

Hardening of the Arteries

Opening Hymn: #183—Watchfulness

“If a man thinks he is ‘somebody,’ he is deceiving himself, for that very thought proves that he is nobody. Let every man learn to assess properly the value of his own work and he can then be glad when he has done something worth doing **without depending on the approval of others**. For every man must ‘shoulder his own pack.’ Don’t be under any illusion: you cannot make a fool of God! A man’s harvest in life will depend entirely on what he sows. . . . Let us not grow tired of doing good, for, unless we throw in our hand, the ultimate harvest is assured.” —Gal. 6:3–5,7,9 [Phillips]

These words should cause us to think about what we’re sowing. Paul was not talking to babes who were starting their walk in the narrow way. He was talking to those who had been walking a long time and who might think they had walked long enough. But had they? Paul suggests the possibility that we could deceive ourselves into thinking God will reward us if we have the approval of others, or that even when we are doing what is good in God’s sight, we might stop doing it. And why might we stop? That’s a good question!

Arteriosclerosis was first used in 1829 to describe a condition commonly called “hardening of the arteries.” If a person smokes, has high blood pressure, or eats the wrong foods, his arteries can become constricted. The blood can’t flow as it should and this can cause a heart attack and death. Sometimes arteriosclerosis progresses rapidly with death coming less than a year after the first symptoms. Sometimes there is no progression. Generally the condition gradually worsens over a period of years. But if a person is properly motivated, he can lessen the condition and, as it were, “unharden” his arteries.

Paul saw that some Christians were suffering from a hardening of their spiritual arteries. The word “artery” does not, of course, appear in the Bible. But here’s a text that’s close:

Heb. 3:13–15 But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end. While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, **harden not your hearts**, as in the provocation.

“Hard hearted” is a well-known phrase. When the Israelites left Egypt, they were full of enthusiasm. They had seen seven plagues fall upon the Egyptians but not upon them. The greatest plague of all occurred when ALL the firstborn of Egypt died, but none of their own. They were suddenly rich since they were carrying away much of Egypt’s wealth. They saw the Egyptian army destroyed because of supernatural forces that protected them. But how quickly their enthusiasm changed!

1. Just three days into the wilderness they found undrinkable water and complained.
2. A month later they had nostalgia for the flesh pots of Egypt and complained.
3. After a few more weeks they complained again about the lack of water.
4. At the three month mark Moses is gone too long so they force Aaron to make them a golden calf because they wanted to **see** what they worshipped.

5. Finally, they accepted the report of the ten spies who told them they could never take the good land of Canaan because its inhabitants were too strong.

No wonder God called this a provocation. They not only had stiff necks, they had hardened hearts. Whatever God did for them was not enough. They expected all the comforts of their Egyptian home, the freedom to do as they pleased, and a special covenant relationship with God that excluded everyone else. But they could not make a fool of God. They harvested what they had sown and they all died in the wilderness.

1 Cor. 10:5,6 [NIV] God was not pleased with most of [our forefathers], so their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples, to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

The Greek word rendered “examples” means “types.” Paul says the experiences of natural Israel **typify** spiritual Israel. | Did they provoke God? So can we. | Did they suffer from unbelief? So can we. | Did they start well but end badly? So can we.

God has taken each of us out of the land of sin and death, and into a special covenant relationship to be His chosen people. He feeds us with daily heavenly manna. He fights for us against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Eph. 6:12) He is willing to bring us into a blessed land far exceeding anything we can imagine. And what does he expect from us? That we don’t harden our arteries [our heart]. Israel’s history seems to say that’s not so easy.

Example

Throughout the Gospel Age God has used human leaders for His work. Such leaders receive special trials and are held to higher standards:

James 3:1 [NIV] Not many of you should act as teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

But those whom God does NOT select as leaders also have special trials and tests. This is especially true with those who are close to someone the Lord is especially using:

Num. 12:1,2 And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses . . . and said, Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? hath he not spoken also by us?
And the Lord heard it.

As sister and brother of Moses, Miriam and Aaron already have more responsibility than almost anyone else, yet they want more. This is called a power play. Power plays occur whenever there are groups of human beings, even Bible Students. Someone wants more power and takes direct action to get it. Sometimes he succeeds, sometimes he doesn’t. Whenever I see a power play among brethren, I wonder what the person will do if he succeeds. Did Miriam and Aaron think they knew a shorter route into Canaan? Does someone who desperately wants to be an elder think he has unique insights that can only be conveyed in discourses from the platform? I guess the answer is yes. “And the Lord heard it.”

