

PART 1
Keys to Freedom from
Emotional Bondage

Carry Me, Lord

*When you're burdened down with care
And there is no relief,
Lift up your head and say this prayer:
O Lord, won't You carry me?*

*Carry me; carry me—
On wings of angels set me free.
Joy returns when You come to me,
O Lord, when You carry me.*

*My spirit's weighed down,
And I want to be free.
On wings of angels set me free.
Till my blinded eyes will see*

*Only You will carry me.
O Lord, You carry me.
My spirit's laid low,
And I want to be free.*

*O Lord, You carry me.
It's You who carries me.
Carry me over the stormy sea.
O Lord, You carry me.*

*You carried my sorrows upon that tree,
And I know You'll carry me.
You purchased my freedom at Calvary
And I know You carry me.*

*Lift me up and carry me
Through this life till all can see
It's You who carry me.
O Lord, You carry me.*

—Robin Martens

Confess

Heart Honesty

“I don’t want to be here, but I need help.” Sarah’s face flushed as she looked up.

“What makes you say that?”

“I always thought seeing a counselor was for people with serious problems, not for me. But lately I’ve thought of suicide a lot.”

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Sarah’s hair was soaked from her dash to the reception door from her red Toyota. Her chart said she was 35, but she looked younger. Her black sweater reflected her mood.

Sarah proceeded to tell me about her life. She was raised in a Christian home but felt her parents’ rules were restrictive. Her dad never showed much affection. In college she enjoyed partying, but one night she barely escaped being raped and decided to stop drinking. She rededicated her life to God when she was 21.

Sarah often clashed with her perfectionist husband, Mike. She wanted to relax and enjoy life, but Mike’s standards were demanding. She realized she wasn’t emotionally available for her five-year-old daughter, Megan. Depression weighed her down almost constantly.

I probed to find the cause of her depression. Sarah was only slightly overweight, but she was miserable about it and obsessed about diets. She felt her in-laws didn’t approve of her. Sometimes she wondered if God or her husband loved her. Sarah couldn’t identify a major stressor causing her depression but felt it was caused by many disappointments that had built up over time. Life just wasn’t the way she wanted it to be.

Sarah had felt depressed off and on in her earlier years, but for almost a year now the sadness was “unbearable at times.”

I wasn’t surprised that she had suffered for nearly a year before making an appointment. Counseling is often a last resort. “How have you tried to relieve your depression?” I asked.

“We go to church regularly, and my faith helps. I keep praying God will make the depression go away. I think He’s helped some, but I keep getting depressed. I don’t understand it. I try to stay busy so I won’t think about being sad, but lately nothing is working.”

As I ended our counseling session, hail was pounding the roof. I referred Sarah to a doctor who could evaluate if an antidepressant was necessary, and I had her sign a contract promising not to hurt herself. For homework, I encouraged her to journal what her feelings would say if they could talk.

The next Tuesday Sarah was late for her appointment.

“I tried journaling, but I couldn’t do it,” she said.

“What was difficult about it?”

“I don’t like to think about what I’m feeling, so it was hard to write anything down. All I wanted to do was swear and complain. Why would it help to write that stuff out? I’m disgusted with myself, and I’m sure God is disgusted with me too.”

“Sarah, God already knows how you feel. His flashlight shines straight into the darkest, most damaged part of your heart. He loves each part of your broken heart. He wants to clean out the poison of old hurts so your heart can mend. When you bring your despairing places to Him, then His light and love brings healing. Being honest with God doesn’t mean you’re trying to justify a bad attitude. Emotional honesty is admitting that you can’t heal your hurts alone.”

I explained to Sarah that we tend to make emotional recovery more complicated than it needs to be. In fact, little children are experts at healing emotionally.

Children are emotionally honest. Their hearts don’t know how to be dishonest. Children feel, say, and show their emotions. They don’t fight their feelings—they flow with them, release them, and return to joy. When a child’s emotions erupt, it isn’t always pretty, but it’s always honest. Children innately know how to release emotion.

