

Stronger
THAN THE
STRUGGLE

Stronger

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STRUGGLE

UNCOMPLICATING YOUR
SPIRITUAL BATTLE

HAVILAH CUNNINGTON



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The author is represented by Alive Literary Agency, 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80920, www.aliveliterary.com.

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ISBN 978-0-7180-94195 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 978-0-7180-94195

Printed in the United States of America

18 19 20 21 22 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Chapter 1

Spiritual Warfare in Real Life

I grew up knowing my best was not good enough, that I was a dreadfully insignificant girl at the end of a long line of overachieving, brilliant, highly educated people I called family. My grandfather was an Italian immigrant who, at the age of six, took the long boat ride with his family to Ellis Island in New York City, hoping for a better life. He shined shoes as a boy and worked his way up to being a successful attorney, a five-term US congressman, and eventually a Supreme Court justice in New York State.

The same drive to succeed was deeply embedded in his highly motivated sons, who migrated to the West Coast

after giving their lives to Christ and beginning new chapters of their lives in pursuit of Jesus. Even with their change of scenery and occupation, success followed close behind. They started evangelistic movements and ministries that reached a large part of the nationwide church. They even made strides into the Christian music industry. And this excellence didn't stop at the next generation. I remember conversations during my childhood about the colleges my cousins aspired to attend. It was never a question of *if* but *when* they would succeed.

I, on the other hand, grew up with learning disabilities. I was not good at reading or writing, and I was always terribly embarrassed about it. In fact, I spent most of my time trying to hide my struggle. I became super social to cover up my inability to perform academically and my subsequent humiliation. Heightening my sense of inferiority, I had an identical twin who was excellent in all the areas where I was subpar.

I would go to school and feel inadequate, then I would go to church and feel the exact same way. I had been raised in the church, but I always felt pretty lost there. Actually, I felt a little lost in general. I did not have a natural, unique leadership gifting. I wasn't the person who was asked to do a lot in my community. I was the girl who flew under the radar, always overlooked and always dreaming, hoping I would one day be exceptional at something. I often thought that I just needed one big win—a triumph to confirm my value. Something that would make the struggle within me worth it. Maybe I thought success would make life easier and give

me the inner confidence I so lacked. Little did I know that my internal battle—which I so hoped to throw off—would shape and influence my purpose and direction in life.

Backseat Breakthrough

We all have moments we want to forget. For me, it was my season in Yuba City. Don't get me wrong; it's a lovely, simple spot in Northern California, nestled between national forests and surrounded by farmlands. Yuba City was where my mom grew up, on a farm just outside of town. When my sister and I were fourteen, my parents made the decision to return, moving our family from Los Angeles to this small town so we could take care of my mom's ailing parents. In hindsight, the move also got us out of high school in LA and back to a simpler life.

I wasn't resistant to moving, but the pleasure and relief that might have come from suddenly slowing down and living a life that almost stood still was wasted on the teenage girl that I was. I felt lost. I was a sophomore in high school and, in my mind, we had left everything that seemed reasonable and comfortable behind in LA.

My learning issues didn't help, and I became obsessed with hiding them. Each year my lack of abilities became more apparent. My peers seemed to be running past me at warp speed, and I stood still. Paused in time. When someone would ask me what I was planning to do after high school, I would jokingly say, "My sister is preparing to go to nursing

school, and I'm going to live off my parents." I was only half-way kidding because I didn't see success in my future. I was just surviving my daily battle.

So when we started over in a new place, I struggled even more to find my footing. I wasn't a popular girl at school. I held my own with advanced social skills, but my beauty didn't hold the room's attention and I could easily slip through the halls unnoticed. For some reason, though, a group of guys made it their mission to get my sister's and my attention that year. Each weekend we would wake up to toilet paper in our front yard—that strange American tradition of creating a winter wonderland by throwing toilet paper as high as you can into someone's trees. The guys at school relentlessly pursued us, and it felt good to be noticed. Eventually we came around and began hanging out with them on the weekends—until one particular night.

