

Equipped to consider the cross

Have you ever thirsted for a long, cool drink of refreshing water, only to find it was undrinkable? Or perhaps a relationship, a new job, or some other life-changing course of action has turned sour and left you with a bitter taste in your mouth. Then join the Exodus 15:23 club! But, in verse 25, the bitter water at Marah became sweet when Moses obeyed the Lord's command to throw a piece of wood into it. We, too, have access to a piece of wood - not physically, but through faith - and that wood is the cross of Christ. When we allow the cross to impact our bitter experiences, it will be difficult for our perspective to remain the same. How?

The cross shows us that bitterness is not an inevitable response to suffering. Jesus knew what it was like to suffer, yet He didn't resort to bitterness. Instead, one of His cries from the cross was *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"*.¹ Are we willing to follow His example and replace bitterness with forgiveness? I find there's a lot of confusion about what it means to forgive someone who has wronged us. Forgiveness doesn't mean our hurts don't matter or that the offender has "got away with it". Forgiving is not forgetting, nor is it the same as reconciliation. When we realize that one aspect of forgiveness involves giving up our right to pay back or "get even" with someone who has wronged us, even if they don't ask for our forgiveness, then we're well on the way to releasing the bitterness that has held many of us captive for too long. Forgiving those who have hurt us is not easy, but we do have a choice: we can either pay the price of forgiving our offenders or we can pay the even higher price of not forgiving them.

The cross demonstrates that things aren't always what they seem. The well-known Dutch painter, Vincent van Gogh, sold only one painting in his entire life. Looking at this statistic alone, we might be tempted to think he was a failed artist. Yet, over 2,000 pieces of van Gogh's art have been preserved and are now acclaimed by many. You see, things aren't always what they seem. To everyone standing around the cross, the future must have looked very bleak. All hope had gone. It seemed that nothing could alter the bitter disappointment and bewilderment of Jesus' followers. But they were wrong. Jesus' resurrection changed all that! A new beginning was about to take place. Do you reckon you could use a new beginning in your life? If bitterness is souring your relationship with God and with others, why not allow the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ to begin changing your perspective?

The cross focuses our attention on eternity. This life, with its joys and sorrows, will very soon be over and, before we know it, we'll find ourselves in eternity. The bible talks about our present troubles being quite small and not lasting very long, relatively speaking, yet they result in great glory that will last forever.² When circumstances are about to overwhelm you and bitterness threatens to get the better of you, remind yourself that this won't last forever, but as a follower of Jesus Christ, you will one day live in His presence, with the awful effects of suffering and injustice completely removed. Bitter experiences, if we're willing to learn from them, can shift our focus from earth to heaven. After all, eternity, not time, is the real deal!

The Israelites at Marah discovered that bitter water doesn't satisfy. Neither do bitter thoughts and attitudes. When we hold on to bitterness, the only person we're hurting is ourselves. If we think we're somehow "punishing" another individual by being bitter, we need to think again. This person is completely unaffected by our attitude! It makes sense, then, to follow through on the command to *"get rid of all bitterness..."*³ We're able to do this when we allow the cross of Christ to touch the parts of our lives that have gone sour. He can make the most bitter experiences sweet!

¹ Luke 23:34 (NIV)

² 2 Corinthians 4:17

³ Ephesians 4:31 (NIV)