

# Bitterness: Its Cause; Its Cure

Straight Talk – Part III

Selected Scripture

## Introduction

Today, we will study the scriptures on the subject of bitterness. We will cover a number of passages that address this subject of bitterness – its causes and its cures. Let me add, however, that we, in only a few moments of time, cannot expose all of the ways to cure bitterness.

I believe that bitterness is a difficulty that all of us fight, from time to time. It knocks on all of our doors and sometimes, the solutions mean untangling webs that go back for years. Yet, I believe the scriptures have the solutions. We will touch on some of them today.

I define bitterness as,

*A condition of inner discontent which erupts in such ways as rage, envy, irritation, slander, rebellion, etc.*

Bitterness is a condition of inner discontent that will erupt. When it erupts, it is dangerous and, after a period of time, it is usually apparent. This is because it will eventually erupt in ways like rage, irritation, slander, and rebellion. And somehow, in some way, sooner or later, this disgruntlement, this bitterness, this root that is deep within, will manifest itself toward someone or toward something. It may be directed toward God, a parent, a spouse, a boss – we do not know at whom or what, but it will erupt.

## The Sources of Bitterness

Now there are a number of sources of bitterness. I have simply, in my study of this, gone through the scriptures, as you can do at home in your own study, to find sources. I will give the results of my study.

1. First, there is a source of bitterness that we could call, the circumstances of life.
  - One source of bitterness is through the circumstance of having an overbearing employer.

An illustration of this is found in the life of Israel. Look at Exodus 1:14.

*And they made their lives bitter with hard labor . . .*

This verse talks of the Israelites living bitter lives as a result of the oppressive employment that they had under the Egyptian Pharaoh's system. Because of the way he caused them to make bricks without straw; because of the way he made their lives so difficult, it says that eventually, the Israelites lived "bitter" lives.

So one of the conditions that can create bitterness is an overbearing employer, which is a simplified description of the problem. This is the conditions at your job – the type of employer or the kind of situation – in which a thorn; a sore develops that eventually, if not handled, will erupt. It will usually erupt at the employer.

- Another circumstance that causes bitterness is the loss of loved ones.

Turn to Ruth 1:3.

*Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons.*

Note Ruth 1:5.

*Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband.*

Look at Ruth 1:19.

*So they both [Naomi and Ruth] went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"*

The women were looking at Naomi's countenance. Perhaps she did not look recognizable.

Now notice Ruth 1:20-21.

*She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?"*

The name “Naomi” is translated “pleasant”. The new name of “Mara,” is translated “bitter”.

This woman has circumstances in her life in which she has lost her husband and her sons. As a result, she is developing a sense of bitterness against the Almighty.

If you were to study the rest of this book, you would find that the solution is found in Ruth. Ruth, the one who adopts Yahweh; the believer who lives with Naomi, is faithful to her, serves her, and is the source of great joy to her. This is the way, I believe from the study of this book, that Naomi is able to overcome her bitterness that resulted from the loss of her loved ones.

I have no doubt that I am speaking to people who have experienced loss – loss of loved ones; loss of dear friends. Perhaps God has taken you through it or maybe some are so close to the experience that you are not yet through it. In this situation, as we can observe in Ruth, there is a ministry going on, as a result of being sensitive to the lives of those who have experienced loss. We can call it the ministry of presence.

There are no verses, or clichés, or any little pats on the back with words like, “God gives and God takes away.” – which is not comforting at all. No, this is just the ministry of friendship.

This ministry is what we observe in the life of Ruth with Naomi. Naomi, who, at this point in her life, is bitter against God, wants to change her name to Mara, so that it no longer resembles something pleasant, but resembles something bitter. Ruth’s presence helps to overcome that.

The loss of loved ones is one of the circumstances of life that can knock on our door and create bitterness.

- There is also bitterness that is created by unanswered prayer.

Look at I Samuel 1:8-12a and read of Hannah, who was barren, praying.