I can't remember exactly when this happened. All I know is that it was dark in the car that evening, and I could feel the inside of my body moving to the beat of the music that was playing so loudly I could hardly think. Nothing could make me lose my mind like nineties R&B, and the gold 1973 Mustang convertible the guys had picked us up in wasn't helping. The windows were fogged up from the new rain, which had fallen a few minutes earlier, and the lack of airflow. I felt as if I belonged there, like the lyrics of the Tracy Chapman song "Fast Car": "I had a feeling that I belonged."

In some ways, it felt like any other night. We had been doing the exact same thing every weekend for months. If

you had told me that this night would change my whole life, I wouldn't have believed you. But, in the darkness of that car, in the nauseating normal, something life changing happened.

My heart began to pound. In fact, the pounding was so hard my mind began to race, and the whole moment paused in time. I sensed something shifting in the car, which I can now say was the Holy Spirit. He immediately had my attention, and I began to hear him speaking to me in my heart.

He said, "Havilah, what are you doing? I've called you to more than living for the weekend. You cannot live like this anymore. You have a destiny and a calling. You've got to be courageous! Fight for your life! Get out of here!"

As my heart beat wildly, I felt I couldn't be silent any longer. I asked the guys to turn down the music so I could speak. Then I exclaimed, "I have a call of God on my life!"

I wish I could convey how awkward this moment was. There was no piano player or pastor in the background. No one nodding in affirmation as I made this life-changing proclamation. Quite the opposite. An uncomfortable silence filled the car, and the dark silhouettes of the two guys in the front seat didn't move. Nothing about it felt spiritual.

At this point, I burst into tears, overcome with the emotions I was feeling. As tears streamed down my face, I glanced at my sister. I wondered if she was going to act as if I were a crazy person who had lost her mind. But as I looked over at her, she was crying too. Something was happening in this car. She was experiencing the same thing I was.

In the middle of this awkward and holy moment, I blurted out to the guys, “You are welcome to come with me if you like, but even if you don’t, this is what I’m going to do. I’m going to follow God’s calling.” My final words were met with utter silence. No one said a thing, and as I continued to cry in the backseat, I felt an overwhelming peace and resolve settling inside of me.

Something had dramatically changed. Before, the approval of others had mattered to me deeply—but now, for the first time, I was free from that. I wasn’t thinking about the guys. In fact, I didn’t care anymore. No more hiding in the backseat of the car. No more feeling invisible in a very visible family. No more feeling left behind in my spiritual community.

Only one opinion mattered at that moment: God’s! Even though I was not sure what the Holy Spirit’s prompting would require going forward, I knew I had just made one of the most important decisions in my life: a wholehearted surrender to follow Jesus.

The Great Divide

Oswald Chambers called this point of decision in our lives the “Great Divide”: “To get there is a question of will, not of debate nor of reasoning, but a surrender of will, an absolute and irrevocable surrender on that point.”¹

My “Great Divide” moment, my place of no return and

complete surrender, happened in the backseat of a car. The guys didn't say anything after my proclamation, and I still laugh about it today. They took us home without saying a word. Later that night, as my sister and I knelt by our beds, I said this simple prayer out loud: "Lord, I am not much. I am young. I am a girl. I have absolutely no special gifts or graces in my life, but if you can use anyone, you can use me."

In that moment, I so wished the heavens would open and angels would appear. I wished for something supernatural to solidify the moment. But it didn't happen. Couldn't God have spared one angel . . . just one? No. Not because he is mean or selective, but because he was trying to teach me a powerful lesson that I would remember to this day.

Simply put, he wanted me to understand that everything counts. No matter what we feel, what is happening around us, or how grand or quiet the moment is, the Lord hears what we say to him every single time. When you are praying and it seems as though you're not being heard, God is listening and taking you seriously. He hears that cry in your voice, in the deepest longing of your heart.

