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BEWARE OF BITTERNESS

Throughout the Church's history there have always been some people who have become disenchanted with the Church, people who have lost interest and then left the Church. The reasons why people left the Church are varied, and those reasons are not important for our purposes here. But in the process of leaving the Church quite a number of those who left became bitter; bitter towards the Church, towards the ministry of the Church, and towards the teachings of the Church. We have also had the situation where people in the Church have become bitter over something or other, but they have chosen to remain in the Church of God in spite of their bitterness. And so they remain amongst us.

Bitterness is an extremely dangerous frame of mind, the final destiny of which is the lake of fire. And we need to resolutely guard our minds against ever becoming bitter.

WHAT IS BITTERNESS?

The word "bitter" refers to one of the four basic taste sensations: sweet, sour, salty and bitter. The last three can at various times be considered to be the opposites of sweet. So to the question "is it sweet?", we may reply "no, it's sour" or "no, it's salty" or "no, it's bitter". The word "bitter" suggests an acrid or intensely disagreeable taste. God made us to intuitively reject such bitter tastes, something all very young children will spontaneously verify. Toxic substances commonly, though by no means exclusively, have a bitter taste, designed by God **to deter us** from ingesting them. So a liking for bitter foods is an acquired taste, something we have trained ourselves to like, contrary to our natural inclination; and in this area we usually limit our liking to things that are only mildly bitter, where mild bitterness is used to moderate the taste of something that would otherwise be excessively sweet (e.g. as in beer). Very few people spontaneously like anything that is intensely bitter (e.g. unrefined brewer's yeast). In general terms the word bitter expresses something we dislike.

When we use the word bitter in reference to people, then we are speaking about certain negative feelings and emotions evidenced in the lives of those people. Specifically, a bitter person is someone who has intense feelings of anger, discontent, resentment and animosity. And even as a bitter taste on the physical level is something that we don't normally like, so also bitterness in someone in our presence is something that makes us uncomfortable, something we prefer not to be exposed to. But just like we can acquire a liking for certain bitter foods by repeated exposure to those foods, so also can we acquire feelings of bitterness from someone with whom we frequently interact. This is a great danger.

Now not everybody who is angry is bitter, and not everybody who is discontent is bitter. People can have these negative emotions as spontaneous responses to something, but such people are usually not bitter. In bitterness these negative emotions are typically more deep-rooted, more intense, and also more inflexible than they are in spontaneous responses of anger to certain provocative situations.

THE PAST HOLDS THE KEY

So let's clearly understand the difference between bitterness and other negative emotions.

When we are hurt, insulted, shamed or provoked, we may (and frequently do) respond spontaneously with anger, indignation, resentment and hostility. We didn't deliberate over our response to the hurtful treatment we received. No, our response of anger, etc. was spontaneous. Our feelings are a response to

present circumstances, and when those “present circumstances” are resolved one way or another, then our negative feelings are likely to also disappear again. Put another way, such spontaneous negative feelings usually do not have any “roots”; they are surface emotions, or in computer terms “WYSIWYG”, meaning “what you see is what you get”, and there is nothing else below the surface.

Bitterness, on the other hand, is NOT a response to present circumstances! The causes of bitterness always lie in the past, even when those causes still persist in the present. It is the past that holds the key to bitterness! Bitter people stew over the past.

Bitter people always live their lives to some degree or other in the past! They refuse to let go of the past. And as long as they cannot bring themselves to let go of the past it will be impossible for them to overcome their bitterness. Bitterness ALWAYS has roots in the past. And with bitterness it is seldom a case of “WYSIWYG”; there is usually more under the surface than what is readily exposed for the casual observer to see. Bitterness MUST feed on the past in order to sustain the intense levels of the negative emotions. If bitter people were able to let go of the past, then present circumstances would at worst only produce spontaneous negative emotions which would dissipate when the present circumstances are resolved.

Consider:

Spontaneously we do our best to cope with whatever adverse conditions may confront us. It is our focus on trying to cope with the present adverse conditions (shame, insults, etc.) that prevents us from becoming bitter “spontaneously”. With unexpected present adverse conditions our minds are frantically searching for solutions, to help us to deal with these present conditions in the most effective way. We are trying to cope with things that confront us right now! There may well be anger and indignation, but there is no time for bitterness to develop.

So let’s look at how bitterness develops.

HOW BITTERNESS COMES ABOUT

All of us will at various times face unfair treatment. Sooner or later all of us get “a rough deal”. Nobody gets through life without ever being falsely accused, not as long as Satan the accuser is around (see Revelation 12:10). Of course life isn’t always fair. It wasn’t “fair” for Jesus Christ, was it? We all receive some unfair treatment at one time or another. God expects us to be able to cope with such unfair treatment. Every time we are treated unfairly, we are facing a test before God. How will we respond: with anger and with indignation? Or will we respond in a godly manner?

In addition to this, there are likely to be situations when we believe we are being treated unfairly, even though in actual fact the treatment we are receiving is perfectly fair. In other words, the criterion is not the objective factual assessment of things; no, the real criterion is always our own personal very biased subjective assessment of things. So even when in a particular situation life is perfectly fair to us, we may still subjectively feel that we are being treated unfairly or getting a rough deal.

So when we are faced with a rough deal, whether real or imagined, how do we respond? It is our response, not the rough deal itself, that will determine whether we later become bitter or not. The key to bitterness always lies in people’s responses to unfair (real or imagined) treatment or experiences. And I might mention that if the unfair treatment is only “imagined” then we are ALWAYS far more likely to become bitter than when the unfair treatment is real. Imagining unfair treatment increases the risk of bitterness developing in us exponentially! Imagining unfair treatment reveals a tendency in our thinking, a tendency that is not good.

As already mentioned, our spontaneous response to such situations, prior to having any bitterness, is an effort to cope in the best possible way. Now if we cope successfully, then this particular incident is unlikely to leave any lasting negative impressions on us.

"**Coping successfully**" may involve: not taking offense at offensive conduct towards us; humbling our self-image to acknowledge that someone else deserved the promotion more than we do; accepting that we really misunderstood the intent in someone else's conduct towards us; acknowledging to ourselves that in the past we too have done similar things to other people; accepting the validity of someone else's actions towards us; instead of giving up, working more resolutely towards success; admitting to ourselves that we were in fact wrong and really had coming to us what we received (the "thief on the cross" is a good example of this, see Luke 23:40-41); resolving genuine misunderstandings; etc.

You get the general idea? We cope successfully when we refuse to see ourselves as the helpless victims who are being treated unfairly. All of these correct responses help to diffuse the potentially dangerous situation, so that we don't come away from the situation with any lasting negative impressions.

But what happens if we don't cope successfully?

When we don't cope successfully with treatment or experiences we perceive to be unfair to us, then we have problems. That's when we get into the "Monday morning quarterbacking" frame of mind. In our minds we relive the situation over and over, and we think of all the things we could have done, but didn't do at the time, which would have made the whole thing so much better for us. And **we start to blame others** for the things that went wrong for us. We can't put the situation out of our minds, and we stew over it. And the more we stew over it, the more resentful we become towards the people we are blaming.

When this happens, the first tiny roots of bitterness have found some fertile ground in our minds. And just like weeds, unless they are confronted and resolutely pulled out, those tiny roots will grow and grow and grow. The principle which the Apostle James applied to the tongue applies equally to the tiniest root of bitterness.

> "**BEHOLD HOW GREAT A MATTER A LITTLE FIRE KINDLES**" (James 3:5)

Not coping successfully may involve: not recognizing our own responsibility or short-coming or guilt in the situation; feeling that we had no choice and could not possibly have done things differently; placing the full responsibility for our "suffering" or our "missing out" on other people; imputing evil conduct to others; imputing evil motives to others ("they did this deliberately just to hurt me", etc.); seeing ourselves as helpless victims of circumstances; feeling the world is against us; etc.

You see the contrast in these two different ways of responding to adversity? Coping successfully looks to God for help and readily faces up to our own short-comings and failings. After all, none of us are without failings and short-comings, right? By contrast, not coping successfully leaves God out of the picture and is primarily concerned with the self-image that is tarnished in such hurtful situations. Not coping successfully with adversity can often be traced back to a wrong focus and a wrong perspective.

