

# Chapter 3



## Bitter Roots

Hebrews 12

Our minds create potholes and sometimes pits into which we fall and from which we struggle to get out. They are what the Bible calls “*roots of bitterness*” or “bitter roots” that need to be weeded out.

We are going to look at some of these bitter roots that have taken hold in our lives that cause us to be sad, depressed, angry, irritable, and physically sick. These bitter roots are thoughts we think every day in our internal dialogue. Yes, we talk to ourselves in thoughts every hour of every day. Many of these thoughts are untrue habitual thoughts that are negative and disturbing to our emotions. God wants us to uproot these thoughts and replace them with God honoring thoughts that are truthful. Psychology calls this “*cognitive deletion*” meaning replacing negative thoughts with healthy truthful thoughts. We call it “*renewing of our minds*” with God’s thoughts. (Romans 12:1-2)

I want to share my personal testimony of what God has done in my life to change some of the toxic thinking patterns that caused me great distress.

### Let’s look at Hebrews 12:1-3

That's our springboard. That's where we're starting. That's where we are going to nest. I believe this chapter of Hebrews 12 is the key to understanding the life of Christ in you. It is key to experiencing the power of the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives. I won’t print the entire chapter here, but you can read it on your own. We are going to focus on Hebrews 12:1-3 and Hebrews 12:12-15, because they address bitter roots in our thought-life.

Let’s begin with the first three verses. I'm using the *New King James Version*. I know people have problems with the old King James Version, and I understand that. We're reading from the *New King James Version*, not because it's a better translation than any other, but because I'm familiar with expressions of the King James Version. Hebrews chapter 12:1-3:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup>fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup>Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

### “Therefore,”

I want you to circle the word “therefore.” The therefore is there for a reason. Every time you see “therefore” in the Scripture, it means something happened before that and a conclusion is being drawn. In this case, it connects us to what was previously said in chapter 11. That's why Hebrews 11 is important. Let’s read verse 1 in another translation that I think makes it clearer.

*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us.”*

I want you to underline those two things. The Lord says, I want you to lay aside every weight and the sin. Those two words, “weight and sin.” Now let me shorten the passage so we get the meaning.

*“Let us throw off every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us and let us run with patience the race that is set before us...lest you become weary and discouraged in your soul.”*

You see here the apostle Paul lays before us the issues that are at stake.

The Apostle just gave us the definition of faith in chapter 11, and a long list of illustrations of people of faith in the Old Testament. Then chapter 12 says, “*therefore,*” because of all these testimonies, we ought to live godly lives as well. He uses the illustration of an athlete running a race. So, to run effectively, we need to get rid of the things that hinder God from doing His mighty work in us, so that we don’t “*become weary and discouraged in our soul.*”

Discouragement comes when we don’t get rid of the things that hinder and ensnare us. Or, as the *King James Version* translates, “the weights and sins that ensnare us.”

It's so very important for us as believers to understand that God is concerned about our soul.

### **The Sin of Unbelief**

What is the “it” he referred to? “It” is unbelief. Unbelief is not just not believing God’s promises, but believing something else instead. How do we know that? It's in this passage in Hebrews 12:1-3.

*“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,<sup>2</sup> Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.<sup>3</sup> For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest you be wearied and faint in your minds.”*

### **The Sin that Ensnares Us**

The sin that easily besets us is not usually the sin of adultery. It's not the sin of robbing God. It’s not lying, cheating, swearing, drinking, drugs, or gambling. It’s not the sin of blasphemy, or even witchcraft. It's not any of those things that we always look for on the outside and recognize as sin. The Apostle here is saying, you need to remove the weight and the sin.

What is the weight and the sin that easily besets us? It is the sin of unbelief. It is the sin of NOT BELIEVING GOD. It is the sin of believing something different from what God says. It is the sin of believing your own thoughts rather than God’s thoughts. It is the sin of thinking wrong thoughts about God, life, the world, people, and yourself. It is the sin of believing lies that Satan whispers in our thoughts. It is the internal self-talk we tell ourselves. Unbelief manifests itself, but the deepest way is in our thought life.

