

“Timing Is All”
 Pastor Sam Richards
 Sermon for 16 March 2025
 Texts: Hebrews 12:12-17

I love it when I experience a thing called **synchronicity** such as when my friend is thinking about Exodus (his pastor is teaching on Exodus) the same week that I am refreshing my knowledge of the historical timeline of the Exodus, when it's on the radio (Edwin Lutzer is teaching on Moses, and the Exodus)—all at the same time. And they aren't doing so by plan, and aren't reading the same script. Then I remember it's Lent and Lent is about the greatest exodus of all—our being set free from bondage to sin, enslavement to our flesh with attendant feelings of shame, guilt and remorse. And one thing that I heard is this: the cry of God's people to be free to journey into the wilderness for three days and hold a feast, offering up sacrifices, worship and praise to God. ***Let my people go is biblically attached to worship.—to an exodus out of work and ordinary worldliness and into the presence of the Lord.*** So I thought about Exodus and I came up with **the root of bitterness** and that is my topic for today. What is this bitterness.

In my devotional time I perused Hebrews 12:12-17 this week. It begins with the word : “wherefore.” And whenever a verse begins with “wherefore” it is critical to discover what the wherefore is therefor! And this is the answer: the wherefore refers to the discipline that God exercises, or wields over the lives of those whom He loves. For it is written, **God chasteneth those whom He loveth**, (Heb, 12:6 and Proverbs 3:12). God aims to produce fruit, the fruit of righteousness, in the harvest of holiness which is the very purpose of our existence. It is not pleasant, or joyous in the process, in the moment but the discipline is worth it as regards the outcome! If the Lord makes you miserable in the process of sanctification, you may rest assured that you will have the reward of it and that you will be soul satisfied when that occurs. ***As it must and will! Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down***, from fatigue, exhaustion, exertion, and strengthen those fatigued and **feeble knees**. (v. 12) We all know the staggering steps of those who have just completed their race. The allusion is to field and track, to running a race. This likens the discipline of the Lord to a footrace. It's illustrative and helpful. Perhaps you have experienced being stooped over, due to the cost of hard physical labor. Same deal.

Rather be strengthened, be encouraged by this evident divine supervision, love and care. And, like a *trained* sprinter, rush straight forward. . . out of the blocks like a champion. Or, at least, a competitor! Don't allow lameness to cause you to leave your lane, to stumble at obstacles, or to deviate and limp off course. ***Rather, let your lameness be healed!***

Hebrews 12:14 introduces a transition. Follow peace with all men and holiness, without which (holiness) no man shall see the Lord. Does this suggest that no man shall see the Lord? Or does it mean that holiness is a requirement for those who will see the Lord? I think the latter.

Verse 15: the apostle here alludes to Deuteronomy 29:18:

The apostle here alludes to [Deuteronomy 29:18](#), **Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away**

from the Lord, lest there should be a root that beareth gall and wormwood (**bitterness!**); and he primarily intends, lest there be any person whose heart is inclined to apostasy from the gospel.

He may mean, however, also, lest any evil disposition, such as covetousness, ambition, anger, malice, envy, revenge, should spring up in any person or number of persons, and destroy the peace and harmony of the Christian society.

In general, any corruption, either in doctrine or practice, is a root of bitterness, which, springing up, would trouble others, and might defile many.
—Benson, Commentary

The verse is: **Looking diligently** (examining oneself and observing the condition of those in the fellowship) **lest anyone fall short/ fail to attain to the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you** (the fellowship, the church) **and thereby many be defiled**. Ponder with me the scope of this verse: all the way from personal (the sprinter) to the corporate (the whole body— mutually exhorting, encouraging and building each other up). Peace is constructed, built up, put into practice. It may seem spontaneous, which is lovely, but it requires time, effort, attentiveness and diligence—spiritual thoroughness.

I am afraid if we miss the allusion to Deut. 29, we might miss a major point of this verse. This **root of bitterness** may result from sorrow, sadness, hurt or abuse—something which may remain hidden for a long season before erupting into defilement! *Whining leads to murmuring and to complaining and these three are **the root system of spiritual rebellion, a hot bed for sin***. The wilderness experience is a case study of this spiritual dynamic! And that is why we are taught that such things are hated by God. Why? Well, because fornication and profane living are rooted *in bitter discontent*—the “bitterness” in view here. It may not have occurred to you that fornication and a profane life-style are rooted in bitterness—it hadn’t occurred plainly to me apart from this verse! So we have two matters arising: a hypothesis regarding the root of bitterness and the spiritual thoroughness I just noted as pre-requisite for the health of the church.