> Think of bitterness as something that is always retroactive! It depends almost entirely on not letting go of the past!

Now let's consider the real problem with bitterness and see why it is so dangerous.

THE REAL PROBLEM WITH BITTERNESS

Bitter people have a distorted view of reality. Bitterness has clouded their ability to assess things objectively. In most cases such people are extremely self-righteous, and they are unable to see where they themselves fall short. They are very critical of others.

The greatest danger, one that bitter people themselves seldom seem to grasp, is that all bitterness is ultimately directed against God Himself! It is God Himself that bitter people are critical of! This is a huge danger! And it is further compounded by bitter people frequently having a “couldn’t care less” attitude when we attempt to reason and to plead with them. (There are no prizes for guessing who inspires this “couldn’t care less” attitude in bitter people.)

Let’s put this into perspective.

A long, long time ago God gave staggering blessings to Satan, making him “the anointed cherub” that covered the throne of God with his wings. Satan became selfish, rebelled and was punished by God, with **further inevitable punishments to follow**. And **Satan became extremely bitter**! Satan can think of the prestige and beauty and splendor he had been able to enjoy with God’s blessings, and all those things have been taken from him. The beauty and the wisdom Satan used to possess have been obliterated by his lifestyle, and now he has neither beauty nor wisdom. And now Satan is miserable, resentful, hostile and extremely bitter! He had so much and he has lost it all! Satan is not only the father of lies (John 8:44); he is also the father of all bitterness!

In Revelation 8 Satan is pictured as a great star falling from heaven. And here God gives us Satan’s name as WORMWOOD!

> And the name of the star is called **Wormwood**: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and **many men died** of the waters, because **they were made bitter**. (Revelation 8:11)

In this same Book of Revelation God tells us that Satan’s church is “the great whore that sits upon **MANY WATERS**” (Revelation 17:1), which “waters” represent **human beings** (verse 15).

“Wormwood” is here a synonym for “bitterness”. And while Revelation 8 is speaking about physical water becoming bitter, we should also understand that it is **people** who **are made bitter by contact with Satan**!

There is a difference between bitterness and other sins. The ten commandments instruct us in what to do and what not to do. We are required to be in harmony with all of God’s laws. Bitterness is different in that it doesn’t focus on any of God’s laws. Instead, bitterness is resentment against God Himself, finding fault with God and the way God manages and controls His whole creation. After all, that’s what Satan did, find fault with God and become critical of the way of life God represents (i.e. the cooperative give-way of life as opposed to Satan’s competitive get-way of life).

So we need to clearly and unequivocally understand two things:

> **1) ALL BITTERNESS IS ULTIMATELY DIRECTED AGAINST GOD HIMSELF!**
>
> **2) THERE IS NEVER ANY JUSTIFICATION FOR BITTERNESS!**

When we can grasp these facts, then the fear of God should motivate us to resolutely resist any and every temptation to become bitter about ANYTHING. Bitterness is such a fatal frame of mind that we must do whatever it takes to keep bitterness out of our lives!

Revelation 8:11 shows people dying because of bitter water. And people who ingest Satan's spiritual "bitter water" will die the second death (see Revelation 20:6). This is the real problem with bitterness, that it is directed against God Himself and that it is very emphatically headed for the lake of fire.

I've already mentioned that one way bitterness develops in people is when they do not cope effectively with unfair treatment. Now that we have looked at Satan's involvement in bitterness, we should also consider another way that people become bitter.

Originally Satan "had it all": brilliance, beauty, wisdom, the most exalted position given to any created being, leadership over millions of other angels, etc. The only limitation was that Satan wasn't God, and that he never would be God. And then because of his rebellion God took it all from him.

In the same way there are people who "had it all": good health, good looks, fame, popularity, intelligence, prestige, wealth, etc. They may have obtained these things without working for them (good looks, health, intelligence, inheriting great wealth, etc.), or they actually may have worked very hard for some of these things (diligently following a healthy lifestyle, working hard and making a fortune, working hard at some sport or other and then becoming popular and famous, etc.). Irrespective of how they reached this state of "having it all", something happens and they lose it. Perhaps they have an accident and are severely injured, perhaps their investments collapse and they lose their wealth, perhaps they engage in foolish conduct and lose their fame and popularity, perhaps they are cheated out of something, perhaps they are the victims of some totally unfair treatment. However it comes about, whether through their own doing or whether because of someone else's doing, the end result is the same: they lose something they used to have and used to take for granted.

That is when Satan then pressures people in this situation to accept his way of thinking, his way of responding to losing something we feel is rightfully ours, something we feel entitled to have. That is when Satan puts intense pressure on people to become bitter.

Nobody specific may have done anything to them. Perhaps circumstances or a natural disaster worked against them. There may be somebody who is to blame, or there may not be somebody specific they can blame. But they've lost something that was very important to them, and which once lost cannot ever be replaced. In such situations some people will become very bitter, and others may rise above adversity and demonstrate remarkable strength of character and determination. The results of such adversity are by no means a foregone conclusion.

But some people in this type of situation will succumb to Satan's pressure and become bitter! They are the ones who cannot let go of the past, and the fame or fortune or abilities associated with that past.

One thing we should always keep very firmly in mind. Satan has many wrong attitudes and wrong traits. He is a murderer and a liar (John 8:44). But the attitude of bitterness pinpoints very precisely HOW SATAN HIMSELF RESPONDED TO "LOSING IT ALL"! **It is Satan who cannot let go of the past**, when he had an exalted position with great prestige and power (given to him by God!). The term "bitterness" identifies precisely how Satan responded to "losing it all". And that is why the attribute of bitterness is always rooted in the past; it represents how Satan thinks about the past. All bitterness goes back to Satan's response to losing it all.

Now let's take a look at some biblical instructions that apply to bitterness.

SOME BIBLICAL INSTRUCTIONS

Let's look at something the Apostle Peter explained.

> For what glory is it, if, **when ye be buffeted for your faults**, ye shall take it patiently? but if, **when ye do well**, and suffer for it, **ye take it patiently**, this is acceptable with God. For even **hereunto were ye called**: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: (1 Peter 2:20-23)

This speaks about how we cope with adversity, not only when our own conduct brings that adversity upon us, but especially when we are the "innocent victims". Our response to unfair treatment is absolutely vital, because that response reveals **how we see ourselves**! Do we see and recognize that we ourselves also have faults and problems or not? "Taking it patiently" refers to the points I listed above under "coping successfully". If we cannot approach unfair treatment from the perspectives listed above under "coping successfully", then we will simply not be able to "take it patiently". But in order to prevent any roots of bitterness being established in our minds, it is essential that we do respond to unfair treatment with the types of responses listed under "coping successfully".

Let's look at something that happened in the days of Moses.

> And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of **the waters** of Marah, for they **were bitter**: therefore the name of it was called Marah. (Exodus 15:23)

When other "benefits" are involved, we may well put up with some bitterness. We'll drink bitter coffee and bitter beer, and eat bitter chocolate and bitter brewer's yeast because of the other perceived "benefits" of these bitter items, which benefits we deem to be desirable (if they were not desirable to us then we would not put up with the bitterness). But when water is very bitter it becomes virtually impossible for us to drink. In this case in Exodus 15:23 consumption of the bitter water actually posed a danger to people. This illustrates that bitterness makes the things it affects both useless and dangerous.

Water is a good substance! But bitterness totally destroys the water's good attributes. Likewise, keeping God's laws is a good thing! But when a bitter person keeps God's laws, then the bitterness destroys the benefits normally associated with the keeping of God's laws. A bitter person doesn't get any credit with God for keeping God's laws; that's the principle of James 2:10. God expects us to confront, and to come to grips with whatever problems we may have, and no observance of all of God's other laws can detract from this obligation. In the case of someone who is bitter, dealing with that bitterness is the most important issue before God, and nothing in any other area of life can diminish the importance of dealing with that bitterness.

