

## “LIFE’S TOO SHORT... TO BE BITTER”

Genesis 45:5-8 with Romans 12:19-21

### INTRODUCTION

1. Bitterness is a scary thing.

Eg. One author said it like this:

*“Bitterness is... like taking a bottle of poison, swallowing it, and then waiting for the other person to die.”*

When a person is bitter, angry and cynical, the chemicals produced in your glands flow through your body. They affect your stomach. They affect your heart. They affect your whole being.”

It was Frederick Nietzsche who said,

*“Nothing on earth consumes a man more completely than the passion of resentment.”*

Nietzsche has said a lot of things I don’t accept, but I agree with that statement.

2. Do you recognize the names Ann Landers and Abigail Van Buren? They spent almost half a century giving advice about relationships in their newspaper columns. They were twin sisters who had a double wedding. They started writing advice columns when they were young adults.

Eventually, “Dear Abby,” left the partnership and started her own column that fractured their relationship. For years, these relational experts didn’t even speak to

each other until they finally patched things up very late in life.

3. Bitterness can do that to you. Max Lucado said,

*“It will cause you to burn down your house to kill a rat.”*

Eg. History tells us that Sigmund Freud, one of the most influential thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, died a bitter and disillusioned man.

In 1918, he wrote these words:

*“I have found little that is good about human beings on the whole. In my experience most of them are trash, no matter whether they publicly subscribe to this or that ethical doctrine or to none at all.”*

It’s no wonder that Sigmund Freud died friendless. By the time he died, he had a broken relationship with each of his followers. He died a bitter old man.

4. Somebody said,

*“No matter how long you nurse a grudge, it won’t get better.”*

Have you noticed we use phrases to describe a grudge in the same way we describe caring for a baby? We say somebody “*carries a grudge.*” Or we say, “*He’s nursing a grudge.*” That’s the way some people treat bitterness.

5. If there was anyone in the Bible who had a right to bitterness it was the character named Joseph. His story is told in the Book of Genesis. If you have a copy of the Scriptures, I invite you to open to Genesis, chapter 45.

You might remember his story. Joseph had a dream one night that he would be exalted above his brothers, and even his parents. Naturally, his brothers weren’t too excited about that dream. Their hearts filled with envy, jealousy and malice toward Joseph.

When the opportunity presented itself, they threw him into a pit, intended to leave him to die. Instead, they sold him into slavery for a caravan headed for Egypt. They went home, told their father that Joseph was dead and forgot all about him.

Meanwhile, Joseph landed in the house of Potiphar, Chief of Security for the King of Egypt. Potiphar’s wife falsely accused Joseph of rape, and he was thrown into jail.

But God gave Joseph the ability to interpret dreams while he was even in jail. He was elevated by the Pharaoh of Egypt to the #2 position in all the country. When a famine struck the Middle East, Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt looking for food. If Joseph ever had the opportunity “to get even” with his brothers for what they did to him and said about him, it was now. But he didn’t go down that road.

So from this story, I want to glean two guidelines today that will help us conquer the problem of bitterness that can trap all of us sooner or later in life. Even if you’re a relational expert, even if you’re a counselor, like “Dear Abby” or Ann Landers, even if you’re a pastor, you can be trapped by bitterness. So, I want you to see two principles from Scripture that will help you conquer the problem of bitterness. First of all, if I’m going to avoid this deadly trap...

### 1. I MUST ACCEPT THE STRATEGY THAT PREVENTS BITTERNESS IN MY LIFE.

If you and I are going to avoid bitterness, we have to accept the strategy for life that Joseph used. That strategy involves several things. First it...

- Involves the providence of God in my life

Look at what Joseph says:

*“...It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you...But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance” (Genesis 45:5,7).*

Do you understand if you focus on the people who hurt you or the reason you’re hurt, you’ll end up in anger, bitterness and despair? If you think back on your life to people who have hurt you deeply – your parents, your children, your grandparents or your friends who let you down, the list could go on and on. As long as we focus on the people who hurt us, we’re doomed to the swamp of bitterness.

