

# STUDY GUIDE

A black silhouette of a woman in a cape, holding a book in her right hand and a rosary in her left. The title 'Victorious SECRET' is overlaid on the silhouette. 'Victorious' is in a pink cursive font, and 'SECRET' is in a white serif font.

## *Victorious* SECRET

EVERYDAY  
BATTLES  
AND  
HOW  
TO WIN  
THEM

LAURA MARY PHELPS



## Hi Sister!

Whether you have chosen *Victorious Secret: Everyday Battles and How to Win Them* for your book club, or are simply looking to dive deeper into ways of winning the battle, I am beyond excited!!! I so wish I could be there with you, sharing and laughing and praying, every step of the way. Also, I would totally bring chips and salsa for every gathering. Just saying.

The fact that you have thousands of choices when it comes to what to read, and how to spend your time, has not escaped me. So let me assure you: Picking up *Victorious Secret*, using this study guide as a tool to navigate prayerful discussion and meaningful connections, is a fantastic choice! This study guide is meant to get you really thinking about the meat of every chapter and battle, encouraging you to take your heart issues and daily obstacles to prayer, offering you practical solutions when you find yourself unprepared on the frontline. You can work your way through this study alone, or, better yet, with a safe group of sister warriors.

What I personally love about *Victorious Secret* is that it is more than a self-help book. It takes you beyond positive affirmations, vision boards, and mindfulness, always guiding you straight to Truth you can stand on — the Truth we need to know, embrace, and live out, if we are going to be victorious in battle. I have also written this guide as if I am sitting in your kitchen right there with you: cracking jokes, shedding tears, nodding my head and saying, “Me too.”

So grab your friends, stock up on the chips and salsa, and let’s dive in!

WITH YOU IN THE BATTLE, YOUR SISTER IN CHRIST,

*Laura*

# THE EVERYDAY BATTLE

*... this book is about battles, and a battle always has an enemy, and ours is the devil. Do not be fooled into thinking the enemy is your annoying co-worker, or your opinionated mother-in-law, or those extra fifteen pounds you can't seem to lose, or your difficult child, or your disappointing bank account, or that perfect friend's always perfect status on Facebook, or your disengaged spouse. "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). Evil is real and so is the devil, and he, the father of lies, is the one Jesus said comes to "steal and kill and destroy" (Jn 10:10). He is the enemy that we are up against. And the sooner we accept that, the better prepared we are to fight, and not just fight — but win. Because that's the goal here, right? To be victorious.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. Do I believe the enemy is real? Why? Why not?

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2. Am I aware of the personal battle I am currently in?

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3. When I'm thrown into a battle, what is my initial response? (And be honest. Don't write "I run into the arms of Jesus" if the honest answer is "I run into a bag of chips and Netflix.")

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## THE EVERYDAY BATTLE

In Chapter One, I share the story of my uncontrollable tears that confirmed a truth I knew, but had forgotten, because of *“that whisper that does not leave me alone. EVER.”* I further explain:

*The fear lodged deep inside of me leaving me paralyzed was not actually the issue. The tears washed me of the lies about who I am and what I'm about and led me away from the anxiety and back to its very source, back to the rulers of the present darkness and the one behind the evil schemes, back to the one I was facing in battle: the devil.*

We often think of the devil's attacks as obvious. But the truth is, he is sneaky and conniving and ever so subtle. He is that whisper in our ear that tells us we are never enough, we are weak and insignificant, we are as good as our worst sin.

If I were with you right now, sitting at your kitchen table, or in the Church Hall, or at that adorable coffee shop in town, I would lean in and share this: The whisper I hear all day long is ... I hate my life.

And I know what you might be thinking. You might be thinking, *That is YOUR whisper, Laura — your voice, not the enemy's. Because it starts with “I.”* Wouldn't a whisper from the enemy be coming from him? Wouldn't it sound like *“Your life is awful”*? But you see, this is what the enemy does. This is how he works. He tricks us. He tricks us. Eve warns us in Genesis when she flat out tells God, *“The serpent tricked me.”* The enemy tricks me by making his lie sound like my truth.

What whisper is in your ear? What lie is on a constant loop in your head? What negative thoughts and comments do you tell yourself — and have allowed yourself to become convinced — are true? Get those whispers out of your head and onto paper. The first step in acknowledging the battle you are in is to say it out loud. To see it in front of you. Write it down. Read it out loud. And talk about it with your small group, or with a friend you can trust.

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### DRESSING FOR BATTLE

Half the battle is knowing you are in a battle. Today, let's identify that thing in our life weighing us down, pulling us out of hope and into despair. Let's call out that negative whisper we have been clinging to as truth. Baby steps, okay? For today, let's simply acknowledge that we are in a battle. **And let's pray:**

*Oh, Jesus ... Life is a battle. But I don't need to tell you that, do I?*

*Lord, I just pray that today you open my eyes to truth. I am so bombarded by the lies that I can barely see straight. My inner narrative has become so entangled with the lies of the enemy that I hardly can tell what is real and what is not. I don't want to lose this battle. Or the next battle. I no longer want to be the girl standing on the frontline naked, without her weapons, because first of all, that would be horrifying ... I panic just at the thought of wearing a bathing suit! But even worse is the thought of showing up to a fight with useless weapons. You know the weapons I am talking about, Lord. The ones I reach for. The ones that numb me or distract me or keep me from facing my fears. The ones that look and taste like chips and salsa because, well, they are chips and salsa.*

*Reveal the battle to me, Lord.*

*I want to fight better.*

*I want to fight stronger.*

*I want to be victorious.*

*Amen.*

# THE SELF-IMAGE BATTLE

*... each of us is a beautiful, beloved daughter of God, an absolute masterpiece, a stunning work of art. That is exactly how you describe yourself, isn't it? ... It's hard to believe this, isn't it? It's hard to get real. I think we have just pretended for so long that it feels wrong to drop our mask and widen the camera lens and show the whole picture. But here is the thing. There will never be a filter we can use that will keep our true selves from the One who sees all, knows all, and created all.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. How do you describe yourself? Not to others, but to yourself. And be honest.

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2. What do you base your worth on? Feel free to give the real answer, not the one you think you should write.

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3. Do you struggle with comparison?

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## THE SELF-IMAGE BATTLE

The truth is, Jesus Christ died for you and me *just as we are*. And he would do it all over again. But we have a hard time believing this, don't we? We tend to base our worth on our performance, how good we look, how successful our children are, and how prettily our homes are decorated. We compare ourselves to everyone and everything but the Cross. At least, I do. I write about my struggle by saying this:

*We are the most competitive species I know, and we love a good game of comparison — as long as we win. So, all of this filtering we do, it really isn't about enhancing the beauty that is already there, is it? No. It is about removing the unwanted to give the illusion that everything is so much better than it actually is, because the way we are, as is, is not good enough.*

If I were with you right now, I would be the first to share my struggle with comparison, leaning in and saying, “I am obsessed with this woman on Instagram who makes me feel like crap! She is perfect, and beautiful, and I just saw all of her beach house pictures and oh. My. Goodness. That house has to be a million dollars! And the kids' bathing suits are incredible! And I love her account because she is an artist and photographer and she makes life look so beautiful ... *Her* life, not mine. After scrolling through her images, I am always left feeling inadequate.”

Does this sound like something you might do, too — see another woman's life and find it impossible to celebrate her beauty without chipping away at yours? Think about this. What might be the driving force behind it? How long have you compared yourself to others? Why? Write your thoughts down, and if you feel safe with those in your company, share them. As I say in this chapter, *not everyone needs to see the inside of your kitchen junk drawer, or what your linen closet looks like* — but finding at least one person who can be your encourager, who speaks truth, who is your sturdy shelter, is like finding gold. Authenticity is a necessary ingredient in our recipe for living free from the desire to be anyone but ourselves.

