

## WHY AM I BITTER? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS!

**INTRODUCTION:** Last Sunday we looked at the *reality* of bitterness. What is bitterness? Here is the rather lengthy **definition** I gave you last week: *Bitterness is a personal, voluntary decision we make to be resentful toward someone—or God—because of what they did (or what we think they did) that displays itself in animosity and hostility toward that person (or God).*

How do we know bitterness is *real*? Because we've *experienced* it...and because God *exhorts us to avoid* it...and because of the *examples God gives* us in His Word. Last week we looked at the example of *Naomi* and saw that she was bitter at God because she *felt God was against her*. She had lost her husband—and two sons—and *did not understand why*. Instead of humbly acknowledging that God ways and thoughts were *higher than hers*, she imagined that God was *unfair*...and that He was doing *wrong*. In her mind, she “knew” what *right looked like*—and God *wasn't doing it!* And so, she became bitter.

From Naomi, then, we learn that people can become bitter *at God* because they believe *God is unfair* with what He allows into their lives. If we studied the life of Job, we would see the same thing. That's not the *only* reason people become bitter, though, is it? There are *other reasons* someone can become bitter *at God*—and there are reasons you and I can become bitter toward *another person*. This morning we are going to look at two more *examples* of people who were bitter *against God*—and what the *reasons* were for their bitterness.

The title of my message this morning is: “Why am I Bitter? Let me count the ways!” Please note that I am not suggesting that it is *okay* to be bitter. Instead, the title is a reminder that we can find *all kinds of reasons* to be bitter—and that we often *feel justified* in being bitter when we are.

The first example we are going to look at this morning is one that we often overlook. In fact, you may not have thought *of Jonah* being bitter until you *saw his name* on your outline! What is even more interesting, though, is *why* Jonah was bitter against God. If there is anyone worthy of the “Stupidest Reason to be Bitter” award, Jonah would win! Why?

### **1. Jonah was bitter because God forgives sinners!**

Crazy reason, isn't it? And, yet, that is unmistakably what God states was the reason for Jonah's bitterness! Please turn to Jonah, Chapter 4.

#### Notice first... A. The demonstration of Jonah's bitterness

How do we know he was bitter? Look at v 1 “But it displeased Jonah *exceedingly*, and he was *very angry*.” I think you'd agree that this was *more than* being annoyed—he was “mad enough to spit.” Some of the younger folks among us might not know that “mad enough to spit” is a *real* saying and means “furious to the point of becoming irrational.” You'll see as we go on that Jonah was certainly *becoming irrational!*

In v 4, God asks Jonah if he is “doing well”—*doing right*—to be angry? Jonah doesn't answer God's question at this time, but does when God asks the same question a second time.

What is both *interesting—and sad*—is that we don't have *any evidence* in this historical account that Jonah “cooled off.” In fact, we see him getting angry at God a *second time*—which is really an indication that he *was bitter* and *never stopped* being angry the *first time!*

Now v 6 “And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd.”

We know from v 5 that Jonah is sitting in a booth, probably made of sticks and covered with leaves to provide shade. The leaves would shrivel up in the heat, though, so God sends a gourd that *miraculously grows overnight* to give him shade. Do I believe that? Yes, I do! Why? Because God *prepared a gourd*—the same way He *prepared the great fish to swallow Jonah!* God wasn't done “preparing,” though.

In v 7, God *prepared a worm* to kill the gourd; in v 8, God *prepared a vehement wind* & made Jonah feel the *heat!*

In **v 9** we see God *asking Jonah about his anger* a second time: “And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?” Notice Jonah’s irrational response: “I do well to be angry, even unto death.” Here are a couple of other translations:

“It is” [right for me to be angry] he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.” (NIV)

“I have good reason to be angry, *even* to the point of death!” (NASB)

Jonah was angry—and I would argue *bitter*—against God, but *why*? Was it just because God had a worm kill the gourd and took away Jonah’s shade? No; there’s more to it than that and we learn the *real reason* from Jonah’s own words in v 2.

### B. The declaration from Jonah as to why he was bitter

For us to truly grasp the significance of what Jonah says in v 2, we need to look at some of the background. Flip back a page to chapter 3. Won’t read the whole chapter but will look at enough to understand what is going on.

--Notice vs 1-2. ‘Jonah, I have a message I want preached.’

--In the end of **v 4**, we see *the message*: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

--And in **v 10**, we see the response of the Ninevites: they **turn from their sin**—and God **withholds** His judgment!

--And now **4:1**, a verse we looked at earlier: “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.” So there we have it—Jonah was angry at God because **God forgave sinners!** And just to make sure we don’t miss that, God records Jonah’s words *declaring* that very thing in v 2!

--V 2 “O LORD, was not this my saying when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for **I knew** that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.”