There are no good points earned for Sabbath-keeping and tithing, etc., when that person at the same time is filled with bitterness. This should make clear to us the utter futility of a bitter person remaining in the Church of God! If we in God's Church DO harbor any bitterness, then we need to come to grips with that bitterness and then expunge it from our minds! Otherwise we will not really be a part of God's Church in the eyes of God; we'd only be in the "I never knew you" category of Matthew 7:23.

Exodus 15:23 should teach us that bitterness destroys the value of something that is otherwise inherently good. James made the same point.

> Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? (James 3:11)

If there had been any “sweet water” (read “commandment-keeping”) present in such a fountain to start with, the bitter water present would have instantly destroyed the positive attributes of that “sweet water”. In people, bitterness always destroys the value of any positive attributes that might also be present. This is extremely serious!

Let’s continue in James chapter 3.

> But if ye have **bitter envying** and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. (James 3:14)

This is a reference to **envy motivated by bitterness**. It is envy on a much deeper level, an envy that will consume the person. This type of envy destroys people’s lives. Bitter envy doesn’t just want to have the things that other people have; bitter envy resents that they have it, and bitter envy wishes that they lose the things they have. Bitter envy wishes failure and destruction on other people. Bitter envy runs far deeper than seeing another person have something desirable and wishing “boy, I wish I also had what they have”.

So what does bitterness achieve? What are the results of bitterness?

WHAT BITTERNESS ACHIEVES

Bitter people need to understand that bitterness never, never, never achieves anything that is good! Bitterness never makes life better for the bitter person. And bitterness never gives any satisfaction to the bitter person. Bitter people are doomed to be permanently dissatisfied, permanently negative and permanently critical, all of which represent some of Satan’s attributes.

The only thing that bitterness ever achieves is **destruction upon destruction**! It destroys the life of the bitter person. Bitterness will destroy the value of everything else they do and have done, that might otherwise have been of value. Bitterness even destroys the value of any obedience to God’s laws, in the same way that bitterness destroys the value of “sweet water”.

This is an extremely serious consequence which bitter people will seldom consider. When we become bitter then we destroy everything good that we may have done before we became bitter. That’s the principle of Ezekiel 33:13.

> When I shall say to the righteous, that he shall surely live; if he trust to his own righteousness, and commit iniquity (this includes bitterness!), **all his righteousnesses shall not be remembered**; but for his iniquity that he hath committed, he shall die for it. (Ezekiel 33:13)

If at the end of our lives we are bitter, then a lifetime of obedience to God’s laws will be blotted out, and we’ll be as though we had never at any stage lived our lives by God’s laws. All our past good deeds will have lost their value and be forgotten.

This is the pernicious twist in bitterness. Bitterness involves not letting go of certain things in the past. The bitter person mentally lives in the past, when things were supposedly, or at least could have been, “better” for the bitter person. And then it is “all those good things” in that past which bitterness will destroy, and those good things “shall not be remembered”. Bitterness is really very self-destructive.

Picture a perverse dictator intent on conquering the whole world, who has access to weapons of mass destruction. When it becomes clear that he is going to be defeated, then he takes the perverse attitude:

> **"Well, I may be going down. But I am not going down alone. If I go down, then I am going to make sure that I take everybody else down with me. You can bet on that!"**

That is Satan's most outstanding attitude, already evident from the destruction of the universe before the creation of Adam, as well as ever since God created Adam and Eve. That attitude is: "I may be going down, but I'll be damned (and he assuredly will!!) if I don't take everybody else with me". And in working towards this perverse goal **bitterness is Satan's weapon of mass destruction**!

[COMMENT: "Damned" literally means "**condemned to punishment**" and it is a word that accurately describes Satan's fate. I have used this word in the above statement because it in addition also ACCURATELY expresses Satan's "I couldn't care less" attitude. I do not mean to offend you, the reader, by use of this word. Satan assuredly WILL be "damned", and he equally assuredly will NOT take everybody else with him.]

Please try to understand the above statement, because this statement spells out EXACTLY **the motivation Satan has right now** in doing his utmost to destroy our calling by God for us to become the sons and daughters of God in God's immortal Family! It is his intense craving to take all of us "with him into perdition" that drives Satan into pressuring us to reject God's way of life! Bitterness is like an energizing drug for Satan.

Of all the weapons that Satan uses in his efforts to destroy the lives of human beings, bitterness is the most devastating one. When Satan can inject his spirit of bitterness into people, then he doesn't have to tempt them to do anything else. He doesn't have to tempt them to break any of the ten commandments; he doesn't have to get them "to do" anything unlawful. Before God that critical attitude of bitterness is worse than the literal breaking of the commandments, and bitter people have been conquered by Satan.

Now let's consider the example of Solomon.

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

In **1 Kings 9:10** the first 20 years of Solomon's 40-year reign come to an end. Earlier, in **1 Kings 4:32**, we are told that Solomon spoke 3000 proverbs (the Book of Proverbs contains only 915 verses, so not all the proverbs Solomon "spoke" are actually recorded in the Book of Proverbs) and that he wrote 1005 songs (over 1000 of which have never been a part of the Old Testament). At the end of his 40-year reign Solomon had 700 wives plus another 300 concubines (**1 Kings 11:3**). At the time he wrote the "Song of Solomon" he had only 60 wives (all of them queens) plus another 80 concubines (**Song 6:8**).

So Solomon wrote the Book of Proverbs during the first 20 years of his reign. During that time he also wrote the Song of Solomon. At that point in time Solomon was still faithful to God, although he already had 140 women (60 + 80), something that represented a potential snare for Solomon, as it surely would for any man. So God appeared to Solomon a second time (1 Kings 9:2). In addition to telling Solomon that He had hallowed the Temple Solomon had built, God gave Solomon a very sober admonition and warning, saying: "**IF YOU WILL WALK BEFORE ME** ... IN INTEGRITY OF HEART" (verse 4) then ... (blessings), "**BUT IF YOU SHALL AT ALL TURN FROM FOLLOWING ME**" (verse 6) then ... (penalties).

This sober warning was certainly needed because, as it turned out, in the latter part of the second 20-year period of his reign Solomon descended into idolatry! At that time Solomon went "after other

gods" (1 Kings 11:4), including Ashtoreth and Milcom (verse 5); he "did evil" (verse 6) and built pagan high places for Chemosh and for Molech (verse 7), and so "**the Eternal was angry with Solomon**" (verse 9). And that is the condition Solomon was in when he then died (verse 43) while still in his mid-to-late 50's.

For the last few years of his life Solomon knew that God was angry with him because God "stirred up an adversary unto Solomon" (verse 14). Instead of repenting and changing from the evil ways he had adopted (i.e. idolatry), Solomon then wrote THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES!

None of the commentaries I have checked really understand this Book, a graphic example of the points made in Isaiah 29:10-12 and in 1 Corinthians 2:14. Yet the true meaning of this book is so plain that anyone should be able to understand it.

To put it in simple terms:

> **THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES PRESENTS US WITH THE WORLD VIEW OF A VERY, VERY BITTER MAN!**

When you can understand this simple fact, then everything falls into place! Everything that Solomon says in this book actually makes sense (which is not the same as saying that it is true, which it is not), when seen through the eyes of a bitter person! But it assuredly does not make sense when seen from God's point of view.

The book opens with the bitter person's world view: vanity of vanities, ALL IS VANITY!

Would YOU, if you had that opportunity, walk up to Jesus Christ and say: "everything is just useless and a waste of time"? Anyone who attempts to find a valid meaning for Solomon's bitter assertion that "ALL IS VANITY" is a hypocrite, because that statement is simply not true! It is not true in any sense! It is nothing more than the very twisted and perverted world view of a very bitter man, who knew full well that he had set his mind to disobey the God who had appeared to him on two separate occasions.

When Solomon descended into idolatry then he also LOST his wisdom, because God left him, and without God Solomon was nothing more than a very intellectual fool! This Book of Ecclesiastes PROVES that at that point in time Solomon was nothing more than a fool, albeit a very intellectual one! The extremely pessimistic views he presents repeatedly in this book simply cannot be justified, because those views oppose the views God presents to us in the rest of the Bible!

