

God can liberate you of this terrible emotion as well. Don't continue in it for another minute. In prayer, give whatever wounded you to Him and express your trust in Him to heal you. How do you do so?

### ***1. Ask God to Reveal Any Bitterness in You***

Unforgiveness is serious business. As you pray, consider these questions: Are you caustic, critical, overly suspicious of others, or easily offended? Do you lash out unexpectedly? Do certain subjects set you off? Is something hindering your relationship with God? These are evidences that bitterness has taken hold in your heart. When others touch anywhere near the open wound of resentment in you, a wave of anger, grief, or fear may engulf you.

This is because when we act out of our damaged emotions, we do not respond rationally or in a manner that coincides with the principles of Scripture; rather, we simply react. We are so driven by our woundedness—or the desire to protect ourselves against more pain—that we respond automatically in a negative and destructive way.

In fact, even thinking about this subject may be extremely painful for you because bitterness burns deep into your heart like acid. But as long as you deny that the emotions exist, you are merely repressing them. They continue to control you. Therefore, listen to the Lord and acknowledge any resentment He reveals in you—even if it is from an event or situation you thought you had already forgiven. In doing so, you take an important step toward taking hold of the peace He desires for you to enjoy.



## 2. Assume Full Responsibility and Ask God for Forgiveness

As the Father reveals areas of bitterness, agree with Him that you have sinned by harboring unforgiveness. Accept what He says fully—He is God and you are not. He can see where there is bondage in your soul, and His goal is to free you from it.

It may be painful. You will probably want to fight it. The feelings that rise up in your heart may be agonizing and confusing. And it is likely you will be tempted to say, “Wait, this is just not fair. That person should be asking *me* for forgiveness. Why should I have to confess? I’ve not hurt them in any way.” But even this reveals that you are harboring destructive anger and you must accept responsibility for your unforgiving spirit.

---

*This part of the process is not about how you responded to the offender, but what the Lord sees in your heart—what is hindering your relationship with Him.*

---

This part of the process is not about how you responded to the offender, but what the Lord sees in your heart—what is hindering your relationship with Him. Recall what King David wrote in Psalm 51: “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge. . . . Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom” (vv. 4, 6).

God is acutely aware of what is going on inside of you in ways you could never imagine. Therefore, trust



Him to know how to free you. If He reveals something as a barrier to intimacy, ask the Father to forgive you of it and of any way you've resisted His work in your life. Then commit your hope and future to Him anew.

### ***3. Ask God to Help You Forgive the Offender***

Once you experience the Father's forgiveness, hopefully it will be easier to put yourself in the shoes of those who have wronged you and to understand things from their perspective. After all, we are all sinful and in need of grace. Just as woundedness, bondage, and the sin within you have at times prompted you to behave hurtfully, you can imagine how the pain of past injuries may have driven the offender to lash out at you (Matt. 18:21–35).

This is exactly how the Lord increased my love for my stepfather and showed me how to give up my right to retaliate against him: He gave me insight into the pain that caused John to react so negatively. The Father also helped me see that John was not my enemy—sin, unforgiveness, and bitterness were. I realized that to pardon what he had done was to show the sacrificial, unconditional love of Christ in a real and tangible way.

I can still remember going to see my stepfather and afterward thinking, *Father, how grateful I am that I now have good feelings toward John. I praise You for helping me understand John better and for showing me that the source of his bitterness and resentment is that his father refused to let him go to college to become a doctor. Knowing the source of his woundedness has grown my compassion and love for him.*



The Lord helped me overcome my painful feelings toward John, and He can do so for you as well. That does not make a past offense right, and it doesn't necessarily mean the offender will stop trying to hurt you, but God will lead you to peace in the situation. The Father will also increase your understanding of His awesome love for you and how you can show it to others. As Paul says, "Perhaps God will change those people's hearts, and they will learn the truth. Then they will come to their senses and escape from the devil's trap" (2 Tim. 2:25-26, NLT).

