

Thank you for your interest in reading this sample of:

STUCK

*...how to overcome your anger, forgive,
and reclaim your life.*

by F. Remy Diederich

How to Read This Book

This isn't your typical self-help book. It's not about psychology; yet it contains many psychological truths. It's not about theology; yet it often quotes the Bible. It's not about theories or ideals. This book is a practical guide to help you mend and move on from broken relationships. It is a manual to assist you in navigating the rough waters of conflict rather than get hopelessly stuck in them.

As pastor, counselor and addiction consultant, I've worked with hundreds of people who have felt stuck and unable to move on with their lives. Their stories differ, but typically have to do with another person: a parent, sibling, friend, co-worker, child, lover, or spouse. Something happened with a significant other to knock them off track and life hasn't been the same ever since.

With these people in mind, I've pulled together the teaching and advice I have offered over the years to help them get unstuck. My hope is that it can help you too.

I'm struck how this present generation lacks mentors, guides, and sages. These counselors exist, but we don't have the same access to them as we once did. We grow up in broken families, often moving from place to place, overloaded with options from our media-rich world, and disconnected from the churches and civic organizations that once held us together and served as anchors for our lives. It's as if people have to reinvent the wheel and find their own answers. It can be a lonely place not knowing where to turn for some of the most basic and important decisions in life.

I hope this book will fill a gap in our culture by offering sound advice for people looking for answers to one of life's biggest questions: *What do I do with this broken relationship?*

I'll tell you right now, getting unstuck is hard work. There are no easy answers. You might not like my answers. You might be convinced I've got it all wrong; I just don't get it; what I suggest will never work. But if you trust me, I can help. Really. You might have to put the book down and come back in a day or two. Then again, it may be best to keep reading; what is unclear at first will probably make more sense when you read a broader context. In the end, I trust you will see the wisdom of what I have to say. Follow me and I'll help you get your life back on track.

I can't take credit for any wisdom found in this book. I don't have an ounce of original thought. I'm merely a collator of wisdom from the Bible, research, other authors, my own personal experience, as well as stories from hundreds of people I've observed or counseled.

I'm a pastor at heart. I'm here to help you. My hope is this book will do more than help you resolve a broken relationship, but also help you experience God in a new way as you invite him into your life to help you get unstuck.

Throughout the book I ask you to stop and "write it down" which means, answer the questions I offer to help internalize what you just read. Hint: the more questions you answer, the quicker you will get unstuck!

Also, feel free to jump to the spot in the book that resonates with you the most. I purposefully made the book scannable with short chapters, numbered points and subheadings to help you fast-forward to special points of interest like: understanding your anger, learning how to forgive, overcoming grief, or how to forgive yourself. But I hope you will read through the initial chapters on anger because that information is foundational to the book.

I hope you'll contact me with your comments and questions. My best days are when I get a note telling me how the words I shared helped change a life. Contact me at remydiederich@yahoo.com, or through my blog at readingremy.com.

STUCK

Stuck in the mud.

Stuck in traffic.

Stuck in the middle.

Stuck in a blizzard.

Stuck at work.

Stuck in the past.

Stuck in a rut.

Stuck in a dead end job.

Stuck in marriage.

Stuck in life.

We've all been stuck. We all know the feeling.

Helpless.

Hopeless.

Overwhelmed.

Confused.

Ashamed.

Angry.

Exhausted.

Powerless.

You want to quit. You want someone to feel sorry for you and solve your problems so you don't have to. You want to wake up and have your problems all be gone.

Nice dream. But that's not reality, is it?

Even when you have the will to do something, you often don't know what to do. Which is the right way to go? Should you take action or wait? What are you

responsible to do and what is the responsibility of others? You've had so many misfires in the past. What's to make this time any different?

I live in Wisconsin. Everyone in Wisconsin gets stuck: in the snow, mostly. That's a part of life. It happens. We know what it takes to get unstuck. We're prepared. You get down on the ground with a shovel and tunnel out the snow from underneath your car. Then you throw down sand to get traction (it helps to travel with a bucket of sand in the trunk). If you can get someone to push you, that's great. Better yet, a group of people. If all else fails, have someone pull you out with a chain (yes, the chains go right next to the sand in the trunk).

My point is, there is an art and a process to getting unstuck. It's not always pretty, but when you are stuck you do what you have to do. Staring at the car doesn't help. Swearing at the car doesn't help. Calling your friends and complaining doesn't help either. If you want to get unstuck, then get to work. You can rest, but not for long. The longer you wait, the longer it takes to get back on the road. Deal with it. Give it your best shot. You may even need to call a tow truck. But do whatever it takes and eventually you'll be on your way. Do nothing and you go nowhere.

Are you stuck?

If you are holding this book you must be stuck. Something happened and you just can't seem to find enough traction to get on with your life. It might be a serious violation like rape, the death of a loved one, or a relational betrayal: an affair or divorce. Or it might be less dramatic, but still hurtful: the loss of a job, the death of a pet, a cross-country move, etc.

You've tried complaining and blaming. You've tried feeling sorry for yourself and possibly medicating your pain with drugs and/or alcohol. It may have gotten so bad you considered, or actually attempted, taking your life. But having tried these things you realize now they only took you deeper, making you more stuck.

It is time...

It's time for a change: time to try something new. You have already wasted too much time but you are ready to move on with your life. You know you have many good years ahead... *if* you do something about it now. It's time to move on, to take action.

I am privileged you have invited me into your life at this important time in your life. It could be your defining moment. Now let's see if we can get you unstuck.

Spinning Your Wheels

In the movie, *Forrest Gump*, we get a great picture of people that are stuck. In my first book, I looked at how Lieutenant Dan was stuck in shame. Now I want to look at another character: Jenny. She was stuck in *anger*.

When Forrest is just a boy, Jenny is his best friend. One day, Jenny invites Forrest over to her house. Jenny meets him in her front yard, grabs Forrest's hand and goes racing through the back yard into the cornfield behind her house. As the two children fight their way through the corn stalks Jenny's dad comes out the back door with a whiskey bottle in one hand and yells out, "Jenny! Jenny, you come back here!"

Jenny doesn't listen. The two keep running until they collapse out of exhaustion. Then Jenny repeats a prayer, "God, make me a bird so I can fly far, far away." Throughout the movie Forrest narrates what's going on; he explains here saying, "God didn't make Jenny a bird but the po-lice did come and took her daddy away."