As already explained, bitterness is directed against God, and bitterness really represents **Satan's view of the value of life**. Can we not understand that IT IS SATAN who wants us to believe that life is all vanity and useless and a waste of time? It is Satan who wants to "take us down with him"!

When Solomon wrote this book he was bitter because of what he had lost due to his own foolish conduct (i.e. the relationship with God), something he knew he would never get back. It was his own fault that he had lost God's blessings, just like it was Satan's own fault that he was removed from his exalted position.

The Book of Ecclesiastes presents us with Satan's point of view regarding the value of life! It is Satan who wants us to accept the pessimistic views presented in this book. As you read through Ecclesiastes, try to identify as many bitter statements as you can find. This book assuredly does NOT present us with God's perspective of life!

Okay, if that's the case then **why is this book in the Bible**? God saw to it that this book is included in the Bible because God wants us TO OPEN OUR EYES! God wants us to clearly understand how a bitter mind thinks, how Satan views life! It is IMPORTANT that we understand this! We are not supposed to gullibly swallow everything we hear. We are to check the source, and we are expected TO VERIFY and TO PROVE "whether those things are so" (see Acts 17:11). It is not enough to establish that the Bible very clearly says "YOU SHALL NOT SURELY DIE" (Genesis 3:4). We need to PROVE whether that is actually correct, which in this example it is not!

"Finding statements in the Bible" is not at all the same as "PROVING whether these things be so". **Finding statements in the Bible is a very elementary process**. PROVING "whether these things be so" means that **we put the statements we find in the Bible to the test**! We need to establish: WHO said this? WHY did he say it? WHAT is the context of this statement? Is this COMPATIBLE with everything else we read in other parts of the Bible or is it IN CONFLICT with other parts of the Bible? Does God actually want us to challenge this statement? etc.

Yes, believe it or not, sometimes God really DOES want us to use our minds and to challenge the things we are told. We are not supposed to blindly believe everything we read. You need some examples?

1) God wanted **Peter** to use his mind, and God did NOT really want Peter to "RISE, KILL AND EAT" (Acts 10:13). It would have been a huge mistake for Peter to have said "yes, Lord, please pass me a knife".

2) When God said to **Balaam** "RISE UP AND GO WITH THEM" (Numbers 22:20) God expected Balaam to use his mind to understand that HE CERTAINLY SHOULD NOT GO WITH THEM! You know the story.

3) When God told **Moses** "LET ME ALONE ... THAT I MAY CONSUME THEM" (Exodus 32:10) God most assuredly did not want Moses to say "Yes, Lord, I'm on my way"! God was testing Moses and God expected Moses to use his mind!

4) When God told **Abraham** "I'm going to Sodom to punish them" (see Genesis 18:20-21, paraphrased), God assuredly did not want Abraham to say "Yes, Lord, let those perverts have it! They sure deserve it!". (poor grammar, but it makes the point)

5) There are many statements in the Book of **Job** we are not supposed to take as correct, because God clearly said to Eliphaz ""My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends, FOR YOU HAVE NOT SPOKEN OF ME THE THING THAT IS RIGHT". So it is perfectly acceptable to question certain statements in the Bible that are made by Eliphaz or by Bildad or by Zophar, right? And since Job himself freely acknowledged that he too had uttered things he didn't really understand (Job 42:3) is it okay to question the correctness of some of Job's statements?

6) **One prophet of God** lost his life because he did NOT question what he was told (in our circumstances that would be "what we have read"). This account is recorded in 1 Kings 13. When another man told him: "I am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke unto me by the word of the LORD saying, bring him back with you into your house, that he may eat bread and drink water" (verse 18) THIS MAN OF GOD SHOULD HAVE USED HIS MIND TO KNOW BETTER! He didn't use his mind and so God had a lion kill that man.

7) The whole Book of Ecclesiastes is example #7.

Finding Scriptures is **the shallow part of Bible study**! Even unconverted people can do that very effectively, what with computer programs to help us find every possible detail. But "proving whether

these things be so" means that we put the things we find to the test! And **sometimes we ought to have enough sense to understand that some statement is CLEARLY WRONG**! (In this regard you should understand that 2 Timothy 3:16 presents us with a gross mistranslation.) Peter and Moses respectfully questioned God, because they used their minds. Balaam likewise should have used his mind when God told him to go with the men who came to him. The prophet who was killed by a lion should also have used his mind. And when Solomon says certain things in Ecclesiastes which express a very bitter view of life and which clearly contradict things we are told elsewhere in the Bible, THEN WE TOO ARE EXPECTED TO USE OUR MINDS!

Listen!

Bitterness is a very pernicious attitude, one God wants **His people** to understand very clearly. At the same time God also inspired the Bible to be written in such a way that **people in general** wouldn't really understand what God is in fact communicating in the Bible (John 12:40; Isaiah 29:11-12; etc.). So God has revealed information in the Bible that people in general neither see nor understand, even though they literally actually "see" every single verse. But the true meaning is hidden from them.

Now if you were in God's place and you wanted God's people on earth to understand very, very clearly exactly how a bitter mind thinks and reasons, HOW WOULD YOU GO ABOUT COMMUNICATING THIS UNDERSTANDING?

Two possible options come to mind.

You could SPELL OUT all the aspects of bitterness in the form of an instruction manual, somewhat like I have done in the earlier parts of this article. Of course, then it would be seen and understood not only by God's people, but also by all the worldly scholars who study the Bible, and even by casual readers of the Bible who are not seeking to live by God's laws and ways.

That approach could work, but it might bring certain information to the attention of some people from whom you really wanted to keep away that particular information. The more openly God presents information, the more accountable people become for that information, something that isn't necessarily always desirable in this age.

But there is another approach, one that will be far more effective in making this information available to only those that God is calling, while simultaneously hiding that information from every one else. With this approach scholars can look at what is presented all day long, and never understand what God is actually telling us.

That approach is TO SAY NOTHING AT ALL! Instead of spelling out in precise terms what bitterness is really like, YOU JUST LET A BITTER PERSON DO ALL THE TALKING! You let the bitter person tell you what life is all about, what is important and what is useless. You WANT the bitter person to very openly lay out exactly how his bitter mind works. And you make no commentary whatsoever on the things the bitter person says. Just let the bitter person do all the talking and be sure not to criticize anything the bitter person presents. Just listen!

Do you have any idea just how EFFECTIVELY this approach will expose the bitter person's innermost thoughts, while at the same time hiding it from people in general? God Himself has NEVER been bitter! So God cannot speak from experience when discussing the ins and outs of bitterness. Solomon, on the other hand, was the greatest human expert on bitterness because he lost the most, one who could speak from personal experience about bitterness. So God allowed "the expert" to expose the underlying philosophy and the inner workings of a bitter mind.

We are not supposed to buy into that presentation! Absolutely not! Rather, God expects the people who have His Spirit to respond with something like: “Ghastly! I had no idea just how twisted and perverted the mind of a bitter person can become”. In other words, **we are supposed to use our minds** in evaluating this information in Ecclesiastes.

The biggest mistake people make with this Book of Ecclesiastes is that THEY TRY TO FIND JUSTIFICATIONS FOR SOLOMON’S CLEARLY BITTER AND PERVERSE STATEMENTS! That’s really the same thing as trying to find valid reasons for Satan’s conduct and behavior. It doesn’t work!!

I have discussed this Book of Ecclesiastes at great length in my 1996 30-page article entitled “Understanding the Book of Ecclesiastes”, and again in my 2001 37-page article entitled “Understanding the Writings of Solomon”. Both articles are posted in the “General Articles” directory on my website. If I were to rewrite those articles today (which I don’t intend to do), I could probably improve on the overall presentation, simply because I now have a better understanding than a decade ago. But those articles very adequately show how Solomon time and again holds views that are diametrically opposite to the views God expects us to espouse.

Don’t believe all the garbage that you can find in commentaries about this Book of Ecclesiastes. Understand that Solomon was a very, very bitter man when he wrote this book. And then accept all of Solomon’s twisted views as the expressions of a bitter mind, one that reflects perfectly Satan’s bitter views regarding the value of life.

