

LESSON 9

WHAT GROWS UNDERGROUND

Hebrews 12:14-15; Ephesians 4:31

HEBREWS 12:14-15 • EPHESIANS 4:31

Reading before class: Hebrews 12 and Ephesians 4.

We begin five weeks on forgiveness. And we are not going to start with forgiving. We are going to start with what is already growing in a person who has not.

1. Think of a plant that came up in your yard where you did not put one. How long was it there before you saw it?

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2. In your own words, what is bitterness? Not what causes it. What it IS. We will come back to this.
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THE THING NOBODY CAN SEE YET

3. Read Hebrews 12:15. The writer warns about a root. What kind of root is it, and what does he say it does when it springs up?

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4. A root is underground. How long does a root exist before anybody knows it is there?
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5. Notice the phrase "springing up." That is not the moment the root began. What is it the moment of?
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6. Read Hebrews 12:14, the verse right before it. What two things are we told to pursue?
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7. So the warning about the root is attached to a command about peace. What does that tell you about what a root of bitterness does to a congregation's peace?
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DO THE ARITHMETIC

I told you last week to count something in this verse. Let us do it now.

8. Read Hebrews 12:15 again. How many roots does the writer mention?
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9. How many people does he say get defiled by it?
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10. Put those two numbers side by side and say what you see.
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11. Most of us think of bitterness as a private matter, something a man carries around inside himself and nobody else's business. Does Hebrews 12:15 permit that view?
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12. Read the first part of verse 15 again, the opening command. Who is it addressed to, and whose job does that make this?
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LET'S SUMMARIZE HERE

1. One root. Many defiled.
2. The root is underground before anybody sees a thing.
3. The command in front of the warning is a command about pursuing peace.
4. Therefore bitterness is never a private sin, no matter how privately it is carried.

READ THE LIST IN ORDER

- 13.** Read Ephesians 4:31. Paul lists six things to put away. Write them down in the order Paul wrote them.

1. _____ **2.** _____ **3.** _____

4. _____ **5.** _____ **6.** _____

- 14.** Which one is first?

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- 15.** Now look at what comes after it. Go down that list and mark which ones happen inside a man and which ones come out where other people can see or hear them.

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- 16.** You studied the fifth item on that list two weeks ago. Look back at Lesson 7 for a moment. If slander is fifth on this list and bitterness is first, what is Paul telling you about where gossip comes from?

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- 17.** In your opinion, is Paul's order accidental, or is he showing you a sequence? Give your reasons.

DRAW IT

- 18.** Draw a horizontal line across the middle of the space below. That is ground level.



19. Below the line, write the things from Ephesians 4:31 that nobody can see.
20. Above the line, write the ones everybody can.
21. Now look at your drawing. Which half does a congregation usually try to deal with, and which half is the problem?
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WHERE THE PHRASE COMES FROM

22. Read Deuteronomy 29:18. Write down exactly what kind of root Moses warns about. Every word of it.
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23. Now put that beside Hebrews 12:15 and compare the two roots word for word. They are not the same words, are they? Write down what is different.
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24. So the writer of Hebrews is not quoting Moses. He is reaching back to him. What did he keep? Look for the part that carried over.
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25. Here is a help. Wormwood is a bitter plant. Knowing that, what has Hebrews done with Moses' wording?
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26. In Deuteronomy, what has happened in a person's heart before that root shows up?
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27. Now read one verse further, Deuteronomy 29:19. Moses tells you what the man with the root says to himself while the warning is being read out loud to him. Write it down.
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28. He hears the warning and decides he is fine. So a root is hidden from the congregation because it is underground. What does verse 19 say hides it from the man himself?
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29. Moses is warning a whole nation and Hebrews is warning a congregation. What do those two situations have in common?
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WORD STUDY · ROOT OF BITTERNESS (HEBREWS 12:15)

First, what this is not. Hebrews 12:15 is often described as quoting Deuteronomy 29:18. It does not quote it. Set the two side by side in your own Bible and you can see it:

Deuteronomy 29:18 warns of "a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood."

Hebrews 12:15 warns of "no root of bitterness springing up."

Different words. Hebrews also adds "springing up," which is not in the Deuteronomy sentence at all. So what is it? An echo. The writer of Hebrews is reaching back to a warning every Jewish reader knew and picking it up in his own words rather than copying it. That is a normal thing for a New Testament writer to do and it is worth learning to spot, because a great deal gets built on top of "quotations" that are really allusions. Here is what carried over. The word root, the shape of the warning about something growing among a people, and the bitterness. Notice how that last one travels: wormwood is a bitter plant. Moses names the plant. Hebrews names what the plant tastes like. Same idea, compressed into one word.

Why it matters here: the writer is not reaching for a garden illustration of his own. He is taking a warning Moses gave to an entire nation and putting it on a congregation. The echo is the argument.

And note this: you can check every word of the above yourself in two minutes, in English, with two ribbons in your Bible. You should.

BUT SOMEONE MAY ASK...

"What if I have a right to be bitter? What was done to me was real."

That is not a dodge and I am not going to treat it like one. Somebody in this room is asking it honestly. Start with what Scripture does not say. Nowhere in Hebrews 12 or Ephesians 4 does God say the wrong was not real, or that it was small, or that you misunderstood it. He never asks you to pretend. Whoever taught that forgiving means calling the injury nothing was not teaching you the Bible.

Now notice what the passages are actually about. Hebrews 12:15 is not a verdict on whether you were wronged. It is a warning about what is growing in the ground afterward, and about how many other people it reaches. Paul's list in Ephesians 4:31 does not begin with a discussion of who started it either. Both texts are about what happens next, and they are addressed to you because you are the only person who can

do anything about your own ground.

And one more thing, plainly. Bitterness is a poor guard. It does not protect a person from being hurt again and it does not settle any account. What it does is defile many, according to verse 15, and most of those many had nothing to do with the original wrong.

If what you are carrying is bigger than a workbook page, come find me. I said that in the Forward and I meant it, and it belongs here more than anywhere else in this book.

FOR YOUR LIFE

- 30.** Look back at your answer to question 2. Would you define bitterness differently now? What changed?

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- 31.** Read Genesis 37:4. Joseph's brothers hated him, and the verse says they could not speak to him on friendly terms. Not would not. Could not. What had the grudge taken away from them?
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32. Look back at Part Two of this book, the four weeks we spent on the tongue. If a man's speech has gone sour, what does Genesis 37:4 suggest you are actually looking at?

33. Hebrews 12:15 says many are defiled. Name the people who would be affected if a root were growing in you. Not names. Categories: who is close enough to catch it?

34. In your opinion, how does a person tell the difference between a wound that is healing slowly and a root that is growing? Is there a way to know?

35. Be honest here and nobody is reading it. Is there a name you cannot say without your chest changing?

THIS WEEK

36. Verse 15 says see to it. That is aimed at all of us about each other. Name one person you are close enough to that you would notice.

37. Write one thing you will do this week about your own ground. If question 35 turned up a name, this is about that. If it did not, write down how you will keep it that way.

Bring this workbook back next week. Next Sunday we are going to do arithmetic in class, so bring something to write with.

NEXT WEEK. Lesson 10: Ten Thousand Talents.

Read before class: Matthew 18:21-35 and Luke 17:3-4.

One thing to watch for: Jesus puts two amounts of money in this parable. Find both numbers before you get to class and write them down. We are going to compare them out loud.