



Transforming the Bitter



**1 Peter
3:3–4**

“Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.”

**Ephesians
4:29**

“Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.”

**Proverbs
31:10, 26**

“Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies . . . She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness.”



What's Inside?

1. God wants us to transform spiritually.
2. The transformation process may be long, messy, and uncomfortable.
3. People react differently to trials. Some end up bitter. Some end up better.
4. Only through the unique sweetness found in Christ can we help others. (Sometimes we help by refusing to help!)

Law of Kindness

Like chocolate, life requires a transformation process to become sweet. Peter tells us to have a meek and gentle spirit (1 Peter 3:3–4). Proverbs 31:26 urges us to have the law of kindness on our tongues. Sometimes it is hard to be sweet, isn't it? Of course!

- * When somebody jumps ahead of you in line at the grocery store.
- * When someone says something uncomplimentary about your child.

❁ When you are at a yard sale and somebody grabs an item you saw first.

❁ When someone starts an untrue rumor about you.

Do these situations call for revenge? No, we are Christians. And when we made the decision to follow Him, we were transformed—we became Christlike.

Paul directs us, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

Becoming Sweet

Becoming sweet may be a long and messy transformation process for some new Christians. What a wonderful coincidence—our tasty chocolate bar also experienced a similar metamorphosis! Chocolate in its raw form does not taste anything like the final product. The seeds from a cacao tree are bitter and astringent with a slightly nutty and floral overtone, in texture somewhat like unripe beans. The pulp that surrounds each seed has the flavor of a Sweet Tart. But yuk! Spit out the seeds. Bringing out the wonderful flavor we identify as “Ah, it’s chocolate!” is a complex process. The Encarta Online dictionary explains it like this:

Chocolate causes certain endocrine glands to secrete hormones that affect your feelings and behavior by making you happy. Therefore, it counteracts depression, in turn reducing the stress of depression. Your stress-free life helps you maintain a youthful disposition, both physically and mentally. So eat lots of chocolate!

—Elaine Sherman

Chocolate manufacturers begin with cacao seeds. They are warmed and allowed to ferment in a pulpy state for three to nine days. The seeds dry and turn brown. Enzymes within the pulp are activated to release substances that will later produce the special flavor. The

beans are dried, cleaned, and roasted to bring out that characteristic chocolate flavor. Then they are put into a crushing machine that shells and grinds them into chocolate. During this process, the fat melts and produces a liquid called chocolate liquor. This liquid may be used to make chocolate candy or it may be filtered (removing the fat), cooled, and ground to produce cocoa powder.

All of the evil that people have thrust upon chocolate is really more deserved by milk chocolate, which is essentially contaminated. The closer you get to a pure chocolate liquor (the chocolate essence ground from roasted cacao beans) the purer it is, the more satisfying it is, the safer it is, and the healthier it is.

—Arnold Ismach, “The Darker Side of Chocolate”

What a long, complex, and messy process to produce this delicious product!

Sometimes we, too, have to go through heated, uncomfortable trials in order to become sweet and lovable. Teddy Copeland’s *Playing the Hand You Are Dealt* describes women who have gone through tough times: widowhood, loss of a child, and terminal illness of a loved one. These women confronted difficulties head on and overcame them.

In chapter 13 Teddy relates the event of a woman who dealt with her son’s incarceration for illegal alcohol and drug activities. Here is her transformation:

“At first,” Darrollene continues, “I thought I could’ve accepted Ryan’s death easier than all this. But now I am so thankful that God gave him another chance. I see now that God knew what was best. All of us are much more spiritual now. I can say from the bottom of my heart that I would do it all again for God to get the glory for the changes I have seen in my family” (Teddy Copeland, *Playing the Hand You Are Dealt*, Lambert Book House, Inc., 1997, page 92).