Nowhere in this book does Solomon ever claim to speak for God. Instead, he just blows his own horn, claiming he was greater than his own father David. Here is what he said:

> So **I was great**, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also **my wisdom remained with me**. (Ecclesiastes 2:9)

Here Solomon shows a very perverted view of physical wealth. Wealth didn’t make him great. WHY would he even want to compare himself to his father, the only one who had been “in Jerusalem before him”? Why was he so concerned with his image?

He claimed that his wisdom was still with him, but **that was simply not true!!!** He was deceiving himself, and he had no idea regarding how much real understanding he had lost! The foolish views that follow this statement in the rest of this book PROVE that he had lost his wisdom, even if Solomon himself couldn’t see that.

In the next verse Solomon boastfully says:

> **“AND I WAS THE WORLD’S GREATEST HEDONIST!”**

Solomon made this statement in somewhat more flattering terms. He actually said:

> **And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them**, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour. (Ecclesiastes 2:10)

That extremely hedonistic lifestyle obliterated the wisdom he used to have, because God’s Spirit of “a wise and understanding heart” (1 Kings 3:12) was conditional on Solomon staying faithful to God. God’s

Spirit will not stay in a hedonistic mind.

Solomon's view of "**HATING LIFE**" (Ecclesiastes 2:17) is the view of a very bitter mind! It is also the view of Satan! Satan hates life and he would much rather have God blot out his existence than face the endless miserable future that lies ahead for him.

Solomon also HATED **ALL** his labor (next verse), chief of which by a long shot was the Temple he had built! Do you understand that Solomon actually HATED THE TEMPLE HE HAD BUILT? Solomon knew exactly what he was saying, when he said "yes, **I hated all my labor** which I had taken under the sun"; he wasn't excluding anything.

And then he was so utterly and so perversely selfish that he hated the prospect of leaving everything he had accumulated to his own son (also verse 18). That is a very, very bitter attitude! Can we not see "Satan" written all over that attitude?

Of all the people who have ever lived, Solomon had the least possible justification for saying:

> For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For **all his days are sorrows**, **and his travail grief**; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity. (Ecclesiastes 2:22-23)

Solomon is talking about himself! In the first 20 verses of this chapter he used the pronoun "I" 32 times. He had been given so much, but his bitterness was oozing with self-pity; he could only see sorrow and grief and travail and fear. What did Solomon possibly have to fear, that would cause him to have 60 valiant men with drawn swords standing around his bed at night (see Song 3:7-8)? WHY did Solomon have "fears in the night"? And why so negative?

To Solomon's question "what has man of all his labor?" the counter-question is "do you mean that immortal life in God's Family isn't worth a few trials in this present life?" Can we see Solomon's wrong perspective?

Consider the perverse view Solomon expressed in Ecclesiastes 4:3.

> Yea, **better is he than both they**, **which hath not yet been**, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 4:3)

This bitter view is critical of God, the Giver of life! This is the bitter person's view that all of life is useless, precisely how Satan feels.

Don't be mislead by the fact that this book also includes observations that are correct. Of course, many statements in this book are correct. It is the mixture of right observations and also bitter critical opinions that is so dangerous. As already stated, God expects us to use our minds, to sift out what is right from the things that are clearly wrong.

In Ecclesiastes 6:3 Solomon expresses the utterly perverse view that **a miscarried foetus** (i.e. "an untimely birth") is better than not having a decent burial. That's how a bitter mind views the value of life. To make this point quite clear: Solomon knew that there was nothing beyond death for him to look forward to. And therefore the only worthwhile thing he could still see ahead was "a decent burial". Immortal life beyond that burial didn't feature in Solomon's thinking.

In Ecclesiastes 9:5 Solomon stated this bitter, bitter view very plainly by saying that the dead do not have any reward to look forward to. The hope of immortality doesn't feature in Solomon's thinking. And he is bitter that there is nothing beyond death FOR HIM.

> For the living know that they shall die: but **the dead** know not any thing, **neither have they any more a reward**; for the memory of them is forgotten. (Ecclesiastes 9:5)

This is a statement that Solomon's father David would never, never have made! That's because David very clearly looked forward to the time when he would be in God's kingdom. But that kind of thinking is foreign to Solomon's views in Ecclesiastes.

Further, does GOD really tell us that there is a time "to hate", as Solomon asserts in Ecclesiastes 3:8? Where does God ever tell us to hate people? Solomon is not expressing God's view of life in this book.

To summarize this section, the Book of Ecclesiastes presents us with the views of a very, very bitter mind. It presents us with a lesson in understanding bitterness, presented in a bitter person's own words.

Now let's look at another bitter man in the Old Testament.

THE BOOK OF JONAH

We are all familiar with the story of Jonah. What most of us usually fail to notice is that Jonah was also a very bitter man. Instead of recognizing Jonah's bitterness, in their sermons about the Book of Jonah, ministers have typically attempted to find some or other JUSTIFICATION for Jonah's conduct! That is not right!

The point is that there simply was no justification for Jonah's conduct! There is never a justification for bitterness.

The book starts with Jonah receiving a very clear instruction from God. Jonah knew without reservation that GOD was the One who had given him this instruction.

Put yourself into Jonah's position. If YOU received a very clear and unambiguous instruction from God, one you knew you were quite capable of carrying out, what justification could YOU possibly have for refusing to obey God's instruction? There was no reason to challenge God's instructions. And the refusal to obey God was utterly foolish. So for you there would be no justification to disobey God, none whatsoever.

Jonah's main problem was that he had a hatred for the Assyrians. So when the Almighty Creator God of this entire universe instructed Jonah to do something that could potentially benefit the Assyrians whom Jonah hated, then Jonah refused to cooperate. His hatred for the Assyrians was bitterness. And irrespective of what he might have known about the Assyrians, his bitterness was not justified.

We know the story. Eventually Jonah does preach as God has instructed him to do. His preaching would hardly have been enthusiastic or zealous. But still the people of Nineveh, from the king down to the lowest person, responded with fasting and mourning. They responded with precisely the response that such preaching is looking to achieve. And **Jonah was bitter that his preaching had been so successful**.

It is **chapter 4** of this book that really exposes Jonah's bitterness. As we know, God tried to teach Jonah a lesson, to help him over his bitterness.

Verse 1 tells us that Jonah was "**VERY ANGRY**" when God decided to not destroy Nineveh. That anger was bitterness, not just a surface emotion. That anger came from deep within Jonah. Any time any of us **actually don't want some other people to repent** (the essence of verse 2), that is bitterness! Jonah is so bitter over the repentance of the Ninevites and God therefore sparing them from destruction, that Jonah asks God to take his life.

Talk about bitterness! Can you picture yourself telling God: UNLESS you take the lives of these people that I don't like, please take my life (verse 3)?!? A person has to be extremely bitter to want to stop living just because the people we don't like actually did something good in God's eyes. The bitterness here involves not accepting God's decision.

That, by the way, is a common source of bitterness: not liking the decisions someone else has made. This happens all too often in marriages, that one spouse becomes bitter over the decisions made by the other spouse.

Back to Jonah. When God said to Jonah "do you do well to be angry? " (verse 4), God was really warning Jonah against bitterness. This warning is the same as the warning God gave Cain, when God said to Cain "WHY are you wroth and WHY is your countenance fallen?" (Genesis 4:6).

After God had "prepared a worm" to destroy the shade-giving plant, Jonah was in a foul mood, wanting to die. So God asked Jonah "is it right for you TO BE ANGRY about that plant that has withered"? (see verse 9, paraphrased)

Jonah's reply was:

> **"I do well to be angry, even unto death!"**

Jonah is speaking with God, remember. This is not the tone of respect we see when Abraham and Moses and Peter, etc. spoke with God. This is not a tone of respect, but one of stubbornly arguing with God. The bitterness in Jonah's reply to his Creator is revealed especially in those last three words "even unto death". Jonah's reply conveys resentment at what God had decided to do.

