



## BITTERNESS

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(Job 21:22-26)

**H**ardships press us up against God. It is a universal truth we all learned in the old Sunday school song, "Jesus loves me, this I know. . . Little ones to Him belong. They are weak, but He is strong." God always seems bigger to those who need Him the most; God always seems stronger to those who feel weakest; God is always most needed by those most in need. And suffering is the tool God often uses to help us need Him more.

Read Job's story. The story of his suffering, recorded in the Old Testament book of Job, is not a story about the suffering caused by torn ligaments on a football field. It is not a story of the suffering caused by a polite refusal letter for financial aid to Princeton. It is not even about the suffering of the heartache over a returned engagement ring. Instead, Job's is a story of suffering stalking a person, tearing him down, and ripping into his sanity. This is affliction spinning out of control. "Suffering like Job's would never draw me to God," we think. "It would only push me away from Him."

God Himself suffered too, however. The Son of God Himself crossed the chasm between divinity and humanity and walked onto earth. His goal was to endure the thrashing due His creatures for their rebellion against His Father, Jehovah. To this day, He requires suffering of all His followers, some of it intense—but only for their good, and never equaling what He Himself passed through.

### **CALLED TO SUFFER**

Despite Christ's compassionate death for our sins, God's plan calls for all Christians to suffer. To encourage us, He may write some light moments into the script of our lives, but without fail, some scenes are

going to break our hearts. Some of our favorite characters will die. And the movie may end earlier than we wish.

God screens the trials that come into our lives, allowing only those that accomplish His good plan. He takes no joy in human agony. These trials are not evenly distributed from person to person. This can discourage us, for we are not privy to His reasons. But in God's wisdom and love, every trial in a Christian's life is ordained from eternity past, custom-made for that believer's eternal good—even when it does not seem like it.

The core of His plan is to rescue us from our sin. Our pain, poverty, and broken hearts are not His ultimate focus. He cares about them, but they are merely symptoms of the real problem. God cares most, not about making us comfortable, but about teaching us to hate our sins, grow up spiritually, and love Him. To do this, He gives us salvation's benefits only gradually and sometimes painfully (Acts 9:16; 2 Cor. 1:5; Phil. 1:29).

### **FINDING CONTENTMENT**

Overcoming bitterness happens when we gain contentment. This does not mean losing sorrow or saying good-bye to discomfort. Contentment means sacrificing itchy cravings to gain a settled soul. We give up

one thing for another. It is hard. Hard, but sweet. We are "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10).

When it comes to contentment, God must be our aim. Whether it is wayward thought, bad-mouthing our circumstances, or comparing ourselves with others whose lives are easier, the battle involves more than eschewing evil; it involves pursuing God. Overcoming bitterness only happens when we are overcome with God.

I was driving at night recently in my handicap-equipped van when everything went dead: the engine, the lights, the brakes, and the steering. It was a very close call! My vulnerability shook me for a moment. I've always leaned hard on God's protection for the "helpless," but in my most helpless moment, my confidence was shaken.

I learned that fear and disappointment are real. They turn our focus away from God and onto ourselves. We question His love and concern for us and quickly plunge into bitterness and despair. The beginning of our Christian life may have been exhilarating. Spiritual adrenaline was pumped up. But now, we feel bitter, confused, and even angry. God has not failed us, however. We have just missed the lesson He has for us. Our life is a straight line to heaven. We need not be sidetracked by a few bumps in the road.

#### **WHEN GOD SAYS "NO"**

I remember those first terrible nights—paralyzed on a Stryker frame in the geriatric ward of a state institution. Scared, bitter, confused. A friend read the story of Jesus healing the lame man at the pool of Bethesda in John 5. "Oh, God, will you please heal me?" I whispered, crying in the night.

It was more than thirty years later when I visited the Pool of Bethesda for the first time. I looked at the ruins of the five colonnades and the steps leading down to

the water. I look around in my mind's eye and see hundreds of paralyzed people. Tears well up in my eyes. Jesus answered my prayer—He said, "No."

And I'm glad. A "no" answer has driven a lot of sin from my life, strengthened my commitment to Christ, and forced me to depend on His grace. It has stretched my hope, increased my faith, and strengthened my character. Now, I can thank Him—for the wiser choice, the better answer, the richer path. That's how we overcome bitterness. We focus on Him and let healing happen on the inside.

