

Find release from bitterness with...

Forgiveness!

As discussed by Scripture.



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Some material from Class Notes, Biblical Counseling

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Restoration Movement Literature

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Bitterness is a common, destructive emotional stronghold. Scripture gives many stories of bitter people, and also the cure for bitterness: forgiveness. This booklet will attempt to discuss both at length to understand the Biblical teaching on bitterness and forgiveness, and present both examples of those who overcame their bitterness with forgiveness, and those who let their bitterness lead to destruction.

Solomon knew much about bitterness; he wrote about it on several occasions. In Proverbs 28:14, he wrote:

“Blessed is the one who always trembles before God, but whoever hardens their heart falls into trouble.” (NIV)

As well, in Proverbs 18:19:

“A brother wronged is more unyielding than a fortified city; disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel.” (NIV)

Let us first fully appreciate these two Scriptures before we look at other examples from Solomon’s life (in which there are many – Ecclesiastes has many strands of bitterness!):

The idea of a “hard heart” is common throughout the Bible; there are 36 references to a “hard heart” or a “hardened heart” or someone “hardening their heart”, or choosing to “harden their heart” in Scripture! Many of these references are focused on just one person at a time, a good example being Pharaoh from the Exodus:

Moses had to continually deal with the hard heart of Pharaoh. Even before Moses went to Egypt, God warned Moses twice that Pharaoh would have a hard heart, and that he had to proceed anyway (Exodus 4:21, 7:13).

Just as God said, Pharaoh’s heart was hard – even in the face of the wonders Moses performed by the hand of God (Exodus 7:22). Pharaoh was going to let his hard heart get him into much “trouble”, as Proverbs 28:14 says.

It is very important to understand Pharaoh’s state of mind as many do not understand the language present in the Exodus story concerning Pharaoh and the Egyptians. In Exodus 7:22, right after Moses writes that “Pharaoh’s heart became hard”, he writes immediately after that, “he would not listen to Moses and Aaron.” The context of Pharaoh’s hard heart was a choice to be bitter!

Pharaoh’s “Bitter/Hard Heart”		
#	Scripture Reference	Language Used (NIV)
1	Exodus 4:21	“I [God] will harden his heart”
2	Exodus 7:3	“But I [God] will harden his heart”
3	Exodus 7:13	“Pharaoh’s heart became hard and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron”
4	Exodus 7:22	“Pharaoh’s heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron”
5	Exodus 8:15	“he [Pharaoh] hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron”
6	Exodus 8:19	“Pharaoh’s heart was hard and he would not listen [to his own magicians]”
7	Exodus 8:32	“Pharaoh hardened his heart”
8	Exodus 9:12	“the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron”
9	Exodus 9:34	“He [Pharaoh] and his officials hardened their hearts”
10	Exodus 9:35	“Pharaoh’s heart was hard and he would not let the Israelites go”

11	Exodus 10:1	“I [God] have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials”
12	Exodus 10:20	“the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the Israelites go”
13	Exodus 10:27	“the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he was not willing to let them go”
14	Exodus 11:10	“the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the Israelites go out of his country”
15	Exodus 14:4	“I will harden Pharaoh’s heart”
16	Exodus 14:8	“the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh”
17	Exodus 14:17	“I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians”
18	Joshua 11:20	“For it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel”
19	1 Samuel 6:6	“Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did?”

What was the cause of Pharaoh’s bitterness? Looking at the above chart, in many places, it would be tempting to have the idea that God caused Pharaoh’s bitterness, he had no control, and therefore – by an extension of rationalization – then neither do we. Much of modern psychology is built on this idea that we really do not have control – and thus are not responsible for – any bitterness, resentment, guilt, or other negative emotions we have.

However, we cannot read ancient Hebrew, in modern English, with 21st century Western eyes, and expect to understand what Moses was writing:

The prophet Samuel – Israel’s last judge and first prophet – sums up ancient Israel’s view and his own inspired recording (and therefore,

the correct recording) of what happened with Pharaoh's, his officials', and all the rest of the Egyptians hearts (they hardened their own hearts):

“Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did? When Israel's god dealt harshly with them, did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their way?” (1 Samuel 6:6, NIV)

Therefore, if Samuel - and therefore ancient Israel - understood that Pharaoh's hard heart (along with the rest of Egypt) was their own choice, then we cannot take the modern view that any bitterness, pride, or other emotional stronghold we develop is genetic, fate, or inevitable – but rather we must take responsibility for it. One cannot use Pharaoh's life, based on Samuel's testimony, as an excuse for harboring bitterness or pride.