***Then Elkanah her husband said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?”***

***Then Hannah rose after eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the temple of the Lord.***

***She, greatly distressed, prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly.***

***She made a vow and said, “O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head.”***

***Now it came about, as she continued praying before the Lord . . .***

To see how often Hannah prayed, look back at I Samuel 1:7.

***It happened year after year, as often as she went up to the house of the Lord . . .***

Hannah goes through this prayer year after year, yet it does not seem to be answered by God. Continue to I Samuel 1:13-15.

***As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. So Eli thought she was drunk.***

***Then Eli said to her, “How long will you make yourself drunk? Put away your wine from you.”***

***But Hannah replied, “No, my lord, I am a woman oppressed in spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the Lord.”***

I have also written in the margin of my Bible, “And I cannot understand unanswered prayer.”

I think the specific issue is her barrenness. The larger issue, that touches all of us, is the fact that we go to God, perhaps month after month, or maybe year after year, and we never get an answer. It seems that the heavens are made of brass and God is distant.

How do you handle unanswered prayer? Bitterly? Is the first accusation from your mouth against God and His sovereignty?

In all of our lives, sooner or later, there will come knocking, if it has not already, a root of bitterness that can be created by an unanswered prayer or an answer to prayer that we wish we had.

- There is another circumstance that can cause bitterness and that is, a financial loss.

This occurs in Job's life, which is a story you are probably familiar with. Job certainly experienced great loss. His response was to fall down and worship (Job 1).

However, it may be startling to learn that Job had not hurdled his loss. Listen to the words he says in Job 7:1-5.

***Is not man forced to labor on earth, and are not his days like the days of a hired man?***

***As a slave who pants for the shade, and as a hired man who eagerly waits for his wages,***

***so am I allotted months of vanity, and nights of trouble are appointed me.***

***When I lie down I say, "When shall I arise?" But the night continues, and I am continually tossing until dawn.***

***My flesh is clothed with worms and a crust of dirt; my skin hardens and runs.***

The last sentence is a reference to his disease of boils. Continue to Job 7:6-11 and note the last phrase.

***My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to an end without hope.***

***Remember that my life is but breath, my eye will not again see good.***

***The eye of him who sees me will behold me no longer; Your eyes will be on me, but I will not be.***

***When a cloud vanishes, it is gone, so he who goes down to Sheol [the grave] does not come up.***

***He will not return to his house, nor will his place know him anymore.***

***Therefore I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.***

This is a man who, at the least, experienced financial loss, but on top of that, every other possible loss that a man can endure. His first response was worship, and I believe, throughout the book, he hangs on to the thread of knowledge that God is in total control. Yet in these verses, we find Job gushing out the bitterness of his soul before God.

Whatever loss you may have experienced, that loss, perhaps financial, can create a bitterness against God.

- Another cause of bitterness is failing in ministry.

Peter was a failure in ministry. Look at Luke 22:31-62.

We see Peter the boaster, "Oh, God, I will never deny You. I'm with You, all the way to the hill."

However, as soon as the servant asks Peter, "Aren't you one of them? Your speech sounds like a Galilean." – Peter responds, "I don't know Him."

I am certain you know the story of the fact that Peter cursed until the servant finally thought that any man who curses cannot be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. We are told that when he denied Christ the final time, the eyes of Christ and his, as Jesus Christ was passing through an outer portion, met and for a brief moment, Jesus penetrated his soul. Peter then, in utter disappointment with himself, according to Luke 22:62,

***. . . went out and wept bitterly.***

One thing that may camp on your doorstep, as it does mine at times, is failing God in ministry. This is when we do not come through as a believer like we should. Perhaps we deny Him, keep our Christianity a secret, spectate instead of serve. Because of this, when Christ penetrates our hearts and we discover we have failed Him, we can respond in one of two ways: like Judas, who sold Him out and then, took his own life, or like Peter, who wept and then, found joy in the fact that Jesus Christ forgives.

