

DON'T TAKE THE
BITTER
PILL



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For the sake of clarity, all Scripture quotations and parenthesized Scripture references have been placed in italics.

Dedication

This booklet is dedicated to the person who has been through something, or who is currently going through something, that just doesn't seem fair. While that situation has the potential to make you bitter, resentful, and angry...it certainly doesn't have to. By responding properly, you can live a life free of those negative emotions. That is definitely my prayer for you.

Introduction

“Don’t take the bitter pill, Jon.” I can still hear my friend saying those words to me as we had dinner together in a little Italian restaurant in a secluded part of Houston quite a few years ago. While I had never heard that expression before, his words caught my attention and made me think. The bitter pill...what an interesting concept. That was new language to me.

That expression may be new to you, too, but I think we all have a pretty good understanding of what bitterness is. Webster’s Dictionary tells us that bitterness is “characterized by strong feelings of hatred, resentment, cynicism, etc.”¹ In other words, when we’ve been hurt in some way, either by a painful circumstance or by another person, if we don’t deal with that hurt in the appropriate manner then we will naturally become bitter. We will either hold a grudge against another person, or we might even hold a grudge against God. Such feelings can lead to the negative emotions of anger and even hatred. Those are unhealthy emotions which can destroy us from the inside out. That’s why my friend warned me against taking the bitter pill. As I shared with him some of the things that were happening in my life at the time, he

was far more concerned with my response to the circumstances than he was with the circumstances themselves. He didn't want to see me become a negative, angry, cynical person. Instead, he wanted to see me walk in faith and love, and he knew that the bitter pill would weaken my faith and lessen my love.

God used his words that night to help me see the importance of maintaining a positive, faith-filled attitude in the midst of negative, painful, confusing, disruptive circumstances. I left the restaurant thinking to myself, "My attitude is everything. I have to stay in faith; I have to walk in love; and I have to remain positive." My friend had given me just what I needed. He had given me a spiritual, mental, and emotional game plan. I now knew how to proceed...with faith and love in my heart and with a smile on my face. God was still in control, and life would indeed go on. The bitter pill wasn't for me. I made a decision that night, in that little Italian restaurant, not to take it. And that decision has made all the difference in the world for me.

Perhaps something has happened in your life that has left you feeling confused, disappointed, and even angry. Let me say, first of all, how sorry I am. I wish you could have been spared

from that painful experience. But since you weren't, you have a decision to make. Are you going to take the bitter pill or not? If you choose to take it, that's your choice. But let me tell you in advance that the bitter pill is lethal. It will begin eating away at you from the inside out. You will become a negative, resentful, angry, miserable person. So my advice to you is simple: *Leave the bitter pill on the table and walk away with a determination to stay in faith and to walk in love.* That decision, perhaps more than any other, could literally save your life. It will certainly make your life more enjoyable and more productive.

In the pages that follow, I want us to look at bitterness from several different angles. I want us to think about the *cause* of bitterness, the *consequences* of bitterness, and the *cure* for bitterness.

Whatever you are currently facing, or whatever you may have experienced in the past, I pray that as we peel back the layers of bitterness you will be freed from its negative influence once and for all. A bitter life is not the life God wants you to live. It's not a part of the abundant, victorious, overcoming life that is available to us in Jesus Christ.

The Cause of Bitterness

Perhaps Jonah is the best example in all of the Bible of a child of God who became bitter. Not only was Jonah a *child* of God, but he was also a *prophet* of God. That tells me that no one is immune from bitterness. If it could happen to Jonah, it could certainly happen to us.

The Book of Jonah begins with a very simple command from God to Jonah to leave Israel and go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, and warn the people there to repent of their sins. This is how the Bible records it: “*Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me’*” (Jonah 1:1-2). Instead of simply doing what God told him to do, Jonah chose to go in another direction. The Bible says, “*But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD*” (Jonah 1:3). Anytime someone travels “from the presence of the LORD,” they pay the price for it. But why didn’t Jonah want to go to Nineveh?

Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh and preach a message of repentance and forgiveness to the Ninevites because they were the enemies of Israel. They had ruthlessly mistreated God's people. Jonah didn't want God to forgive them; he wanted God to punish them. So Jonah went somewhere else instead. He boarded a ship headed to Tarshish...a destination as far from Nineveh as he could find. Perhaps you're familiar with what happened next. A terrible storm arose on the sea. Everyone aboard the ship thought that certainly they would drown. The mariners on board began to pray to their false gods for deliverance and rescue. Meanwhile Jonah, the only believer in the true God on board, "*had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep*" (Jonah 1:5). Even in his disobedience, Jonah was able to sleep. Bitterness can *control* us without even *convicting* us.