Our challenge is to accept our sufferings with the attitude of “Why not me?” rather than “Why me?” The Christian woman knows that,

bitterness: marked by intensity or severity:
 a: accompanied by severe pain or suffering,
 a bitter death
 b: being relentlessly determined: vehement, a bitter
 partisan
 c: exhibiting intense animosity, bitter enemies
 d: (1) harshly reproachful, bitter complaints
 (2) marked by cynicism and rancor.

like chocolate, she can become sweet in the process of being crushed. That is the goal—be sweet, not bitter. James 1:2–5 tells us to count it all joy when trials come to us because they help us to develop patience and Christian maturity. J. B. Phillips translates the text like this:

When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my [sisters], don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realize that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become [women] of mature character with the right sort of independence. And if, in the process, any of you does not know how to meet any particular problem, [she] has only to ask God—who gives generously . . . without making [her] feel foolish or guilty—and [she] may be quite sure that the necessary wisdom will be given [her].

Why is it so difficult for us to welcome trials as friends, not intruders? What is our help if we do not know how to meet a problem?

Name one of the strongest, most godly people you know. How did a specific trial influence that person's spirituality?

Carrot, Egg, or Coffee Bean?

Life was not treating Jennifer very well—at least, that's what she thought—so she dressed Sara, jumped into the car, and drove across town to visit the best counselor she knew.

"Mother," she began, after quietly entering the living room she knew so well, "Rob's having to spend a lot more time at the office with his new promotion, Sara's cutting teeth, and my house looks like a train wreck, to say nothing of my hair and nails. When I solve one problem, two more jump into my life. I'm frustrated!"

"Oh, dear," Mother said sympathetically. "Let's go into the kitchen."

Jennifer followed her mother into another very familiar room of her "old" house and dropped into a dining chair, Sara in her lap. Without saying a word, Mother filled three pots with water and set them on burners. The flames leaped under them.

Jennifer watched in silence.

Mother took an egg and a carrot from the refrigerator and dropped them into separate pots. Then she scooped a bit of coffee from a canister and dumped it into the last pot.

Mother pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. They sat in silence. Even Sara was quiet.

The water in all three pots came to a boil. After a few minutes Mother rose from the table, fished the carrot out and into a bowl, broke and peeled the egg, and ladled a bit of coffee into a cup. Then she moved the carrot, egg, and coffee to the table.

“Tell me, Jennifer, what do you see?”

“A carrot, an egg, and coffee,” she replied.

“Test the carrot,” Mother said.

Jennifer touched it with a fork and lifted it to her mouth. “The hard carrot is now soft,” she replied.

“Now test the ‘liquid’ egg.”

Jennifer stuck her fork into it, dug out a bit of yellow, and put it into her mouth. “It’s hard-boiled—no longer liquid.”

“Now try the coffee.”

Jennifer picked up the cup, savored the aroma, and touched her lips to the liquid. “It’s rich and delicious,” she said. “So what are you telling me, Mother?”

Mother explained, “Each of these objects faced the same adversity—boiling water—but each reacted differently. The carrot was hard and unrelenting, but the boiling water broke down those hard fibers and made the carrot soft.

I don’t understand why so many “so called” chocolate lovers complain about the calories in chocolate, when all true chocoholics know that it is a vegetable. It comes from the cocoa bean and beans are veggies. Nuff said.

“The eggs were liquid. That thin, fragile shell was their total protection. But after sitting through the boiling water, the insides hardened.

“The situation of the coffee is different. The boiling water seemed strong and independent, but guess what. When it attacked the coffee, the coffee fought back and changed the composition of the water.”

Jennifer dropped her head. “I’ve got it, Mother. Adversity affects people differently—according to the strength of their character.”

“So what is your present ‘character’ status, Jennifer? Is it as strong as it was when you stood strongly for right during your high school years?”

“Mother, it seems I’ve slipped a bit, but give me a couple of days with my God and His Word and the answer will be yes—even stronger!”

The problem:

How to get two pounds of chocolate home from the store in a hot car.

The solution:

Eat it in the parking lot.