Perhaps we expect that once we've made the decision to surrender our lives to God, the heavens will open and things will automatically become easier—but that's not the case. In fact, some things get harder, and we struggle to see God in the middle of it all. Yet, as his children, we can be sure that on the battlefield of life, regardless of our current circumstances, he hears us. Faith is what matters to God, and if we reach out in faith, he will respond.

It's Not What You Think

The battles you face in life are not what you think they are. The battles involve more than you and your life. In fact, the war began long before your feet ever touched the soil of this planet.

Let's take a moment to go back to the beginning of the story.

Our enemy, the Devil, once lived in heaven (Rev. 12:9; 20:2). He was a created being. The Bible says he was an angel, and his body contained musical instruments (Ezek. 28:13). He was beautiful and more glorious than all the other angels, but pride, jealousy, and self-exaltation contaminated his heart. He didn't want to be merely a reflection of God; he wanted to dethrone God. He wanted the other angels' worship all to himself. He wanted the glory.

But God does not share his glory—not because he is selfish, but because he is wise and all-knowing. He knows the weight of his glory will destroy anyone who covets it. No one but God is capable of carrying such a high honor.

Still, Satan rallied one-third of the angels to join him in his doomed rebellion, and a war broke out in heaven. In the end, Satan and the fallen angels, now called demons, were cast out of heaven as punishment.

But the struggle continues on earth. This is where we come in.

Humans are God's most precious creation; we alone have been given the opportunity to become his sons and daughters. Satan knows this, and his revenge—his plan to

get back at God—is to destroy our souls. As my friend Chris Durso once said, “Satan has already experienced heaven and knows he’ll never be able to go back. So like a child, if he can’t go, he doesn’t want you to go.”² The enemy is on a suicide mission. His destiny and eternal damnation are already set. His only goal now is to take as many people with him as he can. He wants people to worship him, which robs God of sons and daughters.

What does this look like in our everyday lives? Let’s take a look at Eve and how Satan approached her all those years ago.

Most of us know the story of Adam and Eve, the first humans God created, and how he placed them in the paradise called the garden of Eden. There they lived peacefully and happily and walked closely with God. In fact, Genesis 3:8 tells us that God walked “in the garden in the cool of the day” (NKJV). What a joy it must have been to be in such close relationship with their maker! Then something happened to change everything. Enter Satan in the form of a serpent.

Genesis 3 tells us that the serpent approached Eve with a lie wrapped in truth. He posed a question about God, asking her if what he had heard was true:

The serpent was clever, more clever than any wild animal GOD had made. He spoke to the Woman: “Do I understand that God told you not to eat from any tree in the garden?” (Gen. 3:1)

What a case of “fibs in a blanket”! Yes, God had told

Adam and Eve earlier not to eat from one of the trees in the garden—but not all of them.

GOD commanded the Man, “You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil. Don’t eat from it. The moment you eat from that tree, you’re dead.” (Gen. 2:16–17)

Here we see the formation of a tactic the enemy commonly uses. The first thing he did, at the beginning of all beginnings, was to turn a statement into a question. We can assume the enemy wasn’t confused, that he wasn’t seeking clarity by asking that question. He was seeking engagement. Instead of clarity he wanted to bring confusion. He wanted Eve to become curious, because he knew her curiosity would lead to confusion—and confusion would result in the corruption of God’s words to her.

Why was it so important to the enemy to distort God’s words? He was trying to misrepresent God’s intentions. He knew that if he could get Eve to grow curious, and eventually doubt God’s intentions toward her, he could confuse her and contaminate what God had said. Distorting God’s intentions was an entryway into Eve’s heart—the entry point he needed.