Can pride – what befell Pharaoh, his officials, all of Egypt, and even Satan himself - be a cause for bitterness today?

Pharaoh thought himself a god among gods. His pride was not only in himself, but the kingdom of Egypt that he inherited, and the other gods he believed protected and prospered Egypt. The Israelites were under the Egyptian whip as slaves, and before Moses came, Egypt prospered further still. Pharaoh had no “earthly” reason to believe Moses; no, it would take the witness of the supernatural, but more than anything the hearing of the words of Moses – and then finally a choice – if was to make a right decision concerning the Israelites and the One True God.

People today naturally still suffer from pride, even if they do not think themselves as gods necessarily. A talent, or skill, or success can puff up one's mind and lead a person to think that their status is because

of their own efforts alone. Pharaoh's heart was bitter because Moses' requests directly attacked his pride and requested a surrender of his earthly sovereignty, something Pharaoh chose not to give up even with the threat of Egypt's desolation and the death of the first-born.

This preacher has seen some people "rather die" than accept Christ, despite family and friends' influence, despite hearing the Word of God, despite the agony of some disease, disaster, or other catastrophe that has either befallen them or others around them. The choice to remain proud, in spite of the inevitability of death, may not be logical, but it is very *human*.

God, through Moses, would present Pharaoh eleven different opportunities to repent of his pride, obey God, and let go of his hard heart (bitterness). Three of these times occurred before the plagues even began (Exodus 5:2, 4+5, 17+18), and there were eight warnings during the plagues themselves. God's patience is great (greater than ours, for sure) but not infinite; judgment comes to all (Hebrews 9:27).

The bitterness Pharaoh had was certainly like what Solomon wrote in Proverbs 18:19 – he tried to set and Egypt up as "a fortified city – as the barred gates of a citadel" – but to no avail. Both God and Satan have influence despite our isolation, pride, and bitterness; we are still liable for the choice we ultimately make to yield to God, and accept Him as Lord, or to fall for Satan's temptation that pride and bitterness (the penultimate traits of Satan)

The net result of Pharaoh's (and all of Egypt's) pride and bitterness was incalculable loss to Egypt's economy, population, and morale. Pharaoh himself and his armies perished in their final pursuit of the Israelites. All of Egypt's firstborn were also dead – man and cattle. Their

loss is a type of Satan's loss to come – his pride and bitterness will be his final end as well (Revelation 12:12).

Therefore, it is essential to let go of any bitterness (or, it's prerequisite stronghold – pride) we hold if we are going to have peace and the hope of forgiveness in our lives.

Another verse in Proverbs that describes Pharaoh, his officials, all of Egypt would be Proverbs 14:10:

“Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one can share its joy.” (NIV)

It is testified in Scripture both directly by Samuel (1 Samuel 6:6) and generally by Solomon here in Proverbs 14:10 that Pharaoh's pride and bitterness, along with all who followed him, is a self-aware choice that takes away any chance of joy or peace. We must NOT buy into Satan's lie that we can be arrogant (i.e. proud) and bitter towards those whom we choose; such choices do not destroy those who oppose us, it destroys us!

Charles Gerber, teaching his intensive class on Biblical Counseling at Summit Theological Seminary on February 27th and 28th of 2015, described bitterness as “4 P's”:

P – People see bitterness as being powerful (or, in control)

Revelation 12:10 – Satan is filled with rage

P – People see bitterness as being protective (or, isolated)

An example is Simon and Garfunkel's famous song, “I am an Island”.

P – Bitterness is poisonous

C.S. Lewis wrote in the Screwtape Letters that Satan enjoys other people's pain.

As the old saying goes, "Misery loves company."

P – Bitterness is possessive

A truth he stated in the class goes right along with the above: "If I am bitter towards one person, it is only a matter of time before I am bitter towards everyone."

Bitterness is a commonly employed but poor coping skill. Painful events are inevitable; our response to them is not. Bitterness is one response to a painful event; forgiveness is another, and it brings hope and peace. Forgiveness cannot co-exist with pride, however. If a person expects to be released from bitterness, one must also give up their arrogance and pride.

