

#### **CIRCLE 1/4: SUIT UP**

Think of a time when you were really scared.

One summer night, I was sleeping over at a friend’s house. In cliché childhood tradition, we were telling ghost stories before slipping off to sleep. While we were going back and forth swapping stories, my friend told me a terrifying tale about a young girl who was killed down the road from his house (Googled it. Never happened). After a pause, he stuttered, “She can still be heard playing by the pond today.”

I laughed along, but I was screaming on the inside. As the night went on, the stories slowed down, the Pizza Rolls got cold, and we decided it was time to get some shut eye. Moments before drifting to sleep, my eyes sprung wide open as I audibly heard a droning cry echoing through the house. I assumed I was going crazy, so I just rolled over and tried to fall back asleep. Seconds later, the same sound filled the room again. My friend poked his head over the side of the bed and asked if I had heard it too.

That’s the last thing you want to happen when you’re hearing a ghost— find out someone else is hearing the same ghost. It was confirmed. We were being haunted. We were about to be eaten alive by a ghost girl from the pond.

Here is the most embarrassing part of the story: We ended up laying down weirdly close to each other... terrified for our lives. With each passing moment, the sounds seemed to grow louder. Somehow we managed to fall asleep. While we ultimately survived the night, the haunting melody never seemed to stop. The next morning, the mysterious sounds continued in broad daylight. I’m sure you know this, but ghosts don’t moan in the morning, so we knew something was wrong. I followed the noise until I discovered that the sound was actually coming from a speaker. I pressed the eject button and noticed a blue-colored CD emerge from the boombox. The disk was titled “Ocean Dreams: Songs of the Whale.”

We were being haunted by the *Free Willy* soundtrack.

We felt all that fear over something completely fake! It’s easy to base our view of the supernatural on what we’ve seen in movies. Our minds reflect on over-the-top hauntings with levitating furniture, demon children throwing up, and clowns that live in the sewer. We have bought into this dramatized version of spiritual warfare that looks like the set of a haunted house.

## **READ Ephesians 6:10-16**

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

Paul opens up this passage by confronting a complicated concept— there is an invisible battle going on around us. Every day, we are waging a spiritual war with an enemy that is scheming against us. This passage is designed to help us prepare for that battle. Paul says that we need to suit up in order to stand our ground. What does this spiritual armor look like?

### **Belt of Truth**

For an ancient Roman soldier, the belt kept the entire uniform together while also being a practical place to store weapons. The belt of truth is designed to hold everything together in your life. Simply put, when you live a life built upon truth, everything will stay together. Surround yourself by truth every day. Live a life of integrity. It'll help everything fall right into place.

### **Breastplate of Righteousness**

In ancient armor, a breastplate protected the most vital organs, especially the heart. Righteousness plays the same role in your life. When you walk in the ways of God, you are on the safest path. God doesn't make commands because He wants to control us. Rather, He wants to protect us from pain.

### **Shield of Faith**

This passage says the enemy is ready to launch flaming arrows your way. The shield of faith is designed to block those attacks. When you grow in your faith, it'll shield you from the schemes of the devil. When he tries to make you doubt, the shield of faith will protect you. When he tries to bring up your past pain, your faith will remind you that you are forgiven. When he lies that you aren't good enough, your faith will remind you that you are secure in God's unfailing love.

### **Helmet of Salvation**

Helmets are extremely important. Why? Because they ultimately keep you alive. Can you believe there was a time when hockey players didn't have to wear them? This era was marked with traumatic injury and even death due to their lack of protection.

Salvation ensures that you are eternally secure. There is absolutely nothing the enemy can do to break the safety you have in salvation.

### **Sword of Spirit**

Look back at this list. All of the other pieces of spiritual armor are defensive, which means they're designed to protect you when conflict inevitably comes. The sword is the only offensive weapon in this entire list. What does it represent? Scripture. Read Scripture every day. This will be a weapon that helps you win every battle. Whenever you encounter a lie from the enemy, respond to it with the truth of God. Whenever you are feeling fear, go into the Word. Whenever you face an attack, open the Bible.

Every morning, you need to suit up. Remind yourself of each piece of spiritual armor that God has given you. It'll give you strength even when you feel weak. It'll give you hope even when you feel helpless. It'll lead to truth even when you are surrounded by lies. It'll give you victory even when you feel close to defeat.

What do you do when conflict comes? Suit up.



**THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE WAS WRITTEN BY JACKSON GARRELL. FOR THE LATEST CIRCLES DEVOTIONALS, FOLLOW @STUDENT\_CIRCLES.**

## **TALK IT OUT**

*Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.*

Q1: What's something silly that you were afraid of as a little kid?

Q2: What kinds of spiritual warfare do people battle on a regular basis?

Q3: Have you ever faced a battle with darkness, negativity, doubt, or insecurities without realizing you were under attack? How can you be better prepared now that you know about the armor of God?

Q4: Which piece of spiritual armor resonated with you most? Why?

Q5: What can you do every morning this week to metaphorically "put on the Armor of God?"

## **READING PLAN**

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

James 4:7

1 John 4:4

Ephesians 6:11-17

Isaiah 57:17

Ephesians 6:11-14

John 16:33

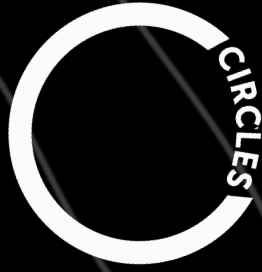
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**REFLECT**– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

**RESPOND**– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.



### **CIRCLE 02/04: DEFEATING DECEPTION**

When I was a kid, Friendly's was my all-time favorite restaurant. I loved the colorful walls, happy waiters, and comfy red booths. However, most of all, I loved the Monster Mash Ice Cream Sundae. Not only is the Monster Mash delicious, it's also made to look like an adorable little monster! The mint chocolate chip ice cream scoop makes the monster's perfectly round face which is completed with M&M's eyes, a cherry nose, Reese's Peanut Butter Cup ears, chocolate syrup hair, and a fluffy whipped-cream monster hat. The menu featured a perfectly-made Monster Mash portrait in the center of the page, and I couldn't wait to finish lunch so that I could order one of my own.

After flying through my basket of chicken fingers, I was waiting with great anticipation for my little monster sundae. Then, I saw my smiling waitress come out of the kitchen carrying a tray towards my table. It was time! She set a sundae down in front of me. My heart sank. There must be some mistake. This was not a Monster Mash. It didn't look like a monster at all. It was just a scoop of mint ice cream with some candy on top.

I broke down in tears. At an embarrassingly loud volume, I cried while exclaiming, "It doesn't look like the picture!" Because of my outburst, I didn't get any ice cream that day. I was fooled by the photoshopped version of the sundae and left crying over my Monster Mash.

### **READ 2 Corinthians 11:3**

"But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ."

The devil is a master of disguise and deception. Since the beginning of time in the Garden of Eden, Satan has been trying to lead God's children astray with empty promises of something better.

Satan says, "If you skip youth group, you'll get ahead on homework." In reality, you'll miss out on a message God wants you to hear to instead lay in bed and scroll through Instagram.

Satan says, "If you cheat in this pointless class, you'll eliminate so much unnecessary stress." In reality, you'll compromise your morals and put your future at risk if you're caught.

The true deception is hidden in the fact that the devil's proposed path is almost always easier than doing what is right. In order to defeat deception, you'll need to choose what's right over what's easy. Next time you are tempted to take the easy way out, take a

moment to think about what you're actually sacrificing. Don't give up something with long-term benefit for something with immediate but fleeting pleasure.

Notice that in 2 Corinthians 11:3 Paul says that he is afraid that your minds may "be led astray." Like so many issues of spiritual warfare, battles of deception are won or lost in your mind. To defeat deception, you must be able to control your thoughts. When Satan is attacking your mind with deceit, combat those tricky traps with righteousness. In Philippians 4:8, Paul says, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things and the God of peace will be with you." If your mind is full of the good things of God, a little internal alarm will go off when you are tempted to choose what is easy over what is right. Then, you will recognize the internal battle you're facing and withstand being led astray.

If you find yourself sacrificing good things from God for empty promises of something better, start strengthening yourself for this battle in your mind. Read the Bible to fill your mind with the truth. Go to church to encourage your mind in Christian community. Hang out with good friends who will influence your mind with love. You can defeat deception by knowing and choosing what is right.



**THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE WAS WRITTEN BY CHELSEA NYSCHOT. FOR THE LATEST CIRCLES DEVOTIONALS, FOLLOW @STUDENT CIRCLES.**

## **TALK IT OUT**

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Q1: What's your favorite flavor of ice cream?

