

Equipped to root out bitterness

Have you ever eaten chocolate with a very high cocoa content? I've done some fun research and discovered that, if the cocoa is not thoroughly fermented, the chocolate can taste very 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 contribute to bitterness. 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. Any of these, and more, can set the scene for bitterness to develop. Like the chocolate that has a high proportion of cocoa, bitterness is unpleasant; it is strong; and it leaves little room for anything else. Let's look at each of these in turn.

Bitterness is unpleasant. In the Old Testament book of Ruth, we meet a woman who knew what it was like to suffer. Her name is Naomi. 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. Bitter roots were being planted in Naomi's life experience.¹ She interpreted unpleasant events in her life as being God's responsibility. However, like all of us, it was her responsibility to choose her response - 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".² 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 garden - 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 garden that used to be 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 embedded in your life bitterness becomes and the less likely you are to consider an alternative 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's in our lives, the less of other, more pleasant, characteristics there will be. Some examples of "unfermented cocoa" in the life of a bitter person are resentment; blaming other people; harsh or hurtful words; self-pity; and an unwillingness to forgive. I think it's probably true to say that the more of these things you have in your life, the more bitter you will become.

Don't let bitterness continue in your life a moment longer. Face up to it and ask God to help you let go of it. The Bible tells us to get rid of all bitterness.³ It wouldn't do 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!

¹ Ruth 1:13

² Ruth 1:20, 21

³ Ephesians 4:31