---

<p><i>Ask Him to give you more understanding on how you can forgive completely.</i></p>	<p>For this reason, do not by any means respond to God's promptings with, "That situation doesn't really affect me anymore, Lord. Whenever it comes up, I just push it to the back of my mind and ignore it. I've already forgiven that person. Really, I'm ok." No, you are not. He is bringing it up for a purpose—to liberate you and heal your brokenness <i>thoroughly</i>. Therefore, ask Him to give you more understanding on how you can forgive completely.</p>
---	---

---

Now, whether a full pardon must involve a face-to-face meeting is between you and the Father—you will need to ask the Lord to reveal if it is necessary. The truth of the matter is there are times when it is either necessary or simply better for you to release your bitterness toward a person in the presence of God alone, without ever confronting him or her about what was done. However, more often than not, it is constructive to go and talk to the individual about what has occurred in order to heal the relationship. I believe God will answer your sincere request for His guidance.



If the person who has hurt you has died, then of course a conversation with him or her will not be possible. However, I have found through the years that many people benefit from an exercise that I call “the empty chair.” What you can do is sit opposite an empty chair and imagine that the person is seated across from you. Confess your resentment of what that individual has done. Do not use this time to blame the other person or to air all of your grievances—that is neither helpful nor necessary. Rather, admit that you felt wounded by his or her actions and that you had difficulty letting it go. Then, ask the other person to forgive you and express your sincere desire to be reconciled to him or her.

This is a one-way conversation, of course, but if you do this with a humble heart—asking God to help you voice all that needs to be said and to be open to the Holy Spirit—you will be amazed at how He takes care of the rest.

#### *4. Pray, with Thanksgiving, for the Person Who Wounded You*

Jesus said it Himself: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:44–45). Why did He do so? Again, this is so He can continue to heal your wound, transform your heart, and give you His perspective about the situation.

Remember, 1 John 4:19–21 admonishes, “We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this com-



mandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.” In other words, every person and trial the Lord allows into your life—including the one you’re struggling with right now—presents an opportunity for Him to demonstrate His love, character, and faithfulness to you and to others through your testimony. If you hate someone because of what the Father is trying to teach you through him, then, in reality, you despise God and the purpose He has for your life.

But if you can look at the adversity as an opportunity to exhibit

---

*If you can look at the adversity as an opportunity to exhibit your faith and show His love to others, then you will grow in Christ's character and likeness.*

---

your faith and show His love to others, then you will grow in Christ's character and likeness. Romans 8:34 teaches us, “Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.” Likewise, Hebrews 7:25 reminds us, “He always lives to make intercession” for us. When you pray for those you have pardoned—you are imitating the Savior, doing just as He does for you.

Likewise, you can gratefully give thanks to the Father, because you know He is working through whatever wounded you in order to give you insight into human nature, bring you closer into fellowship with Him, and mold you into a vessel worthy of His use. The apostle Peter affirms, “Don’t be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in His suffering, so



that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world" (1 Pet. 4:12–13, NLT). He is using this trial for your good; therefore, give Him thanks (Rom. 8:28).

## CONTINUE TO PURSUE FULL FORGIVENESS

So how do you know when you have fully forgiven others? You simply won't see the people who hurt you in the same way. The harsh feelings that you had toward them will be replaced by a new love and understanding. You will want them to experience the Lord's deep tenderness, healing, and grace. And you will find that you have a new ability to accept people just as they are—realizing that God is not finished with them yet, but that they have potential to love and serve Him as well. You look forward to the day when they become all that the Father created them to be.

What this all means in practical terms is that you will also have a different response to them when you encounter them in public.

Shortly after I came to Atlanta, I developed a friendship with a man whom I loved deeply as a brother in Christ. I was very grateful for his camaraderie and partnership in the gospel and said so often. And I really thought he loved and supported me, too. But the truth is, he didn't. He simply pretended to be my friend in order to achieve his own goals—undermining my authority as pastor of First Baptist Atlanta and trying to get rid of me. Thankfully, the Lord spared me from what the man wanted to accomplish. But I was absolutely devastated when I discovered that he had



purposely planned to harm me and that he had no remorse over what he had done.