Jenny goes to live with her grandmother. It was never explicitly stated, but you got the point. Jenny's dad abused her sexually.

Fast forward to Jenny's late teens and early twenties. Jenny's pain is evident. Her life is characterized by alcohol and drug addiction, a series of abusive boyfriends, suicide attempts, and stripping in a club. Looking for some peace and sanity, she goes to visit Forrest who had taken over his mother's southern mansion after her death.

Jenny spends the weekend recuperating: mostly sleeping. Then Forrest and Jenny take a long walk. They enjoy spending time with each other and the beautiful day until Jenny looks up and realizes she's at the driveway of her childhood home. She freezes for a moment then starts to walk down the long

gravel driveway. Forrest lets her go, knowing that she's got some business to do with her deceased father.

As Jenny walks toward the house you can see her pretty face turn ugly. It begins to contort in bitterness as her childhood memories start to play out in her mind. When she gets within throwing distance of the house, Jenny takes one of the sandals she's been carrying and throws it as hard as she can at the house. But it's so light it barely makes a sound. She throws the other sandal with the same effect. In desperation she looks at the ground for something more substantial to throw. She finds a rock and throws it, then another and another.

Finally, one of the rocks hits a window, breaking it, but giving her no satisfaction. Frustrated, she falls to the ground and weeps. Meanwhile, Forrest has been slowly walking down the driveway. He kneels down behind her and gently touches her shoulders, not knowing what to do or say. Narrating again he says, "*Some days there just aren't enough rocks.*"

What did Forrest mean by that: *Some days there just aren't enough rocks?*

Sometimes throwing rocks *can* help. It can relieve the stress of life's frustrations. For example, I like to run and work out for that reason. In fact, a doctor once told me an hour-long workout is the equivalent of taking one antidepressant. But there are other times throwing rocks won't help. The pain is too deep. The wound is too raw.

Jenny was stuck.

Her wheels were spinning but she had no traction. She expended a lot of energy, but to no effect.

What her father started she now perpetuated. Her father wasn't keeping her chained to her past: *she was*...by her thoughts and the decisions she made every day. She needed something much more sophisticated than a rock

throwing session. She needed a process to help her break free from the past and move on to claim her future.

A process...

My guess is you need the same process. We all do.

That's the goal of this book, to give you a reliable process to help you move on from the hurts of your past. This process includes the discussion of anger but also loss, grief, forgiveness, and faith. We will explore some difficult topics, topics that might open the door to freedom and even joy if you are willing to walk through them.

I hope you will resolve right now to not stay stuck.

Nothing good can come from that.

This book is rooted in biblical thought and faith in God. But you can relax. You don't have to believe in God or be a devout believer to get something out of this book. The principles I offer will help you no matter what you believe about God. My goal isn't to preach at you or convert you. I've been teaching this material in a secular environment for years (minus the biblical references) with great effect. But if you want the most power to help you get unstuck then please consider inviting God to help you. If what you've tried so far hasn't helped, it may be worth trying a new approach that includes God.

Write it down:

- *Have you ever felt that "some days there just aren't enough rocks"? What led you to experience that kind of anger?*
- *Who or what would you like to throw rocks at if you could?*
- *Do feel like you are stuck in your past? What is keeping you stuck?*
- *Are you ready to get unstuck?*
- *Take a minute to consider what it is you are looking to get out of this book. What is the goal you want to achieve?*

- *What do you want your life to look like? In other words, what would life look like to you if you could get unstuck? How might it look in five, ten or twenty years from now?*
- *What will your life look like in five, ten or twenty years if you stay stuck?*

Stuck in Anger

It's easy to get stuck. First you experience a loss and then your emotions grab you and chain you to that loss...*sometimes for years.*

Fear, sadness, and anger are the main emotions that get us stuck. My primary focus in this book is on anger.

Lewis Smedes, author of *Forgive and Forget*, paints a vivid picture of what it's like to get stuck in anger. He compares it to trapping yourself in a torture chamber,

Recall the pain of being wronged, the hurt of being stung, cheated, demeaned. Doesn't the memory of it fuel the fire of fury again, make it hurt again? Suppose you never forgive, suppose you feel the hurt each time your memory lights on the people who did you wrong. And suppose you have a compulsion to think of them constantly. You have become a prisoner of your past pain; you are locked into a torture chamber of your own making. Time should have left your pain behind; but you keep it alive to let it flay you over and over.

Your own memory is a replay of your hurt; a videotape within your soul that plays unending reruns of your old rendezvous with pain. You cannot switch it off. You are hooked into it like a pain junkie; you become addicted to your remembrance of past pain. You are lashed again each time your memory spins the tape. Is this fair to yourself; this wretched justice of not forgiving? You could not be more unfair to yourself.

Can you relate to that? Have you put yourself in the torture chamber of unforgiveness? Anger and unforgiveness, by their very nature, lock on to the past. These words, along with other words like: resentment, bitterness, hatred,

and envy are “stuck” words; words that keep you trapped in your past. Whenever you hear yourself using or thinking these words, you are in dangerous territory. Start looking for a way out.

Tim Allen knows what it means to be stuck in anger. Tim was the star of the hit TV show *Home Improvement*. He told his story in *Parade* magazine a few years ago. He said when his dad was killed in a car accident, his world was turned upside down and he immediately became angry. He describes the impact it had on him,

It hit me hard. I didn't see it coming, didn't understand it, and it hurt like hell. Why would God take my father away? Then came the guilt and anger. I kept looking around for someone to help me deal with these feelings. I needed taking care of, but nobody was going to do it. Nobody in my family spoke much about it. There was nobody in school or the neighborhood like me. From then on, I cut myself adrift. It was like I was going down the same river as everyone else, only now I was no longer in the same vessel. I was alone.

What a picture of isolation and despair. Allen tells how growing up he fell in with a bad crowd and started using and selling drugs. He was arrested and sent to prison for over two years. When he got out, comedy became his salvation. He said the only place he felt comfortable was in front of an audience. He became incredibly famous and wealthy from *Home Improvement*, but his drinking got out of control, ending his twelve-year marriage and putting him in a treatment center.

