



Have you ever wondered what bitterness is and how to avoid or recover from it? This e-booklet explains what bitterness is, what causes it and how to overcome it.

# Freedom from Bitterness

by Susan Bowman

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*that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.*

Ephesians 3:17-19

*See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that **no root of bitterness** springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled..* Hebrews 12:15

## **A Bitter Cup**

I have taken a very long sabbatical (think years) from public ministry. There are many reasons why: I needed personal healing; my family needed healing; I had maturity issues and so on. During this extended break I continued to pray one-on-one with people from around the world, I met with my ministry team and led a house church with my husband (with somewhat disastrous results). I continued to study the methods of other similar ministries, traveling to conferences and seminars that focus on healing. BUT I have held no position within a traditional church setting for a long time and neither has my husband.

This may not seem like a big deal to many of you, but for us it has been like trying to walk without gravity. Both of us have been leaders in church-based ministries from the beginning of our conversions. Now, as I contemplate the call to return to public ministry, I realize the painful loss of position and status within the church system was actually ordained by God. As long as I was busy with meaningful work, helping others and absorbed in teaching and writing, I could ignore that the walls of the traditional church, the walls of my family life and my own personal walls were slowly but surely disintegrating around me. Without the distraction of busyness, I have had to face some hard truths about myself, about the state of my relationships and about the wellness of the traditional church.

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So why did God call me apart for this season? I think He wanted to set aside a time for me to learn, to heal and to deepen my intimacy with Him. I would never have chosen to walk with Him outside the traditional church walls on my own, so He forced a separation. I realize that sounds dangerous to some of you. Might even sound like heresy. My husband and I felt exactly the same way when it happened to us. The loss of our place within the traditional church has been indescribably confusing and painful.

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 2 Corinthians 4:7-9*

Yet despite our fear, frustration and consternation, Sam and I are still following the Lord with all our hearts and finding that we have become wonderfully free of ambition and the compulsion to please man. Rather than losing my love for God's people, I have spent this time focused on learning how we work as humans, what breaks us and what restores. I have experienced the Lord in more meaningful ways because He has been all I have had. Either He alone is my Savior or I am lost. And I have discovered that He is consistently genuine, good and kind. Matthew 11:29 is the only scripture I know of in which Jesus describes Himself.

*Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Matthew 11:29*

The truth of the Lord's gentle and humble nature has become very real to me during this time. I think my sabbatical has been for this purpose: to discover this wonderful Jesus and to become His friend. In the doing of that I have become a better friend to myself. And that, folks, is a miracle.

I don't think I have hated anyone more than I have hated myself. And I have hated others. I have even hated God. I'm sorry to report that, but it is the simple truth. Life in this dark earth is so hard for so many of us that hatred of God and others just

seems like the only option we have because it is doing *something* when we feel so powerless to change things. I could at least hunker down in the darkness and hate *them* for hurting me and ruining my life. I hated God first for giving me to my parents; then my parents for being flawed and cruel; then my larger family for not caring; then my friends for being insensitive; my husband for being selfish; THEN the church for savagely kicking us out because I was perceived as a threat to its mandate to *keep itself safe at all costs*. I'm making myself laugh believe it or not. But let me assure you, life has more often than not been a bitter cup.

## **Bitterness Defined**

So what is bitterness? Do you find it frustrating when you are taught again and again to NOT BE bitter, but no one defines what bitterness is so you can not be it?

Have you ever been eating walnuts and gotten a piece of shell in your mouth? Your face screws up, you twist in your seat and you spit that bitter tasting thing out! Emotional and spiritual bitterness is like a bitter taste, shrill sound or disgusting smell that pervades all our being. In other words, we feel it all over. When I was a girl, a childhood friend took a bite of an elephant ear (it's a plant not an animal). It tasted so bitter and burned so much she writhed in pain as tears streamed down her face. That is bitter. Bitterness affects all of our being.