Which am I? Am I the carrot that seems strong but, with pain and adversity, do I wilt and become soft and lose my strength? Am I the egg that starts with a malleable heart, but changes with the heat? Did I once have a fluid spirit but, after a death, a breakup, or a financial hardship, does my shell now look the same, but on the inside am I bitter and tough with a stiff spirit and a hardened heart?

Or am I the coffee that actually changes the water? Do I interact with the circumstances that bring pain and force them to release their fragrance and flavors?

When the hours are the darkest and trials reach their apex, do you rise to another level? When things are at their worst, if you find strength to change the situation for the better, then you are like the coffee. How do you handle adversity? Are you a carrot, an egg, or a coffee bean?

Everyone has problems: sickness; grief over the loss of a loved one; financial issues; emotional issues of anger, anxiety, or addiction—we could go on and on. Everyone has problems! In fact, some people who seem happiest have more problems than even their friends can imagine. But with God’s help, use their problems to transform their lives.



Judi's Sweets

All three of our children were born with physical disabilities. Have they plucked bitterness from life's tree as a result? Read on and see for yourself.

Firstborn son Phil and lastborn daughter Micah have epidermylosis bullosa, a fancy name for a blistering skin disorder. The hereditary birth condition instigates production of only two layers of skin instead of three. Hands and feet blister when exposed to common activities. One or two trips across the monkey bars or one day of sports training may produce blisters that cover the hands and feet. No, not the normal blisters you might get from a new pair of shoes, but quarter-sized sores pushing toes apart.

We have often watched Phil and Micah hobble. They wanted stylish shoes, but their wishes could not always be met. Happily, they could participate in some sports, especially as they got older and learned to maneuver around their challenges.

Garrett, our middle child, has Tourette's syndrome. The condition seems invisible now, since he has outgrown many of the symptoms. But when he was in the fourth and fifth grades, it was a major issue. He would twitch and jerk and make unintelligible noises. Life was rough for him at school, at church, and in general.

I am happy to say that the kids did not let their problems control them. Phil could not excel in sports, but he had no problem sitting still and letting his mind work. He developed a tremendous musical talent.



Garrett learned to laugh through the teasing about his twitches and noises and developed a sensitivity that propelled him into social work. Also, the obsessive compulsive disorder that is often associated with Tourette's syndrome helped him in perfecting his basketball and drumming skills.

Because of her challenges in growing up, Micah learned to listen and empathize with others. She was affectionately known by close friends as the "psychologist of Dixon basement" while in college. Later, her compassion and caring attitude led her into a career in a pediatric office.

Through trials, all three of my children became better instead of bitter.

The following responses to trials are found in
1 Corinthians 4:12-13: we labor; we bless; we endure;
we entreat. What are the trials? How are these responses
both positive and Christlike?

In Ephesians 4:31, bitterness is listed with a host of other sins. Considering the definition given earlier and the sins listed with bitterness, what sinful actions can come out of bitterness?

Exodus 1:14 says that the Egyptians made the lives of the Israelites bitter with hard bondage. How can the actions of other people cause bitterness in us?

How do you respond to trials? Do you look for the good in every situation or do you see only the negative? How can we, with a negative attitude, bring others to Christ? Are they really attracted to Christianity when we send out this message: “Come worship with us. We’re a bunch of miserable folks and you can be too! We will help you grow to become like us!” No! Negativity repels; it does not attract.

Someone once said, “You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” A sweet attitude reflects Christ in our lives. He did not die that we might have a poor, wretched, miserable life. He came that we might have life and “have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). He came

to bring us joy. “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!”
(Philippians 4:4).

Read Philippians 4 and note resources that helped Paul to be positive in his poor circumstances, even while he was in a Roman prison.

List two challenges you have faced in the past. Consider your responses. Did you become bitter or better as a result of those experiences?

When we talk with someone who is going through difficult times, we must let our Christian sweetness show. It may be tempting to say, “My aunt died of that” or “You think you’ve got it bad. When my sister’s husband left, she had to . . . ” Such calloused emotions turn people off.

