to us that a little compromise won't matter—that no one will know and that grace will cover everything anyway.

Don't bite that apple! Sin always leads to death and destruction (Romans 6:23). And though we are saved by grace, we still reap what we sow (Galatians 6:8). Sin promises freedom, but it delivers bondage.

5. THE LIE THAT WE CAN BE GOD. "Your eyes will be opened...and you will be like God" (Genesis 3:5 NLT).

If Satan can't erase God, he will try to replace Him—with us. He feeds us the idea

that we define truth, determine morality, and control our destiny. But putting ourselves in God's place is idolatry. There is only one true God (Isaiah 45:5).

We were not meant to rule our own lives—we were meant to trust the One who does.

So what is the truth?

We are not defenseless. Satan comes at us with lies, but God gives us weapons of divine power. He also offers a simple strategy: Call the lie what it is. Take the thought captive. And replace it with scripture (2 Corinthians 10:3–5).

God's Word may not silence the enemy forever—but His truth will keep us from falling prey to the lies and will keep us on the path to victory. †



CONSIDER

Which lie have you fallen prey to? Are you tempted to doubt God's goodness or generosity because of your current circumstances?



LISA APPELO is a speaker, writer, and Bible teacher who inspires others to deepen their faith in grief and find hope in the hard. Find Lisa's encouragement for faith, grief, and hope at LisaAppelo.com.

THE STORY OF
CJ WILSON

GET IN THE GAME

When God has a plan for your life—and you desire it—nothing can stop it. Not your inexperience, lack of connections, education, finances, or the judgment of others.



PHOTO BY ECU ATHLETICS

As a former Super Bowl champion, I like to say this: If you're willing to get in the game with God, He'll get in the game with you and take you to the end zone every time.

But believe it or not, there was a time when I didn't want to get in the game.

It was my rookie year with the Green Bay Packers. My family and I were thrilled when I was drafted in the seventh round. But once I joined the team and saw the level of talent and intensity, fear set in. This wasn't college football anymore. There, I'd been a standout; here, I felt completely out of my league.

I was relieved when I didn't make the roster for the first game. Standing on the sidelines felt safe. I didn't have to worry about getting hit, making mistakes, or embarrassing myself on national television. It actually felt almost comfortable. I could work out with the team, help get them ready for the game, and still get a paycheck. Not a bad deal. I could do that forever.

When my parents asked why I wasn't playing, I blamed the coach. But the truth was, I'd lost my confidence.

I was surrounded by legends, and none of my college

accolades seemed to matter anymore. My coach reinforced my doubts, and his words replayed constantly in my mind: *You don't belong here.*

A few games into the season, the coach told me I might play that night. Panic set in. I wasn't ready—I hadn't even hydrated. Several guys were ahead of me on the roster, though, so I played it cool. But one by one, three linemen were injured, and suddenly it was my turn. This wasn't just any game—it was a prime-time matchup against the Minnesota Vikings, led by Brett Favre.

Instead of thanking God, I questioned Him—*Why are You doing this to me?* But God didn't give me all that talent to keep me on the sidelines.

I wish I could tell you that I tore it up on the field. But I didn't. I missed plays, fell down, and floundered around on the ground. It was terrible, especially when I saw my mistakes replayed on the big screen.

The coach screamed from the sidelines. His voice was a reminder of what I already knew—I didn't belong on that field.

But then, one of my teammates ran to the sidelines and

said, “Coach, quit yelling at him. Just let him play.” Then, this player came back on the field, looked me in the eyes, and said, “CJ, you can do this.” His belief in me stirred emotions I hadn’t felt in some time—confidence and hope.

I took a moment to pray, “God, You allowed me to go to college, and You put me here in the NFL. Now, I need You to help me perform. If You don’t, it’s over for me.” I was one bad play from being let go.

Asking God to guide my life on and off the field had been a regular thing when I was in college. Faith was central to my life. But in the NFL, I’d somehow forgotten to rely on God and seek His help, focusing more on my doubts and insecurities than on the faithfulness and strength of the God who was for me (Romans 8:31).

As I lined up again, confidence returned. *I can do this! I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength* (Philippians 4:13).

The next play, I broke through the line, tackled Brett Favre, and forced an interception that led to a touchdown and a victory. I led the team in tackles that night.

That moment changed the game—and my life. It reignited my faith, confidence, and passion for the game and sparked a new, intense desire within me to be the best I could be. From that night forward, I did whatever it took in practice to sharpen my craft. I wanted to be remembered as a player of integrity and passion.

That season ended with me starting in the Super Bowl and earning a championship ring. But more importantly, I learned that life is better when you’re in the game.



I’m so thankful God pulled me out of my comfort zone and put me on the field, even though I didn’t feel equipped or deserving. I’m also glad I listened to my teammate’s encouragement and found the courage to line up and play.

Had I stayed on the sidelines, I would’ve missed seven incredible years in the NFL and many life-changing experiences, including meeting my wife. Fear would have kept me from far more than football.

Are you tempted to stay on the sidelines of life? Fear, shame, insecurity, guilt—many things can keep us there. But staying sidelined costs us God’s plans for victory in our lives (Jeremiah 29:11), and it hurts others who need what God has placed in us.



**IF YOU’RE WILLING
TO GET IN THE
GAME WITH GOD,
HE’LL GET IN THE
GAME WITH YOU
AND TAKE YOU
TO THE END ZONE
EVERY TIME.**

Top: CJ Wilson receives a heartfelt hometown welcome from his mother and local fans after Green Bay’s Super Bowl victory in 2011.

Bottom: As a defensive end for the ECU Pirates, CJ Wilson made many game changing plays.

God does sometimes place us on the sidelines for a season to give us instruction or maybe time to rest, heal, or prepare—but hiding out there in fear is different. Satan is the author of fear, not God (2 Timothy 1:7). Satan wants to sideline you so you miss God’s redemption story (John 10:10). Don’t let him.

Tell every voice of fear, doubt, and insecurity to be silent and replace those negative thoughts with God’s truth about you (2 Corinthians 10:5). You *do* belong. You *are* worth it.

I'D SOMEHOW FORGOTTEN TO RELY ON GOD AND SEEK HIS HELP.



And there is still hope. Here’s another thought: your loved ones need you on the field; their victories depend on it too. God created us all with abilities and allows us to have various experiences so that we can help one another get up and persevere to victory. We need each other.

Maybe your past mistakes have you feeling unworthy. Let me tell you something—no one plays a perfect game, not even the greats. Failure isn’t the issue; what you do next is. Will you learn from your failure and try again? Or will you give up and forfeit God’s plan for you?

You might think God doesn’t want you on His team because you’ve wasted your life and His blessings. All you have to do is read the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32, and you’ll see that is never the case. I know from experience that God redeems us from our failures.

I squandered my God-given opportunities in high school so badly that my poor academic performance almost made it so I didn’t get to play college football. I didn’t have learning challenges; I simply cared more about making jokes and cutting up than listening and studying. I didn’t have the grades to get into any college.

I was so ashamed of myself, and knowing I couldn’t stay at home, I prepared to enlist in the military. But the night before I did that, I asked God to forgive me for wasting His blessings. And



Above Left: CJ discovered his love for the game at a young age, excelling at every level of the game.

Above right: CJ with his parents, Amos and Doris, whose love, guidance, and support helped make his NFL dream possible. Their lessons in godliness, integrity, and hard work shaped the man he became.

PHOTO BY PARKER OVERTON PHOTOGRAPHY

GOD IS MORE CONCERNED WITH WHO WE CAN BECOME THAN WHAT WE'VE DONE.