Thankfully, Tim was able to get sober and said he found healing in the presence of his daughter:

I adore being in the house with my daughter...being silent, doing my art; just knowing she's near. It's the best connection – it's unconditional. My daughter eases the ache I used alcohol to calm. Because of her, this void at the center of things since my father died started to fill up. My daughter slowly crept up on me, removing the obstacles to connection.

Tim's story shows how you don't have to stay stuck in anger. You can move beyond the pain of your past. When I first read this story I was concerned that Tim might be tempted to merely *salve* his pain with the help of his daughter without *solving* it. It's tempting to move just far enough down the road to relieve the pain without truly getting free. I was pleased to read a recent article about Tim where he expresses that he has continued to find healing and his spirituality has played a significant role in the process.

Write it down...

- *How have you made yourself a prisoner of past pain?*
- *What is it about Tim Allen's story that you can relate to?*
- *Are you content to salve your pain or are you willing to solve it?*

Seeing Anger

Anger scares us. Because it scares us, we avoid it. We avert our eyes, hoping that if we ignore it, anger won't bother us.

But avoiding anger doesn't change the reality of its existence. It's there. We need to open our eyes and deal with it.

Let me ask you a few questions to help you to start seeing anger.

The look of anger.

When you think of anger, what comes to mind? In other words, what does anger look like to you?

- Rage?
- Violence?
- Swearing?
- Silence?
- Sadness?

Anger affects everyone in a different way. Because of that, we don't always recognize it. For me, anger disguised itself as frustration. I read once where a psychologist said he never used the word "frustrated". Not only would he not use the word, he didn't allow anyone in his practice to use the word either. Why? Because he thought the word "frustrated" was a substitute for "anger". As long as people can describe themselves as "frustrated" they will never admit to being angry. It is a form of denial. When I read that, it hit me between the eyes because I always used the word "frustrated" to describe how I felt.

I was in a leadership meeting at church once. We were sitting around a small coffee table and I had a Styrofoam cup of coffee sitting on it. Something came up in the meeting that was a recurring problem in the church. I said, "I am so

frustrated!" At the same time, I hit the coffee table with my fist, and the cup went flying.

I wasn't *frustrated*. In truth, *I was angry*. But I didn't want to admit to anger because to me, anger wasn't something I should be. Anger was something ugly, something "unchristian". When my dad got angry he would swear and say demeaning things to people and I didn't want to be like him. I took my anger undercover and I called it "frustration".

Write it down:

- *What does anger look like in your life?*
- *How have you taken your anger undercover?*
- *How have you relabeled your anger to make it more acceptable?*

The feel of anger.

Here's another question, how do you *feel* about anger? Does it scare you? Embarrass you? Make you sad?

Most people are ashamed of their anger. They associate anger with losing control, conflict, or broken relationships. Anger makes them feel guilty. In fact, many people will never pick up a book on anger because they don't want anyone to think they have a problem with anger, or don't even want to admit it to themselves. They spend their lives running from anger and conflict, leaving a wake of relationships that are broken, superficial and unfulfilling.

Write it down:

- *How do you feel about anger?*
- *Have you run from anger rather than resolve it?*

The impact of anger.

One last question, how do you think anger impacts our culture? Here are a few areas you'll find anger every day:

- **The news.** Pick up any newspaper on any day and you will easily find a dozen articles rooted in anger. When you read about road rage, divorce, and wars, you are reading about anger. For example, as I write today, the trending story is about T.J. Lane. T.J. is a 17-year-old boy charged with three juvenile counts of aggravated murder for shooting five students in an Ohio high school.
- **Sports.** You see anger in baseball when the benches clear for a fight. You see it in hockey when the players drop their gloves. A few years back, I was shocked to hear how professional basketball players went into the stands to fight the fans. And in Minnesota last year a hockey dad was convicted of attacking and choking his son's coach.
- **Television.** What shows do you think about when you think of anger? *Judge Judy. Divorce Court. COPS.* In my seminars I always ask my audience what shows reflect anger. On one occasion a man responded with, "*Seinfeld*". That really surprised me. No one had ever mentioned *Seinfeld* before. I asked him why he thought of *Seinfeld* and he challenged me to think of any episode. Almost all of the humor on *Seinfeld* is based on anger. I didn't believe him at first, but as I thought through different episodes, he was right. Elaine, George, Jerry, and Kramer were always mad at someone and their anger was the basis for the show's humor: the springboard for their punch lines. As I thought about other sitcoms, I realized that anger is the basis for a great deal of TV humor.
- **Music.** Can you think of any music that is associated with anger? Maybe Rap or Heavy Metal? They might be the first genres to come to mind. But keep thinking. Have you ever heard an angry country song? Oh yeah. Read the chorus of Carrie Underwood's song, *Before He Cheats*:
 I dug my key into the side
 Of his pretty little souped-up 4 wheel drive
 Carved my name into his leather seats
 I took a Louisville slugger to both headlights

Slashed a hole in all 4 tires
And maybe next time he'll think before he cheats

Every music genre has anger, even classical. Why? Because music expresses our soul and our soul is often filled with anger.

- **The legal system.** Where would the legal system be without anger? Just think how many court cases are the results of people trying to get back at someone with a lawsuit.

The list of anger in the culture goes on and on. What about anger in art, religion, politics, and traffic? Once you start to see anger, you will find it everywhere you turn because we are angry people looking for ways to express our anger.

We live in an anger-saturated culture. Because it is saturated, we don't always see anger even when it is in front of us; no more than a fish sees water right in front of it. Since anger is ever-present, we look right past it. And since there is always someone angrier than we are, it is easy to justify the anger we have. As a result, it's easy to get stuck in anger and not even realize it. We've normalized anger to the point that we don't see it is the glue that keeps us stuck in our past.

Write it down:

- It's important that you are able to see anger in our culture in order to be aware of how anger is constantly influencing you. List other examples of anger that you see around you every day.
- *Do you minimize your anger because you see it so much elsewhere?*

Understanding Anger

Anger is a tricky emotion. Its power can confuse and intimidate you, causing you to shut down and become stuck.

Understanding your anger is the first step to getting unstuck.

There are many misunderstandings about anger. Forget what you know or think you know about anger for a few minutes. This chapter is meant to help you get a fresh perspective. I'll start with my definition of anger,

Anger is a God-given emotional response to injustice. It is an emotion that motivates and empowers you to defend what is good and true. Anger compels you to right wrongs.

