

The Other Side of Rescue: Healing When You Were Someone's Project

Breaking Free from Being the Managed One

Introduction: When "Help" Replaces the Healer

You know something is wrong, but you can't quite name it.

Someone loves you—genuinely, you believe. They pray for you, check on you, offer guidance at every turn. They've been there through your darkest moments, and you're grateful. But somewhere along the way, their care began to feel less like freedom and more like management. Their concern became surveillance. Their advice became non-negotiable. And when you tried to make a decision on your own—even a small one—you felt their disappointment like a withdrawal of love.

You were told this was discipleship. That this was what it meant to "bear one another's burdens." That needing help was humility, and resisting it was pride. So you stayed quiet, even as something inside you withered. You became someone's project—a soul to be fixed, a life to be supervised, a testimony to be managed into existence. And in the process, you lost something precious: your own voice, your dignity, and your direct access to the One who actually came to set you free.

This book is for you.

When Love Becomes Control

Healthy love invites. Controlling love insists. Healthy love equips you to stand. Controlling love keeps you dependent. And the tragedy of being someone's "project" is that it often begins with real love—real concern, real compassion. The person who "rescued" you may have had the purest intentions. They saw you struggling and genuinely wanted to help. But somewhere in the process, the line blurred. Your healing became their mission. Your growth became their responsibility. Your choices became their anxiety. And without either of you fully realizing it, they stopped pointing you to Jesus and started becoming your functional savior.

This creates a unique kind of spiritual confusion. You know you're supposed to be grateful—and part of you is. You know they meant well—and they probably did. But you also feel trapped, silenced, and strangely small in a relationship

that was supposed to make you whole. You've been taught that setting boundaries is selfish, that asking for space is ungrateful, that trusting your own discernment is dangerous. And so you've learned to second-guess the very Spirit of God within you, waiting instead for another person to tell you what God is saying, what you should do, how you should feel.

Why Human Rescuers Can Never Replace the Redeemer

Here's what no one may have told you: no person—no matter how wise, how caring, how spiritually mature—was meant to do for you what only Christ can do. When someone takes the place of the Healer, even with good intentions, they stop being a fellow traveler and become a gatekeeper. They stop being a wounded healer pointing you to Jesus and become the mediator you must go through to reach Him. This isn't biblical community. It's spiritual codependency. And it's exhausting for both people—the one being managed and the one doing the managing.

The Apostle Paul faced this very issue in the Galatian church. Believers who had experienced the freedom of the gospel were being told they needed more—more rules, more oversight, more human management of their faith. And Paul's response was fierce and clear: *"It is for freedom that Christ set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery"* (Galatians 5:1).

Freedom. Not management. Not perpetual dependence. Not a faith that only functions when someone else is holding the reins. Christ came to liberate you—to restore your dignity as an image-bearer, to give you direct access to the Father, to put His Spirit within you as your Counselor and Guide. Yes, we need community. Yes, we need wisdom from others. But we were never meant to live under the chronic supervision of another human being who believes they know God's will for us better than we can discern it ourselves.

Jesus: The Rescuer Who Empowers, Not Manages

Here's the beautiful difference: Jesus rescues you *to* freedom, not *into* dependence. He heals you so you can walk, not so you'll need Him to carry

you forever. He teaches you to hear His voice, not to wait for someone else to interpret it for you. His yoke is easy and His burden is light—not because He demands nothing, but because He doesn't crush you under the weight of performing for human approval.

When Jesus encountered people who were broken, He didn't create a permanent supervisory relationship. He healed the瘫痪的 and told him to pick up his mat and walk. He forgave the woman caught in adultery and told her to go and sin no more—not to report back weekly for accountability monitoring. He set people free and trusted the Spirit within them to continue the work. He gave them dignity, responsibility, and direct access to the Father. This is the scandal of grace: God trusts you with your own relationship with Him.

The Purpose of This Book

This book is not about bashing the people who tried to help you. Many of them truly cared and simply didn't know a healthier way. This book is about your healing and your liberation—about untangling what went wrong, naming what was lost, and reclaiming what Christ always intended for you.

In these pages, you'll learn to distinguish between healthy spiritual support and codependent control. You'll discover what it means to honor those who've helped you without remaining enslaved to their approval. You'll explore how to set boundaries without guilt, how to trust your own discernment again, and how to build relationships rooted in mutual respect rather than chronic rescue. Most importantly, you'll encounter Jesus afresh—not as a distant deity who needs a human intermediary, but as your present, personal Redeemer who has already done the work and now invites you to walk in the freedom He purchased.

You are not a project. You are not a problem to be managed. You are a beloved child of God, made in His image, indwelt by His Spirit, and fully equipped to walk in the freedom Christ died to give you. It's time to remember that.

Let's begin.

Chapter 1: The Savior Syndrome—When People Try to Play God

"I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from Me there is no savior." – Isaiah 43:11

Sarah still remembers the moment she realized something was deeply wrong.

She was sitting across from her mentor—the woman who had "saved" her from a destructive lifestyle three years earlier—and she had just shared a decision she'd been praying about for weeks. She was considering a new job opportunity in another city. It felt like God was opening a door. But before she could finish explaining, her mentor's face hardened.

"I don't think you're hearing from God clearly," the woman said. "You're still too fragile to make decisions like this on your own. I think this is the enemy trying to isolate you from your support system. From me."

Sarah felt the familiar knot in her stomach—the one that appeared every time she tried to exercise her own discernment. Shame washed over her. Doubt flooded in. *Maybe she's right. Maybe I can't trust myself. Maybe I need her approval to know God's will.*

It would take two more years before Sarah could name what was happening: her mentor had become her functional savior. And like all human saviors, she was operating without divine authority, divine wisdom, or divine power—but with an alarming amount of control.

The Anatomy of the Savior Syndrome

The Savior Syndrome occurs when a person—often sincere in their desire to help—begins to believe they are uniquely responsible for another person's spiritual welfare, life choices, and ultimate well-being. It's a subtle shift from "I want to help you" to "I am essential to your survival." From "Let me point you to Jesus" to "You need me to survive spiritually."

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned of this danger in his classic work *Life Together*, noting that "the person who loves their dream of Christian community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of that community." He understood that when we try to force people into our

vision of what they should become, we cease to be instruments of grace and become instruments of control. We stop serving the true Savior and start competing with Him.

The Savior Syndrome is codependency dressed in spiritual language. It's the belief that your vigilance, your insight, your constant management is what keeps another person safe, growing, and on track with God. And it's exhausting—for both parties. As psychologist and trauma expert Dr. Diane Langberg has observed in her work with spiritual abuse survivors, "When someone makes themselves indispensable to your faith, they have stepped into a place reserved for God alone."

Imitating God Without His Power

Here's the fundamental problem: human saviors try to do God's job with human limitations. They attempt to:

Be omniscient – They believe they know what's best for you better than you know yourself, better than you can discern through prayer, better than the Spirit can guide you. They track your patterns, read into your words, analyze your decisions, and claim special insight into your motives and needs.

Be omnipresent – They need to be constantly available, constantly checking in, constantly monitoring your spiritual temperature. They create systems where you must report to them, run decisions by them, or keep them informed of your whereabouts and choices. Distance feels like disobedience.

Be omnipotent – They believe your growth, your healing, your very spiritual survival depends on their intervention. Without them, you'll fall apart. Without their guidance, you'll make terrible choices. Without their prayers, you're vulnerable to the enemy. They have become, in their own minds and yours, the functional power keeping you afloat.

But here's the truth the prophet Isaiah proclaimed: "*I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from Me there is no savior.*" God doesn't stutter. He doesn't hedge. He declares His exclusivity as Savior not because He's insecure, but because it's reality. Only He has the wisdom, the presence, and the power to truly save.

Anyone else attempting the role is operating in a delusion—however well-intentioned.

C.S. Lewis captured this danger in *The Four Loves* when he wrote about the corruption of affection: "Of all the tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive... those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience." The human savior genuinely believes they're helping. That's what makes their control so difficult to resist and so damaging to endure.

Why "Rescue" Felt Like Control

If you've been someone's project, you know the feeling: constant surveillance masked as care. Your "rescuer" might have:

- Required regular check-ins that felt more like interrogations than fellowship
- Expressed hurt or disappointment when you made decisions without consulting them first
- Insisted on access to your phone, your schedule, your private thoughts
- Framed their advice as "what God is saying" rather than their personal opinion
- Made you feel guilty for wanting privacy, independence, or space
- Suggested that your desire for boundaries was evidence of spiritual regression
- Created an environment where disagreeing with them felt like disobeying God

This is control, not care. And the confusion comes because it's packaged in the language of love.

Henri Nouwen, in *The Wounded Healer*, draws a critical distinction: "When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we

often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand." True helpers share your burden. False saviors try to carry it for you—and in the process, carry you.

Dallas Willard observed that spiritual formation is often hijacked by those who "mistake their own goals for God's goals and their own methods for God's methods." Your human savior may have had a vision for who you should become—but it was *their* vision, filtered through their anxieties, their need for control, their unhealed wounds. They were trying to create you in their image, not trusting God to form you in His.

Recognizing Misplaced Saviors and Their Hidden Motives

Not all human saviors are malicious. In fact, most aren't. But understanding their motivations—even the unconscious ones—can help you recognize the pattern and protect yourself going forward.

The Wounded Healer Who Never Healed – Some people rescue others to avoid facing their own pain. Your healing becomes a distraction from their wounds. Your dependence becomes proof of their value. If you get too healthy, too independent, they lose their sense of purpose.

The Controller Disguised as Caregiver – Some people have deep needs for control that stem from their own trauma or anxiety. Managing your life helps them feel safe. Your compliance soothes their nervous system. When you resist, their anxiety spikes, and they double down on control.

The Identity-Builder – Some people derive their identity from being needed, being the wise one, being indispensable. They're not necessarily trying to hurt you—they're trying to matter. But they've built their sense of worth on your neediness, which means they have a vested interest in keeping you dependent.

The Unaware Narcissist – Some people genuinely can't see past their own perspective. They truly believe they have special insight into God's will for your life. They conflate their preferences with divine directives. As Chuck DeGroat

notes in *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, this is "a stunning failure of imagination—the inability to conceive that someone else's relationship with God might be as valid, as direct, and as authentic as their own."

The key is this: regardless of motive, the outcome is the same. You've been diminished. Your agency has been stolen. Your direct line to God has been rerouted through a human gatekeeper.

Learning to Discern Between Human Help and Divine Healing

So how do you tell the difference? How do you distinguish between healthy spiritual mentorship and toxic savior behavior? Here are the markers:

Healthy help empowers; toxic rescue disempowers.

A true helper equips you to hear God's voice for yourself. A false savior insists you need them to interpret God's voice for you.

Healthy help has boundaries; toxic rescue is enmeshed.

A true helper respects your privacy, your autonomy, your right to make your own choices—even mistakes. A false savior believes they have a right to total access and total influence.

Healthy help celebrates your growth; toxic rescue fears your independence.

A true helper rejoices when you no longer need them as much. A false savior feels threatened by your increasing maturity and tries to convince you that you're not ready yet.

Healthy help points you to Jesus; toxic rescue points you to the helper.

A true helper consistently redirects your dependence to Christ. A false savior subtly (or not so subtly) makes themselves the mediator between you and God.

Healthy help allows disagreement; toxic rescue demands compliance.

A true helper can handle it when you see things differently or make choices they wouldn't make. A false savior interprets your independence as betrayal or spiritual danger.

Theologian and counselor Dan Allender puts it this way: "The goal of spiritual community is not to create dependent children who need constant supervision, but mature sons and daughters who can stand on their own because they've learned to stand in God."

The Path Forward

If you're reading this and recognizing your own story, take a breath. You're not crazy. You're not ungrateful. You're not rebellious for wanting freedom. You're actually beginning to align yourself with God's design for your life.

God never intended for you to live under the chronic management of another human being. He put His Spirit *within* you—not next to you in the form of a human supervisor. He gave you a mind to think, a will to choose, and a conscience to guide you. Yes, you need community. Yes, you need wisdom from mature believers. But you don't need a human savior. You already have one, and His name is Jesus.

The journey ahead involves unlearning some deeply ingrained patterns. It means learning to trust the Holy Spirit's voice within you again. It means setting boundaries without guilt. It means honoring the help you received without remaining enslaved to the helper. It means reclaiming your identity as God's beloved child—not someone's project.

In the chapters ahead, we'll walk through this process together. But for now, simply let this truth sink in: *Apart from God, there is no savior.* Not your mentor. Not your pastor. Not your accountability partner. Not your spiritual parent. Just God. And that's actually the best news you could receive.

Because unlike every human savior you've ever known, He has the wisdom, the presence, and the power to actually finish what He started in you. And He doesn't need anyone's permission—or assistance—to do it.

Reflection Questions:

1. When you think about the person who "rescued" you, which of the characteristics of the Savior Syndrome do you recognize?
2. How did you feel when you tried to make decisions without their approval or input?
3. Can you identify the difference between times when you truly needed help and times when your dependence was being encouraged or manufactured?
4. What would it feel like to believe that God trusts you with your own relationship with Him?

Chapter 2: The Weight of Being Someone's Project

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." – Psalm 139:14

Marcus couldn't remember the last time he'd made a decision without feeling paralyzing anxiety.

It wasn't always like this. Before his church "adopted" him after his divorce, he'd been a competent adult—a successful teacher, a father, someone who trusted his own judgment. But three years of intensive "discipleship" had transformed him into something he barely recognized: a man who second-guessed every choice, who constantly sought permission for decisions that should have been his alone, who felt guilty for having preferences that differed from his mentor's.

"We just want to help you heal," they'd said. "You're wounded right now, and wounded people make bad decisions. Let us guide you."

It sounded like love. It felt like love, at first. But somewhere along the way, their help had hollowed him out. He'd lost something essential—something he couldn't name but desperately missed. He'd become their project, their success story in progress, their testimony waiting to be written. And in the process, he'd forgotten who he was when no one was watching, managing, or correcting him.

He'd lost the sense that he was fearfully and wonderfully made. He'd started to believe he was fundamentally broken—something to be fixed rather than someone to be loved.

The Spiritual Wound of Being Managed

There's a particular kind of soul-damage that occurs when you're treated as a project rather than a person. It's different from other kinds of hurt because it masquerades as care. The person managing you believes they're loving you. You believe you should be grateful. And yet, something inside you is dying.

Here's what happens: When someone manages you instead of loving you, they relate to you as an object to be shaped rather than a subject to be known. You become a problem to solve, a case to manage, a testimony to construct. Your thoughts, feelings, and choices are no longer treated as the legitimate expressions of an image-bearer learning to walk with God—they're treated as data points to be analyzed, symptoms to be corrected, or evidence of your ongoing need for supervision.

Psychologist and spiritual director David Benner, in *The Gift of Being Yourself*, writes: "False selves are manufactured to deal with the fear that who I truly am will not be loved. The tragedy is that in hiding my true self, I lose the possibility of being truly known and genuinely loved." When you're someone's project, you learn to hide your true self—not because you're being deceitful, but because your true self is constantly being critiqued, corrected, and reshaped into someone else's vision of who you should be.

The wound goes deep because it strikes at the core of how God designed human relationships. We were made for mutual recognition—to be seen, known, and loved as the particular people we are. Philosopher Martin Buber distinguished between "I-Thou" relationships (where we encounter each other as full persons) and "I-It" relationships (where we treat each other as objects to be used). When you're someone's project, you've been demoted from Thou to It. You're no longer a fellow traveler to be accompanied; you're a problem to be solved.

How False Compassion Silences the Image of God

The most insidious aspect of being someone's project is that it's done in the name of compassion. Your rescuer genuinely believes they're helping. They see your wounds, your struggles, your moments of poor judgment, and they feel called to intervene. But their compassion is contaminated by an assumption they may not even recognize: that you are fundamentally incompetent, that the image of God in you has been so damaged that you can no longer be trusted with your own life.

This is what theologian Marva Dawn calls "the tyranny of caring"—when compassion becomes coercive, when help becomes control, when the person being "helped" has no voice in determining what help looks like. In her work on Christian community, she warns: "When we assume that we know better than others what they need, we have ceased to serve them and have begun to play God."

True compassion honors the image of God in the other person. It recognizes that even in our brokenness, we remain bearers of divine likeness—capable of hearing God's voice, capable of growth, capable of agency. False compassion assumes that brokenness has nullified our capacity for self-determination. It treats us as children who need constant supervision rather than adults who need occasional support.

Consider how Jesus treated broken people. The woman at the well had a complicated past and poor relational choices. Did Jesus set up a supervisory relationship where she had to report to Him weekly? No. He revealed truth to her, honored her capacity to receive it, and trusted her to go tell others. The demoniac who lived among the tombs was profoundly damaged. Did Jesus insist on long-term management? No. He healed him and sent him back to his community to testify. Again and again, Jesus restored people and trusted them—trusted the Spirit within them, trusted the Father's ongoing work in them, trusted their capacity to walk in newness of life.

Your rescuer's false compassion does the opposite. It says, "You're too broken to be trusted. You need me to think for you, decide for you, interpret God's voice for you." And slowly, insidiously, you begin to believe it. The image of God in you—that core capacity for choice, for growth, for direct communion with your Creator—gets buried under layers of shame and learned helplessness.

Theologian Miroslav Volf, in *Exclusion and Embrace*, writes about the importance of "making space" for the other—allowing them to be who they are rather than forcing them to become what we need them to be. He argues that genuine love requires "a movement away from the self" and "a refusal to impose one's own vision of the good on the other." False compassion does

exactly what Wolf warns against: it imposes, it overwrites, it refuses to make space for the other person's legitimate selfhood.

The Loss of Personal Agency and Identity in Christ

Perhaps the deepest loss when you become someone's project is the loss of your own sense of agency—your God-given capacity to choose, to act, to shape your own life under God's guidance. Agency is not the same as independence; it's the ability to participate actively in your own formation rather than being passively formed by someone else's agenda.

When you lose agency, several things happen:

You lose the ability to hear God's voice directly. You begin to assume that God speaks to you through your rescuer, not to you personally. You wait for their interpretation, their permission, their confirmation before you believe God has truly spoken. The unmediated relationship that Christ died to give you—direct access to the Father through the Spirit—gets rerouted through a human gatekeeper.

You lose confidence in your own discernment. Every choice you make independently is met with concern, correction, or subtle disapproval. Over time, you internalize this message: "I can't trust myself. I don't hear God clearly. I need someone else to help me discern." The Spirit within you is effectively muted by the louder voice of your human manager.

You lose your sense of identity in Christ. Your identity becomes increasingly defined by your relationship to your rescuer: "the one they're helping," "the one they're discipling," "their success story" (if you comply) or "their disappointment" (if you resist). You forget that your primary identity is beloved child of God, fully known and fully loved, independent of anyone else's assessment or management.

You lose the opportunity to develop spiritual maturity. Maturity requires making choices, experiencing consequences, learning from mistakes, and growing through the process. But when someone manages your every move, you're robbed of this developmental process. You remain perpetually

dependent, perpetually supervised, perpetually infantilized. As A.W. Tozer warned: "The purpose of the gospel is not to make men always dependent upon men, but to make them strong in the Lord."

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson observed in *The Message* that religious leaders often create dependency rather than maturity: "But as soon as the focus shifts from God to the professional (no matter how impressive the professional), the people of God are deprived of their rightful identity as a kingdom of priests... They become passive receivers rather than active participants." This is exactly what happens when you become someone's project—you're moved from participant to recipient, from agent to object, from priest to perpetual patient.

The Specific Ways You've Been Diminished

Let's get specific about what you've lost. You may recognize some or all of these:

The freedom to have preferences. Your likes, dislikes, interests, and passions have been treated as suspect—either indulgences to be managed or potential dangers to be monitored. You've learned to check whether your desires are "approved" before allowing yourself to enjoy them.

The right to privacy. Healthy relationships have boundaries; projects require transparency. You've been expected to share details of your inner life, your struggles, your thoughts that no one has a right to demand. Privacy has been reframed as secrecy, and secrecy as sin.

The dignity of making mistakes. Every error has been treated as evidence of your ongoing need for supervision rather than as a normal part of being human. You're not allowed to learn from your mistakes; someone else must prevent you from making them in the first place.

The joy of discovery. Spiritual growth should involve the excitement of discovering truth, encountering God in new ways, having your own insights and revelations. But when you're someone's project, these discoveries are

filtered through your rescuer's approval. Do they validate your insight? Do they affirm your experience? If not, you learn to doubt it.

The peace of knowing you're enough. Perhaps most painfully, you've lost the settled assurance that you are, right now, fully loved by God—not as a project in progress, but as His completed work. You've internalized the message that you're perpetually insufficient, perpetually in need of more management, more correction, more supervision. You're never quite there. You're never quite trusted. You're never quite free.

Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck understood this danger when he wrote: "The image of God is not a superfluous and supernatural addition, but belongs to the very essence of man." When someone treats you as their project, they've forgotten this foundational truth. They're not just managing your behavior—they're defacing the image of God in you, covering over the glory God placed in you before you were born.

The Theological Tragedy

Here's the deepest tragedy: when you're treated as someone's project, you lose sight of what God has already declared about you.

Before you were born, God knew you. Before you sinned, before you failed, before you needed rescuing, He fashioned you with intentionality and delight. Psalm 139 is breathtaking in its vision of God's intimate involvement in your creation: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

Fearfully—with awe-inspiring attention to detail. Wonderfully—with beauty, complexity, and purpose. This is not the language of someone creating a project that needs constant management. This is the language of an artist creating a masterpiece.

And when you placed your faith in Christ, God didn't just forgive you and leave you broken. He began a good work in you—not through a human supervisor, but through His Spirit. As Paul writes in Philippians 1:6: "He who began a good

work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Not "your rescuer will carry it on." Not "if you submit to sufficient human management, it might be completed." God Himself—the One who started the work—will finish it.

Theologian J.I. Packer, in *Knowing God*, emphasizes that God's work in us is deeply personal: "What matters supremely is not the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—the fact that he knows me... There is tremendous relief in knowing that his love to me is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me." God knows you fully—far better than your rescuer does—and loves you anyway. He doesn't need someone else to manage you on His behalf. He's perfectly capable of doing His own work.

God's Heart for Your Restoration and Wholeness

If you've been someone's project, God's heart toward you right now is not disappointment or agreement with your rescuer's assessment. His heart is grief over what's been taken from you and fierce determination to restore it.

God wants you to know several things:

You are not fundamentally broken. Yes, you're a sinner saved by grace. Yes, you have wounds that need healing and patterns that need transformation. But you are not a problem to be solved. You are a person to be loved. The image of God in you was not destroyed by your sin or your struggles—it was marred, but it remains. And God's work is not to replace you with someone else's vision of who you should be, but to restore you to who He always intended you to be.

Your voice matters. God gave you a mind, a will, emotions, preferences, and insights because He wants you to use them. He wants to hear from you—your questions, your struggles, your joys, your discoveries. He's not threatened by your independent thinking or put off by your need to process things your own way. As author and counselor Larry Crabb notes: "God is not looking for

people who can follow a script. He's looking for people who will engage with Him—wrestle, question, discover, and grow."

You are capable of hearing God. The Spirit of God lives in you. Not next to you in the form of a human supervisor—in you. Jesus promised, "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27). Not "My sheep hear my voice through an approved interpreter." You have direct access to the Father through Christ. Your rescuer is not a necessary mediator. They never were.

Your growth is between you and God. Yes, you need community. Yes, you need accountability and wisdom from mature believers. But your spiritual formation is ultimately a partnership between you and God. As Dallas Willard reminds us in *The Divine Conspiracy*: "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action." You can put in effort—real, legitimate, self-directed effort—under God's grace. You don't need someone else to micro-manage that effort. God trusts you with it.

Healing includes reclaiming yourself. Part of God's restoration work in your life will be helping you reclaim the parts of yourself that were buried, silenced, or shamed under someone else's management. Your personality, your preferences, your way of processing, your unique way of relating to God—these are not problems to be corrected. They're part of how God made you. Brennan Manning captured this beautifully: "Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion."

The Beginning of Reclamation

You may be wondering: if I've lost so much, can it be recovered?

Yes. Absolutely yes.

The journey ahead won't be easy. You'll need to unlearn patterns of helplessness and relearn how to trust yourself under God's guidance. You'll need to set boundaries with people who've become accustomed to unrestricted access to your life. You'll need to grieve what was taken from you and forgive those who took it—not by excusing their behavior, but by releasing them to God's judgment and care.

But here's the good news: the image of God in you cannot be destroyed. It can be buried, silenced, ignored—but it cannot be erased. You are still fearfully and wonderfully made. The Spirit still lives in you. God still knows you, sees you, and is committed to your wholeness—not someone else's version of your wholeness, but the wholeness He envisioned when He first knit you together in your mother's womb.

In the chapters ahead, we'll explore how to rebuild trust in your own discernment, how to establish healthy boundaries, how to distinguish between helpful community and toxic control, and how to walk into the freedom Christ purchased for you. But for now, simply sit with this truth:

You are not a project. You never were. You are a person—beloved, known, and empowered by the God who made you. And He's inviting you to remember who you are when no one else is watching, managing, or defining you.

He's inviting you home to yourself.

Reflection Questions:

1. What parts of yourself do you feel you've lost or silenced during your time as someone's project?
2. When was the last time you made a decision based solely on your own discernment of God's leading, without seeking approval or permission?
3. How would it change your life if you truly believed you are "fearfully and wonderfully made" right now—not just after more fixing, more growth, or more supervision?
4. What would it feel like to relate to God directly, without your rescuer as a mediator?

Chapter 3: Holy Anger and Honest Lament

"In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry." – Ephesians 4:26

Rachel sat in her therapist's office, shaking.

"I'm so angry," she whispered. "And I feel guilty for being angry. They said they loved me. They said they were protecting me. They quoted Scripture. How can I be angry at people who were trying to help?"

Her therapist leaned forward. "Rachel, what if your anger is telling you the truth? What if it's the first healthy thing you've felt in years?"

Rachel looked up, startled. In all her years of intensive "discipleship," she'd been taught that anger was dangerous, that it was evidence of an unsubmitted heart, that she needed to confess it and release it immediately. No one had ever suggested that her anger might be *good*—that it might be the voice of her soul finally speaking truth about what had been done to her in the name of love.

But sitting in that room, something shifted. For the first time in years, Rachel gave herself permission to feel the rage, the grief, the profound sense of betrayal. And in that permission, she discovered something unexpected: her anger wasn't leading her away from God. It was leading her toward Him.

The Anger You've Been Afraid to Feel

If you've been someone's project, you're probably angry. Maybe you haven't let yourself acknowledge it yet. Maybe you've spiritualized it away, confessing it as sin before you've even fully felt it. Maybe you've turned it inward, into depression or self-blame. But somewhere beneath the confusion, the guilt, the lingering sense of obligation—there's rage.

Rage that your voice was silenced.

Rage that your agency was stolen.

Rage that your relationship with God was hijacked.

Rage that it was all done in Jesus' name, with Bible verses and prayer meetings and claims of godly concern.

Here's what you need to know: *that anger is not sin*. In fact, it may be the most spiritually healthy response you could have.

The Apostle Paul didn't say "never be angry." He said, "Be angry, and yet do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26, NASB). The command assumes that anger will happen—that it *should* happen in the face of injustice, betrayal, or harm. The question isn't whether you'll be angry; it's what you'll do with that anger.

Psychologist and theologian Dan Allender writes in *The Wounded Heart*: "Anger is the visceral response to violation... To feel anger is to sense that something precious has been taken or damaged. Those who cannot feel anger cannot love, because anger is love's response to harm." Your anger is evidence that something precious was taken—your dignity, your freedom, your unmediated access to God. Your anger is proof that you know, at some level, that what happened was wrong.

The Spiritual Gaslighting of "Christian" Niceness

One of the most damaging aspects of being someone's project is the way your anger gets reframed as spiritual failure. You were probably taught that:

- Anger is always from the flesh, never from the Spirit
- "Good Christians" don't get angry; they forgive and move on
- If you're angry, it means you're not trusting God
- Your anger is proof that you need more supervision, not less
- Expressing anger is rebellion, disrespect, or evidence of unhealed wounds

This is spiritual gaslighting. It's the use of religious language to make you doubt your own perception of reality. You know something harmful was done to you, but you're told that naming it is ungracious. You feel violated, but you're told that feeling violated means you're not surrendered to God's work

through others. Your soul is screaming that boundaries were crossed, but you're taught that having boundaries is selfish.

Author and abuse survivor Rachael Denhollander has spoken powerfully about this dynamic: "When we teach forgiveness without justice, we teach cheap grace. We teach that the harm done doesn't really matter, that the victim's pain is less important than the perpetrator's comfort, and that speaking truth is less spiritual than keeping the peace." The church, in its rush to promote forgiveness and reconciliation, often silences legitimate anger before it's even been allowed to speak.

But God doesn't do this. Look at the Psalms—the prayer book of God's people. Nearly a third of the Psalms are laments, and many of them are *angry* laments. Psalm 109 is so furious that many Christians skip over it, uncomfortable with its raw rage. But it's in the Bible. God inspired it. He gave His people language for their anger because He knew they would need it.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann notes in *The Message of the Psalms*: "The lament psalm is a cry of genuine pain and anger, addressed to God, who is expected to hear and respond... The amazing thing is that Israel is permitted to speak like this, indeed, is expected to speak like this." God isn't threatened by your anger. He can handle it. In fact, He's been waiting for you to bring it to Him honestly.

Jesus' Model of Righteous Anger

Perhaps the most liberating truth for those of us trained to suppress anger is this: *Jesus got angry*. Not occasionally. Not subtly. He got publicly, dramatically, physically angry—and He was without sin.

He overturned tables in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). This wasn't a calm, measured response. Jesus made a whip. He drove out the money-changers. He flipped their tables. Why? Because they were exploiting people's desire to worship God, turning the sacred into a system of control and profit. They were gatekeepers, claiming to facilitate access to God while actually blocking it and enriching themselves.

Sound familiar?

He pronounced woes on the Pharisees (Matthew 23). Seven times He called them hypocrites. He called them blind guides, whitewashed tombs, snakes, and a brood of vipers. Why? Because they "tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them" (Matthew 23:4). They laid down rules, created systems of control, and made themselves essential mediators between people and God.

Sound familiar?

He defended His disciples when they were criticized for not following religious rules (Matthew 12:1-8). The Pharisees tried to shame them for picking grain on the Sabbath. Jesus didn't tell His disciples to apologize or submit to the religious authorities. He defended them. He pushed back. He asserted their freedom.

Jesus' anger was always directed at those who used religion to control, burden, and exploit others. He was furious at systems and people that made access to God conditional on human approval. He was enraged by those who "shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces" (Matthew 23:13).

If Jesus was angry about these things, why wouldn't you be?

N.T. Wright, in *Evil and the Justice of God*, writes: "Anger against injustice, against the abuse of the weak and the vulnerable, is not only permitted but mandated in Scripture... The absence of such anger is not virtue but vice—a failure to care about things God cares about." Your anger at being controlled, silenced, and spiritually abused isn't evidence of a hard heart. It's evidence of a heart that's beginning to align with God's own heart for justice.

Giving Yourself Permission to Grieve

Anger and grief are often intertwined. Beneath your rage is profound loss. You lost years of your life to someone else's control. You lost opportunities to grow in ways that were uniquely yours. You lost the joy of discovering God without a

human filter. You lost relationships that couldn't survive your increasing dependence on your rescuer. You lost yourself.

This deserves to be grieved.

But you've probably been taught that grief is also suspect—that it's wallowing in self-pity, that it's not trusting God's sovereignty, that it's evidence you haven't "moved on" quickly enough. You're expected to be grateful for the "help" you received and to minimize the harm that came with it. After all, they meant well. They were just trying to help. Shouldn't you focus on the positive?

No. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Henri Nouwen, in *The Inner Voice of Love*, addresses this directly: "You have to dare to grieve. When you have suffered a loss—a rejection, a betrayal, a humiliation—you have to claim your pain and allow yourself to grieve... To say 'It wasn't that bad' or 'Others have it worse' is to minimize your pain and to deny yourself the healing that comes from honest grief."

Your pain matters. Your losses are real. The harm done to you doesn't become acceptable just because it was done with good intentions or in Jesus' name. In fact, the spiritual packaging makes it worse, not better, because it adds layers of confusion and guilt to the trauma.

Let yourself grieve:

- The years you spent second-guessing your every move
- The decisions you didn't make because you were waiting for approval
- The direct relationship with God that was mediated through someone else
- The parts of yourself you buried to keep the peace
- The joy you missed because you were always being corrected
- The freedom you didn't experience because you were always being supervised

- The person you might have become if you'd been allowed to grow naturally

This grief is holy work. It's not indulgence; it's integrity. It's refusing to pretend that what happened was okay. It's honoring the losses by naming them honestly before God.

The Path from Resentment to Lament

Here's where it gets complicated: your anger is righteous and your grief is legitimate, but if left unprocessed, both can curdle into bitterness. And bitterness will destroy you from the inside, giving the person who harmed you continued power over your life.

Paul's instruction in Ephesians 4:26 continues: "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." The warning isn't against feeling anger; it's against letting anger become a permanent resident in your soul, festering into resentment that hardens your heart and distorts your character.

So how do you feel the anger without being consumed by it? How do you grieve honestly without drowning in bitterness?

The answer is lament.

Lament is taking your anger and grief directly to God—not spiritualizing it away, not confessing it as sin, but bringing it honestly and laying it before Him. Lament says, "This is wrong. This hurt me. I am not okay. And I'm bringing all of this to You because You care."

Look at how the psalmists pray:

"How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1)

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?" (Psalm 22:1)

"I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears." (Psalm 6:6)

These prayers are angry. They're accusatory. They question God's timing, His justice, His care. And yet they're Scripture. They're holy. They're the way God teaches us to pray when we're in pain.

Theologian Soong-Chan Rah, in *Prophetic Lament*, writes: "Lament recognizes the struggles of life and cries out for justice against existing injustice. Lament is not only a cry but also a critique of the situation." Lament doesn't minimize pain for the sake of appearing spiritual. It names the pain, protests the injustice, and demands that God see and respond.

This is radically different from resentment. Resentment rehearses the offense over and over, nursing the wound, plotting revenge or withdrawal. Resentment keeps you bound to the person who hurt you, trapped in an endless cycle of replaying what they did and imagining what you wish you'd said or done.

Lament, by contrast, releases the offense to God. It says, "This was wrong. You saw it. I'm giving it to You. I trust You to be the judge. I'm not minimizing it, but I'm also not carrying it anymore."

Practical Steps for Lamenting Well

If you're ready to bring your anger and grief to God, here's how to begin:

1. Write an uncensored lament. Take a journal or open a document and write a prayer that holds nothing back. Tell God exactly how you feel—the rage, the betrayal, the confusion, the loss. Don't edit for theological correctness. Don't worry about sounding gracious. God can handle your honesty. In fact, He prefers it to polite pretending.

2. Pray the Psalms of lament aloud. Let the ancient words of God's people give voice to your pain. Psalms 13, 22, 42, 55, 69, 88, and 109 are good places to start. Read them slowly. Let them validate your feelings. Notice how the psalmists don't apologize for their pain—they bring it boldly to God.

3. Name what was taken. Make a list of everything you lost—tangible and intangible. Your time. Your money. Your confidence. Your peace. Your relationship with God as you once knew it. Your sense of self. Bring each loss before God and tell Him it mattered. Tell Him it wasn't nothing. Tell Him it hurt.

4. Tell God what you needed that you didn't get. You needed to be loved, not managed. You needed to be empowered, not controlled. You needed a companion, not a supervisor. Tell God about these unmet needs. Ask Him to meet them now in ways that human beings never could.

5. Ask God for justice—and release the outcome to Him. This is perhaps the hardest part. You can tell God you want Him to intervene, to correct the person who harmed you, to vindicate you. But then you have to release the timeline and the method to Him. You're not seeking revenge; you're seeking justice. And you're trusting that God cares about justice even more than you do.

6. Return to lament as often as you need to. This isn't a one-time prayer. Healing from spiritual abuse is a process, and new layers of anger and grief will surface over time. Each time they do, bring them back to God. Lament isn't a sign of weakness; it's a sign of faith—faith that God is big enough to handle your pain and good enough to do something about it.

From Resentment to Intercession

As you practice lament over time, something surprising may begin to happen: your perspective on the person who harmed you may start to shift. Not because you're minimizing what they did, but because you're seeing them through God's eyes.

You may begin to see that they, too, are broken. That they were likely managed by someone before they managed you. That their need to control came from their own wounds, their own fears, their own unhealed places. That they were trying to play God because they didn't trust God—or didn't trust that God was enough.

This doesn't excuse what they did. Broken people are still responsible for the harm they cause. But it does open a door to a different kind of prayer—intercession.

Miroslav Volf, a theologian who has written extensively on forgiveness and reconciliation after experiencing ethnic violence, writes in *The End of Memory*: "My tears must mingle with the tears of my enemy... To forgive means to give up the right to seek retribution, to give up one's anger, and to empty oneself for the sake of the other." This is costly. This is hard. And it can only happen after the pain has been fully acknowledged and the anger fully expressed.

You may never reach a place where you pray for your rescuer with warmth or affection. That's okay. But you may reach a place where you can pray, honestly and simply: "God, they're broken too. I release them to You. Do Your work in them. And protect others from experiencing what I experienced."

This is not the same as reconciling with them or returning to the relationship. You can intercede for someone from a great distance, with firm boundaries in place. Forgiveness doesn't require relationship restoration, especially when the other person hasn't acknowledged the harm or changed their behavior. As psychologist Diane Langberg notes: "Forgiveness is between you and God. Reconciliation is between you and another person, and it requires repentance, change, and the rebuilding of trust."

Jesus in the Garden

The ultimate model of holy anger transformed into intercession is Jesus Himself—not in the temple with the whip, but in the garden with the cup.

In Gethsemane, Jesus was in anguish. He was angry at the injustice of what was about to happen—the betrayal, the false accusations, the torture, the murder. He sweat drops of blood. He begged the Father to find another way. He didn't spiritualize His pain or pretend it wasn't that bad. He felt it fully.

And then He prayed, "*Yet not my will, but yours be done*" (Luke 22:42).

This is the movement from lament to surrender. Not a surrender that denies the pain, but a surrender that entrusts the pain—and the outcome—to the Father's hands. Jesus trusted that God would bring justice, would vindicate Him, would make things right. He just didn't know when or how. So He released it.

And from the cross, with nails in His hands, He prayed for His killers: "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34).

This is where lament can lead you—not quickly, not easily, but eventually. To a place where you've felt your anger fully, grieved your losses honestly, and then released both the pain and the people to God. A place where you can say, "They hurt me deeply. What they did was wrong. And I'm letting You be the judge. I'm choosing freedom over bitterness."

Your Anger Is Welcome Here

If you're in the early stages of recognizing how you were harmed, you may not be ready to intercede for your rescuer. You may not even be ready to stop being angry at them. That's okay. God isn't rushing you.

What matters right now is that you give yourself permission to feel what you feel—to be angry without guilt, to grieve without shame, to protest without apology. Your anger is not a problem to be solved; it's a truth to be honored. It's your soul's way of saying, "What happened to me was wrong, and I will not pretend it was okay."

Bring that anger to God. Scream it in your car. Write it in your journal. Pray it with clenched fists. God can handle it. He's been waiting for you to be honest with Him.

And as you bring your pain to Him again and again, you'll discover something beautiful: He's not shocked by your rage. He's not disappointed in your grief. He's not asking you to forgive before you're ready or to minimize the harm before you've fully faced it.

He's grieving with you. He's angry with you. And He's promising to bring beauty from these ashes—not by erasing what happened, but by redeeming it into something that makes you stronger, freer, and more compassionate than you were before.

Your anger is holy. Your grief is sacred. And both are welcome in the presence of the God who sees you, knows you, and refuses to let what was done to you be the final word.

Reflection Questions:

1. What anger have you been afraid to feel or express? What would it be like to bring it honestly to God?
2. Write your own uncensored lament. What do you need to tell God about what was done to you?
3. Is there a difference between the anger you feel at the situation and the anger you feel toward the person who harmed you? How might God want to meet you in both?
4. What would it look like to release your desire for revenge or vindication to God, trusting Him to bring justice in His way and His timing?

Chapter 4: The Counterfeit of Control

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." – Matthew 11:28-30

Jennifer's phone buzzed for the third time in an hour.

"Just checking in. How are you doing?"

"Haven't heard from you today. Everything okay?"

"Getting worried. Please respond."

She stared at the messages, feeling the familiar weight settle on her chest. She'd been at work, busy with meetings, not ignoring anyone. But her mentor's anxiety was palpable even through text. Jennifer had learned that her mentor's peace depended on constant reassurance that Jennifer was okay, that she wasn't making decisions without consultation, that she wasn't drifting away.

The irony wasn't lost on Jennifer: her mentor was supposed to be helping her find peace in Christ. Instead, her mentor had no peace herself—and was making sure Jennifer couldn't have any either.

What Jennifer was witnessing, though she couldn't name it yet, was the bitter fruit of control. When help becomes control, everyone loses. The controller loses peace, trapped in an exhausting cycle of vigilance and anxiety. The controlled loses freedom, trapped under the weight of someone else's unmanaged fear. And both lose sight of Jesus, whose yoke was never meant to feel like this.

When "Help" Becomes Idolatry

At its core, control is a form of idolatry. It's the worship of outcomes we cannot guarantee and the belief that our vigilance, our management, our constant intervention is what keeps everything from falling apart.

Timothy Keller, in *Counterfeit Gods*, defines an idol as "anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give." When someone tries to be your savior, they've made your transformation their idol. Your compliance becomes their peace. Your dependence becomes their purpose. Your life becomes their project, and they need that project to succeed because it's become the thing that makes them feel valuable, necessary, godly.

The tragedy is that this often begins with genuine love. Your rescuer saw you hurting and wanted to help. But somewhere along the way, helping you stopped being about you and started being about them. Your healing became proof of their worth. Your growth became evidence of their spiritual maturity. Your testimony became their trophy. And without realizing it, they stopped serving you and started serving their own need to be needed.

This is why control is so exhausting for the controller. They can never rest because they've taken on a burden God never asked them to carry—responsibility for another person's life, choices, and spiritual condition. They've volunteered for a job that belongs to the Holy Spirit, and they're discovering what we all eventually discover when we try to play God: it's crushing work.

Psychiatrist and spiritual writer Gerald May, in *Addiction and Grace*, observes: "After years of working with people struggling with addictions, I am convinced that addiction is at root a spiritual disorder... Our addictions are our own particular ways of trying to take control of our existence." The person controlling you is, in a very real sense, addicted to control. They've made an idol of your transformation, and like all idols, it demands constant attention, constant sacrifice, constant proof that it's working.

The Prison of Playing God

Here's what many people don't understand about control: it imprisons both people.

The controller lives in constant anxiety. They've made themselves responsible for outcomes they cannot control. What if you make a bad decision? What if you drift from God? What if you don't need them anymore? Their peace is contingent on your compliance, which means they can never truly rest. They're always vigilant, always monitoring, always intervening. It's exhausting. And deep down, they probably know it's not working—but they can't stop because stopping would mean admitting they were never God to begin with.

The controlled lives under constant surveillance. Your every move is analyzed. Your choices are questioned. Your motives are interpreted. You've learned that privacy equals suspicion, that independence equals rebellion, that differing equals disappointment. You can't breathe freely because someone is always watching, always evaluating, always ready to intervene if you stray from their script.

Henri Nouwen, in *In the Name of Jesus*, addresses this dynamic directly when discussing leadership and ministry: "The temptation to consider power an apt instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel is the greatest of all... One thing is clear to me: the temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead."

Your rescuer may have started from a place of genuine concern, but at some point, intimacy became threatening. Real intimacy requires mutuality, vulnerability, the possibility of being changed by the other person. Control is safer—it keeps the power imbalance in place, keeps you at a manageable distance, keeps your rescuer from having to face their own woundedness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw this clearly when he wrote in *Life Together*: "Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial." Your rescuer loved their dream of who you would become more than they loved you

as you actually are. And that dream became a demand, and that demand became control.

The Tactics of Control: Guilt, Shame, and Spiritual Manipulation

Control rarely announces itself. It doesn't say, "I'm going to manipulate you now." Instead, it uses tools that feel like care, concern, and spiritual guidance. Learning to recognize these tactics is essential to breaking free.

Guilt: "After All I've Done for You"

Guilt is the currency of control. When you attempt to set boundaries, make independent decisions, or create space, the controller reminds you of their investment in you. The message is clear: you owe them. Your freedom is ingratitude. Your independence is betrayal.

They may say things like:

- "I've sacrificed so much for you."
- "Is this how you repay me after everything I've done?"
- "I thought our relationship meant more to you than this."
- "You're breaking my heart."

Notice what's happening: they're making your legitimate need for autonomy about their hurt feelings. They're shifting the focus from what's healthy for you to what's comfortable for them. And if you proceed anyway, you're left carrying the weight of their disappointment.

C.S. Lewis identified this pattern in *The Four Loves*: "To love at all is to be vulnerable... The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell." But what Lewis is describing is genuine love that risks and releases. The controller's "love" is the opposite—it doesn't risk rejection; it demands compliance. It doesn't release; it binds. And it uses guilt to maintain the binding.

Shame: "Something Is Wrong with You"

Where guilt says "you did something wrong," shame says "you are wrong." Shame attacks your core identity, suggesting that your desire for freedom reveals a deep flaw in your character.

The controller may frame it spiritually:

- "I'm concerned about your heart condition."
- "I think you're being deceived."
- "You're not hearing from God clearly."
- "This resistance is evidence that you're not healed yet."
- "Healthy people don't need this much space."

Shame is particularly effective because it makes you doubt yourself. Maybe they're right. Maybe you are too broken to trust your own judgment. Maybe wanting independence really is evidence of spiritual immaturity. Shame keeps you second-guessing, keeps you dependent, keeps you trapped.

Psychologist Brené Brown, in *The Gifts of Imperfection*, defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging." Controllers use shame—often without realizing it—to keep you believing you're too flawed to function without their oversight. If you're convinced you're fundamentally broken, you won't risk walking away from the person who claims to be holding you together.

Spiritual Manipulation: "God Told Me"

Perhaps the most insidious tactic is the use of spiritual language to shut down disagreement. When someone claims divine authority for their opinions about your life, resistance becomes not just disagreement—it becomes disobedience to God Himself.

The controller may say:

- "God has given me a burden for you."

- "I've been praying, and I really sense that..."
- "The Lord laid it on my heart that you should..."
- "I don't have peace about this decision you're making."
- "If you were really hearing from God, you wouldn't feel the need to pull away."

This is manipulation cloaked in piety. It's taking the Lord's name in vain—using God's authority to enforce their will. And it's devastatingly effective because how do you argue with "God told me"? If you disagree, you're not just disagreeing with them; you're apparently disagreeing with God.

Pastor and author Chuck DeGroat, in *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, writes: "Spiritual abuse happens when a leader with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control, or exploit a follower, thus causing spiritual wounds... It happens when 'Thus saith the Lord' is used as a weapon to silence questioning or enforce submission."

The biblical test for this is simple: if someone claims to speak for God but their message contradicts what Scripture clearly teaches about freedom, dignity, and direct access to God through Christ, they're not speaking for God. They're speaking for themselves and using God's name to give their words weight they don't deserve.

The Double Bind: Damned Either Way

Controllers also use what psychologists call the "double bind"—a situation where you can't win no matter what you do. If you comply with their demands, you prove you need their management. If you resist, you prove you're rebellious and need more management. Either way, they maintain control.

For example:

- If you share your struggles, they say you're not making progress and need more accountability.

- If you don't share your struggles, they say you're being secretive and need more transparency.
- If you make a decision they approve of, they take credit for guiding you.
- If you make a decision they don't approve of, it's proof you can't be trusted.

The double bind keeps you perpetually off-balance, perpetually wrong, perpetually in need of their correction. There's no way to prove you're okay because the system is designed to ensure you never are.

The Physiology of Control

What many people don't realize is that control has physical effects. When you live under constant surveillance and management, your nervous system stays in a state of heightened alert. You're always scanning for signs of approval or disapproval, always calibrating your behavior to avoid triggering your controller's anxiety or disappointment.

This is chronic stress, and it has consequences:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Physical tension and pain
- Digestive issues
- Weakened immune system
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Depression
- Difficulty concentrating
- A constant sense of impending doom

Trauma specialist Bessel van der Kolk, in *The Body Keeps the Score*, explains that trauma isn't just about dramatic events—it's also about "the erosion of the self through chronic fear, unpredictability, and lack of agency." Living

under someone else's control erodes your sense of self. Your body knows you're not safe, even when your mind tries to rationalize it as "they're just trying to help."

Your exhaustion is not a spiritual problem. It's a physiological response to an oppressive situation. Your body is telling you the truth your mind may still be reluctant to accept: this is not okay. This is not normal. This is not what Jesus meant when He invited you into His easy yoke.

Christ's Invitation: The Easy Yoke

The contrast between human control and Jesus' leadership couldn't be starker.

Jesus said, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:28-30).

Notice what Jesus offers:

- **Rest, not exhaustion.** Following Jesus doesn't drain you; it restores you.
- **Gentleness, not harshness.** Jesus doesn't drive you; He leads you.
- **Humility, not superiority.** Jesus doesn't stand over you; He walks beside you.
- **An easy yoke, not a crushing burden.** Jesus' expectations fit who you are and empower you to grow.

Dallas Willard, in *The Divine Conspiracy*, unpacks this passage beautifully: "The 'yoke' was a standard rabbinic metaphor for the obligations imposed by the law or by a particular teacher. Jesus' yoke is not just easier than the Pharisees' yoke; it's qualitatively different. It's the yoke of a co-laborer, not a taskmaster. Jesus works alongside us, bearing the weight with us, teaching us how to carry it in a way that doesn't crush us."

This is the fundamental difference: Jesus empowers; controllers disempower. Jesus trusts you with responsibility; controllers hoard all the decision-making authority. Jesus teaches you to walk; controllers insist on carrying you (and then complain about the weight). Jesus invites; controllers demand. Jesus leads from the front, showing you the way; controllers manage from above, telling you what to do.

When Jesus says His yoke is easy and His burden is light, He's not minimizing the cost of discipleship. He's saying that discipleship under His leadership doesn't feel like oppression. It doesn't leave you depleted, anxious, and second-guessing yourself. It stretches you, challenges you, refines you—but it doesn't crush you. Because Jesus isn't trying to control you. He's trying to free you.

Why Control Fails Spiritually

Beyond the relational and psychological damage, control fails for a fundamental theological reason: it's not how the Holy Spirit works.

The Spirit leads; He doesn't drive. He convicts; He doesn't condemn. He guides into truth; He doesn't force conclusions. He empowers; He doesn't micromanage. When Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, control isn't on the list. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—these are the Spirit's methods. Notice that even "self-control" is about managing yourself, not managing others.

J.I. Packer, in *Knowing God*, writes: "The ministry of the Spirit is to communicate to us the reality of the presence of Jesus, to impress on us the dimensions of his love, to show us the demands of his lordship, to help us understand his teaching, and to help us obey it." The Spirit's work is to connect you directly to Jesus, not to route you through a human mediator. When someone inserts themselves as the mandatory interpreter of God's will for your life, they're blocking the Spirit's work, not facilitating it.

Paul was adamant about this in Galatians. The believers there were being told they needed human supervision, human rules, human management to be acceptable to God. And Paul's response was fierce: *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery"* (Galatians 5:1).

Freedom. Not management. Christ died to give you freedom—freedom from sin, freedom from death, and freedom from spiritual tyranny. Any teaching, any relationship, any "discipleship" that makes you less free is not from Christ. It's a counterfeit, no matter how spiritual it sounds.

The Controller's Captivity

Before we move forward, we need to acknowledge something: the person controlling you is also trapped.

They're trapped by anxiety—the constant fear that if they're not vigilant, everything will fall apart. They're trapped by pride—the inability to admit they can't save you. They're trapped by their own wounds—using your dependence to medicate their pain. They're trapped by idolatry—serving the idol of your transformation instead of serving the God who transforms.

This doesn't excuse their behavior. They're responsible for the harm they've caused, regardless of their motivations. But it does help you see them as human—broken, afraid, desperately trying to control what they cannot control because they don't know how to trust what they cannot see.

Parker Palmer, in *Let Your Life Speak*, writes: "Violence is what happens when we don't know what else to do with our suffering." Your controller may not be physically violent, but spiritual control is a form of violence—a desperate attempt to manage suffering (theirs and yours) through dominance rather than through surrender to God.

Understanding this doesn't mean you reconcile with them. It doesn't mean you go back under their authority. But it may help you release them to God with compassion rather than contempt. They need freedom too—freedom from the crushing burden of playing God, freedom to trust the real God with

outcomes they cannot control, freedom to rest in grace instead of striving for validation through your compliance.

Breaking Free: What It Looks Like to Choose the Easy Yoke

So how do you move from the heavy yoke of human control to the easy yoke of Christ?

1. Recognize control for what it is. Stop calling it help. Stop calling it love. Stop calling it discipleship. Call it what it is: control. It may have started with good intentions, but intentions don't determine outcomes. The outcome is that you're trapped, and that's not okay.

2. Trust your exhaustion. If following Jesus through this person leaves you depleted rather than restored, that's data. Jesus promised rest. If you're not experiencing rest, something is wrong—and the problem isn't your lack of gratitude or submission. The problem is that you're following a human controller instead of the Divine Leader.

3. Remember what's at stake. This isn't just about your comfort or convenience. It's about your relationship with God. When someone controls you, they interfere with the Spirit's work in your life. They block your access to the Father. They steal your freedom in Christ. This is serious. It's worth protecting, even if protecting it costs you the relationship with your controller.

4. Learn what Jesus' leadership actually feels like. Spend time in the Gospels watching how Jesus led people. Notice His gentleness with the broken, His patience with the slow, His trust in the capable, His refusal to manipulate or control. Notice how He taught people to walk and then let them walk—even when they walked away. This is your model. This is what it means to follow Jesus.

5. Practice hearing God directly. You've been trained to doubt your own discernment and to wait for someone else to tell you what God is saying. It's time to practice listening for yourself. Sit quietly with Scripture. Ask God to speak. Trust that He will—not through a human mediator, but directly to you through His Word and His Spirit. Start small. Practice with low-stakes

decisions. Rebuild your confidence that the Spirit really does live in you and really does lead you.

6. Set boundaries without apology. You'll need to start limiting your controller's access to your life. This doesn't require their permission or their agreement. You don't need to justify it or explain it endlessly. A simple, "I'm making some changes in how I manage my time and relationships," is enough. When they push back—and they will—hold firm. Their discomfort with your boundaries is their problem to solve, not yours.

7. Find a community that empowers rather than controls. You need people in your life, but you need the right people—people who celebrate your growth rather than fear it, people who encourage your autonomy rather than undermine it, people who point you to Jesus and then trust Him to do His work. These people exist. Don't settle for less.

The Promise of Rest

Jesus' invitation still stands: "*Come to me... and I will give you rest.*"

Not "come to me through an approved supervisor." Not "come to me after you've proven you can be trusted." Just "come to me."

The yoke He offers is easy because it fits who you actually are, not who someone else thinks you should be. The burden is light because He carries it with you, not because He stands over you critiquing how you carry it. The rest is real because you're finally freed from the exhausting work of managing someone else's anxiety about your life.

This is what you were made for. Not control, but connection. Not management, but mutual love. Not surveillance, but security in the presence of the One who knows you fully and loves you completely.

Control is the counterfeit. Christ is the real thing. And He's inviting you to trade one for the other—to lay down the heavy yoke that's been crushing you and to take up the easy yoke that will set you free.

Come to Him. He's been waiting.

Reflection Questions:

1. What signs of control can you now recognize in your relationship with your rescuer? Which tactics—guilt, shame, spiritual manipulation—have been most effective in keeping you compliant?
2. What does your body tell you about your situation? Where do you hold tension? When do you feel most anxious? What might your physical symptoms be trying to communicate?
3. How would your life be different if you truly believed that Jesus' yoke is easy and His burden is light? What would change in your daily experience?
4. What would it look like to begin setting boundaries with your controller? What's one small step you could take this week toward reclaiming your freedom?

Chapter 5: From Helplessness to Holy Confidence

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." – Philippians 4:13

David sat in his car in the parking lot, staring at his phone.

It was a simple decision—where to have lunch. But for twenty minutes, he'd been paralyzed, scrolling through options, unable to choose. Part of him wanted to text his former mentor to ask what she thought. Part of him was ashamed that he was even considering it. *It's just lunch*, he told himself.

Normal people don't need help deciding where to eat.

But David wasn't sure he qualified as a normal person anymore. After four years of having every decision supervised, scrutinized, and often overridden, he'd lost the ability to trust himself. He knew, intellectually, that choosing a restaurant wouldn't ruin his life. But emotionally, he felt the old fear: *What if I choose wrong? What if this is a test of my judgment? What if I can't be trusted even with this?*

He'd been free from his mentor's daily oversight for six months now. But he was discovering that physical distance from control doesn't automatically restore what control took—the ability to act, to choose, to trust that you're capable of navigating life with God's help. He'd developed what psychologists call "learned helplessness," and breaking free from it would require more than just distance. It would require relearning what he'd always known but had been trained to forget: that he was capable, that God equipped him, and that the Spirit within him was sufficient for guidance.

David eventually chose a sandwich shop. It wasn't profound. But it was progress. And in the journey from helplessness to holy confidence, every small choice matters.

The Anatomy of Learned Helplessness

Psychologist Martin Seligman first identified learned helplessness in the 1960s. Through experiments (controversial by today's standards), he discovered that when animals or humans repeatedly experience situations

where their actions have no effect on outcomes—where they're powerless despite their efforts—they eventually stop trying. Even when circumstances change and they could escape or improve their situation, they remain passive, having learned that effort is futile.

This is what happens when you're someone's project. You try to make decisions, but your decisions are overridden. You try to exercise judgment, but your judgment is questioned. You try to hear from God, but you're told you're not hearing clearly. Eventually, you stop trying. You learn that your agency doesn't matter, that your choices don't count, that you're fundamentally incapable of navigating life without someone else steering.

The tragedy is that learned helplessness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because you stop exercising your capacity for choice, that capacity atrophies. Because you stop trusting your discernment, your confidence in your discernment erodes. Because you stop taking responsibility for your life, you become less capable of managing your life. Your controller points to your dependence as proof you need their oversight, never acknowledging that they created the dependence they're now managing.

Psychologist Diane Langberg, who works extensively with trauma and abuse survivors, writes in *Suffering and the Heart of God*: "Victimization teaches the victim that they are without power, without voice, and without choice. Healing, then, must include the restoration of power, voice, and choice—not as abstract concepts, but as lived experiences." You can't think your way out of learned helplessness; you have to act your way out, one small choice at a time.

The Theological Foundation: You Are Capable in Christ

Before we talk about practical steps, we need to establish the theological truth that makes those steps possible: *you are not helpless*. You never were. Control taught you to believe you are, but control lied.

Scripture is unambiguous about your capacity as a believer:

You have the mind of Christ. "But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). Not "we have access to Christ's mind through an approved interpreter." We have the mind of Christ. The Spirit within you gives you access to divine wisdom, divine perspective, divine understanding. You can think. You can reason. You can discern. Not perfectly—none of us can—but truly.

You are led by the Spirit. "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God" (Romans 8:14). The Spirit leads you personally, directly, intimately. Not through a human mediator. Not through someone else's discernment on your behalf. You are led—present tense, active voice—by the Spirit of God.

You have been given everything you need. "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3). *Everything*. Not "most things, pending approval." Not "everything except the big decisions." Everything you need has already been given to you—divine power, divine resources, divine equipment for living.

You are God's workmanship. "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). God made you with intention, with purpose, with specific works already prepared for you to walk into. He trusts you with those works. He designed you for those works. He wouldn't give you an assignment He didn't also equip you to complete.

Theologian N.T. Wright, in *After You Believe*, emphasizes the active role believers play in their own formation: "The point of following Jesus isn't simply to learn a few lessons and then get on with life as before. It's to become the sort of person for whom doing the right thing is as natural as breathing... This doesn't happen automatically. It requires practice, discipline, and the development of virtue." Notice: *you* practice, *you* develop, *you* participate actively in your formation. Yes, by God's grace and through God's power—but with your agency intact, not suspended.

Breaking the Stronghold: Renewing Your Mind

Paul writes in Romans 12:2, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The Greek word for "transformed" is *metamorphoō*—the same word used to describe Jesus' transfiguration. It means a complete, fundamental change in form. That's what's possible for you: not just behavioral modification, but a complete transformation in how you think about yourself, your capacity, and God's trust in you.

But notice: this transformation happens through the *renewing of your mind*. You have to actively participate. You have to identify the lies you've believed and replace them with truth. You have to practice thinking differently until the new patterns become automatic.

Here are the core lies learned helplessness taught you, and the truths that can replace them:

Lie: "I can't trust my own judgment."

Truth: You have the mind of Christ and the Spirit's guidance. Your judgment won't be perfect, but it's legitimate and sufficient for the decisions God has given you to make.

Lie: "I need someone else to tell me God's will."

Truth: The Spirit speaks to you directly. Others can offer wisdom and perspective, but no one knows God's specific will for your life better than God Himself—and He's fully capable of communicating with you.

Lie: "Making mistakes proves I'm not ready for independence."

Truth: Making mistakes is how humans learn. God doesn't require perfection before He trusts you with responsibility. He teaches you through experience, including the experience of failure.

Lie: "If I don't have constant accountability, I'll fall apart."

Truth: You need community and wisdom from others, but you don't need constant surveillance. God holds you accountable. The Spirit convicts you. You're not in danger the moment you're unsupervised.

Lie: "Wanting independence is selfish and dangerous."

Truth: Healthy autonomy is part of spiritual maturity. God wants sons and daughters who can walk with Him, not perpetual infants who require constant supervision.

Lie: "I'm too broken to be trusted."

Truth: You're broken and being healed—like every other believer. Your brokenness doesn't disqualify you from agency. Christ works through broken people. In fact, that's the only kind He has to work with.

A.W. Tozer wrote in *The Pursuit of God*: "What you believe about God is the most important thing about you." What you believe about yourself in relation to God is also crucial. If you believe you're fundamentally incompetent, perpetually suspect, and incapable of growth without intensive human management, you'll live accordingly. But if you believe you're equipped, empowered, and entrusted by God with your own life, you'll begin to act like it—cautiously at first, then with increasing confidence.

Small Steps: The Practice of Confidence

Confidence isn't rebuilt all at once. It's rebuilt through repeated experiences of acting, observing the outcome, adjusting as needed, and acting again. Each small success builds neural pathways that say, "I can do this. I can trust myself. I can learn."

Here's how to begin:

1. Start with Low-Stakes Decisions

Don't begin your journey toward confidence by tackling major life decisions. Start with choices that have minimal consequences if you get them "wrong."

- What to eat for dinner
- What to wear
- What route to take to work
- What book to read next

- What movie to watch
- Where to go for a walk

Make these decisions yourself. Don't seek input. Don't second-guess. Don't rehearse what your former controller would think. Just choose. Notice that you survive the choice. Notice that God doesn't abandon you. Notice that you're still okay.

This may sound trivial, but it's not. Every time you make a choice—even a small one—and the world doesn't fall apart, you're rewiring your brain. You're gathering evidence that you're capable, that your judgment works, that you're not the disaster waiting to happen your controller suggested you were.

2. Practice Sitting with Uncertainty

One of the ways control maintains its grip is by promising certainty. Your controller offered to tell you definitively what God wanted, what the right choice was, what you should do. Following their guidance felt safer than trusting yourself because it eliminated the discomfort of not knowing.

