

MIND GAMES

*Winning the Battle for Your
Mental and Emotional Health*

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NEW YORK NASHVILLE

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FaithWords
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
faithwords.com
twitter.com/faithwords

First Edition: November 2023

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN: 9781546003830 (hardcover), 9781546003854 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

LAKE

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is dedicated to my wife, Ashley, our five children, my late father and my mother, and to our faithful church family of Victory. I am forever grateful for the faithfulness, love, perseverance, grace, and Christ-like example from my wife, our kids, my late father, my mother, and Victory Church. Most important, I'm thankful for the gift of knowing Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior and the testimony He's given me to share this message of winning in the mind. Lastly, I dedicate this book to YOU. The personal stories, hard lessons, crazy adventures, hidden scars, embarrassing failures, and private triumphs I share are for you. I pray that these pages give you hope, grace, truth, life, and victory in the battle for mental and emotional health.

Introduction

DAD, ME, AND THE KEY TO VICTORY

“God, please help me!” I cried as I collapsed with my back against the outside door to our church. Here I was again, for what seemed like the thousandth time, locked out of the church. “God, I feel so broken and defeated! Dad, if you can hear me up there in heaven, I just wish you were still here! If only you were here, things would be so much better in my life, and especially in our church!”

The tears kept flowing. I hadn’t cried like this in a while. I’d been holding so much inside for the last few years, and it was like the dam had burst. Finally, with my voice cracking and body shaking, I let out one last broken prayer: “Jesus, I could really use your help right now. I just feel locked out of everything!”

I didn’t know it yet, but God was listening and was about to answer that desperate plea for help.

Have you ever been locked out of something? Locked out of your car, your locker at school, your house, your social media accounts, or your office? I used to get locked out often—I could never seem to remember my keys, or where my keys were, or

INTRODUCTION

what my password was. Maybe you can relate. Maybe you've felt that frustration of trying to figure out a way in, or troubleshooting passwords to see if any of your old pets' names with random numbers or capital letters might work. My frustration that night wasn't just that I was locked out of the church building. For a long period, I had felt locked out of every door I was supposed to be walking through.

This book is about your mind and your heart, and more specifically how to win the battle for mental and emotional victory. I truly believe that God has given you and me the keys we need to access a life that is full of joy, faith, peace, grace, and victory. I believe God wants each of us to be fulfilled in His unique purpose for each of our lives, equipped with His power to walk in victory over worry, depression, fear, anger, regrets, shame, and hopelessness.

But during that season, I felt like I was locked out of hope in my heart, locked out of joy in my spirit, locked out of peace in my mind, locked out of forgiveness toward people, but mainly locked out of experiencing a life that felt fulfilling. That dark season started with a phone call from my mom. I was at my parents' house that evening. I'd gone over to jump in their pool on a hot September day, and after I finished swimming, I had started practicing playing my guitar.

"Hi, Paul. Your dad's up here at the hospital."

"Okay, Mom." I'd been tuning my guitar when she called, and I settled my fingers back on the frets. "Who's he praying with?"

Dad was the founding pastor of our church—Victory Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with more than fourteen thousand

INTRODUCTION

members. He also was founder of Victory Christian School, a large private school in the city, and founder of Victory College, Tulsa Dream Center, and Camp Victory, so he was always busy taking care of people. He was always out and about during the week meeting with members, meeting with staff, meeting with contractors, and meeting with anyone else who needed to see him. Making hospital visits was a regular part of his routine.

“No, Paul...”

There was something in my mom’s voice that finally caught my attention, so I put down the guitar.

“Mom?”

“Your dad just checked into the hospital, Paul. Will you come up and see him?” I told my mom I was coming soon.

I was shocked, nervous, sad, and most of all just stressing out wanting to know why in the world he was in the hospital. There were some very raw, unedited emotions that began to pour out of me. I want to be clear up front here that this book is full of some of the most painful learning moments in my life, which weren’t always pretty, but somehow God used them to be catalysts for His greatest healing moments later on. I’ve found that being open and honest about my own pain, shortcomings, and learning moments has led to me being able to relate with people I serve as pastor much more than just sharing achievements—and I’m hoping the same holds true as an author. So, here goes.