Dr. David Seamands, author of *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, defines anger this way,

Anger is a divinely implanted emotion. Closely allied to our instinct for right, it is designed to be used for constructive spiritual purposes. The person who cannot feel anger at evil is a person who lacks enthusiasm for good. If you cannot hate wrong, it's very questionable whether you really love righteousness.

My guess is you never heard anger defined in such positive terms. Most of us think of anger as something bad: something destructive. And I bet you never heard that anger is from God! Maybe you heard about Jesus being angry, but it always made you a little uncomfortable, like it shouldn't be in the Bible, right? Let's take a look at that now.

When Jesus Got Angry

There are three examples of Jesus getting angry, all in the book of Mark. The first example is when the religious rulers of the day didn't want Jesus to heal anyone on the Sabbath. Mark tells us,

...some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus so they watched him closely... Mark 3:2

Then Mark says Jesus,

...looked around at them in anger... because he was deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts... Mark 3:5

The second passage is when people were trying to bring their children to Jesus but his disciples told them to go away. Mark said,

When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these". Mark 10:14

The third passage is about Jesus coming into the temple to find people setting up a market in the temple courts. Jesus overturned tables and drove people away incensed at what they had done to God's house of worship (Mark 11:15).

Either it's wrong that Jesus got angry or there are times when anger is appropriate behavior. I believe the latter. In each story Jesus became angry in the face of some kind of *injustice*. In each story his anger moved him to *confront* injustice. Note that he didn't hold onto the anger and become bitter. Jesus didn't use his anger as an excuse to lose control, become abusive, or destructive. The anger came, it moved him to address specific injustices, and then he let it go. In other words:

Jesus experienced anger.

Jesus expressed his anger.

Jesus let his anger go.

Anger doesn't have to be a bad emotion with bad results. It's a God given emotion to resolve injustices. That should be our model for how we deal with anger.

Write it down:

- *Have you ever thought of anger in a positive way?*
- *Have you ever thought of anger as God-given?*
- *How does this definition of anger change your thinking about anger?*
- *What's different about the way Jesus expressed his anger and the way you express yours?*

The Anger Process

Jesus' approach to handling anger is a lot different from our approach. In fact, I want to break the anger process down so you can see exactly where it is we go wrong.

Anger progresses in three stages:

Stage One: Anger starts when you perceive an injustice. *Perceive* is the key word here because your perception may be wrong but you still become angry.

Stage Two: Once you perceive an injustice you immediately have the emotional response of anger. Anger will always result when an injustice is perceived. You can't help it. This is a part of who God made you to be. You do not have to feel guilty about experiencing this emotion. In fact, you should be more concerned if you don't have an anger response to injustice.

Stage Three: The purpose of anger is to move you to take action. If anger doesn't evoke a response from you that means you internalized your anger, or what is often called, *stuffing your anger*.

Perceived Injustice > *Emotional Response* > *Action Taken*

This is the anger process. Where we go wrong, and where anger gets all the bad press, is in the space between the emotional response and the action taken. We go wrong for primarily two reasons.

First, we fail to ask if our perception is accurate. We rush to judgment and take action without thinking things through. For example, let's say you have a child who comes home from school and tells you his teacher ridiculed him openly in front of his class. That's a serious accusation. If it's true, it's definitely an injustice and you have every right to be angry. But what if it's not true? What if your child misread the situation? Before you accept the anger you want to first clarify what happened. Did your child misread what actually happened? A simple phone call might be all it takes to determine if your child's accusation is true or false.

Perceived Injustice > *Emotional Response* > *Action Taken*

- True
- False

We often make a mistake by taking a small amount of information and jumping to conclusions. To justify our conclusion, we fabricate why we think our anger is appropriate, creating excuses that may not be true. In fact, studies have shown that when you are angry, your mind seeks to justify your anger. That is, rather than your mind slowing you down, cautioning you to make sure you perceived an injustice accurately, the opposite happens. Your mind is convinced that an injustice has absolutely occurred and *looks* for evidence to prove it. Knowing this, be very careful in letting yourself get angry in the first place because once you become angry it's hard to back down.

My point here is that when you experience anger, your first step should be to question whether or not you have any right to be angry. The Bible gives an excellent example of this. The prophet Jonah got mad at God for wanting to rescue a group of people called the Ninevites. God questioned Jonah's anger saying,

Is it right for you to be angry? Jonah 4:4

That's the question we should always ask ourselves the minute we experience the heat of anger rise up in our chest...*is it right to be angry? Did I perceive*

things accurately? Was there really an injustice? Do I have all the facts? Did I jump to a conclusion or rush to judgment?

The moment you feel anger is an excellent time to invite God to help you gain clarity before your emotion sends you in the wrong direction. Pray something like this:

Father, I'm mad about this. Help me to get to the bottom of this problem and find out if it's true or not. I don't want to get angry or take action until I know all the facts.

Failing to judge your perception is the first mistake we make.

The second mistake we make is defaulting to retaliation. Most people have not been trained in how to respond to anger nor has it been modeled for them growing up. They live by the motto, "If it feels good, do it". If it feels good to yell, then yell. If it feels good to slander, then slander. If it feels good to throw something, then throw something. Any action seems justified by the offense. But retaliation never solves anything. I'll talk about this more in the next chapter.

Write it down:

- *As you assess your anger, do you think it's more often based on true perception or false? Explain.*
- *Are you too quick to perceive an injustice? Why do you think that is?*
- *Do you rush to judgment and jump to conclusions?*
- *Do people often tell you that you misunderstood them?*
- *Do you automatically default to retaliation?*
- *As you look at past retaliation, how has it made things worse for you?*

Seven Triggers That Tick You Off

In the previous chapter I introduced you to the anger behind the anger: what I called primary and secondary losses. I want to explore this idea more to help you better understand what's at the heart of your anger.

When I initially did my anger research I was overwhelmed with the many sources of anger. I listed out countless reasons why people get angry and then labeled each one. I grouped types that were similar and slowly pared my listing down to seven categories of anger triggers. My hope was that, if I could sort the causes for anger, I might find some universal truth about anger. I actually did. When you get to the end of this chapter, maybe you will have the same "ah-ha moment" I did.

Following are the seven categories I came up with, or what I refer to as, the seven triggers that tick you off. They are not all-inclusive but should help you to better understand your anger.

