

*Tara Johnson*

**THE**

*Reclaiming Your Worth*

**LIES**

*by Embracing*

**THAT**

*God's Truth*

**BIND**



## INTRODUCTION

# The Lie about Me

Sobs shook my chest as I lay face down in my dingy bathroom, my fingers clenching the burgundy threads of the bathmat beneath my shuddering body.

I couldn't breathe.

The pressure squeezed my chest like a vise as salt filled my mouth. With a guttural cry, I let the tears drip down my cheeks and off my chin. As the sobs eased, I flipped onto my back and stared up at the white popcorn ceiling overhead. I couldn't keep everyone happy. The demands on my time kept growing; each day was filled to the brim, and my nerves were frayed beyond repair. If I couldn't keep the plates spinning, I would disappoint everyone. And then what would I be? A failure. Rejected. Unloved. I was drowning in a spiral of emotions, and my self-worth was shredding in the process.

Perhaps I had never truly understood my worth to begin with.

*God, this isn't the life You promised me. You said when I gave my heart to You, I would be flooded with joy, but all I feel is pain. I've poured out myself for others, but I have received so little in return.*

*Only exhaustion and an empty ache that chases me wherever I go. If this is all there is—living for approval and producing more and more only to grow emptier—then take me out of this chaos and let me die.*

That was the night I learned to hate bathmats—and when I realized I had traded God’s love for a lie.

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Strange, isn’t it? I find bathmats useful, much better than dropping a towel on the floor. I’ve seen beautiful ones and ugly ones, but I won’t buy any of them. Every time I see one, I’m transported to the night I lay on the floor asking God to end my life.

How did I get to that point? I was Super Christian. I was a preacher’s kid. I did whatever needed to be done in my church and family with a grin and a swish of my cape. I was always smiling, always volunteering, always available. But at some point, I lost my way. And I began to wonder if God’s promises to me were lies.

I had fallen for a lie all right, but it wasn’t that serving God and others was too hard. Somehow, slowly over time, I fell into a life of paralyzing fear, fueled by insecurity that drove me to think I had to do more, be more, to keep everyone around me happy. Perfectionism and people-pleasing became my drug. I clung to the misbelief that approval equals love, and it led me into the cold arms of depression—a suffering so heavy it nearly destroyed me.

## THE UNIVERSAL PROBLEM

I stood before a group of female inmates at the Pine Bluff Women’s Correctional Facility and wiped my sweaty hands

down my jeans. I had spoken at prisons dozens of times, but working with the women was always harder than ministering to men. Male inmates, although often wary, were grateful for the opportunity to leave their cell. They smiled and listened and thanked me for coming with genuine humility. Not so the women. These ladies were tough. Hardened. Angry. Whatever I had to say, they weren't buying. I later learned this hard shell was usually a tough façade used to protect their crushed hearts and hopes. But at the time, all I could see was a sea of scowling faces.

I tried opening with jokes and stories but received no response. A bead of cold sweat ran down my back. After requesting they open their Bibles to Daniel 1, I asked them if they had ever fallen for a lie.

A frowning woman in the back spoke up. "What kind of lie?"

I paused. "Any kind, I suppose. How many of you have ever thought you were worthless?"

Every hand shot up, and my heart ached. Not surprising, considering where we were and the trauma that had led many of them to this moment.

A week later, I was teaching at a women's retreat at a local church. These women were smiling and laughing, talking about the latest clothing styles, whose children had started kindergarten, and where they wanted to go for summer vacation. When I asked these women if they had ever believed they were worthless, the smiles quickly vanished, and every person in the room timidly raised her hand.

I was floored. Of the 200 women I had spoken to in one week, every single one had once believed she was worthless. It couldn't be blamed on their socioeconomic status or whether they were single or married, young or old, incarcerated or free. It

soon became apparent that we have all struggled with this issue or something similar.

I've talked to hundreds of women since then, gathering as much information as I could, asking, "What are the false things you have believed about yourself?" These are some of the most common answers:

"No one could ever love me if they knew the real me."

"If I feel something, it must be true."

"I don't have value."

"God couldn't love me after what I've done."

"I'm a horrible wife/mom/daughter/friend."

"My past will always destroy my future."

"God is against me."

"If my life circumstances were different, I would be different."

On and on the list goes. And in these statements, I see my own story.

## THE DOORMAT

I really don't know how it began. I suppose I could blame genetics. Being high-strung runs in my family, but I believe there is more to it than that. As I mentioned before, I'm a preacher's kid (PK), and growing up in the church is interesting to say the least. You see the good, the bad, and the ugly in people. Often what church members say and what they do are two separate things, and when times get hard, it's easy to blame others. Human beings are really good at picking one another apart.