I asked Sarah how her daughter Megan handled emotions when she was two or three years old.

Sarah smiled. “Megan used to fall apart whenever she was upset or tired. She screamed, cried, and was an angry mess. But a few minutes after she calmed down, or after she had a nap, she loved everyone and everything again.”

I told Sarah, “Little children are a perfect example of the system God put inside each of us to help us release negative emotions and return to peace and joy. Children are honest about what they feel, and they follow their hearts.”

As we mature, we need to learn more appropriate ways to control and also release feelings. However, sometimes instead of learning emotional skills, we just shut down our emotions. We disconnect our God-given emotional healing system and try to reason everything out instead of following our hearts.

What does it mean to follow your heart? The following verse directs us:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (intellect). [Deut. 6:5.] This is the great (most important, principal) and first commandment.) And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as [you do] yourself. [Lev. 19:18.] These two commandments sum up and upon them depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:37-40).

God wants us to love Him with all our hearts. How can we do this if we're unwilling to look honestly at our emotions? To shut down our emotions is to close our hearts to God, to others, even to our own self-awareness. To ignore or deny our own emotions is being hardhearted. When we shut down our negative emotions in order to avoid them, we also suppress love and joy. We barricade the doors to our hearts.

“I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God” (Ezek. 11:19-20, NIV).

The first key to emotional freedom is to admit our true emotions and our need for God's help.

Don't Ignore Emotions

God did not give us emotions in order to annoy, burden, or destroy us. Emotions are a tremendous gift—if we keep them healthy.

“I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea” (Isa. 48:17-18, NIV).

We can be *careful* with emotions without ignoring them. Our emotions are meant to be a valuable compass in determining our path. Peace and joy can be signals to go forward. Distress can be a warning to stop or retreat.

Just as nerve endings warn of physical damage, painful emotions warn of heart damage. Our negative emotions can be compared to the warning lights on the dashboard of a car. It wouldn't be wise to disconnect the wires under the dashboard because the warning lights are annoying. Similarly, we can get ourselves into serious trouble if we ignore—or disconnect—our emotions.

“Motion” is part of the word “emotion,” which is from the *Latin word *movere*, meaning “to move.”¹ Emotional reactions can be stored in our minds or released when the situation is over. To find emotional freedom, the negative emotions must be released—but only in healthful ways.

Emotions may be hard to face, especially when they gather force. Handling emotions can compare to operating a pressure cooker. When the safety valve is opened, steam escapes with no problem. Close the valve, and rising heat explodes the lid and contents, creating a mess. Emotional explosions create damage, but we can maintain control if we keep the safety valve open by accepting and honestly expressing our emotions in safe ways.

Find a Balance

In my first few years as a counselor, I helped clients improve their thought patterns by challenging negative thinking and replacing it with positive truths. Practicing positive thinking was helpful, but it didn't seem to root out deep-seated burdens, repetitive struggles, or strongholds.

In order to get longstanding emotional problems to heal, each client had to be honest about heart struggles.

Emotional freedom requires a balance—to be positive in our outlook and emotionally honest about hurts, fears, and irritations at the same time.

It's wise to choose a positive focus by dwelling on God, His Word, and the wonderful aspects of life. However, if we ignore emotional wounds that need healing, we're in trouble. We can't get free by trying to clean up our acts by ourselves and pretending we don't feel what we feel.

Truth includes our reality; lies deny reality. If we lie to ourselves and cut off our emotions by our own efforts, our burdens will grow heavier. But if we walk in faith and emotional honesty and bring our emotions to God for healing, we'll walk in light and freedom.

Acknowledge Emotions Without Allowing Them to Rule

Parents experience the force of their child's emotions from the first wail of protest to independent, adolescent stubbornness. A child's emotions can be inconvenient, embarrassing, and even heartbreaking. So we teach our children self-restraint. Balanced self-control is a virtue. Uncontrolled emotions destroy relationships, careers, and reputations.