#### **FURTHER MEDITATION:**

Other passages to study about the issue of bitterness include:

- > Genesis 27:41
- > Esther 5:9
- > Proverbs 14:10
- > Ecclesiastes 7:9
- > Matthew 6:14, 15
- > Acts 8:23
- > Ephesians 4:26, 31, 32
- > James 3:14

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To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note about bitterness at Hebrews 12:12–29 on page 1637. See also the personality profile of Saul on page 370.

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- 18 They are like straw before the wind,  
And like chaff that a storm carries away.
- 19 They say, 'God lays up one's<sup>a</sup> iniquity for  
his children';  
Let Him recompense him, that he may  
know it.
- 20 Let his eyes see his destruction,  
And let him drink of the wrath of the  
Almighty.
- 21 For what does he care about his  
household after him,  
When the number of his months is cut  
in half?
- 22 "Can *anyone* teach God knowledge,  
Since He judges those on high?  
23 One dies in his full strength,  
Being wholly at ease and secure;  
24 His pails<sup>a</sup> are full of milk,  
And the marrow of his bones is moist.
- 25 Another man dies in the bitterness of his  
soul,  
Never having eaten with pleasure.
- 26 They lie down alike in the dust,  
And worms cover them.
- 27 "Look, I know your thoughts,  
And the schemes *with which* you would  
wrong me.
- 28 For you say,  
'Where is the house of the prince?  
And where is the tent,<sup>a</sup>  
The dwelling place of the wicked?'
- 29 Have you not asked those who travel the  
road?  
And do you not know their signs?
- 30 For the wicked are reserved for the day  
of doom;  
They shall be brought out on the day of  
wrath.
- 31 Who condemns his way to his face?

And who repays him *for what* he has  
done?

32 Yet he shall be brought to the grave,  
And a vigil kept over the tomb.

33 The clods of the valley shall be sweet to  
him;  
Everyone shall follow him,  
As countless *have gone* before him.

34 How then can you comfort me with  
empty words,  
Since falsehood remains in your  
answers?"

## ELIPHAZ ACCUSES JOB OF WICKEDNESS

**22** Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered  
and said:

- 2 "Can a man be profitable to God,  
Though he who is wise may be  
profitable to himself?
- 3 Is it any pleasure to the Almighty that  
you are righteous?  
**Or is it gain to Him that you make your  
ways blameless?**
- "Is it because of your fear of Him that He  
corrects you,  
And enters into judgment with you?
- 5 Is not your wickedness great,  
And your iniquity without end?  
For you have taken pledges from your  
brother for no reason,  
And stripped the naked of their clothing.
- 7 You have not given the weary water to  
drink,  
And you have withheld bread from the  
hungry.

21:19 <sup>a</sup>Literally *his* 21:24 <sup>a</sup>Septuagint and  
Vulgate read *bowels*; Syriac reads *sides*; Targum  
reads *breasts*. 21:28 <sup>a</sup>Vulgate omits *the tent*.



## SOUL NOTE

**Difficult Times (21:22-26)** Job did not understand why he was suffering so terribly. He had been "blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil" (1:1). His words here reveal the depth of his pain and the bitterness rising in his heart. Fortunately, Job maintained his trust in God. How we respond to struggles defines our attitude toward God. We can become bitter, or we can press on in faith, knowing that God will not subject us to more than we can handle. We should continue to trust God, no matter what. He is faithful and will see us through any crisis. **Topic: Bitterness**

<sup>7</sup>If<sup>a</sup> you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? <sup>8</sup>But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. <sup>9</sup>Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup>For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. <sup>11</sup>Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

#### RENEW YOUR SPIRITUAL VITALITY

<sup>12</sup>Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, <sup>13</sup>and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.

<sup>14</sup>Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: <sup>15</sup>looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; <sup>16</sup>lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. <sup>17</sup>For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the

blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.

#### THE GLORIOUS COMPANY

<sup>18</sup>For you have not come to the mountain that<sup>a</sup> may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness<sup>b</sup> and tempest, <sup>19</sup>and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. <sup>20</sup>(For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned<sup>a</sup> or shot with an arrow."<sup>b</sup> <sup>21</sup>And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling."<sup>a</sup>)

<sup>22</sup>But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, <sup>23</sup>to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, <sup>24</sup>to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.

