

Bitterness

*“Let all **bitterness**, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you,”* Eph. 4:31-32. *“Husbands, love your wives, and do not be **bitter** toward them,”* Col. 3:19. *“But if you have **bitter** envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth,”* James 3:14. *“Looking carefully lest any fall short of the grace of God; lest **any root of bitterness** springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled,”* Heb. 12:15.

In addition to each of these verses having been revealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph., 3:3-5; John 16:13), they all have something else in common; they use the words “*bitterness*” and/or “*bitter*.” “*Bitterness*” is one of the things which must “*be put away from*” the life of a Christian, Eph. 4:31. A husband must not be “*bitter*” toward his wife. Christians must not allow “*any root of bitterness*” to spring up in their lives lest they “*become defiled*,” Heb. 12:15. Clearly, bitterness has no place in the heart and life of a faithful Christian! But what is bitterness?

“*Bitter*” is an adjective, translated from *pikros* and is defined as “sharp, keen, pungent to the sense of taste, smell,” **Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words**, by W.E. Vine. It is used with reference to “*water*” in James 3:11, and metaphorically of “*envy and self-seeking*” in James 3:14. “*Bitterness*” is a noun, translated from *pikria* and is “used in Acts 8:23, metaphorically, of a condition of extreme wickedness, ‘gall of bitterness’ or ‘bitter gall;’ in Romans 3:14, of evil speaking; in Eph., 4:31, of bitter hatred; in Heb. 12:15, in the same sense, metaphorically, of a root of bitterness, producing bitter fruit” (*ibid*).

The danger that bitterness poses is evidenced by the sins with which it is so closely associated — such sins as “*wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking*,” as well as “*malice*,” Eph. 4:31. In Romans 3:13-16, “*bitterness*” is mentioned in a context which also refers to those whose “*throat is an open tomb*,” who with their “*tongues..have practiced deceit*,” whose “*mouth is full of cursing*,” whose “*feet are swift to shed blood*,” and in whose ways are “*destruction and misery*.” In James 3:14 “*bitter*” (an adjective) is used to modify “*envy*,” and is associated with “*self-seeking*” and lying “*against the truth*.” But perhaps the greatest danger connected with bitterness is set forth in Hebrews 12:15 in which the Hebrew saints were admonished to look “*carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any **root of bitterness** springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled*.”

Did you catch that expression — “*lest any **root of bitterness**...*?” We all know what a root is. It is something which lies under the surface; it is not generally seen, but it is what nourishes the plant which is seen. Most farmers, gardeners, and horticulturalists know — the hard way— that one never gets completely rid of weeds and unwanted vines until the roots are destroyed. Snap off a weed at the top of the ground; wait a few days, and you will find weeds both growing and thriving — in exactly the same spot as before.

Will Rogers reportedly stated that “people who fly into a rage always make a bad landing.” Indeed, they do! However, one does not generally just “fly into a rage” unless there is a feeling (a “*root*”) under the surface that prompts the outward demonstration of rage. Quite often (perhaps at a distant time in the past) a person has suffered hurt. It may have been caused by a deliberate insult; it could have been caused by having become the victim of someone else’s wrong doing; it could have been caused by any number of things. One fact of life is this: if you live a normal life span you will sooner or later suffer hurt feelings — hurt feelings because of being victimized by the misconduct of others, or because of the harsh realities of life. Because of this hurt you will become either better or bitter. **Better** if you take things in stride, learn how to forgive, and cast “*all your care upon*” God Who “*cares for you,*” I Peter 5:7. Or **bitter** if you allow your hurt feelings to turn into grudges, anger, malice, and wrath — all just waiting for an opportunity to “explode.”

It is interesting that the text in Hebrews 12:15 which mentions the “*root of bitterness*” immediately follows verse 14 which admonishes Christians to “*pursue peace with all people and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.*” The “*peace*” and “*holiness*” of verse 14 cannot long exist in the presence of the “*root of bitterness*” in verse 15. This is true, whether one is talking about “*peace*” in the local church, “*peace*” in the home, “*peace*” on the job, or “*peace*” in the community.

In recent months we have witnessed a seemingly ever-increasing amount of school shootings, on-the-job violence, and violence in the home. All of a sudden (as it seems) people go “off the deep end,” become violent, and heap havoc on others — many of whom are innocent victims, and totally unknown to the perpetrators. Of course, there are many reasons for this. Some perpetrators of violence are Muslims who have become “radicalized,” and are literally following the evil dictates of the Koran. Some perpetrators of violence are “copy cats” who long for the attention and exposure received by other criminals because of over zealous “journalists” who want to be “the first” to report the news. But I am convinced that most explosions of violence perpetrated by individuals acting on their own volition were first prompted by feelings of bitterness caused by anger and hostility festering in the mind.

Cain became “*angry*” because God “*respected Abel and his offering,*” but rejected the unauthorized offering of Cain. As a result, Cain became “*very angry, and his countenance fell,*” and he later “*rose up against Abel his brother and killed him,*” Gen. 4:4-8. Is it not possible that he allowed his pent-up anger to turn into bitterness? The brothers of Joseph “*hated*” him when they realized that their father “*loved Joseph*” more than his other children, and they later sold him into slavery for a mere “*twenty pieces of silver,*” Gen. 37:3-4,28! At first, because of the partiality of their father, they “*conspired*” to kill their innocent brother, (Gen. 37:18), but changed their minds when they discovered a way to make a “*profit*” (Gen. 37:26) by selling him! How could brothers become so inhumane against their own flesh and blood brother? Could it be that they allowed their hurt feelings to turn into hatred, and hatred to turn into an evil “*root of bitterness?*”

Bitterness heaps havoc upon many innocent people. But the real victims of bitterness are the very ones who allowed themselves to become embittered. Pent-up anger, if left unchecked, leads to bitterness; it also releases hormones into the bloodstream, causing the heart to beat faster,

leading to high blood pressure, ulcers, depression, heart attacks, and strokes. The **physical** effects of bitterness can be very, very serious, but the **spiritual** effects can be even worse.

When mistreated by others, don't "get even," don't become embittered. Go to the persons involved and seek reconciliation, Matt. 5:23; 18:15-17. Spend time in prayer, I Thess. 5:17. Learn to forgive, Luke 17:4. Meditate — not upon your misfortunes—but upon the word of God, Psalm 1:2. Count your many blessings, I Thess. 5:16-18. Spend time in worship, John 4:23-24. Do good to others, Gal. 6:10. Grow up! 2 Peter 3:18.

When victimized by the harsh realities of life, remember that God is still in control; remember that God still loves you, and thus allow the adversities that come upon you from without to make you a better person from **within**. Remember Paul and Silas: for the crime of preaching the gospel they were seized, brought before the authorities, lied against, beaten and imprisoned, with their feet "*fastened..in the stocks*" (Acts 16:16-24). How did they react? Not by nursing their grudges, but by singing and praying unto God, Acts 16:25, and this led to further opportunities to preach the word of God and to save souls.

Conclusion: One reason why it is not wise to allow "*the sun to go down upon your wrath*" is due to the fact that it opens the door for Satan to enter our hearts and do his damage, Eph. 4:25-26. Anger which lingers, and grudges which are "nursed" leads to bitterness, and every form of evil. Satan wants you to become embittered and to hate; God wants you to count your many blessings and to love your neighbor as yourself. Listen to God! It pays — both in the here and in the hereafter!

—B. Witherington