The lessons CJ learned on the gridiron are now being used to help others get up in the game of life.



PHOTO BY ECU ATHLETICS

then, I made a simple request, “God, if You still want me on that field, please make a way.”

A recruiter from East Carolina University (ECU) called the next day to say they wanted me and would help me improve my grades by getting me tutors. Not only that, they offered me a full-ride scholarship. Only God could do that.

He is the God of another chance, even when we don’t deserve one. He’s more concerned with who we can become than what we’ve done—and that includes you. You only need to confess your sins and ask for His forgiveness (1 John 1:9), learn from your mistakes, and then press on to victory with Him (Philippians 3:12–14).

You might be thinking you are too far gone, too far beyond repair for God or anyone else to want you. You might even be deciding that there’s no reason for you to keep playing. All I can say is, none of that is true.

I have been in games when we were so far behind that our fans left the stadium before halftime. Talk about humiliation!

Frustrated and discouraged players kicked over coolers and yelled in defeat, “This was supposed to be our year!” They not only felt they’d lost the game, but their future hope of a championship title as well.

But our coach encouraged us, “Guys, it’s not over! There is still time on the clock. Believe in yourselves, you can win!” And often, he was right.

Perhaps my favorite comeback story is when ECU was playing Old Southern Mississippi. It was the final minute of the game. Southern Miss scored a touchdown and was about to secure the victory with the extra point. But then, something amazing happened.

I blocked the kick, recovered the ball, and ran it back

for two points. That win propelled ECU to become the conference champs.

God has written a comeback story for you, too. It doesn’t matter how many mistakes you’ve made, how much of your life you’ve squandered, or how far behind or outnumbered you are. The Master Coach always has a play up His sleeve that can turn your whole life around.

So what are you waiting for? God is calling your number—it’s time to take to the field. †



CONSIDER

What’s keeping you sidelined? What opportunities and talents have you squandered? How does it feel to know that it’s never too late for God to call your number? Do you have a God-powered comeback story that encourages you in low moments?

CJ WILSON retired in 2017 after a successful seven-year career in the NFL. Today, when he isn’t with his wife and three children, CJ is coaching high school football, mentoring his nephews in the sport, and sharing the lessons from the gridiron and his faith in prison with the Victorious Living team.

All My Hope Is in Jesus

THE STORY OF JULIE SEALS



I *was born with spina bifida.* The doctors told my parents that I wouldn't survive, and if by chance I did, I'd never walk or develop normally. Heartbroken, my parents took me home and waited for me to die.

At six months old, I underwent an operation where the doctors were able to remove most of the tumor that wrapped around my spinal cord and protruded through my skin. They also pushed my spinal cord back inside my body. But they still had little expectations for me.

God had a different plan, though (Psalm 139; Jeremiah 29:11; Ephesians 2:10). Not only did I survive, I miraculously grew into an energetic little girl who walked before age one and read the newspaper before age three.

As I grew older, however, I developed neurological complications in my feet and legs. By age 12, I had lost all feeling in both my feet. By 18, I developed pressure ulcers on the bottom of my left foot.

I underwent 12 surgeries over the next 10 years on my left foot, and then gangrene set in. I woke up one day in the emergency

room, packed in ice from the neck down as the doctors tried to lower my 106-degree temperature. They amputated my left leg below the knee the next morning.

For the next several years, I struggled with alcohol and drugs as I dealt with self-doubt and insecurities. In the midst of all this, I was caught in a toxic marriage and doing my best to be a good mother to my only child, Tyler.

Deep down, I knew I needed God in my life, but I didn't know how to find Him. I

also didn't know what to do with all my problems, so I ran. I took my beloved son and moved cross-country to start a new life in Tennessee.

I found a church there and got baptized, hoping that when I came up out of the water, I'd be a new person. But nothing changed, because I was only going through the motions. I hadn't given my heart to God, nor had I committed to following Jesus.

I still considered myself a victim of life and its cruel circumstances. I didn't think

PHOTO BY CAPTURED MEMORIES BY ESTA

I was a sinner who was in need of a Savior.

I went to church for about a month. After every service, I would stand in the parking lot holding Tyler, hoping that someone would invite us to lunch. I was desperate for fellowship and clueless about how to live for God. But every Sunday, people passed us by, got into their cars, smiled, and waved as they drove away. I felt so rejected and alone.

Instead of reaching out, however, I withdrew and eventually stopped going. Self-pity took over, and I convinced myself that those “church people” didn’t care one bit about me. Truthfully, I’d never given them a chance to know me.

Isolated, I reached for substances again to ease my pain. I started hanging out with a different crowd where I quickly felt accepted. Soon, I was trapped in an old, familiar cycle of self-destruction.

A couple years later, Tyler’s dad found us. We went through a bitter divorce and custody battle. Panicked at the thought of losing the most precious person in my life, I fled to Mexico.

Once I got there, I realized I had no next step to my genius plan, so I crossed back over to straighten things out with the authorities. Turns out, they were waiting for me, and as soon as I crossed the border, I was detained.

The authorities put Tyler in one police car and me in another. As we drove down Interstate 5, they let me listen to his little voice over the police radio. “Hi, Momma!” he piped. “I love you, Momma!” My heart ripped out of my chest.

I was in jail for three weeks for misdemeanor child stealing. After my release, I was given a six-month restraining order, forbidding me to contact Tyler or my ex-husband. The day the restriction lifted, I rushed to call, but the phone number was no good. My ex had taken Tyler and disappeared.

Knowing my son was gone broke me. But before I could process that loss, I learned my dad had lung cancer.

The doctors predicted my father would be fine and scheduled surgery to remove the bottom third of his right lung. But when they opened him up, they saw that the cancer

had spread to the chambers around his heart. He never left the hospital alive.

At that point, I gave up on life. I no longer cared whether I lived or died. My son was gone; my dad was dead. What was left for me? I packed a bag and fled to Mexico with one goal in mind—to stay inebriated so I never had to face reality. I had no coping skills for pain other than substances.

I lived that way for the next two years,

I needed practical skills to live a clean and sober life on the outside.

consuming a steady flow of booze and drugs on the beaches of Ensenada, hoping to die. I felt nothing but despair, despite the beautiful ocean sunsets that surrounded me. And then I connected with a group of people who manufactured and sold meth.

First Corinthians 15:33 says, “Do not be misled; bad company corrupts good character.” I know this to be true.

At first, I knew better than to associate with these people. They were constantly under police surveillance. But when you have nothing to live for, you don’t think logically anymore. It wasn’t long before the Mexican federales were raiding my house. These men were no joke—dressed in all black, wearing full face masks, and armed with machine guns.

One morning as I made my way to the

liquor store to spend the last of my change on a 40 oz. beer, I heard a voice inside me say, “Julie, you are going to hell for the way you’re living.”

I was shocked. I’d never spent time worrying about heaven or hell, so I knew this wasn’t my thought. Regardless, I knew hell was what I deserved.

That afternoon, I had an appointment to see a doctor because of complications in

my remaining foot. My condition, osteomyelitis, had resulted in an infected ulcer the size of a football. The doctor told me my right leg would need to be amputated, or I’d die from the infection.

That news was the last straw for me. I had already lost one leg, not to mention my son and my dad—and now my remaining leg had to be amputated? The anguish in my heart overwhelmed me. Inside, I knew I could either keep running toward death or turn to God.

I returned home and collapsed in a heap of gut-wrenching sobs on my living room floor. Suddenly I sensed what I now know to be the Holy Spirit of God fill the room. He pulled the blinders off my eyes and helped me see my need for a Savior.