I never once felt pressure from my parents to act a certain way, say certain things, or keep up any kind of pretense to protect Dad's ministry. But somewhere along the way, I began to

internalize the need to be agreeable. After all, there are dozens of verses about “keeping the peace” and striving for unity:

*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* Ephesians 4:3, NIV

*How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!* Psalm 133:1, NIV

*I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.*  
1 Corinthians 1:10, NIV

Armed with these verses—and hating to have anyone mad at me—I decided to do my all to please those around me. When the church needed a pianist, I dutifully took piano lessons, a skill which has served me well over the years and one I deeply enjoy. My first piano teacher was a woman who hailed from Japan and had only been in the states for a few months. I couldn’t understand a word she said, except for her continual question, “You understand me, yes?” Instead of saying “no,” I would nod and smile. Maybe if I smiled enough, she would stop asking.

I learned to sing solos at church when there was no one willing to do it and relished all the praise I received. The words of the deacons and sweet older women did something powerful to my heart. I was lauded and bragged on. I found my worth in what I could do.

As I grew into my teen years, I taught Vacation Bible School, led devotional time at church camp, and offered to help teachers in their Sunday school classes. I was the model preacher’s kid, and I loved the attention that brought me.

And then I got married. My husband and I moved away, joined a new church, and I was faced with an obstacle: I needed to impress a brand-new group of people. No problem. All I had to do was smile and say yes to any request. If the pastor said the church windows needed to be washed at midnight, I dutifully appeared with Windex in hand.

Some folks call this behavior *people-pleasing*. I prefer the term *approval addiction*, but each term points to a bigger problem.

## THE RODEO CLOWN

“Tara, why can’t you look me in the eye?”

My friend’s question sliced to the quick. We had been chatting for over forty minutes, and the topic had drifted from the mundane to more personal topics, which make me uncomfortable. When I know someone is peeling back layers and taking a peek underneath the mask of perfection and confidence I work so hard to keep fixed in place, the intensity of their stare is too much. I don’t want them to see the trembling mess I am. So, I take a sudden interest in my shoes. Or the couch cushion. Or the coffee cup clutched in my fingers. Anything other than their probing stare.

Though I’ve made tremendous strides in the past few years—I’m learning to say no, to express my thoughts and opinions without worrying what others might think of me—I’m not exactly *dancing* in freedom. Still, God has been teaching me to *walk* in it, though some days it feels more like I’m tiptoeing around in His grace. That’s OK. Imperfect progress and all that. But why do I still have trouble looking people in the eye? If eyes are windows to the soul, I try my best to keep my soul shuttered and locked away from view.

I made some silly comment in response to my friend's pointed observation. Something intended to make her laugh. A joke. It's what I do. She smiled, but she wasn't through.

"Do you know what you remind me of? One of those rodeo clowns."

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

She smiled kindly, but she didn't shy away from the truth. "You know what the original rodeo clowns were intended to do, right? They were meant to distract the crowd from the blood and gore that had just occurred between the bull and rider. They diverted attention away from the serious issues by entertaining. Cover the grotesque with a smile and a funny routine." She squeezed my hand. "And sometimes a bit of greasepaint."

How faithful are the words of a friend. It was difficult to hear, but my friend was completely correct. Though God is restoring my broken places each and every day, there is still a part of me that longs to hide. A fragment of my spirit that lives in shame. Shame never wants to flaunt itself, does it? It covers. It distracts. It deflects. As Jennifer Dukes Lee worded it in her book *Love Idol*, "Because we can't make any peace with ourselves, we try instead to *hide* ourselves."<sup>1</sup>

Hiding can take all kind of forms. It doesn't have to be the mousy little girl ducking behind her mane of hair and folded arms. Shame and insecurity can be buried in the homecoming queen or the public speaker or, yes, even a rodeo clown. Some of us only want to be seen if we will be perceived as perfect, and we either avert our gaze or apply the greasepaint because we know we're not.

It has taken me awhile to identify how and why my battle with these lies occurred, but the chat with my friend forced me to realize all my laughter and clowning was a distraction from the pain I carried inside. When we aren't forced to examine

our hearts, we muddle through life with coping mechanisms designed to hide the real problem.

## THE LIES

You may not have ever struggled with approval addiction like I did, but I'd wager we all struggle with *something*. Whether through our upbringing, poor decisions, or the destructive decisions of others, we have all been wounded. Shame, rejection, abandonment, death, abuse, betrayal, feeling unloved—all these have the power to usher in lies about our worth, our needs, or our place in this world.

Wounds can only be ignored for so long, and if they aren't dealt with, they can lead to a full-body infection. Our feeble attempts to ignore them or hide them from others may work in the short-term, but it doesn't get to the root of our pain. And it doesn't allow us to heal.

My own struggles are far from unique. After speaking to thousands of women in multiple states and across diverse situations, many of us have succumbed to the knee-wobbling lie of fear. Whether due to work stress or pressure to be the perfect wife, mother, daughter, or friend, we wrap up our worth in how well we perform. Many of us believe we have to have the perfect bodies, homes, and children to be loved. We crave acceptance, thinking it will fill the void inside. We compare ourselves to others and mark our worth not by our successes but by our failures. We battle dark depression and find our meager confidence wavering. Worse still, many of us believe we'll never truly be free of the anguish gnawing at our hearts.