I struggled with being merciful and forbearing toward him, but not for long. I was well aware that if I didn't let all of my anger and resentment go, I would suffer from bitterness and unforgiveness. So I forgave him completely and asked God to help me be gracious to him, should I ever see him again.

Then one day I was attending a session of the Southern Baptist Convention and I saw this man walking across the large rotunda. He was headed in my direction, but he was talking with someone and didn't see me in his path. Suddenly I was acutely aware that the Father had answered my prayers for healing and forgiveness. Instead of any discomfort in seeing him, I had a wonderful spirit of total freedom. I couldn't wait for him to get closer so I could greet him warmly, ask about his family and work, and invite him to worship at First Baptist.

Of course, he seemed to express some awkwardness when he realized I was standing in his path and that he couldn't sidestep me. But as I welcomed him with a smile and extended my hand to shake his, his countenance relaxed and we were able to chat in an amicable manner. The bitterness was gone and friendly feelings were revived. And quite frankly, I believe many wounds were healed and God was glorified through that encounter.

Friend, I know you have most likely faced a great deal. It is easy to blame and difficult to forgive. However, I admonish you for the sake of your future, let go of the bitterness and allow God to heal you. Stop living with the misery caused by acid unfor-



giveness. Choose today to pardon those who have wronged you.

It won't be easy and you will most likely have to go to the throne of grace often for help and guidance (Heb. 4:14–16). But if you will let go of the blame, God *will* heal, comfort, and protect you. He will also free you from your bondage and make you an example of His restoration and a vessel of His love (2 Cor. 1:3–7).

Therefore, allow the Father to have His way in your heart. He will certainly make sure that no tear you ever shed, no pain you ever feel, and no tragedy you ever experience will go without notice or without the promise of redemption.

Father, I come before You today, broken—asking for the very thing I was not strong enough to give—grace. I know unforgiveness is a serious offense in Your eyes, and I accept full responsibility for my bitter spirit. But please forgive me, Father, and help me to lay down blame for my wounds so I will not have to lose another night's sleep over it. Send Your Holy Spirit to teach me how to forever cast aside my bondage to bitterness and resentment so I can be healed. And please restore what has been lost through my stubbornness.

Lord, I pray for the people who have hurt me and ask You to please help me understand what motivated them to do so. Show me their hearts, Father—what pain, confusion, and bondage lies deep within, so I may feel mercy for them. Help me have compassion on their situation, and show me how



*to demonstrate Your love and grace to them in an active and tangible way.*

*Father, I am so grateful for Your promise to pick me up even when I stumble and fall. Thank You for showing me how to be free of unforgiveness and live a life worthy of Your name. Truly, there is none more merciful, compassionate, loving, and kind than You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.*

## QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION AND GROUP STUDY

1. Can you think of situations or people that you have blamed for your wounded spirit? Ask God to reveal them to you and make a list. Then ask Him to help you forgive each one.
2. Have you ever seen bitterness take hold of and eventually ruin a person's life to the point of total ineffectiveness, spiritually and relationally? What happened?
3. Have you noticed times when resentful feelings have affected your prayer life and worship? What changes did you need to make in order to get back on track with God?
4. Have you ever seen bitterness toward others keep you



from having a healthy emotional life? How did these feelings affect you?

5. When is the last time you accepted the full responsibility of your unforgiving spirit and handed it over to God to help you deal with it effectively?
6. How do people act when they feel it is their right to pay back wrongdoing to other people who have hurt them? Have you ever acted that way? How did that work out for you?
7. How has God spoken to you about the root of bitterness and the inability to forgive others through this chapter? What steps are you going to take to get beyond this issue of resentment?