Ok. That describes what bitterness feels like, but doesn't explain what creates bitterness within our hearts. Without that understanding I don't think we are equipped to avoid the warning in Hebrews 12:15.

*See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled...* Hebrews 12:15

Remember I said that bitterness - be it a taste, a sound, a smell - affects all of our being? Bitterness of the heart affects your entire life. Please keep that in mind as we go on.

The soil for the seed of bitterness is prepared by painful experience sharp enough to penetrate our hearts and involve all of our senses. An example is the first time my father molested me. That experience changed the course of my life and was so horribly wrong that every aspect of my being was defiled. It was a *bitter* experience. Along with the *feeling* that my life had just been ruined, the thought or seed was planted by the enemy that he (The Man) had just ruined my life. It certainly *felt* true that my life was ruined. But in order for bitterness to grow I had to accept that my life had been irretrievably ruined by The Man. And I did believe and accept that lie. So here is a definition of bitterness.

***Bitterness is the result of believing deeply within your heart that your life is ruined by some circumstance or someone's behavior that you were powerless to resist and which resulted in a loss from which you can never recover.***

Recall when I wrote that the best I could do was hunker down in the darkness and hate those who had ruined my life? This is because I felt helpless to ever change or recover from what had happened. The action of The Man had left me devastated and I completely believed there was no redemption, restitution, restoration or recovery for me.

Let's take a quick look at the life of Naomi from the **Book of Ruth**. In chapter one, we learn that Naomi went with her family to Moab to escape a famine in Bethlehem. While in Moab, her husband and two sons died leaving her bereft of all that mattered to her. She sent away her daughters-in-law to find new husbands, but Ruth chose to stay with Naomi. Look at what Naomi told her daughters-in-law.

*Naomi said, "Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain*

*from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is **harder** for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me.” Ruth 1:11-13*

The word translated “harder” in the NASB is literally “more bitter.” I want you to notice two things here. First, Naomi acknowledges that the wives have suffered a bitter loss, but they are young enough to have hope for a future. So she believes that her loss is “more bitter” than theirs because she is *without hope for a future*. Second, notice that Naomi blames the Lord for her sorrows. We all have bitter experiences, but for it to settle into the heart and become a serious problem, we must blame someone for a loss that we believe is beyond redemption. *We must lose hope*. Look again at Naomi’s bitterness in the following verses.

*So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?” Ruth 1:19-21*

Mara means bitter. (Naomi means *my joy*, by the way.) I looked up the meaning of Mara in the Hebrew and its literal meaning is a bitter taste ranging from disagreeable (the walnut shell) to poisonous or deadly (the elephant ear). Applied to Naomi’s suffering I think it is safe to say that she was experiencing such extreme loss that recovery felt truly impossible.

I understand Naomi’s anger towards God. I have seen this tendency in myself, in other Christians and in non-Christians. It appears to be universal for people to blame someone when things go bad. And who better to blame than God who is omniscient and omnipotent? He could have stopped it from happening. Couldn’t He? We all think like this and it takes time working through difficult losses with the Lord to come to an understanding of sin, eternity and God’s plan for humanity. Certainly, in the grip of a horribly devastating loss, we tend to automatically rage at the Lord. I don’t think being

angry at the human who has hurt us or even being angry at God while we are working out our loss results in bitterness. *Bitterness sets in when we sink into resigned despair and accept that we will never recover from what that person did and God allowed.*

Picture a tree, its roots deeply planted in the soil of pervasive painful experience, the sturdy trunk wrapped around the belief that your life is ruined, and dangling from its far-reaching branches hatred, resentment, jealousy, cynicism, rage, judgmentalism, pride, hopelessness, depression, despair and unbelief. And probably other fruit I haven't thought of yet. (The pride grows from our belief that we would NEVER treat anyone like God or that person treated us. We are BETTER than them. Ha ha! Live long enough and you will see how true that is.) We will talk about the unbelief in a bit.