“The fruit of the Spirit is . . . self-control” (Gal. 5:23, NIV)

We discussed the value of proper control of emotions. Sarah told me sometimes she shared too much too quickly with people she just met. She admitted she leaned too hard on others in hopes they would make her feel better. Her emotional transparency didn't seem to help her heal or develop relationships. In fact, it seemed to scare people away.

Self-control is important in this journey to freedom. But *excessive* control of emotions results in a joyless, cold, emotionless existence. We should strive for balance, avoiding out-of-control emotion as well as becoming emotionally frozen.

Emotions can be managed well with God's help. Although it's wise to uncover our emotional reality, we must be careful to not harm, overburden, or threaten others in the process. Often our emotions need only to be vented to God. If you share with others, be sure they're trustworthy. It's wise to seek help when needed *and* use discretion.

As we begin to heal emotionally, it may feel as if we're headed in the wrong direction. Guilt and confusion and fears assault us, and an inner voice may tell us to turn back. Ignore these false warnings, and walk through the intense emotion while holding on to God's hand. Eventually we'll find ourselves on the other side of the dark tunnel, free from that stronghold. Then we can say, "That wasn't so bad. I wish I had walked out of that problem years ago!"

If you can't control your behavior while processing emotions, then wait until God enables you to grow in self-discipline. If your emotional struggles are intense, chronic, or extremely painful, find a godly counselor to support you. The more positive supports you have, the better.

Remember: strong emotions should not be used as an excuse for wrong behavior or bad choices.

"Not Me"

Sarah stomped in for our third appointment and flung her coat at the chair. I thought she might be upset with me, but then she blurted out, "I'd like to slap Wendy. She's a lady at my church who thinks she's something special. But I'd never really hit someone. That's not me."

"Who's feeling the anger if it isn't you?" I asked.

Sarah had to admit she was angry before she could make progress.

"Out of the abundance (overflow) of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45).

Often when a depressed person experiences anger, it's a sign

that his or her frozen emotions are thawing. It's possible to be angry in a healthy way, but first we have to take responsibility for what we're feeling.

Sarah didn't *want* to be angry with anyone. So instead of finding a proper vent for her anger, she pushed it down inside. The anger banged painfully against the closed doors of her heart and contributed to her depression.

Sincere people often don't realize what's going on in their own hearts, because they think it's wrong to *examine* their emotions.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23-24, NIV).

Just as a reporter may first discuss a devastating earthquake and then a horrific crime and finally, minutes later, joke about the weather, we can become dissociated from our emotions. If we don't know what we feel, how can we ask for help? How can we get free if we won't admit that we're bound?

Being honest with God, with trustworthy friends, and with ourselves reveals to us the roadblocks in our hearts. When we see the roadblocks, we can allow God to remove them. Don't deny your emotions. Emotional and spiritual healing is not obtained by cutting off emotions. This doesn't apply to *passing* negative feelings, which should be released before they become lodged in our hearts. But if hurts stick and fester, they must be examined in order to heal.

Ask God for His assistance, and pour your fear, sadness, or rage out to Him. We have nothing to fear when we come to God for help. Healing and spiritual maturity are gained by bringing our reality to God. He's a loving father who desires wholeness for His children. Denial stalls recovery; the truth sets us free.

Have We Forgotten About the Heart?

"All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirits (the thoughts and intents of the heart)" (Prov. 16:2).

"We have the prophetic word [made] firmer still. You will do well to pay close attention to it as to a lamp shining in a dismal (squalid and dark) place, until the day breaks through [the

gloom] and the Morning Star rises (comes into being) in your hearts” (2 Pet. 1:19).

Sarah never knew her father’s love, and she fought with insecurity. She asked me, “How can I be OK when even my own father and my in-laws reject me?” She lacked confidence to succeed.

Her pastor preached God’s love every Sunday, but it never *felt* real to her. The truth of God’s love never traveled from her head to her heart.

