

Hebrews - the Way Forward (2)

by J. Glyn Owen

The root of bitterness can cause trouble and defile many, and it is a heart attitude of resentment, anger, and jealousy that can grow when we stop receiving the grace of God.

Duration: 42:23

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-17, Deuteronomy 29:16-18, Matthew 6:33, Hebrews 12:2, Hebrews 12:14-15

Topics: "Hebrews"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the concept of a 'root of bitterness' and its implications in the lives of believers. He emphasizes that there are both promises and curses in the covenant with God, and turning away from Him can lead to embracing the idolatries of the world. The speaker provides three illustrations to support his point, including the biblical background of Moses renewing the covenant with Israel, the example of Absalom's bitterness towards his father David, and the danger of society's influence on believers. Overall, the sermon highlights the importance of remaining faithful to God and avoiding the root of bitterness.

Transcript

We continue this morning with our theme from the Epistle to the Hebrews, and I would ask you kindly to turn with me to chapter 12. We are looking at the passage that begins with verse 14, though we have attempted already to expound the early parts of the passage, and I would like to read as the basis of our meditation this morning, particularly verse 15. See to it that no one misses the grace of God, and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

Now, with the first part of that verse we have dealt also, and so this morning we are going to focus on the second part. We are thinking of the way forward, and here is something to avoid. See to it, see to it that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and to defile many.

Now, let me remind you very briefly of the context of which this text is but a short segment. The writer of this epistle is now coming to the point of summing up and of applying the main teaching of his letter, his epistle. He does so at this point in terms of two main injunctions.

First of all, he tells us, make every effort to live at peace with all men, peace with all men. Peace not simply in the sense of not quarreling with people. We saw when we were looking at this that the term peace, especially in a Hebrew context, means infinitely more than that.

It means that we are really at one with people and wish for them the very best that God has for them, and not only wish that for them but are involved in bringing to men that which makes them indeed men and women of peace with God and with others. That's the first thing, and it's a very challenging word. Make every effort to live at peace with all men, and to be holy, this is the second.

Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. So then, the pursuit of peace and the pursuit of holiness, these are the two things that we are urged and commanded by the authority of the Spirit and the word to seek. In the light of what this epistle has taught us, we should be able.

We have the resources in our Lord and Savior, and that's the background. We have the resources, and here we hear the summons. Having said that, the writer goes on to say that alongside of this double quest, the whole congregation of God's people, he's writing here to a Hebrew congregation, Hebrew Christians, but the whole congregation should exercise a kind of pastoral care one for another.

Well, we may have pastors among us who are devoting more time than the ordinary member is able to do in order to care for the flock, but that does not absolve any member of the congregation from seeking the well-being of others. And in this context, the writer is making it very, very clear. See to it, he says, and he's now writing to the whole congregation, not just to the pastor or the elders or somebody else, you see to it in the plural that no one misses the grace of God, and then what we have before us today.

You see to it that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and to defile many. Such a tragedy as would be implicit in this development of a root of bitterness would mean that virtually our Christian calling could never be fulfilled, as we shall show in a moment. If anything of this kind were to happen in a congregation among the Lord's people, at that point we simply could not do the will of God in this world.

We could not be at peace with all men, and we could certainly not be said to be in pursuit of the holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. Now then, that is the issue before us, and I want briefly to try and say something about it. In moving forward, let me say to you that I am immediately challenged by this in the context.

Oh, there are many things to challenge one. A preacher is especially challenged by a passage like this, but especially by this. In this context, it would seem that the writer is wanting to say that if there is any man, any woman, any member of the Christian church who does not receive the grace of God through the various agencies, the means of grace as we speak of them, then that in and of itself would seem to be adequate for ultimately that person's heart becoming the breeding ground of a root of bitterness.

If I understand what the writer is saying, he is saying something like this. The only thing you need to become bitter in your soul against God or against some of his people is this. Stop receiving the grace of God, either by keeping away from the means of grace, the worship of the Lord's house, the proclamation of his word, or by desisting from your own personal devotions, the reading of scripture, and prayer, and meditation, and study, and so forth.

