

Overcoming Bitterness On The Journey Of Life

My Dear Friends,

As you are well aware we are all on a journey from birth to death. It is called the journey of life. As we travel this journey with each passing year we will ultimately become either bitter or better. It all comes down to how we handle the events and circumstances that we encounter as we journey through life.

I was thinking about that as I was studying the life of Hezekiah found in 2 Kings chapters 18-20 and 2 Chronicles chapters 29-32. In **2 Kings 18:5-7** it says, **“Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the Kings of Judah, either before or after him. He held fast to the Lord and did not cease to follow Him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses. And the Lord was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook.”**

Here was a person who was determined to serve God. As a result you would think that his journey of life would be one of blessing and prosperity, but that was not the case. **2 Chronicles 32:1** says, **“After all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done, Sennacherib King of Assyria came and invaded Judah. He laid siege to the fortified cities, thinking to conquer them for himself.”**

If you were in Hezekiah’s place on this journey of life wouldn’t you be tempted to get angry over the situation? I know I would have. In fact, I must confess I have. I see all these hurting and homeless people. Then when I tried to shelter them, a rich parking lot owner and condominium owners rallied other property owners to sign petitions to stop the New Life Evangelistic Center from sheltering the homeless people who have nowhere else to go. They then got the City to take out all the parking meters in front of 1411 Locust, put up “No Parking” signs along with signs to direct NLEC donations to other charities. Finally these enemies of the homeless got the city to issue a cease and desist order and forced New Life’s church and outreach at 1411 Locust to close.

I found myself really getting angry at these rich people and politicians who had their homes and were stopping New Life Evangelistic Center from giving shelter to those in need. I was becoming bitter not better over this situation. It was then that God reminded me of times in the past when I had encountered other obstacles on the journey of life. At those times I consciously chose to trust God rather than let anger consume me and make me bitter. As a result I saw Him provide a mighty victory in each situation.

Let me share some things that I have learned about anger and the bitterness resulting from it.

Anger is like a toxic waste. Sooner or later it will come out. When anger is turned inward, emotional exhaustion manifested as depression is often the result.

Eph.4:26-27 gives you and I some very valuable steps for dealing with anger. It states: **“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.”**

I have learned while traveling life’s journey that the first step in dealing with anger is to be honest and not deny the anger. People usually relate to anger in one of two ways. They are either intimidators or enablers. The intimidator uses anger to intimidate, while the enabler keeps it all inside until an internal explosion has taken place. Intimidators destroy other people with their anger, while enablers or internalizers destroy themselves by denying that anger exists when asked about it. **Eph.4:26** says: **“Be angry but do not sin.”**

The second step that is given in **verse 26** is to not sin in our anger. **Eph. 4:26** does not say never get angry, nor are we told to feel guilty over our anger. Instead we are told to not sin when we are angry. **Verse 31** of this **chapter 4 of Ephesians** goes into further detail. There it says, **“Get rid of all bitterness.”** Anger that has turned into bitterness, while traveling the journey of life is sinful anger. **Verse 31** goes on and tells us to get rid of rage and anger, brawling and slander along with every form of anger.

The scripture teaches us that we are not to let anger fester in us. That is why we are given the third step to deal with anger in **Eph. 4:26** when it says, **“do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.”** Anger that is not dealt with, is anger that will develop into emotional bitter toxic waste that will poison everything that the angry person tries to do. That is why it is so critical that we do not go to bed with yesterday’s anger. **Verse 27** says, **“and do not give the devil a foothold.”**

When anger is allowed to remain on the journey of life, and forgiveness is resisted, a root of bitterness is allowed to grow and the devil is given a foothold. From a foothold, the toxic poison of bitterness enables Satan to build a stronghold.

Once this satanic stronghold of bitterness has become established, then the devil, whom Jesus referred to as the father of lies, proceeds to deceive the one filled with the toxic waste of bitterness. **“He (the devil) was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is not truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”(John 8:44)**

Hezekiah refused to listen to the lies of Satan or the thoughts of anger, anxiety or fear. Instead we see in **2 Chronicles 32:2-5** that he chose to use his God given wisdom to cut off the water supplies the attacking forces would use. He also fortified the city and made additional weapons.

Hezekiah knew that when one chooses to hold on to yesterday’s anger, the devil is given legal license to come in and establish his foothold and whisper his lies. When we get in desperate situations on the journey of life, Satan will try to convince us that it is all right to steal and let unwholesome bitter language flow like water.

Paul, in **Eph. 4:28-32**, continues giving practical direction for resisting the foothold and schemes of the devil. He writes, **“He who has been stealing must steal no longer but must work, doing something useful with his own hands that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”**

Instead of letting anger control his decisions Hezekiah encouraged the people. In **2 Chronicles 32:6-8** we read, **“He appointed military officers over the people and assembled them before him in the square at the city gate and encouraged them with these words: ‘Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him. With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles.’ And the people gained confidence from what Hezekiah the king of Judah said.”**

Hezekiah chose to let his faith in God guide him rather than anger or fear. He knew that unresolved anger results in grieving the Holy Spirit, who lives in each believer (Romans 8:9; 1 Cor.16:19). The Holy Spirit, as the Third member of the Holy Triune God, can experience grief like Jesus, the Son of God, did, (Matt. 23:37, John 11:35).

