

## PRAISE FOR *I DECLARE WAR*

“We are all created in the image of God. We don’t have to be chained by our feelings. We don’t have to do the things we don’t want to do. We don’t have to be defined by our failures, mistakes, or sin. This is powerful! Yet how often do we not live based on this truth? One of the reasons I admire and respect Levi is his transparency and search for truth. He doesn’t shy away from the hard or ugly stuff. Through his own story, he strives to help others get out of their own way and into the truth of who they are in God. This book will help you do just that!”

—**TIM TEBOW**, Heisman Trophy winner;  
*New York Times* bestselling author

“As I read through the chapters of this book, each truth presented brought new freedom. As the chains of ‘wrong thinking’ clanked loudly on the ground, I barely noticed them as I marveled in the amazing joy and strength that ‘right thinking’ brought. All the doubts that you may have about reading this book are the very reason you need to. Take a stand for your future and read it.”

—**STORMY** from California

“My friend Levi’s new book could not come at a more important time. As we well know, anxiety, depression, and suicide are on the rise in our world today. In *I Declare War*, Levi gives us a field manual for the battles we face on a daily basis.”

—**STEVEN FURTICK**, pastor, Elevation Church;  
*New York Times* bestselling author

“I believe the message of *I Declare War* is inspired directly from God and will meet people where they are and apply to people in every walk of life. Levi’s writing is humorous, thought provoking, and extremely relatable. I love the practical life steps that were given in this book to actively pursue life change.”

—**LUKE** from Ontario

“Levi personally understands that the hardest battle is the one we’re fighting against ourselves. That’s why I’m so thankful he’s poured out the biblical wisdom he’s gained along the way into the pages of this book. The practical tools, scriptural teaching, and trusted guidance found in *I Declare War* are invaluable to anyone who wants to embrace victory in their own life!”

—**LYSA TERKEURST**, *New York Times* bestselling author; president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

“This book is for people who are tired of letting circumstances and personal habits control their lives. Spiritual warfare is not something to be taken lightly, and this book provides practical methods for not only engaging in this war but dominating in it. Levi Lusko is a much-needed voice for this generation. You absolutely have to read this book.”

—**JORDAN** from North Carolina

“Gritty. Honest. On target. There is a battleground on which we all wage war every day: the minefield of our minds, hearts, and souls. ‘I am my own worst enemy’ is not just a catchphrase borrowed from pop culture but a spiritual reality that my friend Pastor Levi Lusko skillfully unveils in *I Declare War*. This resource is full of tools for your arsenal as you battle against the deceptive power of the flesh and for the beautiful things of God. Keep it nearby; your life, and eternity, depend on how you fight this battle!”

—**LOUIE GIGLIO**, pastor of Passion City Church; founder of Passion Conferences

“*I Declare War* is truly transformational. It lit a fire in me that won’t soon be extinguished. This book has the power to change and influence an entire generation, and it definitely started with me.”

—**RC** from Illinois

“A person’s life is often a reflection of what they think about most. In turn, many of life’s battles are won or lost in the mind. That’s why Pastor Levi Lusko’s new book, *I Declare War*, is one you will want to study and revisit regularly. In this powerful, practical book, Pastor Levi skillfully teaches us to capture our negative, anxious, fearful, jealous, and false thoughts—and replace them with God’s truth. If your thoughts have been holding you back from God’s purpose for your life, it’s time to declare war.”

—**CRAIG GROESCHEL**, senior pastor of Life.  
Church; *New York Times* bestselling author

“*I Declare War* spoke to my heart and mind powerfully and impacted me deeply. Packing countless hours of research, studies, scripture, and practical tools all into one place, this book helps equip every reader to be able to facilitate change in their lives and become the version of themselves they want to be. *I Declare War* is, hands down, one of my favorite books on this subject.”

—**DARIEN** from Alberta

“I love this! Too many believers today are losing a personal battle that Jesus already won when he defeated death and the grave more than two thousand years ago. And he is right—declaring war over anxiety, fear, and depression is the right approach. This book is a must-read if you want more than just encouragement and one-liners. You will find practical help and actual steps to freedom from the very things that have their grip on you.”

—**JENTEZEN FRANKLIN**, senior pastor, Free  
Chapel; *New York Times* bestselling author

“*I Declare War* is a battle cry for a generation that struggles with having free access to every bit of knowledge known to man and extreme anxiety about what to do with it. Levi gives us a clear battle cry to tackle our deepest demons and truly change the world.”

