

A Root of Bitterness

We read in the book of Hebrews chapter 12 these concerning words, *"Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled"*. Bitterness is an unpleasant thing and relates in the main to taste or smell, and in many ways is a contrast to the sweet smelling savour God wishes from us in our lives. We read of the Lord Jesus who was *"an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour"* and we are to follow in His footsteps as 'Living sacrifices'. In 2 Cor. 2:15 we read of those who in the testimony of the gospel are *"to God a sweet savour of Christ"*. The word savour means to 'smell well' and in modern usage people talk of savouring a meal when it tastes good, and that is often preceded by the smell which prepares our appetite. So we can have that which is sweet and smells and tastes good, or that which is bitter with a bad smell and taste.

It is important to recognise that the smell and taste are for God, that is the ultimate purpose and direction of our lives, but bitterness, of course, can affect others, and also ourselves. So when there is a root of bitterness it will be part of all that we do, as we shall see later, and affects all our relationships. We read *"walk in love"* so sweetness comes from love and bitterness comes from anything which is contrary to the love of God, shed abroad in our hearts, and its outworking in our lives. Bitterness can be heard in the voice and a harsh tone of speech as well as the words used and can be full of hatred, anger, confrontation and resentment.

The words quoted at the beginning follow the passages in Hebrews 12 about *"Running with patience the race set before us, looking unto Jesus the Author and Finisher of our Faith"*, and the section on Christian discipline, which describes God dealing with His people as sons and correcting them to bring forth *"Peaceable fruit unto righteousness"*. The preceding words to *"Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled"* are *"Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed"*. So we are in a whole section of the Bible which provides warnings and exhortation. Hebrews chapter 12, indeed, continues with the warning to 'look out' in case there be found any *'profane person or fornicator'* within the church. This teaching is written with the intention of looking at **'a root of bitterness'**, but this phrase must be seen in the context of the whole passage of scripture which emphasises ***"lifting up the hands that hang down and strengthening feeble knees"*** in case that ***"which is lame be turned out of the way but rather let it be healed"***. It is clear that if we have feeble knees and our hands hang down then we are unable to 'run the race with patience' and one assumes therefore that spiritual lameness must be possible, which will prevent us moving on with our Lord Jesus and growing in grace and our knowledge of Him. Indeed Jesus encourages those who *"labour and are heavy laden"* to be yoked to Him, like oxen, and if we are lame it is impossible to be yoked to Jesus and move and work with Him.

All of us will have seen images on the TV or in the newspaper of athletes running marathons, and how their whole body language gives away just how they are feeling and what are their prospects for the rest of the race. Indeed, hands do hang down in exhaustion and knees look feeble as the 'spring in the step' goes and everything becomes very hard work. Some runners do get cramp and literally become lame and cannot continue in the race and are 'turned out of the way', so all these words in Hebrews 12 are very poignant, and accurate, and are to help us to maintain a 'spiritual fitness'. The intention of the Hebrews' writer is that we be not 'spiritually lame'; the word in the Greek for 'lame' really means 'to be paralysed' and may be even stronger in emphasis than the word used in the English version. So here is a strong exhortation not to be turned out of the way because, spiritually, our hands are hanging down and our knees wobbling. Even where there is lameness let it 'rather be healed', so the word of God is to help to find a way of overcoming or removing anything which prevents us walking, rather running, ahead with our Christian lives and following our Lord

Jesus. We read of Jesus in the beginning of the same chapter, *"Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross and despised the shame"*. We see the wonderful way in which our Lord Jesus was able to continue, even through His death on the cross, without ever being 'turned out of the way' through spiritual weakness or fatigue, and without ever allowing in His heart anything which would hinder His progress. He had 'joy' set before Him, and as we look at this subject we will find how joy is such a blessing to us all. In the book of Nehemiah, when they were re-building the walls of Jerusalem, often against great opposition, the joy of the Lord, the people were told, was their strength, and we read when the work was done a great shout went up from the people which could be heard *"A far off"*. The joy of the Lord is and should be the strength of the Christian.

The command, in this chapter in Hebrews, is to 'make straight paths for your feet'. In the Bible **walking** is used to describe our manner of living. We read, '**Walk** in the Spirit', '**Walk** in love', '**Walk** circumspectly', '**Walk** honestly', '**Walk** in newness of life', and **don't** '**Walk** in the flesh' and so on. We **walk** with our feet, so to make straight paths for our feet is to make life simple and straightforward. Christians can be so complicated and their paths crooked or twisting and winding. The problem is usually in our thinking, and one can sometimes see minds working through mental 'tick boxes', making sure everything is ok. It all takes so long and the process can be tortuous, and yet our Bible tells us we believe with the heart and not the mind, and trying to get faith through the mental processes can be almost impossible.