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## DRESSING FOR BATTLE

In my book, I suggest we all reach for the Belt of Truth when we engage in the Self-Image Battle. But here, may I suggest there are things in our closet we can also throw out? Things we choose to look at or engage in that leave us feeling discouraged, less-than, or like an enormous loser. Maybe it's a good time to filter out the bad feed and add truth in its place. So, think about and discuss this: What can you put on to better fight this battle? What can you take off? **And let's pray:**

*Father God, you are just that: my Father. Which means I am your daughter. And you love me just as I am. So why do I constantly compare my worst with everyone else's best? Why do I look around and think that everybody else has it so together, is living their best life, and that I, somehow, have missed the boat? Can you help me with this, please? Help me to see myself the way that you see me. Help me to see others as your precious daughters as well. I want to live honestly, authentically, and truthfully. I don't want to base my worth on how well I perform or by what I produce. It is exhausting! Help me to take off everything that is not real, and to put on truth — to live out of my belovedness and nothing else. And thank you, Jesus, for measuring my worth on the Cross, and loving me as is. Amen.*

# THE “WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?” BATTLE

*We don't usually like to put ourselves out there, or change our plans, or make ourselves vulnerable, or go the extra mile, or simply do something we don't want to do, or fully understand, unless we get some sort of reward in return. Some kind of consolation prize. I mean, our children can't poop in the potty without getting a sticker on a chart, and are we really any different? How often do we do what we do, not because we were asked, not because it is the right thing to do, not because we love the person asking, not out of obedience, not because pooping anywhere but the potty is actually kind of gross, but because of the hope that there is something in it for us, personally? Being told, "Well done, faithful servant" just isn't enough for us, is it? We want a sticker on our chart.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. Has the question “What’s in it for me?” ever entered your mind in regard to a personal relationship? How about in regard to your relationship with God?

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2. Do you struggle with putting others’ needs before your own?

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3. When faced with a trial, do you ask God, “WHY?” Or do you ask him, “HOW?”

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## THE “WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?” BATTLE

**A**t one point or another in each of our lives, God is going to call us into a battle that we may not fully understand. And as good soldiers of Christ Jesus, the correct response to give our Commander is YES. But how many of us are able to respond this way? When we face a trial that comes with no clear-cut directions or the guarantee that all will end well, often our YES to God gives way to a desperate need to understand the plan and what’s in it for us. I explain that I think we do this because we are afraid:

*I think we are afraid to answer God’s call. I think we are afraid of what he might ask us to do. I think we are afraid that if we follow Christ, we will not only have to give up those sins that we know are bad for us but think we need to get by, but we will also be asked to constantly give to others. And the fear here is that if we do that, there will be nothing left for ourselves.*

If I were sitting at your kitchen table right now, I would lean in and share with you that more often than I care to admit, I respond out of fear rather than love. Sure, I read about what a generous Father we have; I even preach about his abundant giving and immeasurable power. But when push comes to shove, I am afraid that if I say YES to God and surrender to his will, I will end up with the short end of the stick. I will be the wife who gives and gives but never receives ... the mother who constantly sacrifices but whose kids never notice ... the friend who always stands in the background so others can shine.

Have you ever felt this way? Has fear gotten in the way of your handing over all you have, trusting that God will always supply you with more than enough? Is love for God, and wanting to please him in all things, your daily and constant motive? Or, deep down, do you kind of love yourself and life going your way just a little bit more? Share your heart — either with your small group or in your journal. And do not be ashamed if you come to discover that what drives you to do all the things is actually not love of God, but love of the recognition, prize, or applause. We’ve all been there, Sister. And the good news? The Lord cannot wait to jump on in and help you out of this “What’s in it for me?” mentality ... providing you make the space for him to do so.

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## DRESSING FOR BATTLE

**U**ntil we truly love the Lord with all our heart and soul, this battle will remain a tough one. When I fall out of reading Scripture and start listening to the world rather than the Word, I fall headfirst into selfishness. We need to clothe ourselves in truth. Maybe you can get a tattoo of your favorite Scripture verse on your face. Or perhaps you are good with crafts, and you can make a jacket or vest out of the pages of your favorite devotional. (You know I am kidding, don’t you?) Seriously — look up the following verses below, write them down, and reflect on them. Choose a favorite to memorize, and when “What’s in it for me?” creeps into your mind, knock it on out with this verse.

- Proverbs 11:25
- Acts 20:24
- Galatians 2:20
- Corinthians 10:24

### Let’s pray:

*Lord, you are just that: my Lord. You know what is best for me, and you will never leave me unsatisfied. I am so sorry for acting like a toddler, with my entire arm in the cereal box searching for the prize at the bottom. Always wanting to be first. To be noticed. To be recognized. Unless the prize is HUMILITY, I need to stop reaching down, and start looking UP! Because the truth is, Lord, YOU are the prize, and you are not buried or hidden ... You are right here. And you are not out to give me the short end of the stick, to reward everyone but me. This isn’t a God problem; this is a ME problem. This is me thinking you will not give me enough. This is me thinking I will be left empty. Oh, good grief, I know I am so wrong. Help me turn to your Word when I doubt your abundance. Help me recall your goodness when I am certain you are holding out on me. Help me say YES without always understanding your plan, trusting that if YOU ask, it is for my good. Amen.*



# THE MARRIAGE\* BATTLE

*\*Feel free to replace "marriage" with any significant relationship/friendship in your life.*

*I absolutely went into marriage with unrealistic expectations. I'm telling ya, if I could do it all over again, I would not register for that stupid bread maker. Instead, I would register for realistic expectations. Not sure what department you find that in. Maybe somewhere between the fine china and toilet bowl scrub brush.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. Did you enter into marriage with unrealistic expectations?

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2. When faced with a trial in your marriage, do you see it as an opportunity to strengthen your bond to each other and Christ, or do you see it as a red flag and assume the worst?

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3. What role does God play in your marriage?

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## THE MARRIAGE BATTLE

Living in a world and culture that tells us we should do what makes us feel good and only engage in what keeps us happy is very misleading and damaging to our relationships. Love demands sacrifice, and all relationships will suffer, and, well, sacrifice and suffer are not the most popular words today. (If you don't believe me, throw them out at your next cocktail party and see how well that goes over.) What really messed with me was that I entered into marriage believing it was my husband's job to make me happy. But as I say in my book:

*People and circumstances are not what make us happy. We are not in control of our lives, no matter what anybody tells you. Good relationships will always demand sacrifice, and sacrifice does not, by the way, mean you are weak, or a pushover, or a doormat. It means you love; that you are willing to put others before yourself because of great love.*

Does any of this ring true for you? Has there been a battlefield the Lord has called you and your spouse onto? Has there been a storm under your roof that has taken a toll on your relationship? And have the waves crashed so hard that you can't imagine walking out of this mess hand in hand? If I were with you now — preferably on a secluded beach, with an umbrella drink in my hand — I would share with total confidence, “This storm? This trial? It does not have the power to take your marriage down. Illness, addiction, betrayal, tragedy, trauma ... I will be the first to say they all stink. But if we invite God into the dark spaces and places that overwhelm us, the same power that raised Jesus from the grave can resurrect your marriage.”

What part of your marriage is on life support? What area of your relationship needs a giant dose of God's mercy? Put these thoughts in a letter to your spouse. Pour out your heart, and don't edit your feelings; say what you honestly feel. Don't worry — you do not ever need to give this letter to him. This can be between you and the Lord. And once you get it all out, invite the Holy Spirit to be in control of your marriage. Hand over the expectations you walked into marriage with. Surrender to the God who loves nothing more than to take your broken pieces and duct tape them back into a new creation.