If we want to reach others with the gospel, we must season our words, make them appetizing—like delicious chocolate. Can you imagine that before the 1880s chocolate bars were hard, brittle, and difficult to swallow? Then Rudolphe Lindt of Bern, Switzerland, created a recipe that attracted many to this sweet treat. He added cocoa butter during the manufacturing process. His goal was to make the candy smoother and glossier. But there was a serendipitous result. Cocoa butter melts at human body temperature, 97 degrees Fahrenheit, and therefore, that gentle adjustment made chocolate better—more palatable and more popular. It melts in your mouth!

In the same manner, our words must be softened so they will melt in the hearts of our listeners.

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers (Ephesians 4:29).

Lost and hurting people need positive words. Like chocolate, they need a little sweetness. We can best serve others only when we have been transformed into the gentle, sweet likeness of Christ.



A gentle answer
turns away
wrath, but a
harsh word
stirs up anger.

—Proverbs 15:1 NASB

What are some practical ways we can “be transformed” as we are instructed in Romans 12:2? (Keep in mind that transformation requires a “renewing of the mind.”)

In Exodus 15:22–25 the Israelites, three days into the wilderness of Shur, became very thirsty. They were elated to find water—until they tasted it. It was bitter. Moses asked the Lord what to do. The Lord showed him a tree and told him to cast it into the water. Upon doing so, the water became sweet. Explain how applying God’s instructions instead of insisting on applying our own solutions can transform bitterness into sweetness.



STIRRING SWEETNESS

1. Reflect on the lives of two godly women who have come through trials and been transformed into sweetness. How was their Christian influence enhanced? How did their experiences impact you? Write them a note of appreciation.
2. Determine to view your own trials in a different light. List some challenges you have experienced, and analyze your response to them in view of the scriptures we have examined this week.



WRAPPING IDEAS

Recipe Book. Bring your favorite chocolate recipe to your ladies' class and appoint a volunteer to put them into book form. Make sure everyone gets a copy. Then make extras to give to visitors, friends, newcomers in the community, and brides-to-be.

Dunca's Divine Divinity Candy

- 1 cup sugar
- 3 Tbsp corn syrup
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup water
- 1 egg white, beaten stiff
- $\frac{1}{3}$ Tsp vanilla

Bring sugar, syrup, and water to soft ball stage, about 230 degrees. Continue cooking, but meanwhile begin to beat egg whites. Stop cooking the candy mixture at hard ball stage, about 255 degrees. Pour mixture slowly with constant beating over egg whites. Beat until it takes shape (a dull gloss appearance). Add vanilla. Using 2 spoons, drop on waxed paper to form triangular-shaped candy.

Mama's Old Fashioned Fudge

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup cocoa

3 cups sugar

1 cup milk

Pinch of salt

Cook these in iron skillet over med-high heat until soft ball forms when dropped in cold water. Remove from heat and add:

$\frac{1}{2}$ stick butter

$\frac{1}{2}$ bag mini-marshmallows

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup nuts

1 Tsp vanilla

Stir quickly and pour into buttered dish. Cut and serve.

Mama's Old Fashioned Fudge (Revised)

Mom used to make this in an iron skillet. She used a cup of milk and put the butter in last. Using that much liquid took about 20 minutes to cook. This is an updated version with $\frac{1}{3}$ cup milk. (You get to eat it sooner!)

$\frac{1}{2}$ stick of margarine

1 cup sugar

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup cocoa

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup milk

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup peanut butter

1 Tsp vanilla

Nuts (optional) I use crunchy peanut butter so it has nuts already!

Mix together all except the peanut butter and vanilla. Bring to a boil over med-high heat and cook for 8 minutes or until soft ball forms in cold glass of water. Remove from heat and add peanut butter and vanilla. Stir quickly and pour onto a buttered dinner plate. Let cool and cut into squares. Enjoy!