—**CASEY** from North Carolina

“If you are content in your dysfunction and comfortable with your complacency, this book is not for you. *I Declare War* will not only expose your bad habits but will shake the foundations on which they stand. But if you are ready for radical change in your life, then open and study these pages. Cross the barbed wire fence. Declare war and see what a life uninhibited by dysfunctional behavior looks like.”

—**ANDY STANLEY**, lead pastor, North Point Church; author, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World*

“Levi Lusko infuses scriptural truths, transparency, humor, relatability, encouragement, and tough love in order to mobilize readers to declare war on the version of themselves that they do not want to be. By learning to address their thoughts, feelings, and actions while simultaneously tapping into the power of the Holy Spirit, readers can expect a wolf to rise in their hearts in order to break the chains of sin and win the war within.”

—**MORGAN** from Alabama

“Levi is someone I hand a microphone to in my life. What he says I want to be amplified. In *I Declare War* he not only is vulnerable with the struggles he has gone through and that we all have, but he equips us with scripture and weapons to bring an end to the battles you’ve been fighting all your life. This book will help lead us all to victory as we strive to go down in history as a healthy and strong generation.”

—**SADIE ROBERTSON**, author of *Live Fearless*

“This book grips you in a way that inspires you to fight back. *I Declare War* is pivotal for everyone as arsenal against the enemy and the thoughts that block the life God has for you. This will be the book I recommend to every living person who comes my way facing a battle.”

—**JESSE** from Texas

“Each encounter I’ve ever had with Levi Lusko has left me stronger and more encouraged. This new book promises to have the same impact on all who read it.”

—**MAX LUCADO**, pastor and bestselling  
author of *Unshakable Hope*

“Chapter after chapter I was hit with something that seemed to be exactly what I struggle with. At times, I was brought to tears because it hit home. This book is unlike any other. It grabs you with its ability to relate to so much of your life; then it helps you realize how to win the war against the evil one.”

—**HAILEY** from Kentucky

“*I Declare War* is a deeply powerful challenge to elevate the truth of Scripture above any circumstance or challenge you may face so that you can claim the victory already won for you by Jesus. Levi’s personal story of fighting back the darkness will encourage you as you fight back your own.”

—**CHRISTINE CAINE**, bestselling author;  
founder, A21 & Propel Women

“I can confidently say that throughout this book I started to feel hope again. Reading this has allowed me to break down and process what I need to do in order to declare not just war but eventual *victory* over my thoughts and mind.”

—**MARISA** from Colorado

“Levi is a gifted communicator who carries a heartfelt determination to help every person step into their God-given potential. He is full of faith and is unafraid to engage with relevant issues in order to point people toward the truth of God’s Word. I know his teachings will greatly encourage you and help you rise to live with compelling victory in Christ.”

—**BRIAN HOUSTON**, global senior pastor,  
Hillsong Church

# I DECLARE WAR

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Pain, Finding Incredible Power*

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# I DECLARE WAR



**4 KEYS TO WINNING  
THE BATTLE WITH YOURSELF**

**LEVI LUSKO**



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*To every family member, friend, coworker, and  
stranger who has had unpleasant encounters with  
the version of me that I don't want to be.*

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# INTRODUCTION

## WHEN THE WOLF RISES

*To be prepared for war is one of the most  
effectual means of preserving peace.*

GEORGE WASHINGTON

There is nothing I can do to stop it. My stomach flutters, and my skin is glistening with sweat. Thinking about all the different ways I could possibly die by my own hands, I lurch from sleep with a sickening quickness, like an unbuckled crash test dummy in a simulated collision. My mind races, and my eyes burn. The voice in my head telling me I am going to kill myself sounds like me, but it is not on my side. Helplessly I watch myself moving toward a path of self-harm—and I have no emergency brake to pull. Panicking, disoriented, and scared, I stumble out of bed and pace the hall, trying to figure out where I am and why I am so afraid.

## INTRODUCTION

Under my breath, I mumble a trusted Bible verse from my arsenal over and over. (Hang with me until the end, and I will let you look at the weapons I keep in my war chest for specific situations just like this.) Eventually I'm able to bring down my mind's RPM from a scream to a dull roar. The fear that hung in the air like a thick, acrid smoke soon dissipates, and I start to feel like things will be all right. I peel my T-shirt and towel off my damp skin before crawling back into bed.

