

# Unfinished Business

Title: Part 1 – Getting to the Root

Date: February 25, 2024

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While everyone here in the house is saying “Hi,” as always we welcome you in if you are tuning in on our app or social channels. Thanks for spending some time with us and know that we are FOR you no matter who you are or where you are watching from.

A couple weeks ago my oldest daughter Sophie had a chorus competition in Ocala. The drive was going to take us about an hour and half, she had to be at the school an hour before her performance, and we had not eaten yet, so we hit the road about 5 hours ahead of time, plenty of margin, right? Because traffic is an absolute nightmare on 54 these days, we took the Parkway north and had planned on taking 52 over to the interstate. We got about a mile from Ehren Cut Off when I noticed the temperate gauge was almost pegged in Cheryl's car. So, I pulled over and popped the hood only to discover the radiator cap was missing and most of the coolant had boiled out. Not good! Long story short, in a MacGyver moment, I grabbed everyone's water from the car, thank God for trash can sized Stanley cups, amen? But I poured what water we had in it and duct taped the radiator, limped the car home, got my truck, barely made it to Ocala and even with all that Sophie still got a superior on her performance! But as we decompressed on the ride home after finally eating something I realized what had happened. We had recently had Cheryl's car serviced and you have to not just screw the radiator cap on, but you have to crank it until it clicks. Some of you have a gas cap like this, right? You have to keep cranking until it clicks. In other words, the technician who topped off her coolant had some... Unfinished Business!

It took a few weeks for it to come back to bite us, but here is the truth about Unfinished Business:

## **Unfinished business in the past never remains in the past.**

Instead, it will continue to rear its ugly head at the least appropriate times and in the most unpredictable ways. And this is true under the hood of your car, but it is also true under the hood of your soul, amen? So that's what we are going to dive into for a couple weeks. Today I want to preach a message I am calling:

## **Getting to the Root**

Of all the wounds we experience in life, the wounds of childhood tend to have the most power. Would you agree with that? Early learning, even when it's untrue, still gets recorded as if it were true. So, we believe it and we live it out. As a parent now for 12 years I have learned that children are the world's best recorders and the world's worst interpreters! Which means when I am little I believe as truth what the big people in my life tell me about me, whether that's a parent, a family member, a teacher, or anyone else who happens to come into my life.

Dr. Charles Cooley says **our self-esteem is largely determined by what you think the person who matters most to you, thinks about you.** Let me say again, our self-esteem is largely determined by what you think the person who matters most to you, thinks about you.

In other words, the words we hear in childhood get etched into our hearts and believed and lived out. Many of us spend the rest of our lives trying to compensate for those messages. We might lash out at others if they do or say anything that reminds us of our original pain. We might numb it out through alcohol, drugs, food, or promiscuity. We might become the sort of people who are highly controlling of others. This is all an attempt to minimize our pain. We might become people pleasers or even engage in self-harm. You might even use it as motivation to overwork in an attempt to achieve some level of success you think will soothe

your soul. We believe the messages of childhood so much that they become the lens through which we interpret everything that happens around us.

We call these responses to childhood trauma coping mechanisms. It's what we did to survive. We did the best we could to navigate a dysfunctional family or a painful past. But here's what we need to recognize. What helped us survive as children no longer works for us anymore as adults. To continue with those coping mechanisms in the present is just keeping us stuck in our pain or moving us deeper into it. It causes trouble in our marriage, with our kids, on the job, or just life in general.

That's the problem with stuffing down our hurts from the past. When we push it down, when we try not to feel it, when we just ignore it, eventually something happens that reminds us of that hurt, that taps into our pain and you blow up you, you get reactive, right? It's like where did that come from? It came from our "unfinished business." We haven't learned to express it in the right way, so we lose control of it, and it comes out in the wrong way against the wrong people at all the wrong times AND disproportionate to what's happening in the moment. You end up hurting the people you care about with the same hurt you endured. Does any of this sound familiar?

It's kind of like guacamole. It's appetizing at the moment, but it doesn't keep well! That's the danger of denying anger and hurt, it doesn't keep well. Even though we pretend that everything is fine, the suppressed anger and hurt acts like a cancer eating away at our soul. 100 years ago, industrialists thought they could just bury toxic waste and be done with it. But what have we learned since then. It leaks! It kills, poisons, and contaminates. Buried pain does the same thing. It'll destroy our emotional ecosystem.

BUT hear me church, those triggers, those original hurts, those things fueling our reactions today are the very things that God longs to heal. Amen? The Bible has a lot to say about how to deal with a painful past and denialism is not one of those ways. So, whether something is in our distant past or our recent past, I'd like to address the pattern of stuffing things down and not addressing them or what the Bible simply calls **bitterness**.