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## DRESSING FOR BATTLE

In my book I suggest we put on the Breastplate of Righteousness and the Shield of Faith. But now I think it is time we accessorize with mercy, humility, sacrifice, and love. Reflect on the mercy God has shown you. Can you be that same mercy for your spouse? Reflect on Christ's humility as he washes the feet of the Apostles. Can you imitate that same humility with your loved one? Reflect on Mary's sacrifice as she gave her fiat to God and let go of control. Can we do the same in our marriage? And reflect on God's love for you. You were good enough reason and every bit worthy to allow his only begotten Son to die on a cross. Can we mirror this same love? **And let us pray:**

*Loving Father, I can't believe I said, “til death.” What was I thinking?*

*Actually, I was in love; that is what I was thinking. And I pray I should be so blessed as to be by my lover's side when it is time for him to go home to you. But while living here in the world? Marriage is not for the wimpy! You have made it clear that love is a choice, not a feeling. And I do love my husband. It's just that ... he throws his socks on the floor next to the bed. And he eats all the almonds. And he snores like a rhino. And when the kids need help, and the bank account is empty, and the house and minivan are filthy ... well, I don't feeeeeeeel in love. So I become an all-too-easy target for the enemy. And the first place I lose hope in is in my marriage. But you, God? You can work with this. You can even work with me. You can take the mess I make out of my marriage and restore it. Help me choose to love my spouse each and every day. Help me to do every single thing that I do for your glory and out of my love for you. Help me to always keep you in my marriage and to love my husband to heaven, even if his socks are on the floor. This is an area of my life that I desperately need you in, Lord. Marriage stands no chance without you in the middle of it. Thank you for stepping in, for your grace and forgiveness, for your immeasurable love that never fails to hold us together. Amen.*

# THE “WHAT IS MY PURPOSE?” BATTLE

*I remember standing at the kitchen sink, the usual pile of dirty dishes and cups before me, while some hideous cartoon blared in my ears from the next room. And standing alone, staring out the window with tear-stained cheeks, I recall thinking to myself, “Is this it? How on earth did I get here? What the heck is my purpose? Do I even have a purpose?”*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. What do you base your purpose on?

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2. Is your identity wrapped up in *what you do*, or *whose you are*?

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3. How do you respond to failure? Can you think of a past experience where you failed, and spiraled into the madness of “Well, now what?” How did that make you feel about yourself?

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## THE “WHAT IS MY PURPOSE?” BATTLE

I was listening to Beth Davis and Jenna Guizar from Blessed Is She on their podcast, The Gathering Place. And Beth said the most wonderful thing ever when talking about failures. After hosting their first Women’s Catholic Retreat ever, her mother said, “Here’s a list I made of some learnings ...” Rather than focus on what went wrong, they emphasized what they learned, and how they could improve. I love this so much because, honestly? I think if I’d looked at all of my past failures as learnings — as steps towards becoming better or stronger or smarter — I would not have crumbled on the battlefield so easily. If our so-called failures are steps toward improvement, then they are really not failures at all. They can’t trip us up. They can’t discourage us or knock us off track. But here’s the thing. We can only do this if we are rooted in something greater than ourselves, in something greater than what we do, accomplish, or earn.

(Do you agree? Discuss ...)

In my book I write,

*That discouragement and despair you feel? That awful frustration and growing ache that tell you your life has no purpose? That cunning voice that whispers You are alone, you have nothing, you will feel like this forever? None of that comes from God.*

Have you ever felt this way? Have past failures led you to believe that God gave everyone else a beautiful purpose, and totally skipped you in line? Oh, sweet friend, I have been there. But let me assure you: If we were hanging out right now in our sweats with a bottle of wine, a bag of tortilla chips, and some really good homemade salsa ... The first thing I would say is, “Do we have any guac?” Then ... Then, I would say, “I sure wish I had known God — not just *about* him, but really *known* him, and the truth about who I am. I would have saved myself a whole lot of trouble if I had known I was his beloved daughter, and that my worth in this world is not something I need to earn or prove.”

Sister, I am so glad you picked up *my* book and not those other books. You know — the ones loosely based on biblical truths, which encourage you to *strive* and to *hustle* for your dream; the ones that have you crafting inspiration boards and daily affirmations based on WHAT YOU DO and HOW HARD YOU WORK AT IT. Listen up, sister. You are a beloved child of God, and nothing changes that, ever. Jesus is the hero of your story, and he has written you in a great and important role — and you, my friend, are oozing with purpose. Maybe you can’t tap into it because you haven’t tapped into him. As I wrote:

*The day I decided to open my Bible and read it was the day my life changed forever. ... For too long I went about life thinking I needed to prove my worth, believing my purpose was wrapped up in personal achievements. But God tells us differently.*

It is time to think differently. Look up the following verses to see what God says about you and your purpose. Rewrite them in your own words and share them with your group, or with a friend. Choose a favorite verse and paint it in neon pink over your bed, or stencil it on shiplap and hang it over your mantle, or spray paint it on giant poster board and wear it around your neck. (You know — just some simple suggestions.)

- Proverbs 19:21
- Romans 8:28
- Ephesians 2:10

### **And let’s pray:**

*God, my Creator, thank you for not leaving me the responsibility of earning my worth and purpose. Because the truth is, I could never earn it. You don’t ask me to prove, strive, hustle, or white knuckle my way to success. I am already successful because I am your daughter. I am already victorious in this battle because You are my Commander. But you know me, Lord: I may know this is true, but I often forget. When I fail at something or see everyone else’s achievements, and I hold them all up and compare them to mine, I always feel less-than. Unimportant. Purposeless. Keep me grounded in truth. Help me to always recall not just who I am, but whose I am. Help me not to spiral when I get that one Christmas card from that one woman whose life is so together and who’s doing amazing things so that I don’t throw it across the room and shout to the heavens, “Why am I even here, Lord?? What purpose do I even have???” I know. I am dramatic. You can help me with that, too. And please ... Help me to stay armed with your Word. To listen to what YOU have to say about me. To always know that my worth is not something measured by anything other than the cross. Amen.*

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## THE “WHAT IS MY PURPOSE?” BATTLE

### DRESSING FOR BATTLE

**B**linders. Horse blinders. Seriously. Buy a pair and put them on. It is time we stop looking around at what everyone else is doing, the great purpose they serve in this world, and start focusing on the One and Only thing that matters: Christ. He has your purpose. He IS THE purpose. And he holds your plan. So focus on him and his Word, and visit him in the Blessed Sacrament, and gaze at his love for you on the crucifix, and aim to be the biggest Jesus lover your town ever saw or knew! Because once you really get to know him — like know him know him — the striving and hustling will fall away. And you, my dear, will fall into his arms, totally at peace, because there you will rest in your purpose.

# THE BATTLE OF FINDING REST IN THE MESS

*There is just so much mess. This life of mine, and maybe yours too, gets burdened with filthy garbage and heavy baggage. I don't know about you, but I am kind of tired of it all. I just want to clean it all up and throw it away and sit down and rest. But it feels impossible, doesn't it? There is so much unrest in this life, isn't there? And when I am not careful, which is all too often, this unrest and restlessness leads me to some serious battling in my heart — a battle for peace when life is in pieces.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. Is there something in your life, right now, that is causing you unrest and restlessness?

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2. Do you believe you can have peace when your life is in pieces, or do you think you need everything to be fixed, finished, and back in its right order before that peace is possible?

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3. Is it hard to believe God's promises in times of distress?

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## THE BATTLE OF FINDING REST IN THE MESS

So, here is a little insight into where my inner peace was at when I sat down to write *Victorious Secret*. In case you didn't catch on after the first few chapters, I was in the center of the arena and engaged in a full-on battle *the entire time*. When people ask me how I got this book finished, the honest answer is: I didn't write it. The Holy Spirit did. My family was in the midst of a major crisis — a situation so distressing, so hard to believe, so incredibly painful, that when I sat down to recall God's promises ... like the one about him giving me rest ... I just about lost it. REST? WHERE? I barely slept, I was always anxious, I walked on eggshells in my own home, and I was too stressed to eat. The battle had me worn and weary, and I allowed the enemy to steal my peace. I was also kind of a crazy person. Can you relate to any of this?

The turning point for me was the day I realized that I didn't want God to ease my pain; I wanted him to remove my pain:

*We do not want to accept this present trial, to accept this illness, to accept this financial burden, to accept whatever the heck it is we have strapped to our backs and wrapped around our necks completely exhausting us, and we do not want to reach out for help in carrying it. WE JUST WANT IT GONE.*

My devotion to the Blessed Mother opened my eyes to this. If you are searching for a perfect model of obedience to God's will and total surrender, just look at who stands at the foot of the cross.