There are many sins that afflict us. There are many temptations that seduce us. There are many areas in our lives that need adjustment. But none is more important than the sin that lies within—the sins of our thoughts. Those dysfunctional thoughts, those thoughts that cause us trouble and affect those around us.

## Take Care of Your Car

How many of you take care of your car and actually change the oil every 5,000 miles? You know the care of your car is important. We need to take care of the vehicles that we have.

I grew up in a family where that wasn't taught. My Dad didn't teach us a lot of things about mechanics. He just said, "Go away. Leave me alone." Maybe your dad did that to you and you didn't learn to change the oil regularly. When I was in Clymer, Pennsylvania, we had a big old Ford Galaxy 500. I mean, it was the best car we could ever afford on a salary of \$75 a week.

I didn't have money to put oil in the thing. It was hard enough to put gas in the car when you make \$75 a week. So I didn't bother changing the oil. I thought if it works, it's not broken.

One Thanksgiving, I finished preaching a Thanksgiving service. We wanted to drive 3 ½ hours to Michigan to my parents and come back before Sunday. So we packed up the big car and headed down the road.

During our long drive, the car started to make a little clicking noise. You know what that means? Clicking usually indicates trouble, but since it wasn't broken, we continued driving. We finally got to Michigan and had a great time with family, but we had to get back to church on Sunday. We turned around and started down the road. We got about an hour out and the car started making louder clicks.

I thought I'd better stop and put some oil in the car. So, I stopped the car at one of those rest areas with gas stations on the Ohio Turnpike. It was a holiday weekend, so there were no mechanics available to look at the car. I asked the attendant if there was anybody who could look at my car. He said, "No, not till Monday. You'd have to stay overnight."

I didn't have money to stay overnight, so we kept going. As we traveled the noise got louder. Marilyn was worrying about what we'd do if the car broke down. We prayed. By the time we got to the Pennsylvania line, the car was not only making noise; it was doing the shakes. It was embarrassing to be in it, but we kept praying, "Oh dear Lord, get us home." We had no choice but to keep going. We finally made it to our home in Clymer, Pennsylvania and drove around the back of the church and pulled into our parsonage driveway. The car engine died as we pulled up to our garage door. We said, "Thank God we're home!" When I went out the next day, I discovered that the car's engine had locked up.

On Monday, we called a tow truck to take it to the Ford dealer to be worked on. We prayed, "Oh dear Lord, we don't have the money for this. Please help us."

We waited for the phone call from McGill motors tell us how bad it was. It was bad! The mechanic called and said, "Your engine burned up. Evidently you put oil in too late. It stopped pumping oil because the gunk had plugged it. You know, young man, you need to change the oil once in a while, and changing the filter would be a good idea." We learned a hard lesson about taking care of a car.

## Now let's get back to Hebrews 12:1-3.

God says, "I have just given you a testimony of the great patriarchs of all time and the miracles I did throughout all ages. They all had given a good testimony of faith, but did not receive the promise." God had something better for them (heaven) and God has something even better for you and me, His promises and heaven.

But first we need to do some soul searching "to find" and "throw off" the weights and sins that hinder us. These are sins of unbelief. They are thought-sins. They are thinking patterns that are not pleasing to God. They are thoughts we think that are not true, and contradict the word of God. We need to "throw them off."

## Hebrews 12:12-15

We have examined Hebrews 12:1-3, so now let's look at **Hebrews chapter 12:12-15.**

*Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 13. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. 14. Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. 15. See to it that no one misses (the point of) the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause (you) trouble and defile many. (Hebrews 12:12-15 NIV)*

## The Subject Is Roots, Not Bitterness

The old King James Version translated it "*roots of bitterness*" which is not exactly correct. That gives us the idea that bitterness is what he is talking about. He is not talking about bitterness. He is not referring to bitterness toward someone. Bitterness is not the subject. Roots is the subject. He is talking about "bitter roots." The subject is ROOTS, not bitterness. The roots that grow up in our hearts (thoughts) are bitter and they cause trouble.