As I became painfully aware of the

Julie with her son Tyler—the last photo she has of them together before addiction tore their lives apart, a painful reminder of love lost to drugs.





Neither Julie nor Mike imagined their lives could be restored. But God had other plans, giving them a love story only He could write.

“Do you know that Jesus loves you very much?”

Tears streamed down my face as she went on to tell me about the forgiving heart of Almighty God. He was

person I had become, I cried out, “God, I need You to become the center of my life, or I’ll be lost forever! Help me. I don’t know how to pray. I can’t stop drinking or doing drugs. I’m trying, but I can’t quit. I can’t even meet You halfway. Do whatever it takes to set me free.”

I woke up the next morning but felt nothing. Assuming God hadn’t heard me or wasn’t answering my prayer, I decided

a God who desperately wanted not only to save me but also to change my life. (See Ezekiel 18:23; John 3:17; 1 Timothy 2:3–4; 2 Peter 3:9; and 3 John 1:2.)

I got on my knees in front of my cold metal bunk and surrendered my life to Jesus Christ. A lead weight lifted from my heart. I was in prison and facing 17 years to life. I was at risk of losing my only leg—and yet, for the first time, I felt free and full of hope.

The Lord responded, “Julie, it’s time for you to depend on Me now.”

I had nothing to lose and went ahead with a plan to smuggle meth across the border. I felt numb as I walked to the pedestrian crossing of the Mexico/San Ysidro border at San Diego with four pounds of crystal meth duct-taped around my waist.

I was arrested before I got across.

During my first week of incarceration, a small group of women volunteers came into the prison. One neatly manicured lady sat on my bunk, smiled, and said,

Still dealing with the infection, I requested to see a doctor. He took one look at my foot and told me that, without a doubt, I’d lose my leg, and soon. But I couldn’t agree with him. I had just read Isaiah 53:5 that says, “By His wounds we are healed,” and I believed that Jesus had not only died to save me from my sin, but to heal my sickness and inner wounds.

“Nope,” I told the doctor. “I’m not gonna lose this leg. Jesus is going to heal me!”

He laughed, but God had the last laugh. Every day after that, a small group of faith-filled women and I prayed together, speaking healing over my body. Two months later, the ulcer was gone, and new skin was growing over the hole in my foot. The doctor couldn’t believe it. He declared it a miracle, insisting, “Jesus must have done that!”

Incredibly, I served only 22 months in federal prison, with my last stint at FMC Carswell in Fort Worth, Texas. There, I completed a 500-hour Residential Drug Abuse Program (RDAP). I had requested the program even though it wasn’t required. I needed practical skills to live a clean and sober life on the outside.

My mom was so supportive, despite all the pain I’d caused her and my dad. She sensed the change in me and was excited for me to come live with her upon release. She sent me cards with pictures of clothing she had bought for me. They were hanging in the closet that was going to be my bedroom in her apartment.

But six months before my release, the chaplain called me to his office and told me that my mom had just died in her sleep. I was devastated.

My dear mom, who had only seen me mess up my life, was never going to know the change Jesus had made in me. Tears poured down my face as I asked, “God, what am I supposed to do now?”

Suddenly, as clear as a bell, the Lord responded, “Julie, it’s time for you to depend on Me now.”

I didn’t really have a choice. I had depended on my parents my whole life to bail me out of my legal and financial troubles. I had no family left who believed in me.

I was released from prison on November 20, 2002. I had to fly from Dallas to San Diego to report for probation, as that was where my crime had been committed. I clutched my Bible as I walked through the airport, repeating 2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV aloud: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!” That verse got me all the way to my destination.

PHOTO BY CAPTURED MEMORIES BY ESTA



Far left: After 15 years of separation, Julie and her son, Tyler, found each other. Tyler's gift of forgiveness led to a restored relationship. Pictured here walking Tyler down the aisle at his wedding.

Left: Julie speaks worldwide about finding hope in Jesus. Her book, *All My Hope*, available on Amazon, is an incredible testimony of the restorative power of God.

As I continued to depend on God, He was faithful to provide me every need. He placed wonderful people in my path to support me. He provided a safe place to live and made a way for me to go to college. I graduated with honors, receiving the Chancellor's Award, the highest honor given to a college student there.

And then, on Christmas Eve 2005, He brought a mighty man of God to me. I met Mike at a dinner party at my pastor's house—a set-up date for sure.

I tried to scare Mike away by telling him everything about my past addiction and prison time; I even showed him my prosthetic leg. He just smiled and said, "I'm not going anywhere!"

Mike, a US Navy Senior Chief, had met Jesus after losing his wife of twenty years to cancer. Like me, he had been desperate when God rescued him. We were married in 2006, and not long after, Mike became a prison chaplain. (See Mike's story on page 24.)

Mike often encouraged me to locate Tyler. We prayed for him every day. Eventually we found him on Facebook, but I sensed the Holy Spirit telling me not to reach out to him yet. So I waited, trusting God's faithfulness to reunite me with my son.

While I was still in prison and praying for Tyler, God had led me to Isaiah 49:18. It says: "Lift your eyes and look around;

all your children gather and come to you. As surely as I live," declares the LORD, "you will wear them all as ornaments; you will put them on, like a bride" (NIV).

Now, I showed that verse to Mike, and for the next several years, I prayed and fasted, clinging to God's promise. And then, on May 12, 2013, my miracle happened.

Tyler found me on Facebook and reached out. Three months later, Mike and I were at the airport to pick up my son, who was coming for a visit. I stood on my tiptoes, peering down the long corridor as passengers rolled their carry-on bags toward us. Mike saw him first and yelled, "There he is, Julie. Run!" And run I did.

When Tyler saw me, he dropped his duffel bag and ran to embrace me with open arms. We had a wonderful visit, and not long after that, he moved in with us. We had our challenges, but God saw us through.

Today, Tyler is married to a wonderful Christian woman. Can you believe I walked him down the aisle, and Mike married them! They have a precious daughter, which means I'm now a grandmother. Only God could write such a redemption story.

In 2023, I launched Julie Seals Ministries and published my book, *All My Hope: A Prisoner No More*. It is distributed in prisons and recovery centers in the US and abroad.

If you're reading my story from inside prison walls, know this: your story isn't over. God sees you. He knows your name,

your pain, every mistake you've made, and every wound you carry.

He loves you. And He has a plan especially for you.

Trust Him. He will walk beside you through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4) and bring you out shining like His Son!

I'm living proof that God is real and that nothing is impossible with Him. He can turn your mourning into dancing (Psalm 30:11), your ashes into beauty (Isaiah 61:3), and your mess into a miraculous message.

Don't give up. Keep praying and believing, no matter the odds. And trust God's timing. You can't see clearly now all that He's doing behind the scenes (1 Corinthians 13:12), but He's at work, and your miracle is coming. †



CONSIDER

What pain are you running from or numbing instead of facing? What might that be costing you? Who or what have you depended on instead of God? What small steps could you take toward trusting Him today?

JULIE SEALS is an ordained minister and evangelist who speaks in churches, women's events, rehab facilities, jails, and prisons worldwide. She is the creative content manager for Victorious Living. Her book, *All My Hope: A Prisoner No More*, is available on Amazon. Learn more at julieseals.com.



WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A CHAMPION

BY KRISTI OVERTON JOHNSON

▶ A DECADE AGO, THE LORD SPOKE to my heart: “*Kristi, everything you did to become a world champion water-skier, you will have to do again to complete the work I’m giving you.*” He had just called me into the uncharted territory of prison ministry.

