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Hebrews 12:14-15, New Living Translation.

¹⁴ Work at living in peace with everyone, and work at living a holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord. ¹⁵ Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.

Bitterness roots.

I thought of today's passage the other day when I was thinking about how many people in the last couple of years have seemed to me to be bitter. If you look up bitterness in the dictionary, you'll get "*the lack of sweetness*" as a literal definition. But more figuratively, you'll read something like this: "*a feeling of antagonism, hostility, and resentment*". I had one person recently who expressed an incredibly deep level of bitterness. He was homeless, but it was - more or less - by choice. He was not a patient at the hospital, by the way. I met him on the street. He told me he was not a drug user, and I had no reason not to believe him. He seemed completely sober, and he was quite articulate. He told me that he usually slept in a certain parking structure, but when the security people ran him out of there, he slept in one particular park in Boulder. His hands were filthy, literally blackened with dirt. His clothes were dirty, as well. His hair was longish and tangled. He said

that he had been a rough carpenter, that in his younger years, as he put it, he had “nailed two by fours together” in new housing developments. We’ll call him Mike. He said that he liked doing roof work, that the job he loved the most was placing gables on the tops of houses, and the taller the house, the better. He said he never tied himself down. Nothing beat the thrill of standing on the top of a two-story house while guiding the premade gable being lowered by a crane. It made him feel totally free. But the problem was that he had a son who had gotten himself into trouble many years ago while using methamphetamine; drug use had led to a burglary charge. Ultimately, Mike’s son ended up homeless. Mike said that he literally became homeless so that he could be with his son and protect him.

Let’s look at today’s quote – one that for me is unbelievable short. No one in any position of scholarly authority thinks that Hebrews was written by Paul. The writing style is extremely different from the letters we think Paul did write. And in fact, the author of Hebrews – who does not claim to be Paul – declares his testimony to not be first-hand, but to only be derived from those who heard it from the Lord himself. Still, it is a beautiful document, filled with Christian wisdom, and it certainly is very ancient. The letter is addressed to people who are already believers, but who might be wavering in their faith. The letter is for Hebrews – in other words, Jews who were also Christians. We don’t know the location of the

people to whom the letter was addressed. The best guess is Rome. The author compares Hebrew Christians who forget their faith to Jews who, during the wandering time in the desert between Egypt and Canaan, forgot their Israelite faith. The author berates these people for their spiritual immaturity. Chapter 12 is near the end of the book.

Remember that people did not start using Chapter/Verse numbers with the Bible until sometime after 1500, and that these divisions often don't make total sense. A continuous story or theme might be broken over multiple chapters. In this case, the conclusion of the letter begins in Chapter 12 and continues through Chapter 13. Our two verses are from the beginning of this closing. It is a call for holiness. The reader is being reminded of a theme that runs all through the letter: believers must maintain peaceful, pious lives. We need to look after each other, so that none of us lose the ability to benefit from God's grace. And do not let yourself become bitter – because that will corrupt you: *Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.* Remember that this letter was written to Jewish Christians. And like we see in many other places in the New Testament, the author knows that Jews will recognize this statement from the Old Testament texts, in this case, Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Jewish Torah. It is 29:18: ¹⁸ *I am making this covenant with you so that no one among you—no man,*

woman, clan, or tribe—will turn away from the LORD our God to worship these gods of other nations, and so that no root among you bears bitter and poisonous fruit.

This passage draws a relationship between being morally corrupted and roots that bear bitter fruit. The roots of a tree feed the tree. Corrupted roots do not provide morally sound spiritual food. Instead, they produce poisonous fruit.

The root analogy is a beautiful one. Roots not only feed us and largely determine what we are: they also are hidden. They are huge, often spreading beyond the width of the branches of the tree. When roots are corrupt, we risk experiencing a deep and terrible emotional response. Anger is usually short lived. So is envy and jealousy. But bitterness digs in deeply. It becomes a long-term thing, outliving the situations that cause it. Bitterness makes us seethe. When we are bitter, we are never satisfied. We're joyless. We develop a victim mentality, and we blame others for our failures. It will affect us physically, too. Bitterness wears away at our health.

Now, back to Mike. He spent over a year following his son through the southwest. They started in southern California and went through Arizona and New Mexico, ending up in Colorado. At first, Mike wouldn't live like a homeless person. He refused to "fly a sign", i.e., beg for money. He worked now and then on construction sites, sometimes at fast food places, but with no permanent

home and no way to stay clean for a job, it was impossible to pull in a regular income. He and his son lived in a tent in Colorado – up in the mountains where it was incredibly cold in the winter, and neither of them were prepared for it. During this time, his son was using street drugs and Mike couldn't stop him. One very cold morning, with several inches of snow outside, Mike woke up and his son was gone. Mike spent a week looking for him around town and never found him. Eventually, Mike moved down to Boulder to get away from the extreme cold of higher elevations. He still goes back up to where they used to live several times a year to look for his son. But Mike thinks that his son is in another part of the country. Mike said that it had crossed his mind many times to go back to L.A. himself and look for his son in the places where they used to hang out. But he said that he doesn't have the energy anymore, that's it's just too hard for him to care or for him to take any action. Mike was extraordinarily embittered. He felt that he had tossed his life away to try to protect and care for his son, only to have his son abandon him and never try to contact him. By the time I met Mike, ten years had gone by since his son had disappeared. Mike had settled into life on the street. He worked periodically at fast food restaurants to earn a bit of money, but for the most part, he flew a sign, asking people who passed by for money. He had been arrested at least once and had spent some time in jail.

