

Freedom from Bitterness: the **CANCER** of the Soul



**The Causes and Consequences of Judgmentalism
and Practical Steps To Overcome It In Your Life**

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*W*ithout a doubt, bitterness is one of the most destructive attitudes a person can have. When allowed to remain, bitterness will systematically destroy, like a cancerous growth, all possibilities of joy and happiness in a person's life. The problem with bitterness, however, is that it's often quite difficult to see. Because pride is the root of bitterness, bitter people are generally unwilling to consider the possibility that there's something amiss. Their focus on the wrongs and injustices of others around them often blinds them to the deadly hold bitterness has in their own lives.

Jesus told us that truth sets us free. I hope this booklet will help open your eyes to see bitterness for what it really is. As you read, ask the Lord to show you where the cancer of bitterness might lie in your own heart. Let's start by considering some Biblical examples of how bitterness works in people's lives.

Cain's Bitterness

Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.

So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right,

will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” (Genesis 4:1-7)

We see in these verses the first case of bitterness in the Bible. Cain’s offering of crops was rejected while his brother’s offering of a slain animal was accepted. Instead of asking the Lord WHY his offering was unacceptable, he chose to be bitter and angry. He immediately assumed God was playing favorites.

In truth, Cain probably felt rejected. The rejection undoubtedly entered his life when his brother was born. Such rejection of a first born child is not uncommon. After living in the center of mom and dad’s universe, a first born inevitably feels rejected when number two comes along. It’s important for parents to realize this and to go the extra mile to assure their child of their continued care.

After Cain got angry, we see God trying to reason with Him. He wanted Cain to see what he was doing. He warned him that, unless he quickly came to his senses, sin would jump in and overcome. But what did Cain do? (And unfortunately, what do most bitter people do?) He ignored God’s counsel and held on to his right to be angry! As a result, he was quickly engulfed in the sins of bitterness, resentment, and vengeance, while at the same time, oblivious to what was going on. In short order, these sins played themselves out. Let’s read on:

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.” (Genesis 4:8-10)

From this point on, we read of the terrible consequences that came to Cain because of choosing the way of bitterness, anger, resentment and murder:

Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth." Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is more than I can bear. You have driven me from the land and hidden me from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." (Genesis 4:11-14)

Look at the consequences Cain's sin brought into his life: curses on his ability to make a living; a restlessness and wandering spirit (the inability to ever feel "at home" anywhere); a sense of despair and drivenness; the loss of God's comforting presence; and finally a feeling of paranoia - that everyone he encountered would be against him and want to kill him.

Let's consider exactly what happened. After Cain felt rejected by God he chose to yield to a subtle voice telling him that God was playing favorites. Whose voice was that? None other than the voice of the serpent, who we find whispering in Eve's ear the chapter before. As Cain gave heed, the voice went on and built a case that if Abel wasn't around Cain would no longer feel rejected. The more he listened, the stronger the argument came that the ONLY recourse was to eliminate his brother. Finally, sin "crouching at the door" took over completely and Cain plunged the knife into his brother's heart.

As he stood there with a bloody knife in his hand, God spoke to him and asked, "Cain, where is your brother?" Cain said, "I don't know. I'm not his keeper." By this point, the bitterness had worked its way deep into Cain's heart. There was no repentance. Jonah, writhing in the agony of a whale's belly, observed, "Those who observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy." Cain was experiencing here what Jonah finally found after his rebellion - the consequences of observing a lying vanity. He'd been listening to lying voices. He forsook any possibility of mercy in his life because his pride kept him from humbling himself to God. This is always true

in that we're told, "*God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.*" (James 4:6)

God had to allow the consequences to come. Take note! These same consequences can happen to anyone who listens to the subtle voices of bitterness and refuses to come to God in humility. Let's look at the final result of Cain's bitterness:

But the Lord said to him, "Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. (Genesis 4:15)

Cain's bitterness in the end brought a distinguishing "mark" that set him apart from those around him. Believe it or not, bitterness, in the same way, will put a "mark" on you! It will affect everything you do and everyone you relate to. A person with bitterness finds intimacy with others extremely difficult. Upon reflection, an embittered soul can see a string of unsatisfying and broken relationships all the way back in their life. It's like they were indeed "marked" for yielding to the voices of pride and bitterness in their past.