At first, this new journey was exciting. Prison doors were flying open for *Victorious Living* magazine and for me to go behind bars to speak to the incarcerated.

I knew I’d found my calling, but soon, it got hard. The workload grew heavy and the finances were thin. I cried, “Lord, help! I can’t do this!”

Then I looked back on God’s initial statement and reminded myself that God had given me this work and though it was hard, I had done hard work before. I’d faced difficult

obstacles in becoming a world champion, and now, with God, I could do it again. Only this time, there would be eternal rewards.

I’ve spent a lot of time reflecting on my athletic journey, but lately, I’ve felt an urgency to identify exactly what it was—on and off the water—that helped me become a champion. Finishing well matters to me.

It’s been fun reminiscing, and I’ve decided to share some of what I’ve recalled here and in upcoming issues. This theme will also show up in video teachings on my YouTube channel and on prison tablets under the Victorious Living channel.

People often ask, “Kristi, what does it take to be a champion in life?” In my experience, it’s the very things that helped me become a champion water-skier.

Of course, the pursuit of victory required sacrifice, focus, and discipline beyond the norm. Titles didn’t happen because I or anyone else wished them for me.

I experienced victory at the highest level only because of what I was willing to do in obscurity. Every day required a deliberate choice to push past discomfort and show up at a ski dock, whether I felt like it or not. Then I had to decide to get in the water and say, “Hit it!” to the boat driver.

That might sound easy, but it was not. And lately, I’ve been recalling all the obstacles that could have kept me from my pursuit.

Interestingly, they are the same things that can keep us from living a victorious life in Christ.

Let’s journey back and see who or what might be trying to get in our way of being a champion.

OBSTACLE 1: PAIN. If you’ve been an athlete, you know the body hurts, especially in the morning. I can’t recall a day when I woke up and thought, “Man, I feel *awesome!* I can’t wait to get to the dock and ski!” Most mornings, I felt like a Mack truck had hit me.

I’d be in a hotel room abroad, hours away from my appointed competition time, wondering how in the world I was going to bend over to put my ski on, much less run the ski course. Neck and lumbar disc issues and a congenital hip disorder tried to hinder me early in my career. If I’d waited to feel good to ski, I would have never skied.

The point isn’t to receive sympathy or applause, nor is it to suggest that pain should be ignored and pushed through to the detriment of your well-being. (I learned *that* the hard way.) It’s only to show that daily pain tried to stop me. It still does.

And just like in skiing, if I wait to feel good enough to do what God has called me to do—whether it’s being a wife, mother, ministry leader, or publisher—I’d still be in bed. That doesn’t mean I ignore serious issues. Rather, it means I acknowledge the pain, tend to it if it is possible and needed, and then determine to keep moving to the best of my ability, often with the help of others.

In life, pain will always have a voice; the question is, will we let it have the final say?

PHOTO BY ZACHARY BROWN

OBSTACLE 2: NEGATIVE VOICES. Not only did pain try to keep me from moving toward victory, but so did the voices—both internal and external. They all had one goal: to distract and instill fear and doubt.

An internal voice roared early in the morning and followed me all the way to the dock. It reminded me of all the reasons why I would never be a champion. Sometimes those negative thoughts stemmed from things someone said or didn't say. But usually, they came from my own self-talk. I was my worst critic.

External voices came in various forms. Some came over the loudspeaker as announcers questioned my ability to bring home the gold. Some were from the crowd, like in Melbourne, Australia, when 100,000 spectators yelled "fall off!" in unison from the shoreline as I made my way into the bottom of the jump ramp. I was their entertainment, and they were hoping for a big crash.

Others came from my competitors, their coaches, and even their parents. One overbearing father made sure to tell me how great his daughter was skiing as I entered the water to compete. One year, he sent me a Christmas card with a picture of her in front of trophies, as if to remind me that she would be waiting for me. *Really?*

The reality is, naysayers will always exist. Not everyone wants us to have victory. Satan certainly doesn't want us to fulfill God's purposes (John 10:10).

Our task is to silence those negative voices

to learn from the best and grow my skills.

It's interesting. In all those decades of skiing in those critter-filled waters, not one alligator or snake ever got hold of me... though I did hit a few ducks. Turns out, most

PAIN WILL ALWAYS HAVE A VOICE, BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO HAVE THE FINAL SAY.

and replace them with God's voice of truth. Get in His Word (the Bible) and discover who He says we are and what we are capable of.

OBSTACLE 3: CIRCUMSTANCES.

Once I pushed through the pain and negative voices, then came the obstacles of difficult, frightening, and often unfair circumstances—wind, rain, waves, debris, and broken equipment.

At the Junior World Championships in Quebec, Canada, in 1985, I had the unfair circumstance of pelting rain. The heavens opened, and the rain poured down just as I was putting on my ski. There was no lightning, so the tournament continued. I knew that if I refused to get off the dock, I would be refusing a possible victory. To this day, it

is one of my favorite victories because it was one of the most difficult. There is something about facing the tough stuff and coming out victorious that sticks with you.

There were other obstacles, too—like critters. Alligators loved early morning and late evening water as much as I did. My husband, Tim, would run the boat to stir up the water and shoo those gators away.

Once I counted 14 water moccasins hanging around the dock just as my coach told me to get in. I got in because I didn't want to miss an opportunity

of those critters were just as scared of me as I was of them. Truthfully, the things we think will "get us" usually can't or won't. I'm not suggesting being careless. I'm just making the point that to move out with God, we can't be intimidated by what we see. God is bigger!

Friend, in life, there will always be pain, negative and hurtful voices, and unfair and frightening circumstances, many of which will stare you in the face. But that's okay. They can only keep you from victory if you let them.

God has already paid the price for you to have a victorious life through the death of His Son. He has given you His Holy Spirit. All you have to do is keep getting up, moving forward, and saying yes to Him.

No, it won't be easy, but you will be victorious. God will be with you as you pass through those difficult and scary waters (Isaiah 43:2). And if He is with you and for you, nothing can stop you. (See Romans 8.) [†]

CONSIDER

What obstacle is preventing you from moving forward? Which voices are shaping your decisions—fear, insecurity, and outside criticism, or the steady voice of God? What steps of discipline can you take to prepare for pressure, testing, and greater responsibility?



KRISTI OVERTON JOHNSON

encourages and equips people for victory through her writings, speaking engagements, and prison ministry. To learn more, go to kojministries.org.

Kristi speaking in a prison, sharing lessons she learned competing, and encouraging others to rise above their past and become champions in life.



BRAND-NEW START



THE STORY OF MIKE SEALS

I fell to the floor and curled up in a ball, unable to stop crying. My wife was gone, and it was too late to tell her how sorry I was for the 20 years of anger, cheating, and coming home drunk I'd put her through.

I was a United States Navy Senior Chief, but at that moment, I was just a broken man who had lost everything he thought that mattered. And that's when I felt the presence of God descend into the room.

I knew I was undeserving of His love. I had given my life to the Lord as a teenager, but rebelled and walked away from Him. Yet here He was, comforting me in the moment of my greatest loss. I even sensed that He was not angry with me and that He loved me deeply as I heard Him say, *"This will soon pass, My son. I have plans for you."*

Then—just as He poured His grace out on Saul, a murderer of Christians (Acts 9:1–19), transformed him, and set him on a new path—God poured His grace out on me when I was least deserving. His immeasurable grace set my life on a new path.