Others might mean to harm us but that’s not what God has for us. He may allow those experiences in our lives because He has a bigger plan. Ultimately, He might even allow the unkindness of others to humble us and cause us to cry out for His mercy. Never forget that.

And beyond that, some day **God will settle the score.** Look at these words from Romans...

*“Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.*

*On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”* (Romans 12:19-21).

Eg. The Bible describes how nations like the Assyrians, Babylonians, Edomites and Egyptians all were used by God to discipline His people. But ultimately, God settled the score and those nations were judged!. Some day, in His providence, the scales of justice will be balanced.

All of us have to develop the attitude of Job had when he said it like this:

*“The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised”* (Job 1:21b).

If I’m going to have a strategy for my life that prevents bitterness, I have to understand the providence of God. I also have to understand...

- The process God uses in my life

Look at verse 8 in Genesis 45:

*“It was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt”* (Genesis 45:8).

Perhaps more than anything else, this was the secret of Joseph’s life...

- he saw God everywhere!

He saw the presence of God in every event. He understood God was always working behind the scenes. He knew his brothers didn’t send him to Egypt, God did. He knew it wasn’t Potiphar’s wife that put him in prison, it was God. He didn’t invent the ability to interpret dreams, God did. He knew it wasn’t his own skill that caused him to be elevated to the #2 position in the country, it was God. God was in charge of the whole process.

Eg. Years ago, a film was produced about the horrors of the Holocaust called, “*Shoah*”. It’s a 9 ½ hour documentary that describes death camp experiences of Jews under Nazi Germany. In one painful scene, a death camp survivor talks about the cumulative effects of 40 years of bitterness. Here’s what he says:

*“If you could lick my heart, it would poison you.”*

Folks, that’s what bitterness will do to you if you don’t realize that God is ultimately at work in your life.

But there is another part of the strategy that prevented bitterness in Joseph’s life. I must also understand...

- The priority of forgiveness in my life

I love these next words on your outline from the story:

*“He threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them”* (Genesis 45:14,15a).

Do you understand that forgiveness means we choose not to rehearse the wrong done to us?

There’s a big difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Joseph was reconciled to his brothers, but sometimes that never happens.

If we really believe in the providence of God, God invites us, for our good, to forgive those who’ve hurt us. If we don’t, we are imprisoning ourselves, not others.

If you think it’s impossible to forgive, remember the words of Jesus as He hung on the cross:

*“Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:34a).*

Jesus was wronged and even put to death... yet, He offered forgiveness. If I’m not willing to forgive, remember... it’s like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die! I may not be reconciled, but God still commands me to forgive.

If I’m going to follow the strategy that prevents bitterness, I’ve got to understand the providence of God in my life. I’ve got to understand the processes God uses in my life. I have to understand the priority of forgiveness in my life, and then I must understand there is...

- The perspective only God has for my life.

If we turned over to Genesis 50, Joseph says it like this to his brothers:

*“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20).*

Somebody said,

*“Life is like a giant jigsaw puzzle. We are like children trying to put the puzzle together with only a handful of pieces and someone took the box that has the picture on the cover. We’re left trying to fit our little handful of pieces together and trying to figure out the big picture at the same time. No wonder we struggle with what life is all about.”*

Somebody else said,

*“We’re like ants crawling across a painting by Rembrandt. When we come to darker colors, it feels like the whole painting is dark, somber and foreboding. Everything around us seems dark.*

*If only we could stand back from the painting, we’d see the darker hues offset by lighter colors, like green and orange and yellow and blue. It’s the darkness of the darker hues that makes the brighter colors stand out so vividly.”*

That’s the way it is with life. Betrayal and mistreatment and abuse may cause us to think there are no lighter tones in the painting of life. But, God is creating a masterpiece in your life and my life. Before He’s finished, He’ll use every color on His palette.