Absalom's Bitterness

Let's consider another example in the Bible of how bitterness affects a man's life. In Second Samuel we find the story of Amnon, a son of King David, who had an attractive half-sister named Tamar. Amnon, through trickery, got Tamar alone and raped her. Afterwards, she fled to her brother Absalom's house with her face covered in shame. When King David heard what was done we're told, "*He was furious.*" (2 Samuel 13:21)

If you'll study these passages carefully, you'll find that David's response to this incident started many of the problems that went on for the rest of his life. In spite

of the fact that David was angry with Amnon for raping Tamar, he did nothing about it.

The Mosaic Law, however, was clear. There were certain prescribed commands concerning this sort of offense. But David did nothing. Apparently David had the “Eli” syndrome when it came to his children. When the prophet Eli ignored the Lord’s warnings and refused to correct his sons for their grievous deeds, terrible judgment came upon his family. David was, also, a father who at times wouldn’t abide by the truths of God when it came to his offspring. He had what we would call today an “unhealthy soul tie” with Amnon. Let’s look at the result:

Absalom never said a word to Amnon, either good or bad; he hated Amnon because he had disgraced his sister Tamar. Two years later, when Absalom’s sheep-shearers were at Baal Hazor near the border of Ephraim, he invited all the king’s sons to come there. (2 Samuel 13:22-23)

As a result of David’s failure to bring justice to the situation, his son Absalom became bitter. For two years that bitterness grew in Absalom’s heart until, like Cain, it blossomed into murder.

Absalom ordered his men, “Listen! When Amnon is in high spirits from drinking wine and I say to you, ‘Strike Amnon down,’ then kill him. Don’t be afraid. Have not I given you this order? Be strong and brave.” So Absalom’s men did what Absalom had ordered.... (2 Sam 13:28-29)

Absalom was a king’s son, raised in a courtly and civilized environment. If you had asked him two years before if he would ever attempt to murder his brother, he’d think you were crazy. But two years of unchecked bitterness did indeed bring him to that very point. Notice verse 38 of the same chapter:

After Absalom fled and went to Geshur, he stayed there three years. (2 Samuel 13:38)

As we read on, it becomes evident that Amnon's death still did not eliminate the resentment in Absalom's heart. In fact, during his exile he named one of his children "Tamar," apparently in memory of the event.

Three sons and a daughter were born to Absalom. The daughter's name was Tamar, and she became a beautiful woman. Absalom lived two years in Jerusalem without seeing the king's face. (2 Samuel 14:27-28)

Absalom still hadn't gotten over what had happened. Obviously there was still unresolved bitterness in his heart. And who else would he have been bitter toward but his father! Absalom never forgot that his father failed to do what should have been done to bring justice to the crime. So, even though he lived in Jerusalem, he went two years without coming to see David. Again, bitterness worked its way deeper and deeper into his soul until he was nearly consumed. Let's see how it ultimately manifested:

...Then the king summoned Absalom, and he came in and bowed down with his face to the ground. And the king kissed Absalom.....In the course of time, Absalom provided himself with a chariot and horses and with fifty men to run ahead of him. He would get up early and stand by the side of the road leading to the city gate. Whenever anyone came with a complaint to be placed before the king for a decision, Absalom would call out to him, "What town are you from?" He would answer, "Your servant is from one of the tribes of Israel." Then Absalom would say to him, "Look, your claims are valid and proper, but there is no representative of the king to hear you. If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone who has a complaint or case could come to me and I would see that he gets justice." And Absalom would reach out his hand and kiss him. (2 Samuel 14:33-15:1-5)