Well, where should we turn to explore this hypothesis—namely, that fornication and profane life-styles emanate from **the root of bitterness**? First, we examine our own hearts. Next we might consider the offspring of Isaac—the twins, Esau and Jacob. The bitter contention between them is inescapable. Both were fornicators—and sexual dysfunction is carried forward into the next generation—with Joseph only excepted! We have a better handle on fornication, I think, than we do this business of a profane life. We aren’t simply dealing with profanity—especially taking the Lord’s name in vain, but vulgarity and blasphemy as well. Esau is the exemplar of the fleshly, self-gratifying and self-pleasing life. Of him it might be said, **his belly was his god**; he was fixated on immediate gratification—he wants it all right now. [*I see it, I want it right now!*] We would describe that as impulsive and not in a good way. He was not a vile man, nor was he guilty of the grasping, deceptive thievery of his younger brother. He was profane, in this sense, too. Esau sold his birthright (for a bowl of *pottage*) to his own self-harm. It discloses a spiritual deficiency, a lack of seriousness *that is just as daring in our lives as it was in his*. *Therefore he dealt with something profoundly valuable and sacred even (**his status as heir to the Abrahamic covenant!—a very great gift**) for a bowl of lentil stew?! A hot meal? A tryst?* By so doing he elevated his physical, physiological, material and temporal, even psychological needs (feeling good, happy, satisfied) above his spiritual needs (for

forgiveness, love communion with God), how animalistic(!), country to the yearnings, needs and demands of his eternal soul!

I was dumber than an ox! (Psalm 73:21-28. See Hosea 4:1.). . .

A foolish thing, choice, folly. ***He prioritized physical hunger over divine rights (as pf the first born) and the privileges of sonship.*** Then he learned some things are irreversible, irretrievable. He found no place for repentance in his profane existence and that is severely tragic. Terrible.

That brings us to spiritual thoroughness: this follows from Benson's comment that the apostle: "He (the apostle) may mean, however, also, lest any evil disposition, such as covetousness, ambition, anger, malice, envy, revenge, should spring up in any person or number of persons, and destroy the peace and harmony of the Christian society. In general, any corruption, either in doctrine or practice, is a root of bitterness, which, springing up, would trouble others, and might defile many."

Spiritual thoroughness is a divine attribute. In the Creation account we see evidence of this trait. Before the creation of man, the triune God held a conference, a consultation, saying, **Let us make man in our own image/after our likeness.** A plurality is suggested in the pronouns used. Furthermore, the endowment of **dominion/lordship** is raised (Genesis 1:26). The proximity of **in our own image/likeness** and **dominion** is striking. No less so is the creation of man, him, **in the image of God . . . male and female created he them.** (v. 27) We do not have a revelation of how this male and female creation occurred *in this scripture*. That unfolds in Gen. 2:21-25. Man was made **out of dust** (2:7) after the image of God and woman was fashioned out of **the flesh and bone of man**(2:21). The second consultation appears in Gen, 2:18: **And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a help meet fit for him.** The plurality is gone when we come to the extraction of woman out of the man. Note 1. that the man had already been placed in the garden that God planted and note 2. that Adam, in search of **help meet**, met and consciously named all of the animals (an exercise of lordship—the names accurately described each animal!—also this while **dressing and keeping the garden in Paradise**—his assignment from God.

- God consults in the creation of man.
- God consults over the condition of man—his loneliness, need for a help meet.

Genesis 3 depicts for us the spiritual thoroughness of God in a continuing dialogue, or in an ongoing consultation with man. The serpent engages in subtle (and manipulative) consultation with Eve—an imitation of the divine consultation. He introduces doubt so as to subvert the faithful trust of the woman. She is particularly vulnerable because no one had ever lied to her previously. This level of *innocency* is replicated in every human life and I think it is fair to say, we don't lie by nature—as does Satan!—we do not lie until we have first been lied to. Praise God for this natal remnant of innocency! After Satan/the serpent deceives Eve, Adam and Eve hold a follow-up meeting—consulting with each other without including

God. An enormous misstep! Following their senses and appetite, and pursuant to the command to **freely eat—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil** excepted (2:17), **the tree in the midst of the garden** (3:2), the first couple disobeys God and compromises their marriage—Adam knew better and was negligent, or derelict in spiritual guidance, protection and his ordained leadership. **And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.**

- God consults over sin.

I do not know precisely how this knowledge of **nakedness** relates to the knowledge of **good and evil** but the first follows upon the second when they consumed the fruit of the forbidden tree. *Sewn fig leaves cannot cover the shame and guilt that follow our disobedience.* They can only cover us physically, only cover certain parts which are identified with our loins and sexual parts in the text. Good and evil are symbolically connected, in the narrative, with our sexuality and nakedness, with our sensuality and our appetites. Our appetites represent what we hunger for, and what we still hunger for on an ongoing basis¹.

So in Gen. 3:8 we have a picture of the ongoing consultation that God desires to have with us—it is sweetly alluring. There is a very detailed depiction of this in the opening chapter of the book of Job where God and Satan dialogue/consult in the heavenly court, or council room.

Isaiah 1:17 **Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Reprove the ruthless,
Defend the orphan (or vindicate the fatherless),
Plead for the widow.**
18 **“Come now, and let us reason together,”
Says the Lord,
“Though your sins are as scarlet,
They will be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They will be like wool.**
19 **“If you consent and obey,
You will eat the best of the land;
20 “But if you refuse and rebel,
You will be devoured by the sword.”
Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken.**

Amen

¹ That we hunger and thirst are markers of our creaturely dependence. They are attributes of our physical nature, too. In the encounter at Jacob’s well, Jesus challenges the limits of our physicality when he offers the woman “living water . . . water welling up unto eternal life.” He quickness her to her spiritual reality, her soul-ish existence, that which connects her to God. When Eve put her soul-ish dimension aside for good food/appetite—she fell!