

Uprooting Bitterness: *Uncovering a Destructive Sin* 1 Samuel 22

*“See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no **“root of bitterness”** springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled”*

Hebrews 12:15

Introduction: In the first year Erin and I were married (over 21 years ago!), I was having a stretch of time where I could not get to sleep at night, which for me, was a definite anomaly since I could fall asleep mid conversation and mid-sentence. What was perplexing my mind and heart? I was carrying the pain and sting of hurt and disappointment, which planted the seed of **bitterness in my heart**. In college I had the privilege of working as an intern in a rather large Jr. High ministry where our *staff* numbered in the 40's. Throughout the time of mentorship, it was floated that a possible outcome was taking over as the pastor/director upon graduation, since the ability to teach and disciple early teens means one can disciple *anyone*. However, God had other plans. After the sad departure and public sin of a longstanding pastor/elder, the landscape changed, and both parent and elder did not think entrusting oversight to a 22-year-old was in the best interest of everyone (and they were right). What was explained to me at the time was it was going to another, older man, in part because they believed I could get a job anywhere. It left my immature self **devastated**, feeling betrayed by one I trusted, confused, and unsure about the direction for the future, especially in light of the wake of the consequences of the sin of the pastor. What happened over the next 18 months was a progression of frustration, resentment, strain of relationship, avoidance, and eventually separation. When an opportunity came to take an interim position with a friend, I took it hoping that a change of scenery would help, but it simply left sleepless nights and a bitter heart.

Author Joanna Weaver described bitterness as drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. In the Prophets it was equated with **weeping** (Isaiah 22:4, 33:7, 38:3; Jer. 22:10; Matt. 26:75), with **lament** (Jer. 6:26), with **apostasy and forsaking the LORD** (Jer. 2:19), tribulation (Lam. 3:5), **grief** (Ezek. 21:6), and **mourning of the soul** (Ezek. 27:31). The Bible describes bitterness as a **root** sin, from which sprouts and causes trouble, and many become defiled because of it (Heb. 12:15). Thus bitterness *results* from circumstances, how we are treated, or what has happened to us, and is our *response* to these things. Bitterness is directed *toward something or someone*, even if we cannot always source it specifically. It can result from sorrow, envy, pain, suffering, loss, wounds, frustration, and unmet expectations and will manifest in *anger, pride, selfishness, unhappiness, slander, malice, and loss of relationship*.

One of the big problems that we face with **bitterness** is a *misdiagnosis* of what it is and where it's sourced. Like all besetting sins that originate and reside in our **hearts and minds**, we often think our problems lie **outside of us** and try to deal with the **SYMPTOMS rather than the root**. Here is what I mean. You are treated poorly or go through a trial of loss, which causes a reaction in your heart that seeds bitterness. From that, it sprouts and grows into anger toward a friend, frustration with God, or discontent with the present circumstance. People notice. You notice. But you believe what needs to change is the circumstance itself, or the friend changing, or God giving you back what was lost, instead of dealing with the issue in our own heart. **Herein lies the irony of dealing with bitterness: you could be wronged, but when bitterness takes hold, it is a heart issue that ONLY YOU can deal with, and the only path of joy is through the doorway of repentance, which means you acknowledge what needs to change**

is your own heart. When this happens, joy and contentment can be had, with outward circumstances never changing.

Now, we come back to our study in 1 Samuel in a chapter that sees the anointed king-to-be in David recover from a stretch of fear driven responses to trust in the deliverance of God in spite of circumstances. David had wondered out loud *why things were going so poorly*, why his king and father-in-law was hell bent on killing him, despite the fact he had done nothing wrong, culminating in interacting with the priest Ahimelech without disclosing his plans, taking bread and Goliath's sword, and seeking safety in the Philistine town of Gath. To get out of that noose, he acted crazy, drooling down his beard and scratching at doorposts like a madman. After leaving Gath, he wrote **Psalm 34 and 56**, which was a catharsis of his fear and his re-commitment to **fear the Lord and trust Him**. As a result, though he was still on the run, he was settled back into faith-driven decisions and movement forward.