People can be so full of doctrine and conflicting ideas that it makes them unable to move ahead, as while they are thinking things out, the opportunity has often gone. Seeking for guidance becomes a dilemma; there are lots of different books of 'how to do this, that, or the other' often with conflicting ideas and theories, each promising to provide the answer to victorious Christian living. They all teach people to use their minds and their feelings when the answer is simply to live from a believing heart. God is not the author of confusion. It is interesting to note that in the early church there was no New Testament; they may have had a few verses from the Old Testament, but no book of Romans from which to learn doctrine, no basis from which authors could write their manuals for Christian living or church life which everyone could put into practice. There were no letters to the Corinthians teaching about spiritual gifts, so no basis on which scholars could argue whether they still exist or not while others write long explanations of how they are to work. The churches just got on and lived trusting the Lord, being led by the Spirit of God rather than the wisdom of men. Of course some books are helpful and reading the biographies of 'Christian Heroes' can be inspiring, but follow their faith not their methods and don't try to become a 'spiritual clone'; be what you are in God and do His will. So let us be careful, God does not confuse. We need to remember therefore that 'the carnal mind is enmity against God and cannot be subject to God's laws', but 'to be spiritually minded is life and peace'. So books have to be written, not to produce a method, but rather to inspire faith in our Lord Jesus. 'The letter kills', only 'the Spirit of God gives us life' and, however much a book is trumpeted as being the answer, it will only do so if it brings the living word of God and leads us to the Lord Jesus, 'The author and finisher of our faith'. Everything that is really useful in our lives comes by revelation from God Himself, as 'faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God', rather than the ideas and theories of men or women.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his second letter, chapter 11 *"But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ"*. The passage goes on to talk about preachers/false apostles, the NIV translates them 'super apostles', with differing ideas going round preaching 'another/a different Jesus' and bringing the Christians into bondage, and under their control and not under the simple authority of the Lord. Paul was concerned that their **minds** should be corrupted from the simplicity, or straightforwardness, in our Lord Jesus; the battle is in the mind and is why minds, or the way we think, are the areas where our lives are most challenged. Minds are our vulnerable area and can be corrupted from simplicity, so that we lose our straightforward ways of thinking.

We all know that computer discs can be corrupted so that we cannot get any information from

them, and minds can become like that so that we cannot get any proper spiritual thinking from them. Paul wanted to keep the Corinthians, and of course it applies to all Christians, from **paralysing** complications and confusion in their minds, caused by following the ways of men not the ways of God. In Hebrews 12 we read to *"Lay aside every weight and the sin which does so easily beset us, and to run with patience"*. Both the **making paths straight** and the **laying aside weights** are to make life straightforward in following our Lord Jesus, so we are not burdened and not complicated. Most people, including, if we are honest, many Christians, still like to be in control of their lives, they like their burdens and their complications, they like to be able to work everything out for themselves, it is safe that way; but so often such an attitude is **contrary to faith and believing**, when we are to *"Run.... looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith"*. One would suggest that while we are working everything out for ourselves it is impossible to look to Jesus and have our hearts open to Him.

The whole corruption which took place in Eve's mind was at the beginning of human life on the earth and is where sin and unbelief started. The corrupt mind was one which had 'the knowledge of good and evil' and was therefore able to make its own judgements.

But it is **Jesus' job** to look after us and direct us; and with all our complications could it be said, if we are not very careful, we are finding a way to usurp His authority, not being truly submitted to our Lord and, as a result, remain in control of our lives?

Isaiah says in chapter 40, *"Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the **crooked** shall be made straight and the rough places plain"*. This is in the context of *"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, says your God. Speak you comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins"*. The truth is that our battles are over, Jesus has overcome for us; these are the comfortable words which the prophet cries out from the depth of God's heart. "Be comforted", is God's word of love, "Your battles are over and I will make all your crooked and twisting and complicated thinking straightforward and simple in order that you can walk with me, not being prevented from moving ahead by the paralysis in your mind. Let all your cares be gone, trust me, as I love you and laid down my life for you".

Many of the battles Christians fight have already been won by our Lord Jesus, if only we could but see it, and once we have this realisation it then becomes possible to move on to the real purposes of a Christian life; to serve God and not ourselves. This is all probably best summed up in these wonderful words of Jesus, *"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light"*. As we have said, if we are lame we cannot be yoked to Jesus and move on, but the wonderful thought is that as we are yoked and joined to Him, in His will, all His life and grace will flow to us and take away any hint of lameness. So as we work through the context of our passage in Hebrews 12, we come to 'follow peace with **all** men', not only those within the church but those in the world also. That does not necessarily mean we will achieve peace with everyone but that is to be our goal, and in doing so there must be a positive and constructive attitude in our relationships with everyone. Problems arise in our hearts when we are passive, **following** peace is very positive and means that spiritually we are 'on the move', we are being proactive. The word for follow in the Greek means to '**chase after**' so perhaps that gives the right idea, and we should understand that when we read the word '**follow**' in our Bibles and also when we find it in this teaching. So "if any man will follow" means to hurry on after, it is very positive, and God is very positive towards us in all He has done for us in His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the book to the Ephesians there is the instruction *"Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"*. This of course can only apply within the church and with our Christian brothers and sisters, with whom we are of the same Spirit having been *"Baptised by one Spirit"* into the body of Christ. The word **endeavour** means 'being **diligent**', so it is a thing which must be worked at, again nothing passive here; we had 'diligently' in our sentence related to the 'root of bitterness'. Unity is

very important as *“where there is unity among brethren there the Lord has commanded the blessing, even life for evermore”* (Psalm 133). It is lack of unity, indeed division between people in churches, which hinders the work of God and prevents the Holy Spirit moving in power among God’s people. The bond of peace is about the relationships between brothers and brothers, sisters and sisters, and brothers and sisters in the Lord, and is not only an outward thing but must be one which is deep in our hearts. It is of course based on our personal peace with God, ‘being justified by faith we have peace with God’, and ‘Jesus is our peace’. A ‘root of bitterness’ can arise when there is not real peace between Christians; it could be said that the real solution to being free from bitterness is to have **peace** in our hearts, not only towards all people, but most importantly towards the Lord. When Jesus made peace by the blood of His cross (Colossians 1. 20) it was to **reconcile** all things to **Himself**. Reconcile means to change everything in us which was against God and replace it with everything which is in agreement/fellowship with God.