This is why Scripture warns in Hebrews 12:15 against bitterness:

"See no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." (NIV)

We can see, therefore, that bitterness not only affects ourselves, but those around us. It is a "root", according to the verse above, that will cause us to "miss the grace of God", "cause trouble", and "defile many." Let us give up our pride, our bitterness, and enter the forgiveness of God, so that we may in turn forgive others, experiencing lasting peace.

There are other examples in Scripture about bitterness directly for our learning:

Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, actually changed her name to Mara, the Hebrew word for bitterness (Ruth 1:20). In her bitterness, Naomi states her belief that the Lord has made her life bitter. Naomi has experienced a painful event (the loss of her husband and two sons – Ruth 1:3-5). Any of us who would experience such loss would no doubt feel similarly. Our feelings are not chosen; how we deal with them, however, is chosen. Naomi's response was to become bitter, even to the point of naming herself "bitter", and then believing a lie that God caused her grief. However, we know from Scripture, that God does not cause harm for the faithful (Romans 8:28), and that even in Naomi's life God provided for her through her daughter-in-law Ruth and her husband-to-be, Boaz. Naomi's story of loss, bitterness, and redemption is now immortalized in Scripture for our understanding. May we not miss the deliverance God provides for our own example!

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, as recorded in Luke 15:11-32, tells of the Prodigal's older brother at the end of the story who disowns his own brother (refers to his brother as "your son" to his father). He was bitter, and Jesus was warning in this parable in part to be aware of bitterness against those who have been forgiven, have suffered much, and now prosper by the mercy of others, not because of their hard work (which the brother claimed – Luke 15:29). May we never think our salvation is because of what we have done, but rather recognize our forgiveness of others pales in comparison to the forgiveness God gave us on the cross.

David's first wife and Solomon's younger daughter Michal was bitter: when David danced after the return of the Ark of the Covenant, she mocked him openly. Her bitterness resulted in David's own rash decision not to have any children with Michal (2 Samuel 6:23), a major

blow to any Jewish woman. Their story started out as a beautiful romance, but ended in extreme bitterness, that followed their relationship until their deaths (see Samuel 21:6ff for just how much David held bitter towards Michal's relation and those who she cared for and cared about). Bitterness and pride (2 Samuel 6:21+22) not only destroyed David and Michal's relationship, but actually resulted in the death of many people not even associated with the original problem!

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) also shows how people can become jealous – bitter – because those who worked less did not earn less (Matthew 20:11+12). The landowner responded that they had agreed to be paid a denarius (Matthew 20:2), and were paid just as he said they would be. If he chose to pay the others the same amount, it was none of their business (Matthew 20:13-15). How our society could learn from this parable that the rewards given to others are not for us to concern ourselves with! Instead, the bitterness that develops when we compare ourselves to others in any aspect will never end well.

Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 7:26:

“I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.”

Undoubtedly, Solomon knew from experience, having over 1,000 women in his life as wives or concubines! (1 Kings 11:3) The Scripture testifies in that same chapter how his wives and concubines led him away from God, from peace, and into bitterness, as Ecclesiastes' witness of

Solomon's many godless thoughts and actions led ("Everything is meaningless" – Ecclesiastes 1:1).

Early on, God knew how destructive bitterness was. In fact, He was in process of fixing the great damage the proud and bitter Satan had rendered in creation by his tempting of Adam and Eve by bringing about the Messiah through Israel. Israel's law in Leviticus 19:18 instructs Israel not to be bitter:

"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." (NIV)

Perhaps the most important part of this verse is the authority God puts behind it: "I am the Lord." God expects His people to be peaceful, humble, and forgiving just as He is. He knows this is the only way people can get along, prosper, and have joy. Any kind of retaliation, seeking revenge, bearing a grudge, harboring pride, or bearing resentment or bitterness is against the Law of God, in all dispensations of time (see also Hebrews 12:15, James 3:14, and 1 John 2:9).

Jesus warns directly and very sternly against bitterness in Matthew 18:6 that it is better to have a millstone stone drawn around your neck and be thrown into the sea than to embitter/abuse a child.

There is great bitterness in our society, fueled by the modern attitude and philosophy, that "getting back" is celebrated, and "one upping" is encouraged. Competition becomes a battleground, instead of a market aid, and pride becomes bitterness because the goodwill of all men is not sought (as God does seek – see Luke 2:10+14), but the oppression of any who disagree with the majority.