1. Invalidation.

Invalidation means to negate the value of something. It means to overlook, put down, take for granted, or reject something because you believe it has little or no value.

We are all created with the stamp of God's image on our lives. Therefore, we have inherent value. Many of us recognize our value, if only at a subconscious level, setting up an expectation that we will be shown respect. When someone contradicts our expectation by invalidating us, we experience a loss. That's where the hurt and anger come from. Something inside of us rises up and objects: *This is wrong! How can you say that to me? How can you treat me like that? Can't you see that I have value?*

Earlier I referenced a Bible story where Nabal humiliated David. Nabal made David feel small and insignificant when he said,

Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where? 1 Samuel 25:10,11

Nabal said David was nothing special: just one of many. This invalidation infuriated David. All the protection that David offered Nabal's men and sheep was discounted with just a few words prompting David's intense anger. Isn't it amazing how words can so easily set us off?

Invalidation is often at the root of anger. In fact, marriage researchers at the University of Denver found invalidation is one of four key causes to marriage breakdowns. Invalidation doesn't come from verbal put-downs alone but actions like offering unsolicited advice or questioning motives that make a person feel disrespected by their mate.

What is it about being invalidated that ticks us off? Think of the secondary losses. Respect and a sense of dignity are at the top of the list.

Notice that I make a distinction between "dignity" and "a sense of dignity". Respect is something I give you. Dignity is something God gives you. Dignity is what makes you worthy of respect. It's your inherent value. I can't take your dignity and you can't lose it but I can make you doubt it. So the loss is a "sense" of dignity, not the dignity itself.

Invalidation can also cause you to sense a loss of control. You want so much to stop the person who is hurting you, but you can't. You have no control over them. It's like watching Simon Cowell in the early days of the television show *American Idol*. He could be so cruel with his cutting remarks. When Simon belittled contestants, I'm sure they wanted to turn off his microphone. But they couldn't. They had to sit there and take it. His words could end their careers and they knew it. It must have been humiliating and it angered many of them.

What you expected: respect and esteem.

What you got: invalidation and rejection.

What you lost: respect, control, and a sense of dignity.

2. Personal trauma.

In his book, *A Grace Disguised*, Gerald Sittser tells the story of how three members of his family were taken in one tragic car accident. This is what he said about his loss,

We live life as if it were a motion picture. Loss turns life into a snapshot. The movement stops; everything freezes. We find ourselves looking at picture albums to remember the motion picture of our lives that once was but can no longer be.

Loss turns life into a snapshot. That's an interesting metaphor. Lenore Terr, author of *Too Scared to Cry*, uses another film analogy,

The memory of trauma is shot with higher intensity light than is ordinary memory. And the film doesn't seem to disintegrate with the usual half-life of ordinary film. Only the best lenses are used, lenses that will pick up every last detail, every line, every wrinkle, and every fleck. There is more detail picked up during traumatic events than one would expect from the naked eye under ordinary circumstances.

That's what happened with Sittser. His life was moving along fine, like a motion picture, until the car crash. Then he was handed a snapshot of loss to

always remind him of what once was but can no longer be. He comments on how anger relates to loss,

Anger is simply another way of deflecting the pain, holding it off, fighting back at it. But the pain of loss is unrelenting. It stalks and chases until it catches us. It is as persistent as wind on the prairies, as constant as cold in the Antarctic, as erosive as a spring flood.

I wonder if that has happened to you. What kind of snapshots have you been holding in your hand? Maybe you have albums full of traumatic loss.

Our expectation is that life will be safe and predictable. We live under the illusion that an impervious bubble surrounds us protecting us from harm. It's always other people that experience trauma, never us. Or so we think. When trauma strikes, when our bubble bursts, our world changes.

The loss associated with trauma is the sudden realization that life is not safe and predictable; you have no control. You are vulnerable to the whims of nature and the choices other people make.

What you expected: safety, and a predictable life.

What you got: trauma, and a story you didn't want to have.

What you lost: safety, control, and predictability.

The Cost of Anger

Getting stuck in anger is serious. Unresolved anger does not sit passively in your life. It takes a heavy toll physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Let me outline these three areas for you.

Physically.

A number of studies have shown that unresolved anger stresses your heart. One researcher said that anger has a “cardio toxic” effect on the body. Anger increases both cortisol and adrenaline levels that cause the wear and tear on the heart of the cardiovascular system. The study discovered,

Frequent anger may speed up the process of atherosclerosis, in which fatty plaques build up in arteries... The heart pumps harder, blood vessels constrict, blood pressure surges, and there are higher levels of glucose in the blood and more fat globules in the blood vessels. All this, scientists believe, can cause damage to artery walls.

Another study showed that anger is one of the risk factors *producing* heart disease while yet another study showed that for those that *have* heart disease, getting angry puts them at a greater risk for having a heart attack.

Emotionally.

Anger has a direct link to depression. Professor Robert Enright, from the University of Wisconsin, tells about research done by one of his assistants,

Therapist Judith Wallerstein interviewed family members decades after divorce and found that they were still suffering from the emotional pain related to the divorce... [she said] "Incredibly one-half of the women and one-third of the men are still intensely angry at their former spouses, despite the passage of ten or more years. Because their feelings have not changed, anger has become an ongoing, and sometimes dominant, presence in their children's lives as well."

People tend to think that time heals all wounds. It doesn't. In some cases, time makes things worse. *How can that be? Shouldn't anger dissipate over time?* Not necessarily. If a loss, like divorce, has altered your life for the worse you might continually blame the other person for your situation. As additional losses add up over time they stoke the fire of anger toward your offender. Even though decades pass since the original offense your current losses keep your anger alive.

It's important to note another impact of anger revealed in Wallerstein's research. She said anger could become a dominant presence in the lives of the angry person's *children* as well. We tend to deny that. We think our anger is just between our offender and us. We think we have the ability to compartmentalize our anger: walling it off from the rest of our lives. But that's not possible; unresolved anger impacts every relationship we have, including with God, as I'll show you in a minute.

Wallerstein also conducted research on the correlation between anger and depression. She took two groups of people suffering from depression. One was the control group that had no forgiveness therapy; the other was taken through a forgiveness process. Wallerstein observed,

Those in the forgiveness group improved significantly. Before therapy they had been, on average, moderately psychologically depressed. After forgiveness therapy they were, on average, not depressed at all. Their anxiety decreased, and their sense of hopefulness toward their own futures increased. All six were able to forgive their perpetrators.