Variations of this 2:00 a.m. ritual have played out as far back as I can remember. On the worst nights, my sheets are so covered in sweat that I have to lay down a towel before I can try to drift back to sleep. (If I'm staying in a hotel by myself, I just switch to the other side of the bed.) At one point in my youth, these episodes got so bad I literally retched with fear. My parents vividly recall praying over me.

The Bible calls these fits "terror by night" (Psalm 91:5), and in the moment it feels like being locked in a maze with no exits. I don't always have suicidal thoughts; sometimes I fear harm happening to my children or making a mistake with enormous, terrible implications. For many years my fear took the form of a sense of pressure and urgency, as though I were forced to figure out a puzzle underwater, in the dark, in a language I didn't speak, with the weight of the world bearing down on me and a thousand loved ones' lives depending on my ability to do what I knew I couldn't. There was a period when the fear mostly involved sermons I had written that in my sleep seemed to be terrible. Don't even get me started on the dreams involving snakes.

Fortunately, the sleepwalking has mostly stopped. It was pretty bad for the first twenty-five years of my life. Once, when

I was a child, my mom found me standing over our cat's litter box, and when she asked me what I was doing, I told her I needed to go to the bathroom.

"Not in here, you're not," she shot back as she grabbed my shoulders and directed me to the bathroom. My eyes were open, but I didn't know what was happening.

On an overseas trip I woke up by the vending and ice machines down past the elevators—in my boxer shorts. I had to convince the front desk person to give me a key before I could get back into my room. Another time I woke up in the hotel hallway and assumed I was locked out, but when I plunged my hands into my robe's pockets I found a key card at the bottom. I mouthed a quick thank-you to sleep-walking Levi and went back to my room. And then there was the time I jumped out of my seat on an airplane backward because an Indiana Jones-size boulder was coming toward me. I ended up in the lap of the very surprised person in the seat behind me and apologized with the sheepish explanation, "I was having a bad dream."

The night terrors haven't gone away, but I have learned how to manage them better. They seem to ramp up when something big is about to happen, like when I'm facing a major opportunity or when our church is about to expand.

Unfortunately, nighttime isn't the only time my mind locks up with fear; daytime can be just as scary. Anxious thoughts, fears, worries, and the regrets that come when walking away from a conversation you wish you could do over—all can be just as difficult.

Sometimes I watch myself shifting slowly into a funk that I know will lead to unhappiness. I become like Bruce Willis in *The Sixth Sense*. I try to avoid this well-worn path that leads

## INTRODUCTION

to nowhere. I plead with myself, *Turn around! Quit pouting. This is not the way to get what you want. Use your words and stop sulking!* But I don't seem to heed the warning, no matter how much I wave my arms and raise my voice.

This is not even to mention the addictive way I mindlessly turn to social media, online shopping, and other digital distractions when I am feeling sad, lonely, unappreciated, or bored, or when I am just avoiding working on something great. Oh, yeah—I also look to food to give me comfort when I am down. Carbs are my go-to agent for a quick hit of happiness when I am blue. The empty calories never seem to fill the emptiness in me that I am trying to shove them into, and I know I will feel worse in half an hour, but that doesn't stop me from shoveling chips into my mouth by the handful.

I don't know if you can relate to my issues. Maybe you've never had to towel down in the middle of the night as though you've just finished an Orange Theory workout in your sleep, or ended up in a hotel lobby in your underwear, but I have a feeling you probably have some situations that you don't have an answer for, something that makes you feel terrified, trapped, lonely, victimized by your own bad behavior. Maybe you're numbing yourself with something you download or a substance you drink—a medication to dull the pain—and it's starting to scare you. You used to turn to it to feel good but now you need it just to feel normal. Perhaps it's a cycle of retaliation with your spouse that leads to a vicious silence that no one is willing to break—and if something doesn't change, your marriage isn't going to last. Perhaps you're ready to quit your job because all your coworkers and your boss are against you, just like at the last three places you worked and the last three churches you left



and the last three friends you ended up estranged from. Maybe it's your temper. You haven't crossed the line and actually hit someone, but you've come close.

Bad moods by day, or bad dreams by night. You have problems you feel unable to do anything about. Debilitating fear in a crowded room or crippling anxiety when you wake up alone. The worst thing about being victimized is that it's impossible to be a victim and a victor at the same time.

That's why I decided to declare war, and I want you to join me.

