

## Living above Bitterness

The story is told of a young man who wanted to get a way for a little, to spend time with God. He packed his tent, camping gear, and his Bible and headed into the mountains. The first night around midnight, he awoke to a scuffling and a shuffling; something was in his tent sorting through his things! In the dim moonlight that shone through the open door of his tent, he saw a skunk! Immediately his hand reached for his hiking stick, but as he raised the stick in the air to rid himself of this unwanted visitor, the question occurred to him, "What would the skunk do in its dying?" He hesitated for a moment, then carefully lowered the stick. Quietly, he watched as the skunk continued to dig through his things, and then suddenly turned and ambled off into the darkness where it had come from.

What do you think would have happened if he had hit that skunk? As it was, the skunk had left, and the only harm was the disorganization of his things, something that could be fixed in a matter of minutes the next morning. If he had hit the skunk and the skunk would have sprayed, it probably would have brought a rude and abrupt end to the occasion.

All of us will meet "skunks" at some time or another in life - not physical skunks, but people or circumstances or happenings that come totally uninvited and unexpected. How will we respond when we discover the skunk in our things? Will it be with calmness and acceptance, or will it be with anger and retaliation?

Bitterness is not a new thing. In fact, it has been present on this earth ever since Genesis chapter 4, or before. Let us consider a few examples from scripture.

- Cain – Gen. 4 – God did not accept Cain's sacrifice, but He did accept Abel's. Even though God clearly told Cain what he needed to do to be accepted, Cain allowed himself, instead, to become so bitter at Abel that one day he killed him!
- Sarai – Gen. 16 – Because Sarai longed to have children but could not, she gave her handmaid, Hagar, to Abram. After Hagar conceived, Sarai was jealous - understandably so - but her jealousy/bitterness caused her to treat Hagar harshly, to the point that Hagar fled from her presence.
- Leah & Rachel – had an ongoing competition between them, with feelings of animosity and resentment. The resulting home of 13 children from 4 different women was the beginning of greater problems.
- Joseph's brothers – harbored building feelings of anger and resentment. Eventually they sold Joseph in an attempt to be rid of the "bothersome, spoiled, little brother".
- Gen. 45:3-15 - All their growing up years, Joseph's brothers were the "big brothers". They were bigger than him; they outnumbered him; they were in control! Here they found themselves "out of control", with an apparent criminal case against them, a need of food, a dependence on this "Egyptian" – only to discover this was the brother that they so much hated! What would he do now?!

*So it was not you that sent me hither, but God...*

-I have often been amazed by Joseph's ability to look past all the hurt and pain and rejection and to see the hand of God in it all.

It just goes to show that the conflicts and the problems and the mountains that we face are only a small part of the "Big Picture"!

- Naomi- Ru 1:19-21 ¶ *So they two went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi?*  
*And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. {Naomi: that is, Pleasant} {Mara: that is, Bitter} I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?*
- Saul- 1Sa 18:7-9 *And the women answered one another as they played, and said, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands. And Saul was very wroth, and the saying displeased him; and he said, They have ascribed unto David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed but thousands: and what can he have more but the kingdom? And Saul eyed David from that day and forward.*
- David's ragtag army- The Amalekites had invaded Ziklag while David and his men were at war. When they returned from battle, they discovered their city burned and all of the women and children taken captive. The men, overcome with grief and loss, began to turn on David.  
1Sa 30:6 *And David was greatly distressed; for the people spake of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters: but David encouraged himself in the LORD his God.*

This account is an example of both how not to deal with grief and how to deal with it.

- Absalom- 2Sa 13:22 *And Absalom spake unto his brother Amnon neither good nor bad: for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had forced his sister Tamar.*  
Later, Absalom arranged the murder of Amnon, because of his bitterness against him.
- Job's wife- Job 2:9 *Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die.*  
In one sense, it seems like Job's wife is turning on Job, as if it was Job's fault that all this grief and loss had come upon them. Perhaps it was the fact that in all the other forms of loss they had experienced, she could share the experience. But this time, Job alone had to suffer the pain and agony of his physical condition. Whatever the reason, she had lost her ability to think logically; something was causing her to instruct her husband to curse God.
- Prodigal's brother- The prodigal had run away with his share of the inheritance and had wasted it on foolish, sensual living. When he came to the end of himself and remembered the love and respect of his father, he decided to go back home and serve his father as a servant. When the older brother came in from the field and discovered that his father was preparing a great feast to celebrate the return of his younger

brother, we read this: (Lu 15:28-30) *And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.*

You can almost hear the contempt in his voice, as the unforgiveness and jealousy all came spewing out.