- Another circumstance that can cause bitterness is unfulfilled expectations.

Simon, a man we do not study often, experienced the disappointment of unfulfilled expectations. Look at Acts 8:13-23.

Simon is watching the apostles and is, in fact, sort of tagging along. I have a feeling that John and Peter were a little perturbed that this guy was hanging on. Simon was fascinated with the ability of the apostles to do miracles. He was really impressed with the fact that they could touch someone and that person could be healed.

Simon was trying to do what he believed would be profitable for the cause. He finally says to the apostles, "Give me some of that power so that when I put my hands on somebody, I can zap them and they can be healed."

Because Peter knew what was in his heart, he responds to him by saying, “Oh, Simon, don’t you understand that in your spirit is a gall of bitterness?”

There was a root of bitterness that had started. We do not know when, but perhaps it began as he observed the apostles and tried to fashion himself after them and have the kind of ministry they had. When it did not happen; when he could not pull it off, there arose bitterness from that unfulfilled expectation. I am sure there were other things involved, as well.

I am convinced that one of the things that bothers us more than nearly anything else, is having an expectation and not having it fulfilled. We have, if we could, our lives mapped out just perfectly. Then, there are intrusions and interruptions and things happen, so that what we expected does not happen. It might be the expectation of a spouse, the expectation of a teacher, the expectation of a new home or moving to a city, the expectation of a job, the expectation that comes from a new ministry. We have grandiose thoughts and they are wonderful; we anticipate what God can do with us, but when the expectations are unfulfilled – when that financial goal goes unfulfilled; when that ministry goal is unfulfilled; when that marriage becomes work and the expectations of the bride and the groom are not met – what happens? Bitterness? Perhaps.

We begin to play the “if only” game. We are perhaps, like Simon, who says, “If only I had the power,” or like Naomi, “If only I had my husband back,” or like Peter, “If only I hadn’t denied Him,” and so forth.

We begin to live life like I play golf, “If only . . .”! If you are a golfer, you know exactly what I am talking about. We say things like, “If only I’d used the three instead of a four.” I am still looking at a triple bogie and I cannot change the score sheet.

We cannot change the effects of life’s circumstances; we cannot manipulate – God is in control. We can only submit, and if we submit and allow Him to work in our lives, we can hurdle bitterness rather than succumb to it.

2. A second source of bitterness is caused by what we could call, the relationships in life.
  - One of life’s relationships that can cause bitterness is the relationship between siblings.

In Genesis 27:34-41, we read of siblings Esau and Jacob vying for the first spot; for the position of the heir. As you may remember, Jacob wins the position

and Esau, we are told, weeps with bitterness. He held a grudge against his brother and said that if he could, he would claim his brother’s life.

There is bitterness, perhaps, between siblings who are hearing this today. Maybe you have a brother who is a favored son or a sister who is the favorite of the family and you find that anytime you are around that sibling, you are not as loving. Would you just call it bitterness? This is what Esau faced and eventually, hurdled, by the grace of God, even though he really never accepted that God was gracious with Jacob.

- Another relationship that can cause bitterness is the relationship between a parent and a child.

Look at Ephesians 6:4a.

***Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger . . .***

In other words, do not cause seething resentment, of which a synonym would be, bitterness. Do not provoke with your constant haranguing. Do not provoke with providing a model that the child could perhaps, *never* fill – whether it is athletic or intellectual or whatever it may be. Do not provoke the child to a seething resentment; a bitterness that will last to the grave, except by the grace of God.

- Another relationship in which bitterness can arise is the relationship between a husband and wife.

Turn to Colossians 3:18-19.

***Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them.***

This is interesting. Husbands, do not be, the word could be translated with the synonym “exasperated” with your wives.

All the husbands are smiling. I am going to get in trouble if I do not get off this point!

