

SAND IN OUR GAS TANKS



by Penn Clark

*One of the most common ways the enemy
tries to stop us in our tracks*

SAND IN OUR GAS TANKS

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Published by Wordsmith Publishing of Penn Yan, New York

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This material was originally edited by Edie Mourey (www.furrowpress.com). Special thanks Heather Clark for editing this booklet.

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ABOUT PENN CLARK



As a young disciple growing up in his native Canada, the Lord gave Penn a vision of travelling all over the world to help to start churches. These have become models of what life-giving churches should be like. The vision also contained a calling to raise up godly leaders, who are equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit for a great end-time revival. God also gave him unique ability to communicate His grace in a way that is both profound and practical. From the very beginning, Penn has been a diligent steward the revelations he had been given, writing them out, polishing them, and making them available to others. With more than 30 books available, taken from a

lifetime of study, each book is an example of how to handle the word of God with integrity. Through the years, the Lord has motivated Penn to present discipleship in a way that is both inspiring and accessible, creating beautiful places for this to take place within the local church. The Clark's are based in the beautiful Finger Lake region of New York where they serve WellSpring Fellowship. To learn more about Penn, go to www.pennclark.net or look for him on Facebook.

INTRODUCTION

I once knew a dear Ukrainian woman named Maria who scrubbed pots and pans in the kitchen of a local restaurant and made little more than minimum wage. Somehow, she managed to send most of her earnings back to her family in the former USSR. They did not waste a penny of it. They built three houses, two of which were reconstructed from abandoned homes, making good use of precious material. The third had been built for her aged parents out of new logs. She also sent enough money home for her family to buy a good used car. This would normally be out of reach for the average Ukrainian family. Most walk, many ride bicycles, and a few drive horse-drawn carts, but not many people can afford a car, or the gas to put into it.

The most common car over there is called a Lada, and all I can say is that the manufacturer's slogan is not "Quality is Job One." The joke we heard was, "What are the shock absorbers in a Lada?"

"The passengers," was the dry answer.

So, Maria sent back enough money for the family to buy their first good car. They wisely bought a German-made Volkswagen Jetta, known for its durability. It is really well-built and, perhaps, the best car anyone owns for miles around. Or at least it was.

Late one night, someone crept into their farmyard, unscrewed the gas cap, and poured fine white sand into the gas tank. When Maria's brother jumped into the car the next morning, he didn't get out of the yard before the engine seized up. They were all heartbroken. With no technical training and with only the crudest tools, they tore the motor down and cleaned every piece. The car has never run quite the same since. The last time I saw it, it was being used as a chicken coop.

Why would anyone do this? They can only speculate that someone was envious of their family's prosperity. They suspected that it was a man from church who did it, although they never explained the reason for their theory.

As I meditated upon this, here is what I learned: When the enemy cannot stop us with a full frontal attack or lead us directly into acts of sin, he will try to impede our progress by putting sand in our gas tanks. Sand is the accumulation of a bunch of little things that choke out our life and keep us from getting anywhere. In this study, the sand represents those little offences that make us angry, resentful, and argumentative. These things not only ruin our relationships, but can ruin our spiritual lives because they hinder our ability to freely pray and worship. While none of these are sins in themselves, they act like sin in that they can prevent us from being embraced by God, feeling His nearness, and enjoying fellowship with Him.

With every blessing, Penn Clark

MY OWN STRUGGLE WITH BITTERNESS

Someone once lent me a video of a Christian television program, and after I watched the part they wanted me to see, I continued watching the other programs they had taped. One guest was teaching on bitterness and suggested viewers take the bitterness test.¹ At first, I passed on it, fast-forwarding the tape to something else. When I realized I didn't know much about bitterness and might have to counsel someone caught in it someday, so I better take notes. I got a pen and paper and sat down to take the test. To my great surprise, I flunked the test. Right away, I could see some of the things she said would be evident if bitterness was resident in me! Unfortunately, I did not write down the test verbatim, so the one I have included in these notes is not exactly what she said, but that which impacted me.

1. When the person who has offended you walks into a room, how do you respond? Does a certain coldness grip you? Do hard feelings immediately come to the surface? Do you turn to avoid them? Do you have a similar reaction when you hear their name mentioned? Do you avoid anything that reminds you of them?
2. Do you show indifference towards a certain person even though you once cared for them? You may find yourself thinking, "I don't care if I see them again." Or even, "I don't care if they live or die."
3. Do you resent a person's success or hearing good reports about them? Do you secretly desire misfortune or failure to come their way?

