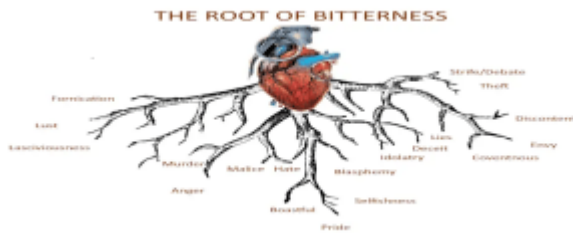


# Bitterness: Weeding Out the Poisonous Root



—BY Jim Henry

I read this article long ago some in the 1980s. It helped me greatly to overcome the grudges and bitterness I used to have toward various people for their perceived wrongs against me. If you have bitterness in your heart toward anyone, I urge you to read it! When I was bitter toward a person, it was like a spiritual acid in my soul. I learned over time to forgive others as Christ has forgiven me. I've realized how sinful I have been in the past in my attitudes words and deeds toward some people, and knowing that humbles me greatly. I can say now by God's grace I'm free from the past and have my eyes only on the present and future, praise God!

I'm not sure who the author of this article, Jim Henry is. There's a Baptist pastor by that name. It could be him.

Bitterness is that hateful, spiteful sourness in the heart that creeps in when you have been, or think you have been, maliciously wronged. I looked up the word in a dictionary, and it was defined as a sharpness affecting the taste, the feelings, or the mind. It comes from an old English word that meant "sharpness to the taste."

If you've ever had a difficult experience with someone who made you mad, and you resented it, held on to it—you know how bad it tasted spiritually, and in your mind it raised hateful feelings and thoughts. That is bitterness, and God's Word has something to say about it.

## **RECOGNIZING BITTERNESS**

How does bitterness show itself?—In at least three ways.

One kind of bitterness is directed against God. You can become bitter against God in the loss of a loved one, when a friend swindles you out of money, when the boss passes you over for a promotion you really deserved and gives it to someone else, or when your husband walks off and leaves you for another woman.

You are angry, and you say, "Lord, if You love me so much, why did this happen? If You answer prayer, why didn't You answer mine? Either You are not powerful enough, or You didn't care enough. Either way, I am angry with You!"

A second kind of bitterness is against other people. It can be there in a child who decides to rebel against his parents, to run away from home because he believes they are unfair to him. It can be there in a wife who says, "I'll have a nervous breakdown if my husband keeps treating me like this, and I'll get even with him."

It might be a person who says, "OK, if I forgive them for what they did to me, that wouldn't be fair. They don't deserve to be forgiven. I'm going to carry this a little longer and maybe somehow along the way they'll see what it has done to me, and something will happen to them."

You and I cannot afford the luxury of holding on to bitterness and resentment against others, because it only becomes the root of other problems.

Your bitterness can also be directed against yourself, and show itself in an inability to forgive yourself, even though God has forgiven you. You carry that load until you say, "I deserved it, but I'm strong enough to take it, and I'll just carry this thing and deal with it myself." Self-centered pride latches onto your heart and you refuse the forgiveness of God and others.

This can also cause you to live in self-pity. You say, "OK, I deserve this. God's trying to punish me. I shouldn't have done this or that, and now I deserve what I'm getting, and I'm just going to have to be a martyr and carry it." So you trudge along in life nursing bitter resentment and a grudge against God or someone else. You carry it until you make life miserable for yourself and everyone around you. Why? Because you never dealt with your bitterness. The Bible says, "Watch out for such bitterness!" ("Look diligently"— Heb.12:15 .)

## **BITTERNESS BEGINS UNSEEN**

Not only am I to "look diligently" for bitterness, but because it may be unseen, I may not be aware of it; and being unaware of it, I may be especially liable to its danger.

Look what the Scripture says: "See to it that no one misses the grace of God, that no bitter root grows up..." Now, where is a root? Usually under the ground. You don't see it, but it's there. I have some weeds in my yard, growing through everything—even bricks! There are roots down there somewhere. They cause weeds to grow, whether there's shade or sunshine—I can't get rid of them. I don't see the roots, but the evidence is everywhere.

