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M I N I S T R I E S

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Parashah Points: Nitzavim – Dig Out the Root of Bitterness

Welcome to another episode of Parashah Points—short thoughts from the weekly Torah Portion.

This week's Parashah Point comes from Nitzavim, which is Hebrew for "Standing," and it goes from Deuteronomy 29:9 to Deuteronomy 30:20.

In this Torah portion, Moses tells the people of Israel that they stand before God to enter into covenant with Him. He speaks of curses that would come as a result of violating this covenant but that forgiveness and restoration is available to all who repent. Moses goes on to teach that God's commandments are not beyond reach, and concludes by exhorting God's people to "choose life" by loving God and keeping His commandments.

There's a lot that we can talk about in this Torah Portion. Today we're going to talk about the importance of letting go of bitterness.

When we read the Scriptures, we are often amazed to see just how merciful and abounding in grace our God is; how He is willing to forgive the worst offenses if we humble ourselves and repent. But did you know that there's one person that the Scriptures say God is unwilling to forgive? This week's Torah Portion speaks of such a person:

Deuteronomy 29:18-20

Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord [YHWH] our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you **a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit**, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.' This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. **The Lord [YHWH] will not be willing to forgive him**, but rather the anger of the Lord [YHWH] and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the Lord [YHWH] will blot out his name from under heaven.

So the person that God is unwilling to forgive is identified as a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.

This person is characterized by stubbornness and indifference toward God. He has a false sense of security—he believes he's safe from judgment, perhaps implying that his sin is rooted deep within his heart and therefore hidden from the community. But it is not hidden from God:

Deuteronomy 29:29

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Some rabbinic commentaries suggest that this verse is talking about the secret “sins” of man belonging to God. That is to say, God Himself will render judgment on the person in secret sin. But those sins that are revealed—made public—are to be dealt with by the community according to God’s law. In either case, even if your sins are hidden from your spouse, friends, and community, beware and understand that God knows about it, and He will render judgment if you continue in your stubbornness.

The New Testament gives us some additional insight into this root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit. The author of Hebrews makes a direct reference to this passage:

Hebrews 12:14

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “**root of bitterness**” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.

The author of Hebrews warns us not to allow a root of bitterness to grow, because it will cause trouble and will negatively affect the entire community. In Deuteronomy this warning is given specifically in regard to a stubborn refusal to turn from idolatry, but this “bitterness” of which Scripture speaks is multifaceted.

Scripture uses the same word found in Hebrews in connection with extreme wickedness (Acts 8:22), evil speech (Romans 3:14), and bitter hatred (Ephesians 4:31-32). Echoing the Torah’s prohibitions against hating people in your heart (Leviticus 19:17) and bearing grudges (Leviticus 19:18), the Apostle Paul commands us to “put away” all bitterness:

Ephesians 4:31-32

Let all **bitterness** and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, **forgiving one another**, as God in Christ forgave you.

Paul’s exhortation to forgive others as Christ forgave you is connected with the admonitions to put away bitterness, wrath, slander, and so forth, in the verse prior. In other words, being able to forgive as Christ forgave requires letting go of bitterness. Bitterness hinders us from being able to truly forgive.

So, what bitter hatreds are hiding deep within your heart? We need to stop defining our lives by how other people have hurt us. We need to let go of our grudges. “But you don’t understand how much that person hurt me!” Some might say. This is not to minimize anyone’s pain due to the betrayal and cruelty of others, but it doesn’t matter as far as *your* responsibility before God is concerned. God says to forgive—you simply have no right to hold on to bitterness.

Ultimately, a refusal to forgive *is* a form of idolatry. It’s a worship of self. It’s putting your own hurt feelings above God and what He requires of you. Scripture says that God will not be willing to forgive

the root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, which, as we've discussed, can manifest as the person utterly unwilling to forgive others. Yeshua reiterates this concept:

Matthew 6:14-15

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

This is further illustrated in Yeshua's parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21-35). The master forgives his servant of a great debt that the servant could never repay. But then that same servant refuses to forgive his fellow servant of a debt owed to him. This is how the master responded to that servant upon hearing of his refusal to forgive another's debt:

Matthew 18:32-35

Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Our master has forgiven us a tremendous debt of sin. Who are we, therefore, to withhold mercy from others? Who are we to keep ourselves and others imprisoned to our bitterness?

Again, take a moment and really think about what might be hidden in your heart. Ask God to reveal any bitterness, and put it away. Don't assume that you're safe as you continue in the stubbornness of your heart. If you're holding onto bitterness and unforgiveness, now is the time to submit it to God. Don't wait. Dig out the root of bitterness. Forgive as God in Christ forgave you.

Thank you for joining us for another Parashah Point!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!

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Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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