After I took the test, I carefully considered my heart's condition. I realized there were other things within me that would serve to indicate I had unresolved bitterness or resentment poisoning my own heart. After further consideration, I added the following questions that could be used to further identify areas of bitterness in our hearts:

1. Does the person who offended or hurt you come to mind often? Do you mentally argue with them or daydream about putting them in their place? This reveals an unresolved conflict, and you need to talk to them about it.
2. Do you keep trying to forgive and forget, but you can't? You may need to confront the person so that you can hear her admit her wrong. Forgiveness will flow out of this according to Luke 17:3-4.
3. Do you feel the need or see a tendency to talk to others about the failures or shortcomings of those who have hurt or offended you?

IT IS A ROOT

One reason I would not have related to the idea of having bitterness in my heart was because I couldn't relate to the word. I would have used the word *resentment* to describe how I felt, but not bitterness. I looked up resentment in the *Oxford Dictionary* and found that it means, "to retain feelings about an insult or injury sustained."² Sounds like bitterness to me.

Then as I got out my Bible to look up verses about bitterness. The first verse I found was Hebrews 12:14-15, which describes bitterness as a root:

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled.

Bitterness is appropriately called a *root* because it is not the obvious manifestation. It lies below the surface, spreading out and cropping up in various ways. I did not recognize bitterness at work in my life because it is a root. I could see the "trouble" it was causing others and their reactions to my resentment but did not look below the surface to see what the source of it was. If I just dealt with the fruit of bitterness, it would be like trying to remove dandelions just by mowing off their tops, only to be frustrated when they reappeared the next day.

When I looked up the definition of the word *bitterness* in the *Strong's Concordance* (HEB. 4751), it lists some alternative that help define *bitterness* throughout the Bible:

1. Anger or chafing
2. Discontentment
3. Heaviness (which is depression)
4. Acidic in temper or manner
5. Sharp speech (such as sarcasm or complaint)

These clues helped me see that I was poisoned by bitterness.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

Beyond the negative mental and emotional effects of bitterness, there is evidence that resentment can manifest in our physical well-being as well. These days, a quick online search can yield many articles to substantiate this, but an early voice in the wilderness connecting these two things was Dr. S. I. McMillen, MD, in his groundbreaking book *None of These Diseases*. He suggested the physical symptoms for bitterness include high blood pressure, ulcers, intestinal or digestive problems, arthritis, hypertension, lower backache, and cancer.³

EVIL SPEAKING

One Greek theologian, John Eadie, wrote in his commentary of Ephesians that the Greek word for bitterness was used in a figurative sense, describing that “fretted or irritable state of mind that keeps a man in perpetual animosity.” Furthermore, Eadie said, “This causes him to be harsh or hold uncharitable opinions about men or things that made him sour.” He went on to state that “bitterness infuses venom into the words of his tongue.”⁴

One of the fruits of the root of bitterness that startled me the most was how it affected my own mouth. I wasn’t fully aware of this until I studied the following verses for the first time. Let’s take a look at them.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:30-32)

Notice the connection between bitterness and evil speaking, bitterness and anger, bitterness and malice?

I began to notice that one of the most obvious fruits of bitterness was our tendency to talk against others. Look for it in the following verses:

Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked, from the rebellion of the workers of iniquity, who sharpen their tongue like a sword, and bend their bows to shoot their arrows—bitter words, that they may shoot in secret at the blameless; suddenly they shoot at him and do not fear. They encourage themselves in an evil matter; they talk of laying snares secretly; they say, “Who will see them?” (Psalms 64:2-5)

Then, I found more verses, which startled me:

But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? (James 3:8-11)

Like everyone else, I suppose I will never read these verses without being convicted about my tongue. However, I had never noticed the connection between bitterness and speaking against others. James calls this a poison. It is not just any poison, but specifically venom as emitted by a serpent. Here’s the definition from the *Strong’s Concordance*:

POISON GK. 2447 *is*; rust (as if emitted by metals); also venom (as emitted by serpents):— poison, rust.

As he continues to write, James links speaking against others with bitterness:

Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh. Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. (vv. 12-15)

The apostle James states that an unruly tongue is full of poison or venom. The tendency to poison others by talking against people comes out of three basic things: bitterness, envy, or self-seeking. Notice that James uses the term *bitter envy*. This is an important distinction because, while some bitterness comes out of past hurts and offenses committed against us, there is a bitterness that comes from envy. Whenever we resent the success of others, we usually speak against them, trying to persuade others to have a lower opinion of them. Those who are self-seeking will also try to make the other person look badly in the hopes that they will look better. Political parties do this all the time, but probably not as much as pastors.