I remember recognizing this strategy of the enemy years ago when I was having a heart-to-heart talk with God. I was sharing my sincere desire to live in a way that demonstrated my full trust in him. I asked him what a lifestyle of true

trust looked like, and he said, “Havilah, true trust is believing my intentions toward you are always good.”

I was speechless. I knew I didn’t live with this reality.

Instantly, my eyes filled with tears, and my heart became heavy as I realized I didn’t fully trust God. I had judged his intentions. I didn’t believe him, or at least not as deeply as I could. He was asking me to return to the place my heart was created to live—a place of complete confidence.

Days and weeks after this realization, I would find myself in times of conflict and would hear him say to my heart, “Havilah, do you trust me? Do you believe my intentions toward you are only good?” Then I would feel the struggle inside. I resolved to listen to the Holy Spirit, knowing his voice would grow stronger in my heart if I focused on him. I was sure his love could overcome my greatest fear, so I would spend a moment releasing my fear and worry and leaning into trust, whispering under my breath, “Lord, I trust you. I believe you only have right motives toward me.” In these moments of spiritual sobriety, peace would flood over my spirit and soul. I was gaining strength over the struggle.

One of my favorite verses that helps during the battle in our hearts over the truth of God’s intentions goes like this: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ says the LORD” (Jer. 29:11 NLT). Another translation says, “I know what I’m doing. I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for.”

The word *plans* in Hebrew is *machashabah*, which means “thoughts” and “purpose” but also “intentions.” When I first

learned this, it only confirmed the word God had given me the day of our heart-to-heart, and several other scriptures that do the same.

Psalm 40 says,

Many, O LORD my God, are the wonderful works
which You have done,
And Your thoughts toward us;
There is none to compare with You.
If I would declare and speak of your wonders,
They would be too many to count. (v. 5 AMP)

The word *thoughts* here is the same Hebrew word as the one translated as *plans* in Jeremiah. David was saying, “Your intentions toward us are wonderful and too many to count.”

The enemy loves to prey on the places in our hearts where we don’t trust God, where we don’t believe his motive is good. He uses the parts of our stories where pain, abandonment, or rejection became our daily bread and then reminds us of those memories, of how we felt in those times, leading us to the conclusion that God is not who he says he is. Unlike God, Satan doesn’t have our best interests in mind.

But the truth is, God would never tell us to do something without the best intentions. It’s outside of his character to do or be anything but good.

Most of the time, when God tells us what to do, the enemy will ask questions that undermine what God has already clearly said. “God told you to do *what?*” the Devil asks. “Why would he do that? Is it that important?” His

suggestions are meant to confuse us. The enemy will always try to change God's periods into question marks. He turns God's loving boundaries and instruction into a question of intention. I wonder how many of us start out taking God at his word but begin questioning him when the enemy comes inquiring.

God says, "You belong to me," and the enemy says, "Do you really belong to God?"

God says, "You are clean, washed white as snow," and the enemy says, "You're pure? Really?"

If we allow God's statements *to* us to change into questions *about* us, we will lack confidence. Our curiosity will lead to confusion, and eventually our enemy will corrupt what God said.

Jesus' half brother James warned us about this very thing, which he called being *double-minded*:

If any of you lacks wisdom [to guide him through a decision or circumstance], he is to ask of [our benevolent] God, who gives to everyone generously and without rebuke or blame, and it will be given to him. But he must ask [for wisdom] in faith, without doubting [God's willingness to help], for the one who doubts is like a billowing surge of the sea that is blown about and tossed by the wind. For such a person ought not to think or expect that he will receive anything [at all] from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable and restless in all his ways [in everything he thinks, feels, or decides].
(James 1:5-8 AMP)

When we are double-minded, we stand “in the middle ground between faith and unbelief.”³ Until we come to a place in our lives where we firmly believe, “If God said it, then that settles it,” we will never have peace, never be sufficiently stable in a turbulent world.

Your enemy’s first attempt to cause instability and double-mindedness in your life will always cast doubt on what God asks you to do. The Devil’s words will sound suspiciously like the truth but with a little spin added, including an evil intention.