The captain of the ship woke Jonah up and asked him to call on his God for deliverance and rescue. The mariners then decided to cast lots to determine whose rebellion had caused the storm. When the lot fell on Jonah, he told them that he was a child of God and that he had disobeyed God's call to go to Nineveh to preach. When they asked Jonah what they needed to do to get

the sea to calm down, he told them plainly to throw him overboard. They refused at first, but as the waters “*continued to grow more tempestuous against them,*” they finally threw him into the sea (*Jonah 1:13*). When they did, “*the sea ceased from its raging*” (*Jonah 1:15*).

At this point in the story, Jonah was swallowed up by “*a great fish*” (*Jonah 1:17*). While in the belly of that fish, Jonah prayed to God. He prayed for mercy. And then the fish “*vomited Jonah onto dry land*” (*Jonah 2:10*).

The Bible says, “*Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah **the second time**, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you’*” (*Jonah 3:1-2, emphasis added*). Aren’t you thankful that ours is a God of second chances? He doesn’t give up on us when we mess up. He gives us another chance. And here He graciously extended that second chance to Jonah. This time, Jonah responded much better. He went to Nineveh, preached a message about the people’s sins, about their need to repent, and about God’s willingness to forgive them if they would repent. Thankfully, the people heeded Jonah’s message, repented of their sins, and received the mercy, grace, and forgiveness of God. Two verses

pretty much sum up the results of Jonah's ministry in Nineveh. The Bible says, "*So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them...Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it*" (Jonah 3:5, 10).

I would call that a highly-successful revival. The whole town got saved! Jonah preached his sermon, gave the invitation, and everybody who was old enough to understand the message came forward. Amazing! Not even Billy Graham ever had a response like that. You would think that Jonah would have been the happiest man in town. But, sadly, he wasn't. The very next verse says, "*But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry*" (Jonah 4:1, *emphasis added*).

Here's the question: *What was the "it" that displeased Jonah?* The "it" was that God had forgiven a group of people whom Jonah wanted God to judge and punish. Remember, the Assyrians had long been the enemies of the Israelites. They had abused and misused God's people. They had committed such vile sins

against the people of Israel that Jonah wanted God to make them pay for it. That's why Jonah didn't go to Nineveh initially. He knew that God was a God of love, mercy, grace, and unconditional forgiveness. And he didn't want to see the people of Nineveh experience any of those blessings. He wanted them to experience God's judgment and wrath instead.

So, when God forgave the people, Jonah became bitter. Very bitter. We'll see how that bitterness manifested itself in Jonah's life a little later, but for now, we're focusing on what caused his bitterness.

The cause of Jonah's bitterness was something that happened that he perceived to be unfair. He just didn't think it was fair for God to forgive the Assyrians. It's interesting to me that Jonah had no such issue with God's forgiveness of his own rebellion and sin. He was grateful that God had forgiven him, but he didn't want to see others receive that same forgiveness.

Bitterness does that. It blinds us to the sin in our own lives and causes us to focus instead on the sin in the lives of others. It creates a double standard. It makes us hypocritical. We don't want others to experience God's grace in the

same way that we have. We're much harder on them than we are on ourselves.

Again, Jonah was bitter because he had experienced something that he didn't think was fair. Let me ask you a question: *Have you ever experienced something that you thought was unfair?* The death of a loved one because of a thoughtless drunk driver? The loss of money because of a dishonest business partner? Damage to your reputation because of the reckless and hurtful words of someone whom you thought was your friend? A friend who wasn't there for you when you needed them the most?

The truth is, we've all experienced things in life that we didn't think were fair. Plenty of them. And that makes each of us a candidate for bitterness. When we experience injustice on any level, bitterness can easily creep into our lives. That's why the Bible warns us not to allow a "*root of bitterness*" to establish itself in our hearts (*Hebrews 12:15*). As we all know, roots eventually spring up. And when the roots of bitterness spring up, they can cause all kinds of "*trouble*" for us and for everyone else in our world (*Hebrews 12:15*). That naturally leads us

to the next question: *What are the consequences of bitterness?*

The Consequences of Bitterness

Sin always produces unpleasant and even painful consequences. When the root of bitterness springs up from within us, we and others ultimately pay the price for it. And the price can be very high. As I think about Jonah's bitterness, I can see five consequences associated with it:

1. *Bitterness drains the life out of you.*

It is obvious from Jonah's experience that his bitterness drained the life out of him. After his successful preaching ministry in Nineveh (when every other preacher in the world would have been basking in the afterglow), Jonah was so unhappy, so disappointed, so angry, and so bitter that God had forgiven the Assyrians that he asked God to take his life. Listen to his words: *"Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!"* (Jonah 4:3). Not only had Jonah's bitterness drained the life out of him, but his

bitterness had also caused him to despair of life. Jonah decided that he would rather die than live, so he asked God to end his life.