This correlation between anger and depression is something worth considering. Imagine if forgiveness therapy could be more effective than anti-depressants.

Spiritually.

Anger can shut you down spiritually as well. When Jesus finished telling his disciples how to pray he added a concluding remark about forgiveness,

For if you forgive others 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

Clearly, holding anger toward someone that offends you will impact your relationship with God. Jesus also said these words in his Sermon on the Mount,

...if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you; leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:22-24

Jesus reveals that our rituals of worship are less important to God than reconciling our broken relationships. Reconciliation (or at the very least, a willingness to work at reconciliation) is a precondition to our worship. Refusing to reconcile with people could shut down our attempts to grow spiritually and connect with God.

Write it down:

- Reflect on these three areas. *How has your anger impacted you physically, emotionally, and spiritually?*
- In some cases, you might be able to put a price tag on how much anger has cost you. For example, maybe your anger is driving an expensive habit of yours. Or maybe your anger has caused significant health problems or numerous speeding tickets. If so, add it up. *How much has it cost you monetarily?*

- *If all of your anger issues could be resolved today how much relief would that bring to your life?*

Seven Factors That Keep You Stuck

Tom came to see me not long ago. He thought I might be a good person to talk to about his daughter who was abusing drugs. Tom was a widower facing this on his own. Life had gotten crazy for him.

His wife died a few years earlier from cancer. When his daughter started using drugs, he confronted her. He thought that was the end of it, but it was only the beginning. Unfortunately she didn't dabble in drugs; she went straight to methamphetamine (or meth). Meth is highly addictive and an epidemic in Wisconsin.

Tom went out of his way to help his daughter, but to no avail. After a few scrapes with the law, she ended up in treatment, only to relapse soon after. This became a cycle. The only time Tom's daughter contacted him was to bail her out of jail.

Tom had enough. He decided to try the "tough love" route, welcoming her back home only after she had been straight for six months and willing to abide by house rules. His daughter rejected his offer. She accepted the offer of a nearby relative who had "compassion" for her.

Tom was looking for some sanity. He decided to move to Minnesota to be near friends and start a new life for the rest of his kids. The past years had thrown the family into chaos; his daughter's drama made life hard for her three younger brothers. Tom wanted to create some space by moving, but his decision to move brought the wrath of his wife's family. They resented Tom taking away the few connections they had to their deceased daughter. They regularly questioned Tom's sons, asking them, "How can your dad do this to the family?"

Tom was stuck. People were mad at him. He was mad at them. He came to me to see if I thought his choices were good ones or not. He was ready to move on with his life but he was afraid if he was wrong he would only compound his problems.

How is it that people can put us in these situations...especially family members?

Beverly Flanigan says in her book, *Forgiving the Unforgivable*,

The worst kind of human wounds occur not on battlefields but in our homes. The worst injurers are not enemies or strangers in a foxhole but our husbands and wives, children, parents, and friends. Wherever love has been a part of relationships, the shrapnel of human destruction is strewn in our living rooms and bedrooms in the form of aborted dreams and wounded hopes. Wars may terminate with the signing of peace treaties, but intimate injuries have no such formal mechanisms for ending them. The most intimate of injuries are often left festering and unresolved – either unforgiven or unforgivable.

Created to connect.

Why is it these injuries cause us so much pain? One of the reasons is because God wired us for connection. When our connections break down, it distorts God's design for us. The Bible quotes God saying, "Let us make mankind in our image" (Genesis 1:26). Then God created Adam and Eve. Note how God refers to himself as "us" and then creates two people in relationship as a reflection of his image. That tells me: *God is relational by nature*. I don't understand it, but the Bible speaks about God as Father, Son, and Spirit being in relationship with each other (what's traditionally referred to as the Trinity).

Since we are created in God's image, we must also be relational by nature. To be in relationship is part of our core identity. To break relationship tears the fabric of that identity; and it hurts. It creates a tension: a dissonance. It creates disharmony, like an out of tune piano, that grates on us.

Disharmony bothers God too. That's why the Bible says God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). God doesn't just hate marital divorce. He hates any kind of divorce, whether it's between friends or family or even within a church. The Bible doesn't say God hates *the people* involved in divorce. He hates the breakup of a relationship. That's because divorce is the opposite of who God is

and who he created us to be. It's foreign to his character. God is unity by nature. He created us to reflect that unity. When people see true unity in a marriage or family or church, they get a glimpse of the nature of God. When they see separation and divorce, they see the very opposite of God.

That's why reconciliation is so important to God; it restores the beauty of unity and reveals his character to the world. Since his unity is part of our spiritual DNA, anything that undermines unity bothers us. It's no wonder we become emotional and lose sleep when our relationships break down.

I opened this chapter talking about Tom. What do you think he should do? Before I tell you what I told Tom I want to walk you through seven factors that often cause people to get stuck in their relationships.

Write it down:

- *Think about your anger. How much of it is related to another person?*
- *What is it about these people that make you angry? Why do you think that is?*
- *Are there people you need to move toward to restore unity?*
- *Are there people you need to move away from to protect yourself?*

UNSTUCK

The story of Aron Ralston is told in the 2010 movie, *127 Hours*. Aron is the climber who got his arm caught under a boulder while hiking in Utah. After being stuck for 127 hours he freed himself by amputating his own arm.

If you saw the movie, his situation looked impossible. There was no way out. His predicament would have certainly ended in death, but he did the

unthinkable and regained his life. After watching the movie you understand why he had to do what he did, but it didn't make it any easier to watch.

My point: getting unstuck isn't always pretty and it takes a lot of hard work; *but it's possible.*

The Foolishness of Forgiveness

After speaking to a small group about forgiveness I was taken aback by the level of *un-forgiveness* I heard in two people. They spoke in no uncertain terms of their desire to see their offenders mercilessly destroyed.

It's interesting to me how I can teach for days about forgiveness, only to realize I'm not making *any* headway with people. They carefully take notes but inside say, *This doesn't apply to me.* Some people have decided...no, it's stronger than that, have VOWED, to not forgive. In their mind you'd have to be a fool to forgive.

They have no idea what they are doing to themselves. When I encounter this kind of resistance it reminds me that forgiveness is *spiritual* and not a simple three-step process.