That bitter and resentful statement by Jonah to his Creator is the last we hear of Jonah in this book. The next two verses show God speaking to Jonah, reasoning about the hard-hearted position Jonah had taken. The book ends without giving us any indications about Jonah's response to God, because Jonah very clearly had to say SOMETHING to God. When God speaks to us, we can't just turn our backs and say "I am not speaking to You". Nobody would get away with trying to do this to God. So Jonah SURELY responded to God in some way! But that response is not recorded. And if Jonah wrote all of this book himself, which seems likely, then it means that Jonah himself chose to keep his own response to God a secret, though he did candidly expose his own negative attitude from start to finish.

Now IF Jonah's response had been one of repentance (e.g. "Yes, Lord, now I can understand that my attitude was wrong. Please forgive me for my stubborn anger and resentment."), there is a good chance that God would have seen to it that this response would have been included in the book. Remember that with God **repentance always makes the headlines**. See the principle of Luke 15:7.

So while Jonah's response to God is ultimately uncertain, it is assuredly not a good sign for Jonah that the last we see of Jonah is a statement of intense bitterness coming from his mouth. This is especially significant since at no point anywhere in this book does Jonah ever display anything that could remotely be termed to be "a good attitude". And it is also clear that Jonah's resentment was directed against God; Jonah resented what God was doing. Jonah's bitterness was quite openly directed against God

Himself.

Two bitter individuals, Solomon and Jonah; one said that he "**hated life**" and the other said that he was "**angry even unto death**". Neither one seems to have placed a high value on life. That's what bitterness does to a person; it diminishes the appreciation of the value of God's gift of life.

Let's look at one more bitter individual in the Bible, the man Simon Magus.

SIMON MAGUS

> But there was a certain man, called **Simon**, which beforetime in the same city **used sorcery**, and **bewitched the people** of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: (Acts 8:9)

Simon Magus had a position of power and prestige in his community, which power and prestige he lost when Philip came to town. Simon was then baptized by Philip. He really should not have been baptized, but he said all the right things and managed to deceive Philip. Then Peter and John came to town. After Simon Magus attempted to buy the power of the Holy Spirit (verses 18-19), Peter confronted Simon Magus regarding Simon's vicious carnal attitude. Peter stated quite forcefully:

> For I perceive that **thou art in the gall of bitterness**, and in the bond of iniquity. (Acts 8:23)

This expression "in the gall of bitterness" means: you, Simon Magus, are EXTREMELY BITTER! Peter discerned that this man was consumed by bitterness against the Church, because it was the Church that had destroyed his position of power in his community. He utterly resented that destruction of his own power. And so Simon Magus had decided to infiltrate the Church with the intention of then "getting even" by destroying the Church.

"The bond of iniquity" means that Simon Magus was still totally under the control of the demons who had given him his witchcraft powers over people. The demons had motivated Simon Magus to seek baptism and to infiltrate the Church. His bitter attitude should have been recognized by Philip. At any rate, Peter clearly recognized Simon's bitterness and demonic carnality, and so Peter then confronted Simon Magus.

What we need to recognize here is that this isn't just an account about some man who foolishly wanted to buy his way into the ministry. This account shows us Satan's first major attempt to destroy the Church from within. Satan filled Simon Magus with bitterness to the point where Simon Magus didn't just want a position of power within the Church; no, Simon Magus wanted to see the Church destroyed! His bitterness and resentment at losing his former power over people made him so angry at the Church that he wanted to see it smashed and destroyed!

The attitude Simon Magus had towards the Church (because the Church had destroyed his power) was identical to the attitude Haman in the Book of Esther had towards the Jews (because Mordecai didn't bow down to him). See Esther 3:6 for Haman's consuming resentment and bitterness. And Simon Magus just as surely desired to destroy the whole Church of God, as Haman desired to destroy all the Jewish people. Haman had also been "in the gall of bitterness" towards the Jewish people.

Simon Magus had been a wolf in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). The same thing happened in our age during Mr. Armstrong's time. The Church was also infiltrated by "wolves in sheep's clothing", and some succeeded in attaining positions of influence and power. Wolves, in the spiritual sense, are always bitter. And the proof that such "ravening wolves" infiltrated the Church is the destruction they initiated

after Mr. Armstrong's death. In our age those who infiltrated the Church have done what Simon Magus had hoped and intended to do. It had been Simon Magus' intention to keep the name of the Church, but to change all the teachings to those he himself had always practiced in his pagan religion. After all, that's what Simon later did when he moved to Rome. He never did get rid of his bitterness and he remained in the bond of iniquity.

Everything Simon Magus did after Acts chapter 8 goes back to his consuming bitterness against the Church of God.

Let's now look at some more biblical instructions that apply to this subject.

SOME BIBLICAL ADMONITIONS

Let's notice what the Apostle Paul said.

> 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, (Philippians 3:13)

This is one of the greatest keys for avoiding the trap of bitterness. We must be willing to forget the past! God's whole way of life is predicated on forgetting the past. We repent and then our past is blotted out by God.

You may have heard people say something like: **I can forgive, but I can never forget**! We should be eternally thankful that God doesn't say this to us, because this statement REALLY means that those people also don't forgive! The greatest single component of real forgiveness is: forgetting things that are past! **Without forgetting the past there can never be any real forgiveness!**

If you have hurt me or wronged me in some way, and then ask for forgiveness, if I say "I forgive you", but every time I see you my mind keeps recalling how you wronged or hurt me, THEN I HAVEN'T REALLY FORGIVEN YOU AT ALL! The words "I forgive you" may well have done something to your mind (i.e. helped you to get rid of the feeling of guilt), but those words haven't really done anything to my mind, if I cannot put your wrong or hurtful conduct out of my memory!

So there are two parts to the process of forgiveness. Part one is to erase the feelings of guilt from the mind of the guilty party. One way that is achieved is when the offended party says to the guilty party "I forgive you". Part two is to erase the feelings of having been wronged from the mind of the wronged party. And that is achieved when the wronged party says "let's forget it", and then actively determines to "forget those things which are behind". That's what God's forgiveness of our sins does, and that's what we must be willing to do for those who "sin against us" (see Matthew 18:21).

Now forgetting the past doesn't necessarily mean that we will be totally unable to recall the things that happened. It is not the ability to recall or not recall that is the issue for us in this present life. We may well still be able to "recall" the things we have forgiven other people. What forgetting the past which we have forgiven really means is: the things we have forgiven other people become totally unimportant and insignificant to us. They don't READILY come to mind. They are not lurking in the background just waiting for excuses to come to the fore in our consciousness! They don't come to mind unless we get some serious prompting, to cause us to recall those things we have forgiven.

Put another way, the real key to genuine forgiveness when we say to someone else "I forgive you", is if those words "I forgive you" do something to OUR minds! If those words don't do anything for our

minds, when we are saying those words, THEN we haven't really forgiven the other person. What happens in the mind of the person saying "I forgive you" is the real key to forgiveness.

Making the effort to forget the past is a major part of forgiveness. And genuine forgiveness is the most potent antidote to bitterness. We "make the effort" to forget the past by in our own minds downgrading the importance of that past to the lowest possible level. It is the things we feel are unimportant that are least likely to come to mind, and that are the easiest to forget. And that's part of real forgiveness, isn't it, assigning an insignificant status to the things that offended or hurt us.

At this point it might be good to consider an example that applies to bitterness in marriage. Notice Paul's instruction in Colossians.

Husbands, love your wives, and **be not bitter against them**. (Colossians 3:19)

While this instruction is addressed to husbands, this obviously works both ways. Both husbands and wives need to guard their minds against developing bitterness towards their spouse.

By the time people have been married ten years, twenty years or more, there will have been many occasions when they had different opinions about something or other. Very likely the husband will have made some decisions during those years that the wife wasn't totally happy with. Perhaps the wife at times pressured the husband to make decisions he didn't really want to make (that happened to Solomon)? Very likely there will have been some misunderstandings during those years. I am not at all referring to marital infidelity here, because that is a completely different subject. But possibly people have said or done things that offended the spouse. Perhaps they have at times even expressed anger towards the other? Perhaps one of them just gets frustrated and irritated with the habits or idiosyncrasies or laziness of the other? etc.