If you have a Bible or the Bible app grab it. Let's begin in the New Testament book of Hebrews. We are not 100% sure who wrote the Book of Hebrews. Many believe it to be another letter of the Apostle Paul's. But the author gives us this command in Hebrews 12:15:

**See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that NO BITTER ROOT grows up to cause trouble and defile many.**

In this passage, bitterness is described as a root. A root is something that grows underground and often remains unseen. It's something that's buried. Of course, roots don't remain roots. Eventually, they break through the surface, and they produce fruits. Roots will always produce fruits! What's hidden beneath the surface of your life will always, eventually, manifest in your life. That's why things like bitterness have to be uprooted.

So, let's first talk about why that's so difficult to do. One of the main reasons bitterness is so hard to uproot is because:

**Bitterness hides beneath outward conformity.**

What I mean is all of us are good at playing the part, right? We know the way we're supposed to behave, and we can play the game of masquerade just as good as the next guy.

The single best example of this in the Bible is a man named Ahithophel **{A hith o fell}**. If any of you are looking for baby names I just saying this might be the one. But the very first time we meet Ahithophel in

Scripture he's engaged in an act of worship. So, get this, this man is known to be full of godly advice. In fact, what the Bible says about him is quite impressive. It says: (2 Samuel 16:23)

**Now in those days the advice Ahithophel gave was like that of one who inquires of God.**

Samuel tells us talking to Ahithophel was just like getting it straight from God Himself. That's pretty high praise. In addition to that, he's a trusted counselor. He's a friend to King David, but there was a bitter root growing in Ahithophel's heart. Inside he was being eaten alive by something that had happened many years prior. A buried pain. He was nursing resentment toward David, but none of it shows, none of it manifests at least outwardly yet. From all outward signs you would think there was nothing wrong. But what do we know? It's still doing its ugly work underground.

This is why bitterness is so hard to detect. It can lie dormant for years! We can rehearse our memories of a hurt, a slight, a perceived injustice for weeks, months, even years, without other people knowing it. Then one day you just kind of dump it all on them, right? We overwhelm someone with a series of things that should have been dealt with in the moment. It's our way of being in control and appearing righteous.

The day Ahithophel bitterness finally manifested was when David's son, Absalom, rebelled against his father. When the Ahithophel sensed that David was vulnerable he saw his chance to exact his revenge. Ahithophel joined the rebellion and he stood against King David. AND out of his bitterness, Ahithophel gave Absalom two words of counsel. The first thing he told Absalom to do was go sleep with David's concubines, his wives, because this would disgrace his father, which Absalom did. That one act created a rift between father and son that would never be healed.

He then tried to persuade Absalom to kill his dad. Had Absalom followed that second piece of advice, it's possible that he would've succeeded. But thankfully, David had a true friend in Absalom's court, a man by the name of Hushai. Now Hushai had originally planned to go with David when he fled from Absalom, but at David's request, he stayed behind in the city to work against the assassination plot. Well, long story short, Hushai was able to convince Absalom not to go through with his plan. Once Ahithophel saw that his plan had failed he knew it was only a matter of time before his lies and deceit would be found out. So he went home and committed suicide. That too is a powerful reminder of where bitterness leads. If left unchecked, it will destroy you.

But I haven't told you why Ahithophel was bitter in the first place. See Ahithophel's granddaughter was a young woman named Bathsheba. David cheated on his wife with Bathsheba, he treated his granddaughter like she was a play thing. He got her pregnant, disgraced her, and then had her husband killed. It's no wonder Ahithophel was angry. I mean, I get it, right?

BUT holding onto bitterness, burying his pain, that was a choice that Ahithophel made... but it wasn't his only choice. Ahithophel allowed his anger to do a slow burn for nine years, and he did nothing about it. He had other options like confronting David over his sin. He could have made the difficult choice to forgive David. But hanging onto hell in his heart ultimately destroyed Ahithophel and not David.

Which reminds me of the second reason that bitterness is so hard to dislodge:

**Bitterness wears a self-righteous mask.**

One of the reasons we like to paint people as being all bad is because then we can feel justified in our own wrongdoing as we destroy their reputation, as we gossip, and slander, and root for their demise. We look for reasons both real and imagined to dislike our villain. With each new piece of information, we add another layer to the bitterness.

You can always tell a person who's trapped in bitterness because when they're questioned, their first response will always be, but you just don't understand what they did to me. In other words, we justify hanging onto it. That's the self-righteous mask. I have a right to the hurt. I have a right to hang onto it.