**12:7** <sup>a</sup>NU-Text and M-Text read *It is for discipline that you endure; God . . .* **12:18** <sup>a</sup>NU-Text reads *to that which.* <sup>b</sup>NU-Text reads *gloom* **12:20** <sup>a</sup>NU-Text and M-Text omit the rest of this verse. <sup>b</sup>Exodus 19:12, 13 **12:21** <sup>a</sup>Deuteronomy 9:19

#### KEY PASSAGE



**Bitterness**

### WEED IT OUT

(12:12-29)

Believers need to look out for each other—helping those who are feeling weak and guiding those who are heading in the wrong direction. This will guard against “any root of bitterness” that might spring up within the fellowship. This phrase may refer to the bitterness of unbelief that can poison a church and the bitterness between people that can poison relationships.

Bitterness, once planted, tends to grow quickly and cause trouble. Bitterness that is allowed to take root in our lives will spring up into actions and words that cannot be taken back. Believers can avoid the root of bitterness by dealing with their feelings immediately. When hurt or doubt are allowed to remain in one's life, they provide hospitable soil for the root of bitterness. With God's help, we can keep that root from having a place to grow, and if bitterness has already taken root, weed it out.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about bitterness on pages 658, 659. See also the personality profile of Saul on page 370.

## SAUL PERSECUTES DAVID

19 Now Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to all his servants, that they should kill David; but Jonathan, Saul's son, delighted greatly in David.<sup>20</sup> So Jonathan told David, saying, "My father Saul seeks to kill you. Therefore please be on your guard until morning, and stay in a secret place and hide. And I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak with my father about you. Then what I observe, I will tell you."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Thus Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father, and said to him, "Let not the king sin against his servant, against David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his works have been very good toward you."<sup>23</sup> For he took his life in his hands and killed the Philistine, and the Lord brought about a great deliverance for all Israel. You saw it and rejoiced. Why then will you sin against him?<sup>24</sup>

Jonathan arose and escaped, and came to David in the cave. And David said to Jonathan, "Where have you been?" Jonathan said, "I was in the field as you are, and I will speak with my father about you. Then what I observe, I will tell you."<sup>25</sup>

Jonathan said to David, "Do not fear, for I will be as you are, and I will speak with my father about you. Then what I observe, I will tell you."<sup>26</sup>

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Bitterness

## SAUL AND THE POISON OF BITTER FRUIT

(1 SAMUEL 19)

## PERSONALITY PROFILE

King Saul wasted his last years in hatred and anger. He sank deeper into darkness and torment suffering as his battle-scarred body and soul yielded to age. Fears, jealousies, murderous thoughts, and violent rage consumed him without relief. He attempted to kill David, driving David to life as a fugitive and wasting kingdom resources trying to track down and eliminate him. Others also suffered. Saul unjustly accused the priests of Nob of conspiring with David, and he had 85 of them killed. Once the killing started in Nob, no one was spared—neither men, women, children, nor animals.

Saul's choices caused a tidal wave of evil to flood his soul. He lost all godliness or restraint. Even David's mercy in sparing Saul's life twice had no softening effect that lasted. His soul was hardened and unresponsive to any message from God. He collected a legacy of evil and bitterness.

Facing his final battle, Saul was terrified by the overwhelming might of the Philistines. Samuel was dead and God was silent. Desperate, Saul consulted a medium—an ancient psychic who practiced divination in direct violation of God's law. The message he received sealed his fate. During the battle, with defeat in sight, Saul fell on his own sword. Bitterness finally turned into self-destruction.

Saul's journey to his doom followed a well-traveled path. People continue to discover that resistance against God's Spirit gains strength with practice. Such lives even show up in the church. These people are bitter, angry, divisive, and dark in thought and deed. As David treated Saul with mercy and respect, so must we treat such people. They must be lovingly called to repentance. The church can speak truth to them while taking care not to join them on their bitter journey.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about bitterness on pages 658, 659. See also the key passage note at Hebrews 12:12–29 on page 1637.

who were tormented with unclean spirits. And they were healed. <sup>19</sup>And the whole multitude sought to touch Him, for power went out from Him and healed *them* all.

For so did their fathers to the false prophets.