## **Passive Inner Vows Are First**

A much more thorough discussion about Passive Inner Vows is found in the book **Healing from the Inside Out**, but here is a brief overview of both active and passive vows.

1. Active inner vows are taken in an effort to **stay safe and control pain**. *Active vows are something we do.* For example, I will make myself invisible so that my father cannot find me. (That worked really well as you can imagine).
2. Passive inner vows are about resigned **acceptance**. We accept something as true because it appears we have no other choice. We take passive vows *before* we take active vows. They lurk in the dark under active vows and are easy to miss. Of the two kinds of vows, passive are the more powerful and damaging to us. This is because passive vows wrap around our identity.

When my father molested me I accepted as true that THE MAN had ruined everything; that I was powerless to change that reality; that living with a ruined life was just the way it was going to be for me forever. I was the girl whose life was ruined. Do you see how my acceptance of this belief wraps around my identity? This is a passive

inner vow. I passively accepted as rock solid truth something about myself that can never be changed or from which I can never recover. Thus I began to live from the following lie-based identity: *I'm just a helpless victim of THE MAN who has ruined everything and there is NOTHING I can do about it. That is just WHO I AM.*

The actions I take to manage and contain the pain of what I believe become my Active Inner Vows, the things I will do to escape this perceived identity or at the very least to not feel what I believe about myself.

## **How I learned about Bitterness**

How did I come to my conclusions about bitterness? Good question! Here is what happened. I was dropping off to sleep one night when the Lord brought the subject of bitterness up. He said very calmly, "You have bitterness towards your father." As far as I was concerned this came completely out of nowhere. I was just about asleep when He spoke those words to me but I became completely awake because, at the Lord's observation, rage boiled up inside of me, and I snarled, "That's right! He ruined my life."

Woo!!!! I did not even know that was in me! I was like most Christians, wanting to avoid bitterness because I had been taught it is bad, but I didn't know what the heck it was. After my initial reaction to God's remark, I became very tearful as I explained to Him why That Man had ruined my life (with a little bit of accusatory mentions of how God LET it happen and if He really loved me He wouldn't have). After I had calmed down *the Lord told me that He has not given anyone the power to ruin my life.* I didn't believe Him of course, so He showed me this brilliant shaft of light and there I was inside that light. He said, "I have hidden your life in me. No one can ruin it." This so comforted me that I was able to release the bitterness I had held in my heart and break my passive vow to accept that I am the girl whose life is ruined by The Man. I was also able to work more on forgiving The Man for ruining my life now that I knew he hadn't really. I just BELIEVED that he had. It was my belief that was powering the enemy. This particular encounter with God was specially designed to help me with my bitterness.

*I pray that the Lord will help you receive a specially designed just-for-you encounter with Him to help you with any bitterness you may have.*

## **How the Heart Believes**

It's necessary to discuss how the heart believes before we move on. The human heart is designed by God to believe completely when it believes. It creates two primary categories: Significant Man and Significant Woman. Within those categories is stored the experiences you have had with your parents, teachers, mentors and other authority figures. These experiences become templates or patterns our heart automatically applies to every important interaction we have with people we perceive as powerful. (Please refer to **Healing from the Inside Out** for more about the heart.) Have you noticed that I refer to my father as The Man? This is how my heart understands and categorizes important men. My heart slots all important men into a category headed Significant Man. How my father behaved in my early years is how my heart believes ALL men (including God) will behave every time. Look at the language I am using. I am using heart language. Have you ever been in the middle of an emotional melt down and wailed at the top of your lungs: Why does this ALWAYS happen to me?!?! The word *always* tells us you are in contact with a painful heart belief. I mention this so that you will be able to follow me as I further explore bitterness. You see, I took my heart belief that *The Man had ruined my life forever and ever Amen* into my relationships with all significant men. Since the heart believes completely, perceives reality as all or nothing and puts people into categories, then every important man in my life was The Man and he would eventually ruin my life because that is what The Man does *Every Time, Always No Matter What, Forever and Ever*.