So real peace for the Christian towards others, inside or outside the church, is that everything and anything in us which was against that person is removed and replaced with that which loves and cares and promotes their best interests. Jesus told us to *“Love our enemies and to pray for those that despitefully use us”* and one would suggest this is part of our following after peace with all men. So we must understand that rather than just being passive and getting on with coping, when things are done wrongly against us, we should pray in the love of God for those who do work wrongly against us, that the Lord Jesus may change them in their hearts and lives. Our Lord Jesus cried out on the cross, *“Father forgive them because they don’t know what they are doing”*, and genuine forgiveness is one of the essential requirements to keeping any root of bitterness out of our hearts. Having real peace with God is essential too, although Hebrews only mentions peace towards men, as we have said, but it is worth repeating, peace toward God is absolutely vital too; any enmity between anyone and the Lord Jesus must create ‘a bitterness’ in the heart.

Perhaps the author of the book to the Hebrews assumed that it was totally understood that there must be peace with God, which is why it is not mentioned here. There are many exhortations earlier in the book to ‘enter into rest’ and that simply is not possible without being at peace with God. Jesus made peace by the blood of His cross, and the experience for the Christian must be that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all unrighteousness, which is everything and anything which would prevent us having peace with God. Indeed Jesus ‘is our peace’ and gives us His peace. What more could we need, and what a wonderful basis for looking to ensure that there is no root of bitterness in us? Having followed peace, we are then to **follow** holiness, again **following** is a positive, forward going, approach and does not allow us to be passive in our Christian lives. The word for ‘holiness’ really means separation/sanctification, and it is translated ‘sanctification’ in some Bible versions; the American Standard Version is an example.

Separation/sanctification in many ways is a more helpful concept to understand; it simply means being set apart **for** God **from** this world. ‘In the world but not of the world’, and is what Jesus prayed for His disciples as we read in John 17, *“And now come I to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are **not of the world**, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou should take them out of the world, but that thou should keep them from the evil. **They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.**”*¹⁸ *As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth”*. Jesus was not of the world neither of the spirit of this world but was of God. He sanctified Himself, He separated Himself for His death on the cross, and thereby to the will of His Father, in order that Christians may be also sanctified, or separated, to God through the truth.

We read these wonderful words in Hebrews chapter 10, *“Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second. By the **which will** we are **sanctified** through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**”*. So our sanctification, which we are to **follow**, is in the Lord Jesus; just as He is our peace, He is our sanctification also. 1 Corinthians tells us

that Jesus Christ is made to us sanctification, so through Him we find ourselves separated spiritually from this world and reconciled to God. That is our position in Christ, but there has to be a practical outworking of that separation in our lives and is why we are to **follow** after holiness and pursue this separation, so that we '**put off**' the deeds of the flesh and, as we read in this same chapter, we 'lay aside **every** weight'. John tells us, *'If we love the world, the love of God the Father is not in us'*, but now '**separated unto God**' we are to live unto Him and therefore remain free from the world with all its sinning. Romans chapter 6 tells us, *"But now being **made free** from sin, and **become servants to God**, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life"*. So holiness is the outworking of our separation unto God, becoming His servants so that we are no longer the servants of sin.

It is not, of course, that we are perfect, but rather working towards being more like Jesus. What it means is that there is **not** continuing and continual sin in our lives and we are not doing any of those things listed in the 'lusts of the flesh' and other lists of wrongdoing in the New Testament. One passage mentions things that we must *"Let it not be **once** named among you, as becomes **saints**"*; (Saints means separated or sanctified ones). In the list of things not to be named, or found in us, are strife, anger and so on, all of which prevent us being at peace with our fellow Christians, and with God Himself. A **root of bitterness** will produce a continuing and continual sin in our lives; our quotation says *"Many are defiled"*; but if we **follow peace** with God and men none of the things which create bitterness can or will be part of our lives. We are told that 'without **holiness no one** shall see the Lord'. One assumes that means in the day that He comes again, and happily in that day we will have His righteousness, and therefore His holiness, in which to stand before Him, but Peter exhorts us to *"Give diligence"*, that word again, to *"make our calling and election sure"*.

However Hebrews 2 tells us, *"But we see Jesus"*, so part, indeed much or most or all, of our Christian life is to have a relationship, by the Spirit of God, in which we 'see Jesus', not with our natural eyes, but in the Spirit, and such a blessing, privilege and necessity will be hindered by any lack of holiness in our lives. The subject we are considering is the '**root of bitterness**' and those, we are told, with such a root are **defiled**, that is made unclean, and uncleanness, of course, is the very opposite to holiness/sanctification/separation, and must hinder our vital relationship with our Lord Jesus.

To continue in Hebrews 12, we are told to *"Look **diligently** in case anyone fails from the grace of God"*. Again, here is something very positive to do; it is to be **diligent**, hardworking and thorough. The word for 'looking diligently' has the same root as the word used for a bishop or an overseer. It means to watch over and to do it well, Hebrews 13 talks of those 'who have rule over you and **watch** for your souls'.

In Hebrews 12 'looking diligently' means we are to watch over our own souls, to be alert and aware of the things which may come and find a place in us. Perhaps it is important to emphasise that this should not mean a great deal of spiritual introspection; we should not be inward looking, we are told to *"Look unto Jesus"*, and indeed there are many ways in which we are totally unable to fully know and understand ourselves; only the Lord really knows us properly. As we read in Jeremiah 17, *"I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins"* (i.e. depths, the word 'reins' is for 'kidneys', that part of our being, from where we get the word 'renal'). When we look within ourselves we have our own judgement, but what is necessary is the grace of God which helps us with understanding and it is His insight into our lives which is vital to us.

There are many so-called ministries which have grown up under the guise of Christian counselling which work on delving into people with apparent discernment or methods. It makes the minister/counsellor dominant, they can become like a mediator, the counselled person vulnerable and exposed. Our Bible tells us to *"Look to Jesus"* and if there are problems *"The Lord will reveal the matter"*. Great caution should be taken in undergoing any such counselling, as we are told in Hebrews chapter 4 that *"the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart"*.