What are you desperately trying to pray away? What are you so tired of carrying that Jesus' offer to help you carry it is NOT what you want to hear — but rather, you want him to take it, throw it off a cliff, and hand you a margarita in its place while simultaneously slimming your thighs and clearing up your skin? What, dear sister, are you refusing to accept?

These right here? These are important questions. They were the ones I sat with, wrestled with, struggled with ... then finally answered and surrendered to. Sweet friend, until we ACCEPT, we cannot OBEY. And if we cannot do these two things, we will never surrender. And guess where that REST is???? The rest is in our surrender. It is not when the situation blows over. It is not when we find the cure, or get the positive feedback, or get out of debt, or fall back in love, or receive that apology, or find that healing, or lose that addiction, or have our loved one return home to us healed and whole. The rest is born out of our total acceptance and obedience and surrender to our God, who we trust will ease the pain and lighten the load. The rest is ours for the taking — when we stop telling God we will believe in his promise ONLY IF he takes this thing away; when we hold out our empty hands and pray, *I do believe in your promise, EVEN IF this never goes away.*

EVEN IF. Sit with that for a while.

And sit with those important questions. Don't pass this chapter by too quickly. It is my favorite and you will hurt my feelings if you do. Okay, not really. But I do ask that you take an honest assessment of your situation and what you really expect of God. Because this chapter was the game changer for me. These questions changed everything. If possible, take them to the Blessed Sacrament. Get honest about where you are with your circumstance and with your God. If you are doing this study with a small group, do you feel comfortable enough to share the burden you are carrying — the struggle that is zapping your peace and exhausting you? I encourage you to do so. When we share our stories, the power we give the enemy to hold them over our heads, making us feel ashamed and scattering our hope, is shattered. God has the power. And when we accept that he is in control and works all things for good, there, dear sister, we find our rest. Right in the middle of the mess ... there it will be.

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## DRESSING FOR BATTLE

I actually spend a lot of time in my closet — not getting dressed, but *resting*. Seeking out the quiet and creating holy moments in your day is going to be key in your search for rest in the midst of the mess. For me, that place is my closet. I've covered a wall with prayer cards, photographs of my children, favorite Scripture verses, and prayers. And when I feel that unrest taking over me, I step out of it, and into my closet. I sit on the floor, I close my eyes, and I play a favorite praise and worship song. And I cry. I let it all out, and I hold out my hands, **and I pray**.

*Almighty God, I need you to be my Father right now. Your daughter is weary. I am in dire need of rest. I am lacking peace and hope, and I need you to rescue me — not from this mess, but while I'm in this mess. And I need you to do this fast. I do not want to give the enemy another inch. I want to stand at the foot of this cross like Mary. Please help me to accept what you give me. To stop resisting it, to quit trying to pray it away. Help me to surrender everything, and fill me with radical obedience. I will never find the rest I so badly need if I refuse to let go of control. Help me to hand this over; to trust that even if you do not remove this obstacle, even if things don't go my way, even if this battle lasts longer than I care for ... You are still good, and I can still find peace. Fill me with an "even-if faith." Show me the green pasture and lead me to it. Not when everything is cleaned up, but right now, right here, in this center of the mess. Lord, I give you my pieces in exchange for your peace. Thank you for showing me that all things are possible ... even if. Amen.*



# THE “IF I ONLY HAD THIS, LIFE WOULD BE PERFECT” BATTLE

*The idea that if I only had **this** (this house, this man, this job, this marriage, this car, this degree, this haircut, this friend, this nose, this recognition, this newest technology), everything would be great, became the most believable yet unattainable lie ever sold to me. The idea that things could fulfill and people complete me became my way of life. And this works. It really does. **For about five minutes.***

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. Have you ever fallen into the trap that material things and human beings will complete your life?

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2. Can you think about a specific time in your life where you were too impatient to wait for God to reveal his plan, and grasped at your own instant plan instead? How did that work out for you?

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3. Be honest and fill in the blank: If I only had \_\_\_\_\_ I could be happy.

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## THE “IF I ONLY HAD THIS, LIFE WOULD BE PERFECT” BATTLE

I really wish I could be discussing this chapter with you in person, because this is something I really struggled with and have no problems sharing all of my mess and ugly. So put on a pot of coffee because I am about to over-share like nobody's business. I had a nose job when I was seventeen years old because I just knew that *if I only had a smaller nose*, I would be content. A few years later I took a nosedive (no pun intended) into a full-fledged eating disorder, because I just knew that *if only I were thinner*, life would be good. Cut to years later, when married life got rocky: I entertained the thought that *if only my husband were different — as in, somebody else* — everything would be perfect! And you know what I am thinking right now? *If only I could find a way to make a ton of money and pay all of my bills and take my family on a vacation*, the depression, anxiety, and addiction that have blanketed my family would be ripped up and thrown away, and we would all live happily ever after! Yup. Like it says in the Bible, money will solve all of our problems. (What? That's NOT in the Bible???)

Do you see a pattern, folks? When we find ourselves seeking out an external cure to an internal sickness, what we come up with is a temporary, quick fix that simply does not last. *No addition on the house. No pair of shoes. No bottle of wine. No plastic surgery. No diet. No other human being. There is nothing we can buy or use that will ever be the answer. What is the answer? Jesus Christ.* And an intimate relationship with him.

Why don't we run to Jesus first? Well, because Jesus is not a magician, and let's be honest: we want fast results. We desire instant change. And we are so desperate for quick change that we end up running to what the world promises will make us happy, failing to recognize that the world's remedy is sitting on quicksand. What empty promise on quicksand are you running to? What is it you desperately need to change? What messy, festering wound have you been trying to bandage, cover up, and avoid? Do you trust that if you sit and wait for the Lord, he will be that thing, the *“if only I had this”* — that with him and nothing else, your life will be perfect?

These are hard questions. But I promise you, once you bring them out of the dark and into the light, your perspective will change. And that, sweet friend, is the necessary change we all need: the way we see things. Are we looking at our lives through the world's eyes, or through the eyes of God? Eternal perspective is so important in this battle. Once we look at that thing, job, person, designer bag and ask ourselves, *“What does this mean for my eternity?”* rather than *“How can I satisfy myself in this moment?”* we allow space for Jesus to step in and guide us towards what truly makes our life perfect. Discuss these hard questions with your group. On your own, make a list of all the times you grasped at the temporary fix, and remind yourself how it turned out. Recall the times you did wait it out and how God showed up. You will probably need to put on a second pot of coffee.

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## DRESSING FOR BATTLE

I think the best way to fight this battle is to get yourself a pair of comfortable shoes — shoes you don't mind standing still in for long periods of time. This battle requires the patience to wait and the strength to stand firm. You might feel like you are not gaining any territory and will be tempted to grab at your own ideas for happiness. But listen to me. Even though you are not moving forward, you are also not moving backwards! STANDING FIRM means you are holding your ground, claiming your territory. This is an important skill on the battlefield. You know what helps me? The Eucharist. As much and as often as possible. If you can get to a daily Mass, run to it! If you have the opportunity to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, well then, what are you waiting for? The Eucharist is our greatest gift ever, and it will give you all you need to resist the temporary cure and to wait for the eternal healing. Then after receiving, **kneel down and pray:**

*Heavenly Father, you are perfect. And you are all that I need. Forgive me for running after useless things to fill the space in my heart that is reserved for you. I just hate waiting. I lack patience. And I want what I want when I want it. But you know what, Lord? I have a pretty lame track record. Honestly. How many times have I tuned out your voice and listened to the world's? How many times have I ignored your will and followed my own? And how many times has this left me with regret, shame, and deep sorrow? There is nothing this world can offer me that even compares to you. Change me, Jesus. Transform me into the woman you created me to be. I will wait for you; I will wait for my true Healer. I am done trying to cure myself. Here are my wounds. Look at my mess. I am finished trying to cover up the ugly parts of me with false hopes and idols. Today, I will choose to stand firm, to avoid the quicksand, and to stop running towards empty wells. Thank you for taking me back ... I am ready to change my perspective. I am ready to do your will. Amen.*

# THE “TOO BUSY FOR GOD” BATTLE

*The moment we eliminate God from our daily plan and choose to move forward without him, the attack has already begun. I have to believe that in today's world, where we wear our busyness like some sort of badge of honor, this is a most common area of attack. It is a deadly one. Because this, sweet friend, is when we start to believe that what we do is what we are, and if we do not accomplish everything, we are failures. This is when we believe that stopping to rest and adding time with God in our lives means we cannot possibly accomplish the demands of our everyday lives. So, he gets pushed farther and farther down the priority list, until one day, he is not on the list at all.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. What is the first thing you think about when you wake up?