The enemy used the same trick on Eve. He said, “Do I understand that God told you not to eat from any tree in the garden?” (Gen. 3:1). The Devil added the words “*any* tree,” trying to question God’s intention. Knowing his love for her, Eve should have been confident in God and his instructions, but she chose to have a conversation with the serpent when she should have walked away.

Most of us know the end of the story. Adam and Eve believed the lie that they could not fully trust God. They ate of the forbidden fruit, and the veil over their eyes was removed. They saw true evil and true good. Then they hid from God in shame, but he pursued them anyway. Leading them to confess, God came up with a plan to redeem them.

What was this most epic plan? Remember, the world was fallen, and man was now sinful; but God still wanted his creation to be able to spend eternity with him as sons and daughters. The problem was that evil and good could not reside in the same place, and humanity’s sin deserved to be separated from God for all eternity—but God had a plan.

He sent his only Son, Jesus, to die the death we deserved in order to set us free. Because of Christ's selfless act, we can now live with our Creator forever and ever.

I love how *The Message* translation explains it:

This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him. (John 3:16–18)

The day Jesus died on the cross, the battle was won. We don't have to find our own way to God. Jesus is the way, and if we fully trust in him, if we reach out to him in faith, he will respond. We will not be doomed to eternal damnation but instead will receive everlasting life. He is our way out! He is our truth and our life, the One we are looking for, the Savior.

How do we know this gift is ours?

Because if you acknowledge and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord [recognizing His power, authority, and

majesty as God], and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom. 10:9 AMP)

God only asks that we do two things to receive this gift of life. First, we acknowledge he is Lord. He deserves all glory, praise, and adoration. Second, we confess this acknowledgment with our mouths and submit to his leadership, living our lives fully for him.

Salvation is the good news. Rather, it's the *best* news we could ever receive! People of every generation, race, religion, gender, and background, those who are well educated or those who are uneducated, the everyday sinner or the greatest blasphemer—all can receive God's free and eternal gift if we will surrender to Jesus and reach out in faith. What a beautiful, triumphant victory in the war that started so long ago!

Why Am I Still Battling?

It's truly an amazing thing to be confident that our eternal life is set and that Jesus has already won the war, but oftentimes we notice we are still struggling. We ask questions such as, "If I'm following Christ, why do I still do things I don't want to do?" or, "Is it normal to battle while living faithfully?" We wonder, "Where is this battle coming from?"

Let me be the first to tell you that you are not alone in this. We all do battle each and every day. The war may have

been won, but the battles are still a daily reality. The good news is, we have strategies to employ. But, first, let's take a look at some examples of everyday battles.

Internal

Our battles often come from inside once we accept our new identities in Christ.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ [that is, grafted in, joined to Him by faith in Him as Savior], he is a new creature [reborn and renewed by the Holy Spirit]; the old things [the previous moral and spiritual condition] have passed away. Behold, new things have come [because spiritual awakening brings a new life]. (2 Cor. 5:17 AMP)

I love how this verse reads: "He is a new creature [reborn and renewed by the Holy Spirit]." As soon as we receive Jesus, we become completely new people. If invited, the Holy Spirit will live inside of us and affirm what God is saying to us through his Word.

But even with the Holy Spirit, the Christian life is not always smooth sailing. Have you ever felt as if it isn't quite working for you the way it is supposed to? Have you ever thought someone else got more God than you did? I know I have—but why? It's because our minds, thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs must also be renewed. Yes! Our spirits want to agree with God, but our old lifestyles and habits of sin can trick us into believing we are not yet free. They lie to us. Our quickest and most powerful weapon, then, is to agree

with truth. We need to ask ourselves, *What does God say about me?* If you know what he says, then you'll know how to do battle with what's coming out of the old you.

External

Sometimes the fight happens simply because we live in a fallen world.