This is **contrasted** with the current king Saul, the people's choice to be like all the other nations, who had continually refused to obey the Lord, even keeping **king Agag** alive and disobeying a direct command of the Lord, resulting in God rejecting him as king, replacing him eventually with David. On top of this, Saul was now filled with **anger** (1 Sam. 18:29) **fear** (1 Sam. 18:12), and **envy**, since God was with David but had departed Saul (1 Sam. 18:8). He believed David was the roadblock in his pathway of happiness, and getting rid of David became his obsession. Saul became a **picture of bitterness**, allowing the seed to take root and what grew out of it was a litany of sinful, illogical, miserable, and self-driven results. All sin turns us inward, curving our view to self, and putting ourselves at the center of the universe. Bitterness does this in exponential ways.

David: A Protector of the Bitter

*1 David departed from there and escaped to **the cave of Adullam**. And when his brothers and all his father's house heard it, they went down there to him. 2 And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who **was bitter in soul**, gathered to him. And he became commander over them. And there were with him about **four hundred men**.*

As David emerged from his misstep in Gath, he fled about 12 miles east to the low hills which contain many caves. I had the privilege of crawling and walking through these caves when I was in college, and some small openings lead to vast rooms where many could hide. He went to the cave of Adullam, where God blessed him with the company of his family, who were undoubtedly fleeing from the heat turned up from Saul's pursuit. But God also provided a group that was...*interesting, to say the least*. Notice the description: "*distressed*", "*in debt*", "**bitter in soul**". This was a group of **strugglers and stragglers, a ragtag group of disenchanting and frustrated**. This would not be the ideal group to start any new venture with, but these became the core of the mighty men that would accompany David for the next months of sojourn and preparation.

A couple of minor points of implication here. First, the rule of thumb in life is to choose carefully who you surround yourself with, since we are easily influenced (see Psalm 1). In church planting and all of church life, there are those that are perpetually discontent, and will move from church to church every 3-5 years until they find something else they do not like. The problem with this is one always takes their problems with them, since most of the issues lie in their own heart. Bitterness and discontentment are often intertwined, and the search for peace will never be achieved until one's own heart issues are addressed.

Second, this group had residual effects of their own heart – when their wives and families were captured in Ziklag, they were **bitter in soul** and talked about stoning David (1 Sam. 30:6) – but it is important to

note that under the faithful leadership of David, much of this group became faithful and useful in the kingdom. There always is an opportunity for those in distress and embittered to truly deal with their heart and respond in faith, finding a better and more joyful result than focusing on the troubled circumstances they find themselves in.

Moab: A Provision Out of Bitterness

3 And David went from there to Mizpeh of Moab. And he said to the king of Moab, "Please let my father and my mother stay with you, till I know what God will do for me." 4 And he left them with the king of Moab, and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold. 5 Then the prophet Gad said to David, "Do not remain in the stronghold; depart, and go into the land of Judah." So David departed and went into the forest of Hereth.

Another small implication of the entire text is David's willingness to care for his family. **1 Timothy 5:8** says that if anyone does not provide for his relatives and those of his own household, he has *denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever!* Caring for our families is an outflow of our trust in the Lord and taking our God-given responsibility seriously. In the gap between being on the run and his trust that God would deliver the kingdom to him, he wanted to make sure his family was cared for and protected. Here it seems instructive that he turned to the king of **Moab for help.**

The nation of the Moabites had an inauspicious start, as the originator Moab was born out of the deception and incest between Lot and his daughter (Yikes! – Gen. 19:37). But in closer history, you'll remember that Moab was the homeland of **Ruth, the daughter in law of Naomi.** Naomi was from **Bethlehem** and married Elimelech, who moved his family to Moab during a famine, and where his two sons took wives from the Moabite people. But then life happened. Not only did Naomi lose her husband, but her two sons died as well, leaving her a widow with two foreign daughter in laws. Her response is telling: *"It is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me"* (Ruth 1:13), and *"the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full and the LORD has brought me back empty"* (Ruth 1:20-21). Naomi and Ruth's circumstances were bitter and it is understandable their reactions. Naomi encouraged her daughter in laws to leave her, to go back to Moab and find husbands to care for them since she could not, nor could she produce more sons for them! It was faithful Ruth that stayed with her, declaring that she would go with her wherever and whenever she went.

