



[What We Think We Know](#)

On Sunday nights from March through May we have bible study and discipleship classes at my church. For the last couple of weeks we've gone over *how* to study the bible. To say the least it has been worth the time.

As Christians, our love for the Lord should inspire us to want to know him better. And in this life, there's no better way to get to know him than the prayerful study of his word. That's *one* reason *why* bible study is important. Knowing *how* to study it is also important.

At the end of our last session we were given some homework. We were to study Hebrews 12:12-17. Pastor Mike told us that this was written to "suffering Christians" about how to live. We were to study this passage looking for what the writer is telling us, and what he really means by it. He also told us to pay special attention to the phrase "root of bitterness". To further guide us he suggested that we look for another place in scripture where this phrase appears, following the idea that the first occurrence of a word or phrase would give more insight into its meaning than a dictionary definition.

There followed some discussion about the word "bitterness". It became quite clear that we all have a common understanding of the word, based on our own experiences. The discussion revolved around notions of anger and unforgiving attitudes. The notion of

discontentment came to my mind after this. My point here is that we all *think* we know what this meant.

Here's the passage Pastor Mike told us to study:

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. 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; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. - Hebrews 12:12-17

Taking our pastor's advice we should start our study with prayer, asking the Lord to open his word to us, to illuminate it and teach us it's meaning, and to prepare our hearts to receive his instruction. After all, we can't hope to truly understand the things of the spirit except spiritually, in humility and submission to his will.

Next, we need to read the passage *in context* several times through. Skip the footnotes and annotations, just read it. *In context*. For me, that implies reading more than just the five verses we're studying here. So I went to [Bible Gateway](#) opened up the entire chapter and copied it to my digital notes, without footnotes, cross references, or other notes.

Look again at the passage we're studying. The very first word (in the English Standard Version anyway) is "therefore". To my software engineer's mind that word implies that what follows is the logical conclusion to something that went before. What went before is clearly a part of the context of what we're looking at now.

So what went before? In Hebrews 12:3-11 you'll find a discussion about the discipline and chastisement that a child endures at the hands of his father. It reminds us that if we are not disciplined we are not sons, and that when we are disciplined and chastised "God is treating you as sons."

"For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." This is the premise leading to the conclusion: We are sons and God treats us as such when he disciplines us, so we shouldn't be despondent or discontented.

Reading from context *seems* to support our common understanding of the phrase "root of bitterness". Surely discontentment leads to grumbling, anger, and bitterness. This causes trouble and quarrels if I remember last year's study in James correctly. As for grumbling:

And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. – James 3:6-8

Having apparently confirmed our preconceptions we might be tempted to stop here. I know I would, and often have. Not this time though. Pastor Mike told us to go further. In fact, he gave us specific instructions. Sure, he phrased them as hints or suggestions in the assignment, but there was more to the lesson than just giving us homework.

Recall that he suggested that we look for another place in scripture where our key phrase turns up. That was more work than I expected. Simply looking for the phrase “root of bitterness” only turned up Hebrews 12:15.

One of the tools Pastor Mike introduced us to during this season’s first session is the *concordance*. A concordance is a handy way of finding the verses of the bible that contain a particular word. I have *The Olive Tree ESV Concordance*, which is available for Olive Tree’s Bible+ app on my tablet. This concordance also includes a handy dictionary for the Greek and Hebrew words. So I started with looking up “bitterness”. The word from Hebrews 12:15 has the “Strong’s number” *g4088*. Here’s what the dictionary in my concordance has for this word:

πικρία STRONG’S NUMBER: g4088

Dictionary Definition

g4088. πικρία pikria; from 4089;

acridity (especially poison), literally or figuratively: — bitterness.

AV (4) - bitterness 4;

1. bitter gall

A. Extreme wickedness

B. a bitter root, and so producing a bitter fruit

C. metaph. bitterness, bitter hatred

Hm... our common notion is the *last* definition here. What we think we know could be right, but that second definition looks interesting, particularly since “a bitter root” sounds so much like the phrase “a *root* of bitterness”. So next I looked at some of the references for “bitterness”, but I didn’t find anything that seemed to shed more light on it. So I looked at one of the cross references in my ESV Study Bible for “root of bitterness” and that took me to Deuteronomy 29:18. That was *not* one of the references I found when looking up “bitterness”, but it *was* the first result when I looked for “root” in the concordance.

“You know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the

nations through which you passed. And you have seen their detestable things, their idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold, which were among them. Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord 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 will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven. - Deuteronomy 29:16-20

This passage talks about the things the people of Israel had seen, and warns them against falling away from the Lord into idolatry. It warns them against hearing the words of the covenant and walking in prideful rebellion, and tells what the consequences will be for the man who does. Comparing it to our passage in Hebrews we can see the similarity between such a man and Esau. And, from my study bible's notes:

DEUTERONOMY - NOTE ON 29:18 Beware lest. *The repeated warning here shows the vulnerability of Israel's heart to go astray to idolatry. **root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.** If one Israelite goes astray, the sin is regarded as contagious, infecting other Israelites. (v. 19) Hence the need to "purge the evil" from your midst (see 13:5 and note). Cf. "root of bitterness" in Heb 12:15, which comes from the Greek translation of this phrase.*

So, the quoted phrase in Hebrews is first found here in Deuteronomy. This should make it clear that "root of bitterness" isn't really talking about anger and hatred filling a man's heart and defiling the assembly, although that *could* be a partially correct interpretation. Instead it seems like a warning against prideful rebellion and apostasy in the face of the Father's discipline. It appears to warn us against false believers who haven't actually found God's grace spreading their false teachings, idolatry, and immorality and defiling the church.

It reminded me of Jesus' warning about false prophets:

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. - Matthew 7:15-20

- “A root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit”
- “the diseased tree bears bad fruit”
- “Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit”
- “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; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy...”

When I look at our study passage this way, it becomes clear that what we think we know can mislead us. Yes, anger and bitter hatred in a man’s heart will defile him. If he’s a believer it will surely set him up for discipline and chastisement; If he’s not it can impede his opportunities to receive God’s grace – remember Esau and the prideful man walking in the stubbornness of his heart neither received grace or forgiveness. But our study shows us so much more. It’s a stern warning to heed God’s word, to remain faithful in the face of discipline, and to avoid idolatry, pride, immorality, and unbelief. We are to seek peace and holiness, to watch for the fruit of false brothers and avoid their teachings.

We study God’s word to know him better. Knowing how to study it is vital to learning what it really tells us about him, and about how we should live. Part of knowing how to study includes recognizing our preconceptions and working through them. It’s work, but worth it.

One final note. All the study in the world is useless if we don’t do one more thing. We’ve got to apply what we’ve learned. Otherwise what’s the point of all the work?

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. – James 1:22-25