If you desist from profiting from these, either by keeping away from them, or by just going through them in a way that you receive nothing from them, then you're in danger. At any moment, you can grow this obnoxious root of bitterness in your soul, and it will disqualify you from seeking holiness or peace. So, you see, it's a very serious word we have before us this morning.

And I ask you to pray for me and to pray for yourselves as we together listen to this, because I'm preaching more to myself, perhaps, than to you this morning. Now, first of all, there is a background to this expression, and we need to say that, we need to see that. The phenomenon itself may appear and not necessarily be called by this term, by this phrase, but the phrase has a background.

It has at least three backgrounds, or two, perhaps. I give you three illustrations, one of one and two of the other. First of all, the phrase has a primary and a biblical background.

It appears in one of the most solemn of all passages in the Old Testament, where Moses was summoned by God to renew with Israel the covenant earlier made on the slopes of Sinai. Now, this is at a much later date, when Deuteronomy 29 and 30 were written. Moses had been commanded to speak to the people of Israel in a certain way.

Now, I want to quote from Deuteronomy 29, verses 16 to 18, and I cannot comment much on this, because time does not permit. Let me therefore read it very carefully. You yourselves know, says God through Moses, how we lived in Egypt, and how we passed through the countries on the way here.

You saw among them their detestable images and idols of wood and stone, of silver and of gold. Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe, among you today, whose heart turns away from the Lord our God, to go and worship the gods of the nations. Make sure there is no root among you that produces this bitter poison.

Now, there it is. That's a translation of the Hebrew. In the Greek, there it is exactly.

Be sure, he says, make sure there is no root among you that produces this bitter poison. What is the bitter poison? The poison is this, that you have a grouse against God, and you argue with him, and you have a quarrel with him, and you turn away from God as he is revealed to you, and you indulge in idolatries of one kind or another, and you take up the fancy deities of the day and of the age, and of the pagan nations around you, and you become absorbed with them, and if you remain any allegiance, if you owe any allegiance to God, it is nothing other than purely formal. Now, this, let me repeat, is terribly serious in the light of the verses that follow, 20 and 21.

Listen to these. The Lord will never be willing to forgive him. Now, I don't suppose that any of you have noticed that there is such a word in Scripture.

The Lord will never be willing to forgive him. The Lord will single him out from among all the tribes of Israel for disaster, according to all the curses of the covenant written in the book of the law. Now, as I said, I have no opportunity this morning to expound this in any large way, but there are issues here which are so devastating, so challenging, that they're frightening.

There are not only promises in the covenant, there are curses in the covenant. And Moses tells the children of Israel, look, he says, you may qualify for the curses that God has covenanted to express and to manifest and to see through. If you turn away from the Lord your God, and because of a root of bitterness against God, you're taking the idolatries of the world around.

Now, in a society such as ours, this is a tremendous peril, that wittingly or unwittingly, we imbibe the philosophies of the world, and we put our arms around the theologies of the world, wrongly so-called, of course. And we become absorbed with the religions of the world, and to that extent, we deny the God who alone is God. The phrase has a subsidiary non-biblical or biblical or extra-biblical background in two

places.

I can only refer to those now. In the literature of the Qumran sect, in their hymns of thanksgiving, they had some remarkable hymns, largely based on scripture, but they speak in these terms. A root breeding gall and wormwood is in their thoughts, referring to some people, and in the stubbornness of their hearts they go astray and inquire of thee amid all their idols.

Now, that's the part. It's exactly the same phenomenon. Here are a people, say the Qumran sect, they've turned away from God, but when things have gone wrong with them, and when things are so oppressive they can't ask their idols, they can't ask their gods to help them, they cry to God for help amidst their own idolatries.

They've given their hearts worship, they've offered themselves, they live for other deities. Things have gone wrong. Who do they pray to? The God of Abram and of Isaac and of Jacob.