When I finally realized my dad had been admitted as a patient in the hospital, the first thought that went through my mind was, how bad the timing was. I was twenty-four years old, pastoring

INTRODUCTION

our college ministry at church, and about to get married to my high school sweetheart. Because I was the college pastor at his church, I knew Dad being sick meant I would need to help cover for him around the church and possibly move my wedding.

In my defense, it never really crossed my mind that Dad could be seriously ill. The man had never been sick during my whole life. More than that, he was my hero. He was my mentor. He was a rock in our community and the foundation of our family. I genuinely believed there was no wind or storm that could budge his place in our lives. In my life.

I was wrong.

The truth hit me as soon as I saw Dad in that hospital bed. He did not look good. Then I looked around the room and realized everyone was there—my mom, my brother, my older sisters, and even their spouses. Something was up.

“What in the world is going on?”

The doctor came in before anyone could answer, and he laid it out straight. I was too shocked to process everything he said, but several words broke through the haze and seared themselves on my mind. Words like *malignant*. And *lymphoma*. And *hospice*. And the big one: *cancer*.

Dad was dying.

I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it. But it was happening, regardless.

That weekend, Dad wasn't in the pulpit for the first time that I could remember. He was one of those guys who made a point to preach fifty-two Sundays a year, every year, so the absence

INTRODUCTION

was glaring. The church and staff were in shock, and we prayed intensely and with great faith for a miracle. As his son, and also a support pastor for the church, I felt so much pressure, along with my other family members, to keep our faith and keep praying for a miracle; but privately I was battling so much fear, anger, and doubt in my mind and heart as I watched my dad—and the most faithful preacher I knew—grow weaker by the day. His last public appearance was at my wedding, which he officiated even though he'd lost a lot of hair and most of his energy. Then, two weeks after I got back from my honeymoon, he was gone.

Just fifty-seven years old.

That first day at the hospital, my mom told me that she and Dad had known about the cancer for about a year. They hadn't told us because they didn't want to make us upset. Dad didn't want anyone to worry. I still marvel at that sometimes. He kept everything to himself and kept at his post while fighting cancer *for an entire year*.

That's the kind of man he was. That's the kind of man we lost—as a family, as a church, and as a community. And none of us had any idea what to do next.

LOCKED OUT

There's a reason I'm telling you about my dad's passing, and that reason is directly connected to the theme and purpose of this book. I'm going to get there, I promise.

INTRODUCTION

But first I need to talk about keys.

Growing up as a pastor's kid, I was always at the church building for one reason or another. I guess I should say "buildings," because our campus has lots of them. Not only does Victory have the normal space you'd expect for serving thousands of members, but there's also a Bible college with three hundred students, a K–12 school with another thousand-plus students, a Dream Center out in North Tulsa dedicated to lifting people out of poverty, and even a hundred-acre camp about an hour from the main campus.

So yeah, lots of buildings. Which meant lots of potential space for a kid to run around, but also lots of doors—with lots of locks, and only a few people had the keys. It seemed like every time I tried to get into someplace interesting, I was locked out.

I grew up volunteering a lot at the church, because as a pastor's kid you're pretty much free labor for your parents. (Just kidding.) I served my tail off for the church, not because I had to, but because I genuinely loved helping people and seeing God impact people's lives through the ministries I was involved in. After college, I got a job on that church staff, and I thought everything would be different. Nope. I did get a few keys to open and operate our college ministry, but that was it. With 450 employees, the church had strict policies about which people could access specific buildings and rooms. If you didn't have a direct responsibility over an area, you didn't get a key. No exceptions.

Not even for the senior pastor's son.

Honestly, I got a bit fixated on the whole key thing during

INTRODUCTION

my first year of ministry. If I wanted to spend time in the choir room or the worship center, or if I needed to use one of the conference rooms, I had to find another pastor to let me in. Or a security guard. Someone who was “approved.”

It felt like an everyday issue. I was constantly begging my way around the building. “Mr. Johnson, could you open this door for me?” “Pastor Jerry, could you let me in there? Please?”

The whole thing was super frustrating—and more than a little humiliating.

I had even complained to my dad about it when he was still alive.

“Dad, I had keys to everything when I worked as a janitor at my college, but I’m the founder’s son here at church and I can’t go anywhere. Why don’t you trust me?”