It is God's speaking which exposes our real intentions. This was what happened to King David as we

read in Psalm 51, as we see later, and with the conviction of need God always provides the solution; we are not to be left with the problem but rather delivered from it. *"If the Son shall make you free you shall be free indeed"*. The true work of God does not leave the person dependent on the minister/counsellor and forever needing help, but on Jesus Christ and Him alone. Paul writing to the Philippians in chapter 3, again in the context of pressing to the mark or moving on with the Lord, says this, *"Not as though I had already attained, either were already **perfect**: but I **follow** after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, **God shall reveal even this unto you"***.

So we are to be pressing on with the Lord, aware that we have not yet arrived at where we need to get to; to the prize of the high calling of God. In 'as many as be perfect', the word does not mean ultimately perfect, Paul says he is not that **perfect** (*highlighted for you*) but rather perfect which means **mature**. The word means 'grown up', but also means that we have done the things which God has given us to do; we are up to date. Possibly it fits in with the exhortation here to **follow** after, as Paul says he **follows** after, (*highlighted for you*). So for those who are mature and with the right attitude and are **following on**, if there is something wrong **God will reveal** it to you (*again highlighted for you*). So we look to Jesus with our hearts and minds wide open to His word and if there is a problem **He** will reveal it.

Often God will speak into our conscience, it is our place of knowing, and we will know something is just not right, and that should, and must, prompt us to seek the Lord for Him to make us aware of our need, and also for the solution. In other words, 'Stop worrying about yourself and looking inside, and get on with serving the Lord; He will do the rest'.

However we also need to consider 'watching over our souls' and to understand there is a corporate responsibility within a church/churches to watch **lovingly** over the souls of one another. Earlier we mentioned those who have rule and watch over your souls. There is a clear place in church life for elders, bishops, overseers, to act as watchmen over the souls in the church in which they serve. The word for elders, bishops, overseers and presbyters is the same in the Greek language, so all have the same job description and function, and that is to watch. Watching involves not only looking over the lives of the flock as would a shepherd, for example, but also looking outward to see what might be attacking the church, and the members, spiritually. A shepherd would do that with the sheep also and keep an eye open for thieves and robbers and predators, in order to provide protection. One of the failures of elders/bishops/overseers in this current generation, in many parts of the world, is that they are unaware spiritually of what is going on and the dangers to the church, as a whole and individual members in particular, and fail to protect, both by prayer and exhortation, the flock from the spirit(s) of this world. All this, of course, has little to do with the allocation and giving of names and titles within denominations, or in any church for that matter, but what a man does before God in His service. Just because a man, or now a woman, has the title bishop it does not necessarily mean that he or she is a bishop as far as God is concerned. God does not recognise the ordination of men but only His own appointment of His servants.

Galatians tells us that if we see another brother overtaken in a fault (the word in the Greek for 'fault' really means a 'sin' or 'trespass'; going into something where we should not go or doing something we should not do), **one who is spiritual** should **restore him or her** in a spirit of meekness **considering** him or herself in case they also are tempted. This instruction seems to go beyond just the role of eldership but also implies a general and prayerful and loving watchfulness in the churches of God, first for ourselves, and then for others, so that we do not fail, or come short of the grace of God. The word '**consider**' is the word to 'look', this word again from which we get the word bishop, overseer or watchman. So again there is the need to look and look diligently, not just for ourselves but for our brothers and sisters also. Watchfulness is a prayerful occupation, it is not spending all our time looking for faults in others but rather a prayerful watching and waiting before God to pray for

one another. James tells us to pray for one another so that you may be healed. This is in the context of confessing faults, so there is a clear indication in our Bibles of the need to pray for each other, and perhaps to do it quietly. at times, before God for our brother or sister and see God work in their lives and bring about the changes required. The requirement mentioned in Galatians is to **restore**, not just to point out the problem but also to provide the solution. This instruction is again positive in our relationships and fits in with all the very positive actions to which we are exhorted in these Bible passages. Happily our Lord Jesus is the *"Shepherd and Bishop of our souls"* and we can look to Him to help us look and watch over our own souls. Here is the great balance which the Bible so often brings of God's absolute and total authority, commitment and watchfulness over our own lives and, at the same time, our responsibility to watch our own lives and ensure that we are free and clear of anything which would defile us.

To continue, we are to look in case *"any one fails of the grace of God"*, the word 'fail' means to 'come short' or to 'lack'. Hebrews 4 says, *"Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come **short of it**"* It gives the idea of not reaching the mark, and we have looked already about 'pressing onto the mark' in Philippians 3. It is amazing really to have to exhort us not to fail of the grace of God, but it must be possible. Grace is grace, unmerited kindness and favour; Paul said *"I am what I am by the grace of God"*. Nevertheless *"It is of faith that it might be by grace"* so we must **believe/trust God** for His grace to enable us to continue to walk on with Him in our lives. We read that *"They entered not in because of unbelief"*, so we must guard against unbelief in our lives; it can so much be the besetting sin and can be a fruit of bitterness, a bitter experience, a disappointment perhaps, where something has not worked out as **we would** have hoped and that can affect our believing, if we are not careful, for the rest of our lives. However if we seek the Lord, rather than draw back, He will show us why things have been as they are, and show us His purposes in His love for us. In Galatians Paul says *"You are fallen from grace"*, because they went back into the law and to circumcision, back to the flesh; they failed at that time from grace. They had stopped believing that they were justified through faith alone. Therefore, we see and should understand, in all these Bible verses there is a great exhortation and urgency to move on with the Lord and not fail or fall short of the grace of God.