When a follower of Christ lets the sun go down on his anger, he lets the devil get a foothold, producing such un-Christ-like actions that the Holy Spirit is grieved. Such grieving of the Spirit is dangerous because it leads to resisting the leading of the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51). This can result in putting out the Spirit's fire and rejecting the supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

Instead of being filled with anger and enslaved to bitterness, Hezekiah chose to pray and trust God. The result was that he and the people of Judah experienced a mighty victory. We read in **2 Chronicles 32:20-22**, **"For this cause Hezekiah the king and the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz prayed and cried to heaven. And the LORD sent an angel, who annihilated all the fighting men and the commanders and officers in the camp of the Assyrian king. So he withdrew to his own land in disgrace. And when he went into the temple of his god, some of his sons, his own flesh and blood, cut him down with the sword. So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from the hand of all others. He took care of them on every side."**

Paul tells us in **I Thessalonians 5:16-22**, **"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil."**

Joseph's journey on the road of life is another example of how one can become better rather than bitter. This was the result because Joseph chose to trust God instead of letting anger and bitterness take over. Genesis chapters 39-45 shows us how Joseph became the second in command in Egypt, as a result of forgiving the brothers who sold him into slavery. Because Joseph forgave those who mistreated him, Joseph remained a man free from bitterness on the journey of life.

Joseph knew that when one refuses to forgive and insists on angrily holding a grudge, such an individual is in essence shutting themselves off from experiencing God's best for their lives. For the Christian that means trampling the forgiveness that Jesus provided through His death and resurrection. Jesus says in **Matt. 6:15** that, **"If you do not forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will not forgive your sins."**

The word forgive occurs over 140 times in the New Testament. It means to let go of the bitterness, leave the offense behind, and cancel the debt you believe the offender owes you. The teachings of Scripture clearly state as we saw in Matt. 6:15, and in the parables that Jesus taught, such as the one we find in Matt. 18:23-35, that if we want to be forgiven by God, we must forgive others.

If we insist on refusing to forgive and extending mercy to others, it will block the flow of God's mercy and forgiveness to us (Heb. 12:15, James 3:11-14). Un-forgiveness and the bitterness it perpetuates keeps us from being free on the journey of life. This is totally incompatible with all that it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

To forgive does not mean to condone wrong or injustice. As Christians, our love for the offender compels us to go humbly to them on a one-to-one basis and point out the error of their ways. Our approach is motivated by our desire to see the offender repent from action that is destructive to them, rather than a desire on our part to get even. The offense may anger us but it need not blind us to all that is right or moral. That is why Eph. 4:26 says to be angry but sin not.

In **James 1:19** we read, **“Wherefore, my beloved, let everyone be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.”** The poison of bitterness on the journey of life keeps this from happening. As this cancer of un-forgiveness spreads within, the root of bitterness continues to grow and the angry person finds it becomes easier and easier to let the poison manifest itself in one outburst after another. Because of Satan's deceptions, each such action seems totally justifiable to the one from whom such venom comes forth. For that reason **Heb. 12:15** warns, **“See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”**

The root of bitterness, which is deep inner unresolved anger can result from suffering, personal tragedy or the hardships encountered in daily living. Such difficulties can actually result in anger towards God. **Heb. 12:5-8** warns, **“Do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and punishes everyone He accepts as a child! Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children.”** When discipline comes, we must trust God and not let it result in a root of bitterness.

Trouble on the journey of life may come as a result of our spiritual warfare with Satan (Eph.6:11-18). These troubles can also be a test to strengthen our faith (1 Peter 1:6-7), or prepare us for a ministry of support and comfort for others who are facing similar situations (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

In the midst of the fires of adversity we must remember **“that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).**

We are also promised that no matter what problem or trouble we may face on life's journey, we do not go through it alone, for **“God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”(Heb. 13:5-6).**

As you face hurt, pain and injustice on your journey through life, never forget you are not alone. Don't let anger fester within as bitterness takes root. Ask the Living God to show you any unresolved anger. Then by faith release the offender through forgiveness as Joseph did his brothers who sold him into slavery.

Let Jesus set you free from the prison of any bitterness and hatred that you may in your life. This prison is a result of the anger upon which many sins have set. When someone has angered you, go to them and **“speak the truth in love,” (Eph. 4:15)** following the directives given in Eph.4:26-32.

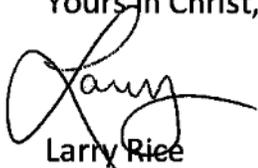
Jesus has come to set us free on the journey of life from all that holds us in bondage. That includes the bitterness of unresolved anger and its toxic poisons of the past. Confess any bitterness that has taken root in you. Believe that Jesus will set you free. **“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).**

As we live daily in the freedom of Christ we will find ourselves becoming better not bitter. Each day, as we grow older, we will become a better person rather than a bitter person, if we forgive and surrender those hurts and disappointments from the past to Jesus.

Jesus has come to set the bitter captives free. Through this freedom we are able to receive Christ's forgiveness and in turn forgive those who have wronged them.

As we do this we will truly be able, by God's grace, to overcome the bitterness that will keep us ineffective and unproductive in the work of God.

Yours in Christ,



Larry Rice