Bitterness can be an unseen enemy, growing like a tumor in your mind and in your spirit. The Bible says we should look out for it. Just because we don't see it, doesn't mean it's not there.

Bitterness is the unharvested fruit of anger, and in time it will show itself. As Numbers 32:23 says, "Be sure that your sin will find you out."

## **BITTERNESS SPRINGS UP & CAUSES TROUBLE**

The Bible warns that the root of bitterness will spring up, and when it does, what does it do? Cause good things to happen? No! Cause joy? No! Cause love? No! Cause peace? No! "See to it...that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble!"

Bitterness, improperly handled, causes trouble—and it does so in at least two ways.

First, it causes physical problems. In his book "None of These Diseases," S. I. McMillan says, "Anger, unhandled, will show itself in at least 50 diseases."

Dr. Norman Wright, a professor of psychology at Biola University and a Christian writer, agrees with McMillan. God has constructed us, says Dr. Wright, with a tube about 30 feet long that begins at our throat and runs to our rectum (the alimentary canal). That long tube, disturbed by bitterness and anger, produces things like colitis, diarrhea and ulcers. (Editor's note: Of course, such ailments often result from many other causes besides bitterness or anger.) When we are angry and do not handle it properly, there are physical consequences.

Bitterness can also show itself in our mental condition. Bitterness is really displaced anger. We can be angry at other things, other people and other objects, not knowing it comes from bitterness. All our energy and mind are set in an anger-mode, and we're affected mentally. There is no joy, no creativity, no positive power flowing through our lives because there is resentment there.

We are also affected spiritually when bitterness is not resolved. How? By an inability to accept God's Love. It can cause you to doubt your relationship to God. Ray Burke has written a book called Anger-Diffusing the Bomb, and in it he says that each time he dealt with those who doubted God's Love for them, somewhere along the line he discovered they harbored bitterness against God, themselves, or someone else. When this bitterness was dealt with and resolved, their ability to accept God's Love and forgiveness returned.

## **HOW DO WE OVERCOME BITTERNESS?**

The good news is that anyone can overcome a bitter spirit. God encourages us to deal with it. He says in Ephesians 4:31, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger..."

The Bible is so practical and clear that if we take what God teaches us about overcoming bitterness and apply it, we can be free of the bondage of bitterness.

## **BITTERNESS TOWARD GOD**

Begin by dealing with any bitterness toward God. The following steps may help.

First, trust God's wisdom. This doesn't mean you should believe that everything that happens on Earth is good. Sin is in the World. Satan is still the prince of the air. Yet I must believe that God allows things to happen that He may not like, and which we may not like. But in His wisdom, somewhere down the line, God will turn it around for good for His children, according to His promise in Romans 8:28 .

Second, I have to ask God what He's trying to teach me through this. The Bible says we're the disciples of Jesus. What is a disciple?—A learner. The Bible says the Father is the teacher, and we are disciples. We are learners. The experiences of life are teaching experiences. Sometimes we are so anxious to get to our destination that we forget how much joy can be ours along the way. When bitterness comes and you are tempted to be angry with God, ask Him what He is trying to teach you.

Third, apply one of God's promises to your situation.

Fourth, reject self-pity. Have you ever been a victim of the "Poor Me Syndrome"? Perhaps you know someone else who always seems to be saying, "Poor me, just look what's happened to me." No one likes being around such a sad-sack for very long, because it's no fun. So don't get into that syndrome.

Fifth, put time into proper perspective. Every difficult experience you may be dealing with now, circumstances that tend to make you angry and bitter, will in time pass away.

Sixth, be quick to give thanks. I've learned a little chorus recently, and I start singing it almost from the time I wake up in the morning: "It's amazing what praising can do." The song goes:

It doesn't matter when things go wrong,  
Jesus fills my heart with a song.  
It's amazing what praising can do.