Peter in his second letter exhorts us to *"Give diligence to make our calling and election sure"*, but to provide the balance of God's great will and purpose in our lives and the sureness of our salvation based only on grace, we read in Ephesians 1, *"According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his **grace**, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved"*. As we have said already, there is the wonderful balance in the Bible between God's sovereignty and our responsibility. Happily we also have the words of our Lord Jesus *"Of all that the Father has given me I shall lose none of them but raise them up at the last day"*. But the balance is in Hebrews 10, which talks about 'drawing back' into perdition or the 'state of being lost' Perhaps this is why there is such a strong exhortation in the book of Hebrews not to *"draw back into perdition"* but to continue to *"Believe unto the saving of the soul"*. The whole truth is about **saving our souls** and keeping us from wrong things, so that we do not fail or come short of that which is provided for us through the grace of God. We are, after all, **following** our Lord Jesus, who believed through His cross never doubting His Father, and became the author of eternal salvation for us. He is our example and has already overcome. Let us look to Him; never take our eyes off Him.

So we move at last to the subject of our teaching; it has taken a while but at least we have put the truth into context and built a good foundation for looking at the root of bitterness. So we read *"**Lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled**"*. The word for 'many' in the Greek can be translated 'the **majority**', implying that the greater number of people to whom the letter was written had a root of bitterness springing up within them and therefore more than

half were defiled/spoiled/marred/unclean, whatever similar word we wish to use. That is a quite staggering thought and shows how widespread bitterness was in these Christians. Possibly the root of bitterness being so widespread is a reason for the letter being written, and one reason why these dear Christians were weak and struggling. Could that also be true of the Christian church in this century? One would suggest almost certainly.

We saw earlier the signs of exhaustion in our athlete running the marathon, so one would suggest that there are signs too of the root of bitterness. Jesus said *"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks"*; what we say and the way we say it expresses what is in our hearts and the attitude in which we live and with which we approach things. It is quite easy to hear in the voice the signs of someone who is discouraged and has lost heart, and so it is with those with a root of bitterness. The hands hanging down and the weak knees can be heard rather than seen as they are spiritual, perhaps emotional and mental things, and find expression in the way people express their attitudes. Sadly too often people in the world, and it can be true of Christians too, are full of bitterness when they talk about their experiences of life. Some will still seek for revenge many years after an event, being either totally unable or unwilling to forgive. In the same way, for those who are full of faith, hope and expectation it can be heard in their voice, what they say and the way they say it declares their freedom. Indeed such people can be criticised by those with less 'bounce in their hearts'; there can be the comment "Well, it is all right for you", which already declares a bitterness and maybe an envy. Perhaps such criticism is a fruit of the discouragement which is within the heart of those for whom everything seems such a struggle.

So, for those with bitterness it comes out, as we have said, in everything they say and declares their attitude to life in general. There are murmurings, complaints, unhappiness and a general doom and gloom in their tone of speech. It is understandable why such things are in the hearts of many people in the world but why are they there in the Christian? Non-Christians sometimes have absolutely no protection against the tragedies that come in their lives, they can be quite overwhelmed emotionally, and yet for the Christian we read, *"When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will raise up a standard against it"*.

The Christian, Peter tells us, has been *"Born again of incorruptible seed"* and has *"purified their souls to unfeigned love of the brethren"* and this is the position to which we should all have come when we received the Lord Jesus. So we are born again of **incorruptible** seed, it is a new seed, a new nature, it is life, newness of life, which God has planted in us. It comes when we receive the Lord Jesus, He is the incorruptible seed, He is our new nature, it is His life which He gives to us when He comes to dwell in our hearts. This 'new seed' is to bring forth good, not bitter, fruit for God. Jesus says *"If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you will bring forth much fruit, and herein is my Father glorified"*. So the natural disposition and nature of the Christian is incorruptible, that means it cannot be spoiled or go rotten. Peter also says that we have purified our souls to unfeigned love, (unfeigned means without hypocrisy), of the brethren. This love is not something put on the outside when inside there are different feelings, but *"love out of a pure heart fervently"*. Fervent is 'enthusiastic; earnest or ardent' and comes from the Latin word to boil or glow. It is love bubbling over; therefore, from Peter's letter even our souls, not just our hearts, are purified so that we can love our brothers and sisters without hypocrisy, and even our enemies. So from where does another root, one of bitterness, come?

There are in reality two possibilities. Roots come from seeds when they are planted. When a seed germinates the root grows down and stem grows up. So, at least in theory, it must have been planted as seed by Satan, the enemy of our souls, after we have received the Lord Jesus, and then the seed germinates and grows to form the root. This root will then produce bitter fruit in many ways and parts of our lives. When we receive the Lord Jesus we **must/should** have confessed our sins and when we do *"He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"*. So **all** unrighteousness should be washed away and any bad root with it. So the truth must be that the root has come since we became Christians, or the other possibility is that it was not removed, as it should have been, when we became Christians. Sadly that is the practical

reality for some Christians, as often the standard of gospel preaching is very poor, and the conviction of our sinful state, and as a result the sorrow over our sins, and the need for deep and meaningful repentance to humbly confess those sins, and all our wrong doing, is not properly ministered. 'Come and be saved' is all that is said, and often the 'coming' is more about getting some sort of provision, some sort of blessing or prosperity rather than a changed life. The Holy Spirit came to convince us of our sin and when He is at work there will be a real awareness of sin and the need for repentance and confession, and then forgiveness. The Holy Spirit also convinces of righteousness, because our Lord Jesus has gone to be with His Father and provides the 'righteousness of God' to be **our** righteousness in which we can live unto God, free from all our old life and ways. There is no criticism intended of any person, but rather a willingness to try and provide a truthful explanation as to why there can be something bitter in Christian lives. If we have bitterness of course it spoils things for us but also for the Lord who wants, as we have said, sweetness in our lives. The bitterness prevents the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus filling our lives; there is always the hard area which cannot rejoice, or the dark cloud which hangs over us even when we seek to praise the Lord. The intention of this teaching is not to find fault but to try to find a solution so that we can be free.