So the first thing I have to do is accept the strategy that prevents bitterness.

But, there is something else I have to do if I’m going to avoid the trap of bitterness in my life.

## **2. I MUST BE WILLING TO ADOPT THE STEPS THAT RELIEVE BITTERNESS**

When I look at the rest of the Bible, I discover three important steps that need to occur if I’m going to release the bitterness that builds up so easily when I’m hurt. First...

- The people must be forgiven

Look at this conversation between Peter and Jesus that occurs in the Gospel of Matthew:

*“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’”* (Matthew 18:21-22).

Did you ever wonder where that number “77” came from? It actually refers to early chapters of the Bible when a man named, Lamech, said it like this in Genesis:

*“I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times”* (Genesis 4:23b, 24).

In other words, in Lamech’s case, he took vengeance into his own hands and determined to get even with the people who hurt him. Jesus looked at that Old Testament experience and said, *“Don’t even go there. You’ve got nothing to gain. People must be forgiven.”*

Jesus was even more direct about this in Matthew chapter 6:

*“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins”* (Matthew 6:14,15).

Do you understand what He’s saying? You and I can’t talk about the forgiveness of God, if we’re not willing to forgive each other. People must be forgiven.

The founder of the Christian faith...Jesus Christ...was the champion of forgiveness! When He died on the cross, He gave you and me the opportunity to experience the forgiveness of God Almighty in heaven.

We have no business claiming to have a relationship with the champion of forgiveness, if we’re not willing to forgive people around us!

The people who have hurt us must be forgiven. That doesn’t mean the relationship will be restored, but for our own good we must forgive them. And then...

- The anger must be forsaken

Paul was very clear about this when he wrote to the Ephesians:

*“In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.*

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you”* (Ephesians 4:26,31-32).

Folks, anger and bitterness are related.

Do you know what will keep bitterness alive in your soul? It’s when you rehearse the anger you feel toward somebody over and over. That’s why Paul said, *“Let it go.*

*Forsake it. Leave it behind. Get rid of it.*” Choose forgiveness. And then there is a third step in this process...

- The past must be allowed to fade

Did you notice I didn’t say, “*forgotten?*” I’m not suggesting that you will be able to completely forget all the wrongs ever done to you. But they will fade in your memory if you’re willing to forgive. And they will become less important.

If you find yourself struggling with this, I invite you to follow the words of Jesus in Matthew, chapter 11.

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28).

I invite you today to give the burden of bitterness to Him!

## CONCLUSION

1. Gary Weatherall spoke at a memorial service for his wife several years ago. He explained why they went to Lebanon and how he felt about what happened. Listen to what he said:

*“So many people think my wife’s death was a waste...but we believe that coming here with the message of Jesus would never be a waste. It’s a message worth laying our lives down for.*

*Whoever did this crime, I forgive them. It’s not easy. It took everything I have but I can forgive these people because God has forgiven me.”* (World Magazine, December 7, 2002)

2. Do you understand why the writer of Hebrews said...

*“See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many”* (Hebrews 12:15).

For those who don’t have a relationship with God, forgiveness seems like weakness. In reality, it’s better than letting bitterness eat away at us like a cancer and destroy us.

Bitterness comes when we’re unwilling to forgive.

Eg. Here’s my recommendation. I want you to think back over last year and list every offense, minor and major, that come to your mind. Then I want you to add to that list the offenses that linger from previous years. Write these down as bullet points on a sheet of paper.

You’ll realize just how many offenses have been polluting your thought life and your spirit. That’s a latent sign of bitterness. It will rob you of the life God has intended, if you let it remain.

2. Then I invite you to walk through that list prayerfully and remind yourself that the most despicable action taken against you pales in comparison to the offenses that you’ve committed against Jesus Himself. Remember, God calls us to forgive as He has forgiven us in Christ.

How would you answer this question?

- Where have I allowed bitterness to influence my life?