The story is truly beautiful, as God provided a **kinsman-redeemer** for Ruth back in Bethlehem named **Boaz.** He took Ruth in as his wife, cared for Naomi, and created a thriving family out of bitter sorrow. Ruth, the Moabitess, became the **great-grandmother of David!** It would also seem that this had an impact on David's ability to protect his family back in Moab, since there were family ties there. The point is this: Naomi's bitter circumstance was part of God's providential plan to save her family in the future, even though she had no idea that would happen nor was alive to witness it. When we trust that God is in control of ALL THINGS, accomplishing His will, we can trust that even the **most bitter** of stretches are being used for His glory and our good.

Saul: A Picture of the Nature of Bitterness

6 Now Saul heard that David was discovered, and the men who were with him. Saul was sitting at Gibeath under the tamarisk tree on the height with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing about him. 7 And Saul said to his servants who stood about him, "Hear now, people of Benjamin; will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, will he make you all commanders of thousands and

*commanders of hundreds, 8 that **all of you have conspired against me? No one discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day.*** 9 Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who stood by the servants of Saul, *“I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, 10 and he inquired of the Lord for him and gave him provisions and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine.”*

The rest of the chapter focuses on the last detailed depictions of Saul’s heart, since after this there will be little said about his heart condition until the episode at **Endor** in ch. 28. Saul gives a vivid picture of blossoming bitterness which leads to a descent into madness. Sin left unchecked leads to a devolving of rational thought and rebellion breeds a heaping of consequences. Or, to say it another way, sin, unchecked, will make you stupid.

Bitterness curves our focus inward and blames the outward (6-10)

Reading this section is like listening to an impetuous pre-teen having a tantrum after being denied his favorite treat. Saul has turned the entirety of his court and army against David (1 Sam. 19:1), seeking to kill him. This caused tension in his family and fractured his relationship with his son Jonathan, but Saul was undeterred. Notice how Saul assesses the situation he finds himself in, as he cannot get his hands on David to kill him, thinking that **IF THAT WOULD HAPPEN, HE WOULD FINALLY BE HAPPY AND AT PEACE!**

- **Questions the loyalty of his servants**, saying, “do you think David would give you these cushy government jobs if HE were in charge??!!?” (v. 7)
- **He saw CONSPIRACY where there was none** – Since bitterness believes everything revolves around ourselves and loses perspective toward others, one starts to see innocent conversations between others as subversive towards them. (v. 8)
- **He thought the people closest to him were intentionally keeping things from him** – “*Why didn’t anyone tell me my son was in cahoots with David!!???*” Notice the all-inclusive statements that keep coming up – “NO ONE”, “NONE”, “ALL” – as a bitter heart sees life in black and white without nuance, meaning it is ALL AGAINST THEM.
- **Bitterness plays the victim card** – This is the height of pride, selfishness, and bitterness. Saul was the king. He had wealth, power, family, and anything his heart desired. But it was not enough. He felt wronged by God and others, even though he brought it all on himself. The king was asking servants to feel sorry FOR HIM? Pity parties are reserved for the immature and are the result of one wallowing in their own bitterness. The identity of the bitter is victimhood, not taking any responsibility but seeing the sin and wrong of everyone else!

Notice the difference in David’s response to being pursued and becoming *persona non grata* for simply being faithful to the LORD and serving the king. Here is what he wrote in the cave in Psalm 57:

57 TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO DO NOT DESTROY. A MIKTAM OF DAVID, WHEN HE FLED FROM SAUL, IN THE CAVE.

- 1 Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, **for in you my soul takes refuge**; in the shadow of your wings I will take **refuge**, till the storms of destruction pass by.

²I cry out to God Most High, **to God who fulfills his purpose for me.**

³He will send from heaven and save me; he will put to shame him who tramples on me. *Selah*
God will send out his steadfast love and his faithfulness!

⁴My soul is in the midst of lions; I lie down amid fiery beasts— the children of man, whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords.

⁵Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!