The heart is “thought of as the vital center of one’s being, emotions and sensibilities; the seat or repository of emotions.”²

The word “heart” is overused. We tend to think of the heart in sentimental terms and associate it with romance and flowers. We “love” others from our hearts.

But it’s also our hearts speaking when we rage. Our hearts may overflow with fear, depression, or anger. We’re emotional beings. Our thoughts and motives can be calm and rational, or they can be fueled by emotions that are conceived in our hearts. It seems we forget or don’t realize we need to apply God’s truth to emotions.

To confess our heart truths, we need to bring *all* emotions to God. If we humble ourselves and confess 100 percent of the pain, anger, lust, bitterness, or fears, He’s able to invade that area of the heart with His love and healing.

Often we pray from our intellect with open minds. But our hearts aren’t open to God. God will bring progressive healing as He is invited into each part of the emotional realm.

Sarah talked in a circular pattern about her past hurts. When someone continually rehashes problems in the same way, it’s a sign he or she is stuck. Instead of processing the painful emotions out of his or her system so healing can begin, the person tries to intellectually solve the problems.

Our reality is comprised of spiritual, physical, intellectual, and emotional facets. We can’t heal emotional hurts the same way we solve intellectual problems or the same way our bodies heal. I once heard John Marquez say, “Imagine your life is like a house with different floors, with your spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical dimensions represented by each level. If a fire is raging on the emotional floor, but you pour water only onto the intellectual and spiritual floor, then you’re not getting to the cause of the fire.”³

Our bodies heal according to physical principles. Our minds resolve problems by thinking them through or by weighing pros and cons. An important key to emotional healing is to realize that emotions can't be solved like math problems. Negative emotions must be released for us to heal. However, we can't release emotions unless we first admit they're there.

We can release emotions by venting or crying in healthful ways. If we rage at our families, we may feel relief, but the hurt and anger can boomerang on us. If we vent by journaling, praying, or talking to a trusted friend or counselor, then no one will get hurt. If when we cry we berate ourselves and hate ourselves, we wound ourselves more. But if we cry and simply release the emotion as a small child would—without analyzing or judging—the emotion is released, and joy can return.

We all wrestle with heart wounds that need to be cleansed and healed. You're not alone; everyone's heart breaks. Don't be ashamed to admit to God when you're hurt, afraid, or angry.

Of course, it makes sense to avoid evil, distressing or painful emotions. Often, we just don't need to go there. However, we may have ingrained patterns of painful emotions that don't go away when we ignore them.

Sarah started journaling her feelings about her relationships with her father, her in-laws, and God. I told her to write on cheap spiral notebook paper and to tear up anything she wouldn't want others to see. The purpose of journaling is to cleanse the heart, not to damage relationships. Sarah let her anger, despair, and sorrow speak without censoring what she felt. She brought her feelings into God's healing light and allowed Him to clean out pain. She wrote letters she didn't send, expressing her pain to those who had hurt her.

Sarah started to realize God is not like her father or any other human. God's love is constant.

It's been said that life's battles are won or lost in our minds, and that's true. But life's battles are also won or lost in our hearts. Our hearts hold keys to victory we often miss. God will fight and win battles for us when we fully commit our minds and *hearts* to Him.

Our struggles are not with calm, objective thoughts; our struggles are with subjective, emotional thoughts. The extreme

emotions of our hearts can push us into behavior our rational minds would not condone.

The Bible refers to our hearts more frequently than to our minds. Concordances list the word “heart” more than twice as often as “mind.” How can we not apply God’s principles to emotions when so many scriptural directives concern our hearts?

“This people’s *heart* has become calloused. . . . Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their *hearts* and turn, and I would heal them” (Matt. 13:15, NIV, emphasis added).

Don’t Fear Emotions

“True (genuine) worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth (reality); for the Father is seeking just such people as these as His worshipers” (John 4:23).

God wants us to be honest with Him even when it hurts.

