

# TURNING BITTERNESS INTO SWEETNESS

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THE BENEFITS OF FORGIVENESS AND  
RECONCILIATION



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# Summary

The Christian life is not always easy. Sometimes, a circumstance may hurt a believer and prompt him to respond with unforgiveness. The Bible speaks about this issue, encouraging us to make peace with everyone so we can always fellowship with our heavenly Father. Considering this truth, this article addresses the problem of bitterness, describing its causes and effects and providing ways to turn it into sweetness from a biblical perspective.

# Outline

<b>I. Definition of bitterness</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. Examples of Bitterness in a Marriage relationship</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>III. Effects of bitterness in the life of the believer</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>IV. Forgiveness and Reconciliation</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>V. Ways to avoid bitterness</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>8</b>

# I. Definition of bitterness

The Hebrew term for *bitter* [mar] denotes a sour taste. It is the antonym of the Hebrew word “māṭôq,” which means “sweet” (Isaiah 5:20; Proverbs 27:7). The bitter taste is unpleasant. For example, during the Israelite journey through the wilderness, “they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter” (Exodus 15:23). When they complained, Moses petitioned God. As a result, “the LORD showed him a tree; and he threw it into the waters, and the waters became sweet” (Exodus 15:24–25).

Because of the literal meaning of the term *bitterness*, it portrays negative feelings and emotions. It evokes the idea of sadness and distress. For instance, Hannah was distressed because she was childless. “She prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly” (1 Samuel 1:10). Similarly, during Job’s trials, he often spoke of the bitterness of his soul (Job 7:11). In such cases, bitterness expresses someone’s disappointment and discontentment. These feelings are stronger when they occur in a relationship where one party provokes the other to anger. Thus, we will look at some causes of bitterness in a relationship.

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## II. Examples of Bitterness in a Marriage Relationship

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Many circumstances can provoke bitterness. For instance, a man may be resentful because he does not receive a promotion on his job. Similarly, a taxi driver may feel angry each time he drives in a metropolitan city due to the traffic. These are all cases of bitterness, which is a hard feeling in and of itself. However, in a relationship where one partner blames the other, the effects of bitterness can be more pronounced. Several reasons can lead to resentment, as the following synopsis demonstrates.

### **Sentiment of neglect :**

A couple's busy schedule or negligence can lead to a lack of communication. Many times, this issue is not intentional. However, it can slide by if we do not pay enough attention. It would be good if one of the parties is straightforward and wants to tell the truth. Otherwise, this lack of communication will soon lead to resentment from one of the parties.

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### **Lack of Transparency from one partner :**

It is common for one partner to be transparent. However, since each person is different, the other partner may always want to hide or withhold important information about the family. For example, a husband may not want to disclose his financial resources to his wife, especially if she does not work. They may not have joint bank accounts, prompting her to think she contributes to nothing. This thought can lead to bitterness, especially if the husband does not meet her financial needs.

### **Lack of Intimacy :**

Money cannot solve every problem. A couple can be poor but feel happy when there is intimacy. This attachment manifests itself through nice talks, uplifting habits, and sex. Failure to show such an attachment to your spouse can cause bitterness in the long run. It often happens when the victim speaks out and receives advice from people with wrong motives. For example, a husband who forgets his wife's birthday—or other special occasions like "Saint Valentine" or "Christmas"—is guilty because he would cause her to think she is unloved. If she talks to her friends, some might tell her to break that relationship instead of encouraging her to communicate her needs to her husband.

## **Frequent and Unresolved Discords :**

Nobody is perfect; Everyone makes mistakes. But we should strive to do better daily. When a couple has frequent and unresolved conflicts, they do not enjoy their marriage. Consequently, one partner or both may develop a sense of resentment.

### **Isolation :**

A partner often leaves his/her house to go work somewhere for several months or even years. The absence creates a hole that nobody else can fill and at times contributes to anxiety and stress. Left unchecked, the suffering partner may develop a feeling of bitterness toward the other.



### III. Effects of Bitterness in the Life of a Believer 5

Bitterness can affect the life of a Christian in several ways: spiritually, psychologically, and socially. On the spiritual level, bitterness can harden the person's heart, preventing him from praying and worshipping God. It can remove his joy and his ability to love God wholeheartedly and his neighbors compassionately.

Psychologically, bitterness can cause the person to become pessimistic. It can even lead to mental disorientation, which some experts call "post-traumatic embitterment disorder" (PTED). The person can also experience depression.