You can't be bitter against God and praise Him at the same time. You can't be blessing Him while you're also shaking your fist at Him. So the Bible says, "In all things, give thanks."— 1Th.5:18 . Learn to give thanks unto the Lord and praise His Name, and it's really amazing what praising can do.

## **BITTERNESS TOWARD YOURSELF**

Many times we get angry with ourselves. It shows up in many forms—we feel rejected, we wallow in self-pity, and our self-image is poor.

It may be because of some sin or failure of yesteryear, something that, if we had it to do all over again, we wouldn't do for a million dollars; but we did do it, and we're having trouble forgiving ourselves.

How do I deal with that?

I begin by confessing my sin to the Lord, and believing His promise: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"— 1Jn.1:9 . Then once I know God has

forgiven me, I can forgive myself.

## **BITTERNESS TOWARD OTHERS**

How do you deal with bitterness against others? One thing you must do is to keep your anger temporary. In Ephesians 4:26 God tells us we should not let the sun go down on our anger. If you're mad at somebody today, you should get it settled before the sun goes down. If it goes down and you don't deal with it, it will simmer all night, and tomorrow there's a good chance you'll be twice as angry and bitter about it as you are today. Washington Irving said that a tart temper is the only thing that doesn't mellow with age. So deal with your anger before the sun goes down. Keep a short account.

Another crucial area is the tongue. The Bible reminds us that though the tongue is a little instrument, it causes a lot of problems. You can't get into trouble for something you didn't say. That's why it's so often best to mentally stamp "N.C." on things you hear or observe. Do you know what that is? "No Comment." You can keep out of trouble that way. Watch your words. A sharp tongue is a tool that grows keener with use. Watch it.

We can also pursue peace. "Make every effort to live in peace with all men."—Heb.12:14 . "Seek peace and pursue it."— 1Pet.3:11 . We must chase after peace, like a dog after a fox! Go for it! In Philippians 4:5 we are commanded, "Let your gentleness be evident to all." Be gentle—not to most people, or to some, but to all of them. Live gently. Pursue peace.

Also, if you know someone is harboring anger, hurt or bitterness towards you because of some wrongdoing on your part, you can take the positive step of initiating reconciliation. In Matthew 5:23-24 , Jesus says that if you come to Him with your offering in hand, and then remember that a brother has something against you, leave your offering, go to your brother, and make your offering after you're reconciled with your brother. So the Lord not only tells us to go to others when we're bitter or unforgiving towards them, but He covers both angles and also tells us to go to those who are bitter or angry towards us.

There's something else: Forgive and forget. How can you forget something negative that's stuck in your mind? The Bible says God remembers our sins no more. So how can God forget something when He is omniscient? How can He know everything and still forget? Here's the secret: When you forgive and forget, the forgetting means that you, like God, don't hold that wrongdoing to the offender's account. God forgets the charge against us; He remembers it no more. Oh, He knows about it, just as you do, but He will never bring it up again. That's what we are to do. Don't fish in the pond of history. Leave it there.

Sometimes we are like the man who came running into the office of a marriage counsellor. "Sir, you've got to do something about my wife. Hurry! She's historical, she's historical!" The counselor said, "Now, wait a minute. You mean she's hysterical." He said, "No! She's historical! She's bringing up everything from the past!"

Some people can go back and reel off in chronological order everything that a person has done against them during their entire relationship. If you forgive a person, forget their offenses and never bring them up again. Don't dwell in the past and don't let the past dwell in you.

Robert E. Lee, after the Civil War, visited a home in Kentucky. The lady of the house pointed to a limbless, battered tree trunk standing on the front lawn, and said, "Before the Union army came through here, that was a beautiful, magnificent magnolia tree. Then they blasted it with their artillery, and that's all that's left. What do you think about that?"

She expected the general to sympathize with her and criticize the Union Army. But instead, he looked at her and said one sentence: "Cut it down and forget it."

## **HOW ABOUT YOU?**

Do you have some trees of bitterness standing in your life? Bitterness toward God? Toward others? Toward yourself? Cut them down and forget them.

Resolve to deal with your bitter spirit. "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."— Eph.4:31-32 .