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2. Do you keep a daily to-do list or planner? Is God anywhere on that list?

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3. When the day is busy and overwhelming, do you add more prayer time, or cut it out completely?

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## THE "TOO BUSY FOR GOD" BATTLE

**F**un fact: I cannot stand when someone's reply to the question "How are you doing?" is, "Busy." And we are all guilty of it. I hear it come out of my own mouth and I want to slap myself. We are ALL BUSY.

But what bothers me more is how we so easily use it as an excuse to not make God a priority in our lives. And by "we," I mean "me." I am totally guilty of this. When life gets overwhelming, and I am living out of my mini-van, and the laundry is piling up, and the fridge is empty, I DO convince myself that setting aside time for Mass or prayer is not smart, that I need that time to get things done. And want to hear something totally ironic? I did not go to daily Mass this morning ... because I have too much to do. Please tell me I am not the only one who thinks this way.

The truth is, when we do not put God first, we tend to do things we really don't need to do. When we create a space for God with early morning prayer, he reveals to us what HE needs us to do. The mornings I do not visit Jesus in prayer and run my planner by him, the to-do list I create is always long. But when I start my day with God as my number one priority, he shows me what is truly important. He leads me to the tasks that will matter, and he guides me through my day. The to-do list becomes manageable and not just manageable, but *fruitful*.

Read the following questions and share your answers. And be honest. This busy nonsense is an epidemic, and the goal here is to raise up some serious sister warriors for Jesus.

Have you ever rationalized your behavior and made excuses for putting God on the back burner?

Do you look at your calendar and plan it all out, acting as if you are in control of your life?

Do you ever ask God what he wants to see on your to-do list?

Do you really think that extra yoga class and trip to Target is time better spent than time with Jesus?

Do you promise yourself that if you could just get this project done, or get through this trial, or just clean the bathrooms, then you will get back to prayer time?

The problem with these thoughts is that there will always be something that gets in the way of God, if we allow it:

*No matter how many things we get through, get done, battle through, guess what? There will be something else around the corner waiting. Our lives are a never-ending thread of things needing to be done. But we stay on this treadmill of "go and do," and all the time we are wondering why we haven't moved ahead. Why we still feel overwhelmed by things and stuff and alarms on our phones. We cross items off lists only to add more, so we grab coffee on the run and pour that third glass of wine as we fall into bed, because good grief, why can't we keep up?*

Does this sound like your life? It is exhausting, isn't it? Eliminating God to create more time is like taking the battery out of the remote control and wondering why it doesn't work. We need to put God back into our days, and we need to be intentional about time with him if we want to live ordered lives.

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## DRESSING FOR BATTLE

**T**he way I dress for this battle is through intentional habits and sisterhood. Morning prayer is non-negotiable. Even if I am too tired to pray the Rosary, I will still get up and sit in my prayer spot. (Full disclosure: I set my coffee the night before.) You see, God isn't asking us to go crazy here. You don't have to set aside hours, neglecting your vocation and job, so that you can recite the Gloria in Latin. He just wants to be first in your heart. Maybe when you open your eyes, instead of reaching for your phone, you can make the sign of the cross and offer the Lord your day. I have also sought out faithful friends. Through Bible ministry, I have found a group of sisters in Christ who hold me accountable to prayer. We meet up at daily Mass, we ask for each other's prayer intentions. We remind ourselves of what really matters. **And together we pray.**

*Lord, forgive me for the times I have chosen lesser things than you. Help me to use my time wisely and balance my day. I can really be like Martha, distracted and anxious about many things. Show me what truly needs to be done, and help me to do all that I am called to do — not out of obligation, but out of love for you. And help me to be more like Mary, who, by sitting at your feet, chose the better part. I don't know why I think being busy makes me look and feel important. Truth is, being busy feels kind of awful and overwhelming. And the only thing I want to be overwhelmed by is you. Today I vow to turn to you before my feet hit the ground, to ask YOU what my plans for the day need to be, and to intentionally step out of the crazy busy and into your arms. Amen.*

# THE “REALLY, GOD, THIS IS MY CALLING?” BATTLE

*God is calling each one of us, personally and specifically. I think we have the habit of looking at the crowd around us and feeling like other people's callings are so much better than ours. I know I do.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. Think about a time God called you to do something that you loved — something that energized you, that gave you that “mountain top” feeling. What was that like? How did it make you feel about yourself and about God?

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2. Now, how about that bitter valley moment — has God ever called you to something you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy? A long suffering? An unexpected tragedy or loss? How did your feeling towards God differ from when he set you on that mountain top?

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3. Do you have trouble accepting where God currently has you?

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## THE “REALLY, GOD, THIS IS MY CALLING?” BATTLE

Can we break out the wine for this one? Good grief. Re-reading my own words just brought back a whole lot of painful memories. So here is the deal: my family lives in a community that was touched by violence and evil, and the ripple effect of trauma on all of my children has been terrifying, to say the least. And I will be honest. I asked, “WHY GOD? WHY ME? WHY MY KIDS?” a whole lot more than I asked, “HOW, LORD? HOW CAN I DO THIS? SHOW ME. SEND ME.” If I had to guess why we refuse our call and cross, I’d say fear. Fear, and lack of trust. We don’t like handing things over, because we have our lives already planned out so well! If only God would just do as we say.

We have been chatting it up for a while now, so let’s talk turkey. Where are you at (I mean, really at)? What does your calling look like right now? Not the calling you want, but the actual calling God has for you. Is it caring for a sick loved one? Is it changing diapers? Is it driving your kids to therapy? Is it loving those you find really hard to love? Is it saying “no” to your child? Is it surrendering to an illness or disease? Is it remaining single? Does it look like mental illness or addiction? Because here is what I think. I think we all have really fun callings. Then I think God gives us these things that we did not plan and do not want, and says, “Here ... This is for YOU. Have at it.” And these? These we do not want. These we run from. And yet these are the things that, if we choose to accept them, will strengthen our faith and bring us closer to Christ.

Ask yourself, and those in your group, these questions:

What are you afraid of? Why do you resist this calling? What is getting in the way of your picking up this cross?

Personally, I was afraid it would not end well. I was afraid of getting hurt. I was afraid I was too small and weak for the job. In short: I DID NOT TRUST THAT GOD GOT IT RIGHT.

I responded out of fear.

How do you respond to a cross you do not want to carry?

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### DRESSING FOR BATTLE

You know the expression “fake it ’til you make it”? That is what we need to do sometimes. Dress yourself in confidence in the Lord, whether you feel it or not. Then, think about all those guys Jesus called as his disciples. Were they qualified? Did they have diplomas and degrees? We have to stop questioning if we are the right woman for the job because, guess what? If God calls you to a job, then you are the right woman for it! He will supply you with all that you need. He certainly did and continues to do so for me. Do not be afraid of breaking down, sweet friend. It is always in the falling apart that we find the blessing. That hard thing God is calling you to ... It is a gift. Accept it. Open it. Embrace it. You were chosen for it. God doesn’t make mistakes. Now, **what do you say we pray?**

*Jesus, I hate my calling. I am sorry. But I do. It is not what I wanted or expected. But ... Jesus, I trust in you. I trust that you chose this for me because I am the best woman for the job. I trust that this will not break me apart, but break me open. I trust that this will not be the death of me, but rather, the life I can only find in you. Help me to respond better when you call. Help me to remember that you would never ask me to step into something that YOU could not handle or manage. And help me to always rely on your Mother, who understands what it means being called to something you do not fully understand but doing it anyway, because God has asked. Jesus, thank you for this cross. I accept this call. Let it be done to me according to your word, Amen.*

# THE “IT’S NOT FAIR” BATTLE

*“It’s not fair.” How many times a day do I hear that? Not from my children, but from myself! When I was younger, problems were unfair circumstances that got in the way of my getting what I wanted and deserved. The worst part of it all might not have been so much that I didn’t get what I believed was owed to me, but that someone else did.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. To what in your life have you responded with, “It’s not fair!”?