I have no doubt that the devil sends demons to mess with me, and the world might very well be another source of problems that come at me. But this I know for sure: I cause more than enough problems to keep myself occupied. The three sources of my primary frustration in life are as follows: me, myself, and I. I am my biggest enemy, and I desperately want and need to get out of my own way.

So I declare war: On darkness. On my demons. On anxiety and succumbing to the nights of the black dog of depression. On my self-sabotaging tendencies. My selfishness. My narcissism and the way I can spend hours doing nothing when I should be focusing on only one thing.

*I declare war.*

I am not asking you to help me fight my battles, but I want to do everything I can to convince you to engage with yours.

*I declare war.*

There is such power in those three words. Say them out loud slowly, focusing on each of the four syllables: *I / De / Clare / War.*

There is freedom in this declaration.

## INTRODUCTION

You can't win a conflict you don't admit you are in.

Declaring war separates you from the problems that you can so easily mistake for permanent parts of your identity and distances you from your thoughts, your fears, and your anxieties. You are not your dysfunctional behavior. You are not your overeating, or your obsessive TV watching, or your judgmental, critical comments you wish didn't keep coming out of your mouth. You are not your mistakes or your transgressions or what you see in your dark and twisted dreams. Choosing to oppose those things is to make it clear that they are not on your side. This is the only way to get out of your rut and move past them.

When you choose to declare war, you are refusing to go gently in the night or to be taken without a fight. You are declaring war on the version of yourself that you don't want to be.

## CROSSING THE BARBED WIRE

When you decide you're done playing the blame game and you're ready to become a victor, you will find that a wolf rises in your heart. That is how Theodore Roosevelt, the youngest person to hold the office of president, described the "power of joy in battle" that floods a person who chooses to meet the challenge spread out before him. This larger-than-life president, who is literally chiseled in stone on Mount Rushmore (and is permanently one and the same with Robin Williams because of *Night at the Museum*, at least in my mind), led the Rough Riders on horseback into the battle for San Juan Hill

YOU ARE  
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ON THE  
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— OF —  
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THAT YOU DON'T  
WANT TO BE



## INTRODUCTION

during the Spanish-American War. Mauser machine gun bullets sprayed out from the top of the mountain, cutting down man after man, yet Teddy fought on, relentlessly urging his men forward.

In that terrible situation he crossed a barbed wire fence that lay on the battlefield and fully committed to the action before him—and at that moment a wolf rose in his heart. With his trademark spectacles fogged up from the humidity, and a handkerchief trailing from the back of his sombrero, he gave no thought to the bullets flying all around him as he urged his horse, Little Texas, forward. (His other horse had drowned while being unloaded from the Navy transport that dropped them on the island.) Teddy had flipped a switch inside, and he was unstoppable in his resolve to do what was necessary. A witness said that from the instant he stepped across the wire he “became the most magnificent soldier I have ever seen.” A shell exploded near him, burning his skin, yet he pressed on. A stray bullet nicked his elbow, but he didn’t notice. He didn’t stop until the battle was won. For the rest of his life, he referred to that day, July 1, 1898, as the greatest day of his life.

I am not saying you need to go to Cuba to fight. I am saying there is incredible power in setting all that is within you in a singular direction. So much of the time, we defensively react to what comes our way. Stop letting life happen to you, and start happening to your life. Meet the enemy on your terms. Go on the offensive. Whether you are a sophomore in college or are in your sixties and contemplating life after retirement, when you decide to stare the things in the face that are holding you back, a strength will bubble up inside your chest. As twentieth-century Scottish explorer W. H. Murray wrote, “The moment

one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too . . . raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would have come his way."

Declare war, and the wolf will rise. Don't overthink it—you have time to work through all the implications. And you're not going to have to fight alone; you have an enormous amount of backup and firepower at your disposal. I'll tell you all about it.

This book will help you discover the keys to winning the battle within yourself. I've divided it into four sections, one for each syllable of the statement *I / De / Clare / War* (just like in the card game War we played as kids). Each section, or card, deals with a vital component of your internal struggles. And each card builds toward the most vital card—the fourth one.

It is essential you make it to the end. As good as the first three cards are, they won't matter without the all-important fourth card.

I have lived the principles I'm going to share with you. They're at play in my life right now, as I sit here in this coffee shop in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, writing this book on my iPad. Every manner of distraction, depression, and gloom has filled my mind the past few months as I prepared to write. But I finally crossed the barbed wire because I know you need these concepts as much as I do.