- Acts 8:14-24 Simon the Sorcerer

For many years he had been the “answer man”, the man the people went to with their problems. But his answers left the people empty and still seeking. He was popular as long as there was no better option, but that all changed when Philip came.

When Philip came to Samaria, he brought “THE ANSWER”. It was an answer that did not leave the people seeking! Instead of mysterious magic, he came with the story of love from a real God, the story of His own Son who lived and died on this earth. Philip had something that Simon did not!

Later, Peter and John came, lay their hands on the believers, and the believers received the Holy Ghost. Simon having never seen anything like this before, longed for that “power”. He wanted the “power” so badly that he offered to buy it from Peter and John. Peter was quick to point out that Simon’s motive was not right.

Simon went wrong when he allowed envy and jealousy to take root in his life. His purpose and motive for wanting this “power” was to satisfy himself, to at least be equal with these men, to once again hold some renown in the community.

These are only a few Scriptural examples we have of bitterness. I would now like to think with the reader about what Bitterness is. If we are going to live above bitterness, it is helpful to consider the character traits of bitterness.

## I. What Bitterness is

### 1. A Leech

A leech secretly attaches itself and begins to feed

Bitterness is not a conscious choice, but rather it grows on us. It begins as one thing and develops into another.

The sooner it is dealt with, the easier the removal, with less chance of infection.

2. **Anger gone underground**

Anger is typically loud and violent – yelling, or, in extreme cases, throwing things.

Bitterness is silent – it is somewhat like a pressure cooker. A person attempts to keep the lid on; meanwhile the temperature and the pressure rises, which raises the boiling point of the water, which means more heat and more pressure until finally something gives!

And it is not pretty! Not only may people may get hurt, but the bitter person may even be surprised at the outburst.

3. **Down the ladder of ruin**

**Anger is a surface emotion**

We probably all know what it is like to get upset about something.

*What in the world were they thinking?! That is absolutely ridiculous! That is totally uncalled for! How ignorant can a person get?!*

And then we come to our senses and begin to think, *“you know what, this really isn’t worth getting all upset about, it is not how I wish it would be, but it is OK! I’m not going to let this thing steal my peace.”*

If left unchecked, that anger will develop into **resentment**, carrying a chip on one’s shoulder. *“If that is the way they want to be, than I will just avoid them. I will go out of my way not to talk to them! They don’t deserve my friendship, and I don’t want theirs!”*

It’s getting worse now; the anger is beginning to burrow underground. The “happening” gets replayed over and over again in one’s mind. And every time, it concludes with the feeling of revenge, or at least a wish for someone to even the score.

As this resentment continues to build, **bitterness** takes hold, and bitterness doesn’t stop! It is ruthless; it is uncaring, and it is cruel and hard. Bitterness will lead a person to the point where they may begin to think *“if nobody else is going to straighten this out, then I might have to”*, and eventually leads to the thought *“then I will”!*

4. **Out of control**

Many people have been hurt, physically, emotionally, and spiritually by bitter people!

The Bible teaches that anger is to be controlled. If left uncontrolled, eventually bitterness takes hold, and bitterness is out of control! No longer does the person control their thoughts and actions, bitterness has taken over!

A bitter person will do the unthinkable! Don't fool yourself in thinking that you can control your bitterness, because you can't! Bitterness is out of control! Many people have been tricked into thinking they could control the bitterness they were harboring in their heart. Today they live with regrets and the consequences of their actions as a result of their bitterness. Bitterness caused Cain to kill his brother, and it has been the cause of many more terrible deeds since then.

5. **Alternate reality**

What thoughts surround the "bitter story"? *"If they would have... if only this would have happened... if only, if only..."*

But guess what? It happened this way, and you are going to have to deal with it!

Life will never be perfect! That is a fact of life. People will not be perfect.