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2. Do you struggle to feel happy for those who seem to “have it all” as you battle through a messy life? Do you feel like God owes you?

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3. How do you respond to circumstances that do not go your way, that feel completely unfair? (And give the honest, not the holy, answer.)

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## THE "IT'S NOT FAIR" BATTLE

**O**K, girls. Let's do this.  
Raise your hand if *life is not fair*.

Every single one of us will have at least one experience where, after we look around and see that everyone else is getting what they want and expected, we look down at our deck of cards and seriously question what God was thinking. I sure did. And here is a secret: I still do. Yup. If I were with you right now, I might be the first one to speak up and share. I would tell you all about the hideous senior year of my firstborn — the year every other mother and friend was happily planning college, and, well, we were too ... but it was a crap shoot, to be honest. (I went through the motions because it was the "normal thing to do," and to be frank, we *expected to plan for college*, and by gosh by golly, we were going to do what we *expected and deserved!*) If you ever run into me on the street or in TJ Maxx, ask me how that all turned out. I could also bring your mood down real fast and talk about the unfairness of the school shooting my two little ones were in, how they carry a cross to this very day unlike any other child's — how one person in serious pain and crisis made a hideous, unspeakable, and senseless choice, and *now my family has to pay for it ... forever*. Let's talk about how fair that is, shall we?

But let's cut to the chase. We can talk for years about all the unfairness each of us has dealt with, but I think we can all agree that, deep down, we understand our Almighty Father is not fair but just. And I think we can all agree that when each of us is standing at the pearly gates with our lives in God's hands, we will be very happy to see that he is not fair ... but just! So what this really comes down to is this: How do we choose to respond? As I state in my book, *What I have discovered is that life is going to be unfair and painful regardless, so this battle really does come down to me and how I choose to respond*.

Here is what I want you to do — alone, with your group, whatever and wherever:

Think about a time life felt unfair.

Now, without giving too many details of the circumstance, rather than share the minute-by-minute playback of your unfair circumstance, I want you to share the EMOTION(S) behind it.

What emotion(s) did you feel?

When college looked iffy, and when the aftermath of the school shooting started knocking my kids down one by one like dominoes, the emotion I felt and responded out of was FEAR. I share this and write:

*It is so crazy that I battle my own God, questioning his will for me, pointing out his mistake. It is crazy because deep down inside I know that God's will is better than mine, and I know God does not make mistakes. Truth is, I am afraid. When God's plan doesn't match up with mine, I am reminded that I am not in control, and this scares me.*

It was not so much that my circumstances were unfair. It was that they were terrifying.

When we respond out of our emotion, rather than our trust in the Lord, things go awry.

How can we respond better?

I use the example of the potter and the clay. The soft, moist clay allows God's hands to shape and mold. The hard clay resists his hands and stays dry. We are the clay, sweet sister, and it is not our job to tell the Potter how to shape us.

What kind of clay are you?

Do you fight the Potter's hands?

Do you trust that every ingredient in your clay is necessary in forming you to become the woman God has created you to be? Even the unfair ingredients?

Carve out a few hours (or years) to discuss this.

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## THE "IT'S NOT FAIR" BATTLE

### DRESSING FOR BATTLE

**B**ecause we cannot control what God wills or permits, it really does come down to how we choose to respond to his plan for us. We need to hand over our control and put on faith. We need to talk to God all of the time. We need to tell him, "Hey! So not feeling this, Lord!" We need to name the emotion(s) behind our response, and we need to pray for the strength to stay still when his shaping and molding hurts. And here is something I have been doing that has been very helpful in my surrendering this battle: I study the life of a saint who is an example of hope and trust when circumstances are looking beyond unfair. I have been journeying with Saint Monica, a mother who, despite doing everything right, suffered for years as her son chose a sinful life far from God. Praying for her intercession, seeing how she chose to respond when life was unfair, and reflecting on how the story ends have been getting me through most days. Today, choose a Saint to help you in this battle. **And pray with me:**

*Almighty, Loving, and Just Father: thank you for this unfair circumstance. Seriously, I am not even being sarcastic. It does not feel good, and good grief, it scares me. But because I know you, I trust that if you have permitted this in my life, it is necessary and will be used for good. Help me to remain as the soft clay does — humble and apt to be shaped into whatever masterpiece you have in mind. And thank you for the intercession of Saint Monica and Mother Mary, my homegirls who "get it" — strong, beautiful, trusting women who, because of their love for you, have shown the world your power through their YES when they did not understand the WHY. Fairness will never transform me into this kind of woman; I know that. And at the end of the day, I do not want to be remembered as that woman who lived a really fair life. I pray to be remembered as a fierce warrior who, in the midst of the battle, chose to live a holy life. So keep on shaping and molding me. And by the way, Jesus, I trust in you. Amen.*

# THE “WHERE THE HECK ARE YOU, GOD?” BATTLE

*I find it nearly impossible to believe, when it feels like all hell has broken out under my roof, and I am literally dying on my filthy kitchen floor from the unspeakable pain, that God **is there**. Because, good grief, Lord, if you are there, how about you DO SOMETHING?*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. Have you ever wondered, “Where are you, God?”

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2. I talk about the chink in my armor being a specific area of vulnerability, a weakness that the enemy knows to aim for. What is the chink in your armor? Where might the enemy aim at you?

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3. Is it harder to trust that God is with you when your circumstance of suffering makes no sense? If so, describe a time in your life where confusion shredded your faith.

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## THE “WHERE THE HECK ARE YOU, GOD?” BATTLE

**I** use the example of a snow globe to describe how confusion and chaos blur our vision of God and lead us to believe He has vanished. All it takes is one hard shake, and the beautiful snow scene is gone, and all we can see is the blizzard. But we know that behind all that snow, in the center of the storm, the scene remains. And so it is with God. He does not leave you alone in the midst of the storm. He remains ever present. We simply struggle to see him.

Do you find that you focus more on the crisis than on Christ?

I did this for years. All I could see was the mess. I had laser focus, fueled by fear, that kept my eyes on the situation — not on the Savior. I failed to look up. James Dobson, family and child counselor, says that pain and suffering are ultimately not what cause the most damage. Rather, it is the confusion that arises in the situation. It is the “confusion that shreds our faith.” Hearing this became a turning point for me.

Ask yourself and discuss your answer:

Does God ask me to trust him when things makes sense? Or does he ask me to trust him in all circumstances? What Scripture verse might help me wrestle with this?

I think if we can surrender this need we have to understand the mind of God, the better off we will be, and the stronger we will stand on the frontline. *The more I try to understand why he allows certain things to happen, the more I step into enemy territory, because, news flash: we will never understand the mind of God. Ever!*

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### DRESSING FOR BATTLE

**I**n Philippians 1:29, Paul reminds us, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.” This right here is everything. We need to stop trying to understand our suffering and start remembering Christ’s suffering. He never asks us to feel, do, endure, or participate in anything that he did not already walk through. And because our faith is not based on how we feel, we need to stand convicted and courageous and claim without a doubt that our God is ALWAYS with us, whether we feel his presence or not. Go and Google “Scripture verse that says I am not alone ...” See how many pop up. Then write them down, keep them close, and believe they are true. And maybe buy yourself a snow globe. Give it one hard shake and watch how, in due time, the snow settles and the scene remains standing. **And let’s pray together:**

*Oh, Jesus ... I praise you for your kindness and goodness. Forgive me for thinking you would ever leave me alone to fight my battles. Remind me of all of the times you have shown up, all the ways you have rescued me, when I least deserved it. I know I am not alone in my suffering. But when the storm rages on and I am overwhelmed by chaos, fear gets the best of me. And it is true; I want to understand. It is so hard to trust that all will turn out well when nothing makes sense. Remind me of the road you walked, Lord — the road you invite me to walk on with you. Remind me how you hung on the cross for my sins. None of that made sense, did it? But you never wavered. Oh, how I wish I had an unwavering faith! Please help me. Help me not to scream out, “Where are you???” Help me to trust that you are right here by my side. Help me to know you are there, even when you feel so very far away. I beg you, increase my faith. Amen.*

# THE BATTLE OF BOREDOM

*Boredom is not a sin. You are not sinning if you are bored. What can be sinful are the not-so-great places and circumstances that boredom is capable of leading us to, and we need to stay awake to that. It is the attitudes and actions — like laziness and a sloth-like approach to life that are often born out of boredom — that are ultimately harmful.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. What is the difference between regular boredom and spiritual boredom (p.124)? Have you experienced spiritual boredom in your own life? What did that look like?