Perhaps you've noticed that it takes a lot of energy to hold a grudge. When someone wrongs you or offends you in some way, it takes a lot of mental work and emotional effort to continually review that offense in your mind and rehearse what you would like to say to the person who hurt you.

Bitterness literally takes your energy away. There's a medical reason for this. Doctors tell us that when we're angry or experiencing ongoing stress (which are natural by-products of bitterness), we experience a serotonin depletion to the brain. Serotonin is a chemical produced by nerve cells. It helps to regulate our moods. When there's the proper amount of serotonin, our moods are better. When serotonin runs low, our moods are more downcast and sad. Additionally, when our serotonin levels are depleted (again, often caused by anger and prolonged stress), we can experience other negative effects. For example, we have difficulty sleeping. Our energy levels are low. We become more irritable. Our appetite is less. Our bodies don't digest food as well. We

experience headaches. We have difficulty concentrating. Serotonin is an important regulator of many bodily functions, and when we're running low on it, that means trouble.²

It's amazing to me how wonderfully complex God made us on the one hand and how physiologically unified He made us on the other. All the chemicals, hormones, emotions, thought processes, digestive components, and even the ability to sleep are amazingly interrelated. When something is off in one area, we feel it somewhere else. While this can certainly be discouraging and frustrating, it's actually a blessing in disguise. When we begin to experience some of the issues I've just mentioned, that is often our body's way (actually God's way) of alerting us to the fact that something is wrong. Many times, what's wrong is our attitude. Often times, it's bitterness coming to the surface. And God is using a variety of unpleasant physical and emotional symptoms to alert us of a deeper problem.

I'm not suggesting that fatigue, exhaustion, depression, and a lack of motivation are always the result of a bitter spirit. I'm not suggesting that at all. There could be a lot of medical issues causing those problems, and there could be a

host of other reasons why your serotonin levels are low. But if you're currently experiencing some of those symptoms, in addition to talking to your doctor and having whatever tests he or she recommends that you have, I suggest that you at least examine your heart to see if there's any bitterness there. Sometimes that's the root problem. Bitterness is a killer. It drains the energy right out of you.

2. *Bitterness prevents you from enjoying God's blessings.*

Jonah had every reason to be celebrating the tremendous revival of which he had just played a major role. He could have (and should have) been thanking God for using him in such an awesome way. After all those people got saved, Jonah should have been thanking God for saving him years earlier, for calling him into the ministry, for giving him a second chance after his rebellion, and for all those people who just got saved. But Jonah wasn't doing any of that. He was too busy being bitter.

Have you ever noticed how blinding bitterness can be? When we become preoccupied with what someone else said or did, we become blinded to the blessings of God

which are all around us. We fail to notice the pretty blue sky, the clouds, the green grass, the birds, and the butterflies. We forget to thank God for things like our eyesight, our hearing, our ability to walk, our appetite, and our ability to digest food. When we're bitter, we take for granted our most prized possessions like our family members, our friends, our church, our homes, our health, our cars, our jobs, and even our pets. Those people and those things aren't even on our radar. We're only focused on that thing in our lives that "just doesn't seem fair." We miss a thousand blessings all around us because we're upset about something that's "just not right." Bitterness is the devil's way of blinding us to God's manifold blessings.

Sometimes a couple misses the blessing of being married because they don't have children (or because their children have moved out of the house). Sometimes a single person misses the blessing of family members and friends simply because he or she isn't married. Sometimes an athlete misses the blessing of being healthy and of being part of a team because a reporter constantly criticizes him. Sometimes a person in business misses the blessing of having a job because a competitor is making more money. Sometimes teachers miss the blessing of doing

what they've always wanted to do because their principal is difficult to work for. Sometimes a pastor misses the blessing of leading a congregation because six people in the church think he should do things differently.

I'm not suggesting that you don't have a valid reason to be bitter at whomever or whatever has hurt or disappointed you. I live in the real world, too. I know how those things feel. All I'm saying is that it's just not worth it. You have too many blessings to enjoy, too many reasons to celebrate, too many good things in your life to allow one person, one group of people, or a difficult situation of some kind blind your eyes to all the good things in life.

I want to give you an assignment: *Take a few minutes and make a list of some of your most cherished blessings.* I often thank God that I'm saved, that I know that I'm saved, that He has healed me of cancer, that I'm healthy and strong, that He called me into the ministry and assigned me to a great church, that He's absolutely in control of my life, for my family, for my friends, for my house, for my car, for my eyesight, for my hearing, for my ability to walk, and for the fact that I can eat and digest food. When I see a butterfly, I try to remember to thank God for

new life. When I wake up, I try to remember to thank God for a new day. And when I go to bed, I try to remember to thank God for His faithfulness to me all day long. I don't always do those things. I'm not always as thankful as I should be. But, on most days at least, I try to be. I encourage you to work at being thankful, too. You've got way too many blessings in your life to miss out on enjoying them because of a bitter spirit. Take the blinders of bitterness off and begin to thank God for all He's done for you.

