

LOVE

ALLOWING LOVE TO WIN OVER BITTERNESS

“I have loved you with an everlasting love”

JEREMIAH 31:3A



THE PROBLEM OF BITTERNESS

The word “bitter” is defined as “feeling angry, hurt, or resentful because of one's bad experiences or a sense of unjust treatment”. Have you felt bitter about something? When an expectation is not met in life, emotions of sadness and anger often arise. And when disappointments occur repeatedly, or last for long periods of time, these feelings of grief can develop into bitterness. This bitterness is typically directed outward toward the circumstances, toward others, or even toward God.

When we believe a false narrative about who God is and how God works, this can lead us to a place of deep disappointments and bitterness toward God. It can even lead to a crisis of faith or cause us to walk away from God entirely. If we believe, for example, that God operates with indifference toward us and our circumstances, this can lead us to a feeling of abandonment and a questioning of God's trustworthiness. And if we believe that God is all powerful, but simply chooses not to intervene, this can lead to a response of resentment and a questioning of God's goodness.

THE SOLUTION OF LOVE

We can overcome bitterness toward God by knowing the truth of who God is. Otherwise, false narratives we believe about his nature and actions can inevitably lead us to resentment and bitterness. Throughout scripture God's love is woven into every theme and every chapter - from the beginning of the Old Testament to the end of the New Testament. In the very beginning of Genesis, Adam and Eve chose to rebel and sin even though they lived in a perfect world and lacked nothing. And what did God do? He called out to them, lovingly pursuing relationship. Then he made a way for them, not only in life, but also for all of eternity when he promised the coming payment for their sin through his only son. We see God's loving interventions over and over, from Abraham and all the patriarch families to Moses and the wandering Israelites, Ruth the widow, David the shepherd boy turned king, Esther the unexpected queen, and more. God called out to each one and he made a way, often in the midst of hard circumstances. Ultimately in the New Testament, we see the fulfillment of God's love for us in Jesus, as his very life was poured out for us and his love was displayed on the cross. It is this faithful love in action that can lead us to trust the God who will see us through, and to release the bitterness we may feel over the difficult things we experience in this life.

THE STORY OF JOSEPH

In the story of Joseph, we see a beautiful thread of God's love woven throughout (Genesis Chapters 37, 39-50). Each time Joseph goes through some hardship the scriptures say that, "the Lord was with him". God was not distant and detached. He was close and compassionate.

Joseph could have become incredibly bitter. First his brothers sell him into slavery, and this was only after one of the brothers suggested it as an alternative to killing him as the other brothers had planned to do. Then Joseph finds himself in Potiphar's house as a faithful servant and Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him. When he refuses her, she falsely accuses him and sends him to jail. While in jail Joseph interprets two inmate's dreams, and the one who could have helped to get him out of prison forgets about him for two whole years.

But in all of this Joseph did not become bitter. He knew that God was with him and we can see clearly that Joseph trusted in God's love for him despite all the hard circumstances of his life. Even at the very end of his life he told his family, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place[1]." Joseph knew that what God said he would do would come to pass, even if he never saw it with his own eyes. Joseph trusted God because he knew who God was, and he had experienced God's love and trustworthiness over-and-over. Joseph is a wonderful example of one who allowed love to win over bitterness in his life.

[1] Genesis 50:25 - New International Version (NIV)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever struggled with bitterness? Have you ever felt bitter towards God?
2. Read Joseph's story (Genesis 37, 39-50) and write down the times that you see the phrase "The Lord was with him". What was happening to Joseph during that time and what was Joseph's response?
3. How have you seen God reveal his presence with you in the midst of hard circumstances? How did you feel about God in that moment?
4. In the beautiful hymn "Come thou Fount" there is a line that says, "Here I raise my ebezer". An ebezer is a stone of help, or a stone that reminds one of God's loving intervention and help. Jacob set up a stone like this after he encountered God (Gen 28: 10-22). Joshua had the 12 tribes set up 12 large stones when the Israelites crossed the Jordan into the promised land (Joshua 4). The stones were a tangible reminder to the Israelites, for generations to come, of God's love and

faithfulness toward them. This week create your own symbolic reminder of God's love and goodness in your life. It doesn't have to be a stone of course, simply a symbol: a list, a picture, an item, etc.

5. Here are some spiritual and practical exercises to help in the journey toward love over bitterness:

Journal your thoughts or share your feelings to God in prayer.

Remember the truth of who God is. Memorize scriptures about God's true nature and love. A good place to begin is to read John 3:16 and to learn the names of God and their meanings.

Implement self care daily into your routine. Parents of children with special needs often put themselves low on the list of priorities. There is simply too much to do and we are often exhausted mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. However, you will be able to operate from a much stronger place if you take a moment each day to take care of yourself and do the things that bring you joy.

See a licensed counselor or therapist. If you are struggling with anger and bitterness that will not subside and is interfering with your day-to-day life do not hesitate to seek out help. Anger is a normal part of grief, but it can also be a trauma response, and a professional will be able to help you process this and move toward healing. It's important to take care of your mental health which is just as important as your physical health.



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