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2. Is feeling loved by Jesus the first thing you think of when you wake up? If not, what first floods your mind when you open your eyes?

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3. Can you live loved by Jesus in your “faith in the desert” days, or do the apathy and weariness lead you further into quiet desperation?

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## THE BATTLE OF BOREDOM

**A**h, sweet friend, the spiritual boredom struggle is real. I have had my share of “faith on fire” days — I love these! I feel so connected, so filled with the Holy Spirit, as a tangible excitement for the Lord and spreading his Gospel runs like electricity through my veins. But I have also been a heap of dry bones, face down in the dust. Or to be quite literal: in the fetal position underneath my dining room table, paralyzed by *all the things*. And yet, even there, under my table, I have found the grace to persevere. But the worst place I have been, the place where I don’t *feel* like praying, don’t *feel* like talking to God, don’t *feel* like doing any Gospel spreading, is when I just feel sort of *there*.

Re-read the quote by Bishop Barron, who comments on why we might find ourselves living just sort of there. He suggests the reason we are living in this apathetic way is because we are following someone or something other than Jesus:

*Maybe it is money, material things, power or esteem of others. Perhaps it is your family, your kids, your wife, your husband. None of this is false, and none of these things are bad. But when you place any of them in the absolute center of gravity, things go awry.*

Now, there is always someone who has an issue with hearing that we need to put God before our families. Is that someone you? Is this hard to accept? Does this shock you? If I were with you, and you were struggling with this, I would share that I understand. However, if I had to reflect on the times Jesus was my center, and when *worry over my children* was my center ... Well, Jesus in the center has never failed me. (*Then I would remind you that Jesus’ way has always been hard to accept and shocking!*)

I write about my love for the phrase “*because of the crowd*.” It is how I see my worry over my children, fear over our finances, obsession with the outer appearance, the desire to be noticed. *These are my crowd*; they push their way into my heart and mind. They become my center.

Ask yourself and share your responses:

Who/What is my crowd?

What keeps me from making Jesus my top priority?

What have I allowed to stand between my God and me?

What is most important to me, if it is not Jesus?

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## DRESSING FOR BATTLE

**N***o matter how boring, passionless, or purposeless our lives might feel, we must keep Jesus front and center. We must push away the crowd and persevere in living loved, no matter where he leads us.*

The best way to fight this battle — to keep the usual boredom from growing into a spiritual boredom — is to make a daily practice of examining our conscience, really doing an inventory of what is occupying our mind and heart and how that leads us to make the choices we do. Remember, the enemy waits patiently for you to invite the crowd in; that is his foothold. The idleness you engage in is the first step away from God, and oh, how the enemy delights in seeing this happen! So stay awake. Wait out the dry seasons. And push back the crowd and protect that center spot reserved for Jesus. **And pray, always.**

*Lord, God Almighty, center of my life, I love you. No matter where you place me today — on the top of the mountain, in the depths of despair, or somewhere in the middle — never let me forget that you are still there; you are always my center. Keep my feelings of weariness, boredom, anxiety, and apathy from leading me into situations and circumstances that are not pleasing to you. Come, Holy Spirit. Fill me with your fire and love so that each day I will get up, suit up, and stay on course, always awake to the truth that no matter where I am and how I feel, you love me. Remind me that the dry desert can be just as fruitful as the green pasture, that this stretch of pavement before me is necessary road — the very path that leads me to running streams of life-giving water. Amen.*

# THE “IT’S OKAY, GOD, I’VE GOT THIS” BATTLE

*You see, relying on yourself fully and completely, while seeking all the praise and glory, as the world encourages us to do, is actually a big-time spiritual battle. When self-reliance runs the risk of becoming our primary source of self-esteem, or when it becomes the only thing that gives us our worth and sense of purpose, we eliminate God from the picture and replace him with our own striving. This battle of self-reliance is worse than it might appear, my friend, because it leads us to pride.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. Do you struggle with self-reliance and the need to be the one in control?

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2. Is your sense of worth and purpose wrapped up in how much you get done and what your talents and accomplishments are? What drives your own need to self-rely?

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3. Do you do things for the praise of self, or for the praise of God? (And really think about this one. I know we all want to shout out, “God, of course!” But every time?? All of the time? Be honest ...)

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## THE “IT’S OKAY, GOD, I’VE GOT THIS” BATTLE

So, here is my take-away from this chapter: I think women have a hard time accepting help. I also think women have a hard time handing things over. Why? Because we are encouraged to strive for success and rely on ourselves. Nobody makes your dreams happen for you, right? Ugh. I really hate this. It is a lie. GOD makes dreams happen. God is the hero of your story. God is responsible for every good thing. Yes, we have to participate and play our part, but the cultural focus is so much on self-reliance, the idea that you are the hero of your story — and it is a stupid lie and recipe for disaster.

*“The more I ask for help, the more grace I am given.”*

Do you agree with this?

Have you ever been in a situation where your surrender to self and acceptance for help opened up a deep channel of grace?

Share your story.

I say this with years of ministry under my belt: make no mistake. Women of faith are not immune to this battle! I have held tightly to projects that I was certain “depended on me.” I have resisted letting go of certain tasks and allowing another to serve for fear of looking like I was not capable of the job, or (if you want the honest truth) for fear that *someone will do the job better than me*. (I not only just took off my mask here, but my shirt, pants, and socks!) In a recent presentation from Bishop Caggiano of the Diocese of Bridgeport, he listed the “Ten Traps of Ministry.” Three of those traps are listed as: (1) *the trap of thinking yourself to be quite important*, (2) *the trap of going it alone*, and (3) *the trap of rivalry and vainglory*. In short? The trap of relying completely on self, and not on God.

Have you fallen into any of these traps? (Not just in ministry, but in any aspect of your life.)

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## DRESSING FOR BATTLE

As I demonstrated in my own confession, this battle requires us to undress. What are you tightly holding to that you need to let go of? What badge of honor are you wearing because it feeds your self-worth? How are you not allowing another sister in Christ to serve God’s Kingdom because you fear someone will get the praise you deserve? Write these down; then hand them over to God. **And humbly pray:**

*O Jesus! Meek and humble of heart, hear me. Please free me: from the desire to be in control, from the desire to be praised, from the desire to be approved, from the desire to be extolled. Help me to let go of all the things I hold so tightly to, of all the things I believe are of my doing, of all the good deeds I boast in (as if I am responsible for my goodness). Help me to remember that we are all on the same team, all working for you and your Kingdom! Remind me that your love is not something for me to strive for and earn. Show me how I hurt you when I insist that I be chosen, preferred, and praised over another precious daughter. My worth and purpose are not tied to how well I do it all on my own. In fact, you ask the very opposite of me. Oh Jesus, loosen my grip and keep me fully dependent on you. You never asked that I handle it all on my own. You ask that I hand it all over. I stand before you with open hands and a humble heart — for, apart from you, I can do nothing. Amen.*



# THE BATTLE OF TRUSTING IN HIS PLAN

*Please tell me that I am not the only follower of Christ who stops every five feet and yells, “You missed a turn, Jesus! I think we should have turned back there! That road looks a lot safer, don’t you think?” Anyone else out there question the road he has laid out for you? Anyone else ever feel like Jesus’ way takes you through that one unsafe neighborhood your mother warned you about? The dark street you go out of your way to avoid? That must be the “man” part of our Savior — unable to follow a woman’s instructions.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. Has Jesus ever led you straight into that unsafe neighborhood? How did you respond?