If one reads the biographies of those Christians, dare we call them the famous Christians, who seem to stand out for their service and ministry, at some stage in their Christian experience there will have been a deep repentance and an acknowledgement of their sin. Like David in psalm 51, *"Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I **acknowledge** my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, **thee only**, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou might be justified when thou speak, and be clear when thou judge. Behold, **I was shaped in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me**".* It is clear that for the Christian to live a full Christian life there will have had to be a time of real repentance and a time when God has dealt with the deepest recesses of their heart. Their heart will have been purified by faith (Acts 15.11). The period of repentance can be short for some and with others a longer time is required. The Lord knows our needs and how best to deal with us each as individuals and the issue of our sinfulness until it is resolved to His satisfaction.

There, it seems, is no standard formula in experience, but these issues are matters which cannot be escaped or bypassed. Paul writing to the Corinthians says *"And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God"*. You were like this, be honest, yes you were, but **now** you are clean. All Christians need to come to that place, **now** are you clean, and be sure every rotten root is removed from them.

All Christians also need to realise that we are ever dependant on the blood of our Lord Jesus to go on keeping us clean from our sin. *"But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the **blood of Jesus Christ** his Son cleanses us (goes on keeping us clean) from **all** sin"*. Peter tells us to 'watch' as our enemy goes around seeking whom he will devour. Sin always provides a place in us for satan, and if we are being kept clean by the blood of Jesus as we walk in the light in fellowship with God the Father and our Lord Jesus, then satan can have no place in us and cannot sow seeds which grow into a root of bitterness.

But if a root of bitterness is in our hearts, whichever way the root of bitterness has come, somehow, and somewhere satan has found the opportunity to find a place where he has sown his seed, which then grows down and creates a root in us which will bring forth fruit, bitter fruit. This, as we have said, is very much in contrast to the sweet smelling savour of love in which we are to walk as Christians. Hebrews says that the root troubles us, in other words gives us problems. Gardeners, who constantly have to remove weeds from their gardens, or farmers from their land, find it a really tough task; it takes time and is a real trouble. So it is when a root of bitterness keeps growing up and spoils our lives and gets in the way just when we believe we are making spiritual progress in our lives.

This root of bitterness will often produce fruit alongside the true fruit. Jesus told the parable of the wheat and the tares/weeds, where the devil comes and sows other seeds among the true wheat. In

that case both were to grow together until judgement day and then there would be a separation, as the weeds did not damage the wheat, but one would suggest in this case the seed of the weed which produces the root of bitterness has to be removed at the earliest opportunity; it does damage the true fruit; indeed we are told the majority were **defiled**. If the truth **makes** free (not sets free as many people quote)

then it is the sowing of a lie, something which is not of 'the truth', in our hearts which produces the root of bitterness. It happens when we fail to believe the Lord with all our heart and listen, as did Eve in the beginning, to the words "*Has God Said?*". Doubt and mistrust of the Lord enters our hearts and then we are in the place where we are vulnerable to taking on board all sorts of ideas and thoughts which are contrary to truth, which when sown in our hearts produce bitterness; ideas, for example, of not forgiving and justifying such an action.

It is important to understand that truth is much more than just doctrine. We have quoted, "*the truth shall make you free*", and earlier "*sanctify them through thy truth, thy word is truth*". So truth is much more than simple fact, it is life changing. Jesus said He was "*The way **the truth** and the life*". John says this in his third letter "*For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of **the truth** that is in thee, even as you walk **in the truth**. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth*". So truth is that wonderful aspect of God's nature which is totally pure and yet works in us removing everything false and 'not right' with Himself. It then provides within us a wonderful foundation from which we can walk in a right relationship with God. We walk then in straight paths, for real truth will deliver us from all the complications of falsehood and trying to work things out for ourselves. Sorry if that sounds a lot, but truth is difficult to define, as it is eternal, and just part of the wonderful fulness of the true and living God.

So the root of bitterness comes from satan and our Bible has some helpful phrases to try and understand his working. We are told "*Not to be ignorant of his devices*". In the Book of the Revelation we find "*Whosoever loves and makes a lie*" as a description of those who are outside the kingdom of God. We are told what God says of satan when he mentions Lucifer the arch angel, , "*For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High*". The very idea that satan could ever sit in the place of God or ever be like God in function and operation is quite ludicrous and therefore totally false. It shows how far the devil is from truth and honesty but also shows that satan not only made, but loved to make a lie. It shows his pride and so many of the risks to our souls come from becoming proud and therefore self-willed, arrogant and stubborn. So much of satan's work involves creating lies in us which work in the opposite way to the truth; rather than making free, they create slavery. Those that have lies in their hearts often love the lie and hold on tight to the untruth. Lies usually have an attraction providing something for self and self-esteem, or providing an excuse, and therefore make it very tempting to stay with the lie rather than move into the truth of God.

It was as Adam and Eve believed the lie the serpent told them in the Garden of Eden that sin entered into their hearts, and to show what a bitter/poisonous thing had taken place, the ground was cursed and it brought forth thorns and thistles. In Leviticus we are told that if we do not destroy the old things in our lives they will be thorns in our sides and pricks in our eyes. They will cause real trouble and a constant irritation, and roots of bitterness will produce the same sort of symptoms in behaviour and attitude. These things hinder any comfort, and prevent us living in rest and peace with God, they are a constant source of agitation and stress. We are likely to be taken up with particular issues which occupy us and take us away from the things of major importance in our Christian lives. Little issues about which we are bitter can become very big issues and often mean we crusade about things which are eternally of little consequence.