The passage from Deuteronomy that is mirrored in Hebrews 12 is also mirrored in Acts, Chapter 8. Here's some background. In the time of the Roman Empire, there was an area called Samaria near Jerusalem. In Old Testament times, after Assyria conquered much of Israel and took its people into captivity, Assyria moved people from its empire into Samaria and surrounding towns and cities. These people intermarried with Israelites; the resulting people who were of mixed heritage (Jewish and pagan) ended up being called Samaritans. Their religion was a blend of the Israelite faith and pagan beliefs. In Acts, Chapter 8, we hear about the spread of Christianity into Samaria. Philip, a non-Jew, appears to have been the first person to carry this new faith into Samaria. This was not Philip the Apostle, by the way. Because of his work, many Samaritans were baptized as followers of Jesus. There was a local magician, Simon; he tried to use witchcraft to manipulate demonic forces; but what he really wanted to do was manipulate God. Simon was so impressed by what Philip was able to accomplish in terms of transforming people into followers of Christ that he wanted to learn the secret of Philip's power. This would allow him to control God, he believed. Here is what happens:

¹⁸ When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power. ¹⁹ "Let me have this power, too," he exclaimed, "so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy

Spirit!”²⁰ But Peter replied, “May your money be destroyed with you for thinking God’s gift can be bought!²¹ You can have no part in this, for your heart is not right with God.²² Repent of your wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive your evil thoughts,²³ for I can see that you are full of bitter jealousy and are held captive by sin.”

We see that Simon offers Philip and the other evangelists, including Peter and John, money to somehow buy their spiritual power. Peter replies to him that you cannot buy spiritual gifts from God. Simon wasn’t motivated by wanting to spread the faith; he simply wanted to be powerful; he was probably motivated by the fact that his own sorcerer’s powers were quite ineffective. Peter goes on to tell Simon that he should repent, quit being wicked, and turn to the Lord. Peter tells Simon, *“For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.”* Again, we see that the readers of Acts, who are a mixture of Jews who have come to follow Christ and Gentile Christians who are in the process of learning what we call the Old Testament, are going to be particularly moved by words that echo Deuteronomy’s warning about bitterness.

Compare Mike and Simon. Mike wasn’t guilty of any crime. We might question the logic of Mike’s approach to “protecting” his son. If my grown son got into trouble and started living on the street, my reaction would not be to give up my house and my job and start doing meth with him. I realize that this often fails, but I would try to get him professional help and bring him back into the

civilized, law-abiding world. Nonetheless, Mike was genuinely trying to do something good, and if nothing else, his behavior was extremely selfless. On the other hand, Simon was far from selfless. The implication is that: 1. He knew that he wasn't actually very powerful as a magician or sorcerer, and 2. He knew that he wasn't going to inherit the gifts that the Holy Spirit had laid upon the Apostles and the various evangelists. He got a glimpse of what they were able to do, but he didn't have the pure heart necessary to earn God's gifts on his own. So, there he was, not being able to respond properly to that warning from the Torah: *I am making this covenant with you so that no one among you—no man, woman, clan, or tribe—will turn away from the LORD our God to worship these gods of other nations, and so that no root among you bears bitter and poisonous fruit. When you worship something other than God, when you turn your soul over to evil and corruption, your deep, wide roots are going to cause you to bear very bitter fruit.*

My point is that bitterness is one of the worst emotional responses we can have to life - and there are two very different kinds of bitterness. The first is innocent, sinless, and only a symptom of being misguided. You don't have to be out there trying deliberately to do harm to be bitter, to rot yourself from the inside out. The second kind is indeed the result of being corrupt, of having evil intentions. The result might be the same, but our response should be different. If

you have had things go wrong in your life, if you have failed at something extremely important to you, and you have innocently become bitter, it's a much easier problem to overcome. God is waiting. God wants you to live without any bitterness. There is no need to feel guilty over an innocent failure, even if in retrospect you realize you could have done things differently and much better. There is a very famous sentence from Ephesians that says: *do not let the sun go down on your anger*. The same can be said about bitterness. Try to discuss your bitterness with God every night. Ask God to help you let go of it. Ask God to direct you toward joy. Ask God to let you leave your bitterness in the past – Remember that as Christians, we have the privilege of starting over at any time, with a completely new, fresh, and clean life under Christ. If, however, your bitterness is due to past evil intentions, then the good news is that it might take longer, but God will welcome you back all the more joyfully. Please pray with me.

God, one of the worst things that can overcome us in life is bitterness.

Please do not let our roots become corrupt. Do not let ourselves be fed with a destructive, cruel, angry regret. Let us seek forgiveness from you when we do wrong and let us forgive ourselves when we have done no wrong, but somehow cannot walk away from the past. Amen.