He just smiled. “It’s not a trust thing. All you need is the key you’ve got.”

Looking back, I think my whole fixation was about something way deeper than physical access to physical spaces. It wasn’t about a lack of keys. Especially after my dad died, it was tied up with spiritual and emotional pain. I felt locked out of the life I read about in my Bible and heard preached about at church. A life free of depression, free of insecurity. A life of fulfillment, a life of joy, a life of love, a life marked with courage, and most importantly a life of victory—spiritually, mentally, and emotionally.

All of those feelings were compounded in a major way after Dad passed away. It was a painful season, especially losing him

INTRODUCTION

as quickly as we did. Then the church started bleeding members. We went through major financial struggles. In a lot of ways, it felt like everything was trending down. Like we were losing when we were supposed to be experiencing victory. We were supposed to *be* Victory! But in that long season it seemed like our best days were behind us.

I felt held back on the inside before my dad passed, but now with him gone I felt stuck for good in this place of mental and emotional torment. Discontented, discouraged, disappointed, and sliding deeper into a heavy cloud of depression. I was trying my best to smile on the outside and pretend to be happy, but I was wearing a mask. I was hurting and feeling miserable on the inside, and I wasn't sure how to break free of it.

This wasn't a salvation thing. I was secure in my relationship with God and my identity as a follower of Jesus. But on the inside I felt so spiritually stuck in this negative place, to the point of wanting to give up. I hadn't discovered this yet, but later I would find that many heroes in the Bible and great people of faith throughout church history struggled in their mental and emotional health too, and yet God still spoke to them, spoke through them, and used them to do incredible things in their lifetimes for His glory. Because I hadn't yet learned that, I was starting to spiral into this internal pit of despair. I wasn't experiencing the kind of life I wanted to live. I didn't have the victory I knew I'd been promised in Scripture.

Worst of all, I didn't understand why.

I had a great wife. I had the support of my family. I had great

INTRODUCTION

friends. I loved the work I was doing with Ashley as we led the young adult ministry at our church.

In spite of all that, I was depressed.

I kind of knew what was going on, although I'm not sure I would have used that label—depression—for myself. There was a cloud that hovered over me for months and wouldn't go away. I learned how to smile on the outside and show everyone at church that everything was good. But I was stuck.

Then, one night, Ashley and I'd just had a silly argument over my lack of gratitude and grumpiness right after she had done some really nice things for me on my birthday. The internal depression was not so internal anymore. I was unhappy and extra sensitive about everything. I remember just feeling trapped that night, like the walls were closing in around me.

So I left the house. I pushed through the front door and kept going.

Just walking down the road and thinking. Kicking rocks.

Eventually I realized I was walking over a highway overpass. It was a bridge about thirty feet off the ground. I leaned against the cement wall and looked down at the road. For several minutes, I watched the big trucks rumble their way underneath my feet. There was a rhythm to the lights and the sound and the speed of those trucks. It was almost hypnotic.

I won't die if I jump from here. But if I landed in front of one of those trucks, that would do it.

Whoa! The thought came out of the blue. Like it just bubbled up out of thin air. But speaking in all honesty, it wasn't totally

INTRODUCTION

unappealing. Here I was feeling angry at myself and uncertain about the future. I was worried about the church and what was going to happen to our ministry. I was really missing my dad, and I was anxious at the thought of trying to fill his shoes one day—anxious at the thought of messing up his vision or ruining his dream.

And in the midst of that darkness, I realized all those feelings could be finished in about four seconds. Just a little jump, and there would be no more pain. No more fear. No more expectations or disappointments or self-doubt.

Then the lies started to pile up. *Nobody loves you. Nobody cares about you. Nobody would even miss you. You can't fix the mess you're in, so just get out. Escape. Jump. Just end the misery.*

The voices were getting louder, and I was listening. I was considering. I even leaned out a little bit over the wall to get a better view of the road beneath.

One jump, and you can stop feeling pain. You can stop causing pain. This is the best way out!

Can you imagine me standing there? If you had walked past me on that bridge, you would have seen a young man in good health with decent clothes. You would have thought I looked privileged—and I did. I was.

Yet I was depressed. And contemplating suicide. And in need of help.