3. *Bitterness keeps you from being productive.*

Bitterness has a way of so preoccupying our minds that our productivity level is greatly reduced. What should Jonah have been doing after the great revival in Nineveh? Well, for starters, he should have been following up on all the new converts. He should have been teaching them how to grow in their relationship with God. He should have been teaching them God's laws and God's ways. That's always what should happen after a revival. But Jonah didn't do any of that. His bitterness prevented him from being productive after all those people got saved.

For many years, Dr. Bill Tolar was a professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological

Seminary in Ft. Worth. He was one of the most respected and loved professors in the history of the school. He taught my father in the 1970s, and even though I never had him for a class when I was a student there in the 1990s, I was blessed to know him and to have a wonderful relationship with him. For many years, he came to First Baptist Church in Pasadena each January to teach the Winter Bible Study to our church. During one of those Winter Bible Study weekends, he was sharing with me about an experience he had been through that caused him to become bitter. If you knew Dr. Tolar, you know that bitterness was simply not a part of his personality. He was a brilliant, upbeat, engaging, and fun person to be around. But he described in great detail how at one time in his teaching career a certain political decision at the seminary had not only hurt him deeply, but had also left him feeling bitter inside. He didn't think the decision was right, nor did he think it was fair. And while the decision didn't involve him personally, it affected him deeply because it wounded one of his longtime friends. As he reflected on how a bitter spirit had begun to take root in his heart, he said, "Jon, bitterness is like driving with the emergency brakes on." What an interesting analogy. He, of course, dealt with those bitter feelings and was liberated from

them. But his statement, “Bitterness is like driving with the emergency brakes on,” has remained with me for all these years.

When we’re bitter about something, or when we’re bitter towards a person or towards a group of people, our minds are consumed with whatever it is that has happened. We’re mentally busy reviewing the experience, remembering what was said, and rehearsing what we would like to say to the person (or people) who hurt us. It’s exhausting. Common sense would tell us that if our minds are that busy with those types of thoughts that it’s going to be difficult for us to be as productive as we ought to be on a project at work, for example. Additionally, when our hearts are full of bitterness and our minds are constantly thinking about what has caused it, it is very difficult for us to fully engage with our family members and friends, or to enjoy a hobby, or to even be in close communion with God. In order for us to be our best and get the most out of those situations, our spirits have to be light and our minds have to be free. Bitterness, though, weighs down our spirits and clutters up our minds. It really is like driving with the emergency brakes on. It’s not an enjoyable ride.

4. *Bitterness causes you to get upset over things that aren't really the problem.*

After the revival in Nineveh, “*Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city*” (Jonah 4:5). It must have been a hot time of the year because the Bible says that “*the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery*” (Jonah 4:6). Jonah was obviously very thankful for the large plant which protected him from the Middle East sun, but the next morning God “*prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered*” (Jonah 4:7). At this point, Jonah obviously lost his shade. The Bible says, “*And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah’s head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live’*” (Jonah 4:8). When Jonah lost his shade, he lost his will to live. God then asked Jonah this question: “*Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?*” (Jonah 4:9). From God’s perspective, Jonah’s anger was unjustified.

Here we gain yet another insight into bitterness: *Bitterness causes us to get upset over*

things that aren't really the problem. Jonah's real problem wasn't the plant. It was that he wanted God to punish the Assyrians and that he was mad when God forgave them instead. That was the root of his bitterness. Any counselor or psychologist could have told Jonah that, but one of the consequences of bitterness is that it causes the person who has it to get upset over things that aren't the real problem. If someone would have met Jonah on the day that his shade tree died, they would have assumed that Jonah was simply angry about that. Knowing nothing of the "backstory," they would have had no way of knowing that Jonah had a deeper problem.

The same type of thing happens all the time today. A person gets angry with a slow waiter at a restaurant. A parent gets angry with a child for making a mess. A coach gets angry with a receiver for dropping a pass. A customer gets angry with the cable company for overcharging them. While all of these things can be frustrating (and even tempt a person to become angry), the intensity of the anger is often the result of another problem.

It would have been natural for Jonah to get frustrated and even somewhat angry when he lost his shade tree, but for him to have actually

wanted to die because of it wasn't logical. His anger over the plant was out of proportion. And that's what bitterness does to a person. It causes us to overreact to frustrating situations in life. It leads to outbursts of anger.

