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BREAKING FREE

FROM

EMOTIONAL STRONGHOLDS

Perhaps you have heard the story of the man who was hiking alone in the mountains when he slipped and fell off a cliff. The only thing that kept him from plunging to his death down a deep gorge was a tree growing from the side of the cliff. As he fell, the hiker grabbed a limb and hung on for dear life.

Clinging tightly to the tree limb, the man began shouting desperately, hoping that someone might be coming along the trail behind him. "Help! Help! Is there anyone up there?" But no answer came back.

Finally, as he neared exhaustion, and his grip on the tree limb began to weaken, the hiker yelled again in total desperation, "Is there anyone up there?"

This time, a booming voice answered, "Yes, I'm here."

The hiker was elated. "This is great! Who are you?"

"It's the Lord."

"Oh, thank You, Lord!" the hiker gasped. "What do you want me to do?"

"Let go, and I'll catch you."

But the terrified hiker was too afraid to let go of the limb. So he cried out again, "Is there anyone up there?"

The Lord answered again, "I said, let go of the limb, and I'll save you."

But the hiker couldn't bring himself to let go of the only piece of security he thought he had. So after thinking about it for a minute, he shouted, "Is there anyone *else* up there?"

That fictional hiker is like a lot of real-life Christians who are clinging desperately to all manner of emotional security blankets. These believers often think their twisted-up emotions are their source of security, when in fact, these emotional problems are the very things keeping them from being really free.

What Christians in this situation need to do is what the hiker in our story needed to do: Let go of that which cannot rescue them anyway and trust God to honor His promises.

My goal for this booklet is to help people in bondage to various emotions and anxieties break free through the truth of God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit. We'll address the anxiety first, and then I want to give you biblical examples and patterns for handling the emotional storms of life that are sure to come your way.

The word I will be using for these traps (into which even Christians can fall) is *stronghold*. My prayer is that Christians in these predicaments will learn to understand and apply the Bible to their lives in ways that they can let go of any emotional stronghold the Enemy may have built in their lives.

FREEDOM IS AVAILABLE

If you or someone you care about is in the grip of an emotional stronghold such as anger, depression, fear, worry—or even some sort of substance abuse—I am here to tell you that there is freedom available in Jesus Christ.

The world's word for things that hold people hostage is *addiction*. We hear it said that people are addicted to drugs, alcohol, sex, or whatever it may be. The problem I have with this word is the implication it often has that we are powerless victims of our circumstances.

In other words, calling something an addiction suggests that we have an excuse for what we're doing, either because we don't have the ability to break it, someone else caused it and thus it isn't our fault, or we have bad genes or a bad environment that set us up for this problem. Some people may even say their addiction has all of these elements.

Now I know that many psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals would argue that the concept of addiction doesn't mean there is no way

out. But for our purposes in this booklet, I'm not interested in what the professionals say nearly as much as I am in the popular perception of what it means to have an addiction—for two reasons.

The first reason is that I believe the average person thinks of an addiction as something that is somehow not the victim's responsibility, which often helps the person dodge the real issue. The second reason is that calling something an addiction doesn't address the spiritual dimension of the problem, which is needed to find the answer.

The word *stronghold* takes us to the real issue because it takes us to our spiritual makeup and to the Word of God. When we get the spiritual part of the equation fixed, the emotional and the physical parts will begin to fall in line.

THE ENEMY'S STRONGHOLDS

The *New International Version* of the Bible says, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4). A stronghold is like a fortress the Enemy has built on your turf, which is why the *New American Standard Bible* translates this word as "fortresses."

Our Enemy, of course, is Satan, who can build strongholds in our minds and hearts if we allow him to gain a foothold in our lives. The Devil is a relentless

Enemy who is not content just to conquer territory in your life. He wants to erect strongholds, which he can then use as his base of operations to attack you whenever he feels like it. When you have an enemy who can take refuge in his stronghold and come out from it to attack you at will, you won't get anywhere until you tear down that stronghold and leave the Enemy with no place to hide.

Our emotions are particularly vulnerable to satanic attack because emotions are feelings that have no intellect of their own. An emotion is a deep-down, often immediate and intense, reaction to something that happens to us. That's why we talk about our gut-level feelings, for example, or say of someone who has upset us, "He really burns me up."

People who are in emotional strongholds usually know something is wrong. When they get up they don't say, "Good morning, Lord," but "Good Lord, it's morning!" In severe cases these people may feel as if they are struggling just to survive because they feel hopeless and can't seem to shake the emotional traps they're in.

Emotional strongholds are attitudes that result in actions that hold a person hostage to something contrary to the will of God. God never ordained for His children to go to bed and wake up depressed every day of their lives. All of us have times when we struggle with our emotions because we are imperfect people living in a fallen world. But strongholds are feelings or actions that dominate your life and consume most of your time and effort.

For many Christians, the cause of their emotional trauma is not the emotions themselves. It is because they have not understood their true identity in Christ or learned to live by grace—so they don't know how to respond to the spiritual causes of their attitudinal distresses.

THREE WRONG WAYS TO DEAL WITH EMOTIONAL STRONGHOLDS

A person who is in emotional distress but doesn't look for the spiritual root of the problem is like someone who turns off the smoke alarm in his house and opens the windows to let the smoke out without ever looking for the fire.

As you know, those are wrong ways to deal with a house fire because all they do is mask the symptoms instead of solving the problem. In the same way, many people use the wrong methods to deal with emotional strongholds because they fail to understand their true nature. I see at least three ways that people try to deal with the pain of an emotional problem without really confronting it.

The first of these is through outright denial, which could be called suppression. This is when a person knows something is wrong but makes a conscious and deliberate effort to run from or bury the problem. People in this situation may constantly insist they are fine and everything is cool when they know that's not true.

A second faulty way to deal with emotional strong-

holds is through repression, or unconscious denial. This is where the pain may be so intense that the person has pushed it deep down below the level of consciousness. These people may no longer be aware of why they feel the way they feel or do the things they do. Someone's denial may be conscious at first, but if it goes on long enough, the person may actually succeed in pushing the problem out of consciousness.

A third wrong way to deal with such problems is to bury them with busyness, drown them in alcohol, or try to drug them out of existence. Those in this category who don't fall into substance abuse may stay on the go constantly, or always make sure that either the television or some other noise is going at all times—so they don't have to hear the alarm going off in their souls.

Remember when you were a child and you didn't want to hear what your brother or sister was saying? You would put your hands over your ears and shout, "I can't hear you!" or start singing to drown them out. That's fine for kids, but it's a terrible way to live as an adult.

Painful emotions are like the pain signals our bodies send out to alert us that something is wrong. You can ignore or deny pain, but if there is something really wrong

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it will not just go away. Just as when we are in physical pain and need to go to the doctor to find out why, when we are hurting emotionally we need to find out why.

Please don't misunderstand what I said about the fields of psychology and psychiatry. When practiced correctly—that is, biblically—the mental health disciplines can help people discover and correct what is wrong. But when there is a failure to take the spiritual side of an issue into account, or to see that emotional problems have spiritual roots, then only the symptoms are being addressed.