

7 Traits of a Bitter Person

Hebrews 12:15 tells us a root of bitterness can spring up and defile many. This is because bitterness can spread to others even through multiple generations.

When it comes to a person's emotional state, bitterness refers to a lingering sense of resentment, anger or disappointment. This feeling often arises from perceived injustices, betrayals or unfulfilled expectations. A bitter person might frequently dwell on past hurts or wrongs, find it difficult to forgive and struggle to experience joy or satisfaction. This emotional state can affect their interactions with others, leading to a negative or cynical outlook on life.

This is profoundly illustrated in the life of Esau, whose animosity toward his brother, Jacob, resulted in historical animosity that pitted his future family line against Jacob's. (Interestingly, Esau is mentioned in Hebrews 12:16.)

Based on the stories of Esau and the narratives involving Amalek and Edom (seen in the book of Obadiah), several traits of a person harboring bitterness can be identified. These traits can be understood in generational conflict and personal grievances.

7 Traits of a Person With Bitterness

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1. Unresolved anger. Esau's anger toward Jacob for taking his birthright and blessing (Genesis 27) demonstrates unresolved anger that can manifest as bitterness in the future. The Amalekites' attack on the Israelites in Exodus 17 shows a continuation of hostility that stems from the unresolved anger and bitterness of just one man (the tribe of Amalek descended from Esau).

2. Victim mentality. Esau felt wronged by Jacob, believing he was a victim of deceit and unfair treatment. This perception can lead to a lasting sense of injustice. Generational bitterness can perpetuate a sense of victimhood, as seen in the persistent enmity between Amalek and Israel. We can also see how bitterness negatively impacts people in contemporary society. They interpret the narrative of their whole life through the lens of being a victim, leading to living an angry life in which they scapegoat other people instead of taking responsibility for their shortcomings.

3. Desire for revenge. Esau's desire to kill Jacob after losing his blessing (Gen. 27:41) illustrated his desire for revenge, a common trait of bitterness. His bitterness was spread to his children, who then spread it to his children's children, leading to a whole nation poisoned with bitterness. The Amalekites' unprovoked attack on the Israelites reflects a deep-seated desire for retribution.

4. Persistent resentment. The ongoing conflict between Esau and Israel (as noted in 1 Samuel 15 and Obadiah 10-14) highlights how bitterness can be passed down through generations, leading to persistent resentment. I have seen families carry resentment and hatred against other families because of perceived injustices that were communicated to them since they were children. One person's bitterness can destroy the emotional life of a whole family and beyond.

5. Lack of forgiveness. Although Esau initially reconciled with Jacob (Genesis 33), his eventual inability to forgive reflects a bitter person's difficulty in letting go of historical grievances. The continued animosity of the Amalekites and Edomites manifests a refusal to forgive past wrongs.

6. Distorted perception of reality. Esau's belief that he was solely a victim may have clouded the perception of his actions and responsibilities. I have found that people filled with

animosity and bitterness distort reality. They revise personal and ancestral history to fit an erroneous caricature that fits their lens of injustice and scapegoating. The book of Obadiah condemns the tribe of Edom (descendants of Esau) for their arrogance, rejoicing and misjudgment during Israel's distress, illustrating how bitterness can cause a destructive trajectory for a whole generation.

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(The Amalekites are mentioned sporadically in later texts but eventually fade from historical records, suggesting their decline and possible assimilation or extinction.) The Edomites faced various judgments and military defeats, notably during the reigns of King David and subsequent Judean kings. The Edomites maintained a presence in the region longer than the Amalekites. However, other groups eventually conquered and assimilated them, particularly after the Roman conquest of Idumea (the Greek name for Edom) in the 1st century B.C. By the time of the Jewish historian Josephus in the first century A.D., the Edomites had largely been absorbed into the Jewish population.

7. Isolation and alienation. Esau's move to a different land (Genesis 36) and the ensuing separation from his family can be seen as a consequence of his bitterness. Bitter people tend to isolate themselves since their challenged emotional state limits their capacity to interact socially with others. Furthermore, Edom's betrayal of Israel during their time of need, as described in Obadiah, indicates how bitterness can lead to actions that further isolate and alienate individuals and groups from their families and other tribes.

Bitterness gives birth to unresolved anger, a sense of victimhood, a desire for revenge, persistent resentment, a lack of forgiveness, distorted perceptions and eventual

isolation or alienation. These traits, as illustrated in the stories of Esau, Jacob and Amalek, and the prophetic condemnation in Obadiah, demonstrate the destructive impact bitterness can have on individuals and their relationships across generations.

In light of this, we need to ensure we are not getting emotionally poisoned based upon the narratives and perceptions handed down to us from others. We also need to walk in forgiveness and allow the love of God to permeate and direct our hearts, “lest a root of bitterness spring up and defile many.”

Some Positive Steps We Can Take

1. Be self-aware and discern if you have inherited the bitterness of an ancestral people group (Obad. 1:10-14).
2. Be self-aware and discern if you view the world through your pain or objective reality (Titus 1:15).
3. Consider seeing a Christian therapist if lingering bitterness persists (James 5:16).
4. Develop a biblical perspective regarding forgiveness, justice and reconciliation (Rom. 5:8-11).
5. Intentionally forgive each person who has hurt or traumatized you, even as God in Christ forgave you (Eph. 4:30-5:2).
6. In some situations, receiving a prayer for deliverance from demonic oppression may also be necessary for full freedom (Acts 10:38).

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