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Dealing With Bitterness

Introduction:

Bitterness is something which tempts us to be distracted, and this keeps us from looking where God's Word requires us to look. And because bitterness has deceived many, it is our responsibility to pray that the God of heaven would teach us to be wise about this great evil.

The Text:

And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? And he cried unto the LORD; and the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them, And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the LORD that healeth thee. And they came to Elim, where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees: and they encamped there by the waters (Ex. 15:23-27).

Overview:

The people of Israel in their wanderings had come to a hard circumstance. The waters of Marah were bitter waters, which the people could not drink. Because of this, the people began to murmur and grumble; *they* became bitter, just like the water. Bitterness in the form of trial often becomes bitterness in the form of rebellion. Moses prayed to the Lord, who showed him a tree that would make the waters sweet when thrown into the water. He did so, and immediately after this, Moses made a statute and ordinance with the people, casting a comparable tree into *their* midst. This is the tree that must be thrown into *our* water as well. Diligently listen to the Lord; do what is right *according to Him*; listen to His commandments and keep His statutes. Then the Lord will keep them free of the diseases of Egypt; God will heal them, just as He healed the waters. And they came to Elim, where there were twelve wells of good water, and seventy palm trees.

When Bitterness is Not Sin:

At the same time, we must not become superstitious about words. The Bible prohibits certain forms of anger (Eph. 4:20), for example, but it *requires* others (Eph. 4:26). It is the same kind of thing with bitterness. We want to address the sin of bitterness, but we must also remember the entire scope of God's Word to us. There is a certain kind of bitterness in repentance, for example. "And Peter went out, *and wept bitterly*" (Luke 22:62). And there is the hard

providence that drives us to rely upon the Lord, as Hannah did. "And she was *in bitterness of soul*, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore" (1 Sam. 1:10; cf. Ruth 1:20-21). But also remember that we might sin even here, when a hard providence does *not* drive us to the Lord.

Bringing Or Sending:

Now when others sin against us, we often forget that God is behind it. As the Puritan Thomas Watson noted, we know all about the one who *brought* this trial to us, and yet we forget the one who *sent* it. When we stumble in this way, we are disobeying the Word of God to us. And how can we complain when others disobey the Word, when we are doing the same thing? There are two key passages we must consider. The first gives the flat prohibition (Eph. 4:30-31). The second illustrates the consequences of disobedience (Heb. 12:14-15). Bitterness is like a root, and roots are out of sight, gathering up whatever feeds them. You begin by trying to dig up a small six-inch stump and four hours later half your yard is gone, and you are thinking wistfully of dynamite. Bitterness is like this. And when it springs up into a plant above ground, many are defiled.

The Nature of the Beast:

If I do something wrong, whenever I think about it, what comes to mind is that wrong. But what if someone does something wrong *to* me and I become bitter about it? Whenever I think about it, what comes to mind is what was done to me, and not my own bitterness. If I tell a lie, then of course I have to correct it. When I think of it, I think of my own sin. But if someone lies *about* me, and spreads it all over town, the strong temptation is to focus on *their* lie, and not on my *own* resentment. This is an optical illusion, designed to trap me. I can confess their sins all day long, and yet my joy will not come back.

The Bitter Root:

The Scriptures give us different descriptions of how bitterness can originate. There are different causes of bitterness. One is *worshipping another god*. Turning away from God leads to sin, and sin leads to bitterness (Dt. 32:31-33; Jer. 2:19; 4:17-18). This is bitterness that strikes at the heart. A second cause is *greed and envy*. When Simon saw the power that was with Peter, he tried to get it by means of his god, which was money (Acts 8:18-23). He was an envious man, and bitterness was his prison. A third cause of bitterness is *sinful sweetness*. This is sin that seemed like a really good idea at the time (Prov. 5:3-4). Sweetness at the beginning is bitter death at the end. If the flatterer is to be believed, adultery can be sweet, but the end is necessarily bitter. And last, there are all the tangles that come from intimacy gone wrong. St. Paul is plain: "Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them" (Col. 3:19).

You Know You Are Bitter When . . .

There are some tell-tale signs that would be good for each of us to be aware of. You know you are bitter when . . .

- *Sharp memory for all details*—bitterness has good study habits: review, review, review.
- *Anonymous critiques or attacks*—bitter words are frequently unsigned (Ps. 64:2-4).
- *Imaginary conversations*—these are conversations that occur in the mind

(over and over). "Then I says to him, I says . . ."

- *Moral inversion occurs*—"Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter" (Is. 5:20). When you find yourself justifying what you would never approve of in other circumstances, you are bitter.
- *Your heart and mouth are full of it*—"Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness" (Rom. 3:14). What happens when the jar of your life is jostled? What comes out? Battery acid or honey? Jostling the jar doesn't change the contents of the jar, but the jostling frequently *reveals* the contents of the jar.

Conclusion:

A man or woman (or child) who is convicted by the Spirit of God over their bitterness needs to make simple application. They must confess their own sin (1 John 1:9) as though they were the only one at fault. On theological paper, they know this is unlikely, but for all practical purposes, bitterness does not know how to think about the faults of others—and so should not even try. What is the conclusion of all this? What kind of fountain are you? What kind of water are you? Is your name Marah or Elim? St. James teaches us that it must be one way or the other (Jas. 3:11-14).

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