All three of these things were at work in the scribes and Pharisees, who were envious of Jesus and His success. They were envious of His spirituality, His gifts, and His popularity. They bitterly contested with Him at every turn. Even Pilate saw their true motivation when he said that he knew the Jews had only delivered Jesus over to be crucified out of envy (see Matthew 27:18). These leaders often spoke against Him in order to poison the hearts of the people against Him. In this way the root of bitterness defiled many. Perhaps, this is one reason Jesus called them “*a brood of vipers*”:

“Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matthew 12:34-37)

Their venom spread until it effectively turned the hearts of the people against Jesus. On the night He was tried, the very ones who, earlier that day, had shouted hosannas to Him, now shouted, “Crucify Him!”

I see another clear connection between the tendency of speaking against others and the bitter venom of serpents in the following example taken from the Old Testament:

And the people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.” So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery

serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived. (Numbers 21:5-9)

They spoke against God and Moses, so God allowed them to be poisoned. In a very real way, they became contaminated with poison. The only antidote available was confessing what they had done and looking to a type of Calvary, which would result in their cleansing, forgiveness, and healing. If there remains any doubt about the connection between bitterness, speaking against others, and becoming poisoned by serpents, consider the following text in its context:

As it is written: “There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.” (Romans 3:10-14)

The oft-quoted adage, how bitterness is described as drinking poison while hoping the other person dies, is very real. Bitterness can kill us, both spiritually and physically. Sometimes, this happens in obvious and dramatic ways, but all too often it seems to be almost imperceptible to the ones bitten, until their lives gradually grind to a halt. This reminds me of another way the enemy tries to stop us in our tracks—by putting sand in our gas tanks.

DEFILED BY BITTERNESS

Defilement can happen in a number of ways. We are defiled whenever we commit acts of uncleanness that will separate us from the Lord. We can also become defiled when we are bitter at God. The enemy does this by suggesting God is responsible for all that has gone wrong in our lives. He would also love to succeed at making us bitter with each other because he knows this will eventually interfere with our relationship with the Lord as well. All he needs is an accumulation of small offences to build up, like sand, until we stall. Our relationship with the Lord is only as open and responsive as our relationship with His people. The enemy knows that the “beauty” of bitterness is that it not only defiles us, but it is easily passed on and will eventually infect and affect the spiritual lives of those around us.

Let’s look more closely at this issue of being defiled by bitterness. Here is what the writer of Hebrews said about the root of bitterness and how it affects our relationships:

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled. (Hebrews 12:14-15)

From these verses, it is difficult to discern which is more important to the Lord—that we pursue peace with all people or that we pursue holiness. These two things are more closely linked

than we realize. We are to be aggressive in maintaining peace with each other, just as we are to maintain our personal purity, because we need both to be at peace in our relationship with the Lord.

The word *defile* is always used in the context of separating man from God, or man from man:

DEFILED GK. 3392 *miaino*; to sully or taint, i.e. to contaminate (ceremonially or morally):— defile.

We usually think of someone becoming defiled by a sin, like fornication, but we see here that we can actually become just as defiled by bitterness. The writer of Hebrews goes on to describe bitterness as something that can move from heart to heart, home to home, and church to church.

One man's bitterness has the ability to defile many. For example, how many times have we heard of an embattled pastor who resigns because of some conflict with a few people within the church? This not only affects him and his family, but also the life of the entire church. Often, those most affected by this fragmentation are the young people or unstable believers, causing them to drift away in disillusionment. It can also cause irreparable damage in the eyes of the community where that church is supposed to be a light. Unresolved conflicts and the bitterness that often ensues can trouble many, keeping them all from going on with God.

How many times have we heard of a husband who becomes bitter at his wife? He leaves her, making her bitter. Their children are also troubled. I have found it nearly impossible to get any of these people to whole-heartedly serve the Lord after this, especially the children. The husband's bitterness troubles many. I've watched bitterness make its way gradually through an entire family. It appears to even cross generational lines, being passed on from the grandparents through to the grandchildren. I have seen wives become bitter, too, and that has all kinds of side effects, including ruining their health and tainting all their other relationships with mistrust.