#### THE BEATITUDES

<sup>20</sup>Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said:

- "Blessed *are you* poor,  
For yours is the kingdom of God.  
<sup>21</sup> Blessed *are you* who hunger now,  
For you shall be filled.  
Blessed *are you* who weep now,  
For you shall laugh.  
<sup>22</sup> Blessed *are you* when men hate you,  
And when they exclude you,  
And revile you,  
and cast out  
your name  
as evil,  
For the Son of  
Man's sake.  
<sup>23</sup> Rejoice in that day  
and leap for  
joy!  
For indeed your reward *is* great in  
heaven,  
For in like manner their fathers did to  
the prophets.

"Judge not, and you shall not be  
judged. Condemn not, and you  
shall not be condemned. Forgive,  
and you will be forgiven."

LUKE 6:37

#### JESUS PRONOUNCES WOES

- <sup>24</sup> "But woe to you who are rich,  
For you have received your  
consolation.  
<sup>25</sup> Woe to you who are full,  
For you shall hunger.  
Woe to you who laugh now,  
For you shall mourn and weep.  
<sup>26</sup> Woe to you<sup>a</sup> when all<sup>b</sup> men speak well  
of you,

#### LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

<sup>27</sup>"But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. <sup>29</sup>To him who strikes you on the *one* cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold *your* tunic either. <sup>30</sup>Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask *them* back. <sup>31</sup>And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise.

<sup>32</sup>"But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup>And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup>And if you lend to *those* from whom you hope to receive back, what credit

is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. <sup>35</sup>But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. <sup>36</sup>Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.

#### DO NOT JUDGE

<sup>37</sup>"Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

6:26 <sup>a</sup>NU-Text and M-Text omit to you. <sup>b</sup>M-Text omits all.

#### SOUL NOTE



**The Plot Thickens** (6:27, 28) When wronged, a human reaction often is to hate the person who wronged us and plot ways to get even. But Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you . . . and pray for those who spitefully use you." Such words turned many away from Christ and still do today.

Loving one's enemies does not mean having affectionate feelings for them. Instead, it requires a decision to act in love toward them no matter how we feel. We need to pray and ask Christ to take our hurt and bitterness, and then to replace those feelings with His love.

**Topic: Bitterness**



<sup>30</sup>So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

<sup>31</sup>And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up

and sit with him. <sup>32</sup>The place in the Scripture which he read was this:

*"He was led as a sheep to the slaughter;  
And as a lamb before its shearer is silent,*



### SOUL NOTE

**Better, Not Bitter** (8:20–24) Peter pointed at Simon's wickedness and need for repentance. "You are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity," Peter said. Simon responded, "Pray to the Lord for me." Bitterness is indeed like a poison, eating away at a person's soft heart, turning it into stone—hard and unyielding. Simon first had to deal with his bitterness and sin. People poisoned by bitterness, whatever the cause, can be touched by God's grace, and so we pray for them.

**Topic: Bitterness**



**Knowing  
God**

### PERSONALITY PROFILE

## THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH'S SEARCH FOR GOD

(ACTS 8:26–38)

Sometimes good reading material can make all the difference on a long trip. This man from Ethiopia, called a "eunuch" (the term may simply have been a government title), was on his way back from Jerusalem and spent his time reading.

That may not seem so unusual, except that in these days, books were hard to come by. For a person to have a scroll of Isaiah meant a certain degree both of wealth and position. The Bible says that this man was "a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury" (Acts 8:27). Because he had been worshiping in Jerusalem, we can assume that he was a Gentile convert to Judaism and had traveled there for one of the great festivals.

In the meantime, Philip, one of the deacons in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:3–5), had been having a great ministry in Samaria. But then God sent him on a special assignment—out to a desert road. It was there that God placed the Ethiopian and Philip for a divine appointment.

Philip approached the chariot and discovered the man reading from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 53. The prophet was describing the Suffering Servant, the Messiah. The man did not understand what Isaiah was describing, but Philip knew. As Philip explained about Jesus, suddenly the pieces fell into place. "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him" (Acts 8:35). The Ethiopian believed, was baptized right then and there, and went back to his home with a message of salvation!

Sometimes we find God in the strangest places. Sometimes divine appointments come when we least expect one. As people search for God, you may be the one whom God sends to explain a passage, offer a word of truth or encouragement, or simply be a friend. We must be open for those appointments. God may want to use us to make Himself known to someone!

To Learn More: Turn to the article about knowing God on pages 164, 165. See also the key passage note at Leviticus 26:9–13 on page 162.

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<sup>34</sup>So the  
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