Today, I work as a senior chaplain in the Department of Corrections, teaching men in prison about Jesus. But my journey here was long and painful. I went through much darkness before finally finding the light.

PHOTO BY CAPTURED MEMORIES BY ESTA

I grew up in rural central Florida, in a home marked by much unrest. My father was an abusive alcoholic who made life difficult for the rest of the family. My mother loved us kids and did her best, but our lives were filled with much struggle. Praise God, my father eventually gave his life to Jesus, but that didn't undo the pain he'd caused.

By the time I was 17, I was buck wild, drinking in the same bars as my dad. My mom, unable to control me anymore, sent me to live with him.

During this time, a new friend from school invited me to a youth event at church. I decided I wanted God in my life and went to the altar to ask Jesus Christ to be the Lord of my life. But I didn't understand what that meant, and no one followed up or taught me how to build a personal relationship with God and live as a Christian.

A month after that decision, I enlisted in the United States Navy to start a new life. Let me tell you—life as a sailor was *not* the ideal setting for a brand-new Christian. Exciting ports, foreign women, and lots of alcohol grabbed for my attention, and I quickly chose a lifestyle far from the one God desired.

Four years later, I met Trina, a beautiful woman from the Philippines. We married after seeing each other for only a few months. I wasn't ready for marriage, though. And I'm ashamed to admit that I was not always a good husband to Trina.

I had serious anger issues, and I took my frustrations out on her. Not only that, but I had a gambling problem too. I was in a casino gambling away Trina's paycheck while she was in the hospital giving birth to our daughter, Susan.

I loved my family the best I knew how—but I was a broken man who didn't know what a functional, healthy family life was all about.

In 1999, after 14 years of marriage, Trina was diagnosed with stage 3B breast cancer. I was terrified. All I could think about was our 13-year-old daughter. How could I possibly raise Susan alone?

As Trina's disease progressed, I became very aware of my need for God, but I felt unworthy to ask Him for anything. None-

theless, I begged, "God, please don't take my wife. But if You must take Trina, please don't take her until Susan graduates from high school."

God, in His great mercy, answered my prayer. Trina was healed. After one year of chemo, radiation, and a mastectomy, the cancer was gone. I was grateful to God, but I didn't surrender my life to Him. Still, He continued to pursue me.

Each day, I carpoled to Camp Pendleton with friends who listened to Christian radio. God used His Word, taught on that station, to tug at my heart. I wore sunglasses so nobody could see my tears.

In late summer of 2004, I heard a voice inside me say, "*Mike, you'd better get your family in church before it's too late.*" I knew it was God, but I kept dragging my feet.

About six months later, my daughter called me at work. "Dad, Mom's eyes are yellow." I didn't believe her, but she insisted. We discovered the cancer had returned, and a few days later, my wife of 20 years was gone.

I was completely broken, lost, hurt, and desperate. And I knew exactly where I needed to go.

I had seen a church sign near my home during my carpool rides to the Navy base. After Trina's funeral, I went to the church.

I sat in the back row crying like a baby, saying, "Lord, why wasn't I the one to die? Why Trina?" All she ever did was love me,



Mike had a successful career in the Navy, but he struggled at home with anger issues stemming from a difficult past.

overnight. Instead, He entered my grief with me and faithfully walked me through it, teaching me that when life is dark and circumstances are hard, He will always bring me to the other side (Psalm 23:4; Isaiah 43:2).

Eventually, my grief began to lift as I walked with God daily, read His Word, fellowshiped with other believers, and attended church regularly. God exchanged my grief for His joy (Psalm 30:11).

I never thought I'd be able to laugh again,

My daughter needed to see that Jesus was real in her father's life.

even when I hurt her. Now it was too late to say I was sorry.

I knew God was giving me one last chance to come back to Him, and then I thought of Susan. My daughter needed to see that Jesus was real in her father's life. She deserved a godly father.

At that moment, I surrendered my life completely to Him. I repented of my sin, asking Him to forgive me and to help me move forward.

God didn't remove my pain and grief

but God gave me that gift. He also gave me a second chance at marriage.

I met Julie at a church conference. Not long after, the pastor had us over for dinner. Julie tried to scare me away by telling me about her past. But when I learned how God had radically delivered her from a 17-year addiction to alcohol and meth, kept her through 22 months in federal prison and various health issues, and saw the incredible joy she exhibited, I was attracted to her more. God had truly transformed her.



I couldn't go back, but I could move forward with God.

Top: Mike and Julie were given a second chance at love, and that love continues to grow stronger even after 20 years of marriage.

Right: Mike and Julie serve together behind prison walls, sharing God's unconditional love. Pictured after a baptism service where Mike baptized several men from the unit he serves as chaplain.



(See Julie's story on page 18.) He had rescued us both (Psalm 18:16–19) and brought us together. I wasn't going anywhere.

I fell head over heels in love with this kind, smart, beautiful woman. Julie sang in the church choir, got straight A's in college, and was on fire for God. We dated for six months before I proposed and she said yes.

After the wedding, I began feeling there had to be more to being a Christian than just going to church on Sundays. I told Julie what was going on, and her eyes sparkled with excitement. She told me she had promised God that once she was released from prison, she would spend the rest of her life going back in to tell others how much Jesus loves them.

We prayed and asked God for open doors. One week later, we met a woman who had a prison ministry. She invited us to attend a women's minimum-security event and share our testimonies. I felt a spark of excitement I'd never felt before. God was up to something big.

That first prison chapel service changed my life. The minute those women walked in, wearing their faded orange uniforms, carrying their worn Bibles, and eager to hear about Jesus—I knew I was where I belonged (Ephesians 2:10). What a sight to see 35 women raise their hands to heaven and worship God, tears running down their faces.

I shared my story, and they cried even more. Some chose to place their faith and trust in Jesus after hearing my testimony. Immediately, I remembered Jesus's words in Matthew 25: "I was in prison and you visited me" (v. 36). I knew that day that my calling was to the incarcerated, to those that Jesus called the "least of these" (v. 40).

Today, I serve as a Department of Corrections senior chaplain in a men's prison. I also run a discipleship group teaching men about Jesus. Julie and I have been married for 20 years now, and God has done amazing things in our lives. We have a wonderful relationship both with my daughter and with Julie's son and their families.

You know, when Trina died, I thought my life was over. I was filled with regret, knowing I could never go back and make right all the wrong I'd caused.

But God's mercy and grace are bigger than my mess. I couldn't go back, but I could move forward with Him. And as I did, God restored the damaged, broken, and lost things in my life.

He can restore all those things in your life too.

Maybe today you think your life is over, that you've wasted all your chances, and there's no way you can go back and fix what you've destroyed. Humanly speaking, you might be right—some things in life can't be fixed. But that doesn't mean it's the end.

God, in His great mercy, can plant a new garden in the soil of your life. He can help you rebuild your life into something beautiful, something with purpose. He can give you a brand-new start and rewrite your story, just like He did for Julie and me.

The question is, will you let Him? †



CONSIDER

Mike knew his daughter was watching his life. Who in your life needs to see a real transformation in you? How could your story of God's restoration become an encouragement to them? How might the things you're most ashamed of become the foundation for your purpose?

MIKE SEALS is a Department of Corrections senior chaplain in a men's prison. He and his wife Julie have ministered together for 20 years, bringing hope and healing to the incarcerated through the love and power of Jesus Christ.

WHEN STUPIDITY BECOMES WISDOM

► **“TO LEARN, YOU MUST LOVE** discipline; it is stupid to hate correction” (Proverbs 12:1 NLT).

