

Shattering Strongholds With Sweet Breakthroughs

Overcomers Christian Weight Loss Academy is the fruit of Teresa Shields Parker's passion. A pair of key revelations drives this ministry, built out of her weight loss season from 2004-2013. The academy's existence serves as practical proof of Parker's hunger to use the power of the Holy Spirit—and of her personal story—to set captives free from strongholds.

Parker understands what it means to feel trapped. She spent most of her adult life battling weight challenges and at one point weighed more than 400 pounds. She wrestled with the anguish of overdue breakthrough, but God allowed her to travel a difficult path. Her challenging journey over many painful moments gave her eyes to see the sadness in others.

Parker began to pray about her weight in 1977 after she first crossed the 200-pound threshold. In the weight loss community, that represents a dreaded mark. She began the weight loss frustration cycle. She would lose weight only to put it back on again at least six times over the following few decades.

Through those years she felt what her academy members feel today: Why doesn't breakthrough come? Will it ever come? She longed for the freedom some realized but which, for her, remained out of reach. God finally led her to breakthrough in 2009.

Breakthrough Moment

Parker, a journalist by trade, accepted Christ at the age of 7 and has been a writer most of her life. As a child, she knew she had a calling on her life to write books about people who did special things with God's help. She also loved and devoured biographies. Beginning in 1989, she published The Good News Journal, a free weekly Christian newspaper,

distributing it in the region around her Columbia, Missouri, home for 13 years. She also published Family Magazine, a Christian parenting magazine, for six years after that.

As the internet matured, it devoured many small publications. Advertising revenue kept small publications alive, but the internet's prevalence caused budgets to dry up. Retail advertising now became possible at lower cost on the internet, forcing many small publications to struggle and close. What's next? Parker wondered.

"I pretty much felt like I had hit rock bottom," Parker says. "I thought, I don't have a purpose; I don't know what I'm doing. Is this the end of my usefulness?"

But Parker seized the opportunity to break the back of her weight issues once and for all. Her breakthrough began when she realized her addiction to sugar.

"It was my come-to-Jesus moment," she says, noting that the revelation shattered the stronghold that held her prisoner for so many years. And it came when her counselor and colleague showed her the truth: "Alcohol is one molecule away from sugar; alcohol is liquid sugar."

"I allowed sugar to control me—that's what happens with any addiction, thinking it helps us at the beginning," Parker says. "So, with sugar, most people eat it because it comforts them, helps them forget about their emotions, helps them chill out for a while, anesthetizes their pain—it's not that you need sugar, it's that you need to figure out how to deal with your emotions."

"We think that the stronghold is the addiction, but that's not it. The stronghold is the lies inside the mental mindset that we believe and leads to the addiction," she says. "This is what 2 Corinthians 10:3–5 says, with pretensions and arguments set up against the knowledge of God, thinking we know better than God and setting ourselves up as if we know best ... That

leads to the addictive behaviors.

"My life flashed before me, all the way back to when God first told me to stop eating sugar," Parker says. Through all the cycles of losing weight but putting it back on again, she says, "I hadn't heard about sugar addiction, but it clicked with me that it was exactly what I was. I had always thought, Other people can eat sugar, so why can't I?"

"You can be addicted to whatever controls you," her counselor later told her—which, Parker says, is the definition of a stronghold.

Turning Point

God had already told her to stop eating sugar. But He didn't mean taper off, He meant stop.

At last, Parker had reached her turning point. It was time to repent of sugar, to turn from it and leave it behind. Her food plan going forward would feature less bread, desserts, sodas and the rest of the carbohydrates that sneak sugar into otherwise good food habits.

During this same period, the puzzle pieces finally began to align in regard to an incident when she was sexually molested at age 11. It also showed her how that moment affected her weight for years afterward. Though she did not suffer physical harm, the episode left lasting emotional challenges.

She kept the secret locked in the same shackles that held her prisoner in the weight she did not want. Through adolescence, college and into her adult years, she self-protected by allowing her weight to slide upward. She drifted into a mindset that told her it was OK to put on a few extra pounds if it neutralized the risk of any sexual molestation ever happening again.

Then came the turning point: a testimony Parker heard Joyce

Meyer give at a conference. Hearing how Meyer prayed a prayer of forgiveness about her father, who had assaulted her during childhood, energized Parker and motivated her to attack her secret and break free.

Meyer invited all attendees who wanted to pray a similar forgiveness prayer to stand. As soon as she did, Parker says, "I saw him [her attacker] in my mind as this little wimpy guy, smaller than I am, and I thought, I've been afraid of this all my life?"

That prayer removed the crippling fear she had carried since age 11—but it did not block the mindset that she needed protection from men like him. Completing her inner healing required a new level of trust in God.

Secure in the belief that God watches over her and would protect her, Parker found herself set for next-level breakthrough. The Lord would soon free her from comforting herself through the sugar addiction her counselor had helped her recognize. Meyers' testimony also helped her understand what other women have gone through. It gave her deeper insight into how fear paralyzes and prevents victims from escaping to freedom.