These lies are often far sneakier than we give them credit for. Sometimes, our misbeliefs feel identical to truth. They *feel*

right because at one moment in our life someone or some event reinforced them. As we grow up, those misbeliefs are clues we receive that tell us how the world seems to work. They shape our worldview and become the filter through which we see everything.

If I were to ask three different people to envision a barking dog and describe it to me, I might receive three different answers. Some folks might picture a cute little yapping puppy. Others may conjure images of their hyper chihuahua barking with abandon at a squirrel outside the window. People who have been attacked or frightened by a ferocious dog will likely picture a snapping German shepherd. Our past experiences shape the way we see the world.

The things we believe about ourselves become the motivating factor in how we behave, what we say, how we treat others—or let others treat us. It molds our perspective. I would daresay most of the bad decisions we make are rooted in a lie we've never confronted.

## BUZZ LIGHTYEAR

We know that lies hurt us, but they are especially destructive when we believe them. Let me give you an example.

When my son, Nate, was four, I noticed the toilet in his bathroom kept getting clogged so badly my husband needed professional plumbing equipment to fix it. What he discovered was a handful of tiny green army men that had been flushed down the commode.

Hmm. The girls were too big to have done something so silly, so that left only one suspect: Nate.

When I asked him if he had flushed his toys down the toilet, his eyes grew wide, and he shook his head. "Uh-uh. Not me."

I pursed my lips and studied him. “Then who did it?”

He grinned, brown eyes twinkling with barely repressed mischief. “I think Buzz Lightyear did it.”

Sure. Buzz Lightyear clogged our commode. I didn’t believe him for a nanosecond, and he got in trouble for lying. His fib didn’t hurt me because I didn’t fall for his ridiculous attempt to wiggle free from the truth. If I had actually bought his story, I would be a neurotic mess, constantly peeking around every corner to make sure this invisible *Toy Story* troublemaker wasn’t tormenting my family.

For a more practical example, I often think of one of my dearest friends. She is a poet, excels in her workplace, and is a martial arts expert. Her earliest memories are of her parents telling her they didn’t want her. Sadly, she believed them. The result was years of battling depression, pornography addiction, and self-harm.

Lies usually confirm our deepest fear and have the power, if we let them, to strip away the freedom Jesus died to give us. Lies leave us in chains—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. They bind us and keep us stuck, propelling us to strive for more but denying us freedom.

In *Present Over Perfect*, Shauna Niequist states, “Years ago, a wise friend told me that no one ever changes until the pain level gets high enough.... The inciting incident for life change is almost always heartbreak—something becomes broken beyond repair, too heavy to carry; in the words of the recovery movement, unmanageable.”<sup>2</sup> When our discomfort becomes too great to ignore, that is the moment when we realize something has to change.

To put it another way, many of us are thirsty, but we cannot find the water to quench our parched souls, in part because we’re

looking for satisfaction in things that cannot satisfy. What each of our battered hearts longs for is Jesus, yet it's difficult for us to recognize the Way, the Truth, and the Life when our souls have fallen for a false alternative. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us this: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them" (John 7:37–38, NIV).

There is a direct correlation between our willingness to face our broken places and our ability to be free. If you're craving peace, joy, and freedom and don't know how to find it, this book is for you.

## EXPOSING THE LIES

The following chapters explore the lies many of us have believed. These lies are created by fear, productivity, perfectionism, people-pleasing, depression, insecurity, and willpower. We will dive deep into discovering how these lies begin, what they promise, and the result from their presence in our lives. More importantly, we will unearth how to expose them to the light of God's love.

I ask you to prayerfully consider my own experiences with these lies and ask yourself if there are similarities between my story and your own. How do you currently feel in your journey? Are you exhausted? Overjoyed? Peaceful? Scattered? Hurting? Pretending? Ask God to show you what He would like you to know as we scrutinize each lie and dig to the root of their origins.

I pray you will learn how to identify your wounds, expose the lies you might have believed, and embrace your worth in Christ. Knowing who we belong to changes our perspectives and, ultimately, our futures.

If you're exhausted, tired from battling the same old storms and the same old patterns, there is hope. Your current circumstances don't have to become your destiny. Let's explore together.

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**BIBLE VERSE**

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Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God. (1 John 4:1, NIV)

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**READER TAKEAWAY**

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At one time or another, we have all fallen for a lie, and believing that lie will leave us stuck in an exhausting cycle.

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**THE TRUTH**

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Lies have the power to wreak havoc in every aspect of our lives, but our current struggle doesn't have to be the conclusion of our story.

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**QUESTION**

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What lie have you believed about yourself?