My father used to call me stupid, and I didn't like it one bit. But looking back, I did do some really dumb things.

Pride was my biggest problem. I hated correction and was unwilling to commit myself to instruction (Proverbs 23:12).

My know-it-all attitude kept me from listening to valid criticism from God and people who knew better. I didn't understand that “wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy” (Proverbs 27:6 NLT).

Pride kept me from taking responsibility. I had an excuse for everything that went wrong. It also caused me to act foolishly. My lack of discipline and self-control deteriorated any good plans I had for the future.

As a result, I ended up in prison for over 30 years, where I met many others who hated correction. Our foolish pride cost us our freedom, dignity, and relationships. “Pride leads to disgrace” (Proverbs 11:2 NLT). I am a living example of the truth of that verse.

I'm so glad that my prideful self eventually discovered the truth of the second part of Proverbs 11:2: “but with humility comes wisdom.” The day I humbled myself before God was when my life began to be built upon wisdom, instead of stupidity. Psalm 111:10 NLT says, “Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true wisdom.”

This verse isn't talking about being afraid of God. That kind of fear would cause us to shrink back, not draw near to Him (Hebrews 4:16; James 4:8). Instead, it

BY ROY A. BORGES
WITH KRISTI OVERTON JOHNSON

means we are to have a reverential fear of God; it can be translated as “awe.”

Think about standing on a beach and looking upon a vast, crystal blue ocean. Or imagine standing on a high mountain, overlooking a magnificent view. Moments like that take our breath away.

When I finally feared God—grasped the awe of His majesty, love, and power—and humbled myself before Him, I began to grow wise. And out of my awe and respect for Him, I no longer wanted to disobey or live in opposition to His ways.

The fear of the Lord helped me grow wiser by increasing my knowledge, insight, and understanding. And it eventually led me out of prison for good. (Read Proverbs chapters 1 and 2 to learn more benefits of wisdom.)

Many think they can forsake fearing the Lord and still become wise. They assume life's experiences and academic knowledge are enough. But if a person doesn't acknowledge God as the source of wisdom, their foundation for making wise decisions is shaky. A wise person builds their life on the solid foundation of God's ways (Matthew 7:24–27).

Are you ready to be a wise person who grows in wisdom? Humble yourself before the Lord and become in awe of Him. Embrace correction from God and others. “Instruct the wise, and they will be even wiser” (Proverbs 9:9 NLT).

Wisdom leads to a fruitful life. “No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way” (Hebrews 12:11 NLT).

If seeking wisdom and correction are new to you, ask God to waken your ear to instruction (Isaiah 50:4). He will guide you in what is right and teach you His way (Psalm 25:8–9).

Let's pray: *Lord, help me to be in awe of You and become wise. Help me to listen, to receive correction without fear or defense, and to trust that Your discipline is a sign that You love me. Let Your wisdom mold me into who You've called me to be. Amen.* †



CONSIDER

When being corrected, what emotion surfaces first? What might that reaction be protecting? What might God be inviting you to learn or become through the discomfort you are resisting?



ROY A. BORGES served 31 years in the Florida Department of Corrections, where he realized his need for a Savior. While incarcerated, Roy ministered to others through his writings, over 300 of which have been published. Roy's book, *101 Short Stories from the Prison Cell*, is available from amazon.com.

The Knock That Changed Everything



—
THE STORY OF DAN EVANS

“Who in the world is that?” A violent knock rattled our front door that warm summer night in 1999.

If I had known detectives were on the other side of that door, I would have taken one more minute to hold my wife close before opening it.

Deep down, I'd always known that knock would come. If only I had prepared my wife for the pain, confusion, and consequences my choices were about to unleash in her life.

Sarah and I were still newlyweds—just three and a half years into building our slice of the American dream. Looking in, we seemed to have it all together. We had great jobs, a bright future, and a supportive church community. We hoped to start a family soon.

But our lives were built on a shaky foundation because I was carrying a dark secret. And with that knock, it was exposed.

The booking area at the jail was cold and dismal. I felt hollow, like I was outside of my body watching a horror movie as the officers snapped my mugshot and fingerprinted me. Only I was the star of the show, and I had no way to change the channel. I was certain I'd lost everything—my wife, my life, and any hope for a future—because of what I'd done.

My whole life, I'd gone through the motions of being a Christian.

I'd thought I'd given my life to Jesus at age seven, but now I realize that I'd never understood what that meant. I'd thought it was about going to church and praying prayers.

With the cold, hard reality of life staring me in the face, I realized I needed more than routine—I needed Jesus. I was losing everything in real time and was completely powerless to help my wife or myself. Apart from Him and His intervention, I had no hope.

I thought about Sarah and all she must be going through. I had betrayed her trust in the worst way, failing her as a husband. The full weight of my failures bore down on me.

I barely made it out of booking before crying out to God: “Lord, You have my attention. If it has to be You and me for the rest of my life, You have me!”

I had no bargaining chips, no promises to do better. All I could offer Him were the broken pieces of my life and a pain-filled cry of repentance and surrender. (See Psalm 51.)

I spent that first night in the county jail wondering if God even knew where I was, much less whether He had heard my prayer or cared to help me through the horrible mess I'd made. But God, in His mercy, answered my cry swiftly, and in a way I never expected.

When morning came, I was surprised to learn that I had a visitor.

PHOTO BY LAURIE SAPP PHOTOGRAPHY

My heart pounded as the guard led me down the hall, seemingly louder than the sound of jangling keys echoing off the concrete walls. Who could it be? A lawyer? Someone from church?

My stomach dropped when I stepped into the small visitation room and saw her sitting there. *Sarah*.

Her eyes were swollen, and her face was pale. The pain in her expression cut deeper than any sentence a judge could hand down. Finally, she broke the silence.

"I don't understand any of this," she said, her tear-stained eyes locking on mine. I braced myself for the words I deserved—the anger, the goodbye—but they never came.

Instead, she whispered: "I forgave you as soon as you walked out the door. I meant what I said when we said our vows before God. I promised to love you for better or for worse. Well, this is just the 'worse' part. We'll get through this together."

I stared at my wife from my place of shackles and shame, unable to comprehend her choice to stay. On the other side of that plexiglass, God was demonstrating an unbelievable gift of grace. I didn't deserve the love Sarah was showing me, nor did I deserve His.

Restoration began that day—not because everything was suddenly fixed, but because grace showed up. Sarah's decision to stick with me was a spark of hope in the darkness, lighting our path.

I posted my bond and went home to wait for sentencing. The following nine months were a strange mix of freedom and fear as we lived in the shadow of a looming sentence while clinging to hope. We both knew the road ahead would be long and hard, but we could

already sense God doing something new in our hearts and marriage.

I received an eight-year prison sentence for my choices. Every day behind bars reminded me of the wreckage I had caused and the grace I didn't deserve. The harsh reality of prison life strengthened my faith as I leaned into Jesus for His help and guidance.

For Sarah, the journey looked different but was just as fierce. She faced whispers and judgment from people we'd once called friends. Our church community was absent. Bills piled high as income disappeared. And then there was the issue of whether her chance of being a mother was gone forever.

Every day, Sarah had to allow God to carry the crushing weight of her burdens by releasing her pain to Him. She clung tightly to His promises as she fought to hold true to her vow. She trusted, as did I, that somehow God could bring beauty out of our ashes (Isaiah 61:3). Forgiving me for shattering her world wasn't easy, but God gave her the grace to do it.

Before I started serving my time, God led us to a new church family who welcomed us with open arms. They helped us navigate this rough terrain.

