

THE INTERCONTINENTAL CHURCH OF GOD

SPECIFIC BIBLE STUDIES - WHAT IS A "ROOT OF BITTERNESS"?

SUBJECT: Root of Bitterness

QUESTION: What is a "root of bitterness"?

ANSWER:

Someone contacted the Web Site Office the other day and expressed a belief that a root of bitterness was something that had to do with relationships among the brethren. The person thought that a person could develop a root of bitterness toward another person. Clearly bitterness can take several forms, but when the Bible speaks to a "root of bitterness" is it speaking to relationships or something else entirely?

First the key verse and related verses:

Heb 12:14-16a 14 Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: 15 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; 16 Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person.

Deut 29:18 18 Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away this day from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood.

Note: We readily see that the root of bitterness is speaking to an individual being defiled by false doctrines and things not of Christ. They are being led astray from the Salvation Process by false doctrines.

Matt 7:16-19 16 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?
17 Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.
18 A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.
19 Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Note: It is interesting that the Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, which pairs related verses together has Matthew 7:16-19 which discusses true and false ministers. False ministers spread false doctrines. False teachers can lead weak and neglectful firstfruits astray, off the path God has laid out and from the truth of the Word of God.

Heb 3:12

12 Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.

Note: Again we see that we are talking about a heart of unbelief. I have personally seen this root of bitterness in people who were once a part of the faith, but now, even years and decades later, hold bitterness FOR THE CHURCH and NOT the fact that they are now out of that faith.

Notice the commentary...

Heb 12:15

[Lest any root of bitterness springing up] Any bitter root. There is doubtless an allusion here to Deut 29:18. "Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away this day from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood." The allusion there is to those who were idolaters, and who instead of bearing the fruits of righteousness, and promoting the piety and happiness of the nation, would bear the fruits of idolatry, and spread abroad irreligion and sin. The allusion, in both cases, is to a bitter plant springing up among those that were cultivated for ornament or use, or to a tree bearing bitter and poisonous fruit, among those that produced good fruit. The reference of the apostle is to some person who should produce a similar effect in the church-to one who

should inculcate false doctrines; or who should apostatize; or who should lead an unholy life, and thus be the means of corrupting and destroying others. They were to be at especial pains that no such person should start up from among themselves, or be tolerated by them.

[Trouble you] By his doctrines and example.

[And thereby many be defiled] Led away from the faith and corrupted. One wicked man, and especially one hypocrite in the church, may be the means of destroying many others. (from Barnes' Notes)

Note: The commentary confirms that a root of bitterness is caused by false doctrines entering the heart of the firstfruit and leading him or her from the faith. Notice another commentary...

Heb 12:15

[Lest any root of bitterness springing up] A root of bitterness signifies a poisonous plant. The Hebrews call every species of poison a bitter, and with considerable propriety, as most plants are poisonous in proportion to the quantum of the bitter principle they possess. The root of bitterness is here used metaphorically for a bad man, or a man holding unsound doctrines, and endeavouring to spread them in the church.

[Trouble you] This alludes to the effects of poison taken into the body: the whole animal system is disturbed; sometimes violent retchings, great disturbances through the whole alimentary canal, together with the most fatal changes in the whole sanguineous system, are the consequences of poison taken into the stomach. The blood itself (the principle, under God, of life) becomes putrescent; and probably to this the intelligent apostle alludes when he says, and thereby many be defiled, mianthoosin (NT:3392), corrupted or contaminated.

Bad example and false teaching have corrupted thousands, and are still making desolation in the world and in the church. (from Adam Clarke's Commentary)

Note: The proof is overwhelming that a root of bitterness is caused by false doctrines spread by false teachers.

The Wycliffe Commentary

After I presented the above text to the person who believed the root of bitterness might be speaking to personal relationships, the person pointed out the Wycliffe Commentary on Hebrews 12 and verses 14-15, which they felt said something different. Take a look:

Heb 12:14-15

Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:

Human relationships improve when the nature of adversity is understood. Follow after peace with all men (ASV). As one seeking harmony, as one having a peaceful spirit, and as one who desires unity and fellowship among the righteous. Men. Better omitted. And holiness. The covering or comprehensive term (hagiasmon, "sanctification"). Lord (kyrion) is more probably God than Christ. Certainly one of the essential proofs of new life in Christ lies in the way believers get along with each other.

The antithesis follows. Here is one who comes short, who fails because deep within him is a root of bitterness that poisons everything and everyone - thereby many be defiled. This root of bitterness is like an infection that spreads through the whole community (hoi polloi) of believers. Notice, this describes a breakdown in human relations among believers because one believer has become bitter.

(from The Wycliffe Bible Commentary)

If you are armed with the other two commentaries I used above, you will see where this one is coming from. It is not speaking to relationships, as in their feelings for each other. It is specifically speaking to common belief and doctrine. The relationships here are speaking to unity in the congregation. What does it mean to "follow after peace with all men."? It says it right in the commentary above: "...As one seeking harmony (of doctrine and belief).", "...as one who desires unity and fellowship among the righteous." This is not talking about friendship or marriage. It is talking about a unity of righteousness. Righteousness is a word describing one in the Salvation Process, possessing truth and immersed in the Word of God. The righteous, by definition do not hold to false doctrine. The only way a congregation can have unity and fellowship is if they are all righteous...in common belief, in the same truth and in the same Salvation Process. Then we see the antithesis in the commentary.

This person cannot, by definition have fellowship and unity with the righteous. Reason? He has contrary doctrine and beliefs. In all probability, he is falling or has fallen from the faith [the Salvation Process]. As the commentary says,

there is a breakdown in relations among believers because one believer has become bitter [because of his hold on false, contrary doctrine]. His bitterness is against truth and those who hold to that truth. His connection to the unity and fellowship is now destroyed.

Again, this is about doctrine and the unity of that doctrine and not the feelings and emotions and other related elements of a relationship between two individuals. Indeed, the commentary is speaking to the entire congregation and makes no reference to a relationship between two specific individuals.