On the outside, Absalom seemed the dutiful and loving son, dripping with charm to all those who came to see his father. He would kiss their hands and flatter them with his attention. But all the while, he was subtly implying that his father wouldn't give them true justice in their case (something he honestly believed from his own experience). As a result:

Absalom behaved in this way toward all the Israelites who came to the king asking for justice, and so he stole the hearts of the men of Israel. (2 Samuel 15:6)

For four years this went on until finally Absalom rose up and led a rebellion against David's kingdom. Then we're told:

A messenger came and told David, "The hearts of the men of Israel are with Absalom." Then David said to all his officials who were with him in Jerusalem, "Come! We must flee, or none of us will escape from Absalom. We must leave immediately, or he will overtake us and bring ruin upon us and put the city to the sword." (2 Samuel 15:13-14)

Absalom's bitterness finally exploded into full blown insurrection! He turned almost the whole nation against their king. Interestingly enough, this rather accurately describes the very things behind most "church splits". The split usually starts with a bitter person (or persons) who feel that their cause or issue has not been given a fair hearing.

David was apparently quite naive during this time, never imagining that such rebellion could come from someone so close. Unfortunately, many pastors and leaders often make the same mistake. The most damaging church splits are usually initiated by those closest to the authority, where their credibility has already been established.

Absalom's bitter rebellion went on to last less than a year and he paid for it with his life. But we should not forget David's part in what happened. If he had been more faithful to God's Word than to his personal relationships, it's quite likely none of this would have happened.

Symptoms of Bitterness

Just as different sicknesses or diseases can be determined by certain symptoms in the body, so there are definite symptoms that reveal the presence of bitterness in a person's life:

- 1) Critical and judgmental attitudes
- 2) Impatience with others
- 3) Isolation (a loner spirit)
- 4) Unruly temper
- 5) Deep seated anger
- 6) Certain types of infirmities
- 7) Surface and shallow type relationships
- 8) The lack of enduring relationships
- 9) Easy association with other bitter people
- 10) Trouble finding release in the spirit and operation in the spiritual gifts

Results of Bitterness

Gossip and Division

"Make sure no one lacks God's grace and no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." (Hebrews 12:15)

Paul's encouragement to church leaders to make sure no one misses the grace of God literally means keep legalism out of the church. A primary role of pastors and

elders is to prevent legalistic teaching from entering the local body. Why? Because as soon as legalism comes in, roots of bitterness spring up. Legalism causes people to strive apart from God's grace, compare themselves with one another and become resentful because of their failure to measure up. The resulting bitterness reveals itself through gossip, evil speaking and jealousy. Once these things enter a fellowship, they spread from person to person like wildfire.

Sexual Immorality

“See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.” (Hebrews 12:15-16)

In examining the context of this verse, we see that sexual immorality follows on the heels of bitterness. Why is that? Think about it. When someone becomes bitter and resentful, he'll invariably throw up walls between himself, God and others. At that point, he's vulnerable to the seductive temptations of Satan. And, if sexual immorality is his weakness, he's likely to yield to whatever the enemy has to offer. While he is hiding behind walls of self-pity and hurt, it'll be very hard for him not to say, “What have I got to lose? Why not just go ahead and indulge in the flesh?”

Torment

“In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tormented, until he should pay back all he owed. “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive each of your brothers from your heart.” (Matthew 18:34-35)

Few things torment the soul like bitterness. One way to deal with the torment is to enter a state of denial and stuff the bitterness into your subconscious mind. Then, at least, the torment won't be on you all the time. The problem with that, though, is that whatever is stuffed down never really goes away. Instead, it often becomes the hidden cause of much else. Many sicknesses and diseases can be traced back to areas of unforgiveness and resentment that were never dealt with.

According to this verse, God is quite serious when He tells us that we must forgive one another from our hearts.

