

# Freedom from Resentment

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Stopping Hurts from Turning Bitter

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Throughout their four years of marriage, Carla's relationship with Max's parents had always been distant. But when her mother-in-law Gail came for an extended visit, the tension escalated. Gail's comments about Carla's parenting techniques did not sit well with Carla. The first correction irritated Carla; the second ignited her. The ensuing days witnessed several verbal clashes. At the end of the visit their parting words were civil, but strained. The breakdown, however, worsened in the following months. Every weekly phone call from Gail to her son only intensified Carla's bitterness. Nor did the problem end there. Carla's complaints about Gail migrated into attacks against Max. "Why didn't you stand up to her when she criticized the way I handled our children? How can you speak so sweetly to her on the phone?" Her bitterness was spreading and her marriage was deteriorating.

Doug's new job started well. While serving as a waiter was not his ideal career, the restaurant was well respected and popular, the more elegant menu prices meant good tips, and the owner appreciated Doug's dependability. But after about six months, for reasons unknown to Doug,

the boss's mood shifted. Doug's hours were cut, his request to work weekends was ignored, and several newly hired servers were given more favorable shifts. When Doug questioned his boss, the man seemed unapologetic, unsympathetic, and unmoved. Nothing changed. Doug's irritation rose, and sleepless nights followed. He found himself increasingly resentful of his boss and jealous of his coworkers. Bitterness was just around the bend for Doug.

After her husband's repeated infidelity, Debbie's first marriage ended disastrously. So her friends and relatives rejoiced when she met Aaron, a caring man marked by constancy and sensitivity. But her dream honeymoon year became a nightmare when Aaron fell and committed adultery. Thankfully, he immediately repented, renewed his marital vows, and proved himself in the ensuing three years to be a solid husband. Sadly, however, Debbie was unable to get over her husband's betrayal, despite his sincere repentance. While maintaining an outer semblance of marital commitment, deep down her heart remained hard.

Do you find yourself relating to Carla, Doug, or Debbie?

There is nothing uglier than bitterness—that inner anger lodged deep in the heart, sometimes known only to the bitter person (and his all-seeing God). Bitterness is *settled* anger, the kind that not merely reacts to someone’s offense, but forms a more general and global animosity against the offender himself. Anger responds to an incident: “I’m angry about *what you did*.” Bitterness goes deeper to form an attitude—a settled stance or posture—against the perpetrator: “I’m bitter at *you*, because *you are* an evil person.” The incident becomes almost secondary.

With most hurts we encounter in our imperfect world, especially small ones, we learn to overlook the offense and forgive the offender. But occasionally we experience a major hurt—an offense that cuts deeply or turns our world upside down—that lingers in our minds and tempts us to become bitter. We might store that hurt in our heart, nurture it, and let it grow to the point where we look with hostility at the offender.

What hope do Carla, Doug, Debbie, and you and I have to escape the sorrow, slavery, and soul impoverishment that resentment brings?

The answer is found in Jesus. Jesus understands. He is with us. He comes to us in our mistreatment and remains with us to help us. As one who was sinned against severely, he understands mistreatment. He has been there. The Scriptures tell us that he came to save his own people but they did not receive him (John 1:11). “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus was sinned against severely: mocked, taunted, punched, spit upon, abandoned, and crucified. This is the Jesus—the mistreated one—who is with us and who is able to help us handle our resentment and overcome our bitterness.

How? The answer is the gospel message of Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 4:31, the apostle Paul calls us to “get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” The antidote to bitterness? “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). This verse is the apostle’s strategy to battle the bitterness he warns against in the previous verse. He calls us to have our minds consciously controlled by God’s forgiveness through Jesus’ death on the cross. As