## The Symptoms Need Healing

The symptoms that bitter roots have sprung up is they cause feeble arms and weak knees and lameness and disabilities in your walk with God. They hinder you, therefore they need to be healed. You don't heal the bitter roots. God does. He is the healer. You are the patient. You are the sick one. You just need to expose your bitter root to the Great Physician, who will heal it.

It's not a physical disease he was talking about, it's a spiritual disease. He makes that clear. He talks about holiness in verse 14, that without holiness, no one will see the Lord. This spiritual cure is about God applying the balm of holiness, of cleanliness in Christ.

## Look Carefully At Yourself

The main point here is in verse 15. We see he wants to be sure that no one misses the point of the grace of God or doesn't misuse the grace of God.

***Look carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause (you) trouble, and by this many become defiled; (Hebrews 12:12-15)***

The Apostle said, “**look carefully.**” God wants us to look carefully into our hearts to see if there are any bitter roots. This verse doesn't address just the Hebrews who received this letter. It is to you. It's addressed to you and me. It's addressed to all of us who know Christ as Savior. That means all of us should stand in front of a mirror (God's Word) and point at ourselves. Put your finger right between your eyes, and say, “You (your name) need to be healed!” That's who this message is for. This message is for you. It's not for your husband. It's not for your wife. It's not for your neighbor or friend. It is for you.

## Bitter Roots Will Trouble You

The word of God says bitter roots spring up and trouble you. The word “troubles” here is the word for annoys, disturbs, or causes trouble. Bitter roots will spring up from time to time in all our hearts. Old thoughts, old temptations, old failures, and old memories will, from time to time, spring up and trouble you. Maybe you thought you had conquered that sin years ago. You thought the old man was dead. He is not dead, he's gone into hiding. He's still there, lurking in the background of your mind and memories. Read Romans 7 and see that even Paul wrestled with his old nature and thoughts.

## Bitter Roots Defile (Affect) Others

Bitter roots are going to give you trouble. You're going to have difficulty. You're going to have some maladjustments in your life as long as these roots are there. God wants you to look carefully and make sure you understand what the root is and where the root came from, and see the damage it will do and how it can be healed.

## A Worm Story

A missionary colleague of mine tells a story about getting a worm in his stomach. I believe it was a Guinea worm he picked up while visiting Guinea, West Africa. It embedded itself into his stomach. The worm got into his system and gradually burrowed in. When he got back from his trip, the worm grew inside his stomach. Eventually, it came through his skin.

He went to the doctor to seek help. He said he could try to cut it out, but that might leave a portion of the worm still inside, and it would continue to grow. What he ended up doing is one of those practical remedies that everybody suggests. You have to dig in there and get the worm by the tail. Then you wrap its tail around a stick and gradually start pulling it out. It is a slow process, but you've got to pull that worm little by little. You can't pull him out suddenly or it will break off. If it breaks off, it will stay alive and keep digging deeper into you. Our friend was in excruciating pain pulling and tugging that worm. He tells a dramatic story about the blood, sweat, and tears of getting that worm out of his stomach. Eventually, he had the joy of being free of that parasite.

## **Spiritual Parasites**

You've probably never had a worm under your skin. But you know the Lord is concerned because all of us get spiritual infections. Sometimes we get spiritual worms, parasites, things that cling onto us and suck the life out of us. God wants us to get to the place where we are sick and tired of being sick and tired. We get to the place where we're sick of having the life drained out of us, sick of being discouraged, and sick of being defeated. Then we grab hold of that thing in the name of Jesus. We excise it and pull it out for the glory of God.

## **An Infected Finger**

My son, Andrew, used to get all kinds of infections while we served in Brazil. He played in the sandboxes where cats go, and you know what that creates. One day, he came in with an infected finger. He had cut his finger, and it really was badly infected, but he was hesitant to bring that to me. When he finally brought it to me, I saw his finger was badly swollen. It looked like an abscess all over his finger. You could see the puss was oozing out where the cut was. It was all very creepy. The last thing I would want to see out of that is maggots coming out of it, which would be the next step in Brazil. So, I looked at that thing and told him we had to do something about it. My son begged, "Daddy, don't touch it."