But life is uncertain. Even when you're walking closely with God, you don't always know the outcome of your choices. And that's okay. God doesn't promise to eliminate uncertainty; He promises to walk with you through it.

Practice making decisions without complete certainty:

- "I'm 70% sure this is the right choice, and I'm going to move forward."
- "I don't know if this will work out, but I sense God's peace about trying."
- "This feels risky, but I believe God is leading me here."

Sitting with uncertainty builds faith. It teaches you to trust God's presence with you more than His detailed roadmap ahead of you. As theologian Peter Scazzero notes in *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*: "The gift of limits is learning to trust God with what we don't know and can't control."

3. Distinguish Between Counsel and Control

You still need wisdom from others. The goal isn't isolation; it's healthy interdependence. But you need to learn the difference between receiving counsel and surrendering control.

Counsel sounds like:

- "Have you considered...?"
- "In my experience..."
- "What I hear you saying is..."
- "Here's what I see; what do you see?"
- "I trust you to make this decision, and I'm here if you want to process it."

Control sounds like:

- "You need to..."
- "God is telling me you should..."
- "I don't have peace about your decision."
- "If you really heard from God, you'd..."
- "I'm disappointed in this choice."

Notice the difference: counsel offers perspective and then trusts you with the decision. Control offers directives and then monitors your compliance. Seek counsel from people who respect your agency. Avoid people who need to be the final authority.

Eugene Peterson, in *Working the Angles*, writes: "The pastoral task is not to provide a crutch for people to lean on, but to help them develop their own capacity for walking with God." Healthy spiritual friends help you walk; controllers insist on carrying you.

4. Learn from Mistakes Without Catastrophizing

You will make wrong choices. You will misjudge situations. You will misinterpret what you thought was God's leading. This is normal. This is human. This is how you learn.

Your controller taught you that mistakes are evidence of your fundamental incompetence. But Scripture teaches something different. Consider:

- **Peter** denied Jesus three times, and Jesus still trusted him to lead the early church.
- **Paul** murdered Christians before his conversion, and God still used him to write much of the New Testament.
- **David** committed adultery and murder, and God still called him a man after His own heart.
- **The disciples** constantly misunderstood Jesus, and He still sent them to make disciples of all nations.

God is not surprised by your failures. He doesn't revoke His trust every time you stumble. He works with imperfect people because they're the only kind available. As Brennan Manning reminds us: "Jesus comes not for the super-spiritual but for the wobbly and the weak-kneed who know they don't have it all together."

When you make a mistake:

- Acknowledge it honestly before God
- Ask, "What can I learn from this?"
- Make amends if needed
- Adjust your approach
- Move forward without shame

Mistakes are data, not verdicts. They're part of growth, not proof of incapacity.

5. Celebrate Progress, Not Just Perfection

Your controller probably moved the goalposts constantly. Nothing you did was quite enough. Every achievement was met with, "That's good, but..." You learned that your best was never sufficient.

Break that pattern. Celebrate small wins:

- You made a decision without seeking approval? Celebrate.
- You sat with uncertainty and didn't panic? Celebrate.
- You heard God's voice and trusted it? Celebrate.
- You made a mistake and recovered? Celebrate.
- You set a boundary and held it? Celebrate.

Celebration reinforces growth. It tells your brain, "This is good. This is progress. We're moving in the right direction." And it reminds you that God delights in your journey, not just your destination. As Henri Nouwen wrote: "Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection... Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life."

Celebrating progress is the antidote to self-rejection. It's saying, "I see what I'm doing right, not just what I'm doing wrong."

The Holy Spirit: Your Restorer and Guide

The most important truth in your journey from helplessness to confidence is this: *you're not doing this alone*. The same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead lives in you (Romans 8:11). The same Spirit who empowered the early church to turn the world upside down is empowering you to reclaim what was stolen.

The Spirit's work in you includes:

Conviction, not condemnation. The Spirit convicts you of sin specifically and constructively, pointing you toward repentance and restoration. He doesn't condemn you globally or leave you drowning in shame. If you feel constant,

vague condemnation that leaves you paralyzed, that's not the Spirit—that's the residue of control or the voice of the enemy.

Guidance into truth. Jesus promised, "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). Not "he will guide someone else to tell you the truth." He guides you. Directly. Personally. Trust that He's doing that work, even when you're learning to recognize His voice again.

Power to become. The Spirit doesn't just tell you what to do; He empowers you to do it. "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7, NKJV). Power—to act. Love—to motivate. Sound mind—to discern. You have everything you need.

Fruit that proves His presence. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). As you rebuild confidence, look for this fruit. Are you experiencing more peace, even in uncertainty? More joy, even in the struggle? More self-control, even when tempted to run back to old patterns? This is the Spirit's work. This is evidence that He's rebuilding what was stolen.

Theologian Gordon Fee, in *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, emphasizes the Spirit's empowering presence: "The Holy Spirit is not simply an influence, but the personal presence of God in our lives... The Spirit empowers us not by taking over our will, but by enabling our will—making us capable of what we couldn't do on our own." The Spirit doesn't bypass your agency; He activates it.

Biblical Examples: From Helplessness to Holy Confidence

Scripture is full of people who moved from helplessness to confidence through God's empowerment:

Gideon was hiding in a winepress, terrified of the Midianites, when God called him a "mighty warrior" (Judges 6:12). Gideon didn't feel like a mighty warrior. He felt like the weakest member of the weakest clan. But God saw what Gideon would become, not just what he currently was. And as Gideon took small steps of obedience—testing God with fleeces, gathering an army,

following God's strange battle plan—his confidence grew. By the end, he led Israel to victory.

Moses argued with God at the burning bush, insisting he wasn't capable of leading Israel. "I'm slow of speech," he said. "Send someone else" (Exodus 4:10-13). God didn't accept the excuse. He didn't send someone else. He sent Moses and promised to be with his mouth. Moses grew into the calling, becoming one of the greatest leaders in Scripture.

Esther was terrified to approach the king uninvited—it could mean death. But Mordecai challenged her: "Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14). Esther fasted, prayed, and then acted with courage. "If I perish, I perish," she said. She stepped into her agency, and God used her to save her people.

Peter went from denying Jesus three times to boldly proclaiming the gospel at Pentecost. What changed? Not Peter's fundamental character—he was still impulsive, still flawed. But he received the Holy Spirit and learned that God's power works through human weakness. He stopped letting his failures define him and started letting God's calling empower him.

These are not stories of perfect people who earned God's trust. They're stories of broken, fearful, inadequate people who discovered that God equips those He calls. You're no different. The same God who empowered them is empowering you.

Holy Confidence: What It Looks Like

As you journey from learned helplessness to holy confidence, you'll notice shifts:

From "I can't" to "I can, in Christ." You'll stop assuming you're incapable and start testing your capacity. You'll remember Paul's words: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Not "I can do all things on my own," but "through Christ." Your confidence isn't in yourself; it's in Christ working through you.

From constant fear to grounded peace. You'll make decisions without the paralyzing anxiety that you're about to ruin everything. You'll trust that God can guide you, that He can correct you if you veer off course, and that He's committed to your growth even when you stumble.

From needing approval to seeking wisdom. You'll stop requiring permission for your choices and start welcoming perspective. You'll be able to receive counsel without feeling obligated to comply. You'll say, "Thank you for your input. I'll pray about it," and then you'll actually pray about it and decide.

From shame-driven to grace-covered. You'll stop beating yourself up for every imperfection. You'll accept that you're a work in progress—just like everyone else—and that God loves you in the mess, not just in the (hypothetical) arrival.

From isolated to interdependent. You'll re-engage with community, but on different terms. You'll seek out people who empower rather than control, who celebrate your growth rather than fear it, who trust God with your journey rather than trying to micromanage it.

From passive to proactive. You'll stop waiting for life to happen to you and start participating actively in the life God has given you. You'll make plans. You'll take risks. You'll try things. You'll fail sometimes. You'll succeed sometimes. And through it all, you'll be *alive* in a way you haven't been in years.

This is holy confidence—not arrogance, not self-sufficiency, but a quiet assurance that you're capable because Christ is capable in you, that you can hear because the Spirit speaks, that you can walk because God has given you legs to stand on.

The Promise: Christ Strengthens You

Paul's words in Philippians 4:13 are often misused to support a prosperity gospel or a "I can achieve anything" mentality. But in context, Paul was talking about contentment in all circumstances—plenty and want, comfort and

suffering. He was saying, "Whatever God asks of me, whatever circumstances I face, Christ gives me strength to endure and even thrive."

That's the promise for you: whatever God asks you to do—whatever decisions He gives you to make, whatever challenges He leads you through, whatever growth He's calling you toward—Christ will strengthen you for it. Not through a human supervisor. Not through constant external management. But through His own presence and power within you.

Dallas Willard reminds us: "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action." You can't earn your capability—Christ has already given it. But you can exert effort—stepping out, risking, trying, learning, growing. And as you do, you'll discover what's been true all along: you were never as helpless as you were taught to believe.

The same God who knit you together in your mother's womb equipped you for this life. The same Spirit who indwells you is sufficient to guide you. The same Christ who died for you trusts you with your own journey.

You can do this.

Not because you're perfect.

Not because you won't make mistakes.

But because Christ strengthens you.

And that's enough.

Reflection Questions:

1. What small decision could you make today without seeking anyone else's input? How does it feel to even consider making that choice independently?
2. Which lie from learned helplessness feels most deeply embedded in your thinking? What truth could you begin to practice in its place?

3. When you think about making mistakes, what do you fear most? How would Jesus respond to those fears?
4. What evidence can you see—even small evidence—that the Holy Spirit is already at work restoring your confidence?
5. Who in your life celebrates your growth and empowers your agency? How might you cultivate more relationships like that?

Chapter 6: Boundaries That Honor God

"All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." – Matthew 5:37

Nicole rehearsed the conversation in her head for the hundredth time.

She needed to tell her former mentor that she wouldn't be available for their weekly "accountability" calls anymore. It was a simple boundary—one most adults wouldn't think twice about. But for Nicole, who'd spent five years under intensive spiritual management, the thought of saying "no" triggered waves of anxiety and guilt.

What if she's hurt? What if she thinks I'm ungrateful? What if she's right and I really am running from God?

Nicole had been meeting with a counselor who kept asking the same question: "What do you want?" It was a question Nicole couldn't answer. She'd been so trained to defer to her mentor's preferences, to prioritize her mentor's feelings, to believe that her own wants were inherently suspect, that she'd lost touch with her legitimate desires and needs.

But she knew she couldn't keep living this way. The weekly calls had become exercises in reporting and defending—justifying her choices, explaining her decisions, managing her mentor's anxiety about her life. They left her depleted, not refreshed. Trapped, not free.

So she wrote a script: "I'm grateful for your investment in my life, but I need to step back from our weekly calls. I'll reach out if I need support, but I need space to grow in hearing God's voice for myself."

When she finally sent the message, her mentor's response came within minutes: "I'm worried about you. This feels like spiritual isolation. Can we talk about this?"

And there it was—the pull, the guilt, the assumption that Nicole's boundary was a problem to be solved rather than a decision to be respected. Nicole

stared at the message, feeling the old familiar tug to comply, to explain, to justify, to back down.

But this time, she didn't. She wrote back: "I understand your concern, but my decision stands. Thank you for respecting it."

It wasn't eloquent. It wasn't elaborate. But it was enough. And for the first time in years, Nicole felt something she'd almost forgotten: the quiet strength of a simple "no."

Boundaries as an Act of Obedience

If you've been someone's project, you've probably been taught that boundaries are selfish, unloving, and possibly even sinful. You've heard messages like:

- "Christians are called to lay down their lives for others."
- "Boundaries are just a worldly psychology concept, not biblical."
- "If you really loved me, you wouldn't need space."
- "Jesus didn't set boundaries; He was available to everyone."
- "Setting limits means you're not trusting God to work through people."

These messages sound spiritual, but they're profoundly unbiblical. In fact, boundaries aren't rebellion against God's design—they're obedience to it. God Himself is a God of boundaries. He established boundaries in creation (separating light from darkness, land from sea, day from night). He gave His people boundaries in the Law—not to restrict them arbitrarily, but to protect them and help them flourish. And He maintains His own boundaries, exercising sovereignty over what He will and won't do, respecting human agency even when we make choices He grieves.

Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend, in their groundbreaking work *Boundaries*, write: "Boundaries define us. They define what is me and what is not me. A boundary shows me where I end and someone else begins, leading me to a sense of ownership. Knowing what I am to own and take responsibility

for gives me freedom." Far from being selfish, boundaries are stewardship. They're taking responsibility for the life, the body, the soul, the calling that God has given you—and recognizing that you're not responsible for managing someone else's.

The Apostle Paul made this clear: "Each one should carry their own load" (Galatians 6:5). Yes, we're called to "carry each other's burdens" (Galatians 6:2), but there's a distinction. The Greek word for "burdens" in verse 2 (*baros*) refers to overwhelming weights—crises, traumas, seasons of hardship where we need help. The word for "load" in verse 5 (*phortion*) refers to everyday responsibilities—the normal weight of managing your own life, your own choices, your own relationship with God.

We help each other with crushing burdens. But we each carry our own everyday load. When someone insists on carrying your daily load—or worse, demands that you carry theirs—they've violated God's design. Boundaries restore that design. They say, "I'm responsible for me. You're responsible for you. And we can love each other without becoming each other."

Jesus: The Master of Boundaries

The most powerful evidence that boundaries are godly comes from Jesus Himself. If anyone could claim the right to be boundless—available to everyone at all times, meeting every need, saying yes to every request—it would be Jesus. He was the incarnate Son of God, the Savior of the world, the only one who could actually meet people's deepest needs.

And yet, Jesus set clear boundaries. Consistently. Without apology. Without guilt.

Jesus Withdrew from Crowds

"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!' Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else'" (Mark 1:35-38).

Notice what happened: People needed Jesus. They were looking for Him. His disciples found Him and essentially said, "You need to come back. People are waiting." And Jesus said no. He chose solitude over availability. He prioritized time with the Father over meeting others' expectations.

Jesus modeled that it's not only acceptable but necessary to withdraw from others' demands to attend to your spiritual health. He didn't explain Himself. He didn't apologize. He didn't let others' expectations override His own discernment of what He needed.

Jesus Said No to Family

"Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, 'Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you!' 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'" (Mark 3:31-34).

Jesus' family wanted access to Him, but He was in the middle of teaching. Rather than immediately complying with their request, He set a boundary. He redefined family in terms of spiritual connection rather than biological obligation. He didn't let family pressure determine His priorities.

This is revolutionary for those of us who've been taught that love means dropping everything the moment someone wants our attention. Jesus loved His family. But He didn't allow their expectations to dictate His schedule or divert Him from His calling.

Jesus Refused to Explain Himself

"The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, 'When evening comes, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red," and in the morning, "Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it

except the sign of Jonah.' Jesus then left them and went away" (Matthew 16:1-4).

When religious leaders demanded that Jesus prove Himself, He refused. He gave a brief response and then walked away. He didn't feel obligated to meet their demands or to defend Himself endlessly. He recognized a no-win situation and simply left.

This is crucial for those of us who've been trained to over-explain our boundaries, to justify our decisions, to keep engaging until the other person accepts our "no." Sometimes the healthiest response is a brief answer followed by walking away.

Jesus Protected His Mission

"After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him" (John 7:1).

Jesus had a mission to complete, and He protected that mission by avoiding danger until the appointed time. He didn't walk into every trap. He didn't subject Himself to every threat. He exercised wisdom and self-protection because His life had purpose and He was responsible for stewarding it well.

You, too, have a life with purpose. You have a calling that's unique to you. Protecting that calling by setting boundaries with people who would derail it isn't selfish—it's faithful stewardship.

Theologian and author John Ortberg notes in *The Life You've Always Wanted*: "Jesus was often busy, but never hurried. He did what the Father gave Him to do each day... He understood His limitations as a human being. He practiced regular solitude and rest. He knew when to say no." Jesus' boundaries weren't evidence of insufficient love; they were evidence of perfect love—love that served others wisely rather than compulsively.

Why Boundaries Feel So Wrong

If boundaries are biblical and Jesus modeled them, why do they feel so wrong when you've been controlled? Several reasons:

You've Been Trained to Prioritize Others' Feelings Over Your Own Well-Being

Your controller taught you that their emotional comfort was more important than your physical, emotional, or spiritual health. When they felt anxious, you needed to reassure them—even if you were exhausted. When they felt disappointed, you needed to change your behavior—even if that behavior was healthy. You learned that love means absorbing others' distress and managing their emotions for them.

But this isn't biblical love. Biblical love doesn't require you to set yourself on fire to keep someone else warm. Paul writes, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:14)—not *instead of* yourself, not *more than* yourself, but as yourself. Healthy love includes appropriate self-care. It recognizes that you can't give what you don't have. If you're depleted, you have nothing to offer.

You've Confused Boundaries with Rejection

When you set a boundary with your controller, they likely framed it as abandonment. "You're pulling away from me." "You don't love me anymore." "After everything I've done for you." They equated any limit-setting with total rejection, making it impossible for you to have a nuanced relationship that included both connection and healthy distance.

But boundaries aren't walls. Boundaries say, "I love you, and I need space." Walls say, "I don't love you, so I'm shutting you out completely." Boundaries allow for relationship at a sustainable level. Walls end relationship entirely. As Dr. Henry Cloud explains: "Boundaries are not to keep people out, but to define who you are and to protect your freedom to be the person God created you to be."

You've Been Taught That Saying No Is Unspiritual

Many Christian communities emphasize servanthood, availability, and sacrifice to the point of implying that saying no is evidence of selfishness or spiritual immaturity. You've been told, "Jesus didn't turn anyone away," or

"We're called to die to ourselves," or "If it costs you something, it must be God's will."

But again, Jesus did turn people away. He turned away the crowds to pray alone. He turned away the rich young ruler who wouldn't meet His terms for discipleship. He turned away people who wanted to follow Him but weren't willing to count the cost. And the call to "die to ourselves" (Luke 9:23) means dying to sin, selfishness, and living for our own glory—not dying to healthy self-care, legitimate needs, or God-given boundaries.

Theologian Miroslav Volf, in *Exclusion and Embrace*, warns against "the fusion of redemptive self-sacrifice with self-obliteration": "The call to self-denial is not a call to self-destruction. It's a call to reorient the self around God and others in healthy ways, not to erase the self entirely." You can't love your neighbor as yourself if there's no self left to love from.

You've Internalized Shame About Having Needs

Your controller likely treated your needs as inconvenient, evidence of weakness, or proof that you weren't spiritually mature. You learned to minimize your needs, to apologize for them, to feel guilty for having them. The message was clear: needy people are burdensome, and you don't want to be burdensome.

But having needs isn't a sign of immaturity—it's a sign of being human. Jesus had needs. He needed food, rest, solitude, friendship, prayer. He didn't apologize for these needs; He met them. And He expects you to do the same. As counselor and author Judy Herr notes: "Self-care is not selfish. You cannot serve from an empty vessel."

The Specific Challenge of Setting Boundaries with Rescuers

Setting boundaries with someone who controlled you is uniquely difficult because they genuinely believe they have your best interests at heart. They're not trying to hurt you (usually); they're trying to help you. And when you set a boundary, they interpret it as your rejection of their help, which feels to them like your rejection of their love.

This creates several predictable responses:

They'll Express Hurt

"I'm so hurt that you don't trust me anymore." "After everything we've been through together, I can't believe you're pushing me away." Their hurt is genuine, but it's also manipulative. They're making your boundary about their feelings, hoping you'll back down to protect them from distress.

Healthy response: "I understand that my boundary is disappointing to you, but I need you to respect it anyway. My needs don't disappear just because you're hurt by them."

They'll Question Your Motives

"I think you're being influenced by [some person, book, counselor]." "This isn't like you." "I'm worried you're making decisions out of fear instead of faith." They'll suggest that your boundary isn't really yours—that you've been deceived, manipulated, or led astray.

Healthy response: "I appreciate your concern, but I've thought and prayed about this. I'm confident in my decision, and I need you to trust that God is capable of guiding me."

They'll Predict Disaster

"I'm really worried about where this is headed." "I hope you don't regret this later." "Without proper accountability, you're vulnerable to the enemy." They'll frame your boundary as dangerous, as a first step toward spiritual shipwreck.

Healthy response: "I understand you're concerned, but I'm trusting God with the outcomes. I'm not asking for your approval, just your respect."

They'll Escalate to Recruit Others

When their direct approach doesn't work, they may bring in reinforcements—mutual friends, church leaders, family members—to convince you that you're wrong. "I've talked to [person], and they agree you need to reconsider." This is triangulation, and it's toxic.

Healthy response: "I'm willing to talk with you about this, but I'm not willing to have this conversation through third parties. If you've involved others, please ask them to stay out of it. This is between you and me."

They'll Withdraw Entirely

Some controllers, when faced with boundaries they can't penetrate, will pull away completely—often with dramatic statements like "I guess you don't need me anymore" or "Call me when you're ready to be honest with yourself." This is a form of punishment designed to make you chase after them and renege on your boundary.

Healthy response: Let them go. If they're willing to end the relationship rather than respect your boundaries, the relationship was based on control, not love. "I'm sorry you've chosen to step back, but I respect your decision. I'm here if you ever want to reconnect in a healthier way."

Psychologist Dr. Diane Langberg, who works with abuse survivors, notes: "The amount of pushback you receive when you set a boundary is often directly proportional to how much that person has benefited from you not having boundaries." The stronger their reaction, the more necessary your boundary probably was.

Practical Steps for Setting Boundaries

Setting boundaries is both an art and a skill. Here's how to do it well:

1. Get Clear on What You Need

Before you communicate a boundary, you need to know what it is. Be specific:

- "I need to reduce our communication to once a month instead of once a week."
- "I need you to stop asking about my personal life unless I bring it up."
- "I need you to respect my decisions without offering unsolicited advice."
- "I need space from our relationship for a season while I work through some things."

Vague boundaries are hard to maintain. "I need more space" can be negotiated. "I need us to limit our phone calls to 30 minutes once a month" is clear and enforceable.

2. State Your Boundary Simply

Don't over-explain. Don't apologize. Don't leave room for negotiation. State your boundary clearly and calmly:

"I've realized that our weekly calls aren't healthy for me right now, so I'm going to step back from them. I'll reach out when I'm ready to reconnect."

That's it. You don't need to provide a list of grievances or justify your decision endlessly. As Jesus said, let your yes be yes and your no be no. Anything beyond that opens the door to argument, manipulation, or negotiation.

3. Expect Pushback and Prepare Your Response

Know ahead of time that they'll likely push back. Prepare a simple statement you can repeat:

- "I understand this is hard for you, but my decision stands."
- "I appreciate your concern, but I'm confident in this choice."
- "I'm not asking for your agreement, just your respect."

You may need to repeat this statement multiple times. Don't be drawn into lengthy explanations or debates. As Dr. Cloud and Townsend advise: "You are not responsible for the other person's reaction to your boundary. You are only responsible for communicating your boundary in a respectful, clear way."

4. Follow Through Consistently

A boundary without enforcement is just a suggestion. If you say you won't take calls after 8 PM and then answer at 9 PM "just this once," you've taught them that your boundaries are negotiable. Consistency is crucial.

This might mean:

- Not responding to texts outside your stated parameters

- Ending a conversation when they violate the boundary
- Declining invitations without explanation
- Blocking their number if they refuse to respect your limits

Following through feels harsh at first, especially if you've been trained to prioritize others' feelings. But you're teaching them how to treat you. And you're teaching yourself that your boundaries matter.

5. Get Support

Don't try to set and maintain boundaries in isolation. Find a counselor, a support group, or trustworthy friends who understand what you're doing and can encourage you when it's hard. You'll need people who will say, "You're doing the right thing," when your controller is telling you you're making a terrible mistake.

Community isn't just nice to have—it's essential. As Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." You need people in your corner who can help you hold the line when you're tempted to cave.

Responding to Guilt with Grace and Truth

The hardest part of setting boundaries is often the guilt. Your controller's pain is real. Their disappointment is genuine. And you care about them, which makes their distress difficult to witness. You'll be tempted to back down, to soften the boundary, to make it less uncomfortable for them.

This is where grace and truth must work together. Grace means you recognize their pain and don't minimize it. Truth means you maintain your boundary anyway because it's necessary and right.

Consider how Jesus handled the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22. The man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to sell everything and follow Him. The man went away sad, and Scripture says, "Jesus looked at him and loved him" (verse 21).

Jesus loved him. But Jesus didn't change the terms. He didn't chase after him. He didn't soften the requirement to make it more palatable. He spoke truth, loved the man, and let him walk away sad.

You can love your controller and still maintain your boundary. You can acknowledge their pain and still refuse to be controlled by it. You can have compassion for them and still protect yourself. These are not contradictory; they're the essence of healthy, mature love.

Brené Brown writes in *The Gifts of Imperfection*: "Compassionate people ask for what they need. They say no when they need to, and when they say yes, they mean it. They're compassionate because their boundaries keep them out of resentment." Boundaries aren't a failure of love; they're what make sustainable love possible.

Boundaries vs. Walls: Knowing the Difference

As you begin to set boundaries, be careful not to swing to the opposite extreme. Boundaries are healthy; walls are not. Here's the difference:

Boundaries:

- Selective, based on specific behaviors and patterns
- Allow for connection within defined limits
- Flexible—can be adjusted as relationships change
- Motivated by health and stewardship
- Say, "I care about you, and I need to protect myself"

Walls:

- Blanket rejection, refusing all connection
- Allow for no relationship at all
- Rigid—won't adjust even when circumstances warrant it
- Motivated by fear and bitterness

- Say, "I won't ever let anyone close enough to hurt me again"

Boundaries are about managing relationships wisely. Walls are about avoiding relationships entirely. As you heal from control, you'll be tempted to build walls—to decide that all closeness is dangerous, that all spiritual input is suspect, that you're better off completely independent. But isolation isn't health. It's just a different kind of prison.

The goal is to find people with whom you can have boundaried, mutual, empowering relationships—people who respect your agency, who celebrate your growth, who encourage your direct relationship with God. These people exist. Don't let your experience with one controlling person convince you that all relationship is unsafe.

Boundaries as Love

Ultimately, boundaries are an act of love—not just toward yourself, but toward the other person.

When you set boundaries with your controller, you're giving them an opportunity to have a real relationship with you instead of a managed one. You're inviting them to know the actual you, not just the compliant version you presented under pressure. You're offering them the chance to relate to you as an equal rather than a project.

Many controllers won't take that opportunity. They'll choose their need for control over the possibility of genuine relationship. And that's tragic—but it's their choice, not your responsibility.

Some, however, will rise to the occasion. When forced to relate to you as an autonomous person, they'll discover that they respect you more, enjoy you more, and connect with you more deeply. The relationship becomes mutual instead of one-sided. And that's worth the discomfort of the transition.

Pastor and author Tim Keller notes: "Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. Truth without love is harshness; it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot

really hear it. God's saving love in Christ... is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us. The merciful commitment strengthens us to see the truth about ourselves and repent. The conviction and repentance moves us to cling to and rest in God's mercy and grace."

Your boundaries offer both truth and love. They tell the truth about what you need and what you'll accept. And they offer love by inviting real relationship, by refusing to pretend, by giving the other person a chance to meet you where you actually are.

The Freedom of a Simple Yes and No

Jesus' instruction in Matthew 5:37—"Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no"—is revolutionary for those of us who've been trained to equivocate, over-explain, and make our boundaries negotiable.

A simple yes means: "I'm available for this. I have capacity for this. I choose this freely."

A simple no means: "I'm not available for this. I don't have capacity for this. I choose differently."

No lengthy justification. No apologizing for your limits. No inviting debate about whether your boundary is legitimate. Just a clear, honest answer that reflects your actual capacity and choice.

This simplicity feels risky because it removes your ability to manage the other person's response. If you just say no without explanation, they might be hurt. They might be angry. They might not understand. And you can't control that.

But here's the freedom: you were never meant to control their response. You're only responsible for your own integrity—for speaking truthfully, for honoring your limits, for stewarding your life well. Their response is between them and God.

As you practice this simplicity—yes when you mean yes, no when you mean no—you'll discover something surprising: most healthy people respect it. They

may be disappointed, but they accept it. They don't demand that you explain yourself into exhaustion. They don't make you responsible for their emotions. They hear your no, adjust their expectations, and move on.

And the people who *don't* respect it? That's valuable information. That tells you who is safe and who isn't. Who can handle your autonomy and who needs you to remain dependent. Who loves you and who loves controlling you.

Let your yes be yes. Let your no be no. And trust that God will honor your obedience to His design, even when others don't.

Reflection Questions:

1. What boundary do you most need to set right now? What's kept you from setting it?
2. When you think about setting boundaries with your controller, what fear comes up most strongly? Is that fear based on truth or on old training?
3. How did Jesus' example of boundaries challenge what you've been taught about Christian love and availability?
4. Where might you have built walls instead of boundaries? How could you begin to distinguish between protecting yourself and isolating yourself?
5. What would it look like to practice simple yes and no this week—in small decisions first, then building toward bigger ones?

Chapter 7: Rebuilding Trust—Listening for God's Voice Again

"My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." – John 10:27

Amanda sat in the coffee shop with her Bible open, trying to pray about a decision she needed to make. It was a straightforward choice—whether to accept a promotion at work—but she'd been paralyzed for two weeks.

She'd prayed. She'd searched Scripture. She felt a quiet sense of peace about saying yes. But every time she started to move forward, a voice in her head stopped her: *Are you sure that's God? Or is that just what you want? You've been wrong before. Remember what happened last time you trusted yourself?*

The voice sounded like her former spiritual mentor, the woman who'd spent three years "helping" Amanda hear God more clearly—which mostly meant telling Amanda she wasn't hearing God correctly and needed the mentor's interpretation. Amanda had been free from that relationship for eight months now, but the mentor's voice still echoed in her head, louder than the Spirit's whisper.

What if I'm wrong? Amanda thought. What if I think it's God but it's really just me?

She closed her Bible, feeling defeated. She'd been a Christian for fifteen years, but she felt like a toddler stumbling in the dark, unable to recognize her own Father's voice. The controller was gone, but the damage remained: Amanda no longer trusted herself to hear God, and she no longer trusted God to speak clearly enough that she could understand Him without a human translator.

What Amanda didn't know yet—what she was about to discover—was that her ability to hear God had never been taken from her. It had only been buried under layers of shame, doubt, and the constant noise of someone else's voice claiming to speak for Him. And buried things can be excavated. Muted things can be amplified. Lost confidence can be found again.

When Your Discernment Was Dismissed

One of the most devastating aspects of being controlled is the systematic dismantling of your confidence in your own spiritual discernment. Your controller didn't just make decisions for you—they taught you that you were incapable of hearing from God yourself.

This happened through patterns like:

Reinterpreting your sense of God's leading: You'd say, "I feel like God is calling me to..." and they'd respond, "I don't think that's God. I think that's your flesh/fear/pride/desire for independence." Over time, you learned that what you thought was God's voice was probably something else—something less trustworthy, less legitimate.

Claiming superior spiritual authority: They'd say things like, "God has given me oversight of your spiritual life," or "I have more experience hearing from God than you do," or "The Lord has shown me that you need..." The implication was clear: their discernment was reliable; yours was not.

Making you dependent on their confirmation: Even when you sensed God's leading, you learned to wait for their validation before moving forward. "Let me pray about that and get back to you," they'd say—and you'd wait, believing that your sense of direction only became legitimate once they approved it.

Questioning your motives: When you expressed what you believed God was saying, they'd respond with, "But have you considered that you might just want that because..." They taught you that your desires were inherently suspect and that "hearing from God" required stripping away everything you actually wanted until you were left with what they thought you should want.

Using fear to paralyze you: "I'm concerned you're being deceived," they'd say. "The enemy can masquerade as an angel of light. Without proper discernment, you're vulnerable." They created an environment where every spiritual impression felt dangerous unless it passed through their filter first.