Did you catch that? Jonah *admits that he is angry* because God changed His mind and *wouldn’t destroy* the Ninevites! He also admits that God’s mercy and willingness to forgive *is the reason he disobeyed God* in the first place!

In essence, Jonah is saying: ‘God, I disobeyed you the first time because I knew that if I preached your message, they *might repent*—and if they *did repent*, you *would forgive* them! And that is exactly what happened!’ Talk about *irrational* thinking!

Let’s pause here for a moment. Is it possible that you and I could have those *same kinds of thoughts*? Before you answer, let me ask another question. What if someone *lived a life of sin*—and got saved very late in life? And what if that *same person* was now *blessed with possessions and things*—things you *wish you had*, but don’t have? Would you become jealous...and bitter? If so, you are bitter at God for being merciful!

Here’s another. What if someone *killed another person*—like their wife—and spent the rest of their life behind bars. And what if that same person—before he died—truly repented of his sins, trusted Jesus as his Savior, and was born again. Would it bother you if a *murderer* was allowed into heaven? If so, are you not in a way *questioning God’s forgiveness and mercy*? Maybe you have a little more Jonah in you than you think!

One more thing I would like us to consider before moving on to our second example and it is this...

### C. The disconnect between mercy received and mercy granted to others

Notice the middle of v 2 again: “for **I knew** that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.”

Jonah knew that about God *before* he disobeyed God and was forgiven. How did he know those things about God? Because Jonah lived around 760 B.C. and well before Jonah arrived on the scene, **Moses** wrote some of those very things about God!

**Exodus 34:6-7a** “And the Lord passed by before him [Moses], and **proclaimed**, The Lord, The Lord God, **merciful and gracious, longsuffering**, and abundant in goodness and truth,<sup>7</sup> Keeping mercy for thousands, **forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...**” God said this about Himself—and Moses wrote it down!

We find a similar statement in Numbers 14:18.

Jonah would have known about God’s longsuffering and mercy from the **writings of Moses**—and probably would have also known them **from the Psalms** which were also written well before Jonah’s time.

**Psalm 103:8** “The LORD is **merciful and gracious**, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.”

**Psalm 145:8** “The Lord is **gracious**, and **full of compassion**; slow to anger, and **of great mercy.**”

But more important than **hearing about** God’s mercy was the fact that Jonah **had experienced God’s mercy** and forgiveness. The “word of the Lord came unto Jonah the **second** time” because God was merciful to Jonah the **first** time! Jonah had been forgiven of his disobedience and his rebellion. His life was spared, and he was given a second chance because God is gracious...and merciful...and slow to anger.”

So for Jonah to be bitter at God **for being merciful**—when he himself had been a **recipient** of that mercy—shows a huge disconnect in his thinking! Since Jonah had **received mercy**, he should have **rejoiced** in God’s willingness to **show mercy** to others. The same is true of us. Since we have been **forgiven much** by God, we should want others to be forgiven—and should be **willing to forgive** the way we have been forgiven!

**Eph 4:32**, right? “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, **forgiving one another**, even as God for Christ’s sake **hath forgiven you.**”

Take your Bibles now and turn to I Kings 18 where we will look at one more example, the example of Elijah.

**Why was Elijah bitter? 2. Elijah was bitter because God forgets service (he thought!)**

Once again, we need to look at the backdrop of what was going on to really understand Elijah’s bitterness.

First, A. The Victory of God through Elijah

Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest.

--We see that in I Kings 18, verses 19-24. The contest is between Elijah—the man of God—and 850 false prophets! The **real contest**, though, is between the **living God** and **non-living idols!**

--The result? Jump ahead to v 36. Remember the phrase “I am thy servant;” we will see that again.

--Now 37-40. The contest, then, **is over**—and God wins, of course! God through Elijah brings a **great victory and fame to God’s name**. You would think, then, that **life is good** for Elijah! Not for long!

B. The Vow of Jezebel to Elijah

Notice 19:1. Jezebel hears that the prophets of Baal—450—and the 400 prophets of the groves that sat at her table—have all been slain.

--In v 2, we see Jezebel’s vow. In other words, ‘Elijah, by this time tomorrow, you will be **just as dead** as the prophets that you killed. If not, may the gods take my life—and more.’

--In one sense, it was a pretty **safe vow for Jezebel**. Why? Because her “gods” **couldn’t bring fire down** from heaven when challenged—and they certainly **weren’t going to kill her** if she failed to kill Elijah!

--On the other hand, it was a **bad vow** for Elijah because **Jezebel was furious**—and she had a way of getting her own way!

How **should have** Elijah responded? ‘God protected me from 850 prophets—and they are now dead—He certainly can protect me from **one** evil woman!’

How **did Elijah** respond? Unfortunately, **not the way** he should have! Instead, we see in v 3, that he **fled for his life**. We don’t **just see** what Elijah is **doing**, though, because God in His goodness and wisdom also lets us know what Elijah **was thinking**. And it is from Elijah’s **thoughts** that we see both his **despair and his bitterness**.