I didn't jump—which you know, because otherwise I wouldn't be writing this book. I'll explain why I didn't jump later in this book. (It's a good reason, praise the Lord!)

INTRODUCTION

But there's a question that bothers me whenever I tell this story: Why aren't we talking about these subjects in the church? About mental health issues? Why aren't we talking about depression and suicide? Why aren't we talking about anxiety, and jealousy, and anger, and all the mental and emotional health issues that affect Christians as well as non-Christians? Why is the church so quiet on those issues? Why do we tiptoe around them and pretend church people aren't dealing with them?

Because they are. Millions of people attend church with happy faces and heavy hearts. I know because I see a bunch of them every week. I talk with them and hear their stories. Beyond that, thousands of pastors stand up onstage and preach the Word of God with confidence every weekend, yet inside they are burdened with sadness and shame and doubt—and yes, even depression.

I know because I've been there.

Scripture says, "As [a man] thinks in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7 NKJV). Where your thoughts go, your life goes. Where your heart goes, your actions and your attitudes follow. And for millions of people in the world today—including millions in the church—their thoughts and their hearts are leading them down to a place that is dark and lonely and frightening and potentially suicidal.

So let's talk about it. Let's see what is required to find mental and emotional victory in the face of mental health challenges. That's what this book is about.

Maybe you aren't facing the same kind of mental health challenges I have faced. I hope you're not. But over the past decade

INTRODUCTION

I've come to realize that lots of people experience something similar to the feeling of being stuck, of feeling unsatisfied and spiritually empty. I've spoken with and prayed with these people, and I hear the same kinds of comments over and over again:

- “This isn't what I expected my life to be like.”
- “I can't let go of the pain of my past. It's too hard to move forward. It's like I am chained to this anger, shame, and disillusionment.”
- “I'm tempted to throw in the towel and just give up on anything I had hoped for from God.”
- “There's something holding me back, but I don't know what it is.”
- “I feel like I'm carrying this weight in my mind and my heart, and I just can't move forward.”

These aren't people complaining because they feel like they deserve a life of luxury, or a life without pain. These aren't people trying to get God to wave a magic wand and make all their problems or circumstances disappear. They're not dissatisfied because they're lacking something silly or superficial.

No. They've been told over and over that God has a plan and purpose for their lives, and that their heavenly Father wants to bless them, and that their Creator loves them and approves of them, and—yes, even likes them. They've heard testimonies of freedom, of others experiencing a breakthrough of God's power and grace setting them free or lifting them from an internal

INTRODUCTION

pit of despair. But they haven't experienced it yet. They haven't seen God do it yet for them. And because they've felt so stuck, they've started believing that maybe it's not true or at least it's not true for them.

They feel locked out.

Can you relate? Have you ever felt stuck mentally or emotionally? Have you come to a place in life where you have to regularly deal with disappointment and discouragement, when you'd rather be enjoying peace and purpose and joy? Maybe you've been let down by a relationship that didn't work out. Maybe you lost a family member you were praying for. Maybe you lost a job. Maybe your heart was broken and you haven't been able to move forward. Maybe you're being held back by something truly destructive in your life. Something like depression. Or addiction. Or codependency.

The good news is that it's possible for those of us who are stuck to get unstuck. It's possible for those of us who are trapped to be set free. I know that from experience, and I'm eager to share a little more about my journey from defeat to victory—starting with the night when everything changed.

LOVED IN

Something significant happened between me and my dad before he passed away, although I didn't realize it at the time. I was sitting next to him at the hospital, just being with him. When he

INTRODUCTION

slept, I prayed that God would heal him—that Dad would be well. But even in those moments my prayers felt weak and faithless. I didn't think I had what it took to witness that kind of miracle.

Whenever Dad woke up, we'd chat about this or that. Somehow we got to talking about the message I was planning to share with our young adults that weekend. I was jabbering away when all of a sudden he got a big smile on his face.

I remember that smile. Dad loved to laugh, and that smile made him look like his old self again. It transformed him, like a light had been switched on for just a moment.

"What's up?" I could see something was on his mind.

He didn't answer at first. Instead, he reached over to grab his key ring from the table next to his bed. With shaking fingers, he painstakingly removed one of the keys and handed it to me. It cost him most of his strength, but I knew not to try to do it for him. He wanted to be strong for us.