Before you move on to the first card, on the next page, write down your declaration of war. In what ways do you need to get out of your own way? Don't sanitize your list. The time for half measures is over. To be clean, you must come clean.

# THE THINGS HOLDING ME BACK

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**I DECLARE  
WAR**

ON THIS DAY \_\_\_\_\_

AT THIS TIME \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNED \_\_\_\_\_

1



**DECLARE  
WAR ON**



**WHAT YOU THINK**

**YOUR THOUGHT LIFE IMPACTS ALL OF YOUR LIFE**



1



## THE WOLF YOU NEVER KNEW YOU WANTED TO BE

*I want to be alone and I want people to  
notice me—both at the same time.*

—THOM YORKE OF RADIOHEAD

In Las Vegas, the escalators and moving sidewalks seem to move in only one direction: toward the casinos. Getting in is as easy as finding a Ding Dong in a truck stop. On the other hand, finding your way out is, by design, much more difficult. The intention is to trap you in a maze of distraction that will cause you to spend as much time and money as possible.

When I find myself struggling with moodiness, I feel as though I'm being carried along on a moving sidewalk, headed to a place I won't like and that I'll have a hard time finding my way back from. I started experiencing this sensation in high school. Something would happen to set me off: feeling



excluded, being made fun of, embarrassing myself with something I said or did. The next thing I knew, I felt like the ground was moving under my feet.

There was almost always a moment of clarity when I knew I was at a crossroads. In the direction I was heading, I could see storm clouds brewing, vultures circling, the bones of bleached wildebeests that had been picked clean shining in the last moments of sun. This is where my moving sidewalk was taking me, and I hated it.

In the other direction I would see Candy Land—vivid colors, warm light. People smiling and jumping rope, explosions of joy radiating across their faces. If I wanted to be where they were, I would have to make a decision and make it fast, because each moment that passed took me further away from the village of joy. If I did nothing, I would be taken straight to the badlands of gloom.

More often than not, I just stood there. Eventually the movement would end, and I would be left in a world of gray too far from the color to see it, with no idea how to get back.

I was officially in a bad mood. Well, some people call it a *bad mood*. I call it *being held hostage by the version of me I don't want to be*. You can rearrange my name to spell *evil*, so I call him *Evilevi*. He might have my fingerprints and blood type, but he is no friend of mine.

Whether it set in after lunch, during second period, or in the car on the way to school, once I was in it, I was *in it*. A wall went up, and my enjoyment of life went down. It's impossible to be at ease when you're clenched up on the inside. After an hour or two, whatever originally set me off was no longer the issue; self-pity and self-loathing were the real problems, and



SOME PEOPLE  
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I CALL IT BEING

**HELD  
HOSTAGE**

BY THE VERSION OF ME  
I DON'T WANT TO BE



they hardened into a mask I felt unable to remove. Eventually I'd give up on the entire day. I'd get to a place where I'd think, *This day is spoiled. I'll just have to try again tomorrow.*

You've felt that way, haven't you? As though so much of the day has been wasted that there's no use trying to make good decisions. *Tomorrow is a new day. This one's no good.* We do the same thing when we've made a bad choice about eating: *I fell off the wagon for lunch, so I might as well binge at dinner and have a cupcake at bedtime. I should have had a healthy breakfast, but since I didn't the whole day is shot. I'll do better on Monday . . . or next month.*

Where did we get the idea that one bad decision must be followed by another? Maybe it comes from failing to understand the true meaning of an often-quoted verse written by the prophet Jeremiah in the book of Lamentations:

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness. (3:22–23 NIV)

What a Bible verse *doesn't* mean is as important as what it *does*. Jeremiah isn't saying that a new morning is the only time you have the opportunity to receive mercy; there isn't anything mystical attached to the clock striking midnight. That's not when God's mercies replenish. Your AT&T data plan might roll over at a specific time, but that's not so with the devotion God has allocated for you.

Rather, what Jeremiah emphasizes is that you always have a new shot—because *God is that good*. You have the option to

go to him morning, noon, and night—once a day, nine times a day, every hour if you need to—and claim the help you need for the present struggle you are facing. Hebrews 4:16 says, “So let us boldly approach God’s throne of grace. Then we will receive mercy. We will find grace to help us when we need it” (NIRV). You don’t have to wait for the start of day; you can seek the grace when you need it.