Satan Gains Advantage In Your Life

“If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven - if there was anything to forgive - I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not take advantage of us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.” (2 Corinthians 2:10-11)

Few things open the door to Satan’s intervention like bitterness and resentment. I’ve found this to be true in case after case over many years of dealing with people.

Spiritual Darkness

“Whoever hates his brother is in darkness and walks around in darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.” (1 John 2:11)

Imagine living in a black, dark, gloomy cave all your life. Now, imagine someone bringing you outside to the glorious reality of light, beauty and color. Then, for some reason, you decide to return to the confining prison of your cave of darkness, with only the memory of light to remember. That’s what happens when a born-again believer becomes hurt and bitter and refuses to forgive.

Unbelievable as it may seem, many times they may not even realize they’re back in a cave of darkness. Jesus described this type of spiritual deception when He told the Laodiceans, *“You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”* (Rev 3:17)

Unforgiveness: The Doorway to Bitterness

Jesus said, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:14-15)

This is an incredible statement. A believer's willingness to forgive is placed on par with his very relationship with God. Refusal to forgive others can bring your relationship with God to a screeching halt! Unforgiveness will harden your heart to God's merciful Spirit and will open you to the subtle influences and suggestions of Satan.

All kinds of things will fill your mind like, "You can't be blamed for being mad. Look at what they did to you!" Or, "Why should you have to be the first one to forgive? They're the one who did you wrong," or, "They'll never change, so why should you forgive? They'll just take advantage of you if you do."

After listening to this for a while, you'll eventually start believing it. In fact, you'll even begin to feel justified in your bitterness. I've known Christians who can spend hours worshipping and praising God and then turn right around and spew judgmental gossip about others. Only, it's often done with a "concerned, religious facade." James spoke of this when he said, *"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be."* (James 3:9-10)

Unfortunately, the Jesus we find in the Bible is often different from the one we see in the lives of those around us. Hanging on the cross, He had every right to be bitter and resentful. Yet He instead said, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they're doing."

No one has ever been treated as unfairly as Jesus was. No one has ever had as much right to respond bitterly from their hurt as did He. Yet, in spite of that, He chose the way of mercy and forgiveness. In doing so, he provided for us an alternative to living life judging and resenting others. Jesus was quite clear in His commands to us to forgive those who've wronged us:

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” (Mark 11:24-25)

So watch yourselves. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” (Luke 17:3-4)

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. (Ephesians 4:31-32)

Mercy: The Currency of the Kingdom

“He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.....Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives transgression? You delight to show mercy. You will have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (Micah 6:8; 7:18-19)

Did you know that mercy is God's currency? Even as we use money to buy things in the world, so God's kingdom has its own currency - the currency of mercy.

Let me illustrate this with a vision the Lord once gave me. One evening at a prayer meeting with a few friends I found myself getting sick. I was feverish and dizzy, and had an awful headache. By the time the meeting ended, I felt quite ill. A couple of those present anointed me with oil, laid hands on me and prayed. While they prayed I had a clear vision of a half full jar of coins and immediately afterwards felt much better. The sickness receded from that point on and I was fine the next morning.

Later I asked the Lord what the vision of the jar of coins meant. The word "mercy" formed clearly in my mind! I felt Him say that since I'd learned over the years to forgive others that had wronged me or spoken ill of me, that He'd given me mercy coins to draw from in time of need. Suddenly I got the revelation. I said, "Lord, do you mean you noticed every time I gave up the right to angry, judge, or resent?" He said, "Yes, I was dropping coins in your jar! "That vision changed my life. Forgiveness is no longer a chore, but rather an opportunity to increase my wealth in kingdom riches! I now understand so much better what Jesus meant when He said, "*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*" (Matthew 5:7)

I also better understand the verse, "*Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*" (Matthew 7:1-2) You always reap what you sow! When you sow judgment and bitterness, you get back a hardened, bitter heart. But when you sow the mercy that's been so freely given to you, you get back golden coins of mercy to draw from whenever you have a need!

Forgive Whoever, Whenever for Whatever!