Freedom Threshold

On Jan. 1, 2013, Parker prayed her customary prayer at the beginning of a new year, seeking God for His plans for the days ahead. She had lost more than 250 pounds since her 2009 breakthrough. She had no specific target weight. The Holy Spirit had shattered her chains and set her free from addictive habits and the long-term fear resulting from the attack she had suffered in childhood.

"I asked God, 'What am I supposed to do?'" Parker says.

"You're going to write a book," God said. "About yourself."

Parker remembered her childhood calling to write biographies of people who did great things with God's help. Over the years, she had a handful of false starts. During her newspaper writing days, she began a few manuscripts about God's work in the lives of people with unique accomplishments.

During that New Year's Day prayer, "God told me, 'Now is the time to put you in the game,'" Parker recalls with a laugh. "And I thought, What game?"

God was showing her that it was time to write "the book," Parker says. But not once had it ever crossed her mind to write a book about herself. She considered herself a failure, recalling the closing of her weekly newspaper. And even after losing so much weight, she still felt she had failed by ever gaining the weight in the first place.

Parker had one more freedom threshold to cross. God was building within her Holy Spirit passion to bless others with the blessings she had received.

The moment God told Parker to write the book, she set to work composing the text. But God gave her a word a few months into plowing through the first draft, the strongest one He had ever given her.

"What if I planned a writer's retreat 10 minutes from your house just for you—and you wouldn't go because of pride?" God asked her.

"And I thought, Well, I guess I'm going then," she recalls.

With no expectations at all, she attended the conference, expecting little but obeying God. Within the first hour, He gave her a revelation download, showing her the exact order and outline as well the specifics of the book's content—what to put in and what to leave out.

The conference built within Parker the courage to believe, and

she now expected to accomplish the task. It also equipped her with sound practices such as writing without stopping. She understood the value of setting goals for completing manuscripts and finished books. Soon, she would apply what she'd learned.

Then the conference leader delivered another key piece of understanding. Parker moved forward by applying the vision of her target audience: those who would read her new book. But the passionate drive that rose above everything else—setting free prisoners of strongholds—could not find fulfillment if her demand for personal perfection still controlled her. Perfection would abort God's lovely plan. Perfection could block His blessings to captives yearning for breakthrough.

Parker got the message. God expanded her heart for His project and the people who would read it. If this book helps one person, it will be worth it, Parker recalls thinking.

She published her first book, *Sweet Grace: How I Lost 250 Pounds and Stopped Trying to Earn God's Favor*, in October 2013. Within 90 days, she recouped all of her costs and realized a modest profit.

Early in the book's life cycle, Parker was able to deliver an excerpt to a contact at , after which she began contributing articles over the following years. When Charisma published the excerpt, "The Snake in the Bedroom," it contained a link to the book's Amazon page, which increased its sales velocity in the initial weeks.

In the following months, the first book led to a second, and today, Parker has published six books and two study guides under her Sweet series brand. She first completed a study guide as a free download with a link in the back of her book. Prompted by questions from Facebook followers, later she published the guide as a separate product.

Soon she learned groups were gathering in churches to study

her book, so she led one at her church. A prophetic word from a friend gave her a vision for delivering coaching sessions, which she offered in both one-on-one and group settings. From there, the Overcomers Christian Weight Loss Academy was born.

But the pandemic of 2020 threatened Parker's growing ministry. How would academy participants attend coaching sessions when the whole country remained under state-led lockdowns and social distancing measures? How could she appear at speaking engagements to keep bringing her message to those trapped in addiction and longing to break free?

In God's perfect timing, just ahead of the pandemic year, He led Parker to the ministry of podcasting.

"In 2019—God always tells me these crazy things, like out of the blue—He says, 'I want you to start a podcast,' and I said, 'I don't know how to do a podcast ... I'm game, but I'm not technical. I don't know how to do it, but I'll do it if You show me how,'" Parker says.

Soon, she connected with a fellow member of a business group who helped her understand more about podcasting. By early November 2019, within a few weeks of God's word to her, she recorded and posted her first podcast. Now a member of the Charisma Podcast Network family, she presents vibrant and practical, Spirit-driven wisdom in her Sweet Grace for Your Journey podcast.

As the pandemic rises and falls, "By having a podcast, I'm still out there, sharing my story, and that's been a real blessing," Parker says. "Of course, once you do a podcast, you get invited to other podcasts, and that's how this developed—we don't know our destiny until we surrender to God."

Parker has a purpose—God-given and hard-earned. Having empowered her for the hard work of getting beyond herself and coming up higher, the Holy Spirit now compels her to lead

people through and out of strongholds.

“It’s the kind of work I love doing,” she says. “Strongholds restrict and affect our connection to our Father God.” Her ministry offers a path forward to freedom for anyone willing to commit. “God showed me it’s ‘no investment, no commitment,’ and I have learned, ‘the greater the investment, the greater the commitment.’”

The Message translation of John 8:32b transformed Parker’s thoughts on the essence of freedom and best captures her faith and ministry: “Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you.”

As she moves forward in faith, Parker will continue connecting those who suffer from food issues with the transforming grace of God’s truth and the freeing power of the Holy Spirit, tearing down strongholds and helping them move into abundant life.

Visit Teresa at [www.treeparker.com](#), and instagram, pinterest and twitter at @treeparker.

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