Astronauts on the International Space Station orbit Earth every ninety minutes, which means they can watch the sun rise and set sixteen times a day. Why? Because they’re moving quickly around the earth. How quickly? My friend Shane Kimbrough, who has spent 189 days in space and was the commander of the ISS, told me that when you’re on the space station, you are moving 17,500 miles an hour, or 5 miles per second, 200 to 250 miles above the surface of the earth. The picture of an astronaut sitting in the Cupola, watching the sun rise and set sixteen times in one day through the enormous window, is key for you to remember as you lean in to the reset God wants to give you: as the heavens are high above the earth, so God’s ways are past finding out (Isaiah 55:9; Romans 11:33). The higher you go the more sun rises there are. You needn’t write off a day that has been tainted. You can start over on the spot. Shake your internal Etch A Sketch! There are brand new mercies waiting for you. Only pride and silliness allow a bad decision to turn into a bad day and make you defer until tomorrow what you need to do right now.

I love the convenience of calling for an Uber. (I always say “*call* an Uber.” I know you don’t *literally* call them, but I don’t have any intention of stopping.) A few clicks of a button, and a car shows up where you are, ready to take you wherever you need to go. It’s Amazon Prime for traveling across town.

Quite a few times I have mistaken a vehicle coming to get me with a car on its way to get someone else. Once at an airport I hopped into the back seat of the Uber I had ordered only to discover it wasn't an Uber at all. The driver was even more surprised than I was! The truth is, you don't have to stay in a bad mood any more than you have to stay in the wrong Uber. If you got in, you can get out.

## SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT

A bad mood exists only in your mind. That's why the first of the four cards to set down when you declare war deals with your thoughts. You can't live right if you won't think right.

My senior year, I had art class last period. The class was in a metal barrack on the far end of campus. A gravel path snaked past the cafeteria and gym, the sagging chain link fences, and the area where buses picked students up before winding its way to a row of portable buildings. It has been seventeen years since I was a seventeen-year-old making my way from sixth to seventh period, but I can still hear the gravel crunching under my feet and feel the weight of my backpack loaded up with books. (Whether I would crack them open that evening was another story.)

I can vividly recall how it felt to walk to art class in a bad mood. It happened regularly enough that I haven't forgotten those angsty feelings churned up by near-lethal doses of self-loathing and self-pity.

My shirt was usually untucked. We had uniforms at my high school—you had to wear a polo shirt or an oxford button-down

with khaki or navy pants. You received a write-up if you were caught with your shirt not tucked in. I usually had it tucked in only above my belt buckle—just enough to claim it wasn't technically totally untucked. What a rebel.

Sometimes a friend who could see the funk on my face would walk with me and ask what the matter was or how my day was, and I'd shove down my emotions and lie through my teeth. "Everything is fine," I would say, even though inside I wanted to admit it wasn't.

Luckily the day was almost over. *Maybe tomorrow will be better. This day is doomed.*

The funny thing is that, even though I can remember walking to art class in a bad mood, I can't recall a single occasion when I walked out of art class grumpy, angry, or wound up.

We each had a little cubby where we would paint, draw, sketch, or color for forty-five minutes. My teacher was a kind woman named Mrs. Losey, and on occasion she allowed us to bring in music to listen to while we worked. I'd slip the headphones of my Discman over my ears, press play on a worship music CD, and fill blank pages with lines, colors, and shapes. Before I knew it I was shuffling back on that same gravel road but in a completely altered state. Miraculously, the spell had lifted, and the funk I had been in less than an hour ago was gone.

I didn't have the self-awareness to realize then what I understand now: it wasn't coincidence that I was in a different emotional place by the end of the period. That art class was like the calming phrase used to soothe the Hulk's rage and transform him back into mild-mannered Bruce Banner: "The sun is getting real low, big guy" (when Black Widow said it,

not Thor). The combination of music, art, and the quiet place were a lullaby that took me to a completely different headspace. My heart rate dropped, and with it my levels of cortisol, the hormone that wreaks havoc on your system when you're stressed. It was as though the bad mood was a six of clubs, and the music and art were the king of hearts. And no numbered card of emotions can overcome Jesus—the King of your heart!

I've learned a lot about what makes me tick, but I still struggle to control my mood. My ability to respond well to external battles has everything to do with my ability to fight the internal war successfully. I'm reminded of Joshua fighting the Amalekites while Moses stood on the mountain above the battle, raising his arms with the rod of God in his hands (Exodus 17:8–13). It didn't matter how much effort Joshua expended; when Moses' arms sagged, Joshua lost momentum, and when his arms were steadfast, the tide turned. Hear me loud and clear. Nothing so influences your life as your ability to control your spirit in the midst of volatile feelings and the madness of life.

