DEALING WITH BITTERNESS

Pulling Up the Root Before It Defiles Many

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Preface

Bitterness is a root.
You do not see a root. You see what it bears.
You see the hard word, the cold eye, the name that cannot be spoken without heat. You see the house that was once at peace and is now divided. But the thing itself is under the ground, and it was there long before anything showed.

I wrote of familiarity, of offence, of envy and of murmuring.
Familiarity lowers what God has sent.
Offence closes the heart.
Envy sours it.
Murmuring gives it a voice.
And when none of them is dealt with, they do not go away.
They go down.
They go underground, and there they become a root.

In *Dealing With Murmuring* we stood at the bitter waters.
This book goes beneath the waters, to the root.

Every shepherd has seen it.
The believer who was wounded ten years ago and still speaks of it as if it were yesterday.

The faithful worker who served with joy, was overlooked once, and has served with a set jaw ever since.
And every shepherd has seen what one root can do. One heart grows sour, and in time a whole house tastes it.

This book has two parts, because the Word speaks of bitterness in two places.
It springs up in one heart.
It defiles many.
The first part is for the heart where the root grows — yours and mine.
The second is for the one who must watch over the many.

You will not find here a way to explain bitterness away.
You will find the way grace pulls it up.

May these pages reach the place where the root has been growing in silence.
May they find the hurt that was never healed and bring the grace that heals it.
May every leader who reads them watch over the house as one who must give account, with a clean heart of his own.

Receive grace.
Put it away.
No root needs to remain.

— Emmanuel Mukisa

PART

One

The Root in You

CHAPTER

1

A Root Beneath the Ground

Bitterness is planted in secret and harvested in public.
Before we see where it grows, hear what it is.

The English dictionary defines bitterness as "angry and unhappy feelings caused by the belief that you have been treated unfairly" (*Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*).
Hear the heart of it: *the belief that you have been treated unfairly*.
Bitterness is not simply anger. Anger can flash and pass. Bitterness is anger that has settled on a wrong — real or imagined — and made its home there.
The same dictionary gives another sense, of food: a strong, unpleasant taste that is not sweet. And that is what bitterness does to a life. It takes the sweetness out of everything it touches.

The English word carries its own warning. *Bitter* comes down from the Old English *biter*, and the old root beneath it is the root that also gave us *bite*. What is bitter bites.
And bitterness does bite — first the one who carries it, and then everyone near him.

The New Testament word is *pikria*. It comes from *pikros*: bitter, sharp, pungent. The lexicons trace it to the idea of piercing or cutting, and the word was used of poison. James sets it against what is sweet: "Doth a fountain send forth at the

same place sweet water and bitter?" (James 3:11).
Pikria appears four times in the New Testament, and each time it shows us something.
In Hebrews 12:15, it is a root.
In Acts 8:23, it is a gall a man can be in: "the gall of bitterness".
In Romans 3:14, it is in the mouth: "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness".
In Ephesians 4:31, it is the first thing Paul tells us to put away.
A root. A gall. A mouth. A thing to be put away. That is this whole book in four verses.

The Old Testament word is *mar*, from the verb *marar*, to be bitter. It is the word for water that cannot be drunk: at Marah "they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter" (Exodus 15:23). And joined to *nephesh*, the soul, it describes a person — *mar nephesh*, bitter of soul.
Water that cannot be drunk. A soul that cannot let go.

So hear it whole.
In English, bitterness is the settled anger of one who believes he was wronged, and it bites.
In Greek, it is sharp, piercing and poisonous.
In Hebrew, it is water no one can drink, and a soul made bitter.

Now hear where it grows.

The writer to the Hebrews gives us the word that governs this book: "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 12:15).

Hear what he calls it. Not a mood. Not a bad day. Not a passing feeling.
A root.

And he did not invent the picture. He reached back to Moses. In the land of Moab, before Israel crossed the Jordan, Moses warned the people: "Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away this day from the LORD our God... lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood" (Deuteronomy 29:18).

In the Hebrew, gall is *rosh*, a bitter and poisonous herb, and wormwood is *la'anah*.
Poison and bitterness — and Moses said they grow from a root.

A root does its work in the dark.
No one sees it go down. No one sees it spread. It takes in whatever it is given — every replayed conversation, every rehearsed injustice, every night spent going over what they did — and it grows.
By the time anything shows above the ground, the root has been there a long time.