Bitterness lives in the alternate world, if only they would apologize, then I could forgive. But what does their apology have to do with your forgiveness? You don't have to have the one to have the other! Because bitterness wants to live in that alternate world, we nurse our hurts, and we tell ourselves again that it is the other person's fault that I am not doing what is right.

6. **Rebellion against God**

"What right do they think they have to..."

Imagine Job going out one night and shaking his fists toward the horizon and the land of the Sabeans and shouting "what right did you have to steal my cattle and kill my servants"...

Human nature wants to stand up and say that they don't have a right, but the truth is, God gave them the right.

There is nothing that will happen to us that will not be first of all allowed by God! When we react to the happening, we really are resisting what God has allowed. Because Job understood this, he was able to say, *"the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord"*.

We need to be very careful that we don't judge other people on this point! When we see another person struggling with accepting God's will, we need to remember that some experiences that people face are extremely painful! We will be far more appreciated and successful if we can walk beside them in their

pain, rather than accuse them of “perceived” failures. Much could be said about helping others learn to deal with the things that God has allowed in their lives, but that is not the purpose of this article. This article is about how to personally live above bitterness. We all need to come to the place where can accept the things that God has allowed in our lives, no matter how hard it is.

7. **Next to damnation (unforgiveness)**

*“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”* Matthew 6:12

This is not just some ideal thought, but rather it is a Biblical reality!

If we do not forgive others, than God will not forgive us! If we are not forgiven, then guess where we will spend eternity?

8. **Sin**

Do I have to say any more?

In many of today’s counseling centers, bitterness is given all kinds of labels and, many times, treated as a symptom of somebody else’s problems. I believe that the Bible is very clear that if I hold bitterness in my heart, it is *my* problem; because God has clearly called us to extend forgiveness, love, and mercy to those who mistreat us. Psalm 66:18 *If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me:*

Now that we have identified what bitterness is, let us consider what bitterness does.

## **II. What Bitterness Does**

1. **Isolates**

While a bitter person builds walls to protect himself from his perpetrator, those walls really tend to keep out the rest of the world, too.

2. **Hurts**

The outbursts that come as a result of bitterness are not confined to only the hurtful experience - it can be anyone or anything who, if they are at the wrong place at the wrong time, get hurt.

Especially when the innocent get hurt, the bitter person feels badly for what they have done, and they tend to add it to the list of hurts they have experienced from before.

3. **Physical, emotional, and spiritual health decline**

Bitterness sucks the life right out of a person!

4. **Kills the person who carries it**

The ironic thing about bitterness is that a person may carry bitterness in his heart for many years! He intends to get even, to see that the other person is set straight. All the while he carries that bitterness, the poison is flowing through his own body, attacking his conscience, eating away at his morals, destroying his character, killing him from the inside out!

5. **Twists the truth**

So much of bitterness is built on assumptions.

I remember an incident that occurred when I was working on getting some important documents for a work project. The man that I was working with, who needed to issue the documents, was being very unhandy. Every time I contacted him, he had some new excuse why he was not ready. I was getting frustrated about the situation! Finally, after weeks of waiting and paper work, he was ready to schedule a meeting. The day before the meeting, he sent me an email stating that the meeting is off! No explanations, no discussions, simply, "the meeting is off." The next day I tried to call him, but received no answer. When I tried again a couple hours later, his phone rang a few times before he picked up and hung up. That afternoon I tried to call again with no answer. Can you imagine my frustration? Can you imagine the thoughts that were going through my mind about him and about the situation? The following day, instead of calling his cell phone, I called to his office and talked with the secretary. To my surprise, she informed me that he was out of the office on emergency leave due to some complications with his son's health.

Suddenly the feelings of frustration and the mounting resentment melted away. I realized that he was not intentionally putting me off, but had a legitimate reason to cancel out, and not answer my calls. It really wasn't any of my business what he was doing, and he had no obligation whatsoever to tell me.

I relate this short account because it illustrates so well how easy it is to build a case against a person based on assumptions. If I had allowed my feelings to overrule me, they would have caused me to become angry at the man because I assumed he was being mean to me. I was fairly certain he was purposely pushing me off, but my assumptions were completely wrong.