The cumulative effect was the erosion of your confidence in the most fundamental aspect of your relationship with God: your ability to hear His voice. As Dallas Willard wrote in *Hearing God*, "Nothing is more important to

us than to hear what our Father has to say to us... And yet, nothing is more commonly misunderstood." Your controller capitalized on this natural uncertainty and turned it into chronic self-doubt.

The Theological Truth: You Can Hear God

Before we talk about how to rebuild your discernment, we need to establish the bedrock theological truth that makes it possible: *Jesus says His sheep hear His voice*. Not "some of His sheep." Not "His sheep with proper supervision." All His sheep. If you belong to Christ, you have the capacity to hear Him.

This isn't arrogance or presumption. It's taking Jesus at His word.

Consider what Scripture teaches:

The Spirit lives in you. "And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ" (Romans 8:9). If you're a believer, the Holy Spirit—the very presence of God—lives in you. Not next to you. Not available through a human mediator. *In you*.

The Spirit teaches you. "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26). The Spirit's job description includes teaching you directly. He doesn't need someone else to do His work for Him.

You have access to God's throne. "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). You approach God's throne—not someone else's interpretation of God's throne. With confidence—not with cowering uncertainty that requires human validation.

God speaks through His Word. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy

3:16-17). Scripture equips you—not just pastors, not just mature believers, but you. God gave you His Word so you could know Him and hear from Him.

You have the mind of Christ. "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). Not "we can access the mind of Christ through proper intermediaries." *We have* the mind of Christ. Present tense. Already given.

A.W. Tozer, in *The Pursuit of God*, wrote: "Every farmer knows the hunger of the wilderness, that hunger which no modern farm machinery, no improved agricultural methods, can quite destroy. No matter how well prepared the soil, how well kept the fences, how carefully painted the buildings, let the owner neglect for a while his prized and valued acres and they will revert again to the wild and be swallowed by the jungle or the wasteland. The bias of nature is toward the wilderness, never toward the fruitful field."

But when it comes to hearing God, the bias is not toward wilderness—it's toward connection. God is not reluctant to communicate with you. He's not hiding from you. He's not speaking in such obscure ways that you need a professional interpreter. He wants to be known. He wants to be heard. And He's equipped you to hear Him.

Why You Stopped Trusting Your Discernment

Understanding why you lost confidence in your ability to hear God is important for rebuilding it. Several things happened:

Your Controller's Voice Became Louder Than God's

When someone constantly speaks over you, interprets your experiences for you, and claims authority to confirm or deny what God is saying to you, their voice inevitably becomes the loudest one in your head. You learned to filter everything through "What would they say about this?" before you even fully listened to what God might be saying.

This is exactly what Jesus warned against in Matthew 23 when He confronted the Pharisees: "They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other

people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them... Everything they do is done for people to see... They love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others" (verses 4-7).

The Pharisees had inserted themselves between people and God. They'd made themselves necessary. And Jesus' response was fierce: "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers" (verse 8). One Teacher. Not a hierarchy of necessary mediators. One Teacher—and He teaches all of His students directly.

You Internalized Their Doubt About Your Capacity

When someone repeatedly questions your spiritual maturity, your ability to hear God, your discernment, you begin to believe them. Their external voice becomes your internal voice. Even when they're no longer in your life, their assessment of you continues to shape how you see yourself.

Psychologists call this "internalized oppression"—when you take the oppressor's view of you and make it your own. You become your own controller, questioning every spiritual impression, dismissing every sense of God's leading, assuming that anything you think or feel is probably wrong.

You Confused Uncertainty with Inability

Your controller taught you that uncertainty means you haven't heard from God. If you weren't 100% sure, if you had any questions, if the path wasn't completely clear, they interpreted that as evidence that you needed more time to discern (i.e., more time for them to tell you what God was saying).

But uncertainty is normal. Even mature believers don't hear God with crystalline clarity every time. Sometimes God speaks in whispers. Sometimes He gives just enough light for the next step. Sometimes He allows ambiguity because ambiguity requires faith, and faith is what He's cultivating in you.

As Henri Nouwen wrote in *Discernment*: "Discernment is not a formula or a technique. It's a spiritual discipline that demands our full attention... Discernment involves uncertainty, waiting, and sometimes not knowing." Uncertainty doesn't mean you're failing to hear God. Often, it means you're in the process of learning to trust Him more deeply.

You Experienced Real Consequences When You "Got It Wrong"

Maybe you did make choices that didn't work out well. Maybe you misread a situation or made a decision that had negative consequences. And your controller used those experiences as evidence that you couldn't be trusted.

But here's the truth: everyone makes mistakes. Everyone misreads situations sometimes. Everyone has experiences where they thought they were following God's leading and it didn't turn out as expected. That's called being human. It doesn't mean you can't hear God—it means you're learning, growing, and sometimes getting it wrong, just like everyone else in the history of faith.

Consider the disciples. They constantly misunderstood Jesus. They got it wrong repeatedly. Peter declared that Jesus should never go to the cross—and Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23). And yet, Jesus didn't revoke Peter's capacity to hear God. He kept teaching him, kept trusting him, kept working with him.

God is not waiting for you to achieve perfection before He trusts you to hear Him. He's teaching you as you go, and mistakes are part of the curriculum.

Distinguishing God's Voice from Others

As you rebuild your confidence in hearing God, one of the most important skills is learning to distinguish God's voice from other voices—your controller's voice (internalized), your own desires, cultural messages, or even the enemy's accusations.

Here's how Scripture describes God's voice:

God's Voice Aligns with Scripture

God never contradicts His written Word. If you sense a leading that contradicts clear biblical teaching, it's not from God. This is why knowing Scripture is so crucial—it's your primary tool for discernment.

Your controller may have used Scripture selectively, pulling verses out of context to support their agenda. But when you read Scripture holistically—in context, with attention to the full counsel of God—you'll find that God's character and His ways are consistent. The Spirit doesn't lead you one way while the Word says another.

God's Voice Brings Freedom, Not Bondage

Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 10:32). God's voice liberates. It may challenge you. It may call you to hard things. It may require sacrifice. But it doesn't enslave you. It doesn't crush you. It doesn't leave you feeling perpetually inadequate.

If a voice in your head is telling you that you're fundamentally broken, that you'll never be enough, that you're always one mistake away from disaster, that's not God. That's the residue of control or the voice of the enemy. God's voice corrects, but it doesn't condemn (Romans 8:1). It convicts, but it also provides a path forward.

God's Voice Is Personal and Specific

God doesn't speak in vague generalities that could apply to anyone. He speaks to you—the specific person He made, with your unique circumstances, calling, and personality. His guidance fits your life like a tailor-made garment, not like generic advice from a fortune cookie.

When you sense God's leading, it often comes with a specificity that feels personal: "This job is for you." "This person needs your encouragement today." "Wait on this decision." "Move forward despite your fear." The specificity is part of how you know it's Him—He knows you, so He speaks to the particulars of your life.

God's Voice Is Patient

God doesn't rush you. He doesn't manipulate you with urgency or pressure. "You must decide now!" is more often the voice of human controllers or the enemy than the voice of God. God is sovereign over time. He can afford to be patient with your process.

As Psalm 37:7 says, "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him." Wait patiently. God's timeline is often slower than ours, and He's comfortable with that. If you feel frantic pressure to decide immediately, step back and examine where that pressure is coming from.

God's Voice Produces Fruit

"By their fruit you will recognize them," Jesus said (Matthew 7:16). The same principle applies to discernment. When you follow what you believe is God's leading, what fruit does it produce over time?

The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)—should increase, not decrease. If following a particular sense of direction consistently produces anxiety, resentment, exhaustion, or spiritual deadness, it's worth re-examining whether that direction was really from God.

This doesn't mean every decision will feel good or produce immediate positive results. Sometimes obedience is costly. But over time, obedience to God's voice produces spiritual fruit in your life and in the lives of others.

Practical Steps to Rebuild Your Discernment

Knowing the theology is important. But you also need practical tools to rebuild your ability to hear God's voice with confidence. Here's how:

1. Create Space for Silence

Your controller filled your life with noise—their voice, their opinions, their interpretations, their demands. To hear God again, you need to create space for silence.

Set aside time regularly—even just 10-15 minutes—to sit in silence before God. Don't fill the time with a to-do list of prayers. Don't bring an agenda. Just sit. Be still. Listen.

This will feel uncomfortable at first. Your mind will wander. You'll feel anxious about "wasting time." You may not hear anything profound. That's okay. You're creating the conditions for intimacy. You're practicing being with God without performing, without managing, without producing.

As Richard Foster writes in *Celebration of Discipline*: "In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds... If he can keep us engaged in 'muchness' and 'manyness,' he will rest satisfied. Psychiatrist Carl Jung once remarked, 'Hurry is not of the Devil; it is the Devil!'"

Silence is where you'll begin to distinguish God's voice from the noise. It's where you'll learn that His voice is often quiet, gentle, and easily drowned out by hurry and distraction.

2. Journal Your Impressions

Start keeping a journal of what you sense God might be saying. Don't censor yourself. Don't wait until you're absolutely certain. Just write down your impressions, your questions, the thoughts that arise during prayer or Bible reading.

Over time, you'll be able to look back and see patterns. You'll notice which impressions bore fruit and which didn't. You'll start to recognize God's "voice"—the particular ways He speaks to you, the themes He emphasizes, the ways He gets your attention.

The journal also serves as evidence against the lie that you never hear from God. When you're tempted to believe you're spiritually deaf, you can look back and see: "Actually, here are ten instances where I sensed God's leading and it proved true."

3. Test Everything Against Scripture

Make it a habit to check your sense of God's leading against Scripture. Not proof-texting—not finding a random verse that seems to support what you want to do. But asking: "Does this align with God's character as revealed in Scripture? Does it fit with biblical principles? Does it contradict any clear teaching?"

This requires knowing Scripture, which means you need to be reading it regularly. Not just devotionally, but studiously. Get a good study Bible. Read commentaries. Understand context. Learn to handle the Word accurately (2 Timothy 2:15).

Your controller may have used Scripture as a weapon—pulling verses out of context to support their control. You're going to learn to use Scripture as it was intended: as a lamp to your feet and a light to your path (Psalm 119:105), illuminating God's character and ways.

4. Start Small and Build Confidence

Don't begin by trying to discern God's will for major life decisions. Start with small things:

- "Which friend should I reach out to today?"
- "What should I pray about during my quiet time?"
- "Is there a passage of Scripture I should meditate on?"
- "What act of kindness can I do this week?"

Practice hearing and obeying in low-stakes situations. As you see God's faithfulness in small things, your confidence will grow for bigger things. This is the principle Jesus taught: "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" (Luke 16:10).

5. Seek Wisdom, Not Permission

There's a difference between seeking wisdom from mature believers and seeking permission for your decisions. Wisdom sounds like: "Here's what I'm

sensing. Can you help me think through this? What do you see that I might be missing?"

Permission sounds like: "I can't make this decision until you tell me it's okay."

Seek out people who will ask you questions that help you discern rather than people who will tell you what to do. Good questions sound like:

- "What are you sensing when you pray about this?"
- "How does this align with what you know about God's character?"
- "What would it look like to trust God in this decision?"
- "What fruit do you imagine this choice could produce?"

These questions help you exercise your own discernment muscles. They don't bypass your responsibility to hear God—they support it.

6. Expect God to Speak in Ways That Are Personal to You

God doesn't speak to everyone the same way. Some people hear God primarily through Scripture. Others through circumstances or the counsel of wise friends. Some through dreams or visions (though this is less common than some charismatic traditions suggest). Many through a quiet internal sense of conviction or peace.

There's no single "right" way to hear from God. Pay attention to how He tends to speak to you. What patterns do you notice? When have you felt most certain of His leading, and how did that leading come?

God made you unique, and He speaks to you in ways that fit how He wired you. Don't try to force your experience to match someone else's. Learn to recognize God's particular voice in your particular life.

The Healing of Intimacy with Christ

Ultimately, learning to hear God's voice is about restoring intimacy with Christ. Your controller interrupted that intimacy, inserting themselves

between you and Jesus. They became the mediator, the interpreter, the gatekeeper.

But Jesus is the only mediator you need: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). Not one God and two mediators (Jesus and your spiritual mentor). One. Jesus alone.

Rebuilding intimacy with Christ means learning to relate to Him directly again:

You Can Approach Him Without Fear

Hebrews 4:16 invites you to "approach God's throne of grace with confidence." Not tentatively. Not through a human gatekeeper. With confidence—because Jesus has opened the way.

Your controller may have taught you that God is disappointed in you, frustrated with your failures, reluctant to hear from you unless you've gotten your act together. But that's not the God revealed in Jesus. Jesus welcomed children, ate with sinners, touched lepers, restored the broken. He didn't require perfection before relationship. He offered relationship as the path to transformation.

You Can Be Honest with Him

Jesus' closest followers—Peter, John, Mary, Martha—were honest with Him. They questioned Him. They expressed doubt. They told Him when they were confused or afraid. And Jesus didn't reject them for their honesty. He engaged with them, taught them, loved them through their mess.

You can bring your real self to Jesus—the doubts, the fears, the anger, the confusion. You don't have to perform or pretend. In fact, as Brennan Manning wrote, "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle." But I would add: the greatest barrier to knowing Jesus is pretending to be someone you're not in His presence.

You Can Trust His Gentleness

Your controller may have been harsh, demanding, quick to correct. But Jesus is "gentle and humble in heart" (Matthew 11:29). When He corrects you, it's with kindness. When He teaches you, it's with patience. When you fail, He restores you with tenderness.

Isaiah 42:3 prophesies about the Messiah: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." If you're bruised—and you are, after years of control—Jesus will not break you. He'll tend to you gently. He'll protect what little flame remains in you and fan it back into fire.

You Can Rest in His Approval

You no longer need to earn approval from a human authority figure. You already have the approval that matters: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). No condemnation. You're already approved, already accepted, already beloved.

This is the foundation of holy confidence. Not confidence in yourself—you'll still make mistakes. But confidence in His love for you, His commitment to you, His patience with your growth, and His promise that He who began a good work in you will complete it (Philippians 1:6).

When You're Not Sure If It's God

You will have moments—many of them—when you're not sure if what you're sensing is really God or just your own thoughts. This uncertainty is normal, and it's okay. Here's what to do:

First, don't panic. Uncertainty doesn't mean you're failing. It means you're learning. Even mature believers experience uncertainty. The difference is they've learned to trust God through it rather than being paralyzed by it.

Second, give it time. If you're not sure, and it's not urgent, wait. God's voice tends to become clearer over time. If it's really God, the sense of leading will persist or grow stronger. If it's not, it will fade.

Third, look for confirmation in multiple ways. Does Scripture support it? Does it align with wise counsel from people who know you well? Do you have

a growing sense of peace about it? God rarely speaks through just one channel. He confirms His leading in multiple ways.

Fourth, step out in faith if you've done your due diligence. At some point, you have to act. You've prayed, you've waited, you've sought counsel, you've checked Scripture, and you still have some uncertainty. That's okay. Move forward with what you have. Trust that if you're off course, God is faithful to redirect you.

As Dallas Willard wrote: "God will not allow us to go wrong for long if we are intent on not going wrong." If your heart's desire is to follow God, He will not allow you to wander far from His path without correction. He's committed to you. He's not setting you up to fail.

The Promise: You Will Hear His Voice

Jesus didn't say, "Some of my sheep hear my voice." He said, "*My sheep hear my voice*" (John 10:27). If you're His, you hear Him. Not perfectly. Not always clearly. But truly.

The capacity was never taken from you. It was only buried, muted, overridden by a louder voice claiming to speak for God. But it's still there. The Spirit still lives in you. God still speaks. And as you practice listening—patiently, persistently, without the noise of a human controller—you'll begin to hear Him again.

Theologian Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase *The Message*, renders John 10:27-28 this way: "The sheep that are my own hear my voice and listen to me; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life; they shall never perish, nor shall anyone snatch them from my hand."

Notice: *they hear and listen*. Two actions. Hearing is passive—the sound reaches your ears. Listening is active—you attend to the sound, process it, respond to it. You're rebuilding both: the confidence that you *do* hear, and the practice of actively listening.

The controller tried to snatch you from His hand—to insert themselves as necessary mediators, to make you dependent on their voice instead of His. But Jesus promises: no one will snatch you away. You belong to Him. He knows you. And He's fully capable of making Himself known to you.

It's time to listen again. Not for your controller's voice. Not for the internalized doubts they planted. But for the Shepherd's voice—the One who knows you, loves you, and has been patiently waiting for you to remember that He speaks directly to your heart.

He's speaking. You can hear Him. And as you learn to listen, you'll discover that His voice is the one you've been longing for all along—the voice that brings life, freedom, peace, and the settled assurance that you're known and loved completely.

Listen. He's calling your name.

Reflection Questions:

1. When was the last time you felt confident that you heard from God? What made you confident? What has changed since then?
2. What specific messages did your controller teach you about your ability to hear God? Write them down. Then next to each one, write the biblical truth that counters it.
3. What might it look like to practice listening to God this week in one small, low-stakes area of your life?
4. If you could ask God one question with the certainty that He would answer clearly, what would you ask? Why not ask Him—and then wait, listen, and see what happens?
5. What would change in your daily life if you truly believed that you can hear God's voice directly, without needing someone else's permission or confirmation?

Chapter 8: Compassion Without Compromise

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." – John 1:14

Thomas stood in the church parking lot, watching his former mentor across the way.

It had been a year since he'd set firm boundaries, a year since he'd stopped the weekly "discipleship" meetings that had slowly suffocated his soul. A year of rebuilding his confidence, learning to hear God's voice again, discovering who he was when no one was managing him.

And now, here she was—looking older, more tired than he remembered. He watched her greet people with the same warmth she'd once shown him, the same genuine care that had drawn him in initially. For a moment, he felt the old pull: *Maybe she wasn't that bad. Maybe I overreacted. Maybe I should go apologize.*

But then he remembered. The countless hours spent justifying his decisions. The way she'd made him feel incompetent, spiritually immature, incapable of navigating life without her oversight. The exhaustion. The loss of himself. The way his relationship with God had been filtered through her interpretation of everything.

No, he hadn't overreacted. The boundaries were necessary. The distance was healthy.

But as he watched her—truly watched her—he saw something he'd been too hurt to see before: she was wounded too. The need to control wasn't born from malice; it was born from her own fear, her own unhealed places, her own desperate attempt to matter in a world where she felt unseen. She'd tried to save him because somewhere deep down, she needed to be someone's savior to feel valuable.

Thomas felt an unexpected wave of compassion. Not the kind that made him want to return to the relationship. Not the kind that minimized what she'd done. But a genuine sadness for the brokenness that drove her to control, for the loneliness that must accompany her need to manage everyone around her, for the anxiety that never let her rest.

He could have compassion without compromise. He could see her pain without returning to be managed by it. He could pray for her healing without sacrificing his own. He could love her from a distance while refusing to re-enter her control.

This was the tension he was learning to hold: grace and truth, together. Just like Jesus.

The Wounded Heart Behind the Control

Understanding why someone controlled you doesn't excuse their behavior, but it does help you respond with greater wisdom and compassion. Controllers aren't villains in a story—they're broken people using broken tools to manage their own pain.

Most controllers are driven by one or more of these deeper wounds:

Unhealed Trauma

Many people who become controllers have experienced powerlessness in their own past—abuse, abandonment, betrayal, trauma. Control becomes their way of ensuring they'll never be that vulnerable again. If they can manage everything and everyone around them, they can create the illusion of safety. Your life became part of that safety system.

Psychologist Dr. Diane Langberg writes in *Suffering and the Heart of God*: "Those who have been traumatized often develop a need to control their environment as a way of managing their fear. The world has proven itself unsafe, so they attempt to make it safe by controlling every variable they can—including the people in their lives."

Profound Insecurity

Some controllers are driven by deep insecurity about their own worth. They need to be needed. They need to be essential. They need to be the wise one, the mature one, the one with answers. Your dependence on them became the proof of their value. If you no longer need them, they lose their sense of purpose and identity.

This is why they react so strongly when you set boundaries. It's not just about losing influence over you—it's about losing the thing that made them feel like they mattered.

Spiritual Formation That Emphasized Control

Some controllers learned this pattern in their own spiritual formation. They had a mentor who managed them, and they're simply replicating what they experienced. They genuinely believe this is what discipleship looks like. They don't realize they're perpetuating a dysfunctional system—they think they're being faithful to a model they were taught.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned of this in *Life Together*: "Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams."

Unresolved Anxiety

Some controllers are driven by chronic anxiety. They catastrophize. They imagine worst-case scenarios constantly. Your independence triggers their anxiety because they can't control the outcomes. Managing you is their way of managing their own fear. They need to know where you are, what you're doing, what you're deciding—because not knowing feels unbearable.

Theological Misunderstanding

Some controllers genuinely believe they're doing God's work. They've been taught—or have convinced themselves—that God has given them special

authority over your life. They see themselves as shepherds protecting sheep, not realizing they've become wolves in shepherds' clothing. Their theology gives them permission to control, and they're blind to the harm they're causing.

N.T. Wright notes in *Simply Christian*: "Many Christians today have made 'authority' into something it was never meant to be... Authority in the church is always given for the purpose of building up, never for knocking down or controlling."

Understanding these deeper wounds doesn't mean you return to the relationship. It doesn't mean you minimize the harm. But it does help you see your controller as a suffering person, not just as someone who made you suffer. And that shift—from seeing them as villain to seeing them as wounded—is the beginning of compassion.

The Difference Between Compassion and Enabling

Compassion feels what the other person feels. Enabling helps them avoid the consequences they need to face.

Compassion says, "I see your pain, and I care about you." Enabling says, "I see your pain, and I'll do whatever it takes to make it go away—even if that means sacrificing my own health or allowing you to continue harmful patterns."

Here's how to tell the difference:

Compassion maintains boundaries; enabling abandons them.

You can care about someone's distress while still holding firm to the limits you've set. Compassion says, "I understand you're hurt by my boundary, but the boundary stands." Enabling says, "You're hurt, so I'll remove the boundary to make you feel better."

Compassion allows natural consequences; enabling prevents them.

Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is allow someone to experience the consequences of their choices. If your controller loses relationships because they can't stop controlling people, that's information they need.

Compassion doesn't rescue them from that reality. Enabling tries to cushion every blow, preventing the growth that consequences produce.

Compassion offers presence without fixing; enabling tries to solve.

You can be emotionally present to someone's pain without trying to fix it for them. Compassion says, "I'm sorry you're struggling." Enabling says, "Let me fix this for you," and then takes over responsibility for their emotional state, their decisions, their life.

Compassion tells the truth; enabling preserves peace at any cost.

Real love tells the truth even when truth is uncomfortable. Enabling prioritizes harmony over honesty, allowing harmful patterns to continue rather than naming them. As Ephesians 4:15 instructs, we're to speak "the truth in love"—both elements are essential.

Compassion trusts God with the other person; enabling takes over God's role.

Compassion says, "God loves you more than I do, and I trust Him with your journey." Enabling says, "If I don't manage this, everything will fall apart," which is essentially claiming that your vigilance is more reliable than God's sovereignty.

Psychologist Dr. Henry Cloud writes in *Necessary Endings*: "Compassion is not the same as enabling. In fact, true compassion sometimes demands that we allow someone to experience the pain that their own choices have created, because that pain may be the only thing that motivates them to change."

Balancing Mercy and Truth

Jesus is described as "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Not grace without truth—that's sentimentality. Not truth without grace—that's harshness. Both, together, in perfect balance.

This is your model for relating to your controller:

Truth Names What Happened

Truth doesn't minimize, excuse, or spiritualize away harm. Truth says:

- "What you did was controlling, not loving."
- "Your behavior violated my boundaries repeatedly."
- "The relationship was unhealthy, and I needed to step away."
- "Your need to manage my life caused real damage."

This truthfulness isn't cruelty—it's honesty. And honesty is necessary for both healing and any possibility of future relationship. As long as the harm remains unnamed, it cannot be addressed. As long as the pattern remains unacknowledged, it will continue.

Theologian Miroslav Volf, writing about reconciliation after violence in *The End of Memory*, emphasizes: "To remember wrongdoing is not to be vindictive; it's to be truthful. Without truthfulness about what happened, we cannot move forward toward healing."

Grace Recognizes Their Humanity

Grace sees beyond the harm to the human being who caused it. Grace says:

- "You're a broken person, just like me."
- "You were doing the best you could with what you had."
- "I don't define you solely by the harm you caused."
- "I can see the pain that drove your need to control."

Grace doesn't erase truth, but it holds truth with tenderness. It refuses to dehumanize the person who hurt you. It resists the temptation to make them into a monster when they're actually a wounded person who wounded others.

Truth Sets Boundaries

Truth protects you and others by saying, "This behavior is not acceptable, and I won't allow it to continue." Truth establishes limits:

- "I'm willing to have a relationship with you, but not under the same terms."
- "I need you to respect my autonomy and stop trying to manage my decisions."
- "If you can't honor my boundaries, we can't have contact."

Grace Leaves the Door Open—But Not Unconditionally

Grace says, "I'm open to relationship, but it has to be a healthy one." Grace doesn't demand that the person remain frozen in their dysfunction forever. It allows for the possibility of change, growth, repentance. But it doesn't return to dysfunction in the name of mercy.

This is crucial: grace doesn't mean going back to an unhealthy relationship. It means being willing to build a new, healthier relationship if they're willing to change. The door isn't open for a return to the old patterns. It's open for something different.

Truth Holds Them Accountable

Truth requires acknowledgment of harm and genuine change before reconciliation. It doesn't accept cheap grace—quick apologies followed by unchanged behavior. Truth says:

- "I need to see consistent change over time, not just words."
- "An apology without changed behavior isn't really an apology."
- "I'm watching for fruit, not just professions."

Grace Prays for Them

Even when you can't be in relationship with them, grace continues to pray for their wholeness, their healing, their freedom from the patterns that enslaved them and harmed you. Grace intercedes, asking God to do the work in them that you cannot do.

Pastor and author Timothy Keller writes in *The Reason for God*: "Forgiveness means refusing to make them pay for what they did. But that does not mean you have to trust them again immediately or return to the relationship at all... Forgiveness and trust are two different things. Forgiveness is granted; trust is earned."

How Jesus Modeled Compassion With Boundaries

Jesus is the ultimate example of holding grace and truth together without compromise. Look at how He interacted with people who opposed Him, hurt Him, or needed boundaries:

With Peter After the Denial

Peter betrayed Jesus at the moment Jesus needed him most—denying three times that he even knew Him. This was profound woundedness, deep rejection. Yet after the resurrection, Jesus didn't shame Peter or punish him. He restored him with grace.

But notice: Jesus also addressed the issue directly. He asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" (John 21:15-17)—once for each denial. He didn't pretend the betrayal hadn't happened. He brought truth into the light. And then, having addressed it, He entrusted Peter with mission: "Feed my sheep."

Grace restored. Truth addressed the harm. And the combination made genuine relationship possible again.

With the Woman Caught in Adultery

The religious leaders brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus, ready to stone her. Jesus protected her with grace: "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). He refused to participate in her condemnation.

But He also spoke truth to her: "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11). He didn't excuse her behavior. He didn't say, "It's okay, do whatever you want." He offered grace—"Neither do I condemn you"—and truth—"Go and sin no more."

With the Rich Young Ruler

When the rich young ruler came to Jesus asking about eternal life, Jesus looked at him and loved him (Mark 10:21). But Jesus also set a boundary: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

The young man went away sad because he couldn't meet Jesus' terms. And Jesus let him go. He didn't chase after him. He didn't soften the requirements to make discipleship more palatable. He loved the man and let him walk away.

This is crucial: Jesus didn't need the relationship more than He needed integrity. He didn't compromise truth to preserve connection. He offered relationship on terms that were healthy and honest, and when the man couldn't accept those terms, Jesus released him with sadness but without pursuing him.

With Judas

Even with Judas—the disciple who would betray Him—Jesus showed both grace and truth. He called Judas "friend" even in the moment of betrayal (Matthew 26:50). He gave Judas every opportunity to repent. He loved him to the end.

But Jesus also spoke truth: "Woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born" (Matthew 26:24). He named what was happening. He didn't pretend betrayal was acceptable. He held both love and truth simultaneously.

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, paraphrases John 1:14 this way: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish."

Generous inside and out—that's grace. True from start to finish—that's truth. Jesus never sacrificed one for the other.

Loving the Controller Without Losing Yourself

So how do you actually practice compassion without compromise? How do you love someone who hurt you while protecting yourself from further harm?

1. Acknowledge Their Humanity Without Minimizing Their Choices

Your controller is a human being created in God's image, worthy of dignity and respect. They're also someone who made harmful choices. Both are true. You can acknowledge their brokenness without excusing their behavior.

Prayer can help: "God, I see that [name] is hurting. I see their fear, their insecurity, their wounds. I pray for their healing. And I also acknowledge that what they did to me was wrong and caused real damage. Help me hold both truths."

2. Set Clear Expectations for Any Future Contact

If you're willing to have any relationship with them—even limited contact—be crystal clear about what the terms are:

- "I'm willing to have coffee occasionally, but I need you to respect that I won't be discussing my personal decisions with you."
- "I'm open to being in the same spaces at church, but I need you to understand that I'm not returning to weekly meetings."
- "If we're going to rebuild trust, I need to see that you've done your own work—that you've addressed the patterns that led to the controlling behavior."

Don't leave room for ambiguity. Ambiguity invites them to test the boundaries, to slowly creep back into old patterns.

3. Allow Natural Consequences

If your controller is experiencing loss—loss of influence, loss of relationships, loss of their sense of purpose—don't rescue them from that pain. That pain may be what God uses to get their attention.

This doesn't mean you celebrate their suffering. It means you trust that God is at work even in hard circumstances, and you don't interfere with what He might be doing.

As Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend write in *How People Grow*: "Growth happens when people face the truth about themselves and their situation. When we protect people from consequences, we rob them of the very thing that could produce growth."

4. Pray for Their Freedom, Not Just for Reconciliation

Your prayer shouldn't be primarily, "God, restore this relationship." It should be, "God, set them free from the patterns that keep them trapped. Heal their wounds. Help them see what they're doing and why. Give them the courage to change."

You're praying for their good, not for your own comfort. And sometimes their good requires them to face painful truths—truths you cannot force them to see.

5. Grieve the Relationship That Could Have Been

There's legitimate grief here. You entered the relationship hoping for support, encouragement, spiritual growth. What you got was control. It's okay to grieve the loss of what you hoped for, even as you acknowledge the reality of what actually happened.

Grief isn't resentment. Grief says, "I'm sad this didn't turn out differently. I'm sad they couldn't love me in healthy ways. I'm sad I lost years to this dysfunction." Grief is honest. And in grief, you honor both the hope you had and the reality you faced.

Henri Nouwen wrote in *The Inner Voice of Love*: "The great challenge is living your wounds through instead of thinking them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds deeply than to understand them, better to let them enter into your silence than to talk about them."

6. Model the Health You Wish They Had

One of the most powerful forms of compassion is demonstrating what healthy relationship looks like. Your boundaries, your emotional health, your direct relationship with God—these become a witness to a different way of being.

You're not responsible for whether they learn from your example. But you can offer it nonetheless. Sometimes people change because they see someone living differently and realize there's another option.

7. Release Them to God's Justice and Mercy

Ultimately, your controller's fate is not in your hands. You're not their judge. You're not responsible for their repentance or their consequences. God is the judge, and He's far more just and far more merciful than you could ever be.

Romans 12:19 instructs: "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." Leaving room for God's wrath means you don't take justice into your own hands. You trust that God sees, God knows, and God will deal with them appropriately.

And God's "dealing with them" may look like discipline, or it may look like drawing them to repentance, or it may look like allowing them to experience the natural consequences of their choices. But it's His responsibility, not yours.