The solution to bitterness in your life is this: Forgive whoever, whenever, for whatever! That's it! It's that simple. But there's something you must remember - forgiveness is a choice of your will, not a feeling. Once you make the choice to forgive, release and have mercy on someone for something they've done to you, the feelings will eventually follow (how quickly usually depends on the time passed since the offense).

The reason many have trouble with forgiveness, however, is that they can't stop listening to the "yeah, but..." demon. You know what I'm talking about. It's the voice that comes to you right after you forgive someone that's hurt you: "Yeah, but...they're probably gonna do it again!" "Yeah, but...why should they get off so easy?" "Yeah, but...they're not in the least bit sorry for what they've done!" There's only one way to combat the "Yeah, but..." demon. Tell it, "Yeah, but...I forgive in the name of Jesus because He's forgiven me so much more!" That works every time because you know no one has ever come near offending you the way you've offended the Lord.

Also, few things are as emotionally healing as going back and forgiving people that have hurt you in your past. Just ask the Lord to bring to your mind any stuffed resentments, old hurts or judgments towards those you've known over the years. As they come to mind, make the choice to forgive them for whatever they may have done to you and bless them in the name of the Lord.

You may be surprised at the emotions that will often come up along with the memories. As you faithfully forgive and release these old offenses, you'll be

amazed at the freedom you'll feel in your heart. Sometimes our biggest struggles are rooted in nothing more than old areas of unforgiveness, resentment and bitterness that we've long forgotten about.

The same type of thing is very helpful in a marriage. One of the healthiest things couples can do is sit down and have a "confession session" together. That's when they bring to the light areas where there's resentment and bitterness towards each other. As things are shared, they choose to have mercy and forgive! Satan will find it difficult to drive a wedge when forgiving love is the rule.

The Incredible Example of One Man's Mercy

Now Caleb approached Joshua at Gilgal and said to him, "You know what the Lord said to Moses the man of God at Kadesh Barnea about you and me. I was forty years old when Moses sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions..." (Joshua 14:6-7)

Caleb and Joshua had known each other for many years. They'd first become friends back when Moses sent them and ten others to spy out the promised land. Unfortunately, the ten others brought back an evil report that discouraged the people's hearts from entering in. As a result, the nation had to wander around in the wilderness for forty years until that entire unbelieving generation died. In fact, at this point, in Joshua 14, Caleb and Joshua were the only two left. Caleb, who is now 85 years old, came to Joshua reminding him of that time and of the good report they'd brought back. He went on to say:

...But my brothers who went up with me made the hearts of the people melt with fear. I, however, followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly. So on that day Moses swore to me, 'The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the Lord my God

wholeheartedly.’ “Now then, just as the Lord promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the desert. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! And I am still as strong as the day Moses sent me out; I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then.

Now give me this mountain that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, with the Lord helping me, I will drive them out.” So Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. So Hebron has belonged to Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since, because he followed the Lord God of Israel wholeheartedly. (Joshua 14:8-14)

Imagine an eighty-five year old man saying, “Give me that mountain!” Caleb, who’s faith was strong as it had ever been, was not going to let anything keep him from driving out the inhabitants and claiming that mountain as his inheritance. Obviously, he never lost his spirit of faith! Joshua gladly granted him his request.

There’s a powerful lesson about bitterness in this story. In spite of the fact that Caleb came back with a good report, he suffered the forty-year judgment of wandering in the wilderness along with everyone else. He had to live with his unbelieving brethren day after day for all those years. Though he was personally guiltless in the affair, he shared the consequence of their sin until that whole generation passed away.

Yet, the amazing thing is - he never became bitter! Instead of judging and resenting those that brought on God’s judgment, his life flowed with forgiveness. How do we know that? What else could explain an eighty five year old man who was just as strong and vigorous as he’d been forty five-years before? Because he chose to travel the road of MERCY, he retained his strength and was rejuvenated in his old age!

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