The more we relive the hurtful experience, the more of our perspective we add to the story as *fact*, until we get to the point that we are convinced that everybody is out to get us.

My feelings and my perspective cannot be trusted in overcoming bitterness!

I now would like to consider ten keys to victory.

## I. Living above Bitterness

1. Acts 8:22 *Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.* What was Simon to repent of? He needed to repent of his envy, pride, and anger which had led him into bitterness. Simon could not just try to be better, he needed to repent and ask God to make him better.

**The Key** – bitterness must be repented of.

2. Romans 2:1-10- This passage contrasts those who extend God's mercy and forgiveness with those who proudly refuse to accept and forgive others. In these verses, we see a drastic difference in the eternal well-being of these two groups of people. It reminds me of Jesus' words spoken in the sermon on the mount, *"Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again."* As we experience God's love and forgiveness in our own lives, we need to share it with those around us, whether or not we think they deserve it. As we reflect on our own lives, is it not true that God loved us when we were altogether unlovely? Before we even loved Him, *He first loved us.*

**The Key** – we need to view others from a heart of love and not from a heart of judgement and criticism.

3. Rom. 12:2 *"And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God."* So how can we live above bitterness? We need to allow God to change us from the inside out. The teaching here is not that the world needs to change so that I can live in victory, but rather it is me that needs to change. Far too many people are consumed with trying to change the people around them, and they become frustrated and overwhelmed when they can't possibly do it. How much simpler and more rewarding to ask God to change me!

**The Key** – work at allowing God to change you instead of trying to change others.

4. 2 Cor. 10:5 *"Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;"* - So much of bitterness is built on imaginations; we hold things against people because of what we think they meant, or what we think their motive was. We become worried about why they looked at us in that way, and what we are sure they are thinking about us. We convince ourselves that their actions were intentional; we are sure they don't like us and they were just looking for an opportunity to be unkind. All the while we build a big case of bitterness in our hearts because of things that we imagine that are not reality. True, there are times in life that people really do treat us wrongly, but before we build a personal case against them, consider if

there is a deeper reason. If we can take the time to view the situation objectively, we may find an opportunity to show them the love of God.

**The Key** – base your thoughts and actions on known facts, especially in regards to your own personal obedience to God and His Word.

5. Eph. 4:26-32 *“Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil. Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth. Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that is may minister grace unto the hearers. And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”* Don’t take your anger to bed with you! An important fact to understand is that; bitterness cannot just be pushed out, it needs to be replaced. I believe the Biblical imperative is to replace bitterness with love and service. Too many times people who realize they are being consumed by bitterness try to push it out of their life. They try not to think about what happened, or what was said; they busy themselves with work, or fill their minds with music. But when they are all alone, when the things of life have slowed down, when the guard is not at his post, the bitterness comes surging back.

**The Key** – allow God to replace the bitterness in your heart with love.

6. Col. 3:12-14 *“Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.”* A rather obvious fact of life is that bitterness drives relationships apart while love brings them together. Examples of this truth abound all around us, in broken marriages, soured business deals, neighbors at odds with each other, and more.

**The Key** - purpose in your heart to pursue love and service; don’t wait for it to find you!

7. Hebrews 12:14-17 *“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the*

*blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.” Human nature wants to nurse one’s pain and hurt. It seems like the easy way out of a problem, but problems always increase in size if not dealt with.*

**The Key** – Deal with your problems while they are small; the sooner they are dealt with, the easier!

8. James 3:13-18 *“Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? Let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.”* One of the hardest things to accept is the fact that I am the one that is wrong. No amount of denial or rejection will change the truth.

**The Key** - don’t make excuses. If your attitude is not right, deal with it!

9. James 4:5-12 *“Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? But he giveth more grace, Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up. Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?”* These verses speak plainly of God’s hatred of pride and His blessing on humility.

**The Key** – understand that bitterness is not compatible with humility and submission.

10. 1Pet. 4:8 *“And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.”* The human tendency is to magnify the faults and failures of others, while the true mark of spirituality is to show love.

**The Key** - love doesn’t dig up old bones, or post another’s failures on the church bulletin board!

In conclusion: Bitterness is a choice and the choice is yours. Deuteronomy 30:19 *“I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live:”*