While most of these things are insignificant, they have the potential to develop into bitterness. In a large number of divorces bitterness is a major component. And bitterness in a marriage develops because "things that happened" are not forgotten. Once there is "a reservoir of such incidents" (say after a decade or two of marriage), THEN, whenever a new disagreement or argument develops, then one spouse (let's say the wife for this example) may dip into this reservoir of past events and say: "you always do that ... here's what you did to me back then ... and here is what you did to me at this other time ... and here ...". This then prompts the husband to likewise dip into that reservoir of past events, and drag up other things that make the wife look bad; and on and on it goes.

In this type of scenario the whole thing depends on both of them having **AN EXCELLENT MEMORY**! They need to have the ability to perfectly recall things the other one said or did years and years ago. But they would surely get a failing grade if they were judged on "forgetting those things that are behind", because that's the last thing they are likely to do, to forget where the other one did something wrong. That's what I have seen many times in years of marriage counseling.

But there are also those marriages where people have **A TERRIBLE MEMORY**! They hardly remember anything negative! They have a really difficult time recalling when the other one wrecked the car, or spent too much money, or never got around to doing the repairs around the house, or said something nasty to them, or embarrassed them in front of family or neighbors, or did something else that other husbands or wives are likely to take offence at, or ... etc. They genuinely would have a hard time thinking of something that irritates them about their own husband or wife, because they have learned to "forget the things that are behind". Oh yes, did I mention that the people with this type of terrible memory also happen to have far happier marriages?

Yes, sometimes it is really much better to have a terrible memory than it is to have an excellent memory.

And people who retain a perfect memory of all the things their spouse has done that they didn't like are setting themselves up as prime candidates for bitterness. Bitterness NEEDS the memory of those past hurts and offenses, because without that memory bitterness would fizzle out, much like a flame dies out if we don't supply more fuel.

In the context of marriage we might take another look at Solomon's bitterness, because he was quite bitter towards all of his wives. As he openly said:

> And **I find more bitter than death the woman**, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her. Behold, this have I found, saith the preacher, counting one by one, to find out the account: Which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: one man **among a thousand** have I found; **but a woman among all those have I not found**. (Ecclesiastes 7:26-28)

Here Solomon very openly reveals that by this stage of his life he didn't really like any of his 1000 women. He is bitter towards all of them. They were the ones who had pressured him into idolatry (1 Kings 11:4). And while Solomon gave in to their pressure to keep the peace, he ended up being bitter against them. Solomon is also the ultimate example of bitterness in marriage. And by the way, any man who desires to marry 1000 women, let alone actually doing so, is without any question whatsoever an extremely selfish fool! If YOU attempted to marry 1000 women (assuming that was legally possible and that you were rich enough to afford it) then YOU would assuredly be one enormous fool! What's true for you is also true for Solomon. Wanting to marry 1000 women demonstrates a total absence of REAL wisdom. By the time Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes he assuredly was no longer wise!

Now let's look at Hebrews.

> 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**; (Hebrews 12:14-15)

Bitterness always has roots in the past. The point in this Scripture is that bitterness is extremely infectious. It can spread like wildfire. If we are in the company of bitter people, their bitterness can very easily rub off on us. Negative attitudes spread extremely easily and speedily. Whole families can become bitter because one person in that family initially became bitter. Partisanship provides the perfect vehicle for spreading bitterness, since partisanship is by definition biased in favor or one's own party.

Because bitterness can spread so easily and so rapidly, therefore the only way to deal with any "roots of bitterness" is to openly confront them and to expose them for what they are. It requires the application of the principle of Proverbs 19:25.

> **Smite a scorner, and the simple will beware**: and reprove one that hath understanding, and he will understand knowledge. (Proverbs 19:25)

The principle is: to deal with bitterness we need to expose it for what it is; we need to call a spade a spade. That's what I've done with the books of Ecclesiastes and Jonah. Bitter envying in the heart, spoken about in James 3:14, needs to be brought out into the open.

Let's now briefly consider the recent history of the Church.

OUR SITUATION TODAY

Soon after Mr. Armstrong's death in 1986 the Church started to split up. Ten years later the splitting up was in full swing. And another almost 15 years have since then passed. Consider how things have developed over this past quarter of a century.

The new administration introduced numerous changes, designed to eventually lead God's Church back into the general Protestant fold, not unlike what Simon Magus had wanted to do. At first some people disagreed with certain specific changes that were introduced, and they went out and started new churches. But the changes that the new administration had introduced formed **the springboard** for other people to also introduce their own changes. This brought about the atmosphere where many people felt entitled to reject whatever teaching THEY wanted to reject, and to accept whatever new ideas THEY wanted to accept. Because the Church was leaderless, therefore "every man did that which was right in his own eyes", like Judges 21:25. And that's the situation we find ourselves in today.

So the introduction of heresies by the administration after Mr. Armstrong did more damage than just introduce some heresies into the Church. The REAL damage they did is to create the precedent and the atmosphere that emboldened a vast number of people to follow their example, and to also introduce THEIR OWN PET IDEAS into the cauldron of doctrinal disputations.

This process put considerable indirect pressure on some of those men who went out and started new church groups. That pressure was that such men really had to come up with "new understanding" to justify them forming new groups. After all, if all your beliefs are 100% identical to another Church of God group down the road, WHY are you separate from them? Why don't you combine with them to form "one body"? Well, we can't combine with them because "they" don't accept this new truth that I have introduced in my group over here. So therefore we will have to stay separate, and I will have to stay in charge of my group.

Can you grasp that minor (and major, for that matter) doctrinal differences are essential **to justify us staying divided**, as well as justifying the leader being the leader? These comments are not directed against anyone; I only mention these things to explain the general process we are involved in. And so today we have a large number of groups that all trace their origins back to an association with Mr. Armstrong.

Now at the same time as all these splits were taking place and new groups were springing up in various places, **at the same time bitterness surfaced on many different fronts**! The bitterness had been introduced by the administration that followed Mr. Armstrong, and it was eagerly taken up by various people who wanted nothing more than to tear down everything that had been built and achieved during Mr. Armstrong's time. A root of bitterness was planted by that administration, and many were defiled thereby.

In some cases the leaders of new groups bristled with hostility towards Mr. Armstrong. And so they attracted people who shared that hostility. In time hostility to Mr. Armstrong became more and more common. I know this because I have heard various taped messages that openly presented this hostility to the listener. You surely also know that some organizations have the sole purpose of discrediting Mr. Armstrong and things associated with him. Bitterness is the driving force in those organizations.

I know that this is not pleasant to talk about, and it is not a comfortable subject. But today we in the greater Church of God have a large amount of bitterness amongst us. People started to blame THE CHURCH for all their problems, or they blamed THE MINISTRY for their problems, or they blamed THE TEACHINGS for their problems, or they blamed MR. ARMSTRONG PERSONALLY for their problems. Today there are many Church of God people who resent the ministry and who resent certain teachings

of the Church. Their personal problems ranged from health problems to broken marriages to financial problems to job problems to family problems to unfulfilled career aspirations to no provisions for their old age, etc., and the blame for all these problems was placed on the Church, the ministry and the teachings of the Church.

It is a very sad fact that today there are a large number of very bitter people in the greater Church of God. The root for that bitterness obviously existed already before Mr. Armstrong's death; but it was the split up that facilitated the rapid spread of bitterness throughout most, if not all, the various Church of God groups. This is very sad because, as I have tried to explain, bitterness is so very dangerous. Bitterness is really a form of spiritual suicide, methodically and systematically destroying the bitter person's life.

Bitterness focuses primarily on self. That is why bitter people frequently cannot agree with other bitter people. And the continued fracturing of the Church is in fact PROOF of the presence of bitterness amongst us. Bitterness causes divisions and fractures. I don't mean that every one is bitter, certainly not. But there are enough bitter people around to block any possibilities of reconciliations amongst us.

Let's go back to Solomon for a moment. When he wrote Ecclesiastes, Solomon knew that he himself had hardened his heart, and that he was not prepared to change. The whole book is about Solomon himself, and he was referring to himself when he wrote in Ecclesiastes 4:13:

Better is a poor and a wise child than **an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished**.