As a pastor, I have seen many people move from one church to another, with their families in tow, unable to settle into the body life of a fellowship because of past wounds, unresolved conflicts, and the resulting bitterness. Often, they are hurting people who hurt others, usually with what they say, until eventually they quit going to church altogether. For some reason, they do not equate their broken relationships with people to their broken relationship with the Lord. Bitterness slowly, almost imperceptibly, ruins their relationship with the Lord. This is one of the most devastating effects of sin and bitterness: They choke out spiritual life.

I believe that, if there are enough unresolved conflicts in a church, they will stop its growth and development. The enemy will use this small but effective means to try to stop the life flow of our churches or our own personal growth. Learning how to live a life of wholesome confronting can stop this. I have been experimenting with creating a culture of confronting in our church for a number of years now, training our people how to do it the right way. I can testify that, as a church, it has spared us inestimable grief. We have had very little turnover in our membership and see lots of healthy relationships. Do we have conflicts? Sure. All the time. But we have come to understand that the Lord does not mind our having conflicts, providing we are willing to deal

with them in the manner He prescribes. If we refuse to clear our offenses and breakdowns, we allow the lion to come in, walk away with people in his jaws, and poison their wounds with his toxic mouth. It can keep our flock from growing, spiritually or otherwise.

SEPERATING US FROM THE LORD

We also know it can prevent the presence of the Lord from being apparent in our churches and in our individual devotional lives. This is too high a price to pay. Early in our church's development, the Lord taught us that there is a direct link between the quality of our relationship with each other and the quality of our relationship with Him. In Psalm 15, David asked:

Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in thy Holy Hill? (v. 1)

He was asking who could dwell where God dwells or who could abide in His presence. Here was the Lord's reply:

He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart; he who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend; in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but he honors those who fear the Lord; he who swears to his own hurt and does not change; he who does not put out his money at usury, nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. (vv. 2-5)

Notice that all these things are relational. I am speaking of our relationships with people, not the Lord. The quality of our relationship with the Lord is either enhanced or blocked in proportion to our relationship with others. If He seems distant or aloof, check who you have become distant or aloof with in your close relationships.

I think that one reason the Lord hates this behavior is that this is what Lucifer did to Him, causing one third of the angels of heaven to forsake the Lord. Then, the whispering serpent tried the same tactic on Eve in the garden, causing man to reject the Lord.

I hate being talked about behind my back. The Lord also hates this practice, as seen in Proverbs 6:16-19 where it says there are six "yea" seven, to use King James English, things that He hates:

1. A proud look,
2. A lying tongue,
3. Hands that shed innocent blood,
4. A heart that devises wicked imaginations,
5. Feet that are swift in running to mischief,
6. A false witness that sows lies,

7. And he that sows discord among brethren.

None of these sins affect us alone. They are all social sins that affect us *and* those around us. Anytime someone does or says something that divides brethren, they are sowing discord. The word *discord* is from the Hebrew, listed in the *Strong's Concordance* (HEB. 4066) as a "contest or quarrel, a contention or strife."

If sharing the faults of a friend with another causes a quarrel, contention, or separation, we are sowing discord. While this may not be the intended goal, it is often the consequence of repeating the offenses of another.

King David's policy is similar to the Lord's, and one we should adopt toward those who come to us to complain about another. He wrote about this in Psalm 101:5:

Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will destroy; the one who has a haughty look and a proud heart, him I will not endure.

The Living Bible renders this as, "I will not tolerate anyone who secretly slanders his neighbors; I will not permit conceit and pride."

I have wondered about the use of the agricultural term *sowing* as it relates to spreading division. When someone comes to us to speak against another, it is like weed seed that is inserted into our hearts. It may not seem unmanageable at first, as it is a small seed. Then, it begins to grow within us, multiplying until it chokes out any love we had for the one who was spoken against. It also has the potential to keep multiplying and affecting the spiritual lives of others. If the conflict could be limited to the two parties involved, it would effectively keep the seed of division from being spread by the enemy.

Whether it is sand, seed, or something septic, let's ask the Lord to flush our hearts with forgiveness. Let's ask Him to wash away any of the words we have spoken against one another. Let's forgive those who have rejected and hurt us. Let's look for the mercy of God for them, even as we want it for ourselves.

GOD WILL SHOW YOU A TREE

There is an interesting story in Exodus 15:22-25 about the journey of Israelites after they left Egypt. It depicts something most believers experience early in their own journey. One of the first places the Israelites came to on their journey only had bitter water to drink. They called the place *Marah*, which means bitterness. They were thirsty after three days of walking in the wilderness, so they complained against Moses. He, in turn, cried out to the Lord, who showed him a tree. He was told to cast it into the bitter waters so they would become sweet.