## **How Sam Ruined Everything (Only Not Really)**

After leaving the traditional church, Sam and I led a house church for about 11 years. Let me define what a house church is. House churches are composed of believers who meet in houses instead of in large buildings. Saves tons of money, as you can

imagine. We left the traditional church where we had been successfully teaching because of an ugly rumor campaign launched against me by a couple of people who believed that my presence interfered with their ministry goals. It became so shockingly nasty that we decided to quietly leave before we were forced out. This couple suffered from a bad case of selfish ambition and they were bitterly jealous of the anointing God had placed on me. See, this anointing made teaching easy for me and my classes attractive to others. So while I was having a joyous time (blissfully unconcerned about any toes I was stepping on), they were striving and getting poor results. They viewed my success as robbing them. In their eyes, I was a thief and the destroyer of their dreams. Getting rid of me became their priority, and they were willing to do whatever it took to accomplish my removal because I was *ruining everything!* This kind of jealousy is a fruit of bitterness.

*Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. James 3:13-16*

Finding ourselves churchless, with no intention of starting a house church, we just could not get settled anywhere. I was continuing to learn and teach about inner healing and people were coming to our home to join in my adventure. They also were longing for more intimate connections with God and people and for the safety and freedom to explore. So we began meeting regularly in my living room. At first, Sam was working evenings at the hospital and rarely attended. In those early days, our meetings were very lively. The presence of the Lord was strong and we had decided to research and try out different strategies on each other to see what worked to bring healing and freedom. Our motto was *Do Not Throw the Baby Out with the Bathwater*. The Lord was so fun and wonderful as He anointed our explorations with a spirit of freedom and joy. He did not validate everything we tried, but He did validate the exploration. This was an extremely healing time for me because my confidence had been seriously rattled by our

experience in our previous church. Then Sam changed shifts at work and suddenly we had The Man in our midst. Remember how the heart puts all important people into categories? To my heart, Sam is The Significant Man.

Sam brought into our group his strong opinions about how we should be meeting. And it wasn't the way I was doing it. Talk about a clash of the titans! Let me just say that the anointing departed; our meetings became dry; my marriage became a burden to me; and I sank into a functional depression that lasted for years. How our group survived for as long as it did is beyond me.

Remember that I believed in my heart and accepted as true that The Man ruins everything? Well there you go! The Man did it again. It felt like Sam had ruined the most important thing in my life at that time which was the anointed meetings we were enjoying.

## **Unbelief and Bitterness**

*"I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" Luke 18:8*

It is time to talk about unbelief as a fruit of bitterness. When Sam became a force in our meetings, he brought his bitter expectation that his contributions would not be welcomed or valued. In his childhood home only hard work was important. His artistic giftings were viewed with suspicion and quickly squashed. His outgoing and bubbly nature was discouraged. He was forbidden to take part in any after-school peer group activity and required to slave away morning and night every day of his young life on the family farm. Now couple this wounding with his recent painful loss of fellowship and purpose when we left the church where he, too, had been teaching successfully. When he joined our house-based meetings with his strong opinions and his hurts, I am sorry to say he was not made very welcome.

In retrospect, I realize that the Lord was ready to make a shift and if we had welcomed Sam and his giftings, confident in the Lord that there was room for him, we would have easily and joyfully shifted with the Spirit of the Lord and flowed in the direction He (God, not Sam) was leading. That so did not happen! We loved the anointing and direction we were enjoying and we did NOT want to make any changes, thank you very much. I realize now that the people needed some foundational Bible teaching and that Sam was equipped to provide it. BUT we felt threatened by Sam's criticisms and grew rigid and closed. Our exploration of healing strategies became *our way* of doing things and we were not going to change it. Now, granted, Sam did not conduct himself very wisely. You do not come into a group and begin pointing out what you think they are doing wrong. Not if you want them to like you and listen to you.