Examples of bitterness in our society include road rage, talk shows like Jerry Springer, and the enjoyment many people get from watching people fight. There are truly endless examples, but the idea is clear that the Bible knows about these symptoms of bitterness and warns greatly against them.

“Getting even” must be understood in its real context – no one wants to get even – they want to be above, superior. “Equality”, or “fair”, is never brought up if a person has “more” than someone else, only if they have “less”. Our inherent desire for fairness is inherently unfair! The world’s philosophy is never going to be able to fill this gap because it throws away forgiveness as a viable alternative. Only Scripture gives us the understanding of forgiveness, exemplified in God Himself – in the flesh – Jesus Christ.

Dr. George Faull correctly comments when he says, “If you get the first button on a shirt wrong, all of the other buttons will be wrong as well.” The same is true for understanding human behavior without applying God’s knowledge on the subject – they do not understand the nature of bitterness – and therefore have no real way of combating it.

Secular psychology recognizes guilt as “real”, but teaches that is a worthless emotion and that no one should feel guilty. They view fear the same way. All the same, they do not recognize bitterness. This results in a lot of bitter counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists, who do not see consistent fruit from their work. The first button on the shirt of the career was put on wrong, so they cannot logically expect good results.

Alternatively, guilt is both real and *good*; without it, we could not process right from wrong, or seek to right a wrong. All the same, fear is *good*; without it, we would not rightly fear things that can hurt ourselves

or others. Emotions on any level are never good nor bad; rather, what we do with them is *always* what is good or bad!

Charles Gerber, again in the aforementioned class, recommends that to understand if someone is dealing with guilt, fear, or bitterness, one must “peel and reveal” as part of five counseling skills:

P – Peel (focus on FROGS – Future, Relationships, Opposite Sex, God, Self)

R – Reveal (lies that are now believed)

K – Kneel (humble yourself before God)

D – Deal (solve the problem with God’s Word – see John 7:23)

H – Heal (forgive yourself and others)

We must remember that the Bible is God’s Word and it brings healing (Proverbs 3:8, 4:22).

It is not enough, however, to try to “let go” of bitterness. When a negative emotion exits, a vacuum comes, and it will be filled with something, and that something must be forgiveness if the bitterness and pride is truly to be shed.

First, forgiveness is rejected because it is *hard*. Charles Gerber again provides an acrostic for us to understand the difficulty behind forgiveness:

A – Against human nature (forgiveness is a *supernatural* experience; you cannot do it on your own!)

B – Believing lies about forgiveness

Three lies commonly believed about forgiveness:

- “If I forgive, I’m telling the person who wronged me it was OK”
- “If I forgive, I’m giving you permission to do it again.”
- “If I forgive, I’m being weak, a doormat, a fool.”

These are lies that must be countered with truth, specifically from God’s Word:

Jesus forgave *immediately* – Matthew 6:14-16.

Jesus forgave *repeatedly* – Matthew 18:21+22.

Jesus forgave *without condition* – Luke 23:34.

Jesus forgave *to give freedom* – John 8:1-11.

Jesus did not believe the lies about bitterness, though He had many reasons to be! We should remember at all times that Jesus has been tempted with everything we have been, but never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus never fell for pride (though He had every reason to be proud but humbled Himself anyway – Philippians 2:6-8), and even during His execution, never became bitter, but forgave to the last breath (Luke 23:34). What an example of freedom from bitterness Jesus is!

C – Continual reminders of the hurt

Other Bible characters exemplified forgiveness: Stephen forgave his executioners *while he was being stoned* (Acts 7:60), Joseph forgave his brothers for their treachery and saw God’s hand working through their sin (Genesis 50:20), and David forgave Saul’s descendant Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 9:1-13).

Joseph had every reason to be bitter, but chose instead to be forgiving, seeing God’s divine providence even through the pain and

multiple injustices. Stephen had every “right” to be bitter when stoned for giving good testimony, but instead he found release through forgiveness. David, having earlier sought vengeance on the descendants of Saul (2 Samuel 6), now seeks out the sole survivor of his house to show mercy to (2 Samuel 9).

In all these examples, God has shown us that the lies the world has taught us about forgiveness are indeed false. There is freedom and peace in forgiveness that can never be had while pride and bitterness reside.