A heart of bitterness has brought them there. Now, you have one other incident, extra-biblical, I can only refer to it. The apocryphal book of 1st Maccabees refers to the notorious Antiochus Epiphanes.

You know, that person who tried to introduce Greek culture and paganism among the people of Israel of old. He tried to dethrone and to get rid of all the Old Testament teaching and influence, tried to persuade the Jews to hide the fact that they were circumcised, and everything Jewish to get rid of them, and to become just like the nations, Antiochus Epiphanes. And he was called a root of bitterness, poisonous, and God will not have such roots of bitterness, bitter roots.

He will deal with them in due course, as he did with Antiochus Epiphanes. Now, as far as we are concerned, we're in a Christian context here in Hebrews. And you see, it's terribly challenging that the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews envisages this kind of thing can happen in a church.

That you and I can come to the house of God and be involved in the things of God, apparently, and yet in our hearts we can be growing, we can be nurturing, we can be feeding a bitterness, a root of bitterness that can not only cause trouble but can defile the whole community. Now, let's have one or two case histories, unless we are asking too much there. At least let's give two or three brief illustrations of how this has worked out in the lives of some people.

What is this? Why do you say it's so terribly important? Why do you say that God hates it? Why does God sort out that person and mark that person guilty of this? Why does he do so and say, look, I will keep for you the curses of the covenant? Isn't God a little bit rough there? Well, now, the first illustration comes from our reading this morning, so I won't say much about it. The case of Miriam and of Aaron, Numbers chapter 12. Here is a very tragic case of a root of bitterness opening up an avenue whereby the heart can express its awesome, its hideous, satanic spleen, not against a stranger but a brother and a sister against another blood brother who was also called of God to be the leader of Israel.

Moses and Aaron were brothers. Miriam was their sister. So, you see, they all belong to the same family.

Now, what is it that could have upset the family circle like this? What is it that could possibly have upset Miriam and Aaron in such a way that they say, has the Lord only spoken by Moses? Now, they knew the Lord had spoken by Moses, but they wanted to elevate others alongside of Moses in order to denigrate and to bring down Moses a few steps. Now, if we may dare summarize, it would seem, and most of the expositors are fairly unanimous on this, it would seem that what had really brought spleen into the

situation was this. Moses had got married and he was a little bit late in life getting married.

Up until now, his sister and his brother had occupied a very central position in everything that he had done, and Miriam had been the woman in the trio, and she'd had a special place. But Moses married a Cushite woman, and that aggravated the matter too, that he married a Cushite woman. Apparently, God gave his blessing to it, but they were angered by it for some reason or other, never mind why this morning.

But when this Cushite wife of Moses came into the picture, Miriam was angered, and she gave birth to her spleen, and God had to take hold of things. Now, you remember what happened. God had to get the three of them together and take an unusual step and come down in an obvious manner alongside of the tent and say that Moses was his man, and that he spoke familiarly with him as man with man, and that Moses was allowed to see his form.

You cannot talk like that, he says, about my servant Moses of all people. So this can appear within a family. Jealousy can come in at the very table where we eat with our brothers and our sisters, our parents and our children, a root of bitterness, arising usually from jealousy and a few other things thrown in.

But it can bring poison into the home, and it can bring division and disaster. And from a spiritual point of view, it can incapacitate that home to follow the injunctions here of seeking peace with all men and the holiness without which no man shall see the Lord, and that's a tragedy. Let's take another illustration.

I've been reading of late in the Old Testament, and I've been back again in books of Samuel. Let me just take two illustrations from there which are very telling. I find them at any rate.

First of all, take the case of King Saul. Now, I don't suppose there is a more complex case than this, because there are many facets to it that I can't refer to this morning. It's very complex.

First of all, God did not plan, did not purpose that Israel should have a king, but Israel wanted a king like the nations. Because Israel wanted a king by the nations, God agreed to it. And He even chose a man, the kind of man that the nations wanted.