Proverbs 25:28 tells us, “Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.” In the ancient world, walls were everything. A city without walls was the equivalent of a hotel room without a lock, deadbolt, spy hole, or flippy thingamajiggy that lets a door be opened a couple inches. You wouldn't feel secure in your hotel knowing you were completely vulnerable to invasion. That's why Nehemiah's crusade to restore the walls of Jerusalem was so important. When we neglect to control our spirits, we leave them vulnerable to attack.

When God created Adam and Eve, he sculpted their bodies



NOTHING SO  
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— AND THE —  
**MADNESS OF LIFE**





from the dust with his fingers, but it was his breath that gave them their spirits. Your spirit is the part of your being that responds to God and receives his power.

The word *spirit* shows up hundreds and hundreds of times throughout Scripture. Here are some of the highlights:

- When you are saved, your spirit is the part of you that is most affected: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26).
- When you sin, your spirit gets off kilter and needs recalibration, like a compass near a magnetic field: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10 ESV).
- You must learn how to control your spirit, and then practice doing so, especially in times of anger: “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city” (Proverbs 16:32).
- Your spirit can have good intentions, but it can be overcome by sinful desires and needs to be fortified by prayer: “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38).
- A calm spirit causes you to have a quiet confidence: “He who has knowledge spares his words, And a man of understanding is of a calm spirit” (Proverbs 17:27).
- We can ask God for a spirit marked by generosity just like his: “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit” (Psalm 51:12).
- An extraordinary spirit leads to open doors and promotion: “Daniel became distinguished above all the other

high officials and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom” (Daniel 6:3 ESV).

- God is drawn to those who have a spirit marked by humility and those who lift their eyes to him when in pain: “The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

Learning how to steer your spirit by managing your thoughts is incredibly important. *If your spirit is out of control, it's difficult to put your life under God's control.* And a spirit under God's control is key to the wolf rising in your heart.

*Hold on!* I can hear you objecting. *About that . . . I'm not really sure I want to rise up like a wolf. In the Bible, aren't wolves described in a negative light?* Not to mention all the fairy tales—even Little Red Riding Hood and the three little pigs know that wolves are big and bad.

Thank you for bringing that up. How like the devil to want to completely own the image of an animal with attributes we desperately need. Yes, the enemy does attack us like a wolf, but he also likes to dress up as an angel of light, a serpent, and a roaring lion. We don't seem to have any problem appreciating angels and lions, and Jesus told us specifically to be wise like serpents. So why would we write wolves off? If anything, the enemy's interest in them should tip you off that there is something powerful about them.

Wolves were created by God and are truly remarkable creatures—known for loyalty and strength. In addition to being highly social and smart, they also have other lesser-known qualities you should want in your life. They have been

scientifically proven to be susceptible to contagious yawning (did you yawn when you read that?), which is believed to be linked to empathy. And this is my favorite: wolves are very rare in that they're willing to adopt orphaned wolf pups even if they belong to a rival. Among apex predators this is not normal. Even lions (and I have a lot of love for lions) who take over another pride will almost always practice infanticide, killing all the lion cubs to end the blood line of their predecessor. But not wolves. The new alpha male and alpha female will tenderly care for the pups of their enemy and bring them into their pack. How touching is that? It's a bit of a cliché to speak of someone with bad manners as having been "raised by wolves," like Mowgli the man-cub. But there is some truth behind this expression, as these ferocious hunters also willingly play the part of foster parents.

Read this excerpt from *The Wisdom of Wolves* and tell me if you don't find yourself wanting to channel your inner wolf:

They care for their pups with a familiar devotion and share our reflexive instinct to care for youngsters, related or not. They hold a place in society for their elders. They push boundaries and explore, then return to visit their families. They care what happens to one another, they miss each other when they're separated, and they grieve when one among them dies. . . . They are benevolent leaders and faithful lieutenants, fierce mothers, nurturing fathers, and devoted brothers; they are hunters, adventurers, comedians, and caregivers.

To be a wolf is not just to be a brave warrior; it is also to be a loving nurturer, and that is your destiny.