David leaned his trust and faith away from himself and circumstances INTO the LORD, and even though his situation did not change, he was able to sing (v. 7) and give thanks (v. 9), recognizing that God was accomplishing HIS WILL and PURPOSE for David. Faith curves our view outward from self and upward to our refuge in God.

It is here that Saul becomes irrational and non-sensical, even for him.

Bitterness results in loss of perspective and rational thought (11-16)

Our friend Doeg makes an appearance, one of those guys who always seems to be lurking in the shadows and appears to do dastardly things. Bitter people will always find someone who agrees with their plight and will tell them what they want to hear. Doeg tells of the interaction with David and Ahimelech, which caused Saul to conduct a kangaroo court with the priest of God.

Saul accused Ahimelech of conspiracy against the crown and himself, but the priest's response was clear. He said, "What servant do you have as faithful as David, your son-in-law, the captain of your bodyguard, and honored in your house? David came to me, as he has many times before, and I inquired of the LORD on his behalf." In other words, neither David nor I am guilty of any crime, nor are we ashamed at what we've done.

At these words, Saul snapped, and gave a punishment that did not fit any crime. He ordered the death of the priest and the entirety of his father's house, meaning the rest of the priests. This is the definition of insanity, the kind of insanity that fuels abuse against loved ones, divorce, adultery, and rejoicing in the harm of others. **James 4:1** says this is where murder comes from, since we desire and do not have, and irrational thought takes over and murder seems both justified and reasonable. If that seems extreme, just look at the news today, or check your own heart in terms of anger or envy toward others.

Bitterness replaces God with ourselves (17-19)

The sad and appalling conclusion to this episode is the mass execution of the people of Israel by their own king! Saul, who was unwilling to kill Agag for selfish gain, was more than willing to kill his own priests for selfish goals. He ordered the killing, and ALL of his men stood down, the second time his own people refused a direct order (see 1 Sam. 14:45-46 when they refused to kill Jonathan). But there was Doeg again, who took a sword and killed **85 priests**, along with the men, women, children, babies, and livestock at Nob. This was akin to the command God gave at Jericho (Josh. 6:21), but this was Saul

making a command that only God could justifiably give. Though one priest named **Abiathar** escaped and whom God preserved, this showed the depth and reach of self-driven sin.

Here is one counter-intuitive glimmer of hope. This sin came out of rebellion and bitterness, and Saul was completely responsible, but it also accomplished the promise of God! Back in 1 Samuel 2, God cursed the wicked priest **Eli and his descendants**, declaring that his house in the future would die by the sword (see 1 Samuel 2:30-36, especially 31-33). Even when our sin grows and blossoms, it does not thwart the plans and promises of God. We always know what God is doing (glorifying Himself, accomplishing His will, doing all that He pleases – Ps. 115:1-3), but we do not always know exactly what He is doing. Saul was powerful, so much so he could order the death of a city. But he still was an instrument in God's hand, rather than an independent deity. Most people would like to think that they can determine their own destiny, but they will discover in this life or at death that every knee will eventually bow to the LORD of the universe, Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:9-11).

Concluding Thoughts: So is there hope for our bitter heart? Absolutely, through the gate of faith and repentance. See what **Ephesians 4:31-32** says:

*31 Let all **bitterness** and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 **Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.***

In a section that calls us to repentance, turning from sin and replacing it with righteousness. Here, because of the death of Jesus on the cross and taking our sin upon Himself, we can confess and turn from our sin, **putting away** bitterness and all that comes with it. The gospel gives us NEW HEARTS and allows us to remove the root of sin, replacing it with **kindness, grace, and forgiveness**. This is how we turn bitter tears with joyful hearts. God may not change our circumstances, but He promises to turn our mourning into joy and gladness for sorrow (Jeremiah 31:13).

At the end of several sleepless nights, Erin encouraged me to have the conversation I had been dreading. But through prayerful preparation, I had a meeting with my mentor, the one whom I had harbored bitterness toward. I confessed my sin towards him, explained my angst, and asked for forgiveness. God granted it, we had an open and tearful conversation, and the relationship was restored, bringing back rest and sleep. Forgiveness in Christ uproots our bitterness, and replaces it with a heart of thankfulness that says, "**Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth.**" (Psalm 57:5)