What kind of a man did the nations want? Oh, a big strapping fellow, good-looking, handsome, you know, the appeal of the sensual and of the physical. That's always true of the world, brothers and sisters. The world has never changed.

And when God paraded before Israel, this man who was head and shoulders above everybody else, here's the man for us, they said. We want a giant for our battles, and he's good-looking from the crown of his head to the sole of his feet. Saul is our man.

They were thrilled to bits. God knew from the beginning that he was a man of straw, but that was the type of man they wanted, and God gave them what they wanted. You know it's a blessing sometimes when God does not answer our prayers.

It would have been better for Israel if the prayer for a king had never been answered, than to have been given Saul. Well, Saul became king, but soon he manifested the fact that he was not really true to the God who allowed him to occupy that position at all. I can't go into these details either this morning, but God had to step in and take him down, take the throne away from him, and ordained in his place the young stripling David.

Well, now you can imagine what happens. Hurt pride, and there is nothing more ravenous and ridiculous and terrifying than hurt pride. Here's the man taken down from his throne, and God has ordained a little stripling of a fellow, and that a young lad was nothing but a shepherd boy who looked after the sheep in the backwoods of the desert.

God has ordained a stripling David to take his place. It sounds ridiculous, and he was the giant, and David was but the young fellow ready of countenance, like a little school boy. The audacity of the Almighty to take him away from his throne in the first place, but to choose a man like this is just to add pepper to the pill.

It took a particular serious turn, of course, when Saul heard the women chanting, following David's victory over Goliath and the Philistines, and this is a key moment. The women began to chant, Saul has killed his thousands, but David his tens of thousands. Oh my, he couldn't get that, he couldn't take that.

David has killed his, sorry, Saul has killed his thousands, they agreed to that, but David his tens of thousands, and we read that Saul was very angry, and listen to this language, this refrain galled him, that's the word. A root of bitterness, of gall was in his soul, and of course it seethed for the rest of his life. Now from that moment forward, Saul does nothing else but this, try to stop David, the anointed of the Lord, from taking his place on the throne.

God had summoned David to rule in place of Saul, and everything that Saul does, directly or indirectly, seems to be related to this. I'm not going to quit my throne, I'm not going to let this stripling take my place, I'm going to fight God, I'm going to fight man, I'm going to fight everybody, I'm going to keep my position. See, he was worshipping himself, self-worship idolatry, pride is idolatry, and of course you're not surprised to hear that ultimately this man ended in suicide.

On the field of battle, he was wounded and he got somebody to perform the last stroke, which is suicide. Take one other, and I think it's sadder than even these, I'm dealing with something serious this morning, you agree with me? You see, this can happen in a family, this can happen on a larger scale, anywhere, even in a church. Take this other illustration, that of Absalom, we're still in David's family.

Absalom, David's son by his third wife, Macca, daughter of the king of Geshur. Now Absalom again, it's strange isn't it, Absalom again is described in almost similar terms to Saul physically. In 2 Samuel 14, 25 to 27, he's described in great detail, all Israel praised his beauty because they said of him that from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him.

But whatever about physical blemishes, his heart was not right with God. His heart, Absalom, was not right with God. Now this came to a head over one issue.

His half-sister Tamar was sexually violated and molested by her half-brother Ammon. Absalom loved his half-sister and he was absolutely mad, he was furious and he decided that he simply couldn't tolerate this and apparently David was not able to do what he thought David should do. And Absalom was not called to account immediately and Absalom was not judged and he was not dealt with as he might have been and so this young prince Absalom took everything into his own hands.

I can't go into the details, we hear of intrigue, we hear of inner wonder, we hear of this that and the other duplicity and the determination for revenge and for murder. I'm not telling you how he planned it but you see what's going on. In his heart of heart he's taking matters into his own hands, he's becoming king

himself, he's thinking of himself as responsible for executing judgment in the land.

God had never put him there. God had never raised him to that position, God had not never made him a judge nor a king nor a prophet. God had never given him that prerogative.