Back to the story in Exodus 17. Moses eventually grew exhausted, and try as he might, he couldn't keep his arms in the air. Luckily, his friends Aaron and Hur improvised a couple of hacks: they stuck a rock under Moses like an old-school bar stool, and they stood by his side and each held up one of his arms. Moses was in the exact same position he had been in before, only now it was much easier to keep his arms raised.

We can be creative in involving the help of other people and even props to keep our spirits in check. This is true whether your struggle is losing your temper with your kids, interacting with a rude or condescending customer service person, or dealing with an unprepared coworker. Or, in my case, seeing someone on our team yawning or showing no enthusiasm in a preservice huddle. (My Hulk side flashes to life on this one.) Something as simple as where you sit, what you bring with you, or the way you prepare yourself for a complex encounter can be the difference between a controlled response and a response you will regret. For example, I heard of one person who brings water with him into conversations where he knows he will be tempted to lose his cool. Before shooting off his mouth, he takes a sip. No one blinks an eye at someone drinking instead of talking.

I leave you with three takeaways from this chapter: First, no matter how much of the day has been spent, it's not too late to change course—not tomorrow, but right now. Second, having a name for the version of you that you don't want to be helps you call yourself out when you're behaving badly. Decide a name for your own version of Evilevi. Once you have a name for your alter ego, you can take them off the guest list. Name that version of you before it claims you. Third, you don't have

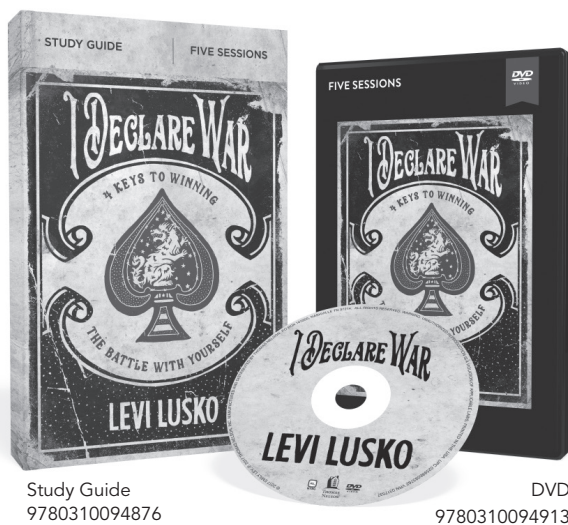
## I DECLARE WAR

to go to Mrs. Losey's art class to calm yourself down. New mercies are only a prayer, a breath, a short walk, or even a sip of water away. Slip your ear buds in. Throw a song on. Close your eyes for a little bit. Buy a small set of watercolors to keep with you. Figure out what your equivalent of art class is so that you can hit reset on what you believe you are stuck inside. Escaping your self-imposed hostage situation might not be as easy as hopping on the moving sidewalk that brought you there, but that's okay—you can take the stairs.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**L**EVY LUSKO, author of the bestselling books *Through the Eyes of a Lion* and *Swipe Right*, is the lead pastor of Fresh Life Church in Montana, Wyoming, Oregon, and Utah. He and his wife, Jennie, have one son, Lennox, and four daughters: Alivia, Daisy, Clover, and Lenya, who is in heaven. Levi travels around the world speaking about Jesus.

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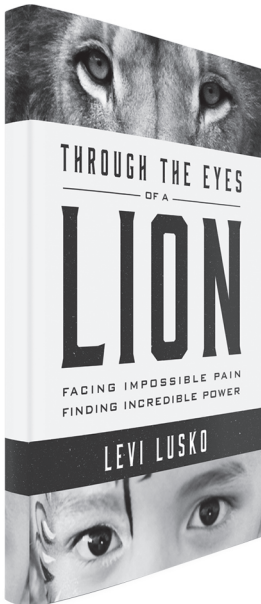
## ALSO AVAILABLE FROM LEVI LUSKO

This can't be real.

These thoughts swim through my mind and try to strangle me. My heart is shattered into a thousand pieces, each shard jagged and razor sharp. The pain is surreal, deafening, and catastrophic. My eyes burn. I want to cry, but the tears won't come. I want to scream, but it won't help. I am afraid. But I'm not alone....

You must not rely on the naked eye. What you think you see is not all that is there. There are unseen things. Spiritual things. Eternal things. You must learn to see life through the eyes of a Lion. Doing so is to utilize the telescope of faith, which will not only allow you to perceive the invisible--it will give you the strength to do the impossible.

*From the introduction of Levi Lusko's book,  
Through the Eyes of a Lion.*



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