What Compassion Does Not Require

As you navigate compassion for your controller, be clear about what it doesn't require:

Compassion does not require reconciliation. You can have compassion for someone from a great distance. You can pray for them, wish them well, see their humanity—all without re-entering relationship with them.

Compassion does not require trust. Trust is earned through consistent, changed behavior over time. You can be compassionate toward someone you don't trust. In fact, healthy compassion recognizes that trust must be rebuilt, not automatically given.

Compassion does not require you to explain yourself endlessly. You can be compassionate and still refuse to justify your boundaries repeatedly. "I understand you're hurt, but my decision stands" is compassionate. Engaging in endless debates about whether your boundary is legitimate is not required.

Compassion does not require you to manage their emotions. They may be hurt, disappointed, angry. That's their work to process, not yours to fix. You can acknowledge their emotions without taking responsibility for them.

Compassion does not require you to pretend the harm didn't happen. Real compassion is truthful. It doesn't rewrite history to make the other person comfortable. It acknowledges what was and hopes for something different going forward.

Compassion does not require you to sacrifice your own healing. Your healing is not less important than their comfort. God cares about your wholeness as much as He cares about theirs. Protecting your healing process is not selfishness—it's stewardship.

Therapist and author Nedra Glover Tawwab writes in *Set Boundaries, Find Peace*: "Compassion is not co-signing someone's dysfunction. You can love people and refuse to participate in their chaos."

When They Won't Change

The hardest reality you may face is this: your controller may never change. They may never acknowledge the harm. They may never see their patterns. They may continue to believe they were right, that you were the problem, that your boundaries are evidence of your spiritual immaturity.

If this is the case, you'll need to grieve this too—the loss of hope for their transformation, at least in the timeframe you can see. And you'll need to practice compassion without any expectation of reconciliation or vindication.

This is where your faith becomes crucial. You trust that God sees. God knows. God will deal with them in His way and His time. You release both the person and the outcome to Him.

Jesus modeled this on the cross. He was being murdered by people who refused to see the truth, refused to acknowledge what they were doing. And He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

He had compassion even for those who would never repent. Even for those who would never change. Even for those who, in that moment, were actively harming Him.

That's the pinnacle of compassion without compromise. Jesus didn't come down from the cross. He didn't excuse their behavior. He didn't minimize the harm. He spoke truth—"They don't know what they're doing"—and He extended grace—"Father, forgive them." And then He trusted the Father with the outcome.

You may be called to do the same: to hold truth and grace simultaneously, to pray for their forgiveness and healing, and to trust God with whether and how they change—all while maintaining the boundaries that protect your own soul.

The Long Obedience in the Same Direction

Practicing compassion without compromise is not a one-time decision. It's an ongoing discipline, a "long obedience in the same direction," to borrow Eugene Peterson's phrase.

Some days, you'll lean too far toward grace and be tempted to soften your boundaries. Other days, you'll lean too far toward truth and be tempted toward bitterness. The goal is to keep returning to center, to keep asking God to help you hold both.

Over time, you'll find that compassion becomes less of a burden and more of a freedom. When you release someone to God—truly release them—you're no longer trapped by resentment, no longer controlled by their opinion of you, no longer bound by the need for them to acknowledge what they did.

You're free. Free to see them clearly. Free to love them from a safe distance. Free to pray for them without needing anything from them. Free to hope for their healing while trusting God with the timeline.

This is the paradox: compassion without compromise doesn't keep you stuck in relationship with someone who harmed you. It sets you free from them in a way that bitterness never could. Because bitterness keeps you bound. Compassion releases you both.

The Hope of Transformation—For Both of You

Finally, remember this: the God who is healing you is capable of healing them too. The same grace that's restoring your confidence can restore their humility. The same truth that's setting you free can convict them. The same love that's holding you can reach them.

You may not see it in your lifetime. You may never see it. But God is faithful, and He's not finished with anyone until they take their last breath. Your controller's story isn't over. And neither is yours.

As you practice compassion without compromise, you become a living testimony to the possibility of change. You prove that people can heal from control, can learn to hear God's voice again, can establish healthy boundaries, can walk in freedom. And that testimony—even if your controller never acknowledges it—speaks powerfully to a watching world about the kind of transformation God makes possible.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."

The compassion you're learning to extend—the ability to see someone's woundedness without being controlled by it, to love without losing yourself, to hold grace and truth together—this is preparing you to comfort others who will walk similar paths. Your suffering is not wasted. Your healing is not just for you. And your compassion, hard-won and dearly bought, is part of how God

will use you to bring freedom to others still trapped in the same patterns you escaped.

Full of grace and truth. Like Jesus. This is who you're becoming. And this is the hope for everyone involved—that all of us, broken and beloved, would learn to love one another the way He loves us: with grace that doesn't excuse and truth that doesn't condemn, with mercy that doesn't enable and justice that doesn't destroy, with compassion that sees clearly and boundaries that protect lovingly.

This is the way of Jesus. And it's the way forward.

Reflection Questions:

1. What emotions surface when you think about having compassion for the person who controlled you? Can you name them honestly before God?
2. Where are you tempted to lean too far—toward harsh truth without grace, or toward sentimental grace without truth? What would balance look like for you?
3. What would it mean for you to pray for your controller's freedom and healing, even if you never reconcile with them?
4. Are there areas where you might be enabling them—protecting them from consequences, managing their emotions, sacrificing your own healing for their comfort? What would it look like to stop?
5. How has God been teaching you to hold both grace and truth? Where do you see growth? Where do you still need help?

Chapter 9: Forgiveness That Frees Your Soul

"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." – Colossians 3:13

Katherine sat in her counselor's office, staring at her hands.

"I know I'm supposed to forgive her," she said quietly. "I know that's what Christians do. But I'm so angry. Every time I think about what she did—how she controlled me, how she made me doubt myself, how she claimed to speak for God—I feel rage all over again. How am I supposed to forgive when I'm still this angry?"

Her counselor leaned forward. "Katherine, who told you that you have to stop being angry before you can forgive?"

Katherine looked up, confused. "Isn't that what forgiveness is? Letting go of the anger? Moving on?"

"No," her counselor said gently. "That's not what forgiveness is at all. Forgiveness isn't a feeling. It's not the absence of anger or pain. Forgiveness is a decision—a decision to release someone from your judgment and entrust them to God's judgment instead. You can be furiously angry and still forgive. You can be deeply hurt and still forgive. Forgiveness doesn't erase your emotions. It redirects them."

Katherine sat with this for a long moment. She'd been taught that forgiveness meant pretending everything was okay, that good Christians don't hold grudges, that she needed to "forgive and forget" and move on as if nothing had happened. She'd been trying to manufacture feelings of warmth and reconciliation, and when she couldn't, she'd felt guilty—like she was failing at Christianity.

But what if forgiveness wasn't about her feelings at all? What if it was about releasing the burden of judgment—the exhausting, soul-crushing work of holding someone accountable, demanding justice, rehearsing the offense over and over? What if forgiveness was giving the whole mess to God and

trusting Him to do what she couldn't do: bring true justice and true mercy in perfect balance?

For the first time in months, Katherine felt something shift. Maybe forgiveness wasn't the impossible burden she'd thought it was. Maybe it was actually the path to freedom.

What Forgiveness Is Not

Before we talk about what forgiveness is, we need to clear away the misconceptions—because many people who've been controlled have been given a distorted view of forgiveness that keeps them trapped rather than setting them free.

Forgiveness Is Not Excusing the Behavior

When you forgive, you're not saying, "What you did was okay." You're not minimizing the harm, pretending it didn't hurt, or letting the person off the hook morally. Forgiveness actually requires the opposite—it requires acknowledging that something wrong was done, that it caused real damage, and that it matters.

As theologian Lewis Smedes writes in *Forgive and Forget*: "When you forgive someone for hurting you, you perform spiritual surgery inside your soul; you cut away the wrong that was done to you so that you can see your 'enemy' through the magic eyes that can heal your soul. Impossible? Yes. But this is the big difference between forgiving and excusing. We excuse people when we know they didn't really mean it. But we forgive when we know they did."

Forgiveness says, "You did this. It was wrong. It hurt me. And I'm choosing to release you from my judgment anyway."

Forgiveness Is Not Forgetting

"Forgive and forget" is a popular saying, but it's neither biblical nor psychologically possible. You can't force yourself to forget trauma. You can't erase memories of harm. And God doesn't ask you to.

What changes through forgiveness is not your memory but your relationship to the memory. You remember what happened, but you're no longer enslaved to rehearsing it, nursing it, using it to fuel your bitterness. You remember, but the memory loses its power to control you.

Miroslav Volf, in *The End of Memory*, writes: "The question is not whether we should remember wrongs suffered... The question is how to remember—whether we should nurse the memory of wrongs or not, whether we should think of the perpetrators in a particular way or not, whether our remembering should be a source of poison in us or a source of healing."

Forgiveness Is Not Reconciliation

This is perhaps the most important distinction, and the one most often confused. Forgiveness is unilateral—you can do it on your own, regardless of whether the other person repents, changes, or even acknowledges what they did. Reconciliation is bilateral—it requires both parties to participate, and it requires the offender to acknowledge the harm, genuinely repent, and demonstrate changed behavior over time.

You can forgive someone and never reconcile with them. In fact, in cases of ongoing abuse or control, forgiveness without reconciliation is often the wisest and healthiest choice. Forgiveness frees you from bitterness. Reconciliation re-establishes relationship. They're not the same.

Dr. Dan Allender, in *Bold Love*, explains: "Forgiveness is granted to the unrepentant as well as the repentant, but the fruit of forgiveness—restoration—can only be enjoyed in a relationship where repentance is present."

Forgiveness Is Not Trusting Again

Trust and forgiveness are separate issues. Forgiveness is granted; trust is earned. When you forgive, you release the person from your judgment. But you don't automatically trust them with access to your life, your heart, or your vulnerability. Trust must be rebuilt through consistent, demonstrated change

over time—and in some cases, trust may never be appropriate to extend again.

Forgiveness Is Not Pretending You're Not Hurt

Forgiveness doesn't require you to minimize your pain or put on a brave face. You can be deeply wounded and still forgive. In fact, forgiveness requires honesty about how much you were hurt—because you can't forgive what you won't acknowledge.

Forgiveness Is Not a One-Time Event

For deep wounds, forgiveness is often a process, not a single moment. You may need to forgive the same person for the same offense multiple times as new layers of pain surface or as triggers bring the memory back. This doesn't mean your initial forgiveness wasn't real—it means forgiveness is sometimes an ongoing choice, not a permanent fix.

What Forgiveness Is

So if forgiveness isn't all those things, what is it?

Forgiveness Is Release

At its core, forgiveness is releasing someone from the debt they owe you. They harmed you. They owe you justice, restitution, acknowledgment, apology. And forgiveness says, "I'm not going to spend my life trying to collect that debt. I'm releasing you from it. God will deal with you. I won't."

This doesn't mean the debt wasn't real or that justice doesn't matter. It means you're transferring the account from your ledger to God's. You're trusting Him to settle accounts in His way and His timing.

Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35) illustrates this perfectly. The servant owed his master an unpayable debt—10,000 talents, an astronomical sum. And the master, moved with compassion, canceled the entire debt. Released him from it completely.

That's what God has done for you in Christ. Your sin—your debt before God—was unpayable. And He canceled it. Released you. And now He calls you to extend that same release to others, even when their debt to you feels unpayable.

Forgiveness Is Surrender

Forgiveness is surrendering your right to vengeance, your right to make them pay, your right to see them suffer. It's relinquishing control of the outcome and trusting God to do what you cannot do—bring perfect justice and perfect mercy simultaneously.

Romans 12:19 instructs: "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." Leaving room for God's wrath means stepping aside, getting out of the judge's seat, and letting God be God.

This is hard because it means accepting that:

- You may never get an apology
- You may never see them held accountable publicly
- You may never receive validation from others that you were wronged
- Justice may not look the way you think it should

But the freedom that comes from this surrender is profound. You're no longer responsible for ensuring they get what they deserve. That burden is too heavy for you to carry. God will carry it. And He'll do a better job than you ever could.

Forgiveness Is Choosing Life Over Death

When you hold onto unforgiveness, bitterness takes root. And bitterness is toxic—it poisons your soul, damages your other relationships, blocks your intimacy with God, and keeps you chained to the person who hurt you.

Forgiveness breaks those chains.

Hebrews 12:15 warns: "See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." Bitterness

doesn't just hurt you—it spreads. It affects how you relate to others, how you see the world, how you experience joy. Forgiveness is choosing life—choosing to protect your soul from the slow death of resentment.

Author and psychologist Dr. Everett Worthington, who studies forgiveness extensively, writes: "Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and hoping it will hurt the other person. When we refuse to forgive, we're not hurting them—we're destroying ourselves."

Forgiveness Is an Act of Faith

Ultimately, forgiveness is trusting that God is who He says He is: just, merciful, sovereign, and good. You're trusting that He sees what was done to you, that He cares, and that He will deal with it appropriately—whether through discipline, through drawing them to repentance, or through allowing natural consequences.

You're also trusting that His command to forgive is for your good, not your harm. That He's not asking you to do something that will destroy you, but something that will set you free.

As Timothy Keller writes in *The Reason for God*: "Forgiveness is a form of suffering... You either inflict suffering on the person who hurt you, demanding payback, or you absorb the suffering yourself and forgive. To forgive is to absorb the cost yourself rather than make the wrongdoer pay. And that's what God did on the cross."

The Cross: Where Forgiveness Becomes Possible

The reason Christians are called to forgive is not because we're naturally capable of it or because it's an easy moral principle. We're called to forgive because we've been forgiven—massively, undeservedly, at great cost.

Paul writes in Colossians 3:13: "Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Not "forgive if you feel like it" or "forgive when they deserve it." Forgive as the Lord forgave you. In the same manner. With the same extravagance. Regardless of whether it's earned.

How God Forgave You

Consider what Christ's forgiveness of you involved:

He forgave while you were still sinning. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). He didn't wait for you to clean up your act. He didn't require you to prove yourself first. While you were still His enemy, He died for you.

He absorbed the cost Himself. Forgiveness isn't free. Someone pays. On the cross, Jesus absorbed the full cost of your sin—the wrath, the punishment, the separation from the Father. He didn't make you pay. He paid.

He released you from the debt completely. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). Not partially. Not conditionally. Completely. The debt is canceled, not transferred to a payment plan.

He restored you to relationship. Forgiveness wasn't the end goal—reconciliation was. God didn't just release you from your debt; He adopted you as His child, gave you His Spirit, and brought you into intimate fellowship with Himself.

He doesn't keep bringing it up. "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (Isaiah 43:25). When God forgives, He doesn't keep a record to throw back at you. He doesn't bring it up every time you fail. He genuinely releases it.

This is the standard. Not because you can do it perfectly, but because Christ's forgiveness of you is the power source that makes forgiving others possible.

The Cross Makes Forgiveness Both Possible and Mandatory

The cross changes everything about forgiveness. Without the cross, forgiveness would be either impossible (the debt is too great) or unjust (someone must pay). But the cross satisfies both problems. Justice is served—sin was punished. And mercy is extended—you're set free.

Theologian Karl Barth wrote: "We are not forgiven because we forgive, but we can and must forgive because we are forgiven." The cross enables you to forgive because it reminds you how much you've been forgiven. When you're tempted to withhold forgiveness because the debt feels too big, you remember: your debt to God was infinitely bigger, and He forgave it all.

The cross also makes forgiveness mandatory—not because God is harsh, but because withholding forgiveness is essentially saying, "I don't believe the cross was enough. I need more payment. I need more justice beyond what Christ provided." It's minimizing Christ's sacrifice and elevating your own sense of what's fair above God's provision.

Jesus said it clearly: "If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14-15). This isn't legalism—it's logic. If you refuse to extend the forgiveness you've received, you're demonstrating that you don't actually understand what you've been given. You're hoarding grace instead of circulating it.

The Process of Forgiving

Understanding what forgiveness is doesn't make it easy. How do you actually do it, especially when the hurt is deep and the anger is real?

1. Feel Your Feelings Fully

Don't try to forgive before you've allowed yourself to feel the full weight of what was done to you. Premature forgiveness is cheap grace—it's spiritualizing away pain without actually processing it. And it doesn't work. The pain will resurface later, often with greater intensity.

Take time to:

- Name what was done to you specifically
- Acknowledge how it hurt you
- Allow yourself to feel angry, sad, betrayed, confused

- Bring all of this honestly to God

The Psalms give you permission to do this. David cried out to God in raw, honest pain. He didn't pretend he was fine. He didn't spiritualize his anger away. He brought it all before God—and then, from that place of honest lament, he was able to move toward trust and release.

2. Count the Cost

Make a list, if it helps, of everything you lost because of this person's control:

- Years of your life
- Confidence in your discernment
- Direct intimacy with God
- Other relationships that suffered
- Opportunities you missed
- The person you might have become
- Peace, joy, freedom

This isn't to wallow in victimhood. It's to be honest about the debt. You can't forgive a debt you won't acknowledge. You have to know what you're releasing them from before you can actually release them.

3. Acknowledge That They Can't Repay

This is crucial: even if they wanted to, your controller cannot undo what was done. They can't give you back the years. They can't restore your lost confidence. They can't erase the damage. The debt is unpayable.

This is why waiting for them to "make it right" before you forgive is futile. They never can. The only question is whether you'll spend the rest of your life trying to collect what cannot be collected, or whether you'll release the debt and trust God with it.

4. Make the Decision to Forgive

At some point, you have to decide. Not because you feel warm and fuzzy. Not because they've earned it. Not because you're over it. But because you choose to release them from your judgment and entrust them to God's.

This might look like praying: "God, I release [name] from the debt they owe me. What they did was wrong, and it hurt me deeply. But I'm not going to carry this burden anymore. I'm giving it to You. I trust You to deal with them justly and mercifully. I choose to forgive."

You may need to pray this prayer multiple times. You may need to pray it with clenched fists and tears running down your face. That's okay. God honors the decision even when the feelings haven't caught up yet.

5. Redirect Your Thoughts

After you've made the decision to forgive, you'll notice that your mind still wants to rehearse the offense. You'll replay conversations. You'll imagine confrontations. You'll think about what you wish you'd said or done.

When this happens, you have a choice: you can indulge those thoughts, or you can redirect them. "I've already released this to God. I'm not going to rehearse it again. God, help me think about something else."

This is the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2) in action. You're training yourself to stop nursing the wound, stop fueling the bitterness. Over time, the intrusive thoughts will diminish. The offense will lose its emotional charge. Not because you've forgotten, but because you've genuinely released it.

6. Pray for Them

This is one of the hardest steps, but it's also one of the most powerful. Jesus commanded: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

You don't have to feel loving. You don't have to want good things for them emotionally. But you can pray: "God, I pray for [name]'s healing. I pray that You would open their eyes to the patterns that hurt me and others. I pray that You

would set them free from their need to control. I pray that they would come to know You more deeply and love others more healthily."

Praying for them is how you know forgiveness is taking root. When you can genuinely pray for their good—not their harm—you're demonstrating that you've released them. You're no longer their judge. You're their fellow broken person, and you're entrusting them to the God who loves them even as He disciplines them.

Corrie ten Boom, who forgave her Nazi captors, wrote: "Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart." She forgave while still dealing with the trauma, still grieving her losses. And she testified that forgiveness, though costly, was the only path to freedom.

When Forgiveness Feels Impossible

There will be times when forgiveness feels beyond your capacity. The hurt is too deep. The anger is too hot. The betrayal is too fresh. In those moments, remember:

You Can't Forgive in Your Own Strength

You're not capable of forgiving in your own power, especially for deep wounds. But the Holy Spirit in you is capable. This is where you pray: "God, I can't forgive this on my own. But I'm willing to be made willing. I'm willing to let You do in me what I can't do myself. Give me Your heart for this person. Give me Your strength to release them."

God honors that prayer. He doesn't expect you to manufacture forgiveness through sheer willpower. He offers to do the forgiving through you if you'll let Him.

Forgiveness Is Not All-or-Nothing

You don't have to forgive perfectly or completely in one moment. You can take steps. You can forgive one aspect of what they did while still working on forgiving another. You can make progress without having arrived.

Think of forgiveness like peeling an onion. You forgive one layer, and later you discover another layer beneath it that still needs to be addressed. That's normal. It doesn't mean your first forgiveness wasn't real. It means forgiveness for complex, deep wounds is a journey.

You May Need Help

There's no shame in seeking a counselor, a wise pastor, or a support group to help you process your pain and move toward forgiveness. Some wounds are too deep to navigate alone. Getting help isn't weakness—it's wisdom.

God Is Patient With Your Process

God isn't standing over you with a stopwatch, demanding that you forgive on His timeline. He's walking with you through the valley, holding your pain, grieving with you, and gently leading you toward freedom. He knows this is hard. He's not angry that it's taking time.

Psalm 103:13-14 says: "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." He knows your limits. He knows your pain. And He's patient with your process.

What Forgiveness Frees You From

When you forgive, you're not primarily doing something for your controller—you're doing something for yourself. You're reclaiming your freedom. Here's what forgiveness liberates you from:

The Burden of Being Judge

You're not designed to be someone else's judge. That's God's job, and it's exhausting when you try to do it. Forgiveness releases you from the burden of determining their punishment, ensuring they face consequences, or making them see what they did. You hand the gavel to God, and your shoulders drop in relief.

The Prison of Bitterness

Bitterness is a prison where you're the only inmate. Your controller goes about their life while you're trapped behind bars of resentment, rehearsing their offenses, plotting revenge you'll never enact, or waiting for vindication that may never come. Forgiveness opens the prison door. You walk out free.

The Exhaustion of Emotional Entanglement

As long as you're holding onto unforgiveness, you're still emotionally entangled with your controller. They still have power over you—they can ruin your day just by crossing your mind. Forgiveness severs that entanglement. They no longer have emotional access to your inner world.

The Cycle of Replaying the Past

Unforgiveness keeps you stuck in the past, replaying conversations, imagining different outcomes, nursing wounds that can't heal while you keep reopening them. Forgiveness allows you to move forward. The past is still real, but it no longer dominates your present.

The Barrier to Intimacy With God

Unforgiveness creates distance between you and God. Not because He stops loving you, but because harboring resentment is incompatible with receiving His grace. When you extend forgiveness, you open yourself more fully to experiencing His forgiveness, His presence, His peace.

The Identity of "Victim"

As long as you define yourself primarily by what was done to you, you remain a victim. Forgiveness doesn't erase what happened, but it allows you to integrate it into your story without letting it define your entire story. You move from victim to survivor to someone who overcame with God's help.

Author Philip Yancey writes in *What's So Amazing About Grace?*: "Forgiveness breaks the cycle. It does not settle all questions of blame and justice and fairness... but it accomplishes something more important. It ends the paralysis."

Living in Forgiveness

Forgiveness is not a one-time event that resolves everything permanently. It's a posture, a way of living. Here's what ongoing forgiveness looks like:

When Triggers Surface

You'll be going about your life, seemingly healed, when suddenly something triggers the memory—a phrase someone uses, a situation that feels familiar, a smell or a song. And the pain comes flooding back, along with anger and the temptation to rehearse the offense.

In those moments:

- Acknowledge the trigger without shame ("This brought up old pain. That makes sense.")
- Remind yourself of your decision to forgive ("I've already released this to God.")
- Pray again if you need to ("God, I'm giving this to You again. Help me.")
- Redirect your thoughts ("I'm not going to dwell on this. I'm moving forward.")

Over time, the triggers will have less power. The pain will be less intense. The recovery will be faster.

When You See Them or Hear About Them

If you're in overlapping circles—church, community, mutual friends—you may encounter your controller or hear news about them. This can reopen wounds. How do you handle it?

- You can be civil without being warm. "Hello" is sufficient. You don't owe them conversation or updates about your life.
- You can feel whatever you feel without acting on it. Anger, sadness, anxiety—these are normal responses. They don't mean you haven't forgiven.

- You can pray for grace in the moment. "God, this is uncomfortable. Help me respond with integrity."
- You can leave if you need to. Forgiveness doesn't require you to endure their presence if it's harmful to you.

When Others Don't Understand

Some people won't understand why you've set boundaries with someone who "just wanted to help you." They'll pressure you to reconcile, to give the person another chance, to "forgive and forget." How do you respond?

- "I have forgiven them. Forgiveness and reconciliation are different things."
- "I appreciate your concern, but this is between me and God."
- "I've done what I need to do for my own healing. I'd appreciate your support in that."
- You don't owe anyone a detailed explanation of your process or your decisions.

When They Never Acknowledge the Harm

This is perhaps the hardest scenario. They never apologize. They never change. They continue to believe they were right and you were wrong. And your forgiveness feels like it's for nothing—they don't even know they need it.

But forgiveness was never primarily about them receiving it. It was about you releasing it. Your freedom doesn't depend on their acknowledgment. Your healing doesn't require their participation. You forgave for you, before God, regardless of what they ever do or don't do.

Jesus forgave people who never repented. Stephen forgave those who were stoning him (Acts 7:60). Your forgiveness is between you and God. What they do with it—or don't do—is their business.

The Relationship Between Forgiveness and Justice

One of the most common concerns about forgiveness is that it seems to let people "get away with it." If you forgive, does that mean there should be no consequences? No accountability? No justice?

No. Forgiveness and justice are not opposites—they can coexist.

Forgiveness releases the person from your personal judgment. You're not demanding personal revenge or holding onto bitterness. But forgiveness doesn't preclude:

- Natural consequences (they lose relationships because of their behavior)
- Church discipline (if their behavior warrants it and the church is healthy enough to address it)
- Protecting others (warning people who might be targeted next)
- Legal action (in cases where abuse or harassment rises to that level)

You can forgive someone and still believe they should face appropriate consequences. You're just not the one administering those consequences or demanding specific outcomes. You're trusting God and appropriate authorities to handle justice while you handle your own heart.

Miroslav Volf, who wrote about forgiveness in the context of ethnic violence, emphasizes: "For the sake of peace, however, we must name the troubling memories rightly; we must provide truthful accounts of wrongs suffered and forgiveness given. In doing so, we will not be able to hide behind political or religious slogans or allow ourselves self-deception about who we are."

Truth-telling and forgiveness go together. You tell the truth about what happened. You protect others from similar harm. You allow appropriate consequences to unfold. And you release your personal right to vengeance. All of these can coexist.

The Freedom of Forgiveness

When you finally forgive—truly, deeply, from the heart—you'll experience a freedom you may not have felt in years:

The freedom to think about other things. Your controller will no longer dominate your thought life. You'll discover mental space for creativity, for joy, for focusing on your own growth rather than their guilt.

The freedom to love others well. Bitterness spills over into other relationships, making you suspicious, defensive, or withdrawn. Forgiveness restores your capacity to trust appropriately, to be vulnerable again, to give others the benefit of the doubt.

The freedom to worship fully. When you're holding onto unforgiveness, worship feels hollow because part of your heart is closed off. Forgiveness reopens your heart to God's presence, His love, His delight in you.

The freedom to be present. Unforgiveness keeps you mentally in the past, rehearsing what was done to you. Forgiveness allows you to be fully present to your life as it is now—to enjoy this moment, this relationship, this opportunity without the shadow of past pain darkening everything.

The freedom to become who you were meant to be. As long as you're defined by what was done to you, you can't fully become who God created you to be. Forgiveness integrates the pain into your story without letting it be the whole story. You're free to grow, to change, to move forward.

Lewis Smedes wrote: "When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free was us."

Jesus' Final Word From the Cross

On the cross, in the midst of unimaginable suffering—beaten, mocked, nailed to wood, abandoned by His friends, bearing the weight of the world's sin—Jesus spoke these words: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

This is the heart of the gospel. While they were still sinning against Him, He forgave. While they were still mocking, He interceded. While they were still guilty, He released them.

This is your model. Not because you're as strong as Jesus, but because His Spirit lives in you and can do through you what you cannot do alone.

You may not feel like forgiving. You may not want to forgive. But you can choose to forgive because you've been forgiven. You can release because you've been released. You can extend grace because you've received grace.

And when you do—when you finally lay down the burden of judgment, when you entrust your controller to God's care, when you choose freedom over bitterness—you'll discover that forgiveness doesn't diminish you. It liberates you.

You'll discover that the cross is not just where your sins were forgiven. It's where you learned how to forgive. It's where justice and mercy kissed. It's where the seemingly impossible became possible.

And you'll discover that you're stronger than you knew, that God's grace really is sufficient, and that freedom—true, soul-deep freedom—was always just on the other side of release.

Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Not perfectly. Not all at once. But truly, from the heart, with God's help.

And watch what God does with your obedience. Watch how He heals what forgiveness sets free. Watch how He restores what bitterness had stolen.

The cross makes it possible. The Spirit makes it doable. And your choice makes it real.

Forgive. And be free.

Reflection Questions:

1. What misconceptions about forgiveness have you carried? How might the true definition of forgiveness change your perspective?
2. What specifically do you need to forgive your controller for? Make a list. Then offer each item to God, releasing them from your judgment.
3. What would it feel like to be free from the burden of bitterness? What might change in your daily life if you weren't carrying that weight anymore?
4. Where are you in the process of forgiveness—still feeling the hurt, acknowledging the debt, deciding to release, or living in ongoing forgiveness?
5. How does the cross—Christ's forgiveness of you—motivate and empower you to forgive your controller?

Chapter 10: Restoring Your God-Given Identity

"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." – Ephesians 2:10

Elena stood in front of her bathroom mirror, studying her reflection as if seeing herself for the first time in years.

Who was she now?

For eight years, she'd been someone's project—carefully shaped, constantly corrected, perpetually managed. Her mentor had opinions about everything: how Elena should dress (modest, but not frumpy), how she should speak (gentle, but not passive), what she should study (practical, but not worldly), who she should befriend (mature believers, not "baby Christians"), what she should enjoy (uplifting, but not shallow).

Elena had complied with almost all of it, believing that becoming the person her mentor envisioned was the same as becoming the person God intended. But slowly, imperceptibly, Elena herself had disappeared beneath layers of someone else's expectations. She'd become a performance, not a person. A project, not a self.

Now, eighteen months after setting boundaries and stepping away from that relationship, Elena was discovering something both exhilarating and terrifying: she had no idea who she actually was. What did *she* enjoy? What did *she* think? What gifts had God woven into *her* specific design? What was the shape of her soul when no one was watching, correcting, or managing?

She'd spent so long becoming who she was supposed to be that she'd forgotten who she actually was.

But something was shifting. As she learned to hear God's voice directly, as she practiced making decisions without seeking approval, as she forgave and released her controller to God's care—something ancient and essential was waking up inside her. Something that had always been there but had been buried, silenced, shaped into something it was never meant to be.

Her true self. The person God had designed before the foundation of the world. The masterpiece that had never stopped being a masterpiece, even when it was hidden under someone else's "improvements."

And as Elena looked in the mirror that morning, she whispered a question she hadn't dared ask in years: "God, who did You make me to be?"

The journey to answer that question—the journey to restored identity—was just beginning.

The Loss of Self in Control

One of the most profound casualties of being someone's project is the loss of your sense of self. Controllers don't just manage your behavior—they reshape your very identity, convincing you that who you naturally are is insufficient, suspect, or in need of constant correction.

This happens through several processes:

Your Preferences Were Treated as Problems

When you expressed preferences that differed from your controller's, they weren't simply acknowledged as valid differences—they were pathologized. "I think that preference comes from your woundedness." "That desire seems rooted in selfishness." "I'm concerned that you're being led by your flesh rather than the Spirit."

Over time, you learned to distrust your own preferences. You stopped knowing what you actually liked because you'd been taught that what you liked was probably wrong. Your natural inclinations—the way God wired you—were treated as defects to be corrected rather than features to be celebrated.

Your Personality Was Critiqued

If you were naturally quiet, you were told you needed to be more outgoing. If you were naturally expressive, you were told you needed more self-control. If you were analytical, you needed to be more emotional. If you were feeling-oriented, you needed to be more rational.

The message was clear: who you naturally are isn't good enough. You need to become someone different. And that "someone different" just happened to match your controller's preferences or their ideal of spiritual maturity.