The same thing happens today. We come to a place of bitterness, start complaining, and then, when we cry out to the Lord, He does the same thing to us as He did to Moses. He shows

us a tree with a blood-soaked Man hanging on it. It is the only remedy for bitterness. We must go to the cross, both to give and receive the forgiveness needed to flush our hearts of this dreadful disease.

As I pastor, I often see new believers being given an opportunity to be offended and hurt in their relationships, whether it is in the church or in their own family. I would do anything to keep this from happening, but as I watch them cry out to the Lord for help, He always shows them a tree. This tree is in the shape of a cross. It is here they discover that they are loved as much as the person who hurt them, and that forgiveness flows freely towards the offender as well as the offended, even as they freely forgive.

It is interesting to note that, as Jesus hung on the cross, He refused to drink from a sponge filled with bitter wine. It was meant to lesson His pain. He did not want to take the easy way out. He did not want to lessen the pain. This is a great example to us. So often, we cut corners, looking for the easy way out, taking the road of least resistance, and doing whatever it takes to lessen the pain.

LEARNING TO CONFRONT

Jesus did not say, “Bury the offenses committed against thee.” Nor did He say, “Ignore or avoid those who do or say things that hurt thee.” To do this would make you a candidate for bitterness, which will eventually contaminate your relationship with others and your relationship with the Lord. He tells us to go to the person who trespassed against us and tell him his fault.

The word *confront* comes from two Latin words: *com* (which means, together) and *frons* (which means, forehead or front). It describes two people meeting *face-to-face* to talk. Although it is not a Bible word, the concept is referred to or demonstrated often in both Testaments. It is important to our spiritual, mental, and social well-being that we learn to confront and do it often. The alternative is to keep everything bottled up, letting bitterness set in. The bitterness creates a wound that will attract the lions who slowly eat away at our souls until they kill our spiritual life.

Sometimes, bitterness is an indicator of a hardened heart. Broken relationships and conflicts, as we have discussed already, without forgiveness can cause bitterness to take root.

ANTIBIOTIC FORGIVENESS

If it seems like you have to forgive constantly and wish I could do it once and for all, there is another way to approach it. I recently came across a helpful insight in a book called *Limping Through Forgiveness*,⁵ in which the author says forgiveness is more like taking an antibiotic than an aspirin. It is not something you do a few times when you are in pain, but you take it more like an antibiotic, for many days after the symptoms have ceased. You do this so your “disease” does not come back later, even worse than before, or become resistant to treatment. You do it

consistently and completely. An incomplete forgiveness leaves us stuck in the past, rehashing old hurts, reopening old wounds. Here is the verse that links our need to forgive others the same way Jesus forgave us:

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:30-32)

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN YOU HAVE REACHED THE FINAL LEVEL?

How will you know when the process of forgiveness is complete, having reached the deepest level? In general, I would say forgiveness is complete when the hurt does not come to mind as often, when there is no inner avoidance (trying to bury it), no need to distance yourself from where it took place, no need to tell others of the wrong that had been committed against you, no desire for vengeance, no pleasure taken in your enemies' subsequent suffering or loss, or no negative reaction when their names are mentioned. You are well on the other side of it when all your negative feelings have been replaced with a deep sense of God's love for those who hurt you.

What would happen if we decided to use every remembrance of an offense we experienced as an opportunity to marvel at the fact that the Lord has also forgiven us? There have been times when we have been guilty of wronging others—times when we have needed and received forgiveness ourselves. David called this *the blessedness of forgiveness*:

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Psalm 32:1-2)

The apostle Paul used the same verse to show how this same blessedness is available to us today:

But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin." (Romans 4:5-8)

Let's practice receiving this blessedness into our hearts until it fills us with wonder, joy, and deep gratitude. Stay with it until it causes praise to bubble up in your heart. Take time to drink it in, receiving His love afresh. From this, we should have more fuel to love others, and we will keep bitterness at bay, rejecting the sense of rejection and putting the need for revenge aside. I have done this in order to deal quickly with feelings of unforgiveness, not allowing them to remain, for my own spiritual and physical health.

ROCKS IN OUR WELLS

One time as I walked along a trail in Alaska one time, I happened to notice a spring of water pouring out of the ground. Just a few yards from where it was gushing out, a small stream emerged that further down became a river. It is not very often that we get to see the source of a river.

In John 7:37-39, Jesus talked about a spiritual river that would flow in and out of our hearts:

On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Jesus said this as if it was to be the norm for each of us who believe on Him. He wants a river of life flowing through us, not just for our benefit, but to impact others with His life. This is true for us personally and for our churches, which should also have a river flowing through them.

