

rooting out BITTERNESS

by Florence MacKenzie

I love chocolate and I've often wondered what contributes to the different chocolate flavors. So I thought I'd read up about it and discovered that a lot has to do with whether or not the cocoa is thoroughly fermented. If it isn't, the chocolate can taste extremely bitter. Eating bitter chocolate is no big deal, though, as the taste soon goes away. Unfortunately, the same can't be said for bitter attitudes and feelings.

Bitterness is a form of anger.

It's like a poisonous weed whose roots grow deep in the soil of our souls. Many things can encourage bitterness to develop. For example, being wronged in some way by other people; being rejected, perhaps in childhood or in a friendship or a marriage relationship; or being in circumstances not of your choosing. Like chocolate with a high proportion of unfermented cocoa, bitterness is unpleasant, it is strong, and it leaves little room for anything else.

Bitterness is unpleasant. In the Old Testament book of Ruth, we meet a woman named Naomi who knew what it was like to suffer. She experienced famine, she was widowed, and her two sons died. I think her dreams died also – dreams of grandchildren perhaps, or of a better life in a foreign land. Naomi interpreted unpleasant events as being God's responsibility (Ruth 1:13). But, like all of us, it was her responsibility to choose her response to circumstances – and she chose bitterness. Naomi's story tells us that bitterness is not something we're born with, but rather something we can acquire. She wasn't always bitter – her name means “pleasant” – but she wanted to be known as Mara which means “bitter” (Ruth 1:20, 21). In effect, she was replacing the pleasant (Naomi) with the unpleasant (Mara) and thereby embracing bitterness.



Bitterness is strong. Once bitterness takes root in our lives it can be very difficult to remove it. You know what it's like when you have weeds growing in your yard – the longer you leave them, the harder it is to get rid of them. Over time, their roots go deeper and they start to spread to other parts of your yard that were previously weed-free. It's pretty much the same with bitterness. One of the ways you can keep bitterness strong is to go over and over in your mind the hurts that were inflicted on you, or the losses you endured as a result of difficult circumstances. Every time you do this, it's like treading a well-worn path across a field. The more you walk along this path, the more established that path becomes and the less likely you are to consider crossing the field by any other route. That's what happens with bitter attitudes and feelings. The more you tread the bitter path, the more firmly bitterness becomes embedded in your life and the less likely you are to consider a different way of thinking.

Bitterness leaves little room for anything else. With chocolate, the degree of bitterness is proportional to the amount of unfermented cocoa it contains. High levels leave little room for any other taste. The same is true of bitter attitudes and angry feelings. The more anger and resentment that are in our lives, the less of other, more pleasant, characteristics there will be. Some examples of “unfermented cocoa” are resentment, harsh or hurtful words, unduly blaming other people, self-pity, and an unwillingness to extend forgiveness to someone who has wronged us. It seems that the more of these things we have in our lives, the more likely we are to become bitter.

If someone has hurt you deeply, it's understandable that this might produce feelings of bitterness which, once they take root, allow that person to continue hurting you. The one who inflicted hurt on you is not affected by your bitterness. When we hold on to bitter feelings, the only one we're hurting is ourselves.

If you can detect even the smallest degree of bitterness in your attitude or your feelings, why tolerate its presence any longer? Face up to it and ask God to help you let go of it. There's a verse in the Bible that tells us to get rid of all bitterness (Ephesians 4:31). It wouldn't say this if it weren't possible for us to obey in the power of the Holy Spirit. With His help, you can begin to root out the bitterness that holds you back from being all you could be!