

#231 "The Root of Bitterness"

By Brent Barnett

www.relevantbibleteaching.com

James 3:1 says, "Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?" All Christians at one time or another will struggle with responding bitterly to the various predicaments of life, but God's call through James is that we would learn to spring forth pure things rather than that which is rotten and of no use or glory to God. After heading out into the wilderness for three days under the hot desert sun and having found no source of drinking water, the Israelites came to Marah (Exodus 15:22-23). Yet Marah was named Marah, or "bitter," because of the bitter, undrinkable water. Even with the unimaginable thirst that the Israelites would have possessed, this kind of water was still utterly repulsive, and it could not bring refreshment or satisfaction. If bitter water is really this awful and nauseating, then we must recognize the gravity of James' exhortation that we avoid springing this nastiness forth and offering it up as drinking water to others. The obvious result should we do this is to leave others nauseated, angry, and repulsed when we should rather be pointing them to the refreshment found in Christ. There is nothing bitter about Jesus. Nowhere in His life on earth was there a hint of being cold, callous, cynical, frustrating, angry, or resentful. Rather, He was a giver of life and joy, and every encounter others had with Him pointed them to the praise of God, whether they liked it or not. Perhaps we find ourselves struggling with bitterness right now because life is not going how we had hoped, and envy and anger are creeping in. We need to deal with the roots of our bitterness before they spiral out of control and lead others to becoming sick with it as well.

Hebrews 12:15 says, "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." Just as weeds can spread and take over an entire yard in a matter of days, so too can bitterness take over an entire church. It is highly contagious, and it grows back readily unless it is killed off at the roots. Thus, we must understand the antidote to bitterness, so that the roots are killed along with plant that is visible. We might be able to paste a smile onto a bitter spirit, but unless we are truly changed from the inside out, bitterness will inevitably make a comeback and consume us further. The last thing we want to do is discourage other believers or spread the contagion of envy and anger, leading them astray. Rather, we should be those who bring a good word of praise and thanksgiving (Proverbs 12:25), for we are bearers of good news, not bad news, and certainly not bitter news (Acts 13:32).

The antidote to bitterness is to own up to our selfishness, to thank God unconditionally (Philippians 4:6-7, 1 Timothy 6:6), and to trust Him that He will work good out of all things, creating in us increased godliness of character (Romans 8:28-29). We must accept that life can be hard, that we will make mistakes, and that God is still faithful even when we are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13). Rather than fight God, we must trust what He allows in our lives as being ultimately the kindest, wisest, and best plan. Any waffling when it comes to God's love for us and His fairness in what He ordains for our lives, and bitterness will quickly take root.

When bad things happen, it is natural to feel an angry or bitter response coming and to begin comparing our situation with that of others. It is easy to envy their position, believing that we should have what they have or be doing what they are doing. But though the mind of a man plans his way, God directs His steps (Proverbs 16:9). He is ultimately in control of our lives, and we must learn this, believe this, and glorify Him for this. He can be trusted, He is good, and goodness and mercy will be His legacy in our lives. **Rather than fight God or fall into a bout of covetousness, we would do well to serve God as He has provided, to rejoice in what He has given, and to glorify Him in the moment.** Whether our lives have been shattered by natural disasters, relational distress, illness and disease, or any other assault from being in this sin-marred world, that moment of response not only reveals what we really believe but it gives us a chance to learn more about God and His ways. As we take baby steps of faith, putting one foot in front of the other (for that is all that God asks), we will see things about God that we hadn't seen before, we will learn things about happiness that we didn't know existed, and we will be transformed as God provides nourishment to our souls and joy where one would have thought there should only be bitterness.

In an environment where grace is freely understood and freely given, it is tough for bitterness to take root. Where grace reigns, sanctification thrives, relationships deepen, and God does mighty things. Let us be sure no one comes short of the grace of God, that we are never too stingy with the life-giving spring of pure water that is God's unending grace. This water satisfies, and this water gives life. May God make us into such springs.