But God didn't make a mistake when He designed your personality. Psalm 139:13-14 declares, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Your inmost being—your temperament, your wiring, your natural bent—was God's intentional design. It didn't need to be fundamentally altered; it needed to be sanctified and directed toward godly purposes.

Your Gifts Were Redirected

God gave you specific gifts, talents, and abilities. But if those gifts didn't fit your controller's vision for your life or their understanding of what was "spiritual enough," they were minimized or redirected.

If you were gifted in art but they valued only "ministry" activities, your art was treated as a distraction. If you were naturally entrepreneurial but they valued only traditional career paths, your business ideas were dismissed as worldly. If you had prophetic insight but they were threatened by it, your discernment was reframed as judgmental.

Your controller essentially said, "God gave you these gifts, but I know better how they should be used." And in the process, the unique contribution you were designed to make—the good works God prepared in advance for you (Ephesians 2:10)—went unactualized.

Your Story Was Rewritten

Controllers often reinterpret your past to fit their narrative. They emphasize your failures, your wounds, your poor decisions—not to help you heal, but to establish your ongoing need for their management. Your story becomes "the one who was a mess until I intervened," and you're expected to be grateful for the intervention rather than confident in your own journey with God.

But your story belongs to you, not to them. Yes, you've made mistakes. Yes, you've been wounded. But you're also a person whom God has been pursuing, redeeming, and forming long before your controller arrived. Their chapter in your story doesn't define the whole narrative.

Psychologist and theologian Dan Allender writes in *To Be Told*: "We must tell our stories and listen to others tell theirs. But more, we must read our lives for what they reveal about the heart of our God. When we do, we find that our stories are not really about us at all—they are about his passion to restore his own."

Your Direct Relationship with God Was Mediated

Perhaps most damaging, you were taught that your access to God required their mediation. They became the interpreter of God's voice, the validator of your spiritual experiences, the gatekeeper to God's will. And in the process, you lost confidence that God could speak directly to you, work directly in you, love directly without requiring their involvement.

But 1 Timothy 2:5 is unambiguous: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus." Not two mediators. One. Your controller was never meant to stand between you and God, yet that's exactly where they positioned themselves.

What Was Lost: Your True Self

Theologian and spiritual director David Benner distinguishes between the "true self" and the "false self" in his book *The Gift of Being Yourself*. The true self is who you are in God—the person He created you to be, with all your unique design elements intact. The false self is the persona you construct to earn approval, manage others' expectations, or protect yourself from rejection.

When you were controlled, you developed an elaborate false self—a version of you that was acceptable to your controller, that minimized conflict, that ensured their continued approval. But in the process, your true self went underground.

Here's what was buried:

Your authentic voice. The way you naturally express yourself—your humor, your cadence, your way of processing thoughts aloud or internally—was shaped into something more "appropriate." You learned to speak in ways that pleased your controller rather than in ways that were genuinely you.

Your God-given desires. Psalm 37:4 says, "Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." But when your desires were constantly questioned, you learned to distrust them entirely. You forgot that God puts desires in your heart—desires that reflect His purpose for your life. Not every desire is godly, but not every desire is suspect either.

Your natural rhythms. Some people are energized by crowds; others by solitude. Some think best while moving; others while still. Some process quickly; others slowly. Your natural rhythms—the way God designed you to function—were overridden by your controller's preferences or assumptions about what "healthy" looked like.

Your specific calling. Ephesians 2:10 says God prepared good works in advance specifically for you. Not generic good works that any Christian could do, but works uniquely suited to your design, your passions, your story, your gifts. But if your calling didn't match your controller's vision, it was dismissed or redirected.

Your capacity for joy. When you're constantly being evaluated and corrected, joy becomes elusive. You're always aware of being watched, always worried about whether you're measuring up. The spontaneous delight that comes from being fully yourself in God's presence—that was stolen.

Your confidence that you are enough. Not self-sufficient. Not perfect. But enough. Acceptable. Beloved as you are, not as you might become after sufficient improvement. This is the core truth controllers destroy: that you are already God's masterpiece, being further perfected, but already fundamentally complete in Christ.

Thomas Merton wrote: "There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality, for life is maintained and nourished in us by our vital relation with realities outside and above us." Your false self is an unreality. Restoration means returning to reality—to who you actually are before God.

The Biblical Foundation: Your Identity in Christ

Before we talk about how to restore your true self, we need to establish what God says about who you are. This is not wishful thinking or positive self-talk. This is theological truth, established by Christ's work and declared in Scripture.

You Are Chosen

"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Ephesians 1:4). Before you were born, before you succeeded or failed, before you met your controller or were wounded by them—God chose you. Your identity begins with His choice, not with your performance or anyone else's assessment.

You Are Adopted

"In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will" (Ephesians 1:5). You're not an employee trying to earn your keep. You're a child in the family, with all the rights, inheritance, and security that come with adoption. Your controller may have treated you like a project, but God treats you like a son or daughter.

You Are Redeemed

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Ephesians 1:7). Your past does not define you. Your mistakes do not disqualify you. You have been purchased, ransomed, bought back at the highest price. And what God has redeemed, no one can un-redeem.

You Are Sealed

"Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 1:13). You belong to God, permanently. The Holy Spirit's presence in you is God's guarantee that you are His. Your controller may have questioned your spiritual state or made you doubt your salvation, but God has sealed you. You are secure.

You Are God's Workmanship

"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). The word "handiwork" is *poiema* in Greek—from which we get the word "poem." You are God's poem, His masterpiece, His work of art. Not a rough draft. Not a work in progress that might not make the final cut. A masterpiece.

You Are Loved

"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1). Not tolerated. Not conditionally accepted. Lavishly loved. The kind of love that overflows, that can't contain itself, that delights in you.

These truths are not contingent on your behavior, your growth, or anyone else's approval. They are facts, established by Christ's work and secured by God's character. Your controller may have tried to make your identity conditional, but God has made it settled.

Theologian J.I. Packer writes in *Knowing God*: "What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—the fact that he knows me. I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of his mind. All my knowledge of him depends on his sustained initiative in knowing me."

How the Holy Spirit Restores Your True Self

The work of restoring your identity is not something you do alone. The Holy Spirit—the divine Person living within you—is actively working to restore what

was stolen, to bring your true self back to life, to help you become who you've always been meant to be.

The Spirit Reminds You of Truth

Jesus said of the Holy Spirit: "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26). When you forget who you are, when you slip back into performing for approval, when you start believing the lies your controller planted—the Spirit reminds you of truth.

This is why spending time in Scripture is crucial. The Spirit uses the Word to speak truth to your identity. As you read that you're chosen, beloved, equipped, adopted—the Spirit makes those words come alive, penetrating deeper than intellectual agreement into the core of who you are.

The Spirit Convicts Without Condemning

Romans 8:1 declares: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The Spirit's job is to convict you of specific sins that need to be addressed, not to condemn you globally as a failure. He points to specific behaviors while affirming your identity.

Your controller's voice said, "You're fundamentally broken and can't be trusted." The Spirit's voice says, "That specific action was wrong, but you are still my beloved child. Let's deal with this together."

Learning to distinguish between conviction (from the Spirit) and condemnation (from the enemy or internalized control) is essential for identity restoration.

The Spirit Produces Fruit That Reflects Your True Self

Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Notice these aren't manufactured behaviors you force yourself to produce. They're fruit—organic growth that happens when you're connected to the Vine (John 15:5).

As the Spirit works in you, you'll notice these qualities emerging naturally. Not because you're trying harder, but because you're becoming more yourself—your true self, the one designed to reflect God's character. This is the paradox: the more you become who God made you to be, the more you reflect His image.

The Spirit Empowers Your Unique Calling

Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12 teach that the Spirit distributes gifts differently to different people. Your specific gifting is the Spirit's work in you, designed to accomplish the good works God prepared for you.

As you heal, the Spirit will reawaken gifts that were dormant or redirected during your time under control. You'll rediscover passions, abilities, and callings that were always yours but were buried. The Spirit is faithful to complete what He started (Philippians 1:6)—and what He started includes the specific design He gave you.

The Spirit Leads Into Freedom

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). The Spirit's presence doesn't produce greater conformity to human expectations. It produces freedom—freedom to be yourself, to grow in your unique way, to follow your specific calling, to become the particular person God designed.

If a voice in your head is demanding conformity, perfection, or constant approval-seeking, it's not the Spirit. The Spirit leads into freedom, not bondage.

Dallas Willard wrote in *Renovation of the Heart*: "Spiritual formation in Christ is the process through which the embodied/reflective will takes on the character of Christ's will. It is a process that moves through the dimensions of the human self—thought, feeling, choice, body, social relations—as it is surrendered to and shaped by the action of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God."

Practical Steps to Reclaim Your Identity

Understanding the theology is essential, but you also need practical ways to walk in your restored identity. Here's how to begin:

1. Ask God Who He Made You to Be

Spend time in prayer asking, "God, who did You create me to be? What did You have in mind when You designed me? What are the specific contours of my soul that reflect Your image in unique ways?"

This isn't navel-gazing or self-absorption. It's asking your Creator about His creation. And He delights in revealing it to you.

As you pray, pay attention to:

- What activities make you feel most alive?
- What injustices stir your heart most deeply?
- What do you lose track of time doing?
- What do others affirm in you that you've dismissed?
- What dreams did you have before they were managed out of you?

2. Experiment With Rediscovery

You may not remember what you enjoy, what you're good at, or what brings you life. That's okay. You get to experiment.

Try things. Take a class. Pick up an old hobby. Read a genre you've never explored. Spend time in nature or in the city, whichever you've been avoiding. Go to a museum or a concert. Cook something adventurous. Write, paint, dance, build, explore.

Notice what resonates. Notice what feels like coming home to yourself. You're not trying to become someone new—you're uncovering who you've always been.

3. Practice Making Choices From Rest, Not Fear

For years, your choices were probably driven by fear: fear of disapproval, fear of making mistakes, fear of disappointing your controller. Now, practice making choices from rest.

Ask yourself: "If I weren't afraid of anyone's disapproval, what would I choose?" "If I trusted that God is pleased with me already, what would I try?" "If I knew I couldn't fail in God's eyes, what would I risk?"

This is how you begin to access your true desires—the ones God planted in you, not the ones you manufactured to please others.

4. Pay Attention to Your Body

Your body holds wisdom your mind may have forgotten. Notice what makes your shoulders drop in relaxation. Notice what makes your chest tighten in anxiety. Notice what activities leave you energized versus depleted.

Your body is not an enemy to be controlled (as your controller may have taught). It's part of God's good design, and it communicates truth. When you ignore your body's signals, you disconnect from important information about who you are and what you need.

5. Celebrate Your Uniqueness Instead of Apologizing for It

Stop apologizing for:

- Being introverted or extroverted
- Needing time to process or deciding quickly
- Being detail-oriented or big-picture
- Being emotional or analytical
- Loving structure or thriving in flexibility

These aren't defects. They're design features. God made you this way on purpose. Celebrate it. Thank Him for it. Let it inform how you live rather than constantly trying to be someone you're not.

6. Establish What Matters to You

Your controller had a clear hierarchy of values, and you probably adopted it as your own. Now it's time to discern what actually matters to *you*, under God's guidance.

What do you value? Justice? Beauty? Knowledge? Community? Adventure? Stability? Order? Creativity? There are no wrong answers here—only authentic ones versus borrowed ones.

Make a list of your top five values. Then look at your calendar and your budget. Do they reflect what you say matters most? If not, you have permission to realign your life with your actual values, not someone else's.

7. Build Relationships That Celebrate the Real You

Surround yourself with people who:

- Affirm your gifts without needing to redirect them
- Celebrate your growth without needing to manage it
- Respect your boundaries without making you explain them
- Offer wisdom without demanding compliance
- See your potential without denying your present worth

These relationships will be mirrors that reflect back to you who you actually are, helping you see yourself more clearly. They'll normalize your uniqueness instead of pathologizing it.

8. Create Space for Solitude

In solitude—away from others' voices, expectations, and agendas—you can hear your own thoughts, feel your own feelings, and encounter God directly. Many people who've been controlled avoid solitude because it's uncomfortable at first. The inner critic (often your controller's internalized voice) is loud.

But push through. Regular solitude is where you'll meet your true self and your God without interference. Even 15 minutes of silence a day can begin to restore your sense of self.

Henri Nouwen wrote in *The Way of the Heart*: "In solitude we discover that our life is not a possession to be defended, but a gift to be shared... In solitude we realize that nothing human is alien to us, that the roots of all conflict, war, injustice, cruelty, hatred, jealousy, and envy are deeply anchored in our own heart."

9. Permission to Change Your Mind

You're allowed to change your mind about:

- Beliefs you adopted wholesale from your controller
- Career paths you pursued to please them
- Relationships you maintained to prove you were "healthy"
- Ministry commitments you took on out of obligation
- Preferences you claimed weren't really yours

Growth means evolution. You're not betraying your past self by becoming more yourself. You're honoring the person God always intended you to be.

10. Walk in Your Good Works

Remember Ephesians 2:10: God prepared good works in advance for you specifically. Not generic Christian duties, but works uniquely suited to your design, your story, your gifts, your passions.

As you rediscover who you are, ask God what He's prepared for you to do. Not what your controller thought you should do. Not what seems most spiritual. But what He designed you for before the foundation of the world.

And then do it. Not to earn approval. Not to prove you're okay. But because you're free to be exactly who God made you to be, doing exactly what He made you to do.

Confidence Rooted in Grace, Not Performance

One of the most profound shifts in identity restoration is moving from performance-based confidence to grace-based confidence.

Performance-based confidence says: "I'm okay because I'm doing well. I'm valuable because I'm succeeding. I'm worthy because I'm improving." This confidence is fragile because it depends on outcomes you can't always control. One failure, one setback, one criticism can shatter it.

Grace-based confidence says: "I'm okay because God says I am. I'm valuable because He made me. I'm worthy because Christ declared me so." This confidence is unshakeable because it's rooted in something outside yourself—God's character and Christ's finished work.

Your controller probably taught you performance-based confidence: "You're doing better! I'm proud of you!" when you complied, and "I'm concerned about you" when you didn't. Your worth became contingent on measuring up.

But God offers something different. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." If your salvation isn't based on performance, why would your identity be?

Grace-based confidence means:

You can fail without being a failure. You'll make mistakes. You'll misjudge situations. You'll fall short. And you're still God's beloved child, still His masterpiece, still secure in Christ.

You can succeed without pride or anxiety. Success doesn't prove your worth (you already have worth), and it doesn't obligate you to maintain impossible standards. You can celebrate achievements without building your identity on them.

You can rest without guilt. Performance-based confidence drives you to constant activity—you must keep proving yourself. Grace-based confidence allows for rest, for Sabbath, for simply being without doing.

You can admit weakness without shame. When your confidence is in God's strength, not your own, you don't have to pretend you have it all together. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

You can receive correction without devastation. When someone points out a genuine area for growth, you don't interpret it as "I'm fundamentally flawed." You hear it as information: "Here's something I can work on with God's help."

Brennan Manning wrote in *Abba's Child*: "Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion." Your controller tried to define you by your performance, your compliance, your need for management. God defines you by His love. And His definition is the only one that matters.

Living From Your True Identity

As your identity is restored, your life will begin to reflect it. You'll notice changes:

You'll make decisions with greater peace. Not because you're perfect at discerning, but because you trust that God is guiding you and that He's patient with your learning process. You're not paralyzed by fear of getting it wrong.

You'll engage in relationships more authentically. You'll show up as yourself—not the curated version designed to please others, but the real you. Some people will appreciate this; others won't. And you'll be okay either way because your worth isn't contingent on universal approval.

You'll pursue your calling with clarity. The fog of "what am I supposed to do?" will lift as you step into the good works God prepared specifically for you. You'll have a sense of fit, of alignment, of "yes, this is what I was made for."

You'll experience joy more readily. When you're not constantly monitoring yourself for acceptable performance, you can be present to moments of beauty, connection, delight. Joy returns when you're free to be yourself.

You'll handle criticism without crumbling. Not all criticism is valid, and you'll be able to evaluate it without defensiveness or devastation. Valid criticism becomes information for growth. Invalid criticism can be released without internalizing it.

You'll extend to others the freedom you're experiencing. As you're set free from being someone's project, you'll be less tempted to make others yours. You'll celebrate their uniqueness instead of trying to manage it. You'll point them to Jesus instead of positioning yourself as mediator.

You'll worship more freely. Worship becomes less about performing for God's approval and more about responding to His love. You'll discover that God delights in you—the real you—not the sanitized, managed version.

This is the fruit of restored identity: a life lived from rest rather than striving, from confidence rather than fear, from authenticity rather than performance. This is what freedom looks like.

The Journey Continues

Identity restoration isn't a destination you arrive at; it's a journey you walk. You'll have moments of profound freedom and moments when old patterns resurface. You'll have seasons where you feel solidly yourself and seasons where you struggle with doubt.

That's normal. That's growth. That's being human.

What matters is the trajectory. Are you moving toward greater authenticity? Greater confidence in God's design of you? Greater freedom to be exactly who He made you to be?

If yes, you're on the right path. Keep walking it. Keep listening for God's voice telling you who you are. Keep experimenting with what brings you life. Keep celebrating your uniqueness. Keep practicing grace-based confidence.

And remember: you were never the problem. You were always the masterpiece. Your controller couldn't see it, and for a while you couldn't see it

either. But God has never stopped seeing it. And now, slowly, you're beginning to see it too.

The God Who Delights in You

Let me leave you with this final, essential truth: God doesn't just tolerate you. He doesn't just accept you. He doesn't just approve of you in a distant, clinical way.

He delights in you.

Zephaniah 3:17 says, "The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."

Picture that. The God of the universe, the Creator of all things, the One who spoke galaxies into existence—He sings over you. Not because of what you've accomplished. Not because you've finally gotten yourself together. Not because you've met someone's standard of spiritual maturity.

He sings over you because you're His. Because He made you. Because He loves who He made.

Your controller may have viewed you as a problem to fix. God views you as a masterpiece to behold. Your controller may have seen defects. God sees design features. Your controller may have demanded change before acceptance. God offers acceptance as the foundation for change.

You are not too much. You are not too little. You are not too anything. You are exactly, precisely, specifically who God intended when He formed you in your mother's womb. And that person—the real you, the true you, the you that's been buried under years of control and management—that person is beloved, delighted in, and celebrated by the God who knows you best.

As you walk forward into freedom, into wholeness, into the fullness of your restored identity, remember this: You are not starting over. You are returning home. Home to yourself. Home to the person you've always been beneath the

performance, beneath the false self, beneath the project someone tried to make you.

You are coming home to the truth that you have always, always, always been enough. Not because of what you've done or who you've become, but because of who God made you to be from the very beginning.

Welcome home, beloved.

Welcome home to yourself.

Welcome home to the freedom of being exactly who you were created to be.

You are God's masterpiece.

You always have been.

And nothing—not control, not shame, not years of being someone's project—could ever change that.

Walk in that truth.

Live from that truth.

And watch what God does as you finally, freely become the person He's been calling you to be all along.

The other side of rescue isn't just survival.

It's thriving.

It's wholeness.

It's becoming.

And you're already on your way.

Final Reflection Questions:

1. If you could ask God one question about who He designed you to be, what would you ask? Take time to ask Him—and listen for His answer.
2. What parts of yourself have you buried or hidden to please your controller? What would it look like to let those parts come back to life?

3. What does grace-based confidence feel like compared to performance-based confidence? Where are you still operating from performance?
4. What good works might God have prepared specifically for you—works that fit your unique design, your story, your gifts?
5. How does it feel to imagine God delighting in you, singing over you, celebrating exactly who you are? Can you receive that, or does it feel too good to be true?

A Benediction:

May you walk in the freedom Christ purchased for you.
May you hear His voice clearly, without interference.
May you know—deeply, truly, unshakably—that you are beloved.
May you become exactly who He made you to be.
May you live from rest, not striving.
May you extend to others the grace you've received.
And may you discover, every day, that you are more than a survivor.
You are His masterpiece.
You are His delight.
You are free.

Amen.

Chapter 11: Healing Family and Generational Patterns

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" – 2 Corinthians 5:17

Rebecca sat at her kitchen table, watching her six-year-old daughter play across the room. Maya had just made a decision—where to put her toys—and Rebecca felt the familiar urge rising inside her: *That's not the right place. I should correct her. If I don't guide her now, she'll develop bad habits. I need to teach her the right way.*

Rebecca caught herself mid-thought and froze. The words echoing in her mind were almost identical to the ones her mother had used throughout her childhood. And her grandmother before that. And probably generations before them—women who loved deeply but controlled tightly, women who believed that loving someone meant managing them, women who couldn't rest unless everything and everyone around them was properly supervised.

Rebecca had spent three years in therapy working through the damage from her mother's controlling love. She'd set boundaries. She'd grieved. She'd forgiven. She thought she was free. But now, with her own child, she was discovering the terrifying truth: the pattern was still there, lying dormant, waiting to express itself through her.

She looked at Maya, happily arranging toys in a way that made sense to her six-year-old mind—not efficiently, not the way Rebecca would do it, but with her own logic and creativity. And Rebecca faced a choice that would echo through generations: Would she intervene and continue the cycle? Or would she trust her daughter with the small autonomy God designed her to have, even at six years old?

Rebecca took a deep breath and said something her mother had never said: "I like the way you organized your toys, Maya. That makes sense."

Maya beamed. And something ancient and toxic—something that had traveled through generations of Rebecca's family like a hereditary disease—lost a little of its power.

The cycle was breaking. Slowly. Painfully. But it was breaking.

The Inheritance You Didn't Ask For

Family patterns are powerful. They're passed down not through genetics but through modeling, through unspoken rules, through the emotional atmosphere we absorb from infancy. You didn't choose these patterns. You inherited them. And if they go unexamined and unhealed, you'll pass them on to the next generation, just as surely as you inherited your grandmother's eyes or your father's height.

Codependency and control rarely start with you or even with your controller. They have roots that go back generations, creating what the Bible calls "generational sin" or what psychologists call "intergenerational transmission of trauma."

Common Patterns That Pass Through Families

Enmeshment disguised as closeness. Some families confuse intimacy with the absence of boundaries. "We tell each other everything." "We're always in each other's business." "Family doesn't keep secrets." What feels like closeness is actually enmeshment—a lack of differentiation where individual identity is sacrificed for family unity.

Love expressed through control. In some families, managing others is the primary way love is demonstrated. "I only do this because I love you." "If I didn't care, I wouldn't correct you." "This hurts me more than it hurts you." Children from these families grow up believing that if someone isn't controlling them, that person doesn't truly care.

Anxiety as the family's emotional baseline. Some families live in chronic anxiety—always anticipating disaster, always hypervigilant, always needing to control outcomes to feel safe. Children absorb this anxiety and either become anxious themselves or develop controlling behaviors to manage the anxiety they feel.

The designated "broken one." Many families identify one person as "the problem"—the one who needs constant help, intervention, or supervision. This role often gets passed down: grandmother was the rescuer of her broken sibling, mother became the rescuer of her broken child, and now you're expected to either be the rescuer or the rescued.

Performance-based acceptance. In some families, love is conditional on achievement, compliance, or maintaining the family image. "We're proud of you when..." "You're only as good as your last accomplishment." "What will people think?" Children from these families become adults who believe they must earn love through performance.

Spiritual manipulation. Some families use God as a tool for control. "God told me you should..." "If you really loved Jesus, you'd..." "I'm praying that God will convict you about..." Children grow up unable to distinguish between God's voice and their parents' preferences.

Conflict avoidance at all costs. Some families prize "peace" (really, the absence of conflict) above truth, health, or individuality. "Don't rock the boat." "Keep the peace." "We don't talk about those things." Disagreement is treated as betrayal, and honesty is sacrificed for surface harmony.

Psychologist and family systems expert Murray Bowen noted that "the family is a system in which members are emotionally interdependent and where patterns of behavior and interaction are repeated across generations." What your grandmother did to your mother, your mother did to you. And without intervention, you'll do to your children—not because you want to, but because it's the only model you know.

The Biblical Context: Generational Sin and Redemption

Scripture acknowledges the reality of generational patterns while also proclaiming the power to break them.

The Pattern of Generational Consequences

Exodus 34:7 describes God as one who "does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation." This doesn't mean God holds children accountable for their parents' specific sins. It means sin has consequences that ripple through families. An alcoholic parent's choices affect their children, who may struggle with addiction or the trauma of growing up in chaos. A controlling parent's patterns affect their children, who may become controllers themselves or be drawn to controlling relationships.

We see this throughout Scripture:

- Abraham lied about his wife; Isaac repeated the same lie about his wife; Jacob was a deceiver
- David's adultery and murder were followed by sexual sin and violence throughout his family line
- Eli failed to discipline his sons; his grandson Ichabod was born into the aftermath of that family's destruction

Sin doesn't stay contained. It spreads. It replicates. It finds expression in new generations.

The Promise of Generational Redemption

But Scripture also declares that cycles can be broken. Ezekiel 18:19-20 proclaims: "Yet you ask, 'Why does the son not share the guilt of his father?' Since the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to keep all my decrees, he will surely live. The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child."

You are not destined to repeat your family's patterns. You can make different choices. You can establish different patterns. You can, by God's grace, become the generation where the cycle breaks.

Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" This isn't just about

personal salvation—it's about the power to become someone new, someone who breaks free from what was and steps into what could be.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann writes in *The Prophetic Imagination*: "The alternative community must be so presented that it gives the lie to the old ordering and shows it to be false, indeed deathly... We must present an alternative that is both credible and relevant." You become that alternative community. You embody a different way. And in doing so, you give the lie to the old patterns and show there's another way to live and love.

Recognizing the Patterns in Your Own Life

Before you can break a cycle, you must recognize it. This requires honest self-examination—often uncomfortable, always worthwhile.

Signs You May Be Repeating Generational Patterns

You feel anxious when you're not in control. If someone makes a decision without consulting you—your spouse, your child, your friend—do you feel immediate anxiety? Do you experience their autonomy as threatening?

You struggle to let others fail. When someone you love is about to make a mistake, can you let them experience the natural consequences? Or do you feel compelled to intervene, to rescue, to prevent the pain?

You use God's name to enforce your preferences. Do you find yourself saying, "I think God wants you to..." or "I'm praying that God will show you..." when really, you want them to do what you think they should do?

You're hyper-aware of how others perceive your family. Do you manage your family's image more than you nurture their actual wellbeing? Are you more concerned with how things look than how people feel?

You have difficulty allowing others to be different from you. When your child, spouse, or friend has preferences, opinions, or approaches that differ from yours, do you experience it as problematic? Do you feel the need to correct, redirect, or reshape them?

You believe rest is irresponsible. If you're not actively managing, improving, or intervening, do you feel guilty? Have you internalized the belief that constant vigilance equals love?

You dismiss others' direct relationship with God. When someone tells you what they believe God is saying to them, is your first instinct to validate or to correct? Do you trust that the Holy Spirit can guide them without your mediation?

You feel responsible for others' emotions. When someone in your family is upset, do you feel it's your job to fix it? Do you experience their distress as your failure?

These aren't condemnation—they're invitations to awareness. The first step in breaking a cycle is recognizing you're in one.

Tracing the Roots

It can be helpful to trace where these patterns came from. This isn't about blaming previous generations; it's about understanding. Consider:

- How did your parents express love? Through words, acts of service, control, criticism, distance?
- What were the unspoken rules in your family? ("Don't question authority." "Always put family first." "Don't show weakness.")
- How was conflict handled? Was it avoided, explosive, or processed healthily?
- Who in your family was "the fixer"? Who was "the broken one"? What role did you play?
- How was God talked about in your family? Was He a loving Father, a distant judge, or a tool for control?
- What happened when someone violated family expectations? Were they shamed, excluded, or lovingly confronted?

Often, you'll discover that your parents were simply replicating what they learned from their parents. This doesn't excuse harmful behavior, but it does provide context. And context helps you respond with both truth (this was wrong) and grace (they were doing the best they could with what they had).

Breaking the Cycle Through Christ's Power

You cannot break generational patterns through willpower alone. These patterns are deeply ingrained, triggered automatically, and reinforced by decades of family history. But what you cannot do in your own strength, Christ can do in you through His Spirit.

The Gospel Breaks Cycles

The gospel is fundamentally about breaking cycles:

- The cycle of sin and death is broken by Christ's resurrection
- The cycle of law and guilt is broken by grace
- The cycle of performing for acceptance is broken by adoption
- The cycle of slavery is broken by freedom

Paul writes in Romans 6:6-7: "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin." Your old self—including the patterns you inherited—was crucified with Christ. You are free to become someone new.

This isn't instantaneous. Sanctification is a process. But it's a real process, powered by the Spirit, that genuinely transforms you from the inside out.

Practical Steps to Break the Cycle

1. Name the pattern specifically.

Don't just say, "I want to be healthier." Get specific: "I want to stop using anxiety to control my children." "I want to stop making God's voice identical to

my own preferences." "I want to allow my spouse to make decisions without my approval."

Naming it specifically makes it concrete. You can't fight what you can't name.

2. Confess it as sin—not just as a "struggle."

There's a tendency to soften generational patterns: "I just struggle with being too helpful." But if you're controlling others, violating their boundaries, or making yourself their mediator to God, that's not a struggle—it's sin. Call it what it is. Confess it before God. Ask for His forgiveness and His power to change.

1 John 1:9 promises: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Confession isn't just admission—it's the first step toward transformation.

3. Identify your triggers.

What situations activate the old pattern? When your child makes a mess? When your spouse makes a decision without consulting you? When someone in your family struggles and you're not the one helping them?

Once you identify triggers, you can prepare for them. You can pray ahead of time: "God, when this happens, help me respond differently. Give me Your peace instead of my anxiety. Help me trust You with outcomes I can't control."

4. Interrupt the pattern with a new response.

When you feel the old urge to control, intervene, or manage, pause. Take a breath. Pray a one-sentence prayer: "God, help me trust You with this." Then choose a different response:

- Say nothing when you want to correct
- Ask a question instead of giving a directive
- Acknowledge someone's choice without trying to change it
- Pray for the person instead of managing them

- Walk away if you can't resist the urge to control

Every time you interrupt the pattern, you weaken it. New neural pathways form. New habits develop. Slowly, the new response becomes more automatic than the old one.

5. Replace lies with truth.

The patterns you inherited are rooted in lies: "If I don't control this, disaster will happen." "Loving someone means managing them." "I'm responsible for others' choices and emotions." "God needs my help to work in people's lives."

Counter each lie with Scripture:

- "God is sovereign; I am not." (Isaiah 46:9-10)
- "Love trusts; it doesn't control." (1 Corinthians 13:7)
- "Each person is responsible for their own load." (Galatians 6:5)
- "The Holy Spirit guides believers; they don't need me to mediate." (John 16:13)

Speak these truths aloud. Write them on cards. Memorize them. Let God's Word reprogram your thinking.

6. Get outside perspective.

You can't see your own blind spots. You need people who will gently point out when you're slipping into old patterns. A counselor, a trusted friend, a spouse who has permission to say, "That sounded like control, not concern"—these relationships are invaluable.

Don't be defensive when someone points out the pattern. Receive it as a gift. They're helping you see what you can't see on your own.

7. Celebrate progress, not just perfection.

You will slip back into old patterns sometimes. You will catch yourself mid-control and realize you did it again. Don't despair. Don't give up. Don't conclude, "I'll never change."

Instead, celebrate that you noticed. Celebrate that you care about changing. Celebrate that you're making different choices more often than you used to. Progress, not perfection, is the goal.

Theologian and pastor Eugene Peterson coined the phrase "a long obedience in the same direction" to describe spiritual growth. Breaking generational patterns requires exactly that—persistent, daily, imperfect obedience in the direction of freedom.

When to Reconcile With Family, When to Release

As you heal and break patterns, you'll face difficult questions about your relationships with family members who remain stuck in the old patterns. Do you pursue reconciliation? Do you maintain boundaries? How do you honor parents who harmed you? How do you love siblings who refuse to change?