The Bible addresses this attitude in the book of James, it says: (3:14)

**But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.**

James is talking about this very thing, to brag about your moral superiority while harboring a bitter spirit. In other words, bitterness loves to wear religious clothing. It loves to sound spiritual in order to justify hanging onto hate in the heart, which leads us to this:

**Bitterness is a choice.**

Now, it's interesting in the Old Testament, the word for bitter is **MARAR**. AND it can be defined in two ways. Marar is to be bitter (as in the taste or the condition of one's heart) but it can also mean to strengthen and become strong. Which, at first glance, appear to be polar opposites, right? But the reason the word can mean both things is because hurt and injustice have the power to do either but the outcome is totally dependent on us. It depends on which we choose. Hurts can literally make you bitter or better!

We see this in Exodus 1:14, it says:

**They** [meaning the Egyptians] **made their** [meaning the Hebrews] **lives bitter,** [there's our word] **forcing them to mix mortar and make bricks and do all the work in the fields.**

This verse is talking about how the Jews were treated in Egypt. They were oppressed, made to do strenuous, manual labor. Now, you could say this awful treatment made them bitter, that would be a proper use of the word. BUT many Old Testament scholars agree that a better translation for this verse would be by imposing hard labor, they only made the Hebrews stronger! In other words, the circumstances that were designed to break them and produce bitterness didn't work. What could have made them bitter instead made them better or stronger!

AND which one it makes us is entirely up to you and me.

So, think about the implications of this. Bitter people like to blame their bitterness on the person who hurt them or let them down. But the truth is bitterness is always something of our own making. It's a wrong reaction to perceive hurt or injustice. Nobody makes you bitter. You make you bitter. Aren't you glad you came to church today.

So, let's shift gears and let's for a moment, let's talk about the consequences of bitterness. You probably know many of them: sleepless nights, ulcers, irritability, angry words, lost friendships, ruined marriages, separated families, and a lot of other terrible things. So, let's talk about the major blowbacks that come from nursing bitterness. Number one:

**It will dominate you mentally.**

It's an axiomatic law in life. If you maintain an ugly place in your heart, it will only get uglier. This is why the Bible tells us you're only hurting yourself with your anger. Another way of saying it is bitterness is self-induced misery. Notice Hebrews 12 again: (v.15)

## **...lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you.**

Who does bitterness trouble? You! That's because bitterness does more harm to the vessel in which it's stored than the one on whom it's poured! If we constantly rehearse how we've been victimized, nursing our wrongs will eventually define who we are. We become victims not of someone else's actions, but of our own!

Church hear me. It's easy to righteously obsess about our injuries and outrage, to proclaim our innocence and our virtue when we feel like we've been wronged. Let's be honest, there's a certain level of gratification that comes from feeling that we're better than those who wronged us. In fact, it's quite intoxicating. But what I am learning by God's grace is that when I find myself replaying a conversation in my head too often, I have to see that for what it is. It's a warning that something's off in my soul.

By the way, a good rule of thumb when it comes to bitterness is simply this:

## **Bitterness remembers details.**

I mean, think about it. You've had thousands of conversations in your life, most of which you have forgotten. But there's one that took place five years ago, and you remember every single word. You remember the words, the inflection in their voice, the look in their eyes. You remember exactly what happened which means you are... bitter. You say, "Well, I just have a good memory Pastor Brian." Well, maybe, but not likely. Why? Because memory is enhanced by review! You remember it so well because you've gone over it so many times in your own mind. If your brain continually replays experiences where you were hurt or humiliated or felt a great deal of resentment, it means that experience has not been dealt with properly.

Or what's worse about it is this:

## **The undisposed past creates a filter by which we misinterpret life.**

I heard someone say one time that, "When I become an emotional garbage collector, it won't be long before everything in life starts looking like garbage." Our garbage becomes the filter through which we see all of life. A second very real consequence of bitterness is this:

## **It will depress you emotionally.**

Bitterness is a depressant. You'll never find a happy, bitter person, period! Criticism, cynicism, negativism, pessimism. These are the marks of a bitter person. Bitterness depresses you and everyone around you. I came across this quote, and I thought it was too good to not include in today's message: "Unforgiveness is choosing to stay trapped in a jail cell of bitterness, serving time for someone else's crime."

A third consequence of bitterness is this:

## **It will debilitate you physically.**

Doctor Redford Williams of the Duke University Medical Center says this, "People who harbor hostility and anger are five times more likely to die of heart disease and six times more likely to die prematurely from other causes."

The University of Tennessee completed a study on women and anger in which they discovered that many health problems like depression, headaches, obesity, and autoimmune diseases are the direct result of allowing unresolved anger to fester. Now, I'm not saying that every sick person is bitter, or that every bitter person is sick, but every bitter person who remains bitter will eventually suffer physically for it.