Q2: Can you think of a time when you chose what was easy over what was right? How did it turn out?

Q3: When have you chosen to do what was right even though it was more challenging? What did you gain?

Q4: What temptations are often disguised as being fun or cool?

Q5: How can you prepare your mind to defeat deception? Commit to taking that step this week.

## **READING PLAN**

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

1 Peter 5:6-7

Deuteronomy 31:6

Psalms 23

Matthew 6:25-34

1 John 4:13-18

Hebrews 13:5-6

Psalms 34

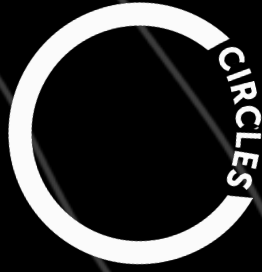
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**REFLECT**– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

**RESPOND**– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.



### CIRCLE 03/04: **DENY THE LIE**

Long distance relationships are hard.

When my wife, Liz, and I were dating, we were long distance. No, not just like living in different cities. We lived in completely different parts of the country. The dramatic drive between us was roughly 650 miles filled with traffic, mountain roads, potholes, and hundreds of red Sheetz gas stations. Believe it or not, my then-finance would make that drive every month just to see me.

Whenever she was in town, we had our Sunday routine down like clockwork. We would enjoy a late lunch and then share our goodbyes around 4 p.m. Liz would start the drive back up to New York while I went off to church for student small groups. After I had wrapped up my evening responsibilities, I would give her a call around 10 p.m. We did it the same way dozens of times. One specific night after she left, I threw my backpack in the corner and settled down into my favorite chair for the night. I noticed the clock read 10:11 p.m. “Shoot,” I thought, “I am late for our call.”

I picked up my phone, tapped her name, and listened to the phone ring. It rang and rang and rang, and then went to voicemail. “That’s weird,” I thought. She always picks up. She usually uses her phone to play music while driving. Thus, a phone call was unavoidable because it likely would have interrupted a Beyonce song. Not wanting to be creepy, I waited sixty seconds before calling her back again. The phone rang and rang and then went back to voicemail. At this point, I started freaking out, so I started calling her nonstop. Call after call went unanswered. Fifteen minutes later, I was absolutely losing my mind.

What did I do to cope? I started doing math. With a few simple calculations, I discovered roughly where she’d be on her drive. I pulled up the real-time Google traffic reports to see that there was a bold red line on the highway there due to an accident on her route. I immediately assumed the worst. I imagined her car mangled into a mess of metal on the side of the road. I imagined paramedics persistently doing CPR on her. I imagined some other boy with a beard and a six-pack coming to her rescue, saving her life, and her deciding she wanted to marry him instead of me. Then they’d ride away on his motorcycle.

After a twenty-minute nervous breakdown, my phone started ringing on my pillow. I pick up, and Liz instantly asks, “Why did you call me 27 times?” “Because you were



dead,” I replied. Confused, she went on to explain that she was in a long line at Sheetz because she was buying some pickles.

All of the mental chaos. All of my imaginative scenarios. My borderline breakdown. All of this was due to some pickles. You see, I am a really bad over-thinker. My mind can quickly jump to crazy conclusions at the drop of a hat. Did you notice how I transitioned from a missed call to a dead girlfriend in a mere moment? That’s the agony of overthinking.

This whole scenario that I agonized over? It was just a lie. It was a work of fiction. It is amazing how much mental energy we can give to our negative thoughts. It is such a waste of imagination. When you focus on your fear, it will always fail you.

We give so much mental energy to lies, don’t we? We believe that popularity will make us happier. We believe that we are alone in our struggles. We believe the awful things that person said about us. However, God is calling you to live a different way! He doesn’t want negative thoughts to overtake you.

### **READ 2 Corinthians 10:5**

“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

The Bible is calling us to deny the lies that live in our mind. It doesn’t just say deny them; it says to take them captive. Negative thoughts are inevitable, but you must realize them and replace them with something more powerful. Replace those poisonous thoughts with the promises of God.

You may think that you have to struggle in silence, but God has promised to heal your broken heart.

You may think that you are alone, but God has placed a caring community around you. You may think that you will never get through this, but God has promised to give you strength and rest.

You may think that your mental chaos is unavoidable, but God has promised to give you peace.

You may think that your life is worthless, but God’s got some amazing stuff planned for you.