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2. When your life takes an unexpected turn, do you trust the Lord knows what he is doing, or do you fall back on your own resources?

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3. Have you prayed for something — a spouse, a cure, a child, a degree, a home, a family, a protection, a sign, a miracle — for what feels like years, and God appears to either not be listening or have no intention of answering? Does the radio silence chip away at your trust? Have you ever given up on prayer?

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## THE BATTLE OF TRUSTING IN HIS PLAN

God is so much easier to trust when he does what we ask; don't you agree? It is in those long sufferings, those endless years, those hours on our knees that, when met with seemingly little to no response, our ability to trust is tested. It is here that we focus on the pain, forgetting who Christ is. Have you ever forgotten? Have you ever thought him to not be good, to not care, to have abandoned you? Can you share your experience with your group? (They are safe. Let them into your pain.) You don't need anyone to fix you; you just need someone to listen to you. Chances are, they have their own similar story to share. None of us is unique when it comes to the battle of trusting in God's plan.

There was no way I could write about trust without bringing up Mary. She is my homegirl. And God is so good — because whenever I throw a hissy fit from not getting my way and I'm called into the center of the arena to battle something I would rather run away from, the Holy Spirit plants her image in my mind. And just like that, I am brought to my knees. Have you ever asked yourself:

How was Mary able to say “no” to all of her plans, and say “yes” to God's?

How was Mary able to stand at the foot of the cross?

How did Mary not allow fear of taking the unsafe road become an obstacle to carrying out God's will?

Do you think Mary's trust ever wavered? Why or why not?

And how did she do all that she did without Starbucks?

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### DRESSING FOR BATTLE

We need to get out of the driver's seat, hand over our map and our plan, and let the Lord lead. And the only way I know how to do this is by staying close to Mary. Mary accepted God's will for her life, and then she obeyed. Can we do the same? Can we wear acceptance and obedience no matter what, and follow the Lord with a trust like Mary's? I think we can. If we make praying the Rosary a daily habit, really meditating on the Annunciation, asking the Lord to increase our trust in him ... I do believe we can. From the moment Mary believed, the world was changed. Let's imitate Our Lady in this battle. **And let's pray:**

*Jesus, I do believe. Help my unbelief. I want to follow you, and I trust that wherever you lead me, it is for my good and a part of your great plan. Jesus, increase my trust. I know you are not safe, but I also know that you are good. Help me to say “no” to my planners and roadmap, and “yes” to yours. And I pray this through the intercession of our Blessed Mother Mary. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

# THE “CAN I STILL BE ME IF I’M TRYING TO BE HOLY?” BATTLE

*The enemy wants us to turn our backs on holiness and not even consider striving for it. Why? Because holiness, in the simplest terms, is about our relationship with God. The focus was never meant to be on what we are prohibited from doing, but rather, on the awesomeness we are called to be and do.*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. What does “holy” mean to you?

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2. Do you believe that “someone like you” could be holy?

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3. Do you reserve your “holy self” for your friends of faith, your ministry relationships, or holy huddles? Do you tone down the holiness around people you fear will mock or judge you for your “outdated” religious beliefs?

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## THE “CAN I STILL BE ME IF I’M TRYING TO BE HOLY?” BATTLE

This final chapter was and still is my favorite because, sister, it is one heck of a battle! Since writing this book, I have had yet another incident where I was called Mother Teresa! Me! Mother Teresa! Because . . . I go to Mass?? Because I pray? Because I wear a religious medal? Good grief, I WISH becoming a Saint were *that* easy! Truth is, shooting for holiness is a battle in its own right. As I share:

*My path to holiness at first felt like a painful stripping of everything I held tight in an attempt to feel good. But I found it was truly a most needed lesson in the truest things my heart was longing for. Things like self-control, purity, modesty, humility, perseverance, endurance, strength, compassion, and love.*

You see, I believe that these are the things we all yearn for, but because living these out is not easy, we tend to fall back on our comfy cozy sins. Sins that, if we are being honest, we actually kind of love.

What are your habits (the ones you love and believe make you who you are) that are contrary to what God wants for you?  
What sin are you afraid to let go of?  
What would your life look like if you could lose this sin?

Holiness is not about losing yourself, but about gaining who you truly are as you seek out a deeper relationship with Christ. But embarking on this journey to holiness is going to require that you be bold, strong, and steadfast. So, let me ask: What can you do to protect this quest? What can you add to your life — people, practices, habits — that will support you in this endeavor? Share your ideas. It takes a village! Let’s encourage and support one another as we march into this battle, shoulder to shoulder!

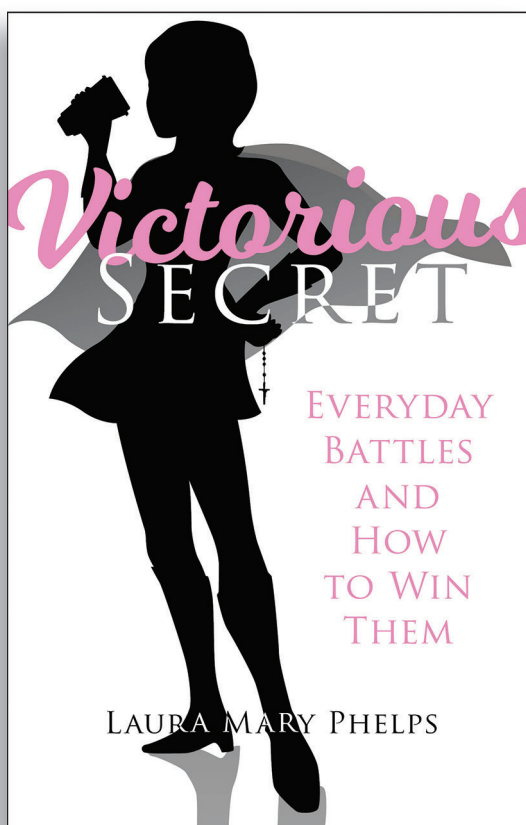
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### DRESSING FOR BATTLE

Sister, there is no need to change a single thing about you — providing that single thing is pleasing to God. The best way to dress for the holiness battle is to put on the Sacraments, obey the commandments, love your enemy, and help those in need. Basically, be Jesus to everyone you encounter. (See??? Told you this was hard!) Honestly? Pruning hurts. It hurts a lot. But the moment you see the new fruit growing, the second you catch a glimpse of a sweet bud emerging, what was once painful and lost will be replaced by the unimaginable beauty you gain.

Look, the enemy is going to come at you full speed. He has worked really hard at getting you to fall out of Christ and into your own sin . . . and he is not going to stop trying. But do not be afraid! Put on all of your armor and stand firm. Do not give in to his lies that tell you a holy life is unattractive, boring, not for someone like you, or simply not do-able in today’s world. YOU CAN BE HOLY. You can have all the chips and salsa and be the funniest girl at the party without being creepy or losing your holiness. You are a sister warrior and a soldier of Christ Jesus, and you will be victorious in this battle. Remember, the prize is heaven. Kind of makes striving for holiness totally worth it — don’t ya agree? And now, **what do you say we holy ladies pray?**

*Come, Holy Spirit. Fill me up with your love. Make me holy. Help me to lose every dead branch, every piece of rotten fruit . . . anything and everything that keeps me from holiness. I have been holding so tightly to useless things — things that are not pleasing to you; things that glorify this secular world and not You, my King. But I was made for more. I am your precious daughter, a princess, and I ought to be living out of this truth. It is difficult to be a bold Catholic today, Lord. We are not popular. And I fear I will be mocked, ridiculed, and challenged. But you know what? That is okay. Because I do not fight this battle, or any battle, alone. You are with me always. And with you on my side, of what should I be afraid? I don’t care what comes my way. I don’t care if people think I am creepy. I want to be holy like You. Amen.*



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