

Rooting Out Bitterness

John was forty-five and frustrated. It seemed to him that life had given him an unfair share of reverses, hurts, and disappointments. From his youth he had worked for his dad on the farm. When the farm failed, his dad and brothers had come out better than he had, and he blamed them for taking advantage of him. In addition, he felt his church had let him down; it should have helped his family more in the losses leading to the farm's collapse.

At twenty-two, he married and started farming for himself, and again he faced one setback after another. He finally had to sell out and was left carrying a large debt. He set out to pay it off, knowing it would take many years. He worked long hard hours. As the years passed, John's bitterness imperceptibly and increasingly robbed him of joy and peace.

John's wife stayed strong in faith even through the tough times. She kept praying for him and supporting him. She understood why he felt overwhelmed. She sensed his hurt when a brother in the church made a careless remark about people who fail in farming and live with debt the rest of their lives. She encouraged John to go talk with the brother, but John refused. He was finished trying. He was done with this church.

After much prayer, John's wife shared the incident with the deacon's wife. She hoped that if the brother apologized to John, it would help him overcome the hurt. The deacon did his part, and the brother apologized. But John mistrusted the brother's motives and doubted his sincerity. John had let his frustration, suspicion, and resentment build walls between him and his brothers. Not long afterward he withdrew his membership from the church. Yes, he would still attend. But no, he wouldn't be a part anymore.

But John was determined to be a good dad to his children and not fail as a father, like he thought his dad had. John appreciated his wife's family who lived in another church community. He often wondered if life would be better in their church. Her family had

loaned him some interest-free money to help him when his farm failed. Her uncle Fred visited them often. He was kind and caring, and John enjoyed his friendship.

John often wished he could be as happy as Uncle Fred. John's heart was in constant turmoil. When he rehearsed his hurts, which he did frequently, resentment and anger welled up in him. Though he had high hopes and aspirations for his family, a battle raged inside him.

Uncle Fred observed John slipping away from the godly influence of his brothers in the church. He saw him forming friendships with other hurting people. He realized John was allowing his wrong attitudes and responses to choke his spiritual life. Fred prayed for wisdom to stand in the gap and help John. He often sat and listened to John vent his feelings of hurt, anger, and resentment.

Fred tried to encourage John and to redirect his thoughts toward the good things happening in his life. And most of all, Uncle Fred took time with John's children. He played with them and took the boys fishing. John knew Uncle Fred cared about his life and family.

Uncle Fred had a heart for helping people who were struggling spiritually. He also had wrestled with doubts about God and with resentment toward others. He had observed how the tests of life could make people either better or bitter. He was all too familiar with the victim mentality and the slippery slope under it.

Understanding Bitterness

John had fallen into what the Scriptures call bitterness. By yielding to the temptation to view himself as a victim, John gave bitterness a prime opportunity to take root and grow. When things go wrong, it is tempting to see ourselves as victims of circumstances beyond our control. Bitterness can begin in very small ways, but as we feed on our hurts, it will grow. Some will indulge in self-pity, despair, and even suicide. Others may become angry and controlling.

The circumstances that can tempt a person toward bitterness are many and varied. It could be an abusive parent or spouse or being taken advantage of by an employer. A young person may be hurt by a failed courtship, or a seeker may feel misunderstood by a congregation.

Hebrews 12:11-15 speaks about bitterness in the context of the chastening hand of God. Verse 11 says God's chastening, although painful, is designed for our good.

"Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (v. 11).

Accepting chastening and trusting God through it produces fruits of righteousness. But the next verses warn against becoming bitter. Verse 12 urges those who feel discouraged to take courage in order not to be turned aside from the right path (verse 13).

"Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed" (vv. 12, 13).

Verse 14 calls us to peaceful relationships and holy living, and verse 15 makes it clear that we need to diligently apply God's grace so that we do not become bitter.

"Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest

*any root of bitterness springing up trouble you,
and thereby many be defiled” (vv. 14, 15).*

The last phrase of verse 15, “and thereby many be defiled,” reminds us that bitterness destroys not only the person who harbors it but also often has destructive effects on those around him.

The passage describes bitterness as a root that springs up and troubles us. Often, bitterness is a hard-to-see tendril—until it grows vines and branches in full daylight. It begins as hidden anger and resentment about our circumstances. It lies in the dim depths of our heart and mind and begins to color our outlook on life. It is a sinister, negative resistance toward people and, at times, toward God.

While these small roots of bitterness are mostly hidden, we can make things look mostly good on the surface. But under the right circumstances, our bitterness bursts forth to trouble us. One normally insignificant comment can trigger a flash of irritation and angry words. The person who made the comment may be shocked at the magnitude of our feelings. How were they to know that underneath our calm surface, we had nursed hard feelings toward

them? How could they have expected their comment to cause such an emotional reaction?

Bitterness distorts perspective. Our perspective of those we are bitter toward is always skewed; we view their mole hills as mountains, their small scratches as gigantic wounds, and their careless words as major sins against us. And too often, if we could only see it, our perspective of what happened is simply wrong, and we are falsely accusing them.

Small hidden roots do not stay small; they grow larger and stronger. They are deceptive and sneaky, so we often don't see what is happening to us. When these small feelings of bitterness make their appearance, we must act quickly to eliminate them, or they will continue to grow.

Let's consider ways to cultivate a mindset and attitude that overcomes bitterness and prevents its seeds from sprouting and growing.

- Develop and maintain a right view of God and His sovereignty.
- Stay humble, refuse to blame others, and own and confess our sins and failures.
- Remember that our experience is normal; many have faced what we face.

- Seek God's help to forgive so we can receive His forgiveness and experience peace and joy.
- Thank God in all of life, even in the hard times.

See God as Sovereign and Good

Fred worked to help John understand that life is not usually “fair.” Bad things happen, even to God's people. Fred pointed out how Satan, with God's permission, brought terrible loss and pain to Job.

Satan is still out to destroy God's people. He still orchestrates painful events and suffering to influence people to believe they are victims. Then he tempts them to pity themselves and doubt God and His goodness. The person who chooses that route begins to develop a mindset that, unchecked, will lead him into a maelstrom of bitter, self-destructive thoughts.

Satan often appeals to this human tendency to feel sorry for ourselves. He entered the Garden of Eden and in essence said, “God is holding you back from good. He knows that if you eat this fruit, you will be wise. He is hurting you.” Such wrong thinking incites strong emotions in a person's heart. It prompts him to question God and His Word. This lie of Satan's is designed to prompt people to disobey God.

The truth was that God had been very gracious to Adam and Eve and blessed them abundantly. They could eat from many, many good trees. Why should they focus on the one forbidden tree when countless trees offered them good fruit? This was Satan's tactic to steal the hearts of our first parents from their Creator and God. It is a tactic Satan still uses today.

When a person begins to believe the lie that God is not good, they see their problems as overwhelming. God becomes small. Their problems define them. They tend to think, *If you understand my problems, you will understand me.*

We could say life happens TO people who think this way. As Christians, they may claim to believe God is with them in their problems. But in their hearts, their problems loom over them and come to define their lives. The following diagram illustrates this thinking.



My Problem

Me and God