We can accurately tell what is in people's hearts by what flows out of their mouths and actions. These flow out like a river. In Proverbs 4:23, the writer talked about this river, telling us to keep our *"heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life."* Another translation says, *"Guard your heart."*

The enemy's goal is to put sand in our hearts, stopping the flow, keeping the life that is supposed to flow in and through us. This is best illustrated in an Old Testament story that is found in Genesis 26, where we read about Isaac who had an experience with his wells being blocked. The context for this encounter with God came during a difficult time, a famine, where nothing grew. Isaac packed up his family and left home, heading towards Egypt where things were better. He got as far as the coastal land of the Philistines, in a place called Gerar, when the Lord appeared to him, saying,

Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you. Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your descendants I give all these lands, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws. (vv. 2-5)

All of this was a major revelation to Isaac. The Lord was essentially saying: "The way I was with Abraham is the way I will be with you. The way Abraham walked with Me is the way I want you to walk, too." Isaac became aware of God's blessing on his life from that moment on.

In verse 6, we read where Isaac continued to live among the Philistines in Gerar and began to take his first steps of faith. He obeyed the Lord and stayed in a land of famine and hardship,

and he sowed his precious seed. He was about to take the same faith walk that Abraham did in order to know the Lord. You cannot have one without the other. In verse 12, Isaac sowed seed during a time of famine, which could have been used for food to get him through the next few months, but instead he walked out into the dry soil and broadcast it the way he normally would. You have to have “something under the hood” to do this kind of thing—sowing into soil where nothing grows. That takes faith!

We are told that he reaped in the same year a hundredfold because the Lord blessed him! Each seed produced a hundred seeds without fail. What an amazing combination of his faith and God’s blessing.

In verses 13 through 14, it says that Isaac *“began to prosper, and continued prospering until he became very prosperous; for he had possessions of flocks and possessions of herds and a great number of servants. So the Philistines envied him.”*

They resented him because they envied his success! It was also because of envy that the religious leaders decided to crucify Jesus (Matthew 27:18).

Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, told Isaac, *“Go away from us, for you are much mightier than we”* (v. 16). That was the real issue right there. They were afraid and envious.

Here is where we begin to apply the opening verses about a spring of water flowing in and out of each of us. In verse 15, we are told the Philistines had stopped up all the wells that Abraham’s servants had dug by filling them with dirt, rocks, and gravel.

Isaac left Abimelech’s region and began to re-dig these old wells until he found running water there. He tapped into the original springs that fed these wells and sustained life in this desert region.

But Abimelech’s herdsmen came along and quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen, saying, “This water is ours.” So he renamed the well “Esek,” because they quarreled with him and walked away. We can do that when we are aware of God’s blessing on us. It does not matter what others try to do to us. Others can be against us—take advantage of us—but we don’t have to resist them because it is not about a lucky location. It is about the blessing of God that is not limited by location; it is only limited by our obedience and walk with Him.

In verse 21, it says they went and dug another well and the same herdsmen quarreled over that one as well. Then, Isaac moved again and dug another well, which they did not quarrel over. So he called its name “Rehoboth,” because he said, *“For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.”*

Next, Isaac went up from there to Beersheba, where the Lord appeared to him that very night, saying, *“I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you and multiply your descendants for My servant Abraham’s sake.”* (v. 24)

Wouldn't it be nice to be assured that the Lord is pleased with us and there is nothing to be afraid of? That His blessing is upon us wherever we go and whatever we do? Isaac bowed down and worshipped the Lord. He built an altar right then and there, calling upon the name of the Lord. He pitched his tent and ordered his servants to start digging another well.

In verses 26 through 29, we are told that Abimelech and his friends came out to where Isaac was and humbly admitted to him,

We have certainly seen that the Lord is with you. Let there now be an oath between us, between you and us; and let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no harm, since we have not touched you, and since we have done nothing to you but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the Lord.

This was not true, but by this time it did not matter what they said or what they tried to do. Isaac did not even need to hear this because he was now aware that God was watching and what He said about him was all that really mattered. So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. You can do that to those who have treated you wrongfully because that is the way the Lord is.

In verse 32, it says that, after this, Isaac's servants came and told him that they just hit another spring and the well they were digging was flowing with water.