We see Elijah's despair in his... C. The View Elijah has of himself

Elijah is discouraged; some even suggest he is **depressed**. Why do they say that? Look at the middle of v 4 "and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers."

Strange request, isn't it? He **didn't want to be killed** by Jezebel—that's why he fled. But now he wants **God to end his life!** Why? Is it because he wants to be **with God?**

No; I think it is because he wants to be **free from his troubles!** **Benson writes:** "I have lived long enough for thy cause, and am not likely to do thee any more service; neither my words nor works are likely to do any good upon these unstable and incorrigible people." In other words, 'My usefulness is gone—take me home!'

Elijah isn't just depressed, though—I believe he is **also bitter**. We see that in...

#### D. The view Elijah has of God

In **v 8**, we see Elijah traveling forty days and forty nights "unto Horeb the mount of God."

In **v 9**, God asks Elijah what he is doing there. We see Elijah's response in verse 10.

**V 10** "And he said, I have been **very jealous** for the Lord God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." So what is **Elijah's view of God** that is implied by what he says?

I believe there are two. **i. Elijah seems to believe God has forgotten his service for God**

"I, even I only, am left..." I pointed out earlier that when Elijah was on mount Carmel he said, "I am thy servant..." Here he repeats that thought, but then adds— 'I am the **only one left** that serves you.'

It is almost as if Elijah is saying, '**The whole nation** has turned their back on you, God—**except me**—and You don't seem to notice or care!'

Can God's servants feel that way sometimes? Can they feel **overworked**—and **underappreciated**? And can those feelings, in turn, **lead to bitterness**? They certainly can—and the **same can happen to you!** Too often times, I fear, we have **too narrow of a view** of what makes someone a servant of God. **Listen carefully**—if you are a **child of God**—and God **calls you to do something**—you are a **servant of God!** And I am not just talking about what happens **in the church building** or **for the people** of the church!

--If a family member becomes ill or injured—and God calls you to care for them—you are serving God!

--If a friend or neighbor needs help—and God calls you to help them—you are serving God!

And if **God calls you** to do these things, **don't get bitter at God** for doing what God calls you to do!

--Shelly Hamilton, wife of Ron Hamilton—aka "Patch the Pirate"—has been called by God to go through a long-lasting and incredibly difficult trial. Although Ron is still alive, she lost him—to dementia—a number of years ago. He was in their home receiving home health care for quite some time and just recently went into a care facility. It is hard—and she is transparent about that—but she is not bitter. And I believe her writings, where she shares her heart about this journey, has been an incredible help to others.

Here's I believe a 2nd view Elijah has of God: **ii. Elijah seems to suggest that it doesn't pay to serve God!**

I see that in the last part of v 10 "I, even I only, am left; and they **seek my life, to take it away.**" Again, it is almost as if Elijah is saying, 'I am jealous for you, God—and I'm the only one serving you—and what am I **getting in return?** A vow from a wicked woman that she is going to kill me!'

#### E. God's response to Elijah's complaint

How does God respond to what Elijah says? Don't have time to develop them, but way too important to skip.

##### **i. God shows Elijah who He is**

**V 11** "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by..."

God sends a great wind...and an earthquake...and a fire. God was not **in those things**—but **sent those things**—to show His power. God then speaks with a still small voice, indicating His tenderness and care.

'I am more powerful than Jezebel...and I know how you feel...and I care.'

Next, **ii. God gives Elijah something to do**

In vs 15-16, we see God instructing Elijah to go back where he came from and anoint two kings—and the prophet that was to take his place.

‘Stop your moping...get up...and keep serving Me! I’ll tell you when you are done!’

Third, **iii. God gives Elijah something to remember**

What was Elijah to **remember**? Verse 18 “Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.”

‘You’re not alone, Elijah! I have others that are serving me—not just you!’

And that is God’s message to us as we serve Him.

--He is all-powerful—and yet tender;

--He wants us faithfully serving—not feeling sorry for ourselves.

--And He wants us to remember that there are others that are faithful to God—not just us!

So what would God have us do in light of His Word this morning?

1. First, be a recipient of God’s mercy. What do I mean by that? Although God is merciful to you every day, that is not the mercy I’m talking about. The mercy I’m talking about is that which you need when you stand before a holy God and every one of your sins—whether you remember doing them or not—is presented as evidence against you. Your greatest need at that moment? Mercy!

But if you wait until that moment, it will be too late! You need God’s forgiveness and mercy now!

2. Don’t be bitter—against God or people. Bitterness is a sin that must be confessed and forsaken. Don’t hang onto it—and don’t think that because God has called you to do something difficult that He doesn’t care for you. He does care—and that is why He is molding you to be more like Jesus.