"This one's for my office," he told me. "You can use it whenever you need a place to study."

"Okay, Dad. Thanks." I took the key and put it on my own ring. I didn't think much about it then, and I forgot about that key completely in the whirlwind that came later.

And it was a whirlwind. The pain was intense for our family, of course. And for the church congregation. But the fallout went way beyond our grief. As I mentioned earlier, in the first year after Dad's death, the church lost a couple thousand members. Then another thousand that second year. Everything was

INTRODUCTION

strained to the breaking point—the finances were underwater, we had trouble finding volunteers, the staff was under pressure like never before. The hits kept coming.

I remember sitting down for exit interviews with employees and other members of the church staff who had literally helped raise me. I'd known these people my entire life, but I had to look them in the eyes and say those terrible words: "We can't afford to keep you on staff. We have to let you go. At least for now." I hoped some of them would stay in the church or at least return after being gone a few months, but very few did.

As the stress continued to pile up, I found myself drawn to our church building when nobody else was there. Three years had passed around that time frame since my dad went to heaven. And things only seemed to be getting worse on the outside and inside of my life. I would go back late at night when I couldn't sleep and just be there for an hour or two. Sometimes I'd play the piano and worship; other times I would sit in my dad's old office looking out the window at the stars; I would just walk the halls or pray silently in the worship center. I don't know if I was trying to get closer to God or my dad during that difficult season. Probably both.

The problem, though, was that I was still locked out. Especially during those late-night visits. I had to call a security guard or custodian to unlock the building and let me in. Rules were still rules.

That's the background for the night that changed everything. "Sorry, Paul," the custodian said, sounding as tired as I felt.

INTRODUCTION

“I’m at the Dream Center right now, and I won’t be back to the main campus for at least an hour.”

Grrrrrr. Locked out again! On this night in particular, I was tired of the whole mess. Tired of being locked out physically. Tired of feeling locked out spiritually. Tired of the extra stress and strain. Tired of feeling like I didn’t have what was necessary to untie my dad’s shoes, let alone try to step into them.

In a moment of intense frustration, I decided to take things into my own hands ninja-style. I was going to break into the building.

I started by ramming the door with my shoulder and banging on it with my fists—which was painful for me but had no effect on the door. Then I tried to jimmy the lock with my credit card like I’d seen people do on TV about a thousand times. No luck. Apparently that trick is harder than it looks. Then I thought maybe I could put one of my keys partially in the door and try to get the lock open by twisting it back and forth while I wiggled the door. Maybe I could pop the lock or something.

Without even realizing what was going on, I shoved a key into the lock so I could start jiggling—and the key fit. Perfectly. I turned the key in the lock, and the door opened as smooth as you please.

Honestly, my first thought was that I’d experienced a miracle. *God, did You just transform my key?*

Then I actually looked at the key. It was the one my dad had given me in the hospital. The key to his office. Then I remembered all the times I’d complained to him about having no

INTRODUCTION

access to our campuses, about feeling locked out. Then I remembered how he'd said, "All you need is the key you've got," and the smile that had broken across his face right before he gave me that key—the smile that made him look like his old self.

Finally, mercifully, I understood. Dad always loved a good joke, and I could picture him looking down from heaven and just laughing, laughing, laughing.

I ran inside and started using that key on every door I could find. The choir room? Yep, unlocked. Interior hallway doors? Yep. I ran over to the drum closet, because nobody ever has a key to the drum closet. Now I did; unlocked. Then I walked slowly over to the main auditorium—the room that intimidated me the most. I literally prayed out loud in that empty hallway, "God, if this key works on this door, then EVERYTHING CHANGES!" See, my dad had built this 4,500-seat auditorium as a connection to our older church campus just two years before he passed away. He believed it would be full every Sunday someday, but since he'd passed, we had only experienced more decline . . . This room had been causing me so much pain, intimidation, anger, grief, and insecurity. I was already holding back the tears forming in my eyes from unlocking the other doors, but when I stuck the key in this door and turned it, a flood of tears began to flow. As I unlocked the door, I made my way to the stage and climbed up behind the podium. The same place where my dad had stood and preached so many times before.