My class included a sixty-five year old man and a twenty-year-old girl: both trapped in bitter anger. The man's father had abused him as a child. The girl had been raped. The man hated his father his entire life and it showed in every deep line on his face. I hoped the girl saw this. I wanted to ask her...*Is this what you want to look like in forty-five years? Is your bitterness and resentment worth the cost of what you will pay over the next five decades?*

Her hatred didn't hurt her offender, only her.

Of course, I understood her reaction. The violation of rape is incomprehensible to me. She had the right to her anger. I just didn't want her to embrace it forever and slowly destroy her life. There is a saying that goes: *Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting your offender to die.*

This girl was so young and had so much life ahead of her. I have daughters her age. I would hate to have either one of them consumed with the level of hatred I saw in her.

Even if she could retaliate, what would that achieve? She would then have to deal with the guilt and consequences. Plus, she would reduce herself to her offender's level. That's not a win. It's just one more loss added to the tragedy.

Marrying herself to her abuser through hatred and revenge was not the answer. Her anger only invited him back into her life every day to abuse her emotionally one more time. The best thing she could do for herself was to forgive. Move on. Take back her life and let God deal with her offender.

This young woman wasn't able to see this. Forgiving her offender was too much to ask. It made no sense. The idea was actually offensive to her, like I was in some way excusing her offender. It was if she was saying, "Don't lay that religious crap on me. Can't you see I'm hurting?" To her, forgiveness was just

another burden laid across her back. To the contrary, I suggested forgiveness to help remove the burden from her back so she could rise and reclaim her life.

The Role of Forgiveness.

Undoubtedly, people do use forgiveness as a religious quick fix to “make nice” of a tragic situation. I agree that approach is simplistic and offensive. That’s not what I’m talking about here. Forgiveness is important to accomplish three things:

1. **Reclaim your life.** Forgiveness helps you separate emotionally from the pain of an offense as well as your offender.
2. **Reconcile with your offender.** Forgiveness clears the way for the *possibility* of reuniting with your offender.
3. **Rehabilitate your offender.** Forgiveness can *potentially* free your offender to live a new life if they choose to do so.

In many cases, only the first goal is ever achieved. But that alone is significant, even life-changing. If reconciliation and/or rehabilitation are achieved then that should be celebrated even more.

The young lady in my class was consumed with bitterness and thoughts of revenge plus it fed her self-destructive addiction. But forgiveness offers her hope to get her life back.

Maybe forgiveness could do the same for you.

Moving On...

Up until now, I’ve helped you see what gets you stuck. In the rest of the book we’ll work to get you unstuck.

If you are eager to get unstuck, you may have turned to this section first. You think you know “stuck” inside and out. I hope you’ll go back and read the earlier chapters at some point to help understand what may have gotten you stuck in the first place.

How to Forgive

One of the questions I often get asked is “How do I forgive?” People know they *should* forgive. What they lack are the practical steps on *how* to forgive.

It’s interesting to note that, even though the Bible often commands us to forgive, it never once gives instructions on how to do it. I wonder if the disciples ever stopped Jesus after one of his teachings and said, *Whoa, whoa, whoa...wait a minute. We get that we are supposed to forgive. But what does it actually look like? Are there steps? Is there a process? Give us a little help here!*

That’s what I want to give you now, practical steps to forgive. I hesitate to call them “steps” because forgiveness isn’t a formula. It’s more of an art. Lewis Smedes says,

Forgiving, when you come down to it, is an art, a practical art, maybe the most neglected of all the healing arts. It is the art of healing inner wounds inflicted by other people’s wrongs.

Since forgiveness is an art, let’s just call these “suggestions” or, “ideas” on how to forgive.

First Steps

I'm not much of a golfer. I play six times a year at most, but I've been playing for fifty years, so I've picked up a few tips along the way. One thing I've learned: the better I position myself, the better I hit the ball.

You don't just walk up to a ball and swing. You get yourself set: knees bent, back straight, hands slightly ahead of the ball, relaxed grip. When everything is in the right place, the chance of me hitting the ball high and straight increases dramatically.

It's the same with forgiveness. Once you've made the *choice* to forgive, the next step is to *position* yourself to forgive. That's what I want to look at in the next three chapters; three steps you can take that will put you in the right position to forgive.

Reframing

In the book *Change or Die*, Alan Deutchman says there are three factors that contribute to change: relationships, retraining, and reframing. You need to have the right person coaching you (relationship), the right information (retraining), and to see your problem from a fresh perspective (reframing).

The Bible agrees with this assessment of the change process, especially when it comes to retraining and reframing. The book of Romans tells us to be “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (12:2) and Ephesians tells us to be “made new in the attitudes of your mind” (4:23).

The apostle Paul took an aggressive approach to his thought life. He sees his mind as a battlefield,

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. 2 Corinthians 10:5

This is what reframing is about. It’s about taking your thoughts captive to serve you rather than allowing your thoughts to work against you.

In the next three chapters I want to help you reframe your situation by first reframing your offense, second reframing the outcome, and then reframing your identity. When you do this you cast new light on your situation, empowering yourself to get unstuck.

Having the Conversation

Before I entered the ministry for the second time (I took a number of years off after my initial run at ministry), I wanted to enter with a clean slate. I didn't want to bring any baggage into my ministry that might cause me to be less effective in any way.

I sat down and asked God to show me anyone from my past with whom I might be at odds. Thankfully, there wasn't a long list to clean up, but one name was obvious. It was a partnership that broke down dramatically several years prior and I knew what I had to do.

I called this former partner and invited him to dinner. He was pleasant and agreed to the meeting. When the evening came, we had a nice dinner and caught up on the past seven years. We had been good friends until a breach took place, so I enjoyed reconnecting. I was hopeful we could renew our relationship.

I wasn't content to merely get reacquainted. I believed God wanted more from me, so I broached the subject of our parting. I said, "You know, I'm sorry it worked out the way it did. I'm sure we both did things wrong and I'd like to talk about it. Maybe we can get together again and talk it through."

At this point his mood changed. It was like a chill came into the room. His responses were curt and you could tell he was ready to go home. I got him to agree to meet again, but I felt it was in word only. The minute he walked out the door he had no intention of seeing me again.