I said, Andrew, I have to touch it. I have to see how bad it is and how we can treat it. But he begged, "Please daddy, please don't do it. Don't do it. Don't touch it." I sat him down and, being the imaginative story teller I am, I said, "Andrew, you know what'll happen to that if we don't get that infection out? That infection is already deep inside your finger. It's only going to get worse. If you are not careful to take care of it, the infection is going to spread down your finger into your hand, then your hand is going to get all swollen, and then it's going to crawl up your arm, then from your arm it will go to your neck and then your heart."

Of course, my wife walked in at that moment. "Why are you scaring him?" I was just trying to get him to the hospital to take care of it. Well, the scare worked. We took him to the neighborhood clinic. The doctor came in and examined Andrew's finger and said it was badly infected and he needed to drain the puss out of it.

As I sat there, he took a syringe with a long needle and approached Andrew. I said, "Andrew, you've just got to look the other way. Let the doctor do what he's got to do." He stuck the needle in and injected a saline solution into his finger. The puss started oozing out this way and that way. It was so bad he had to do it a second time. Finally, he got it all cleaned out, then put an antibiotic on it and wrapped it up.

Then the doctor said, "Andrew, this is going to be just fine, but we had to get the infection out. I know it was painful, but it would have been more painful if we didn't do something."

Think about that in the spiritual realm. The Lord says there is a deep infection in our hearts. There are poisonous roots that need to be dealt with. There are worms and parasites in our spiritual lives that will suck the life out of us. They will eat us up, and they will spread throughout our system. We need to deal with these things. It's painful to deal with it but it must be done.

Throughout this book, we will be dealing with difficult things. Some of these things are little bitter roots that sprout thorns, and later more complex problems. God wants us to address them, although they are difficult. We can overcome and we must deal with them.

God says these weights and sins of unbelief first trouble you, then they affect other people and defile many. These roots are dysfunctional thoughts, thoughts that contradict the word of God. They are beliefs, ideas and attitudes that are not godly. Some of these weeds have deep roots that embitter your lives.

I call them distorted thoughts about God, about Christ, and about life, and they are the weeds that are going to eat you alive. God instructs us to search diligently for these bitter roots, these spiritual weeds, so that we can be healed.

### **Dysfunctional Thoughts Are Bitter Roots**

The **bitter roots** that cause us trouble, make us feeble, weak, lame and disabled are the sins of the heart. Every sin comes from the thoughts of our heart before its shoots are seen in the real world. A root is not seen until it breaks out into daylight. Even then, you don't see the root, you see the fruit.

**The Apostle encourages us to “look carefully” for these bitter roots. The only way to discover the root cause of our troubles is to look into our hearts (our innermost thoughts) to see what is there. Jesus said that before we ever sin outwardly, we sin in our hearts, our thoughts cause our troubles.**

First, the bitter roots are going to **trouble you**. You're going to have difficulty. You're going to have some inner struggles. You're going to have emotional ups and downs. You're going to have some maladjustments in your life. God wants you to look carefully to make sure you understand what the root is and where the root comes from, and the damage that it will do. There are all kinds of bitter roots and weeds springing up in our thought lives. Every weed in our heart has a root cause. Find it and uproot it.

Second, the bitter roots are going to **defile others**. They are going to not only trouble you, but they will affect the people around you, your family, your spouse, your children, your friends, and your church family. What are they? I am sure there are more than we can number.

Years ago, when we suffered the death of our 12-year-old daughter while serving as missionaries in Brazil, my world came crashing down. My faulty belief system came apart. My health broke. We had to seek counseling for my troubled mind and emotions. It was not a good time in my life. I nearly lost my faith completely through lying thoughts that had nested in my inner mind since childhood. You can read my full story and restoration in our book, *Restoring Shattered Faith*. We will have a link for you at the end of this book.