That was the moment I got it. You could say that was the moment when everything finally "clicked."

INTRODUCTION

I said the truth as a question first: “I’ve had the master key this whole time?”

Then I spoke it with confidence and conviction: “I’ve had the key to VICTORY this whole time!”

Standing on that stage, a flood of emotions overwhelmed me. Once again, this was way deeper than physical access to physical spaces. God used that moment to heal a whole series of wounds I hadn’t been able to comprehend, let alone verbalize.

Just as I had been carrying around the key to Victory Church in my pocket literally for years, God showed me that I’d possessed the key to victory in my spiritual and emotional life for as long as I’d been aware of my spiritual and emotional life. All those times I’d felt held back from what I wanted or expected to experience as a child of God. All those times I’d felt unworthy or unwanted or untrusted or unable.

After all those times I’d felt locked out, God helped me finally realize the truth: I’m loved in.

Because I had the key to victory.

LIVE IN VICTORY

Let’s talk directly about the theme and purpose of this book. If I could summarize my hope for this book in a single word, it would be *victory*.

I want you to live in victory on the inside so you can begin to experience victory on the outside. I want you to find victory

INTRODUCTION

in your mind and heart so you start living with greater courage, love with greater confidence, embrace who you are in Christ, and fulfill your God-given purpose.

There have been a lot of years between the night that changed everything—the moment I realized I had been carrying the key to victory with me without realizing it—and this moment. Personally, I've been on quite a journey, and I'm excited to share more of my story with you throughout these pages.

Most importantly, I'm excited for you to understand and truly believe that you have the key to victory. You have the opportunity to shake loose from whatever's been holding you back or preventing you from experiencing God's plan and purpose in your life. To live free.

I mentioned earlier that I've spoken with many people who feel locked out from the life of abundance God promised His children in Scripture. In engaging those conversations and hearing those stories, including my own, I've come to realize that much of what holds people back today can be traced to issues of mental and emotional health.

So many of us—myself included—are dealing with these issues. We're chained up and worn down by insecurity. Anxiety. Depression. Anger. Fear. Addiction. Stress. Loneliness. Jealousy. Bitterness. The list goes on and on.

Often it feels like we're playing some kind of mind game but we have no idea how to win. We don't even know the rules! We're just doing our best to survive.

That's the bad news.

INTRODUCTION

The wonderful news is that we don't have to remain burdened or trapped or afraid. We don't have to settle for being set back. We can live free. I know that from personal experience, and I've seen thousands of people find that freedom in our congregation at Victory, in our community of Tulsa, and in my broader travels around the world. **Victory is possible, and living in victory brings God's greatest blessing into our lives.** Friends, when we win the victory against insecurity, we find confidence. When we win the victory over depression, we find hope. When we win the victory over loneliness, we find community. When we win the victory over bitterness and resentment, we find forgiveness.

That's the kind of mental and emotional victory I want you to find through this book. But I need to say this up front: That victory won't come from me. I can't do the work of healing in your life. I can't fix what's been broken. I can't give you the key to unlock whatever chains have been holding you back.

I can and will encourage you to seek help from therapists, counselors, and doctors who can help you find practical help as well. But they are only part of the story.

How, then, will you live in victory? By recognizing, through God's power, **you've got the master key—the key to victory.** My friend, if you've surrendered your life to Jesus, then you've had it the whole time. The key for a life of victory begins with surrender. God is more moved by our surrender than our success. He is not impressed with our trophies, accolades, or spiritual knowledge. He is drawn to our brokenness, our need for Him, our heart's cry for Him to save us, redeem us, and make us new.

INTRODUCTION

A PRAYER OF SURRENDER

I want to give you a chance right now to pray a prayer with me that I believe will change the course of your life forever. If you've never said these words and meant them in your heart, this is a great moment to do it. If you have said these words, then consider saying them again with the emphasis of this book now in mind.

Dear God, I surrender my life to You. I believe you sent Your son Jesus to die on the cross for my sins, and right now I repent of my sins and receive Your forgiveness. I believe Jesus raised from the dead and has given me victory. So today I declare that I belong to Jesus and I will walk in victory in my mind, heart, and life from this day forward.

*In Jesus' name,
Amen.*