At first I was confused by what happened. Everything seemed to be going so well. Then it dawned on me; my former partner was so positive about our meeting because he was sure I was going to apologize for our fractured relationship. He didn't feel any responsibility for what happened. It was all on me. No wonder the air got so cold when I suggested otherwise.

I didn't understand why God would bring this man to mind when it ended so poorly. But then I realized there was value in having our conversation even though it didn't end in reconciliation. I forgave him and made an attempt to bring resolution, even though he rejected me. As I noted before: forgiveness isn't necessarily reunion.

I mention this encounter because, if at all possible, speak to your offender no matter what you think the result might be. If it goes well, you've won back a friend. If it goes poorly, you can take pride in being a "hero" and taking action. You didn't sit back like a coward and avoid the hard thing.

Having the conversation is so important I'm going to take two chapters to address it. The first chapter is about the spirit of the conversation while the second chapter is about the "how to" of the conversation.

When Nothing Works

Not long ago, I taught a series at my church about how to restore broken relationships. A friend of mine came up to me halfway through the series and said, “You know, this doesn’t always work. Relationships can’t always be reconciled”.

He knew what he was talking about. He had been working to draw closer to his family for the past few years and it wasn’t working.

I agreed. *That's reality.* Broken relationships can't always be resolved the way we would like. So I asked my friend to share his story to close out the series. His name is Byron. Let me recap Byron's talk for you.

In the early days, Byron's siblings connected to each other in three ways: through their parents, the family farm, and their church. They were one big happy family and assumed they always would be. But as siblings grew up and moved away, they no longer had the farm or church to hold them together. Thankfully, holidays with mom and dad, and fond memories still held them close.

As the health of his aging parents started to fail, Byron's siblings drew even closer as they shared the same purpose of helping them. But when mom and dad passed away things changed. The siblings no longer had time for each other. Byron related how he sensed a profound loss: not only were his parents gone but his the sense of "family". Byron didn't want to be passive so he sought to create opportunities for his siblings to come together. But most chose to ignore these opportunities. The family that was once seemingly so close was now distant.

This was disillusioning to Byron. *How could this happen? Aren't we family? Aren't we all Christians?* After reflecting on these questions he realized how the three things that kept his siblings together no longer existed: his parents, the farm, and their common church experience. Without these factors they were little more than acquaintances.

Byron slowly came to understand that he needed to accept this "new normal", grieve it and come up with a plan of action. He developed personal "rules of engagement:" a plan for how he would communicate with his siblings without putting pressure on them to respond. I offer them to you here (with my commentary) because our congregation found it very helpful advice. Maybe it will help you as well.

The Other Side of Forgiveness

Most of this book focuses on how to forgive others so you can move on with your life. But sometimes you get stuck because others can't forgive you or you can't forgive yourself. In the closing chapters, I want to address the other side of forgiveness.

Forgiving Yourself

I finished teaching on God's forgiveness and felt pretty good about it. I presented what I thought was an ironclad case for why God's forgiveness is free and unconditional. When I asked for comments Angie said, "I understand God's forgiveness. I don't have a problem with that. I just can't forgive myself."

Her response threw me off a bit. I assumed if you accept God's forgiveness you would automatically forgive yourself. But as I thought about it more, it made more sense. It's probably true in my own life to some degree. I know God forgives me. But when I mess up I feel it necessary to beat myself up for a while. God's not ashamed of me but I am.

Angie lived with the regret of losing her children. Her chronic addiction to drugs and alcohol caused her to lose custody to her ex-boyfriend. She now lives under her own harsh judgment as she continually reflects on the poor choices she made leading up to the loss of custody.

Angie is not alone. Many people just can't seem to shake their self-accusations for past failure. It's as if they choose to stay stuck in life as a means of self-punishment. It's one of the few things they can do to pay for what they've done wrong. But no one is made to live under the weight of guilt. We all need to learn how to forgive ourselves so we can move on in life and achieve better things.

Over the next two chapters I want to answer two questions:

Why should I forgive myself?

How can I forgive myself?

Thank you for reading this sample of STUCK.

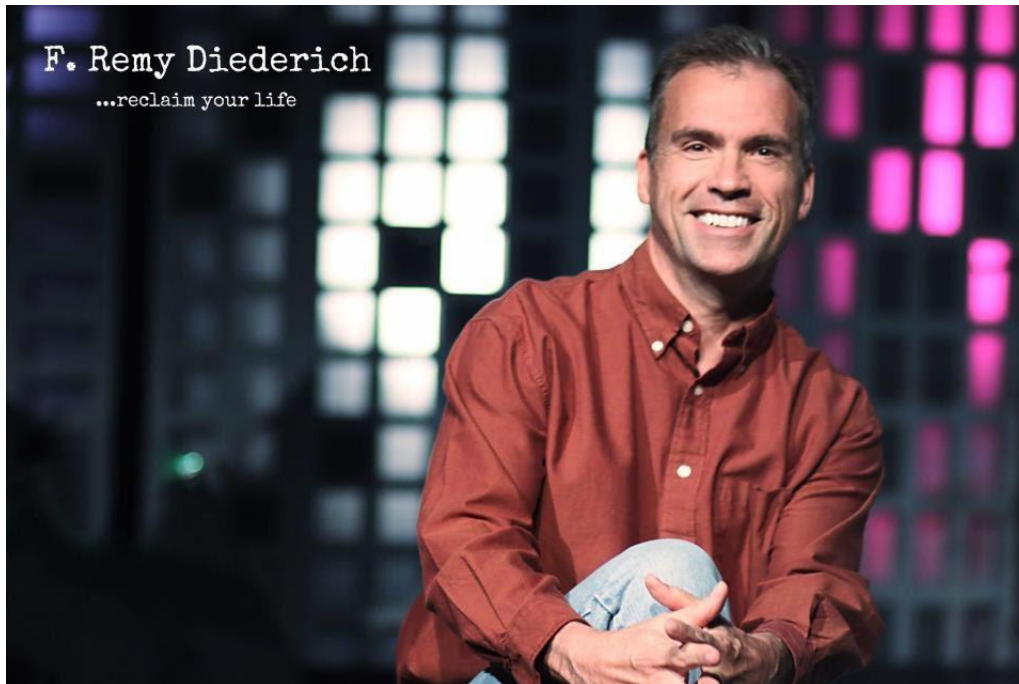
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