Generally speaking, when a person is huffing and puffing about the politicians they don't like, the decision the school board has made, the tax increases, or how terrible their boss is to work for, something else is going on. This is certainly true if their anger is chronic. Mark this down: *Sudden anger, continuous anger, and extreme anger are almost always the result of hidden anger of some kind.* In other words, the anger was there all along, and the fact that the waiter messed up the order just became the easy outlet for the anger to express itself.

So I encourage you to examine yourself. Are you angry? Are you really angry at whatever it is you're complaining about, or is something else going on? Often times, there's bitterness buried beneath the surface. The *bitterness* is the *root*, but when *anger* becomes the *fruit*, that should be a wake-up call for us. That negative, complaining, angry spirit should alert us to the fact that there's a poisonous root of bitterness in our hearts that needs to be removed.

5. *Bitterness stains others.*

Perhaps you're thinking: "It's my life. I'm the one who has been wronged and hurt. I have justifiable grounds for being bitter and angry. It's nobody else's business." Well, while there may be a certain amount of logic to that type of thinking, the logic is flawed. It's flawed for this reason: *When you're bitter, other people are negatively affected.* Bitterness is like the coronavirus...it endangers everyone who gets near the person who has it.

The classic passage of Scripture in the New Testament about bitterness is found in The Epistle to the Hebrews. Read these two verses slowly and carefully: *"Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: 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"* (Hebrews 12:14-15). Notice that bitterness "springs up." The *root* inevitably produces *fruit*. It doesn't stay underground forever. And when it springs up, it always causes trouble, and *"many become defiled"* (Hebrews 12:15). That word "defiled" is an interesting Greek word. It has with it the idea of being stained.³ When the bitter root

springs up and produces bitter fruit, other people are stained. They are stained mentally, emotionally, and even psychologically. And notice that not just a few people get stained, but that “many” people do.

Think of all the people who were stained by Jonah’s bitterness. Think of the people on board that ship headed to Tarshish. His bitterness nearly killed them...literally. Think of the people in Nineveh who, although they heeded his message, must have noticed his sour disposition. Think of his family and friends back in Israel who were well aware of Jonah’s utter disgust for the Assyrians. Think of how miserable his misery must have made all of them. He stained them. Bitterness does that. Our bitterness negatively affects others.

As I appeal to you to address the bitterness that may have taken root in your heart, I appeal to you to deal with it not just for your own sake, but also for the sake of your spouse, your children, your grandchildren, your parents, your siblings, your co-workers, your friends, and your church family. I appeal to you to deal with your bitterness so that you won’t stain the lives of those whom you love most. For their sake, dig out the bitter root. Remove it. It’s not worth

what it's doing to you, and it's certainly not worth what it's doing to those close to you.

The fatigue that your bitterness is causing you to experience is taking a toll on your loved ones. The fact that *you're* not enjoying *your* blessings is causing *them* not to enjoy *their* blessings. They are paying for your lack of productivity. Your anger is demoralizing them. The bitterness in your heart is staining those in your own inner circle. Dig it out. Remove the root. If you do, everything will change...for you and for those close to you.

But how do we do that? How can we remove the deeply embedded root of bitterness? In the remainder of this booklet, I will attempt to answer that question.

The Cure for Bitterness

We come now to the most important part of this booklet: *How can we actually deal with whatever it is that has happened in the most appropriate way?* Since sometimes our bitterness is the result of painful circumstances that may not even involve other people, and

since sometimes our bitterness is the result of what people themselves have actually done to us, we have to deal with the bitterness based on its source. Let's think about that for a moment.

If the Bitterness Is Caused by Circumstances...

1. Accept what you cannot change.

Sometimes things happen in life that we simply cannot control. It's not so much that a person has hurt us as it is that a circumstance has caused us pain. An illness, the death of a loved one, a flooded house. There's no one to forgive in these cases because no one caused these things, but they can still make us bitter.

So what do we do in these instances? Well, the wise thing to do is to accept them. Accept them as circumstances that God has allowed into your life. *The Serenity Prayer* puts it this way:

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change...courage to change the things I can...and wisdom to know the difference.”⁴

Sometimes in life we just can't control what happens. What do we do then? We trust God, and we move on. In 2015, I was in an emergency room due to severe lower back pain. They did a CT scan on me, and a few minutes later they told me that I was passing a kidney stone and that I also had approximately twenty other stones. Yikes! Even worse, though, they told me that I had a tumor on my left kidney. The first thing that came to my mind, I mean immediately, was this truth: *God is in control*. God instantly brought that truth to my mind. My mind and my heart were full of that promise from Scripture, and, as a result, I had perfect peace. I was in tremendous pain, but I was at peace. The Holy Spirit reminded me that God was still, even then, in total control. That made all the difference for me.

Step one to avoiding bitterness when circumstances turn against you is to simply say: *God is in control*. Believe that truth. Confess that truth. Rest in that truth. Trust God in the midst of the pain.