David was on the throne, he assumed it and a root of bitterness began to thrive in his soul and thrive to such iniquitous proportions that he was determined to murder and to lead a section of the nation in civil war against David his father, the anointed of the Lord. And so it happened. Take one little picture, you read it for yourself and you will find it really is an amazing picture.

Read 1 Samuel chapter 15. Absalom lost no time in going after his father's throne. He was brought back, he was sent into exile when he murdered his half-brother and then he was brought back by certain means and methods.

Back into Jerusalem David clasped him and embraced him but he was not allowed to see the king's face. He lived in Jerusalem but he did not see the king's face and he was angry with David. Why can't he occupy the place he occupied before? Why can't he sit at the king's table? Why can't he be the man he was before? Why does David look down upon him as the guilty culprit? Why is he held responsible for murdering the man that violated his half-sister whom he loved? Why? And so subtly, you see, subtly, with his retinue of horses, chariots and 50 retainers to run before him he began to capture the imagination of Israel and he determined that he was going to get Israel away from their allegiance to God and to David, particularly to David as God's servant, onto himself.

And he was going to ingratiate himself upon the people. Each morning he got up very early. It's not only zeal for God that can get men out of bed, zeal for themselves can get them up earlier.

Absalom got up early and he went out and he met the people who were coming with their problems for king David to settle and he said, oh I'm sorry, says nobody's been deputed to see to your needs. If only I were king, he says, I'd see that everything was all right. But my father's far too busy, he's got far too much to do.

And with any windows and insinuations he intimated that if only he were number one, all would be well. You see what he's doing? And the scriptures go on to tell us that he stole the hearts of the men of Israel away from king David, a root of bitterness. And he engaged in civil war against his father, God's anointed.

High treason shows itself. Where did it come from of justice? A root of bitterness. Pride, jealousy, self-worship, call it whatever you like, whatever was at the root of it, however many facets lay at the root of it, constituted the root of it, here it is in its awesome, hideous expression.

And Absalom died in the ensuing civil war which he himself had engineered in his overweening pride. Oh, this is a serious condition and dangerous wherever it's found. That brings me to the last thing I want to say, the outcome or fruit of the condition in question.

It will cause trouble, says the writer to the Hebrews, and defile many. Don't allow this kind of root of bitterness to grow in your soul, he says. See that it doesn't happen, he tells the congregation.

Keep looking out for one another. See that it isn't allowed to happen. Take care of one another.

Don't let this happen to people. If you're concerned for their material well-being all the time, but for God's glory, don't allow this to happen to any man or woman in the church of God. Why? It will cause trouble and it will defile many.

If we permit this kind of condition to develop in our hearts, we are not simply breeding an innocent, non-Christian alternative to God's will. We are nursing an imponderably serious condition of far-reaching consequences. You see, if there is a root of bitterness in your soul, that condition will render it impossible for you to fulfill your Christian calling to live at peace with all men.

A man or a woman with a gall of bitterness, unforgiving, without grace, unchristlike, ungodlike, cannot live at peace with the people of God or with anyone else. A root of bitterness makes it impossible to be peaceful. And a root of bitterness defiles.

And if it defiles, it is contrary to the search and the quest for holiness. I cannot be holy if I have a root of bitterness in my soul that spreads its ugly influence all around and sooner or later seeps out of me in the form of bitter statements, animosities, pent-up grievances that will stab at this and jibe at that. I can't do it.

So peace and holiness are out of it. And brothers and sisters, what is the church of Jesus Christ if we have not shalom and if we have not holiness? Turn it into a concert hall. The church of Jesus Christ without shalom and holiness is a church that is severed from the life of God, who has sent the gift of his Son to make peace and to reconcile men and women to himself and to one another, and has sent the Holy Spirit into our heart to give us a new nature, which is the very seed of holiness in the soul of man.