We’re often overloaded with busy schedules and information coming at us through television, radio, and the mail. We can become so distracted that we fail to stay in touch with our hearts. We spend too much of our energy ignoring our emotions rather than dealing with them in a beneficial way.

The most common way to deal with negative emotions is to try to keep a positive attitude and hold the negative feelings at arm’s length. People who deal with their emotions this way may end up in a counselor’s office trying to control the overflow.

Sarah isn’t the only person who has had a hard time understanding how to release negative emotions in order to become free.

It may be hard to find a safe environment in which to air your emotions. Work conversations avoid religion, politics, and other emotional topics. Dinner discussions condense the day’s events. Church prayers request healing for cancer or heart disease, not depression or rage.

How can we find the answers if we can’t ask the questions?

How can we feel loved by our families if we’ve closed ourselves off from them emotionally?

People often leave the Sunday morning service with the same anxiety, sadness, and anger they came with. The hurts, fears, and

addictions we fail to bring to the light gather power in darkness and may overwhelm us.

“If we [really] are living and walking in the Light, as He [himself] is in the Light, we have [true, unbroken] fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses (removes) us from all sin and guilt [keeps us cleansed from sin in all its forms and manifestations]” (1 John 1:7).

With our Heavenly Father, there is no condemnation, only forgiveness and restoration. God is waiting until He can pour His compassion on us (Isa. 30:18). It doesn't make God angry when we admit our true thoughts and feelings. He is aware of everything within our hearts, and He's glad when we're finally honest with Him.

What's in your heart?

Which emotions cause you to struggle?

Would you like help?

Progressive and powerful healing is available as we open our hearts and submit to God's working in us, rather than trying to contain our emotions. As God removes the sludge suffocating our lives, not only do we heal, but we're also able to grow.

Sometimes the process of releasing impacted, festering, old emotional build-up is too painful on our own. Although God is the only one who can heal us, sometimes we need a friend to support us along the way. More support is needed for chronic or severe emotional distress, and it's beneficial to seek aid from as many sources as possible, such as mature and compassionate Christian friends, family members, counselors, support groups, pastors, or church workers.

As you go through the following checklist, rate the intensity of your emotional patterns from 1 to 10. The intensity indicates how much pain you carry around with you. Any recurring emotion stronger than a 5 needs healing, and emotional patterns that consistently register close to 10 require professional help. If your emotional pattern is extreme and interfering with your ability to function, to seek assistance from a Christian counselor or physician. God often provides support and healing through counseling or medical care.

God wants to heal you. The first step is openhearted confes-

sion that includes your emotions—not just your intellect. Confession means total honesty.

Checklist to Identify Heart Truths

1. Do you experience a recurring pattern of painful or difficult emotions?
2. Do you have emotions you keep trying to avoid that threaten to spill into your life?
3. Do you have a pattern of feeling rejected or lonely?
4. What irritates you more than you think it should?
5. What fills you with guilt or shame?
6. What do you feel you lack? What do you crave or lust after?
7. What hurts and pushes you toward fear or obsession?
8. How long have these patterns continued? When did they start?
9. Do you feel God is distant and uncaring when you experience these emotions?
10. Are you able to pray when in the midst of these emotions?
11. Are you uncomfortable being alone in quiet and uneasy with what may overflow from your heart?
12. With God's direction, are you willing to explore, feel, and confess recurring emotional patterns rather than analyze them?

Prayer to Confess Heart Truths

Father God, thank You for Your kindness and mercy. Thank You for being close to the brokenhearted [Ps. 34:18]. Thank You for wanting to cleanse my hurts and heal me. In 1 John 1:9 Your Word says that if we confess our faults, You are faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. You promise not to reject or condemn us when we come to You in truth. You only forgive and heal.

I admit to You the truth in my heart. I lay open before You my struggle with _____ [depression, envy, bitterness, irritation, anger, anxiety, lust, or any other emotion]. Forgive me for not opening this place in my heart to You before. I ask You to be in charge of these conflicts within me. I trust in Your kindness and mercy. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.

“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18, NIV).