2. Embrace what God has allowed.

God wouldn't allow something painful to come into your life if He didn't have a good

purpose for it. Begin to look for that purpose. Ask God questions like these: What are You up to? Why have You allowed this? What are You saying to me through this? How can I respond properly to what I am now facing? How can I grow closer to You through this situation?

Those are good questions. They help us to embrace the painful experiences of life instead of fighting against them. When we fight against our circumstances, we only get frustrated. When we embrace them, we find peace. I've noticed that when people go through a major life crisis that they either draw closer to God or drift away from God. They seldom stay the same. I encourage you to draw closer to God. If you do, He will draw closer to you. The Bible says, *"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you"* (James 4:8).

There's a reason why you're going through whatever it is that you're going through. It may be as simple as helping you to see life from a different perspective. It may be to teach you to trust God more. It may be so that you can better understand the pain that others feel. God's purpose will become clearer as time goes by, but for now, embrace what He has allowed and grow from it. That's the wisest thing you can do.

If the Bitterness Is Caused by Other People...

1. Try to understand them.

I find it helpful to sometimes practice a little psychology. I like to ask these questions to myself: Why is this person acting this way? What's their story? What is motivating them? Are they insecure? Have they been hurt in the past? That last question is an especially helpful question to ask because *hurt people tend to hurt people*. In other words, if someone has been hurt, they often inflict their pain onto someone else.

Try to give your offender the benefit of the doubt. That doesn't excuse their behavior. Not at all. That never excuses wrong behavior. But when you try to get into the soul of your offender, it at least helps you to view them more compassionately. It may help you to understand why they act the way they act.

Sometimes, for example, if a person wasn't popular or athletic or accepted by others in high school, they will overcompensate for that later in life by trying to prove to others that they

have significance. They will try hard to assert themselves. In those cases, low self-esteem fuels their behavior. That's helpful information to have as you try to process the way they operate. As best as you can, try to understand the way your offender is wired. It will help you to not take things so personally.

2. *Choose to forgive them.*

Forgiveness is a choice. The idea behind forgiveness is that you are letting the person who has hurt you go free. You are no longer holding them responsible for their actions. You are releasing them into the hands of God. You no longer try to “make them pay” for what they did to you or for what they said about you. You cease playing God. You forgive that person simply because God has forgiven you and because He has commanded you to forgive them. The Bible says it this way: “*And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you*” (Ephesians 4:32). That's pretty straight forward.

Let me be clear on something: *By choosing to forgive another person, you are not saying that what they did is no big deal.* It may have

been a very big deal. *Neither are you saying that it doesn't matter.* If you were hurt, it matters. *You also are not saying that you condone their actions.* You can't condone sin. When you choose to forgive, you simply blot their offense off of your record just as God has blotted your offenses off of His record. We forgive others because we have been forgiven by God.

One thing that really helps me here is to remember my own sinfulness. When I think of all the sins that God has forgiven me of, I find it much easier to forgive others. Self-righteous people have a hard time forgiving others because they aren't really aware of their own sinfulness. I'm so aware of my own sins that forgiving others comes a little easier (not always easy, but easier) for me. If you think about all the sins you have committed through the years, you, too, may find it easier to forgive others.

You may be wondering: *How do I actually forgive them?* That's an excellent question. The short answer is this: *You forgive them from your heart through prayer.* You release them into the hands of God, and you refuse to be angry any longer. You could do that right now, if you'd like to. You could pray a prayer like this:

“Dear Heavenly Father,

You know what has happened. You know what _____ has done to me. And You know how much it has hurt me. But God, the weight of unforgiveness that I am carrying may be heavier than the offense itself. I don't want to carry this unforgiveness any longer. And so, Father, right now, as an act of my will, I choose to forgive _____ for what they did to me. I let it go. I forgive them. I release them into Your hands, God, and I ask You to forgive them, too.

*In Jesus' Name I Pray,
Amen.”*

Friend, if you prayed that prayer, not only did you just free your offender, but you also freed yourself. The visual for forgiveness is opening the cage door and letting a bird go free. Sometimes, when we forgive, we discover that we were the bird trapped in the cage and that by forgiving others, we ourselves were freed. When we refuse to forgive, we live in a state of bondage. When we extend forgiveness, though, we liberate ourselves and begin to walk in the freedom that God desires for us to experience.

3. *Begin to pray for them.*

There is something about praying for another person that changes our attitude towards them. This is especially true of those who have hurt us in some way. When we pray for them, our hearts are gradually softened, and, as time goes by, we eventually begin to feel altogether differently about them. This is why Jesus said we should “*pray for those who spitefully use...and persecute us*” (Matthew 5:44). He knew that such prayer would actually change us.

Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian church, prayed for his executioners. As they were literally stoning him to death, he prayed, “*Lord, do not charge them with this sin*” (Acts 7:60). Wow! You talk about praying for your enemies. What an example! By praying for those who were in the process of killing him, Stephen was able to live his final moments on earth free of all bitterness. He stepped out into eternity with not only a heart full of faith, but also with a heart full of love.

It has always been interesting to me that during Stephen’s final moments on earth he had a vision of heaven. He was able to see “*the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand*

of God” (Acts 7:55). Notice that he saw Jesus “standing.” The interesting thing about that is that we read elsewhere in Scripture that Jesus is “sitting.” For example, we read that Jesus, “when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus is currently seated at the Father’s right hand in heaven. He’s been in that position for almost two thousand years. But when He witnessed Stephen’s death, He stood. He stood in honor of Christianity’s first martyr, and perhaps He also stood because of the way in which Stephen died...praying for those who were killing him.

What a convicting thought. Stephen had honored Jesus with his life, and now he was honoring Him in his death. As a result, Jesus honored Stephen by standing up for him in his final moments on earth and as he entered heaven. Stephen died like Jesus died...praying for his executioners.

Could it be that if we pray for those who have hurt us that Jesus will stand up for us, too? It seems possible at least. Whether He actually stands or not remains to be seen, but one thing is certain: *If we will honor Him, He will honor us.* He Himself has promised, “*Those who honor*

Me I will honor” (I Samuel 2:30). Perhaps we honor the Lord best by praying for those who have hurt us. We’re certainly following His example when we do so. We’re being obedient, and we’re tenderizing our own hearts in the process.

4. Look for ways to extend love to them.

You may be thinking, “Give me a break. Praying for people who don’t even like me is hard enough, but extending love to them is just more than I can do.” I understand how you feel. Sometimes it is more than we can do, but it’s never more than the indwelling Christ in the Person of the Holy Spirit can do through us. And remember, *“the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:5).*

When we think of love, we normally think of a feeling. We think of either being “in love” or of “having love” in our hearts for someone. And that’s appropriate. Love includes feelings, but love is more than feelings.

In the New Testament, for example, the word “love” is often in the noun form. The verse we just looked at in Romans mentioned *“the love*

of God” being “*poured out in our hearts*” (*Romans 5:5*). If we were in a grammar class, our teacher would point out that the word “love” in that verse is a noun. That’s how we think of love...as something we have...as something we can feel.

There are other places in the New Testament, though, where the word “love” is in the verb form. For example, a well-known verse in the Bible puts it this way: “*Love one another*” (*John 13:34*). In this verse, the word “love” is obviously a verb. What is the significance of a verb? A verb implies action. We were taught in grade school that verbs are action words. In the above-mentioned verse, Jesus wasn’t telling His disciples to “feel” something; He was telling them to “do” something. Love is not only a noun...something we “have” or “feel,” but love is also a verb...something we “do.”

So when I say that we should look for ways to extend love to those who have hurt us, I’m talking about the verb form of the word. We need to “do” something instead of just sitting around waiting to “feel” something.

One of my most treasured friends in the world was married to a pastor for well over forty

years. After he went to heaven, she continued (and continues) to serve the Lord with all of her heart. She told me a story one night that I found very interesting. She said that in their first church there was a lady who just didn't seem to like her very much. The lady wouldn't even speak to her, and she just made it obvious that she didn't care for her. My friend, of course, was bothered by that. Nobody enjoys being "unliked" by anyone. So she decided to try to make the lady her friend. She baked her a cake and took it to her house. The lady was shocked when she showed up, and from that day on, everything was different. The two ladies became good friends.

When I say that we need to look for ways to extend love, that's the type of thing I'm talking about. We need to "do" something. We may need to bake a cake, or make a phone call, or write a letter, or send a text, or give a gift, or smile at the person when we see them again, or shake their hand, or say something kind about them behind their back with the hope that what we have said will make it to the ears of the person who has hurt us.

Ask God to show you the appropriate thing that you could "do" to extend His love to your

offender. You just might be surprised by what He places on your heart.

Remember God's Ultimate Plan

As we journey through life, God will at times allow difficult circumstances and difficult people to come into our lives. His reason for allowing this is because He knows that such pain can become an opportunity for us to grow. Let me be clear: *God is not the one who causes the pain.* He doesn't cause the atrocities that some people have to endure. Sadly, we live in a fallen world. People have free wills, and sometimes really bad things happen. Again, God doesn't cause these things, but He does allow them. And if He allows them, we can rest assured that He has a good purpose in mind.

God's goal is for you and me to become progressively more like Jesus. That's His primary will for our lives. The Bible says, "*For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son*" (Romans 8:29). When we get to heaven, "*we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is*" (1 John 3:2). But for now, we're still works in progress. He's

in the process of making us more and more like Jesus in our attitudes and in our actions. And sometimes, He allows us to go through something painful in order to accomplish that goal.