Jesus is the Example of Forgiveness by Joshua Stucki			
#	Scripture Reference	Jesus’ Example	Stephen’s Example
1	Matthew 6:14-16	Forgave immediately	Forgave immediately – Acts 7:60
2	Matthew 18:21-22	Forgave repeatedly	
3	Luke 23:34	Forgave without condition	Joseph’s Example
4	Philippians 1:6	Forgave in anticipation	Forgave without condition – Genesis 50:20
5	John 8:1-11	Forgave to give freedom	
Key Point: Jesus exemplifies forgiveness for us!			
The Prodigal Father’s Example			David’s Example
Forgave without condition – Luke 15:11-32			Forgave in anticipation – 2 Samuel 9:1-13

God, through the prophets, also warns various generations of Israelites against bitterness. Samuel warned against the bitterness of Pharaoh and the Egyptians now having entered Israel in 1 Samuel 6:6, and Micah warned a much later generation of Israelites against the same in Micah 2:1a:

“Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds!” (NIV)

A few verses later, God predicts the destruction of those who would do that very thing (Micah 2:4). It is interesting to note that sometimes when bitterness is present and grows, God brings judgment; other times, the bitterness is self-destructive, and God is merely warning that the inevitable doom of bitterness will come.

In Genesis 27:41, Esau vowed to kill his brother Jacob for stealing the birthright. However, when later Jacob and Esau meet again, Esau had forgiven Jacob! (Genesis 33:4-9) God had provided much for Esau, and Esau had chosen not to let the past embitter him against Jacob anymore. Esau is described in the New Testament as a godless man (Hebrews 12:16), so we cannot assume that Esau was faithful to God in general. Nonetheless, even a stopped clock is right twice a day, and Scripture reveals to us here that Esau in his forgiveness was right and the story is recorded for our benefit and example.

Forgiveness is actually the greatest need any human has. Forgiveness of sins is essential to escape eternal damnation; interestingly, God has our forgiveness of others a necessary part of our own forgiveness (Matthew 6:14; 18:34+35; Mark 11:26). Paul comments on the same in Colossians 3:13. Until we truly grasp God’s forgiveness as

available through the cross and resurrection of Christ, we cannot expect to be able to forgive others and experience the peace that comes with it.

Romans 3:14 warns against those whose bitterness is built up:

“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” (NIV)

When a mass shooting happens, secular psychologists and counselors admit regularly they have “no idea” why someone would do such a horrible thing. However, through Scripture’s instruction and example, we know exactly why: bitterness. You do not shoot people you are happy with; all the same, when a person is bitter, anything can become a weapon, and chaos ensues, to Satan’s delight.

Bitterness trashes people’s lives; forgiveness heals it. A bitter person’s life is a wreck; when a person refuses to let go of bitterness and the pride causing it, it will affect their own life and everybody’s around them (“it defiles many” – Hebrews 12:15). We can expect that the external symptoms of a bitter heart will manifest themselves consistently in self-destructive behavior, depression, anger, and rage.

Our media feeds this problem exponentially – the music and movies about revenge being celebrated abound. Media that puts others down so we can feel better about our pathetic state may seem “normal”, but it is antithetical to healing. Scripture takes a completely different route – everybody can be forgiven – and everybody can forgive. Therefore, everybody can let go of the bitterness and pride that has plagued their own lives and the lives of those around them.

To understand if someone is bitter, Charles Gerber gives us three questions we can ask:

1) What was your loss? (Biblical example: Naomi in Ruth 1 – loss of husband and sons)

2) What was your injustice? (Proverbs 21:15 – when justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous, but terror to evildoers. Also see Luke 18:1ff for the Parable of the Unjust Judge.)

3) What was your betrayal? (Betrayal is unique: only a friend can betray, not a stranger)

The painful event, combined with lies believed, with poor coping skills, results in destruction. Bitterness, when unchecked, always leads down this path.

How can we have the strength to forgive? Isaiah 43:2 tells us the following:

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.” (NIV)

Jesus says the same in Matthew 28:20:

“And lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”
(NIV)

God is with us! God has given us His Word and the choice to obey them to our freedom and peace! Isaiah 45:2 again reinforces (as God does consistently throughout Scripture) that He is with us, for us, and loves us. Psalm 3:3 tells us how God is our shield, the one who “lifts up our heads”. This is more prophetic than we may think; when we are bitter, our heads are in the gutter. When God lifts up our heads when we

obey Him, we can see beyond the narrow-minded hate that encompasses bitterness.