We are running counter to God, contrary to God. We are moving against the tide of God's plan and program and purpose. If the root of bitterness remains in your soul or mine, brothers, we're not going toward the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

We're walking in the other direction. We're dissembling. We're splitting up the troops.

We're dividing the household of faith. And we're causing harm and unholiness of thought and action in the process. Now, I close with this.

I began with it. To me, one of the most devastating revelations here is this. That this can happen to me.

Not necessarily because Satan specially singles me out and attacks me. It may come that way. Not necessarily because of some evil people that I'm keeping company with.

It could come that way. But it can happen to me and it can happen to you when you come to church and read your Bible and you don't get grace through the means of grace. And you go through the rigmarole and the routine of the means of grace, but you don't get grace.

You don't get grace. You don't receive it. By faith, you do not draw it.

It is in God. It is in Christ, but you don't draw it. It is there, but you go through it all and we do not imbibe.

We come to the waters and we look at the waters, but we do not drink. We come to God and we talk about God and we sing to him, but we do not draw from God the grace we need. A growing church cannot afford to have one solitary member who is not by the reading of the scriptures and fellowship and listening to the Word expounded and meeting at the Lord's table, drawing grace from God.

Drawing grace. Jesus Christ, our Lord, is the fount of grace. By the appointment of the Father, the grace of God is flooding over in him.

You and I must not simply call him by the right names or go through the right motions in approaching him. We must draw from him. How do we draw from him? By faith.

This calls for an active, vital, virile faith that sees him as the giver and the donor of grace upon grace, grace sufficient for every day, grace for me and grace for you and grace for us all. And when we've all been feasting upon grace, we have to say at the end, he giveth more grace. But drawing it, you see.

Oh, Wesley was right when he sang, plenteous grace with thee is found. Grace to cover all my sins. Let the healing streams abound, cleanse and keep me pure with him.

Thou of life the fountain art, freely let me drink of thee. Spring thou up within my heart, rise to all eternity. Have you come there? Has your faith laid hold of the Lord Jesus and he's come within you and he is a fountain of living water within you and you're daily having your thirst quenched from within and from the throne? And deep within calls to deep without and God satiates the wilder desert of your soul by the overflowing tide of his infinite provisions.

I wonder whether there's someone here this morning who's got a root of bitterness. Incipient, maybe. You know, and God knows.

My friend, face it if you do. Face it if you do. Don't hide it, don't try to brush it under the carpet.

If this passage this morning and its context says anything, it says it is terribly serious. And it has to be dealt with if you are going on with God in the pursuit of peace with all men and the holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. It's as serious as that.

So acknowledge it. Seek the cleansing blood of Jesus. Right in the pew where you are, close your eyes if you like, even now.

Cry to God that the cleansing blood of Jesus will purge you, that the cathartic composition of the atoning blood will be such as to make you clean before God and he will not hold you responsible anymore. He will forgive your sins. We sang together just now.

Let me repeat it in concluding. Oh, to grace, how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be. Let that grace, Lord, like a fetter bind my wandering heart to thee, prone to wander.

Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love and whether my idolatries be amongst gods of gold or gods of silver or of wood or of ideas that are purely man-made or whether I may worship myself, it makes no difference. I'm an idolater.

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Take my heart.

Oh, take and seal it from and for. I believe Wesley initially had this line, seal it for thy courts above. Will you pray that prayer this morning? Let us bow before God together.

Oh, mighty God, our Father, who knowest all our hearts and knowest our thoughts afar off, our down-sitting and our uprising, draw near to us in these closing moments as we move to your table. We need to be able to partake with a worthiness, the worthiness of those who have acknowledged their sins

and their trespasses and have brought them to the fount of cleansing and to the light of your countenance and have left them there. Oh, grant to us this morning like the pilgrim in Bunyan's story, grant us that as we look at the cross we may find the burden roll off our backs and the root of any hideous condition such as the one we've been thinking about taken out of our spirits.

Oh, healing God, saving God, oh, save us from sin. To the glory of your name. Amen.

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