In other words, your love is not to allow room for this bitterness; this root that arises; this frustrated exasperation between husband and wife. I think this could be flipped, just as easily, the other way.

- One other relationship that can cause bitterness is between believers.

Turn to Hebrews 12:14-15, which is talking about the church.

***Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;***

In other words, in the congregation of the saints, one person who has the root of bitterness springing up; one person who does not pursue peace; one individual who has allowed whatever it may be, because of circumstances or relationships, to cause him to come into the body with bitterness, can defile many; can impact many; can affect the whole congregation. Enough people with a root of bitterness can change the complexion of a New Testament church.

It is interesting the way that one person being bitter can affect so many. Perhaps you read the *Time* magazine article on Leonard Holt, some time ago. Leonard Holt was an individual who was respected. He was a Boy Scout leader, seemed to be a caring father, and was a regular church attendee.

However, one morning, Leonard Holt packed two pistols – a .45 automatic and a Smith and Wesson .38. He got in his pick-up truck and headed to his job at the mill. What happened over the next hour, as he walked into that mill, was nothing less than calculated frenzy. He began to fire two and three bullets into people he had known for years, until he was through, and then, he left.

A posse was formed and the police came after him. They found him snarling on his steps, saying, “Come and get me.”

Almost overnight it seemed, this eruption had occurred. Several things were finally discovered in this man’s life. He had been working at the mill job for fifteen years and had been constantly overlooked for promotions. Several people that he had killed were those who had been promoted over him. He was an individual who had, just days before, had a run in with his neighbor because a tree had fallen into his yard. They had gotten into a fist fight. Enough evidence was turned up to recognize that Leonard Holt was a seething, angry man who had put on all of the façade of someone respectable. In fact, *Time* magazine subtitled the article, “Respectable, Responsible, Resentful.”

Now I know we are not coming into this church with loaded pistols and there are no bullets ricocheting off the walls. However, it is possible for me to come

into this body with a root of bitterness that erupts in less potent, more subtle ways. It could be that by just rubbing shoulders with you, I give you a black cloud. Why? Because there is an unresolved source of bitterness in my life that, even though I may be recognizing it, I am not admitting it. It is bitterness because of some circumstance that has occurred in my life or bitterness because of a relationship in my life. And by one being bitter, many are defiled.

## **The Solutions for Bitterness**

What is the solution for bitterness? Let me take you to Psalm 73. This Psalm of Asaph is a study in itself. I want to show you a man who is bitter, a man who is angry and frustrated, yet a man who gives insight into hurdling this deep problem.

Listen carefully to Psalm 73. We will divide this Psalm into three divisions and with each, I will give a solution to bitterness.

1. The first solution to bitterness is to stop comparing circumstances.

Look at Psalm 73:1-14.

***Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!***

***But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling; my steps had almost slipped.***

Why is that, Asaph?

***For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.***

***For there are no pains in their death, and their body is fat.***

***They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like mankind.***

***Therefore pride is their necklace; the garment of violence covers them.***

***Their eye bulges from fatness; the imaginations of their heart run riot.***

In other words, they have everything they want.

***They mock, and wickedly speak of oppression; they speak from on high.***

***They have set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue parades through the earth.***

***Therefore his people return to this place, and waters of abundance are drunk by them.***

***They say, “How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?”***

In other words, “Who is God? He is not up there.”

***Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth.***

***Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence;***

Uh-oh, watch it!

***For I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning.***

In these verses, Asaph is falling prey to a theology that is running rampant in our society. We refer to it as “prosperity theology”. He has equated prosperity with blessing from God.

Asaph is looking all around and sees people who mock God; people who shake their fist at God; people who say, “God isn’t up there, He doesn’t exist.” Yet, these people seem to roll in it. Their investments seem to double; they have all kinds of stuff. Whatever their eyes want, they have.