Earlier I referred to Solomon in his old age as "a very intellectual fool". In this verse here Solomon referred to himself as "A FOOLISH KING"! So my assessment agrees with Solomon's own admission. And certainly, the fact that Solomon was no longer willing "to be admonished" proves that he was at that stage a fool, and he knew it.

Solomon was bitter, but he was also honest, something that was vitally necessary for God to use the approach of "letting the bitter person do all the talking". It wouldn't work if the bitter person was going to disguise his true feelings and opinions. God allowing the bitter person himself to give us a vivid look at bitterness is predicated on that bitter person being honest and open. And Solomon didn't try to hide his true feelings; he expressed himself quite openly.

The point here is that bitter people typically KNOW that they are bitter. They KNOW that they have hardened their hearts, something we absolutely must not do (Hebrews 3:8). Most of the people in the greater Church of God today who are bitter actually KNOW that they are bitter or resentful or hostile towards someone or something. And yet, they (in most cases, it seems?) have a couldn't-care "so what?" approach when confronted with their bitterness. It's the same attitude as when you confront a smoker with "do you know that smoking will give you lung cancer?", and the smoker says "yes, I know, but I am still going to smoke".

The bad news is that most smokers are not willing to change, and the same is true for most bitter people. The good news is that there are plenty of smokers who ARE willing to change, and I hope that likewise there are at least some bitter people who also ARE willing to change. But just as it is much easier to never start smoking in the first place than to become a smoker and later try to give it up, so also is it much easier to never allow bitterness to take root in our minds than to first allow ourselves to become bitter and THEN to try to remove all bitterness from our lives. Prevention is the most effective route to take in this matter.

Now let's consider how we should best protect ourselves against becoming bitter.

ANTIDOTES TO BITTERNESS

Bitterness is something that can happen to all of us. None of us are inherently immune. The only way to really avoid this danger is to openly recognize just how dangerous this attitude is and to take active steps to protect ourselves against becoming infected with bitterness.

There is a powerful two-step approach for guarding our minds against bitterness. Those two steps are:

1) WE MUST **ALWAYS LET GO** OF ALL THE NEGATIVE THINGS IN THE PAST.

2) WE MUST **ALWAYS FORGIVE** ALL THOSE WHO TRANSGRESS AGAINST US.

In other words, to always "**forgive and forget**" is the most powerful way to inoculate our own minds against the devastating ravages of bitterness.

We have already looked at Philippians 3:13, from which we learn that we too must "forget those things which are behind". When we truly forget the past, by totally diminishing in our own minds the importance of all offenses against us, then we are depriving the flame of bitterness of its supply of fuel and it will go out.

In Ephesians 4:31, which we have also already seen, Paul instructs us to actively put away from us all bitterness. In the next verse Paul then tells us how to go about putting bitterness out of our lives.

> And **be ye kind** one to another, tenderhearted, **forgiving one another**, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:32)

The key for providing us with the motivation to forgive others is found in the last part of this verse. That key is **the recognition of how much God has forgiven us**!

A bitter person has lost the recognition of just how much God has already done for us personally! We don't see that when we are bitter towards other people. Instead, when we are bitter we become like the servant who had ten thousand talents forgiven by God but who was unwilling to forgive someone else one hundred pennies. And then God's response to us is:

> Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, **even as I had pity on thee**? (Matthew 18:33)

As Jesus Christ continued to explain:

> So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, **if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses**. (Matthew 18:35)

Already earlier in His ministry Jesus Christ had also addressed the vital importance of us forgiving other people.

> For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But **if ye forgive not** men their trespasses, **neither will your Father forgive your trespasses**. (Matthew 6:14-15)

An unwillingness to forgive others is the most obvious symptom of bitterness. Such an unwillingness to forgive obviously depends totally on not being willing to let go of the past! Without reference to the past bitterness doesn't have a leg to stand on, does it? These two always go together: a willingness to forgive goes together with a willingness to forget, and an unwillingness to forgive goes together with an unwillingness to forget.

Bitterness has microscopic vision to identify "the mote" in the eyes of those we are bitter against, while at the same time being totally blind to "the beam" in our own eyes. See Matthew 7:3-5. This must not be!

The other thing we need to do is BE ON GUARD against other people infecting our minds with bitterness. We may not have any grudges or resentment at all. But then we come into contact with people who are bitter, and the next thing we know is that we too share their bitterness.

This is an absolutely devastating occurrence, when previously innocent minds are poisoned with someone else's bitterness! That is what Satan did to all of the angels that had been placed under his leadership; he poisoned the mind of every single one of those angels, to the point where all of them joined him in his rebellion against God. A root of bitterness had sprung up in one individual (Satan) and thereby multiple millions of angels were defiled. If angels were susceptible to "contagious bitterness" then so are we.

So here is what we need to do when we are dealing with bitter people:

1) NEVER, NEVER, NEVER feel sorry for someone who is bitter! It doesn't matter what the cause of the bitterness is, because bitterness is NEVER justified! That bitterness is really directed against God Himself, and to feel sorry for a bitter person amounts to siding with the bitter person against God! Don't ever kid yourself here! Whenever your emotions pressure you to feel sorry for the bitter person, you are being pressured to side against God! So don't ever do that!

2) Realize that the bitter person ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS has Satan's unconditional support! And we should never be on the same side as Satan! Don't let feelings blur your vision.

3) In all your Church contacts always be on the lookout for bitterness that is directed against the Church, the ministry, the teachings of the Church, Mr. Armstrong, one's own spouse, another racial group (Jonah and Haman) or the brethren in general. It doesn't matter where that bitterness comes from, whether it is from the pulpit or from literature or from the person sitting next to you in services; if you detect even the slightest signs of bitterness, then **guard your mind**! Realize that Satan is presenting his pitch to you, tugging at your emotions and appealing to your sense of "fairness". Yes, something may well be unfair, because life isn't always fair; but bitterness is never, under no circumstances, an acceptable response to unfairness. Bitterness criticizes God. And we must never strive against God (see Isaiah 45:9).

4) Voice your disagreement with the bitterness you can detect. Use wisdom, but don't ever give another member of God's Church the impression that you agree with his or her bitterness. In doing this (voicing your disagreement) you will risk that person becoming bitter towards you, because bitter people easily take offense. However, if you can factually present your clear disagreement with the bitterness, without you yourself becoming emotional, showing them that your entire motivation is to help them, then you may be able to avoid that bitter person becoming bitter towards you. But you will always run the risk of the bitter person becoming upset with you. But here is what you need to remember in this situation:

A) IF you show your opposition to, and disagreement with the bitterness, THEN you will be guarding your own mind!

B) IF you create the impression that you “understand” their bitterness, and by implication therefore also sympathize with their bitterness, THEN you are opening your own mind to becoming infected with their bitterness. Believe me, this has happened to millions of people before you (amongst all human beings, not just amongst Church members), that their minds became bitter because they sympathized with someone else who was bitter. When a moth circles a flame, then it is only a question of time before that moth gets burned; and showing understanding for bitterness is equally dangerous.

5) If the bitter person remains bitter, then try to minimize future exposure to that bitter person, if that is possible. If the bitter person knows your opposition to his or her bitterness, because you took a stand, then they may well tone down expressing their bitterness when you are in their company. That would help.

The most important point we must always remember when we are dealing with bitter people is: we must guard our minds like the authorities guard Fort Knox.

As a concluding thought, let’s take to heart Paul’s admonition in Ephesians 4:26.

> Be ye angry, and sin not: **let not the sun go down upon your wrath**: (Ephesians 4:26)

If we get any “wrath” out of our system before we go to sleep that night, then it is likely to be no more than a surface emotion. We responded with anger to some or other provocation, but we got the whole matter out of our system before the end of that day.

On the other hand, if we hold over to the next day any feelings of anger and resentment and hostility, THEN those negative feelings are likely to become the seed-bed for bitterness. Bitterness requires us to “let the sun go down on our wrath”; bitterness needs that wrath to be retained for future use! Therefore we must not do that!

Bitterness in the Church is a sad reality. Let’s be sure we always keep all these antidotes to bitterness in mind.

Frank W. Nelte!