

Freedom from Bitterness

When You Can't Get Past the Hurt

By Linda Graf



I was moments away from losing everything—my job, my church family, and most of my friends. As I awaited the decision, I honestly didn't know what I hoped for the outcome. Perhaps it would be better just to sever ties and move on from my employment. It certainly would be easier.

As the mediator of our meeting brought it to conclusion, he asked my boss (who was also my pastor), "Can you continue to work with Linda?"

After a long pause, my boss answered, "I'm willing to try."

At the time, I was trapped in patterns of sinful behaviors. I was unhappy with my life and lashed out at those I blamed for my circumstances. Painful childhood wounds and insecurities resulted in multiple strained relationships. I was angry most of the time and generally miserable.

That not-so-enthusiastic response of my boss crushed my heart. I didn't see how our relationship could ever be repaired. What could God ever do in this mess?

Identifying Bitterness

I knew God felt far away, and I didn't have the hope and joy and love I was supposed to have as a child of God. But I didn't identify the bitterness that had taken over my life. I just thought there was something wrong with me. I was a product of my upbringing and the hurts and wounds of the past. I blamed my circumstances and the failures of others. And because I believed that most Christians had not been through the depth of my struggles and difficulties, self-pity consumed me.

The problem with this mindset is that it removes God from the equation. I was suffering from a profound lack of faith in what God could do within me. I settled into a victim mentality and didn't leave room for Him to work in my life.

Paul writes, "We all . . . are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18). This is God's promise that He is working to transform us through the Holy Spirit.

All of us who are believers in Christ have the Holy Spirit within us—and He wants to transform us! Regardless of the wounds we've suffered or the hard things we've experienced, God is ready to do His restoring work if we believe He can and if we ask Him for His help.

Checking the Heart

How do we identify bitterness? Here is a description of the stages I've discovered lead to full-blown bitterness:

Step 1. Anger. This is a common emotion. We all have felt anger flare up when people do something to harm us or fail to do something we expect of them.

However, Scripture speaks abundantly about how dangerous this

emotion is and about the need to take care of it quickly. This is the key to stopping the progression toward bitterness. Paul says, “‘In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Eph. 4:26–27). Satan takes advantage when we hold on to our anger. James says that “human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (1:20).

Step 2. Rehearsing the wrong done to us. We relive the moment over and over again in our minds. We are quick to remind ourselves of the unfairness of it all. This creates resentment, which keeps the offense alive and painful. It causes us continual hurt, which grows and hardens us.

Step 3. Bitterness. Bitterness is the firmly held belief that things are the way you’ve perceived and determined them to be, so now you have a worldview that cannot be changed or reasoned away.

It might sound like this: “My father never loved me.” “That boss sabotaged my advancement in that job.” “Those people are out to get me.” “My sister will never change.” “This is just the way I am.”

People who embrace bitterness—either knowingly or unknowingly—tend to be angry, unhappy, and full of self-pity. We all need a “heart check” to see if bitterness resides in us.

Praying for Release

If you suspect bitterness is affecting your life, here are a few ways to pray:

1. Pray that your eyes will be opened. You may be harboring anger and bitterness against others or even God Himself. Ask God to reveal your sin and any areas of unforgiveness you are

hiding or denying. We can feel far from God when we have unconfessed sin. Ask Him to shine a spotlight on the far corners of your heart. Psalm 66:18 says, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened."

2. Pray for a deeper love for God. Jesus tells us to love God *first* and *wholly* and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:37–39). Ask the Lord to help you grow in love for Him and others. Invite Him to heal your wounds and repair anything that keeps you from loving Him or others fully. God assures us that it is His will that we grow in holiness and sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3–5). Seek to purify your heart and mind and increase your desire and capacity to love.

3. Pray for a heart that feels remorse and sorrow. It's easy to focus on what has been done to us and forget that we have often wounded people. Ask God to show you how your unkind words and actions have hurt others. Pray that Psalm 51:17 will be true of your own heart: "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise."

4. Pray, believingly, for forgiveness. Our Father has compassion on His children, but He also remembers that He made us out of dust! (Ps. 103:13–14). It is because of His kindness that we can come to a place of repentance (Rom. 2:4). Ask God to forgive you for your sins of anger, revenge, or bitterness. Be encouraged that He is always faithful to forgive when we ask (1 John 1:9). Thank Him for His great love and the gift of forgiveness.

5. Pray for an obedient heart that turns away from sin. Ask God for a heart that chooses to forgive and submits to Him in obedience. If you have been bitter or angry with God, confess it and declare that you want His will in your life, whatever that looks like. Ask Him to bring beauty from the ashes as He promised in Isaiah 61:3.

6. Pray for the ability to forgive those who have deeply wounded you. God is not a harsh Father who commands us to do something we absolutely cannot do. As a popular worship song title puts it, He's a "Good, Good Father." And He has given us everything we need for "life and godliness" (2 Cor. 4:7, kjv). Paul says we are as "jars of clay" so that God's power and glory will be evident in us (2 Cor. 4:7), and God's power will be made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Choosing to forgive is difficult, but nothing is impossible with God's power.

7. Pray for those you seek to forgive. If they are not believers, pray for mercy that they will be brought to salvation. If they are believers, pray for their growth in holiness and sanctification. If they are no longer living, pray that you will speak well of them. Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44).

8. Pray for a transformed mind in right thinking. We need to believe truth and take our thoughts captive to Christ. After we have taken the steps of repenting of our sin of bitterness and then forgiving those who have hurt us, God wants us to seek to transform our minds (Rom. 12:2). Otherwise we can easily slip back into the same patterns of taking offense, wallowing in self-pity, and harboring anger. When we recognize the battle, we can rely on God to help us overcome: "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

9. Pray for strength to put others first and avoid selfishness. Human beings are by nature consumed with ourselves. I am often most concerned about my to-do list, my feelings, and my desires for each day. But Jesus said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Paul follows up on that, instructing us,

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (Phil. 2:3–4).

For me, the battle against bitterness has often been one of self-pity. When I am feeling sorry for myself and concentrating on the disappointments, hurts, and injustices done to me, my focus is not on Jesus or His Kingdom. I have no thoughts of loving others or how I might please and glorify God. This is a trap God wants all of us to avoid. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can think of God and others first.

10. Pray for a thankful heart. It’s God’s will for us to grow in gratitude (1 Thess. 5:18). Paul warns us about the progression of sin as seen in godless and wicked people: “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21).

An unthankful heart is the first step on the slippery slope to ruin. By giving Jesus thanks for His many blessings to us, we can fight sin and bitterness (1 Thess. 5:18).

Finding Healing: God’s Mighty Work

My story has a happy ending. The Lord graciously revealed my sins of anger and bitterness and the damage I had inflicted on others. As I embarked on a journey of prayer and repentance, along the way I found healing. I received forgiveness and was reconciled to my pastor. I still work for him today, years later. We even wrote a book together!

It took a mighty work of God in my life to accomplish this—and to restore hope and joy to my heart. But I praise Him that I believed Him for healing. I know now that He can do His work

in us if we step out in faith and ask Him.

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