Now he has not used the word “bitter” yet, it will come up later in the Psalm, but just know that the skids are being greased because Asaph is comparing his circumstances with those of other people. And do you want to know how to get bitter really quick? Compare your life with another believer’s; compare your stuff with theirs; compare your job, your car; compare all that you have and I guarantee, you will become bitter very fast.

So stop comparing. In fact, there is a verse of scripture in the New Testament that says, “don’t compare yourself with yourself” (II Corinthians 10:12). That is, as believers, do not compare yourselves with each other or you will run into trouble. Compare spiritual things with spiritual things. Stop comparing circumstances.

2. The second solution to bitterness is to start considering eternity.

Look at Psalm 73:15-24. We will begin with verses 15-17.

***If I had said, “I will speak thus,” behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.***

***When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight***

***until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.***

Now do not get carried away into thinking that Asaph is ringing his hands thinking, “Oh boy, they’re going to burn one day!”

He is not saying that. Asaph is simply coming to the realization that life is not the end. What you get, in terms of stuff and things and all of that, in a moment, eternity begins and that is when the real accounting takes place.

Continue to Psalm 73:18-24 and note the form of the word “bitter” in verse 21.

***Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction.***

***How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!***

***Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form.***

***When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within,***

***then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You.***

This is like the unbeliever.

***Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand.***

***With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory.***

I really believe that if you and I had mature understanding; if we could really grasp all that is in the scriptures in its significance, its theology, we would begin living with greater passion for the coming kingdom; would do everything in light of the coming kingdom. Why do we give out the gospel? Because the kingdom is coming. Why do we do what we do? Why do we live like we live? Why do we wash our hands? Why do we live pure lives? Because we are going to live in the kingdom with the King.

There are theologians who are now making a suggestion of what is going to happen during the seventy-five day span between the end of the tribulation and the beginning of the millennial kingdom. There are seventy-five days stuck in there and theologians have been trying to figure out for years what is going to happen during those days. We will never know until the seventy-five days. However, one suggestion that I recently read really strikes me. The speculation is that this will be the period of time when we have the marriage supper. Now all the theologians can check this out. The marriage supper

is the time when the positions in the kingdom are given out. It is an interesting thought.

I do know that what brought Asaph to the end of his bitterness was his recognition that one day, he was going to glory.

So, solutions to bitterness are to stop comparing circumstances and start considering eternity. Let me give a third solution.

3. The third solution to bitterness, and I think the most important, is to continue cherishing today.

Look at Psalm 73:25-28.

***Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.***

***My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.***

***For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You.***

***But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works.***

Start cherishing today. Start cherishing the relationship that you have today, with Jesus Christ. Cherish Him! Get to know Him! Develop love for Him! In doing this, how easy it would be to overcome bitterness, resentment, anger, irritation.

You may be familiar with the story of the hymn that we will sing in a moment in closing. A gentlemen who lost all that he had, in terms of his children, wrote the hymn. His wife and children were on a ship that went down and his children did not survive. He got on a ship headed for England, to meet his wife, who alone, survived. When the ship was in the middle of the tossing ocean water, the captain rapped on his cabin door and said, "Sir, I want you to know, this is the point where the ship went down and you lost your children."

At that moment, Horatio G. Spafford took out a pen and in the silence of his room, wrote the words to the hymn, *It Is Well With My Soul*.

There is a great opportunity for bitterness. We face potential situations that create bitterness. Stop comparing. Start considering the kingdom. Continue to cherish today.

Sing:

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

*Refrain*

*It is well, with my soul,  
It is well, with my soul,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials  
should come,  
Let this blest assurance control,  
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,  
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.*

*Refrain*

*My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!  
My sin, not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!*

*Refrain*

*For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to  
live:  
If Jordan above me shall roll,  
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life  
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.*

*Refrain*

*But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we  
wait,  
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;  
Oh trump of the angel! Oh voice of the Lord!  
Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul!*

*Refrain*

*And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall  
be sight,  
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;  
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall  
descend,  
Even so, it is well with my soul.*

*Refrain*