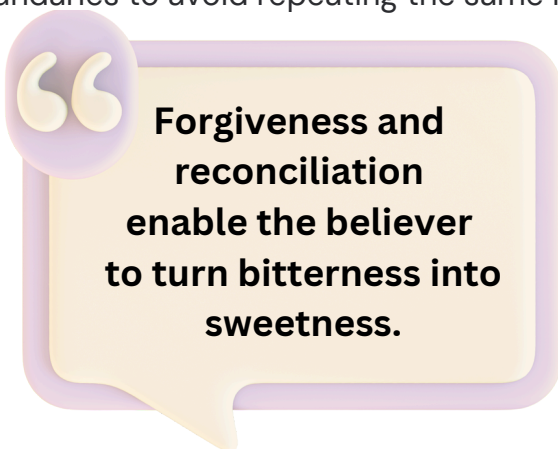
Socially, the bitter person can isolate himself from others, especially if the bitterness has already led to depression. He may refrain from fellowshiping with other saints and avoid gatherings where he could receive emotional support. This situation is unpleasant and harmful. One of the best ways to prevent its lasting effects is to practice forgiveness and reconciliation.





Forgiveness and reconciliation enable the believer to turn bitterness into sweetness. The former is the act of love by which someone ceases to feel resentful for an offense. The latter (reconciliation) is the “restoration of friendly relationships and of peace where before there had been hostility and alienation.”<sup>1</sup> These steps are crucial in the believer’s life as he seeks to please God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares, “If you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matthew 6:14–15).

According to the teachings of Jesus, a Christian cannot live harmoniously with God without practicing forgiveness and reconciliation. We must forgive those who have wronged us so we can receive forgiveness from God. We must be willing to seek peace even when the other person hurts us, realizing it is the work of the flesh. We must reconcile with one another while setting up boundaries to avoid repeating the same mistakes.



<sup>1</sup> Walter A. Elwell, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 1823–24.

In the Creole language, a proverb reads, “Lang ak dan toujou mòde,” which means, “Tongue and teeth always bite.” People often use it to say that good friends can disagree. In a marital relationship, it means that the husband and the wife will sometimes have discords. But they remain bound to each other like the tongue and the teeth within the mouth (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5). This lasting bond suggests that we avoid bitterness to enjoy our lives and be at peace with one another. The writer of Hebrews warns that “no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble” (Hebrews 12:15). Therefore, we ought to seek God’s wisdom in every matter to ensure we please Him. Below are some principles to help avoid bitterness.

**M**editate the Word of God together with your spouse

**A**ctivate love in the home continually

**R**esolve any conflict quickly and seek peace

**R**espond favorably to your spouse’s needs

**I**mplement an atmosphere of joy in the home

**A**ct softly and tenderly with one another

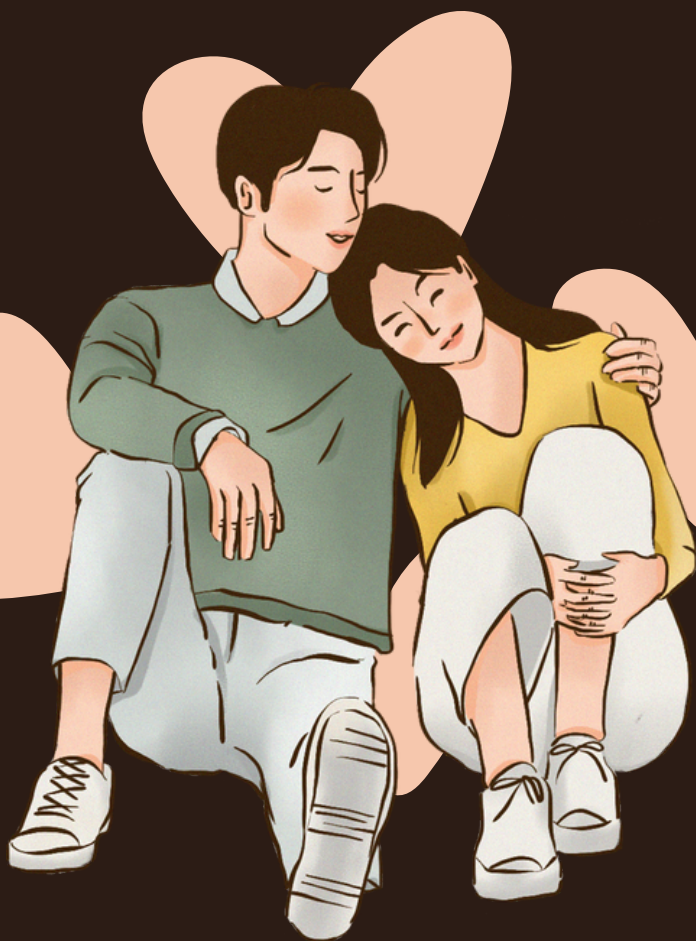
**G**ive yourself completely to your spouse

**E**ncourage honest communication in the home

2 Walter A. Elwell, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 1823–24.

Life always has ups and downs. At times, it seems unfair. Sometimes, it brings happiness, wellness, and satisfaction. Other times, it brings deception, depression, and despair. But believers should focus on God to lead their homes and work things out for His glory. Through His help, we can all turn bitterness into sweetness using the power of forgiveness and reconciliation.

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