Biblical Principles for Family Relationships

Honor doesn't mean obey. Exodus 20:12 commands us to honor our parents. But honor and obedience are different. Children are called to obey parents (Ephesians 6:1), but adults are called to honor them—which means treating them with respect and dignity, but not subjecting yourself to their control or authority over your adult life.

You can honor a parent while maintaining boundaries. You can respect their position in your life while disagreeing with their choices. You can speak well of them publicly while limiting your private contact with them if the relationship is toxic.

Leave and cleave applies to all families. Genesis 2:24 says a man "leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife." This principle—leaving the family of origin to form a new family unit—applies whether you're married or not. At some point, you establish your own household, your own patterns, your own way of relating to God and others.

Some families make this impossible. They demand perpetual enmeshment. They treat your boundary-setting as betrayal. But God's design is that you

leave—not abandon, but differentiate. You become your own person, under God's authority, not perpetually under your parents' management.

Forgiveness doesn't require reconciliation. As we explored in Chapter 9, you can forgive someone without reconciling with them. Forgiveness is unilateral—you release them from your judgment. Reconciliation is bilateral—it requires repentance, changed behavior, and rebuilt trust.

If your family members refuse to acknowledge harmful patterns, refuse to change, or continue to violate your boundaries, you can forgive them and still limit contact. You're not being unforgiving; you're being wise.

Love can be expressed from a distance. Jesus loved the Pharisees, but He didn't maintain close relationship with them. He prayed for them, spoke truth to them, and died for them—but He didn't give them ongoing access to His life or ministry.

You can pray for family members, wish them well, and hope for their healing without being in close relationship with them. Distance is sometimes the most loving choice for everyone involved.

Questions to Guide Your Decisions

Is there evidence of genuine repentance? Have they acknowledged the harm? Do they take responsibility for their patterns? Are they actively working to change, or are they just apologizing to get you to return to the relationship?

Can they respect boundaries? If you've set boundaries and they repeatedly violate them, that's important information. Reconciliation requires mutual respect, which includes respecting the limits you've established.

Do they see you as an autonomous adult? Or do they still treat you as a child who needs their guidance, approval, and management? If they can't relate to you as an equal, the relationship will continue to be unhealthy.

Is the Holy Spirit leading you toward reconciliation or toward continued distance? Not every family relationship is meant to be close. God may be calling you to limited contact for a season—or permanently—because close

relationship would be harmful to your healing or to the people you're now responsible for (your spouse, your children).

Would reconciliation require you to betray your own healing? If returning to close relationship with family means suppressing your true self, abandoning your boundaries, or subjecting yourself to ongoing control, that's too high a price. Your healing matters. God cares about your wholeness.

Levels of Relationship

Not all family relationships have to be all-or-nothing. You can have varying levels of connection:

Full, mutual relationship: Regular contact, emotional vulnerability, shared experiences. This is only appropriate when the relationship is healthy, boundaries are respected, and both parties have done their work.

Limited, boundaried relationship: Occasional contact (holidays, family events) with clear boundaries about what topics are off-limits and how much time you'll spend together. This allows for some family connection without ongoing harm.

Very limited contact: Brief, surface-level interactions—a card on birthdays, brief phone calls, polite conversation at family gatherings. No emotional vulnerability, no deep sharing, no expectation of closeness.

No contact: In some cases—particularly where there's ongoing abuse, harassment, or complete refusal to respect boundaries—no contact is the wisest choice. This isn't punishment; it's protection. And it's sometimes the only way to heal and break the cycle.

Marriage and family therapist Dr. Henry Cloud writes in *Necessary Endings*: "For a relationship to be healthy, there must be 'life' in it. And for life to exist, there must be honesty, growth, mutuality, and respect. If those things are absent despite your best efforts, it may be time to bring that relationship to an end—or at least to the end of the form it's been taking."

Leading Your Own Family Into Healthier Patterns

If you have a spouse, children, or people you're responsible for, you have both an opportunity and a responsibility to establish different patterns—to be the generation where the cycle breaks.

Modeling Healthy Relationship

Your children (or those you influence) are watching how you:

- Handle conflict
- Express love
- Set boundaries
- Relate to God
- Respond to mistakes
- Make decisions
- Treat others who disagree with you

They're absorbing not just your words but your way of being in the world. You're teaching them, every day, what normal looks like. Make sure you're teaching them health, not dysfunction.

Practice what you preach. Don't just talk about boundaries—model them. Don't just say God loves unconditionally—demonstrate it in how you love your children. Don't just teach that mistakes are learning opportunities—show grace when they fail.

Apologize when you slip into old patterns. When you catch yourself controlling instead of guiding, manipulating instead of influencing, shaming instead of correcting—apologize. "I'm sorry. I was trying to control you, and that wasn't right. You get to make that decision."

This is powerful modeling. You're showing them that adults can be wrong, can recognize their mistakes, and can change. You're also breaking the cycle of "parents are never wrong" that may have characterized your upbringing.

Celebrate their uniqueness. When your child or spouse has preferences, interests, or ways of doing things that differ from yours, celebrate it. "I love that you thought of that differently than I would." "That's such a unique perspective." "I'm glad you're wired that way."

This teaches them that differentiation is good, that they don't have to be like you to be acceptable, that God made them with intention and purpose.

Trust them with age-appropriate autonomy. Give your children increasing freedom to make decisions as they grow. Let them experience natural consequences (within safe parameters). Don't rescue them from every discomfort.

This is how they develop confidence, discernment, and the ability to function independently. If you manage everything for them, you're teaching them they're incompetent—the same lesson your controller taught you.

Creating a Different Family Culture

Culture is "the way we do things around here." You get to establish what your family culture is. Consider:

What will be your family's core values? Not what you inherited, but what you're choosing. Honesty? Kindness? Growth? Adventure? Service? Beauty? Decide intentionally, and let those values shape your choices.

How will conflict be handled? Will you avoid it (unhealthy) or process it (healthy)? Will disagreement be treated as betrayal or as normal? Will you teach your children that healthy relationships include friction, resolution, and repair?

How will love be expressed? Through words? Quality time? Acts of service? Physical affection? Make sure love is communicated clearly, not assumed. And make sure it's unconditional—not contingent on performance, compliance, or achieving family expectations.

What will relationship with God look like? Will you teach your children that they can hear God's voice directly, or that they need you to interpret it for

them? Will you encourage their own spiritual questions and doubts, or will you require uniform belief? Will you point them to Jesus, or position yourself as mediator?

How will you handle mistakes and failure? Will they be treated as opportunities for growth or as evidence of fundamental inadequacy? Will you shame or will you discipline with dignity? Will you allow natural consequences to teach, or will you rescue and lecture?

What will rest and joy look like? Will your family live in chronic hustle and achievement, or will you model Sabbath, play, and delight? Will joy be permitted, or will everything be serious and heavy?

Author and researcher Brené Brown notes: "Who we are is how we parent. And we cannot give our children what we don't have." If you want your family to be different from your family of origin, you must do your own healing work. You can't give them freedom if you're not free. You can't teach them healthy boundaries if you don't have them. You can't model grace-based confidence if you're still operating from performance-based fear.

Specific Practices for Breaking Cycles

Family meetings where everyone's voice matters. Even young children can participate in family decisions that affect them. This teaches them their opinions matter, that they have agency, that they're part of a community where they're valued.

Affirming each person's direct relationship with God. "What do you think God is showing you?" "How are you experiencing God lately?" These questions honor that the Holy Spirit speaks to each person, not just through you.

Apologizing and seeking forgiveness. When you wrong someone in your family, model healthy repair: acknowledge specifically what you did, express genuine regret, ask for forgiveness, and change the behavior going forward.

Celebrating differentiation. Notice aloud when family members are different from each other—and celebrate it. "Dad loves hiking; Mom loves reading.

We're not all the same, and that's good!" This normalizes that love doesn't require sameness.

Allowing privacy. Don't demand access to every thought, every feeling, every relationship. Teach children that some things are private—journals, conversations with friends, their personal relationship with God. Privacy isn't secrecy; it's healthy differentiation.

Encouraging direct communication. Don't allow triangulation ("Tell your father..."). Teach family members to speak directly to the person they have an issue with. This prevents the manipulation and alliances that characterized your family of origin.

Limiting criticism and maximizing affirmation. Research suggests it takes five positive interactions to counter one negative interaction. Make sure your family culture is overwhelmingly affirming, with correction offered sparingly and gently.

Praying with and for your family. Not controlling prayers ("God, help Johnny see that he needs to...") but genuine intercession. Model dependence on God, not on your ability to manage everyone.

When You Don't Have Children: Breaking Cycles in Other Ways

Not everyone has children. But everyone has influence. You can still break generational cycles by:

Being a different kind of aunt, uncle, mentor, or friend. The children and young adults in your life are watching you. Model health. Be the adult who listens without managing, who celebrates their uniqueness, who points them to Jesus without inserting yourself as mediator.

Creating chosen family. If your family of origin is unsafe or unable to change, you can create family among friends, church community, or other relationships. These become the people with whom you practice healthy patterns, mutual respect, and grace-filled love.

Becoming secure so others can attach securely. As you heal, you become a safe person—someone others can be vulnerable with, someone who doesn't use their pain against them, someone who allows them to be themselves. This is profoundly countercultural, and it breaks cycles in every relationship you have.

Speaking truth in your spheres of influence. When you see controlling behavior in church, workplace, or community, you can gently name it. "I notice you're making decisions for them. Have they been included in this conversation?" Your voice, informed by your experience and your healing, can help others recognize patterns they've been blind to.

Writing, speaking, or sharing your story. Your story of breaking free from control and finding health can give others permission to do the same. You become living proof that cycles can be broken, that healing is possible, that there's life after being someone's project.

The Power of Becoming a New Creation

Paul's declaration in 2 Corinthians 5:17 is revolutionary: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

This isn't just personal salvation. It's the power to become fundamentally different from what you were, from what your family was, from what generations before you have been. In Christ, you're not just reformed—you're re-created. The old patterns don't have to define you. The old ways don't have to be your ways.

Theologian N.T. Wright emphasizes that new creation isn't just about going to heaven when you die—it's about heaven breaking into earth now, transforming you into someone who lives differently: "The point of the new creation... is that the present world is to be set free from slavery, from its corruption and decay. That is the hope... not for 'souls' to 'go to heaven' but for the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come."

You are part of that new creation. You embody it. You demonstrate it. And in doing so, you give hope to everyone still trapped in old patterns that another way is possible.

The Old Has Gone

The old patterns—control, enmeshment, anxiety, performance-based acceptance—have been crucified with Christ. They have no legal claim on you anymore. You've been set free.

Yes, you'll still feel their pull. Yes, they'll try to reassert themselves. But they're no longer your master. You have a new Master, and He calls you to freedom.

The New Has Come

You get to create new patterns:

- Rest instead of anxiety
- Trust instead of control
- Empowerment instead of management
- Grace instead of performance
- Freedom instead of enmeshment
- Direct access to God instead of mediated religion

These aren't just ideals. They're real possibilities, made available through the Spirit's power working in you.

A Prayer for Breaking Cycles

Father,

Thank You that in Christ, I am a new creation. Thank You that the old patterns—the ones I inherited, the ones I learned, the ones that have caused so much harm—do not have to define me.

I confess the ways I've repeated what was done to me. The ways I've controlled instead of loved, managed instead of empowered, anxiously

supervised instead of peacefully trusted. Forgive me. Cleanse me. Remake me.

Give me eyes to see the patterns I can't see on my own. Give me courage to interrupt them when they arise. Give me Your peace instead of my anxiety. Give me Your trust instead of my need to control.

Help me love the people in my life—my family, my friends, those You've entrusted to my care—with the love You've shown me: empowering, not controlling; grace-filled, not performance-based; trusting, not anxious.

Break the cycles that have run through my family for generations. Let it stop with me. Let me be the generation that turns toward health, toward freedom, toward Your way of loving.

And where I fail—because I will fail—give me grace to confess, apologize, and start again. Teach me that progress, not perfection, is what You're after.

I trust that what I cannot do in my own strength, You can do through Your Spirit in me. Make me new. Keep making me new. Until the old is truly gone and the new has fully come.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Reflection Questions:

1. What patterns from your family of origin do you recognize in yourself? Where have you found yourself repeating what was done to you?
2. Who in your family history might have struggled with similar patterns? Can you trace the cycle back through generations?
3. What specific pattern do you most want to break? What would it look like to interrupt it the next time it arises?

4. If you have children or people you influence, what kind of family culture are you creating? Is it different from what you inherited, or are you unconsciously replicating the old patterns?
5. What would it look like to believe—truly believe—that in Christ, you are a new creation, capable of living differently than your family has lived for generations?

Chapter 12: Living Free—From Project to Purpose

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." – 2 Corinthians 3:17

Sarah stood in her church's lobby, coffee in hand, watching theebb and flow of conversation around her.

Three years ago, she would have been anxious in a moment like this—scanning for her mentor's approval, monitoring her words to ensure they were spiritually acceptable, wondering if someone was evaluating her choices, her friendships, her very presence in the room.

But today was different. Today, she was simply... present. Not performing. Not managing anyone's perception of her. Not trying to prove she was healed, mature, or spiritually acceptable. Just present, as herself, in this moment, with these people.

A friend approached and asked how she was doing. Sarah answered honestly—not with the spiritual veneer she'd once worn, but with the truth: "I'm actually really good. Life isn't perfect, but I'm free. And that feels like a miracle."

Her friend smiled. "You seem different. Lighter, somehow."

Sarah nodded. "I am different. I'm finally becoming who I was meant to be all along."

Later that day, as Sarah reflected on the conversation, she realized something profound: she'd stopped living as someone's project and started living with purpose. Not a purpose imposed from outside—someone else's vision of what her life should accomplish—but the purpose God had planted in her before the foundation of the world.

She was walking with the true Rescuer now. And He'd never once treated her like a project. He'd treated her like a beloved daughter, a masterpiece in the making, a co-laborer in His kingdom. He trusted her with her own life. He

delighted in who she was becoming. And He was teaching her what it meant to live truly free.

This was the other side of rescue. Not just survival. Not just recovery. But thriving—whole, Spirit-led, and beautifully, wonderfully unmanageable by anyone except God Himself.

What Freedom Actually Looks Like

Freedom isn't what you thought it would be. When you were controlled, you might have imagined freedom as complete independence—no one speaking into your life, no accountability, no community. Just you and God, with no messy human interference.

But that's not freedom. That's isolation. And isolation is just another form of bondage.

True freedom—the freedom Christ offers—is something altogether different. It's the freedom to be interdependent rather than dependent or independent. The freedom to receive wisdom without surrendering your agency. The freedom to be vulnerable without being consumed. The freedom to love without losing yourself.

Here's what freedom looks like in practice:

You Make Decisions With Peace, Not Paralysis

Decision-making no longer sends you into spirals of anxiety. You've learned to:

- Pray and listen for God's voice
- Seek counsel from wise people who respect your autonomy
- Weigh options without catastrophizing
- Make a choice and trust God with the outcome
- Adjust course if needed without shame

You're not perfect at discerning. You still make mistakes. But you've discovered that God is faithful to guide you and that He's far more patient with your learning process than your controller ever was.

When you make a choice that doesn't turn out as expected, you don't interpret it as evidence you can't be trusted. You see it as part of learning, part of growing, part of being human. You adjust, learn, and move forward.

You Have Relationships That Empower, Not Diminish

Your relationships look different now. You've found people who:

- Celebrate your growth instead of fearing your independence
- Offer perspective without demanding compliance
- Ask questions that help you discern instead of telling you what to do
- Respect your "no" without making you explain it endlessly
- Trust that God is working in you without needing to micromanage the process

These relationships are mutual. You give and receive. You're challenged and you challenge others. You're supported and you support. There's accountability, but it's the kind that empowers rather than controls—the kind that asks, "How can I pray for you?" instead of "Why did you do that?"

You've also learned to recognize red flags early:

- When someone needs constant updates about your life
- When someone interprets your boundaries as rejection
- When someone claims to speak for God about your decisions
- When someone makes their peace contingent on your compliance

You don't wait years to address these patterns anymore. You set boundaries early, clearly, and without apology. And if someone can't respect them, you

limit the relationship—not with bitterness, but with clarity about what's healthy for you.

You Trust Your Discernment

You've rebuilt confidence in your ability to hear God's voice. Yes, you still seek wise counsel. Yes, you still test everything against Scripture. But you no longer outsource your discernment to others.

When you sense God leading you in a particular direction, you don't wait for someone else to validate it before you move forward. You trust that the Spirit within you is sufficient to guide you. You trust that God is capable of redirecting you if you're off course. You trust that your relationship with Him is real, direct, and not contingent on anyone else's mediation.

This doesn't make you unteachable or arrogant. It makes you spiritually mature—able to receive input while maintaining responsibility for your own walk with God.

Theologian Dallas Willard wrote in *Hearing God*: "It is a major mistake to think that God can speak only through someone who is in an officially recognized position of authority... God will speak to us and can help us to recognize his voice... We can be responsible for our own direct relationship with him."

You Rest Without Guilt

Perhaps one of the most tangible signs of freedom is your ability to rest. Under control, rest felt irresponsible. There was always something more you should be doing, some way you should be improving, some accountability you should be maintaining.

But now you've learned that God built rest into the fabric of creation. The Sabbath isn't just a good idea—it's a command, reflecting God's own rhythm of work and rest. You've discovered that you're more effective, more present, and more joyful when you honor the need for downtime.

Rest looks like:

- Taking a day off without checking work emails or spiritual to-do lists
- Saying no to commitments that would overextend you
- Enjoying hobbies that produce nothing "useful"—just joy
- Sitting in silence without feeling the need to be "productive" in prayer
- Trusting that the world will continue spinning without your constant vigilance

Eugene Peterson wrote in *The Pastor*: "I didn't want to be a 'busy' pastor. I wanted to be a praying pastor. I knew I couldn't be both." You've learned this truth: you can't be both constantly productive and spiritually present. Rest is not the opposite of work—it's the foundation of sustainable work.

You Express Your True Self Without Apology

You've stopped apologizing for who you are. The quirks, the preferences, the way you're wired—you've learned to see these as design features, not defects.

If you're naturally introverted, you no longer force yourself to be the life of the party. If you're analytical, you no longer feel pressure to be more emotional. If you process slowly, you no longer rush yourself to match someone else's pace.

You've discovered that authenticity is not only acceptable—it's essential. God made you specifically, intentionally, with purpose. And the ways you're different from others aren't problems to fix; they're the very things that enable you to fulfill the unique calling He's given you.

Brennan Manning wrote: "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle." But we could add: Christians who pretend to be someone they're not, who perform rather than live authentically, who hide their true selves behind spiritual masks—these also deny the God who made them fearfully and wonderfully.

You're done pretending. You're done performing. You're done hiding. You're living as yourself—flawed, growing, but genuine.

You Experience Joy as Your Baseline

When you were controlled, your emotional baseline was anxiety. You were always monitoring, always worried, always aware of being evaluated. Joy was rare and fleeting.

But freedom has shifted your baseline to something closer to joy. Not constant happiness—that's not realistic. But an underlying current of contentment, peace, and delight that runs beneath even difficult circumstances.

You laugh more easily now. You notice beauty you missed before. You experience wonder, playfulness, and spontaneous gratitude. These aren't manufactured emotions—they're the natural fruit of walking in freedom with the One who loves you most.

Paul writes in Galatians 5:1: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." Not for heavy burden. Not for constant striving. Not for joyless religion. For freedom. And freedom, when it's real, produces joy.

Healthy Interdependence in the Body of Christ

Freedom doesn't mean you no longer need the body of Christ. It means you need it in a different way.

Under control, your relationship with the church was distorted. Either you were being managed by someone within it, or you were so wounded by spiritual abuse that you pulled away entirely. Now you're learning what healthy Christian community actually looks like.

The Biblical Vision for Community

Scripture presents a vision of community that's neither codependent nor isolated:

We need each other. "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). We're not designed to walk alone. We need prayer support, encouragement, practical help during crisis, and people who know us well enough to speak truth when we're blind to our own patterns.

We're each responsible for our own relationship with God. "Each one should carry their own load" (Galatians 6:5). While we help each other with overwhelming burdens, we each manage our own daily walk with God, our own choices, our own spiritual formation. No one else can do this for us.

We have different gifts that serve the whole. 1 Corinthians 12 presents the body of Christ as an organism where each part has a unique function. You're not meant to be like everyone else. Your particular gifting, perspective, and calling are necessary for the body to function fully.

We speak truth in love. "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). Healthy community includes both honesty and kindness—not control disguised as concern, but genuine truth offered in a spirit of love.

We submit to one another. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). Notice: submit to *one another*. Not hierarchical control where some people have all the power and others have none, but mutual submission where everyone recognizes their need for others and their responsibility to others.

This is radically different from what you experienced under control. Control was one-directional—they spoke, you listened; they decided, you complied; they had authority, you had none. Healthy community is multidirectional—everyone contributes, everyone receives, everyone has both responsibility and agency.

What to Look for in Healthy Community

As you engage with Christian community, look for these markers of health:

Mutual respect. Your voice matters as much as anyone else's. Your insights are valued, not dismissed. Your boundaries are honored, not violated.

Grace for imperfection. Mistakes are treated as opportunities for growth, not as evidence of fundamental failure. People can be honest about their struggles without fear of shame or surveillance.

Empowerment, not dependency. Leaders and mature believers equip others to hear God, make decisions, and grow in maturity. The goal is to work yourself out of a job, not to keep people dependent on you.

Celebration of diversity. Different perspectives, different personalities, different callings are welcomed, not treated as problems to be corrected. Unity doesn't require uniformity.

Accountability that honors agency. When someone asks, "Can I hold you accountable?" they're offering to pray for you, check in on your progress, and encourage you—not to police your behavior or punish you for falling short.

Transparency about limitations. Healthy leaders admit when they don't know something, when they made a mistake, when they need help. There's no pretense of having it all together.

Protection of the vulnerable. The community takes seriously any reports of manipulation, control, or abuse. Leaders don't get special treatment. Victims are believed, supported, and protected.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*: "Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality... We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans... It is part of the discipline of humility that we must not spare our hand where it can perform service."

What to Avoid

You've learned to recognize patterns that look like Christian community but are actually dysfunction:

Spiritual elitism. Any community that divides people into spiritual haves and have-nots—"the mature" and "the immature," "the leaders" and "the projects"—is setting itself up for control dynamics.

Demanding loyalty above honesty. If you can't voice concerns without being labeled disloyal, divisive, or unspiritual, you're not in a healthy community. You're in a system that protects itself rather than serving its members.

Excessive oversight. If leaders need to know details of your personal life, decisions, or finances that aren't their responsibility, that's overreach. Healthy community has appropriate boundaries between leaders and members.

Isolation from outsiders. Communities that discourage relationships outside the group, that speak disparagingly of other churches or Christians, or that create an "us vs. them" mentality are exhibiting cult-like characteristics.

Weaponized Scripture. If Scripture is regularly used to enforce compliance, shame questioners, or justify control, that's spiritual abuse. The Word of God sets people free; it doesn't enslave them.

No clear exit. Healthy communities allow people to leave with blessing, not guilt. If leaving is treated as betrayal or spiritual danger, something is wrong.

If you find yourself in a community with these characteristics, trust your discernment. You've been here before. You know what this feels like. And you don't have to stay.

From Victim to Victor: Turning Your Testimony Into Ministry

One of the most redemptive aspects of healing from control is discovering that your pain has prepared you for purpose. What you've survived can become what you share. Your testimony can become ministry to others still trapped in what you've escaped.

The Biblical Pattern of Redemptive Suffering

Throughout Scripture, God takes people's worst experiences and uses them for others' good:

Joseph was betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused, and imprisoned. Years later, he told his brothers: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). His suffering positioned him to save a nation.

David was hunted by Saul, betrayed by friends, and faced constant danger. But his psalms—born from his pain—have comforted millions of believers for thousands of years.

Paul was persecuted, imprisoned, shipwrecked, and beaten. But he wrote: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). His suffering equipped him to comfort others.

Jesus suffered the ultimate injustice—torture and murder for crimes He didn't commit. And that suffering became the means of salvation for the world. "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand" (Isaiah 53:10).

Your suffering under control was not God's ideal for you. He grieves what was done to you. But He wastes nothing. What the enemy intended for your destruction, God can redeem for your purpose and others' freedom.

How Your Experience Equips You

Your journey through control and into freedom has given you:

Compassion for those still trapped. You understand the confusion, the shame, the cognitive dissonance. You know what it's like to be someone's project. You can offer empathy that those who haven't experienced it cannot.

Credibility. When you share your story, others who've been controlled recognize truth. You're not speaking theoretically—you're speaking from lived

experience. Your testimony carries weight that academic understanding alone cannot provide.

Practical wisdom. You've learned what works in setting boundaries, in rebuilding discernment, in forgiving without reconciling. You can offer concrete steps, not just platitudes.

Hope. You're living proof that healing is possible, that cycles can be broken, that freedom is real. Others who are just beginning this journey need to see someone further along the path who made it through.

Prophetic insight. Having experienced control, you can spot it earlier than others. You can name it when you see it in churches, organizations, or relationships. Your voice can protect the vulnerable from predators disguised as helpers.

Spiritual authority. Not positional authority, but the authority that comes from having walked through darkness and emerged into light. When you speak about spiritual abuse and freedom, you speak with the authority of one who knows both intimately.

Sharing Your Story Wisely

Not everyone needs to hear your full story. And not every moment is the right time to share it. But when God opens doors, you can offer your testimony in ways that bring freedom to others.

Share when invited, not when you need to prove yourself. Your story isn't a defense of your decisions or an explanation of your boundaries. It's an offering—given when someone is ready to receive it, not forced on those who aren't.

Focus on God's faithfulness, not just your controller's failures. Yes, name what happened. Truth-telling is important. But the emphasis should be on God's redemption, His faithfulness through the process, His work of restoration. Your story is ultimately about Him, not about them.

Protect others' privacy. You can share your experience without naming your controller publicly. In most cases, specific names aren't necessary—the patterns are universal enough that people will recognize them. If you do need to name someone (for example, to warn others who may be targeted), do so with wisdom and appropriate boundaries.

Be honest about the ongoing journey. You don't have to pretend you've arrived or that healing is complete. "I'm still learning" is a powerful testimony. It normalizes the process and removes the pressure for others to be "fixed" immediately.

Invite questions. Some of the most powerful ministry happens not in monologue but in dialogue. When you share your story and invite others to ask questions, you create space for their own processing, their own recognition of patterns in their lives.

Point people to resources. Your story is powerful, but it's not comprehensive. Point people to good books, counselors, support groups, and healthy churches that can provide ongoing support beyond what you can offer.

Know your limits. You can't rescue everyone. You can't be everyone's counselor. You can't carry the weight of others' healing. Offer what you can, and trust God with what you can't. Remember: you're not their savior. Jesus is.

Henri Nouwen wrote in *The Wounded Healer*: "The great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there... The minister is called to recognize the sufferings of his time in his own heart and make that recognition the starting point of his service."

Possible Expressions of Your Ministry

Your ministry might take many forms:

Informal conversations. Simply being honest about your experience when it's relevant—not hiding your story but sharing it naturally as opportunities arise.

Mentoring. Walking with one or two people who are where you once were, offering the support and empowerment you wish you'd had.

Leading a support group. Creating space for others who've been controlled to process together, learn together, and heal together.

Writing. Sharing your story through blog posts, articles, or even a book.

Written words reach people you'll never meet but who desperately need to know they're not alone.

Advocating for change. Speaking up in churches or organizations where you see controlling dynamics developing. Using your voice to protect others from experiencing what you experienced.

Training leaders. Helping pastors, ministry leaders, and counselors recognize signs of spiritual abuse and learn to create healthier environments.

Creating art. Some people process and share their stories through music, visual art, drama, or other creative expressions that give language to pain that words alone cannot capture.

Simply living free. Never underestimate the power of your transformed life.

Others are watching. Your freedom, your peace, your joy—these testify to God's redemptive power without a word being spoken.

Whatever form your ministry takes, remember: it flows from your healing, not from your woundedness. You don't minister *instead of* healing; you minister *because* you've been healed. God uses wounded healers, but He doesn't use people whose wounds are still open, infected, and consuming them. Do your work. Get help. Heal. And then, from that place of health, offer what you've received to others.

Walking With the True Rescuer

At the heart of your freedom is a profound shift in relationship: you're no longer being managed by a human rescuer. You're walking with the true Rescuer—Jesus Christ, who saves without suffocating, who empowers without controlling, who leads without manipulating.

How Jesus Rescues Differently

Remember the differences between human rescuers and the divine Rescuer:

Jesus rescues you to freedom, not *into* dependence. Every interaction with Jesus is designed to make you more capable, more confident, more mature. He's not threatened by your growth. He celebrates it.

Jesus trusts you with your own journey. He doesn't micromanage. He doesn't need constant reports. He doesn't panic when you take risks or make mistakes. He walks with you, guides you, and trusts the Spirit within you to do His work.

Jesus respects your agency. He invites, never coerces. He offers, never demands. He stands at the door and knocks (Revelation 3:20), but He doesn't break the door down. Even in salvation, He honors your choice.

Jesus empowers rather than disempowers. His goal is to equip you for the works He prepared for you (Ephesians 2:10). He gives you gifts, calls you by name, sends you out with authority. He doesn't keep you perpetually dependent on His daily instructions.

Jesus leads by going before, not by standing over. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus said. "The sheep follow him because they know his voice... he goes on ahead of them" (John 10:4). Shepherds in the Middle East walked in front of their sheep, leading them to good pasture. They didn't drive them from behind with threats or force.

Jesus' yoke is easy and His burden is light. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Following Jesus feels freeing, not crushing. It stretches you, but it doesn't break you.

This is the Rescuer you're learning to walk with now. Not a harsh taskmaster. Not an anxious controller. Not a demanding manager. A gentle, humble,

trustworthy Shepherd who knows your name, who protects you from real danger, who leads you to good pasture, and who laid down His life for you.

The Ongoing Relationship

Walking with Jesus as your Rescuer is a daily practice. Here's what it looks like:

You bring everything to Him first. Before you ask others for advice, before you rehearse your anxieties, before you make your plans—you bring it to Him. Not because He's demanding or jealous, but because He's wise and trustworthy and He knows you better than anyone else.

You listen for His voice above all others. The voices of friends, leaders, family, and even your own internal dialogue are secondary to His voice. You test everything against His Word. You wait for His peace. You trust His timing.

You rest in His pleasure, not human approval. The fear of man is a snare (Proverbs 29:25), but you've been set free from it. You care what Jesus thinks. You care far less what anyone else thinks. His "well done" is all you need.

You follow His example in how you treat others. Jesus didn't control people. Neither do you. Jesus empowered people. So do you. Jesus pointed people to the Father. You point people to Jesus. You become more like Him, which means you become less like those who controlled you.

You experience increasing freedom. Paul writes, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). As you walk more closely with Jesus, you experience greater freedom—freedom from fear, from performance, from the need to prove yourself, from the tyranny of others' expectations.

You discover His joy. Jesus said, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). Walking with Him produces joy—not the shallow happiness that depends on circumstances, but the deep joy that remains even in hardship because it's rooted in His presence, not your performance.

C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*: "The more we get what we now call 'ourselves' out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become... It is when I turn to Christ, when I give myself up to His personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own."

The Joy of Unmanageability

You've discovered something wonderfully subversive: you are unmanageable. Not rebellious. Not unteachable. Not independent in an unhealthy way. But unmanageable—meaning no human being can control you, direct your every move, or make you their project.

You belong to Jesus. You answer to Him. You're accountable to Him. And while you welcome wisdom from others, while you participate in community, while you honor appropriate authority—no one manages you but God Himself.

This is exactly as it should be.

You're a child of God, not a project of people. You're the temple of the Holy Spirit, not someone's mission field. You're a co-heir with Christ, not someone's perpetual student.

