



Carstairs-Bancroft United Church

January 12, 2021

**DAILY ENCOURAGEMENT
DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

By Rev. Maria Szabo Berces



Source: Our Daily Bread

Beloved Carstairs Bancroft United Church Member,

We don't have to be in an especially difficult time such as the present pandemic to experience losses or pain. It's true however that last year and the novel virus has blown blasts at many individuals and families. It is easy to sink in to desperation, depression or bitterness due to circumstances we can't control, or losses that hurt a lot.

Those pains and worries are real, and shouldn't be belittled. At the same time, we also should be aware of the possibility of healing and comfort. The Creator and Sustainer of this universe hasn't left us alone. As we go through challenges or grief, the Holy One wants to stand by us and calls us to call onto his name.

You probably remember this quote from James: **"Come near to God and he will come near to you."** (James 4:8). Or this other one from Peter: **"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."** (1 Peter 5:7)

Nevertheless, I am also aware that we might be reluctant to care for advices like these when we are in intense suffering. These all seem to be just words in the site of certain personal disasters. When we want to handle any loss or pain by ourselves, the overwhelming emotions may very well start to develop the bitterness that the Our Daily Bread meditation below talks about. And when it does, it further poisons our life and our relationships.

In my understanding, there are two things which can help us to go through our grieving processes and to tackle the challenges of life. The first one is to remember and to cling to the promise that *we are not alone* in any of our dark valleys.

No matter how trivial the encouragements of the Scriptures sound when we feel like just hiding away from everybody, God knows our aching heart and wants to soothe our pain. It is a valid life experience of centuries: **"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."** (Psalm 34:18)

Even in our anger, in our incomprehension of our situation, we are called to approach God with our feelings and complaints. Even if we don't know what comes next, we are encouraged to **"cast all"** of it on the Almighty.

The second thing is to open up to follow God's advice and instructions of living. As we remember and fulfill Jesus' most important command - **"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."** (John 13:34) – we will find that our pain calms down. Through our willingness to love and care for others, the Almighty opens ways for us to receive love, care and comfort. This is a 'work' that yields its fruits, and bring forth beautiful results of comfort and joy.

Grace and Peace to You All,

Rev. Maria



Dig It Up

Get rid of all bitterness.

Ephesians 4:31

READ RUTH 1:3-5, 20-21

When Rebecca's brother and sister-in-law started having marriage problems, Rebecca prayed earnestly for their reconciliation. But they divorced. Then her sister-in-law took the children out of state and their dad didn't protest. Rebecca never again saw the nieces she dearly loved. Years later she said, "Because of trying to handle this sadness on my own, I let a root of bitterness start in my heart, and it began to spread to my family and friends."

The book of Ruth tells about a woman named Naomi who struggled with a heart of grief that grew into bitterness. Her husband died in a foreign land, and ten years later both her sons died. She was left destitute with her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah (1:3-5). When Naomi and Ruth returned to Naomi's home country, the whole town was excited to see them. But Naomi told her friends: "The Almighty has made my life very bitter. . . . The Lord has afflicted me" (vv. 20-21). She even asked them to call her "Mara," meaning bitter.

Who hasn't faced disappointment and been tempted toward bitterness? Someone says something hurtful, an expectation isn't met, or demands from others make us resentful. When we acknowledge to ourselves and God what's happening deep in our hearts, our tender Gardener can help us dig up any roots of bitterness—whether they're still small or have been growing for years—and can replace them with a sweet, joyful spirit.
– By **Anne Cetas**

REFLECT & PRAY

God, help me to see the goodness in life You're always displaying. And dig up any root of bitterness in my heart that dishonors You. Amen.

What areas of life do you tend to become bitter about? What's growing inside your heart that needs God's loving care?

SCRIPTURE INSIGHT

The book of Ruth isn't the only time we see the name Mara or Marah (bitter) in the Bible. In Exodus we read how the Israelites had just escaped slavery in Egypt when God miraculously parted the Red Sea. After the Israelites crossed the sea, He released the water so their Egyptian pursuers were swallowed up. The result? "When the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant" (14:31). Yet, three days later, the Israelites couldn't find water and began to doubt Moses (and God). They found an oasis, but because its water was undrinkable, they named the place Marah. God instructed Moses to throw a piece of wood in the water and it immediately became sweet (15:22-25; see Numbers 33:8-9). – By **Alyson Kieda**

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