Rebuilding our marriage was a slow, painstaking process. With prison walls separating us, our only lines of communication were letters, phone calls, and visits. We leaned on these fragile connections to stay close, just as we had years before when I served in Desert Storm.

Only this time, in this storm, our conversations were centered on our faith in Jesus Christ. Our bond in Him made us stronger and more resilient. He was the anchor that kept us secure (Hebrews 6:19).

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THAT PLEXIGLASS, GOD WAS DEMONSTRATING AN UNBELIEVABLE GIFT OF GRACE.



From their wedding day to renewing their vows years later after he got out of prison, Dan and Sarah's marriage endured betrayal and darkness—but grace, forgiveness, and love continue to write their story.



Dan ministers weekly behind prison walls through his ministry, Harvest of Life. Pictured speaking in a Florida prison as an incarcerated brother translates his message of hope to Spanish-speaking men.

Three years into my sentence, God began to reveal His purpose for our lives. My *ah-ha* moment happened while I was in a prison chapel service, listening to a volunteer share his testimony. He had been incarcerated too, but was now part of a ministry on the outside.

I wondered what kind of crazy kook would want to come back after doing time in prison, but after hearing his testimony, I felt inspired. “Lord,” I prayed, “could You do for me what You’ve done for him?”

To my great surprise, God responded, “Yes, but you have to give Me your future.”

God then gave me this verse to confirm His words: “Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?” (Jeremiah 32:27 NIV). That verse became a lifeline for me.

Trusting God with the details and surrendering my future to Him

I KNEW THAT I WASN’T TO WAIT UNTIL I GOT OUT OF PRISON TO START SERVING.

was the key to unlocking His plans and purposes for my life. It also marked the beginning of my call to prison ministry.

I knew that I wasn’t to wait until I got out of prison to start serving the incarcerated; I was to start now while behind bars. So, with God’s help, I began leading Bible studies, working in the chapel, and helping the less fortunate.

Meanwhile, on the outside, God called Sarah into prison ministry too, as a volunteer in a federal women’s prison, where she ministered to pregnant women. She also started a Bible study on the outside for the wives of incarcerated men.

Sarah knew firsthand the pain of incarceration and the impact of choices. Only God had been able to comfort her broken heart and restore her life. Only He had given her the strength to endure the pain my actions had caused. She wanted to bring the hope and com-

fort of Jesus to others (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

When I was released, Sarah and I faced new challenges as we navigated reentry, probation, sought stable work, and lived under the heavy weight of my past. Trials tried to choke out the progress we made, but God kept us strong. His grace was enough. He made us strong in our weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Every day we trusted the Lord to rebuild our lives. As we focused on obeying Him and moving forward in faith, God was faithful. Nothing was impossible for Him.

Not only did He meet our needs, He gave us our heart’s desire—two beautiful children. Our kids remind us every day that God not only is a restorer of what seems lost (Joel 2:25), but a rewarder of those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

Today, Sarah and I lead a thriving prison ministry together, reaching people who feel forgotten and hopeless. We walk back into the very places that once held me captive, bringing the hope and freedom that can be found only in Jesus Christ.

Our mission is simple: to offer the hope that no life is beyond redemption and no failure is too great for God’s grace. Where sin abounds, grace abounds more (Romans 5:20).

When that knock came at my door, I thought my life was over. In reality, it was just the beginning, because that knock from law enforcement led me to answer God’s knock on my heart.

In Revelation 3:20 NIV, Jesus says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.”

Jesus is still knocking on hearts—including yours. The question is, will you answer it?

Friend, the same grace God extended to me is waiting for you on the other side of your heart’s door. All you have to do is open it and receive His unconditional and undeserved love. You don’t have to clean up your life first. You don’t have to have all the answers. All you have to do is let Him in.

His knock can change everything. †



CONSIDER

Have you been “going through the motions” with God? How might a relationship with God impact your life? Is there someone you need to forgive or seek forgiveness from so restoration can begin? What “knock” might God be using in your life right now to draw you closer to Him?

DAN EVANS is the director of Harvest of Life Prison Ministry. Dan and Sarah enjoy serving others, living with joy, and pointing people to the freedom that is found only in Christ. For more information visit: www.harvestoflife.org.

Choosing Faith over Fear in Everyday Life

BY SHERIDAN CORREA

▶ **COURAGE DOESN'T ALWAYS LOOK** like bold speeches or heroic acts. Sometimes it's surprisingly small. In fact, sometimes, it can be red fingernails.

I recently painted my fingernails red. That may not sound courageous, but for me, it was an intentional act of bravery. Why? Because my fingers have an identity and a reputation all their own. They are long. They are expressive. They are *extra*.

Whether I'm leading worship at my church, recording content for prison tablets, or teaching, I consciously keep my fingers together so they don't take over the stage, the screen, or the pulpit. They are loud without speaking, distracting without effort.

People often make fun of them. Their subtle comments and sideways glances leave me feeling flawed, exposed, and like I have a weakness that needs to be hidden.

But that isn't true. Yes, my fingers sometimes look like they belong to aliens, but God made them on purpose and gave them function. So despite the attention they receive, I decided to paint them. And I chose red, the scariest color for me.

Guess what? They're pretty. They might stand out, but that's okay.

These red nails are a reminder for me that courage isn't the absence of fear—it's choosing to act anyway. It's showing up honestly instead of shrinking back quietly. It's deciding not to be governed by insecurity, but, instead, by God's truth.

In Joshua 1:9 (NIV), the Lord said to Joshua: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." God wasn't inviting Joshua to act courageously—He was commanding it.

God gave this same command to Moses and the Israelites in Deuteronomy 31:6, where He also promised that He'd never leave or forsake them.

Why would God repeat this command and

Sheridan courageously returns to jails and prisons nationwide now as a free woman, sharing hope and redemption with those still behind bars.



encouragement to His people? Why say it to Moses and Israel, and then again to Joshua?

Well, they were facing unknown territory, stepping into responsibilities that felt bigger than their strength. They were leaving the familiar to walk toward what was promised. And they felt exposed.

God didn't shame them for their fear. Instead, He reminded them: *I am with you. I'll go with you. I will never leave you or forsake you.*

I frequently speak this scripture over my life, especially in moments when fear feels bigger than faith. I imagine Moses and Joshua had to regularly remind themselves of God's encouragement too.

Being strong and courageous isn't easy, but it's necessary if we want to do what God has called us to do. Every day, I ask God for His strength, so I can choose courage over fear. I want to obey Him despite how I feel, despite my circumstances, and despite my flaws, past, or limitations.

Remembering that God promises to be with me and will never leave or forsake me helps me find the courage and strength I need to show up and act. This doesn't mean I never feel fear; it just means fear no longer determines my next move.

Fear doesn't have to determine your next move either. If you step out, choosing to trust God's presence and His provision, He will march you right into your promised land, free of addiction, broken relationships, regret, lack, and shame.

But you have to act. You have to choose the uncomfortable and refuse to listen to your insecurities and what others whisper.

So today, whatever your "red nails" might be—whatever small, quiet act of courage God is inviting you into—do it, despite everything and everyone. God will be with you every step of the way. †



CONSIDER

What fear tries to control you? Where is God calling you to be strong, even if you feel weak? What step of courage is God asking you to take, even if it feels small?



SHERIDAN CORREA is a trauma-informed biblical counselor and Victorious Living's director of healing and restoration initiatives. A wife and mother of two teenage boys, Sheridan has been radically changed by Jesus.