Deny the lie. Proclaim the promise.



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## **TALK IT OUT**

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Q1: Share a time when you ended up worrying yourself into a panic for no reason.

Q2: What lies are commonly running through the minds of teens your age?

Q3: What are the most important truths people need to hear to combat those lies?

Q4: How can your words or actions reveal that you're battling negative thoughts in your mind?

Q5: What can you do to commit to denying the lies and proclaiming God's promises this week?

## **READING PLAN**

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

Philippians 4:6-7

Philippians 4:12-13

Matthew 6:9-13

Matthew 6:25-27

Exodus 16:1-3

Esther 4:14

1 Timothy 6:7

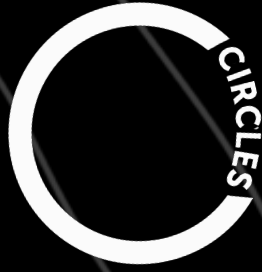
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#### **CIRCLE 04/04: WE WIN IN THE END**

I grew up in the golden age of wrestling. This was not like modern UFC fights in an octagon made out of chain fences, nor was it like high school wrestling matches with strict rules, cushioned mats, and concussion-preventing helmets. No, this was way cooler. It was called WWF— World Wrestling Federation. It was a collection of the strongest men and women in the world who professionally punched each other to a pulp. This stuff was over-the-top. Grown men in unitards would throw their friends through tables, smack them with metal chairs, and then nail them into a coffin and pretend to run them over (Yep, that really happened in one of the episodes.)

Can you imagine my shock when, due to a lawsuit, the WWF had to change its name to WWE— World Wrestling Entertainment? Why did they do this? Because apparently it was all fake. As a kid, I used to hang on to every melodramatic move. Watching in awe as some of my favorite athletes (or actors) would basically play fight for three hours was the best part of my week. Honestly, my child brain thought it was all real. Turns out that a lot of kids thought like I did and believed all this nonsense was authentic. Thus, they had to legally start calling it entertainment. It wasn't wrestling; it was acting.

In those fictional fights, the victor had been predefined in a writing room weeks before the fight even happened. Every smack with a chair, every setback, every pretend pass-out was all pre-planned. Even when it seemed like there was no chance at victory, the scripted victor always came out a winner.

This got me thinking about the fights that we face every day. Scripture teaches that we are constantly surrounded by an ongoing fight between good and evil. Here is the cool thing: we already know who wins. Your victory was made possible by the miraculous work of Jesus who was killed and then defeated death. You will experience victory because it was predetermined an eternity ago when God wrote the script.

#### **READ: Romans 8:32**

"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

When Paul is writing to the church in Rome, he reminds them that they are more than conquerors. This means that they're undefeated and undefeatable. The Roman church was facing serious setbacks. The government wanted to shut them down and constantly threatened them with death, but Paul reminded them that their fight is already won. This passage presents the powerful principle that Jesus is greater than death, demons, stress, struggles, sin, and anything that's holding you back.

Sometimes we feel like we just cannot win, like victory is no where in sight. I know that some of you are facing overwhelming circumstances in your life.

You feel like there is no winning in your current social situation.

You feel like there is no winning in your mental battles.

You feel like there is no winning in your seemingly endless struggles.

You may even feel like there is no winning in life itself.

But I am here to give you good news! We win in the end.

Jesus is greater than sin.

Jesus is greater than your doubt.

Jesus is greater than your insecurities.

Jesus is greater than your past pain.

Jesus is greater than your fear.

Jesus is greater than death itself.

Whatever you are facing, I can assure you that you're going to win in the end. Why? Because Jesus is fighting for you — and He will never lose. Stop trying to fight your battles alone! Draw closer to Jesus because He's undefeated, and He will refuse to lose.



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## **TALK IT OUT**

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Q1: What's your favorite [not so real] reality show?

Q2: How do you respond to bad days when it feels like you just can't win?

Q3: How can knowing that good defeats evil in the end change your mindset during struggles?

Q4: How can you draw closer to Jesus in times of conflict to fight from a place of victory?

Q5: What's one struggle you can commit to pray to God about every day this week?

## **READING PLAN**

*READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY*

1 Corinthians 15:57

Psalms 119:105-112

Daniel 6:1-13

Luke 24:1-12

1 Timothy 1:8-19

1 John 1:1-10

Revelation 21:1-8

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