We have quoted earlier, Christian discipline, from a loving Heavenly Father, which yields **peaceable** fruit unto righteousness. This is, of course, the antidote to a lack of spiritual rest by 'making our paths straight', preventing us being turned 'out of the way' and becoming preoccupied with unnecessary things in our lives. As we have said, it is the 'believing of a lie' which sows the root of

bitterness in human hearts, whether Christian or non-Christian. The truth is that, for the Christian, there is a way of deliverance which is not there for the non-Christian. Of course the world has its methods, counselling and so on, but such methods can never produce the deliverance available from God, through our Lord Jesus, who has put all these wrong things to death in His death and therefore **dealt** with them once and for all. All

we need to do is to come to Jesus and allow Him to put to death all the wrong things in our lives, with all the bitterness they produce. The world provides coping mechanisms which merely cover over the issues but *"If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed"*.

Some find 'believing the lie' makes life easier for them to get on with their own lives, in their own way, and make excuses for what they do and the way they are. Often many of these things are quite understandable, at least from a human point of view, and it is so easy to make excuses and take the world's view of things and natural methods and solutions. But Christians are 'born again', we are spiritual men and women and must know the power of the Spirit of God, making real in us the grace and ability of our Lord Jesus, so that we may overcome and serve Him. The joy is that when we **do not** believe God, when we make our excuses, **He remains faithful** to us, working in our lives in His love to bring us to a point when we can 'make our paths straight'; trusting Him again, surrendering the issue to His will, and allowing the truth to make us free. Jesus never gives up in His people.

Bitterness can come in many ways and from many sources. It can come through bad experiences in our lives, things being said against us, unjust treatment and decisions which have gone against us, and so on. The list of how these things come is probably endless and different things will affect people in different ways, according to their personality and differing experiences of life. One person will react quite differently to another undergoing the same experience.

This teaching is not a manual to prevent us reacting in the wrong way in each situation in our lives. It is not a list of 'do's and don'ts' but an exhortation to believe God and allow Him to work in and through all the difficulties of our lives and so prevent us 'failing from grace' and receiving a root of bitterness. The truth is that only the Holy Spirit can intervene in our hearts, at varying times and in varying situations, as it is only with **His** help and the power of **His** keeping we are enabled to resist the things which would work to cause damage in our hearts. *"If you through the **Spirit** do mortify (put to death) the deeds of the flesh you will live"*. To have a formula involves self effort and human power and is doomed to failure. *"It is **God** who works in us to **will and do** of His good pleasure"* and it is the surrendering of our will to the will of God over the difficult issues in our lives which allows God to work in us, and then the *"Excellency of the **power** is of **God** and **not** of us"*. It would seem that roots of bitterness involve the will, when we make choices and decisions as to how we respond at different times and in different situations in our lives. If that is the case and we make a choice, for example, not to forgive someone who does something against us, it is why then as we have **willed** to go one way it is so hard to **will** to go another way and break free.

Paul tells us to *"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in us to will and to do of His good pleasure"*. Our salvation is that which keeps us whole and keeps us free, which saves us from our sin and from bitterness. We work out that which **God** works in, so our salvation involves submission of our will to allow the will of God to be the will we follow, so that the choices we make are those which please God and not please ourselves. To look at the example of unforgiveness; it can please us to find an excuse not to forgive and we can justify the decision saying how wrong, for example, the things done against us are. However in 'not forgiving' we fulfil the **will** of the flesh and the mind. The truth is that such things can **never be** the will of God and so we need God's will in our will. If we choose our will then, as we have suggested, bitterness can quickly take root in our hearts and can be so hard to remove.

So we need Jesus' help and **His** will in our will, by which we are made free and holy, to bring us out of these things and help us to choose the right way. When we take a particular way, it can set a pattern of behaviour and thinking in our lives which becomes the normal and establishes the way in which we think and act. If we choose the way of bitterness, rather than love, this will be the normal pattern in our lives, which defiles everything we do and will affect our relationship with our brothers

and sisters, our friends, and more importantly, with the Lord Jesus; our whole spirituality will rapidly go into decline.

Perhaps it is appropriate, at this stage, to share some testimony, firstly the experience of Joseph, the son of Jacob and Rachel, whom we read of in The Book of Genesis, and then the author. Joseph was the beloved son of Jacob and had upset all his brothers by telling them the dreams which he had received. The dream said that his brothers would come

and bow down before Joseph, and they hated him; there was great bitterness in their hearts.

Bitterness, as with Cain at the beginning, can so often be the motivation for evil acts, indeed of murder. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, but we are told **God was with him**. When things were going well in his servitude in Potiphar's house, again he was mistreated and put into prison and yet **God was with Joseph**. After some time, and the interpretation of dreams, he was elevated to be the 'second in the land of Egypt', and eventually his dreams were fulfilled and his brothers were at his mercy and bowed before him. After the death of Jacob, Joseph's father, his brothers had expected Joseph to take revenge. When they came to see Joseph his words were; *"You meant it to me for evil, but God meant it to me for good"*. No bitterness in Joseph's heart at all, just love and mercy and forgiveness. Joseph knew God, had vision, and was submitted to the will of God and content to fulfil His purposes.

We read, *"The people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" and "where there is no vision the people perish"*. Joseph had knowledge of God, so was not destroyed by bitterness or hatred of those who worked against him. He had vision too of the purposes of God for his life, so did not perish spiritually in all his difficulties. Too often Christians do not know God well enough and have so little vision for their lives that this leads them to struggle in their circumstances. John in his letter tells us, *"When Jesus shall appear we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. He that has this hope in him purifies himself even as he is pure"*. This should be the vision in each Christian life, and so each Christian should, at the least, have the vision or expectation of Jesus' return in their hearts, and that should motivate them to purify themselves as Jesus is pure and not allow any wrong doing or bitterness in their lives, with all its harmful spiritual effects.