Relearning How to Live

Our ministry team meets thousands of incarcerated people annually during our national prison tours. Recently, our founder, Kristi, sat with a group of men in a Kansas prison who were relearning how to live in a way that would honor God.

These men were vulnerable about the challenge of dealing with problems and problematic people differently than they had done before following Jesus. No longer could they run, hide, or hurt others, and knowing that brought fear. JC Almanza shares a similar struggle on page 8.

Relearning how best to think, act, and respond like Christ takes time for any new believer, and it can be especially difficult while incarcerated. Below, our VL family members share how they learned to live a new life in Christ.



ROBERT WHITNER

Learning how to live a “normal” Christian life after years of living selfishly can seem impossible. For me, reading God’s Word daily and applying its truth provided the tools I needed to identify and correct the wrong belief patterns that caused the negative behavior that had led to my destructive lifestyle and incarceration. But this wasn’t done in a vacuum.

I needed community with other disciples of the Lord so that iron could sharpen iron (Proverbs 27:17). Accountability kept me from making excuses. No longer could I get away with the worn-out cliché, “That’s just who I am.”

Practicing sincere, surrendering prayer also furthered my transformation process between the old man and new man. I continually asked God to search my heart and make me more like Him, just as King David prayed in Psalm 139:23–24. God patiently taught me about myself as I sat before Him.



SHERIDAN CORREA

After a radical encounter with Jesus during my eighth time down in jail, I realized why my old coping methods weren’t working—they didn’t fit with God’s plan. I had been using substances to numb, escape, and avoid pain, but this old way of living didn’t match who God was calling me to be.

Drugs weren’t my only coping choice. I was also an expert at avoiding hard things. I ran from problems, jumped from relationship to relationship, self-harmed, isolated, and blame-shifted whenever life felt uncomfortable. I didn’t know how to sit with pain, face my choices, or take responsibility.

A real, personal relationship with Jesus, paired with strong discipleship, helped me overcome. I became a truth seeker.

Instead of running from pain, I learned to lean into it and seek the truth about myself, my patterns, and God’s ways. Honesty, correction, accountability, studying Scripture, praying, repenting, and renewing my mind became daily disciplines.

Over time, God transformed my heart and taught me how to thrive instead of just survive.



KORY GORDON

After years of addiction, street life, and incarceration, I was a selfish, calloused, and rebellious person. My desires always trumped common sense, law, and morality as I lived for money and pleasure. Then I surrendered my life to Christ, and I knew I had to change. That didn’t come naturally for me, however, nor was it an easy process.

My family and I struggled financially during my incarceration. While the men around me profited from fraud and selling drugs, I fought the daily temptation to join in. It’s hard to take the long, right way when you’ve cut corners your entire life. But as I trusted God, He provided in miraculous, amazing ways.

Twelve years later, this process of transformation is far from over. Like a soldier coming home from war, transitions can be challenging. Trauma, brokenness, and sinful mindsets don’t change overnight. But with God, all things are possible.

It will take time to change, so don’t be too hard on yourself. God is love, and love is patient (1 Corinthians 13:4). Give yourself some grace, and keep leaning in to learn from Him.

WANT TO KNOW JESUS?

ARTWORKS BY ALBERTO HENRIQUEZ



“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” —Matthew 11:28 NIV

Do you need rest? Peace? Freedom? Forgiveness? Restoration?
Call out to Jesus, accept Him as your Savior, and be made whole.

Pray: “Jesus, I invite You into my life. I confess that I am a sinner in need of a Savior. Thank You for saving me from my sins and making me whole. Thank You for laying down Your life for me so that I can have a new life in You. I receive, by faith, this forgiveness of sin. Take my life—my past and my future. Guide my steps and speak to my heart, Lord. Use me, God. Amen.”

Let us know of your decision so we can help you grow in your faith.
Write to: VL Correspondence, PO Box 2751, Greenville, NC 27836.

WHAT NOW? ►



I've Accepted God's Salvation. Now What?

PERHAPS AFTER READING the stories in this magazine, you've surrendered your life to Jesus. Congratulations—it's the most important decision you will ever make! But you might be wondering, now what? Here are six ways to ensure spiritual growth. Remember, the Christian life is a journey that brings lifelong transformation.

1. **PRAY.** Talk to God about everything and listen for His response. You don't need fancy words, just a sincere heart.
2. **STUDY THE BIBLE.** God's Word contains all the instructions we need for life. Get into a Bible study and discover new revelations daily. Free resources are on page 34.
3. **GET BAPTIZED.** Although baptism is not a requirement of salvation, the Bible clearly tells us that we are to be water baptized after salvation. Baptism symbolizes our dying to sin and being raised to new life in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:4). Prison restrictions may make immersion by water difficult, so get creative and let the Holy Spirit reveal how you can take this step of obedience until immersion is possible.
4. **FIND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.** Join a local congregation of Christ-followers. If incarceration makes attending church difficult, fellowship with other believers the best you can. They will help you stand strong and keep you accountable.
5. **TELL SOMEONE.** Share your decision to follow Christ and tell them what He has done for you. And then, tell us! We'd love to hear from you.
6. **SERVE.** Look for opportunities for God to use you to give others hope.

RESOURCES

Below are opportunities for free Christian-based resources for both English- and Spanish-speaking persons and chaplains. When you contact the addresses below, tell our partners VL referred you.

+ VICTORIOUS LIVING

Personal correspondence available in English and Spanish. Bulk copies of *VL Mag* are available for jail and prison libraries at chaplain's request.

PO Box 2751, Greenville, NC 27836



PHOTO BY GERI SIMPKINS PHOTOGRAPHY



2ND OPPORTUNITY

Reentry and employment-readiness programming; job/housing referrals upon request.

PO Box 3411
Peachtree City, GA
30269



PRISON ALLIANCE

Discipleship studies by mail; free Christian books and Bibles for libraries at request of authorized personnel.

PO Box 97095
Raleigh, NC
27624



RESCUED NOT ARRESTED

Free NIV Bibles, Bible study correspondence course, and NIV Life Application Study Bible upon completion of study.

PO Box 90606
Phoenix, AZ 85066



CROSSROADS PRISON MINISTRIES

Correspondence, Bible studies, and mentoring letters with completed lessons. Free Bibles for CPM students upon request.

PO Box 900
Grand Rapids, MI 49509



HOPE IS ALIVE

Nationally-based sober living homes, faith-based support groups, and grief support groups for those impacted by addiction.

14400 Bogert Parkway
Suite 200
Oklahoma City, OK
73134

Victorious Living Prison Outreach Information

- We do not mail individual subscriptions of *VL Mag* to incarcerated persons. However, bulk copies are provided free to prisons, jails, recovery, and reentry programs, with or without staples, at the request of chaplains and program directors. They may also inquire about our national VL Prison Tour.
- We offer discipleship materials on various prison tablet systems. Search "Victorious Living" to discover *MORE Victorious Living* and *STEPPING FORWARD with Victorious Living* broadcasts and VL podcasts.
- Currently we are on the following platforms: PANDO, Edovo, Paytel, Westpond, CypherWorx, ATG, ICS, Tech Friends, ViaPath, Homewav, Turnkey, Securus, Smart Comm, and iTi.
- Family members of our incarcerated family and our ministry partners can enjoy our free resources through pandoapp.tv and VL's online platforms like vlmin.org, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Our care team is available to pray with family members of our incarcerated family by phone.
- We offer fellowship through correspondence to those who are incarcerated. Write to us at PO Box 2751, Greenville, NC 27836.
- We cannot receive COD emails or phone calls, nor do we accept legal documents or unsolicited stories for publication.