The joy of unmanageability is the joy of being exactly who God made you to be, answerable to Him, led by His Spirit, secure in His love, and free from the need to comply with anyone's vision of who you should become.

This doesn't make you difficult. It makes you free. And free people are some of the most loving, generous, gracious people you'll meet—because they love from overflow, not from obligation. They serve from freedom, not from fear. They give because they want to, not because they must.

Living Your Purpose

You've moved from being someone's project to living your purpose. That purpose looks like:

Doing the good works God prepared specifically for you. Not generic Christian duties. Not what your controller thought you should do. But what

God designed you for from the beginning. Your unique contribution to His kingdom.

Loving others without losing yourself. You've learned to love with healthy boundaries, with appropriate distance, with the freedom to say yes when you can and no when you can't. Your love is sustainable because it flows from wholeness, not from depletion.

Walking in your calling with confidence. Whether that calling is parenting, teaching, creating, leading, serving, building, healing—you do it with the settled confidence that God equipped you for it, calls you to it, and empowers you in it.

Pointing others to Jesus, not to yourself. You've learned what it feels like to be someone's project, so you refuse to make others yours. You point people to Jesus consistently, trusting Him to do His work in them without your interference.

Enjoying life as God's beloved. You're not just surviving. You're thriving. You laugh, you rest, you create, you play, you delight in beauty. Because you're free to be fully human, fully alive, fully yourself.

Offering grace to those still learning. You remember what it was like to be trapped, confused, and uncertain. So you extend patience to others who are where you once were. You offer hope, not judgment. You share your story, not to shame them for where they are, but to show them where they can go.

Frederick Buechner wrote: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." You're discovering that place. It's not where your controller thought it should be. It's where God prepared it to be. And walking in it—finally, freely—is one of the greatest joys of your life.

The Ongoing Journey

Freedom isn't a destination you arrive at and then stop moving. It's a way of walking, a posture, a daily choice. You'll have moments when old patterns

tempt you. You'll face new situations that trigger old fears. You'll encounter people who try to control you, and you'll need to set boundaries all over again.

But you know how to do this now. You've built the muscles. You've learned the skills. You know your own value, your own voice, your own direct relationship with God. And each time you face a new challenge, you'll face it from a position of strength, not weakness.

You're not the person you were when you started this journey. You're stronger. Free. More yourself. More confident in God. More secure in His love. More capable of walking in the purpose He designed you for.

And you're not done. You're still becoming. Still growing. Still learning to walk more fully in freedom. And that's exactly as it should be.

Paul writes in Philippians 1:6: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." God isn't finished with you. He's still working, still refining, still calling you forward into greater freedom, greater wholeness, greater resemblance to Jesus.

The difference now is that you trust the process. You trust the One doing the work. You know He's faithful. And you know that where He leads, you can follow—not with anxious compliance, but with joyful confidence.

A Benediction for Your Journey

As this book closes and your ongoing journey continues, receive this blessing:

May you walk in the freedom Christ purchased for you at Calvary.

May you hear His voice clearly above all other voices—the voice that calls you beloved, capable, and wonderfully made.

May you rest in His finished work, knowing you are not a project to be completed but a masterpiece already declared good.

May you set boundaries without guilt, knowing that protecting what God has entrusted to you is an act of worship.

May you love others from the overflow of being loved, never depleting yourself to fill others' emptiness.

May you recognize control when it appears and have the courage to resist it, gently but firmly.

May you forgive those who wounded you, releasing them to God's justice and mercy, and finding your own freedom in that release.

May you break the cycles that have run through your family for generations, becoming the generation where health begins.

May you discover your true identity—not who others said you should be, but who God created you to be from the beginning.

May you walk in your unique calling with confidence, doing the good works God prepared specifically for you.

May you point others to the true Rescuer, never positioning yourself as mediator but always as fellow traveler.

May you experience joy as your baseline, gratitude as your posture, and peace as your portion.

May you know—deeply, unshakably, permanently—that you are seen, known, loved, and free.

May you live as God's beloved child, unmanageable by anyone except Him, secure in His love, empowered by His Spirit.

And may you discover, every single day, that the other side of rescue is not just survival—it's abundant life, overflowing with purpose, meaning, connection, and joy.

You are free, beloved.

Walk in it.

Live from it.

Celebrate it.

And never, ever, let anyone take it from you again.

"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." – John 8:36

You are free indeed.

Final Reflection Questions:

1. What does freedom look like in your life today? How is it different from when you started this journey?
2. Where do you still feel the pull of old patterns—the temptation to be controlled or to control others? How will you address this going forward?
3. What is your unique purpose—the good works God prepared specifically for you? Are you walking in them?
4. Who in your life needs to hear your story? How might God be calling you to share what He's done for you?
5. As you close this book and continue your journey, what is one commitment you want to make to ongoing freedom?

A Prayer for Your Future:

Father,

Thank You for setting me free. Thank You that I am no longer someone's project but Your beloved child, designed with purpose, equipped for calling, secure in Your love.

Thank You for walking with me through the darkness of control into the light of freedom. Thank You for never giving up on me, even when I struggled to believe I could change.

Help me to walk forward in this freedom—not taking it for granted, but also not living in fear of losing it. Give me wisdom to recognize controlling patterns

early. Give me courage to set boundaries when needed. Give me grace to forgive repeatedly, releasing others to Your care.

Use my story for Your glory. Let my testimony bring freedom to others still trapped in what I've escaped. Make me a wounded healer who points people not to myself but always to You.

Protect me from becoming what I've been freed from. Keep me humble. Keep me teachable. But also keep me confident in Your design of me, secure in my identity, and bold in my calling.

Thank You that the story doesn't end here. Thank You that You're still writing, still working, still leading me forward into greater freedom, greater wholeness, greater resemblance to Jesus.

I trust You with my future. I trust You with my journey. I trust You with my purpose.

I am Yours.

And I am free.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

The End of the Book, The Beginning of Your Story

You've reached the end of these pages, but you haven't reached the end of your story. In many ways, it's just beginning.

The chapters ahead are yours to write—not under someone's management, but under God's loving guidance. You'll face challenges. You'll have victories. You'll make mistakes and learn from them. You'll help others find freedom, and you'll continue discovering new depths of your own freedom.

Through it all, remember this:

You were never meant to be someone's project.

You were always meant to be God's masterpiece.

You were never meant to be managed, controlled, or suffocated by human rescuers.

You were always meant to walk freely with the divine Rescuer who gave His life for yours.

You were never meant to live small, scared, or suppressed.

You were always meant to live fully alive, fully yourself, fully free.

The other side of rescue is beautiful.

It's worth every hard step it took to get here.

It's worth protecting with fierce boundaries.

It's worth sharing with others still in darkness.

You are free.

Now go live like it.

THE OTHER SIDE OF RESCUE

Personal Study Guide & Reflection Journal

Healing When You Were Someone's Project

How to Use This Guide

This study guide is designed to help you process your journey from being controlled to living in freedom. It can be used:

Individually: Work through at your own pace, using the questions and exercises for personal reflection and prayer.

With a trusted friend: Share your responses with someone who understands healthy boundaries and can offer support without control.

In a small group: Gather with 2-4 others who have similar experiences. Commit to confidentiality, respect, and mutual support.

With a counselor: Bring this guide to therapy sessions as a framework for processing your healing journey.

Guidelines for Your Journey:

Go at your own pace. There's no timeline. Some chapters may take days or weeks to process.

Be honest. This is your safe space. Write what's true, not what sounds spiritual or acceptable.

Give yourself grace. Healing isn't linear. Some days will be harder than others.

Protect your process. Only share with people who are safe, who respect boundaries, and who won't use your vulnerability against you.

Celebrate progress. Notice and acknowledge even small steps forward.

Return as needed. You may need to revisit certain chapters multiple times as new layers surface.

INTRODUCTION & CHAPTER 1

When "Help" Becomes Control: The Savior Syndrome

Personal Reflection:

1. **My Story Begins Here:** When did you first realize something was wrong in the "helping" relationship?

2. **Recognizing the Pattern:** Check all that apply to your experience:

- They claimed to know God's will for my life better than I did
- They required regular check-ins/reports about my life
- They interpreted my desire for boundaries as spiritual rebellion
- They became hurt/disappointed when I made decisions without them
- They used "God told me" to enforce their preferences
- They suggested I was too broken to be trusted
- They made me feel guilty for wanting independence
- Other: _____

3. **The Cost:** What did this relationship cost you? (Time, other relationships, confidence, joy, etc.)

Truth to Embrace:

"I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from Me there is no savior." – Isaiah 43:11

Write this truth in your own words:

For Discussion (if sharing with a friend):

- What similarities do you see in our experiences of being controlled?
- What was the hardest part to recognize or admit?
- How did the relationship begin? What drew you to this person initially?

Prayer Prompt:

God, help me see clearly what happened without minimizing it or exaggerating it. Give me courage to name the truth. Help me trust that You are the only Savior I need.

Action Step This Week:

Write down three specific ways your controller behaved like they were your savior instead of pointing you to Jesus.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

CHAPTER 2

The Weight of Being Someone's Project

Personal Reflection:

1. **What I Lost:** When you became someone's project, what parts of yourself disappeared? My voice:

My preferences: _____

My confidence in hearing God:

My joy: _____
Other: _____

2. **The Image of God in Me:** *"You are fearfully and wonderfully made."* – *Psalm 139:14* Do you believe this about yourself right now? (Circle one)
Not at all ---- **Struggling to believe** ---- **Starting to believe** ---- **Yes, I believe it** What makes it hard to believe you are fearfully and wonderfully made?

3. **Agency Audit:** Rate your current sense of agency (1=none, 10=complete):

- Ability to make decisions without seeking approval: ____/10
- Confidence in my own discernment: ____/10
- Trust that God speaks to me directly: ____/10
- Freedom to have preferences: ____/10
- Belief that I'm capable: ____/10

Truth to Embrace:

You are not fundamentally broken. You are being healed, but you were never a problem to be solved.

For Discussion:

- What do you miss most about who you were before being controlled?
- How did being treated as a project affect your view of yourself?
- What would "fearfully and wonderfully made" look like in your life?

Prayer Prompt:

God, help me see myself as You see me—not as a project, but as Your beloved child. Restore what was taken. Remind me who I really am.

Action Step This Week:

Do one thing this week purely because you enjoy it, not because it's productive or spiritually beneficial. Notice how it feels.

What I did: _____

How it felt: _____

CHAPTER 3

Holy Anger and Honest Lament

Personal Reflection:

1. **Permission to Feel:** On a scale of 1-10, how much permission do you give yourself to feel angry about what happened? ____/10 What messages have you received about anger? (Check all that apply)
 - Good Christians don't get angry
 - Anger is sin
 - If I'm angry, I haven't forgiven
 - My anger proves I'm not healed
 - Expressing anger is disrespectful
 - Other: _____

2. **Write Your Lament:** Use this space to write an uncensored prayer to God. Tell Him exactly how you feel about what was done to you. Don't edit for theological correctness. Be raw. Be honest. God,

3. From Anger to Intercession: Where are you in this process? (Check one)

- I'm in the anger stage and not ready to move forward yet
- I'm beginning to see their brokenness alongside my own pain
- I can pray for them from a distance
- I'm able to release them to God's justice and mercy
- I'm not sure where I am

Truth to Embrace:

"In your anger do not sin." – Ephesians 4:26

Anger at injustice is holy. What you do with that anger determines whether it leads to freedom or bitterness.

For Discussion:

- What are you most angry about?
- How has your controller's possible brokenness shaped their behavior?

- What would it look like to hold both compassion for them and anger at what they did?

Prayer Prompt:

God, I'm angry. I'm hurt. I'm betrayed. And I'm bringing all of it to You. Help me not to sin in my anger. Transform this rage into something redemptive. Lead me from bitterness to freedom.

Action Step This Week:

Choose one:

- Pray a Psalm of lament aloud (try Psalm 13, 55, or 88)
- Write a letter you'll never send, expressing everything you wish you could say
- Tell a trusted friend one thing you're angry about

I chose: _____

How it helped: _____

CHAPTER 4

The Counterfeit of Control

Personal Reflection:

1. Control Tactics Inventory: Which tactics did your controller use?

(Check all that apply)

- Guilt: "After all I've done for you..."
- Shame: "Something is wrong with you if..."
- Spiritual manipulation: "God told me..."
- Surveillance: Needing to know where you are/what you're doing
- Emotional withdrawal when you asserted independence

- Making you responsible for their emotional state
- Creating double binds (damned if you do, damned if you don't)
- Other: _____

2. Physical Effects: What physical symptoms did/do you experience from being controlled?

- Difficulty sleeping
- Digestive issues
- Chronic tension/pain
- Anxiety/panic attacks
- Depression
- Difficulty concentrating
- Constant sense of dread
- Other: _____

3. Comparing Yokes: Create two columns comparing your controller's "yoke" with Jesus' yoke: **My Controller's Yoke:** | **Jesus' Yoke:**

_____		_____
_____		_____
_____		_____

Truth to Embrace:

"My yoke is easy and my burden is light." – Matthew 11:29

If it feels crushing, it's not from Jesus.

For Discussion:

- Which control tactic was most effective in keeping you compliant?
- How did control become disguised as care in your relationship?
- What would Jesus' "easy yoke" actually feel like in daily life?

Prayer Prompt:

Jesus, teach me the difference between Your yoke and human control. Help me recognize when I'm carrying burdens You never intended. Show me what rest feels like.

Action Step This Week:

Identify one area where you're still carrying the controller's burden (their expectations, their anxiety, their vision for your life). Practice mentally handing it back to them and to God.

The burden I'm releasing: _____

How it feels to release it: _____

CHAPTER 5

From Helplessness to Holy Confidence

Personal Reflection:

1. Learned Helplessness Assessment: How often do you experience these? (1=rarely, 5=constantly)

- Paralysis when making decisions: ____/5
- Second-guessing everything: ____/5
- Waiting for permission from others: ____/5
- Assuming you'll make the wrong choice: ____/5
- Feeling incapable of basic discernment: ____/5

2. Lies I've Believed → Truths I'm Learning:

Lie

Biblical Truth

I can't trust my judgment I have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16)

3. **Small Wins:** What's one small decision you made this week without seeking approval?

How did it feel? _____ What did you learn? _____

Truth to Embrace:

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." – Philippians 4:13

Not in your own strength, but through Christ in you, you are capable.

For Discussion:

- What were you capable of before being controlled that you've forgotten?
- What would it look like to celebrate progress instead of demanding perfection?
- How can we encourage each other to take risks and learn from mistakes?

Prayer Prompt:

God, rebuild my confidence. Help me trust that You've equipped me, that Your Spirit guides me, that I'm capable in You. Give me courage to try, to fail, to learn, and to grow.

Action Step This Week:

Take one small risk this week. Try something without certainty of the outcome. Notice what happens.

My risk: _____

The outcome: _____

What I learned: _____

CHAPTER 6

Boundaries That Honor God

Personal Reflection:

1. My Boundary History: Rate your current boundary health

(1=nonexistent, 10=strong and clear):

- Physical boundaries (personal space, touch): ____/10
- Emotional boundaries (not responsible for others' feelings): ____/10
- Mental boundaries (my thoughts are mine): ____/10
- Spiritual boundaries (direct access to God): ____/10
- Time boundaries (can say no): ____/10

2. Boundary Fears: What are you most afraid will happen if you set boundaries?

Are these fears based on actual evidence or on old training?

3. Jesus' Boundaries: List three times Jesus set boundaries (from Chapter 6 or your own study of the Gospels):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What do these teach you about boundaries and godliness?

Truth to Embrace:

"Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no." – Matthew 5:37

Simple, clear, unapologetic boundaries honor God and protect what He's entrusted to you.

For Discussion:

- What boundary do you most need to set right now?
- What pushback do you anticipate, and how will you respond?
- How can we support each other in maintaining boundaries?

Prayer Prompt:

God, give me courage to set boundaries without guilt. Help me believe that protecting what You've given me is an act of worship, not selfishness. When I face pushback, remind me that I'm answering to You, not to anyone else.

Action Step This Week:

Set one small boundary and hold it, even if there's pushback.

My boundary: _____

The response I got: _____

How I held the boundary: _____

CHAPTER 7

Rebuilding Trust: Listening for God's Voice Again

Personal Reflection:

1. **Hearing God Inventory:** Rate your confidence in each area (1=no confidence, 10=strong confidence):

- I can hear God's voice: ____/10

- I trust my discernment: ____/10
- I don't need another person to interpret God for me: ____/10
- The Spirit speaks to me directly: ____/10
- I can distinguish God's voice from others' voices: ____/10

2. Voice Recognition: How do you typically recognize when God is speaking to you?

- Through Scripture that comes alive
- Through a sense of peace or conviction
- Through circumstances aligning
- Through wise counsel that confirms what I'm sensing
- Through dreams or visions
- Through a still, small voice
- Other: _____
- I'm not sure yet

3. Practice Listening: Spend 10 minutes in silence asking God one question. Write what you sense: My question:

_____ What I
sensed God saying: _____

How confident am I that this was God? (1-10): ____/10 How will I test this?

Truth to Embrace:

"My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." – John 10:27

If you belong to Jesus, you can hear His voice. Not perfectly, but truly.

For Discussion:

- How did your controller interfere with your direct relationship with God?
- What would it look like to trust that the Spirit can guide you without a human mediator?
- How can we help each other grow in discernment without creating new dependencies?

Prayer Prompt:

God, I want to hear Your voice clearly. Forgive me for doubting that You speak to me directly. Help me distinguish Your voice from the voices of control, fear, and my own desires. Teach me to trust that when You speak, I can recognize it.

Action Step This Week:

Practice listening prayer three times this week. Start with low-stakes questions and build from there.

Day 1: Question _____ What I heard _____

Day 2: Question _____ What I heard _____

Day 3: Question _____ What I heard _____

CHAPTER 8

Compassion Without Compromise

Personal Reflection:

1. **Seeing Them Clearly:** Can you identify what might have driven your controller's behavior?
 - Their own unhealed trauma
 - Deep insecurity about their worth
 - The way they were disciplined/controlled
 - Chronic anxiety

- Theological misunderstanding
- I'm not ready to think about this yet
- Other: _____

2. **Compassion vs. Enabling:** Where are you on this spectrum for each statement?

Statement	Enabling ← → Compassion
I can see their pain	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
I maintain boundaries despite their distress	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
I pray for their healing	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
I allow natural consequences	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
I tell the truth about harm while honoring their humanity	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. **Grace and Truth Together:** For your specific situation, what does grace look like? What does truth look like? **Grace:**

Truth: _____

Truth to Embrace:

"Full of grace and truth." – John 1:14

Grace without truth is sentimentality. Truth without grace is harshness. Jesus models holding both.

For Discussion:

- How do we have compassion for someone who hurt us without excusing what they did?
- What's the difference between forgiving and reconciling?
- How can we support each other in maintaining boundaries while staying soft-hearted?

Prayer Prompt:

God, give me Your heart for the person who controlled me. Help me see them as wounded, not just as someone who wounded me. But also help me protect myself wisely. Teach me to hold both grace and truth, just like Jesus.

Action Step This Week:

Pray for your controller three times this week. Honest prayers—not pious or fake, but genuine intercession for their healing and freedom.

What I prayed: _____

How it affected my heart: _____

CHAPTER 9

Forgiveness That Frees Your Soul

Personal Reflection:

1. Forgiveness Audit: Where are you in the forgiveness process?

- I'm still in the anger stage and not ready to forgive
- I want to forgive but don't know how
- I've made the decision to forgive but still feel the pain
- I've forgiven but need to forgive again as new layers surface
- I've forgiven and am walking in increasing freedom
- Other: _____

2. What Forgiveness Is NOT: Which misconceptions have you believed about forgiveness?

- Forgiveness means what they did was okay
- Forgiveness means I have to forget
- Forgiveness means I have to reconcile
- Forgiveness means I have to trust them again
- Forgiveness means I pretend I'm not hurt
- Forgiveness is a one-time event

3. The Debt: What do they owe you that can never be repaid?

Are you willing to release them from this debt and trust God to settle accounts?

- Yes, I release them now
- I want to, but I'm not there yet
- I'm willing to be made willing
- No, I'm not ready

Truth to Embrace:

"Forgive as the Lord forgave you." – Colossians 3:13

You forgive not because they deserve it, but because you've been forgiven. And forgiveness sets you free.

For Discussion:

- What makes forgiveness feel impossible?

- How has unforgiveness affected you physically, emotionally, spiritually?
- What would it look like to release the burden of judgment to God?

Prayer of Release:

When you're ready, pray this prayer (or write your own):

God, I release [name] from the debt they owe me. What they did was wrong, and it hurt me deeply. But I'm not going to carry this burden anymore. I'm giving it to You. I trust You to deal with them justly and mercifully. I choose to forgive, not because they've earned it, but because You've forgiven me. Set me free from bitterness. Heal my heart. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Date I prayed this: _____

Action Step This Week:

When thoughts of the offense intrude, practice redirecting: "I've already released this to God. I'm not rehearsing it again." Count how many times you have to redirect.

Number of times: _____

Did it get easier? _____

CHAPTER 10

Restoring Your God-Given Identity

Personal Reflection:

1. **Who Am I Really?** Complete these sentences as honestly as you can:

Before being controlled, I was:

_____ While being controlled, I
became: _____ Now I'm discovering
that I'm actually: _____ God designed me
to be: _____

2. **Design Features vs. Defects:** What aspects of your personality were treated as defects that were actually design features?

Treated as Defect Actually a Design Feature

Example: Too quiet Reflective and thoughtful

3. **Your Good Works:** *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* – *Ephesians 2:10* What good works do you sense God prepared specifically for you?

How did being controlled prevent you from walking in these?

Truth to Embrace:

You are God's masterpiece—not a rough draft, not a work in progress that might not make the final cut, but a completed work of art that He's continuing to refine.

For Discussion:

- What parts of yourself have you buried that need to come back to life?
- What's the difference between grace-based and performance-based confidence?
- How can we celebrate each other's uniqueness instead of trying to make each other conform?

Prayer Prompt:

God, show me who You made me to be. Restore what was buried. Awaken what was silenced. Help me see myself as Your masterpiece, designed with

intention and purpose. Give me permission to be exactly who You created me to be.

Action Step This Week:

Do something this week that expresses your unique design—something that reflects who you are when you're most yourself.

What I did: _____

How it felt: _____

What I learned about myself: _____

CHAPTER 11

Healing Family and Generational Patterns

Personal Reflection:

- 1. Family Pattern Recognition:** What patterns from your family of origin do you recognize in the controlling relationship?

Who else in your family history might have struggled with control or codependency?

- 2. The Cycle Stops Here:** What patterns are you committed to not passing on?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What new patterns do you want to establish?

4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

3. **Family Relationship Decisions:** For each family member involved in or affected by the controlling relationship, identify the level of relationship that's currently healthy:

Person Current Level (Full / Limited / Very Limited / No Contact)

Truth to Embrace:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" – 2 Corinthians 5:17

You don't have to repeat what was done to you. In Christ, you can become something new.

For Discussion:

- What family patterns do we see in common?
- How do we break cycles without dishonoring family?
- If you have children, how are you creating a different family culture?

Prayer Prompt:

God, break the cycles that have run through my family for generations. Let it stop with me. Give me wisdom to create new patterns rooted in health, freedom, and Your love. Heal not just me, but the generations that come after me.

Action Step This Week:

Interrupt one old pattern this week. Choose a different response when you feel the pull of the familiar dysfunction.

The pattern I interrupted: _____

My new response: _____

How it felt: _____

CHAPTER 12

Living Free: From Project to Purpose

Personal Reflection:

1. Freedom Inventory: Rate how free you feel in each area (1=still trapped, 10=completely free):

- Making decisions: ____/10
- Trusting my discernment: ____/10
- Saying no without guilt: ____/10
- Being my authentic self: ____/10
- Enjoying life: ____/10
- Experiencing joy as my baseline: ____/10
- Walking in my calling: ____/10
- Pointing others to Jesus, not managing them: ____/10

2. From Project to Purpose: As someone's project, I was:

Now, walking in freedom, I am: _____

My purpose is: _____

3. Your Testimony: Write your story in 3-5 sentences. Focus on God's faithfulness, not just your controller's failures.

Who might need to hear this story?

Truth to Embrace:

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." – 2 Corinthians 3:17

You are free. Walk in it. Live from it. Protect it. Share it.

For Discussion:

- What does freedom look like in your daily life now?
- How can we help each other stay free and not slip back into old patterns?
- What's your next step in walking out your purpose?

Prayer Prompt:

God, thank You for setting me free. Thank You that I'm no longer someone's project but Your beloved child. Help me walk in this freedom every day. Use my story to bring freedom to others. Keep me close to You, the true Rescuer who saves without suffocating. I trust You with my future.

Action Step This Week:

Share your story (or part of it) with one person who might benefit from hearing it.

Who I shared with: _____

What happened: _____

ONGOING TOOLS & PRACTICES

Weekly Check-In

Use this weekly to track your progress and identify where you need support:

Week of: _____

This week I felt most free when:

This week I struggled most with:

Old pattern I noticed:

New response I tried:

Boundary I set or maintained:

Decision I made with confidence:

Way I experienced joy:

Person/situation that triggered old fears:

How I responded differently:

Prayer request for next week:

Red Flag Recognition

Keep this list handy. If you notice these patterns emerging in any relationship, address them early:

Warning Signs of Control:

- They need to know details about your life that aren't their responsibility
- They become hurt/disappointed when you make decisions without consulting them
- They claim to hear from God about your life regularly
- They interpret your boundaries as rejection or spiritual immaturity
- You feel anxious when you're around them
- You find yourself lying or hiding things to avoid their reaction
- They make you responsible for their emotional state
- You feel more controlled than cared for
- They can't celebrate your growth if it means you need them less
- Their "concern" feels more like surveillance

If you notice these patterns:

1. Name what you're seeing: "This feels like control."
2. Set a clear boundary: "I need you to respect my autonomy."
3. Observe their response: Do they honor the boundary or escalate?

4. Protect yourself: Limit the relationship if they can't respect boundaries.
5. Get support: Talk to someone safe about what you're experiencing.

Scripture for Freedom

Memorize and meditate on these truths:

Identity:

- "You are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works." (Ephesians 2:10)
- "You are fearfully and wonderfully made." (Psalm 139:14)
- "I have called you by name; you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1)

Freedom:

- "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." (Galatians 5:1)
- "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Corinthians 3:17)
- "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36)

God's Voice:

- "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27)
- "The Holy Spirit will teach you all things." (John 14:26)
- "We have the mind of Christ." (1 Corinthians 2:16)

Boundaries:

- "Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no." (Matthew 5:37)
- "Each one should carry their own load." (Galatians 6:5)
- "Above all else, guard your heart." (Proverbs 4:23)

Forgiveness:

- "Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Colossians 3:13)
- "Love keeps no record of wrongs." (1 Corinthians 13:5)
- "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions." (Psalm 103:12)

Progress Markers

Celebrate these signs of healing. Check them off as you experience them:

Emotional/Relational:

- I make decisions without paralyzing anxiety
- I can say no without excessive guilt
- I trust my own discernment
- I have relationships that empower rather than diminish me
- I can receive correction without feeling devastated
- I set boundaries and maintain them
- I feel more peace than anxiety as my baseline
- I experience joy regularly
- I can be vulnerable without being consumed

Spiritual:

- I hear God's voice directly
- I trust that the Holy Spirit guides me
- I read Scripture without hearing my controller's interpretations
- I pray freely, not according to someone else's formula
- I experience God's delight in me

- I know I'm God's beloved child, not someone's project
- I can worship without performing
- I trust God with outcomes I can't control

Practical:

- I pursue my calling/purpose
- I honor my own preferences
- I rest without guilt
- I express my authentic self
- I've forgiven my controller (even if we're not reconciled)
- I'm not repeating controlling patterns with others
- I'm breaking generational cycles
- I can share my story to help others

When I checked my first box (date): _____

When I checked my 10th box (date): _____

When I checked my 20th box (date): _____

Emergency Reminders

When you're struggling, return to these truths:

When I doubt my discernment: "I have the Holy Spirit. I have the mind of Christ. I can hear God's voice. My discernment isn't perfect, but it's legitimate and sufficient."

When I feel guilty for having boundaries: "Jesus had boundaries. Boundaries honor God. Protecting what God has entrusted to me is stewardship, not selfishness."

When I'm tempted to go back: "That relationship was not healthy. The peace I feel now is real. I am not abandoning anyone—I am protecting what God has restored in me."

When I feel angry again: "My anger is valid. What happened to me was wrong. God can handle my honest emotions. I will bring this to Him in prayer and release it again."

When I question if I'm healed enough: "Healing is a journey, not a destination. Progress, not perfection, is the goal. God is patient with my process."

When I doubt my worth: "I am God's masterpiece. I am fearfully and wonderfully made. I am chosen, adopted, redeemed, sealed, and loved lavishly. My worth is not based on anyone's assessment except God's."

Finding Support

Safe People Checklist:

A safe person to share this journey with will:

- Respect your boundaries without making you explain them endlessly
- Celebrate your growth, not fear your independence
- Ask questions that help you discern, not tell you what to do
- Maintain confidentiality
- Admit their own struggles and imperfections
- Point you to Jesus, not position themselves as mediator
- Trust that God is working in you
- Allow you to make decisions they wouldn't make
- Believe your story without minimizing it

Where to Find Support:

- Individual therapy with a counselor who understands spiritual abuse
- Support groups for survivors of controlling relationships
- Trusted friends who have healthy boundaries
- Healthy church community (look for the markers in Chapter 12)
- Online communities for spiritual abuse survivors
- Books and resources on spiritual abuse and recovery

Not Safe:

- Anyone who was complicit in the controlling relationship
- Anyone who dismisses your experience or tells you to "just forgive"
- Anyone who tries to reconcile you with your controller before you're ready
- Anyone who can't handle your honest emotions
- Anyone who makes you feel you need to defend your boundaries

Your Commitment to Freedom

Sign and date this commitment to yourself:

My Commitment:

I commit to walking in the freedom Christ purchased for me. I will:

- Trust my discernment while remaining teachable
- Set and maintain boundaries without guilt
- Listen for God's voice directly
- Forgive while protecting myself wisely
- Break generational cycles

- Walk in my God-given identity and purpose
- Point others to Jesus, not make them my projects
- Rest, play, and experience joy
- Be gentle with myself in the process
- Celebrate progress, not demand perfection
- Stay connected to safe community
- Return to these truths when I struggle

I am no longer someone's project.

I am God's beloved child.

I am free.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Witness (optional safe friend): _____

Next Steps

After completing this guide:

Continue the Journey:

- Return to chapters that still need deeper processing
- Meet regularly with a safe friend or support group
- Consider working with a counselor who specializes in spiritual abuse recovery
- Read other resources on boundaries, identity, and spiritual health
- Journal regularly about your ongoing journey
- Revisit this guide in 6 months and notice your growth

Share Your Freedom:

- Identify one person who might benefit from your story
- Look for opportunities to gently name controlling dynamics you observe
- Support others who are where you once were
- Advocate for healthy community in your church/organization
- Pray for those still trapped in controlling relationships

Protect Your Freedom:

- Stay vigilant for red flags in new relationships
- Maintain the boundaries you've established
- Keep practicing hearing God's voice directly
- Continue breaking generational patterns
- Regularly remind yourself of your identity in Christ

A Final Blessing

May you walk in freedom every day.

May you hear God's voice clearly.

May you set boundaries without guilt.

May you love without losing yourself.

May you know—deeply and unshakably—that you are beloved, capable, and free.

You are not a project.

You are a masterpiece.

You are not managed.

You are empowered.

You are not someone's testimony.

You are God's beloved child.

The other side of rescue is beautiful.

You're living it now.

Keep walking.

Keep healing.

Keep celebrating your freedom.

And never, ever let anyone make you their project again.

You are free indeed.

Notes & Reflections

Use this space for anything else you need to process: