

JOHN I. SNYDER

RESENTING



GOD

ESCAPE THE DOWNWARD  
SPIRAL OF BLAME



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## WHEN ANGER TURNS UPWARD

**I**t was an already-packed Saturday. I had a couple coming in for counseling, and I needed to attend a birthday party, was behind on my sermon preparation for Sunday, and was scheduled to do a funeral service, all on the same day. If there were no glitches, I would have just enough time to cover all my bases.

Everything seemed to be running smoothly at first. The couple left early, so I had a few extra minutes to prepare for the funeral service. From my window, I could see cars pulling up, so I went outside to meet the funeral party. With greetings exchanged, I escorted them back into our Fireside Room to go over the details of the service. I had half the party in one room, but the other half was somewhere else. I couldn't seem to get everyone together, so I pulled one of the pallbearers aside and asked him what the matter was. Apparently, there was a family squabble between two brothers, and they didn't want to be in the same room together.

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Since we were already running late, I pulled one brother into the room and asked about the problem. He admitted that there had been a falling out between him and his brother some *forty years ago*. He couldn't remember what the cause was, but both brothers had managed to harbor their resentment against each other for all those many years. Not even their mother's death could pry apart the intense loathing.

This was nothing new to me. Whether officiating weddings or funerals, I find that there's usually some relative there who is angry with another relative. You might be surprised to know how many families will carry on a long-standing feud like this one, unwilling to mend fences and bury old grievances. Siblings, parents, ex-spouses, children—the list is endless.

Families, supposed safe havens for us, are often smoldering cauldrons of resentment and all that goes along with it. Deep-seated childhood envy is twisted into childish hostility. A simple family celebration can keep psychiatrists busy for months. Add to this the dynamics with in-laws and ex-spouses, and fallout from these times is a therapist's windfall.

Resentment seems to be multiplying and gaining a strong foothold worldwide, and not just among family members. If you search the Internet for “resentment,” you'll find a wide variety of reasons why people are angry,

envious, spiteful, or simply filled with the culmination of this disease: hatred.

Through years of pastoral counseling, I can attest that, if left unchecked, resentment is a powerful, deadly force. Just ask its victims. It is a cancer that destroys everything it touches. In seconds it can kill a deep relationship that has taken years or even decades to develop. It dissipates love, joy, and hope. It neutralizes marriages, churches, small businesses, large corporations, political parties, and governments. When it comes to Christian faith, it can eat up trust and confidence in God faster than a flesh-eating virus can dissolve the tissues of a human body.

Resentment can harm or delude you without your even knowing it. It clouds your reasoning, keeps you from recognizing the truth, and makes you incapable of seeing someone else's point of view. Bottom line: it hurts you more than the person you're resenting! And when you're resentful of someone, you can mistake your strong, heated feelings for logic. It's like trying to reason with a drunk person. You'd have to be just as drunk as that person to understand his or her logic.

Resentment, the great deluder, is often based upon a delusion of grandeur. The person harboring the resentment gets a false sense of power. In reality, this is just a short-lived burst of adrenaline. It is very similar to other addictions. You get charged up. You feel alive and good

and then you need more. Just one more drink, one more smoke, one more X-rated film, one more pulse-raising fight. When those effects wear off, you're left in a far worse condition with lower self-worth, less self-control, and more self-doubt.

In a real sense, when you resent people, you put them in charge of your life. You end up the loser. Actress and novelist Carrie Fisher wrote, "Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die."<sup>1</sup>

### What Is Resentment?

Resentment, envy, jealousy, bitterness, hatred, and similar emotions can lead to virtually any sort of physical or psychological disorder. Mental health professionals recognize this, so why do Christians often ignore or gloss over it? Resentment against God isn't typically discussed by church leaders or preached from our pulpits. Sure, we're aware of it among our unbelieving—or believing, but unchurched—friends. We even realize that many people's skepticism about God has stemmed initially from youthful resentment against him, leading ultimately to a full disbelief in his very existence. Today, however, there seems to be an increasing anger on the part of *believers* against God. We know what usually produces resentment against other people, but why against God—the One who claims to be our best and most reliable friend, the most

loving and loyal being in the universe, the Creator of all things?

None of us is a stranger to this poisonous emotion, which manifests in so many different forms. At some point in our lives, we've experienced an aspect of it when we've been the victims of injustice, deception, abuse, and betrayal. Or when we felt mistreated and hurt. Or, if we're honest with ourselves, when we've permitted the green-eyed monster of jealousy to abide with us for a while. When in a group of believers, it's difficult to find those willing to admit that they could possibly be jealous or resentful of another's success or even that they resent another person.

Resentment of any kind isn't necessarily related to the *reality* of things; rather, it's often a response to what we *think* is real. It isn't difficult to see how a wide range of dangers can stem from this emotion. Most of us have heard news stories of people who seemingly snapped and went on to severely harm others. Or about an enraged employee who one day suddenly lost control and killed an office full of coworkers. News of heavily armed persons entering schools and murdering in cold blood is becoming more and more commonplace. Their motive? Often it's long-term, seething resentment against someone, anyone—parents, neighbors, or even God. The resentment is perhaps never addressed or confronted, but it is certainly ever present.

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Time doesn't heal all wounds; sometimes they get much, much worse! Let's not forget that the first case of resentment recorded in history led to the first recorded case of murder (Genesis 4:1-8) or that resentment was one of the reasons that the religious leaders of Jesus's day demanded that he be crucified.

### Why Do We Resent God?

God is the Creator of all things, the sovereign Ruler of the universe, the very embodiment of justice, holiness, and perfection. He's merciful and kind in all his ways and fair in everything he does. He should be loved and worshipped by everyone, everywhere, and always. You might think, *How is it even possible to resent him?*

After many counseling sessions with people who are angry with God, I've found the following to be among their reasons:

- I don't know who God really is.
- I struggle with God's sovereignty (he's in charge, and I'm not).
- I perceive some failure on God's part.
- Life's stresses are consuming me.
- I am having to face the depressing effects of aging.
- I struggle with unfulfilled promises.

- My life situation is distressing. It isn't what I expected.
- I fail to live up to my own personal expectations.
- I am discouraged.
- I have been mistreated and abused.

One psychology study found that even atheists (who claim not to believe in God) have admitted to being mad at God at one point in their lives.<sup>2</sup> I can't help but think that a leading cause of anger toward God stems from the ever-popular ice-cream-and-cotton-candy brand of Christianity being sold. Many of us were raised with this version of the gospel, reinforced every Sunday not only by the sermons but also by the songs we were taught to sing in church. Complete with a perky, finger-snapping tune, one song went like this: "Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before, / Every day with Jesus, I love Him more and more."<sup>3</sup>

How I wish that were true! Even though this song is beloved by many, it does contain some pretty dubious theology. It is difficult to find a single statement in the New Testament that encourages us to believe that every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before. However sincere the composer's sentiments, it isn't a true reflection of normal Christian life. For most of us, this is just not the way it is.

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Such ideas in these songs create a slaphappy, ever-euphoric model of faith that powerfully shapes peoples' expectations for a lifetime. If people are unable to detect reality from mere Christian advertising, the message gets garbled and they can feel completely betrayed by God. "I believed, but he didn't deliver," they might say. These unfulfilled "promises" turn their sweetness to bitterness against their Creator.

The frequent use of text messages today is a classic example of how we can misinterpret things. Relationships can be shaken or even end because texts are completely misunderstood. Even worse is the incomplete message. You get only half of it, think it's the entire message, and completely misconstrue the sender's motives. This can lead to broken trust and confidence in the person or a complete shutdown in communication, without even bothering to find out the true, intended meaning.

Similarly, when we don't understand what true faith is, we can't deal realistically with problems that arise in our lives. If we imagine that believers around us are living this kind of ever-smiling, always-cheery Christian life, then we'll be very hesitant to reveal any tremendous inner struggles we may be experiencing. Enormous battles with guilt, temptation, bitterness, or doubt will be swallowed or kept quiet for fear of not appearing to live the "victorious life." They may even seem unacceptable or

forbidden topics within the faith community. Who wants to be known as the spiritual dwarf in the presence of all these giants for Jesus? Aren't we expected to trust God every minute and feel this enormous affection for Jesus all the time?

This false view places a further burden on those who, for some reason, find it hard to trust God or for whom things are getting worse each day, not better. I've known some saints who have brushed aside people's anger at God by encouraging them to chant catchy gospel songs, or they made matters worse by admonishing them, "Now, you shouldn't be feeling such things!" Let's face it—there are plenty of things in life we shouldn't be feeling or thinking, but we do anyway.

I can often spot resentment in someone's heart the moment he or she walks through my office door. Over the years, I've even watched close friends put distance between God and themselves. No matter how much you might try to convince them, they won't budge an inch. In their minds, God didn't deliver. They obeyed the rules, did the right things, but God didn't come through. Unless something happens to interrupt this line of reasoning, the believer ends up alienated and full of bitterness against the very One who is their most innocent and faithful friend.

Trying to get people to rid themselves of their resentment is often virtually impossible. They won't admit it,

nor do they want to let go of it. I remember one leader of the women's group in our church who wouldn't give up her animosity toward "that woman" in the group. Sadly, the leader was diagnosed with terminal cancer and given just a few months to live. One day, I got a call from the hospital that she had to speak to me immediately. I rushed over. As I entered her room, I could tell she didn't have much longer on this earth. I approached her bed, and she feebly started to speak. In her last, labored breaths her final desire was for me to promise that "that woman" wouldn't take her place. Even in her dying hours, knowing she would be facing the great Judge, she couldn't let go of her resentment.

But it's not just about our friends or "those kinds" of church members. Whether we want to talk about it or not, admit it or not, at some point in our lives resentment against God can find its way into our heart. We can be sure that life will throw us many curves. At times we will find ourselves in the depths of despair, grief, or hopelessness. In a moment, all our securities and things we love may be snatched away, leading us to feel completely tricked by God. Unless we have a complete confidence that he wills our best, it will turn into resentment. Since he is totally sovereign and therefore holds complete control over our lives, we can easily come to blame him for permitting terrible things to happen.

# We are blamers, and we blame God for life's most painful and depressing experiences.

We've all been there or are there. It can strike any person, anytime, anywhere. If we begin to give in to it, we'll be pulled into a powerful downward spiral that we can't escape by our own strength. Ultimately, the way out comes in knowing who God is and realizing that far from abandoning us in our hard times, he is the one who rescues us.

"What binds the reader to the author is the common experience of resentment and its children, blame and anger, as well as their good friend revenge. This book is worth not just reading but discussing, praying over, and sharing. And for finding glory in God anew."

—**Rev. Dr. Paul G. Watermulder**, Board of Directors, *The Presbyterian Outlook* magazine

"*Resenting God* explains in lay terms how Reformed theology and Object Relations psychology together inform how believers form an understanding of what God is like. It examines how people project human traits onto God and explores healthier ways to experience the reality of God in their lives."

—**Rev. Susan L. DeHoff**, PhD, author of *Psychosis or Mystical Religious Experience?*

"A thought-provoking, inspired read by a missionary who himself has faced trials and tribulations and yet lives in a humble, joyful poise toward God and neighbor."

—**Rev. Dr. Henry J. Hansen**, Senior Pastor, Bidwell Presbyterian Church, Chico, CA

"If you're burdened by resentment, bitterness, and blame and want to live a positive life, you will want to read *Resenting God*. 'God is never less than we imagine him to be, but always more.' I highly recommend it!"

—**Gregg Bissonette**, Grammy Award-winning musician

"Every person should have a John Snyder in their life. *Resenting God* will become one of my annual reads, no matter what is going on in my life."

—**Judith Briles**, author of *When God Says NO*

"Many books have been dedicated to encouragement for hard moments, but what makes this one standout is Snyder's understanding of the anatomy of those low points."

—**Matt Whitman**, Pastor of Free Church in Lander, Wyoming; host of the podcasts *The Ten Minute Bible Hour*, *History Nugget*, and *No Dumb Question*



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