To be completely honest, no one in our little group was very wise. We were such beginners at being a community and at following the Lord as a community. All of us had been faithful traditional church members and we were good at faithfully following the pastor. Following the Lord is different in that there is tremendous freedom but there is a need for tremendous sensitivity to the Lord leading us. Because we were all trained to follow a man, none of us possessed any skills for following the Lord *as a community*. We had never been in an environment that valued such things. When Sam began attending our meetings, the people began arguing over us; choosing sides. They were behaving like the second-generation Israelites who had demanded a king to follow instead of just working on the skills needed to follow God as a community. So which king would our people follow? Sue or Sam? We had stopped following the Lord as a community.

After the Lord showed me my bitterness toward my father, He began to show me that our house church meetings were poorly anointed (if you will) because of the bitterness I had toward Sam. And I wasn't the only one who felt that way towards him. Two other founding members were also angry and bitter towards him. God withdrew his anointing so that we would (duh) figure out what was wrong and stop blaming Sam!

So what *was* wrong? *Ultimately, bitterness is about unbelief.* I, along with the other two members of our group, did not believe that God could replace one anointing with another anointing just as wonderful or even more exciting and wonderful. We did not believe that when God changed directions it was a good thing.

When I was painfully coming to the realization that our meetings were dull and dry because of ME, the Lord spoke Luke 18:8 to me, asking if He would find faith in the earth when He returned. And I had to answer Him with a no. As far as our church was concerned I had not had faith that He would see to it that we made a recovery and moved on to greater things. I had sunk into bitter despair and was blaming The Man for a loss that felt irretrievable. Because I had the underlying bitterness from my experiences with my father, my current loss was amplified by all the unprocessed pain of that original bitter experience.

Now don't feel too sorry for Sam. He finally stopped being defensive long enough to admit that he had come into the group with a critical attitude, believing that we needed fixing *by him* because HE knew how to meet in a small group and WE didn't. His apology did help me forgive him and move past my bitterness, but regardless it was my responsibility to take my bitterness to the Lord and receive from Him the healing and reassurance I needed.

**Bitterness bears the fruit of unbelief because in order to be bitter we must believe that there is no recovery from the loss.**

In 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 3, David and his men return to their camp, Ziklag, to discover it burned and their women and children taken by the Amalekites.

*When David and his men came to the city, behold, it was burned with fire, and their wives and their sons and their daughters had been taken captive. Then David and the people who were with him lifted their voices and *wept until there was no strength in them to weep.** 1 Samuel 3:3-4

Now notice after they have wept and lamented over their great loss, the people turned on David apparently blaming him for this tragedy.

*Moreover David was greatly distressed because the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were embittered, each one because of his sons and his daughters.* 1 Samuel 3:6

**Remember that bitterness finds someone to blame when a penetratingly painful loss is so devastating that it feels as if there is no hope of recovery.**

David's people did not believe that they would recover their families. But look at how David responded to his loss and to this unjust attack against him. And keep in mind that David had just lost his wives and had wept just as bitterly as the other men.

*But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God. Then David said to Abiathar the priest, the son of Ahimelech, "Please bring me the ephod." So Abiathar brought the ephod to David. David inquired of the Lord, saying, "Shall I pursue this band? Shall I overtake them?" And He said to him, "Pursue, for you will surely overtake them, and you will surely rescue all." 1 Samuel 3:6-8*

What David did and we, as a rule, do NOT do is he asked the Lord for advice. He believed that the Lord had a solution to his problem. Sometimes, God's plan for our future isn't obvious especially at the time of our tragedy, but becomes clearer as we mature. Until we know his plan for us, let's ask the Lord to teach us to strengthen ourselves in Him.

*Lord, I ask that You would teach us how to strengthen ourselves in You as David did when we are faced with the hard things in life. That by Your power and great love for us, You would keep us from falling into despair and unbelief. That You would whisper to us that You have a plan for our future no matter how impossible or painful our circumstances may be. Prove to us, Lord, that there is recovery and hope for us always. In the name of Your beautiful Son, Jesus, I pray.*

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