Now, back to the point. In John 7:37-39, Jesus talked about a spiritual river that should flow in and out of our hearts. We are also told in Proverbs 4:23 to keep our hearts *"with all diligence, for out of [them] spring the issues of life."* There is a spring of life in each of us, which the enemy would like to fill with dirt, rocks, and gravel—anything to stop life from flowing in and through us. He did this to Abraham's wells, and he will do it to ours, if we let him. We learn from the verse in Proverbs that it is our responsibility, not God's, to guard our hearts and to keep the life flowing. In our churches, the enemy will try and fill our wells with enough rocks and dirt to stop the life from flowing. Someone has to re-dig the well. God will not do it. That is our responsibility. I have seen them dig wells by hand in India. It is a tough job; it is a difficult and dirty job. But they stay with it until they hit the life-spring again. That's what we must do.

What are the rocks that fill our wells? It can be anything, but it is often a bunch of small stuff like the sands of bitterness that sink in so silently we are hardly aware the water has stopped flowing. All of us have been disappointed by those who have left our churches and no longer worship with us, but let's flush away these hurts with forgiveness and see if life does not begin to flow again. Let's get rid of any hardness of heart towards each other, any barriers of mistrust that we have built. Let's remove any ideas that we let hinder us from giving, loving, and worshiping the Lord. You can tell if a heart has been filled with rocks or sand because there is an inability to really worship the Lord. One of the first things to go when we have our hearts hardened, is worship. Conversely, one of the first things we find our heart doing within us when we are set free is worship.

Let's ask Him what the rocks are. Let's be diligent to dig out whatever He shows us. We want life to flow again. We want the blessing of the Lord on all we say and do, no matter what others have done or will do to us. We need to procure the blessing of the Lord by our response to what men may do. Amen!

A QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE TO FORGIVENESS

- ✓ We forgive out of obedience.
- ✓ We forgive others in order to be forgiven.
- ✓ We forgive to get free from the tormentors.
- ✓ We forgive for the sake of our own health and peace.
- ✓ We want complete forgiveness for them, the same way God completely forgave us.
- ✓ Then, we begin to show our forgiveness through acts of kindness and generosity.
- ✓ Then, we come into the kind of forgiveness that our heavenly Father exercises on the just and unjust.
- ✓ Then, we become more like Him.
- ✓ Then, we forgive others so they can get free.
- ✓ Then, we forgive others for the sake of their own health and peace.
- ✓ Then, we forgive others so there are no consequences, no charges, and no remembrance of what they did to us when they stand before Jesus on the Judgment Day.

“As I walked out the door to the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I did not leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I would still be in prison.” — Nelson Mandela⁶

REFERENCES

1. To find the complete bitterness test, which was written by Bunny Wilson in *Betrayal's Baby*, write to this address: P.O. Box 2601, Pasadena, CA 91102. The address was provided on the screen of a TBN telecast.
2. The Oxford English Dictionary was edited by John Simpson and Edmund Weiner. It was published in 1989 by the Oxford University Press.
3. *None of these Diseases* was written by S. I. McMillen, MD. It was published in 1963 by Fleming H. Revell Company, New Jersey.
4. Professor John Eadie wrote that *pikria* is “a figurative term denoting that fretted and irritable state of mind that keeps a man in perpetual animosity—that inclines him to harsh and uncharitable opinions of men and things—that makes him sour, crabbed, and repulsive in his general demeanor—that brings a scowl over his face, and infuses venom into the words of his tongue” (*A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*, p. 357, published in 1883 by T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, Scotland).
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6. Nelson Mandela quotation - Long Walk to Freedom - Autobiography of Nelson Mandela Published in 1995 by Back Bay Books.

Stopping The Mouths of Lions - The Battle for Your Heart Is in Your Head

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Levels of Forgiveness—From Head to Heart 2017 © Copyright by Penn Clark Published by Wordsmith Publishing of Penn Yan, New York

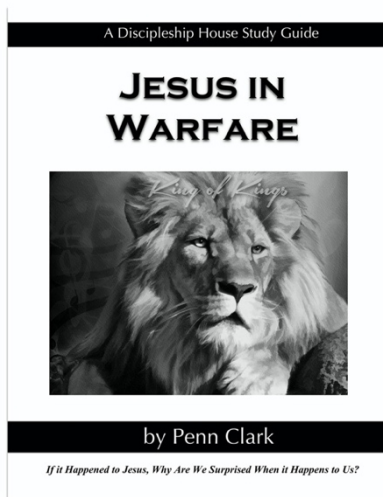
COMPANION EDITIONS

I wrote *Jesus in Warfare* and *Stopping the Mouths of Lions* at the same time, over a thirty-year period. I had always seen them as two parts to the same book, but the more I wrote the more I realized they were two distinct aspects of spiritual warfare. *Jesus in Warfare* deals with what happens to us through people while *Stopping the Mouths of Lions* addresses what happens to us in our heads. Both books are over 100 pages in length, beautifully printed, with many practical assignments and space to include your own notes and a large Q & A sections appear in the latter portions of both books that shed more light on spiritual warfare.

JESUS IN WARFARE

During a time when I felt particularly embattled in my ministry, I decided to study what Jesus taught and demonstrated in terms of personal spiritual warfare. I took a paperback edition of the Bible and, with an orange highlighter, began to mark the occasions when Jesus was in some form of spiritual conflict.

My criteria for defining warfare were the moments when the enemy tried to hurt Jesus or hinder Him from fulfilling His purpose. I marked out every time His life was threatened or He was assaulted with physical violence, false accusation, slander, betrayal, plotting, traps and trickery, deceit, gossip, condemnation, intimidation, name-calling, and other forms of rejection. He also experienced what is now called “spiritual abuse” by the hands of those who were in authority. These are all the same tools the enemy uses against us today.



Once I completed the mark-up, I fanned through the four gospels with my thumb and was amazed to see how orange it was. Jesus was in constant conflict from conception to the cross.

I began to see a pattern of how the devil preferred to use those who were closest to Jesus to hurt and hinder Him. For example, he used Judas Iscariot because of his proximity to Jesus. Then, there was Peter. One minute he was speaking revelation by the Spirit and the next minute he was being used by the enemy to prevent Jesus from fulfilling His purpose.

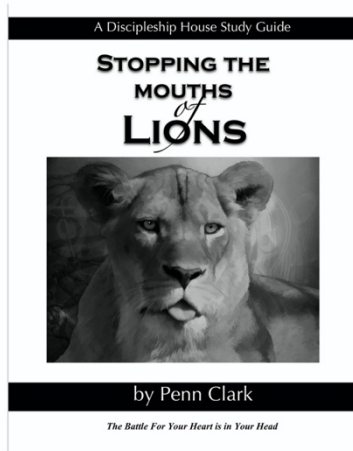
None of us like the idea that the enemy can momentarily use those who are closest to us in order to speak aloud those things that he wants spoken, often hurting and hindering us.

The fact is, the enemy wants to use the closest warm body to us to keep us from doing the will of God. He could use a family member, a friend, a pastor, or a board member, anyone who is supportive one minute and then can be pitted against us the next. He knows that this can blow us away more thoroughly than if he used someone we don't know.

If it happened to Jesus, why should we be surprised when it happens to us?

STOPPING THE MOUTHS OF LIONS

The apostle Peter gave a graphic reminder to pastors about our adversary who, like a roaring lion, is roaming around seeking whom he may devour. It was popular in the early 1980s to proclaim that the devil was only a "roaring" lion because Jesus had kicked out his teeth at Calvary. This was a real crowd pleaser, intended to reduce our fears that the devil could really hurt us. I



I understand the sentimentality behind this idea, and agree that we should not be intimidated by the devil's roar, yet this notion minimizes the fact that Peter was warning us of a very real danger. He said that the devil is seeking whom he *may devour*. All we have to do is look at the number of Christians who are out of the race, or how many ministers have been removed from ministry, before we dismiss the devil as toothless. This warning clearly states that the enemy cannot devour us at will but, if we let him, he can and will. We may not always be aware that he is doing this because he tends to devour people from the inside out. Peter's description of Satan as a lion is right on and, just like this predator, his hunting strategies are ancient, predictable, and few.

When the enemy eats someone, he always eats their heart first, removing their passion, zeal, and spiritual life. I have seen pastors eaten from the inside out. They go through the motions, but they have no heart for the people, the lost, or the hurting. They care more about their "ministry" than they care about people.

Here are some other facts about the way lions hunt:

- Lions roam the darkness where some Christians carelessly stray.
- Lions watch for those who become isolated from the flock.
- Lions tend to prey on the young and the weak.
- Lions prey on the sick.
- They divide and conquer. All our enemy needs is an issue, preferably a non-essential one, which will generate enough mistrust and confusion to divide us.

They are available both in print and as e-books on our online bookstore at www.wordsmith-py.com

OTHER BOOKS BY PENN CLARK

I have written two other books that deal with recovering our relationships. They are:

KOINONIA KILLERS - This is a study about the things that run our fellowship with God and man.

COMMUNION ON THE MOON - This is a study about the real purpose of communion.