Whatever Happened to Jonah's Bitterness?

Let's get back to Jonah for a moment. When we left him, he was wanting to die because his shade tree had withered. Whatever happened to his bitterness? Did he ever get victory over it?

Well, unfortunately, we just don't know. The Book of Jonah only has four chapters. And at the end of the last chapter, God was reasoning with Jonah about his bad attitude towards both the plant that perished and the people of Nineveh. And then, suddenly, the book ends.

I wish there were another chapter. It would be great if there were a fifth chapter which read, "And Jonah repented of his bitterness, bought some sunscreen, quit complaining about the withered shade tree, and loved the Assyrians so much that he retired in Nineveh!" Now that would be a happy ending. But that ending isn't

there. The Book of Jonah doesn't have that fifth chapter.

Jonah's story ends abruptly. We're left to wonder what happened. But your story is still being written. How will the book of your life come to an end? Will you be a bitter old person who never was quite able to get over whatever it was that happened? Or will you learn to trust God with the mysteries of life and forgive those who have hurt you along the way?

The poet, Robert Frost, said this: "*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.*"⁵ The road of faith, love, and forgiveness is the road less traveled by. Most people go the other way. But let's join Jesus, Stephen, and the others who took the road less traveled by, and let's live and die with hearts full of faith and love and free of bitterness. At the end of that road stands Jesus. And the greeting we long to hear is this: "*Well done, good and faithful servant*" (Matthew 25:21).

Taking the road less traveled by begins by asking Jesus to come into your heart and to forgive you of your sins. That requires humility. And that requires faith. It also requires that we leave our sins behind and pursue Him wholly.

Jesus referred to it as “*the narrow gate*” (*Matthew 7:13*). It’s not an easy road to travel.

You can begin your journey with God right now. Just pray this prayer:

“Dear Jesus,

I need You in my life. I’m sorry for my sins. Please forgive me. I believe You died on the cross to pay for my sins and that You rose again.

I ask You now to come into my heart, forgive every sin, and make me a Christian. I ask You to save me, and I trust You to do it.

You have forgiven me. I thank You for that. Now help me to forgive others. Help me to spend every day of my life walking in faith and love.

I love You, Jesus.

*In Your Name I Pray,
Amen.”*

Friend, if you prayed that prayer, God just answered it. The Bible says, “*For whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved*”

(*Romans 10:13*). And that word “whoever” includes you.

I encourage you to share your decision with a friend, make it public in a good Bible-believing church, and continue to trust God and love people...all people...no matter who they are or what they do.

One day, God will make every wrong right. That’s His job. He’s the Judge. Our job is to love people...unconditionally...just like God loves us. And our job is to trust Him, no matter what difficulty we might have to endure. We simply can’t lose if we’ll learn to trust God and love people. That’s actually the Christian life in a nutshell. Bitterness cannot survive in a heart full of faith and love.

So walk in faith, extend love, and refuse to take the bitter pill. If you’ll do those things, God will be pleased...you will be peaceful, joyful, and blessed...and others will be encouraged when they are in your presence.

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- ¹ *Webster's New World Dictionary* (2nd College Edition), Prentice Hall Press, New York, 1986, p. 145.
- ² Healthline.com, *Serotonin: What You Need to Know*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/serotonin> (accessed 9/28/2020).
- ³ W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1985, p. 154-155.
- ⁴ Wikipedia.org, *Serenity Prayer*, Reinhold Niebuhr, August 30, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer (accessed 9/29/2020).
- ⁵ Poetryfoundation.org, Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken> (accessed 9/28/2020).

Booklets by Jon Redmond

- *How to be a Happy Christian*
- *Riding Out the Storms of Life*
- *Finding Freedom Through Forgiveness*
- *Never Alone*
- *How to Make Heaven Your Home*
- *How to Make Heaven Your Home (Spanish)*
- *When God Says, "Wait"*
- *How to Have a Peaceful Heart*
- *In the Twinkling of an Eye*
- *Angels Among Us*
- *What Happens at the Moment of Death?*
- *Discovering God's Will*
- *The Lord Is My Shepherd*
- *How to Lead a Child to Christ*
- *On Eagles' Wings*
- *Living on the Edge of Eternity*
- *The Problem With Procrastination*
- *The Lord's Prayer*
- *Lessons from the Lions' Den*
- *How to Survive a Satanic Attack*
- *Lessons I Learned From My Mother*

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- *When My Heart is Overwhelmed*
 - *Don't Take the Bitter Pill*
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Most of these booklets can be read online at www.fbp.org. All of the booklets are available at First Baptist Church in Pasadena, Texas.

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