The fourth consequence of bitterness is:

### **It will drain you relationally.**

It will dominate you mentally. It will depress you emotionally. It will debilitate you physically and it will drain you relationally. Notice how bitterness is described in Deuteronomy 29, God says: (v.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 describes a progression of relationships, man, wife, family, tribe. That's what bitterness does. It works its way out into all of our relational networks. It expands outwardly. WHY? Because bitterness always seeks reinforcement! Once we're hurt, we immediately go in search of validation for our feelings. In other words, bitterness refuses to be miserable alone. It reminds others continually what a rotten deal I got.

BUT to continually dwell on our injuries, especially telling those who are not a part of the solution over and over, let's be honest about what that is. It's sympathy seeking. And over time the Bible says those bitter roots will defile many. If I let bitterness take root in my heart, I'm not going to be the only one polluted by that unforgiving spirit. It will spread poison throughout all of my relationships. There's no such thing as a bitter person who keeps the bitterness to themselves.

The final and most dangerous consequence of all is, bitterness:

### **It will damage you spiritually.**

When I hang on to bitterness, I grieve the heart of God. The Apostle Paul warned the Ephesian Church about this. He says: (Ephesians 4:30-31)

**And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.**

Let's be honest, we get so caught up in the wrong that's happened to us that we don't even consider how holding onto it breaks God's heart. Our unwillingness to let go of a hurt doesn't just hurt us. It hurts God! That should be reason enough to let it go, amen? Paul says we actually give the devil a foothold in our lives and that breaks God's heart.

SO, in our time remaining, let's talk about solutions. I think we get the idea that bitterness is not something you want to let take root in your life. If you are taking notes, write these three phrases down: **{LEAVE THESE UP}**

**Trace it.**

**Face it.**

## Erase it.

Say those with me out loud: Trace it. Face it. Erase it. One more time we are going to do what? Trace it. Face it. Erase it.

First we have to **TRACE** it. And here is how we can begin to do that. One of the surest signs that you have unfinished business from your past is when you're having reactions that are bigger than what the moment calls for. That's a strong indicator that what you're actually doing is rolling this present moment into every past event that was similar to it. You're combining new anger and old anger. You turn little things into BIG things. Right anger, wrong battlefield!

AND here is the truth, every relationship you have: spouse, kids, coworkers, friends, neighbors... there's enough to deal with just within that relationship without having to answer for all the other times you were disappointed by your parents or hurt by someone you cared about, amen?

So, when you find yourself getting reactive, it's time to slow down and start asking questions. Questions like, why is this making me so mad? When have other people treated me in the same way? Our reactions revealed the most about us. Where and how we've been hurt. What lies and distortions do we actually believe, and where we feel most vulnerable.

So, you need to ask yourself, what is the real hurt I'm experiencing in this moment, AND why is this such a sensitive area in my life? What distorted, hurtful messages have I heard in the past that are being reinforced by what I'm experiencing right now? AND what am I really *fearing* in this moment, that I'm not lovable, not acceptable, that there really is something fundamentally flawed about me?

Your blowups and your breakdowns hold the key to unlocking a painful past that you've repressed, pushed down, and tried to forget. Paying attention to the things that push your buttons and then tracing them back to their source is the key to victory. Because here is what I believe, by God's grace and the work of His Holy Spirit if you trace your reactions back to their source, you CAN be freed from having those reactions over and over again! It'll take away your triggers! It'll leave you confident about who you are! And you won't be putting all of your past pain onto your current relationships. Come on doesn't that sound good?

That's step one. You gotta trace it. Here's step two. **FACE IT**. And this is where I warn you, be prepared for more pain. Healing your hurts is a process of painful self-exploration. This is why we fear revisiting our past. We know it will hurt because it hurt the first time we experience them.

BUT consider the alternative. If we don't face them, then you continue to be reactive, the kind of person that other people can easily push your buttons, and you'll always be the sort of person who's always taking out your pain on those who least deserve it. Or you can go back, revisit it, grieve that it happened, see it through the lens of an adult perspective, forgive that person, and leave it in the past forever!

Listen to me, here is why this is so important. As we open the box of the past and examine its contents, as painful as it might be, we can say, "You know, this is not really me and neither is this! And I didn't put this in here! I don't have to carry this anymore! I didn't deserve this." AND here is the best news, you don't have to do this alone! You invite God into those painful memories! Listen to this promise from Scripture: (Ps 34:18)

**If your heart is broken, you'll find God right there; if you're kicked in the gut, he'll help you catch your breath. {GO BACK TO 3 THINGS SLIDE IN A BIT}**

The great devotional writer, Oswald Chambers wrote this, "Leave the broken irreversible past in God's hands and step out into the invincible future with Him."