Matthew 5:45 (NLT) says, "Your Father in heaven . . . sends rain on the just and the unjust alike," which means no one is untouchable. Each life is touched by pain, sickness, and death. Life happens. Evil persists. The Devil is real. The fact that we face hard things doesn't always mean we are guilty of a specific crime. Suffering only confirms that an active battle still separates us from God.

Furthermore, God doesn't remove our power to choose good or evil. Our choice is vital to God's supernatural ecosystem, because without choice there is no such thing as real love. Everyone must have an authentic opportunity to choose him or to choose evil. And sometimes this means other people will choose evil.

We have no power over other people's choices. Many of our battles are the results of people's wrong decisions, as they give themselves over to Satan's darkness. Their decisions have consequences that affect us no matter how much we are relying on God's guidance.

Theological

I once had a leader in my life who was excellent at making decisions. She seemed to have the secret sauce. Her

choices were always embraced by the team in the end, even if they sometimes meant difficulty in the short-term.

One day I cornered her and asked, “When it comes to making a decision for your staff, what filter do you use?”

Without hesitation, she said, “I look for what’s best for the rest.”

I looked confused.

She explained, “When I make decisions, I look at what will serve the greater whole rather than what will serve an individual or even myself. I don’t mind making a choice that might cost someone something if it serves the greater whole.”

God operates in the same way. Many of our personal battles feel deliberately put to us, and, well . . . let me explain.

God’s mission is to gather as many souls on earth as are willing to live with him for eternity. He is passionate—no, vigilant—for everyone to have an opportunity to choose him. When we give our lives to him, his mission becomes our mission, though we don’t see the whole picture as he does. We get caught up in our nearsighted natural and cultural realities.

So when we ask God to do something for us, our asking isn’t wrong; in fact, he wants us to ask. But often he will answer with a no or not yet. If we don’t agree with his answer or don’t want to wait, we struggle. We battle with his no. Sometimes we wonder if the Devil is withholding what we want from us. Sometimes we wonder if we lack the faith to move the hand of God. But in these cases, God

is actually saying, “I’m going to do what’s best for the rest. I have a plan. Trust me.”

Each type of battle—internal, external, or theological—can leave us asking questions and struggling with life. Our questions may sound like this:

- Why am I on this earth?
- Is feeling lost normal?
- What is God’s will for my life?
- Am I ever going to feel as though I have enough?

Maybe our questions go even deeper:

- Do I belong?
- Do I have what it takes?
- Am I replaceable?
- Can I really be happy?

Can I tell you something amazing? We don’t need to feel continually caught in these questions and the struggles of life. I want to help blow the lid off of the enemy’s plan and show you what he’s been up to. I want to empower you to tread him underfoot and keep him there. Right where he belongs.

Gone will be the days of constant warring, wondering if you have what it takes to belong to God. By walking this path together, we’ll learn how to clearly know when the battle is coming from inside of ourselves, when the Devil is

involved, and when God is intervening to give us a plan for battle.

We'll get practical and realistic. I'll tell you what's worked for me and share the small but radical shifts that have made a tremendous impact on my spiritual life. You can't win a battle if you don't have a fight plan—and God is ready to give you one.

This whole book is designed to crack open God's plan for your life. It will show you what a healthy spiritual life looks like and bring God's plan to the forefront. You'll begin to win in your everyday life.

So, my friend, let's jump in together and expose the truth.

EMPOWERMENT POINTS

- Everything counts. No matter what we feel, what is happening around us, or how grand or quiet the moment is, the Lord hears what we say to him every single time.
- God would never tell us to do something without the best intentions. It's outside of his character to do or be anything but good.
- If we allow God's statements to us to change into questions about us, we will lack confidence.

STRONGER THAN THE STRUGGLE

- Our battles often come from inside once we accept our new identities in Christ.
- The fight happens simply because we live in a fallen world.