The author, and his wife and family, of course, suffered the death of a much loved daughter who was 26 years old. The daughter collapsed while out running and was airlifted to hospital but was dead on arrival. She had no ID, and after a while the police came to our house as they had information that caused them rightly to believe that it was our daughter who had died. The author was taken to the hospital to identify his daughter. Then there was the return home to announce the death to the family. The author found them all meeting together giving thanks and rejoicing in the Lord **in all** the tragedy. Their testimony was **"If ever I loved you My Jesus it is now"**. We learned later that much prayer was being offered in many fellowships for our spiritual wellbeing, for which we are still very grateful. The whole tragedy was totally stunning, and the author, tired, went to bed but, as can be imagined, was troubled and unable to sleep. Nevertheless great waves of forgiveness and love from the Lord Jesus went through his being during that night and, after some eventual sleep, the author awoke to find no anger or bitterness, no resentment and no critical questions about what and why in his heart. There was an amazing ability to be at peace, though of course very, very sad, and to submit the whole matter to the Lord. So it has remained, our testimony saying, 'the sovereign grace and ministry of God, supported by the prayers of many friends, prevented any bitterness taking root and so spoiling our lives'. So rather than having 'something against' God for what had happened, which may be what would have been expected, the opposite is true and thanks is offered to the Lord Jesus for His goodness and mercy, keeping us from that which could have ruined the rest of our lives. We realised too that our daughter, who was a very committed Christian, loved us too much to want her death to spoil and dominate our lives. God's grace also prevented a mad pursuit of finding out why it had all taken place and looking for some sort of justice. There was no need for what people call 'closure' as our 'closure' was in the love of God and not in the understanding of men.

Perhaps these testimonies demonstrate how it is possible to go two ways in any circumstance,

however bad a circumstance may be, and to choose 'life or death', whether to go with or against God. It may be a hard thing to say, but any bitterness/ criticism/anger is ultimately against God. We read in psalm 51 *"Against you and against you only have I sinned"*. This was King David's reaction when aware of his sin of adultery and conspiracy to murder which, though committed against Uriah and Bathsheba in human terms, was, as David understood, really against God. So it is with us when we develop bitterness from things which have happened to us, whether tragedies, things said, unjust and unfair treatment and so on, that bitterness is really sin against God. We are therefore defiled; it makes us 'spiritually lame' and prevents us from walking with God in our lives; *"How can two walk together unless they be agreed"*.

When we have real understanding of what our sin is, and against whom we have sinned, the way of deliverance then becomes clear and we can seek forgiveness from God. Of course we see the quality of the life of our Lord Jesus who, on the cross, cries out, "Father forgive them"; He is not only in agreement with His Father's will to die on the cross, but also free enough to forgive all those involved in the brutality of His death and the conspiracy against Him; and so is kept from any bitterness.

It is interesting just at this time to note the scripture *"Being conformed to His death"*. Paul, as we can read in Philippians 3, had a great desire in His own life to find a conformity to Jesus' death. Jesus' death was free from unforgiveness, anger, bitterness, uncleanness, indeed anything contrary to holiness and the will of God. **When** we have Jesus' death **working** in **us**, it will keep us free from that which is against God, and what Jesus was in His death **will** be and **must** be outworked as we live. We will be conformed to **Jesus death**, we *"Always bear about in our body the life of the Lord Jesus"* and are always *"Living sacrifices for His sake"*, and all the grace of God in the life of Jesus will keep us free from the things which were never in Him. It will then be a joy to come to the end of our lives, to our natural death, and be entirely free of all bitterness, hatred and uncleanness, just as Jesus was free. Hallelujah.

So we have seen how the root of bitterness can spoil our lives and make us defiled before God. We have looked at how it can come and how it works. We have seen how bitterness can permeate everything we do and affect every area of our lives. It can prevent us doing the will of God, as the bitterness of previous experience can prevent us trusting the Lord again and moving in faith at His word. It can harden the heart; that is what the deceitfulness of sin does.

We see from the example of Joseph that he continued to do the will of God in spite of all that came against him. *"God meant it to me for good"* was the response of His heart. We have seen how bitterness can spoil our relationships with God and our friends, and consume us with self-pity, self-indulgence and lots of excuses for being the way we are. No wonder we can become 'turned out of the way', or better in newer English 'turned in the wrong direction'.

The will of God is that Christians are undefiled, that we are holy and free from bitterness. We saw earlier the need to be diligent and be watchful over our own souls to make sure that nothing creeps in unawares. *"Moses endured, seeing Him who is invisible"*, so should we walk *"Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured"*. His faith, by which we are to live, will enable us to endure and keep us free from bitterness, indeed from all sin; He will fill us with joy. Jesus prayed that His joy would be fulfilled in us. 'Keep your eyes on Jesus'. David in the psalm says *"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting"*

If there is a root of bitterness in any of our lives, let us allow God to examine our hearts. Don't do it yourself, that is bound to lead to disaster, as we cannot properly know ourselves. If there is a wrong way, a wicked way, a besetting sin, a root of bitterness, God will show it to us and lead us to repentance and confession. *"If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from **all** unrighteousness. If anyone sins we have an advocate with the father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who is the propitiation for our sins and those of the whole world"*.

There is an answer; let Jesus remove the root, let Him wash you clean and then lead you in the way everlasting and bring you to the end of your days full of joy and ready for His coming. However,

better to be watchful and allow the Lord Jesus to keep us from anything that defiles, anything which displeases Him. So whether we are free from bitterness or have a root in our hearts from which we need to be delivered, Jesus Christ the Lord is the answer, to keep us and get us ready for His coming again, so that we may always be conformed to His death, and will hear His words *“Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord”* Praise the Lord. *Amen*