No one talks much about it but the wives of elders have their own special trials. Once in awhile every elder says something or does something that displeases others. No matter who you are, if something you

do or say is criticized, take a moment to think about it. Maybe the criticism is constructive. Mature elders do that. What about their wives? This can be a hard trial for them because it appears their “man” is under attack and they leap to his defense. Don’t do it. The Lord is quite able to defend His own.

There’s an interesting experience when David is being severely “criticized” and others leap to his defense. His reaction is instructive:

2 Sam. 16:5ff [NIV] Shimei cursed as he came out. He pelted David and all the king’s officials with stones. As he cursed, Shimei said, “Get out, get out, you man of blood, you scoundrel! . . . You have come to ruin because you are a man of blood!” [vs. 9] Then Abishai said to the king, “Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and cut off his head.” [vs. 11] [David responds] “Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am receiving today.”

Elders might ask themselves how they respond when others “curse” them. Abishai—like wives and others closely associated with a leader—is quick to say “off with his head” even though David certainly knows how to defend himself.

One example of the special trial that comes upon elders’ wives is illustrated by the wife of Bro. Russell. Undoubtedly she was a talented woman. When Bro. Russell was criticized, she made an extensive trip to defend him. She wrote articles that appeared in *The Watchtower* over her own name. One can almost see Miriam when Sr. Russell tried to gain more power and more influence. “Hath the Lord spoken only by my husband? Hath he not also spoken by me?” And the Lord heard it.

Those who already have power frequently want more. In Numbers chapter 16 an ambitious and influential Levite called Korah decides the time has come to execute a power play. He gets the support of the Reubenites, probably by suggesting that under his leadership they’ll inherit the double portion due them as Jacob’s firstborn, something which Moses would not give them. Korah resented how his uncle Amram’s two sons (Moses and Aaron)* had cornered the nation’s political and religious power for themselves. Although they had the same grandfather, they did not have the same status. Korah plotted his conspiracy carefully, and he had widespread support from nearly all Israel. He did NOT, of course, tell others about his own personal ambition. He DID talk about the general good of all. This is what he says to Moses and Aaron:

Num. 16:3 [NIV] “You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord’s assembly?”

Moses left the entire matter in the Lord’s hands. And God becomes angry and threatens to destroy the entire nation. But Moses argues that the problem is with one man, not with everyone (vs. 22). After the Lord shows his leadership choice by causing an earthquake to swallow up the tents of the rebels and fire to consume Korah and the 250 with him who are offering incense, one would have thought His selection was crystal clear. But these are people with very hard hearts:

* See Exod. 6:18,20,21

[vs. 41] The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. “You have killed the Lord’s people,” they said.

For the second time, God threatens to destroy the entire assembly. Moses and Aaron again intervene to save them, but only after 14,700 had died.

If someone wants power, he never suggests it is because of his own personal ambition. He wants it for YOUR good, or the good of some larger community to which you belong and for which he just happens to be speaking. Be very careful when you hear how bad off you are under present arrangements, and how much better you would be if only you supported someone else. If the Lord is really in charge of our life, our ecclesia arrangements, and our religious activities, He surely can bring down those in power and raise others when it is the right thing to do. Supporting the power plays of others rarely produces good. In Korah’s case, it produced a lot of death.

The Man of God

What should one do when one appears to be receiving conflicting signals? You think you know what is right—what God wants you to do—but along comes someone who claims superior knowledge who tells you something else. Eve in the garden of Eden is an example. She knows God’s will, she’s following it, she’s happy, and yet, when someone claiming superior insight appears, she listens to him. Disaster follows. A similar experience occurred with an unnamed “man of God” following the death of Solomon. The break-away ten-tribe northern kingdom under King Jeroboam was quickly falling into idolatry. The King had established his own ceremonies, priests, and places of worship. When the king himself was offering a sacrifice at Bethel, this man of God appears and cries out against him.

1 Kings 13:4 [NIV] When King Jeroboam heard what the man of God cried out against the altar at Bethel, he stretched out his hand from the altar and said, “Seize him!” But the hand he stretched out toward the man shriveled up so that he could not pull it back. Also, the altar was split apart and its ashes poured out according to the sign given by the man of God by the word of the Lord.”

Naturally the king is shocked about his hand and pleads for healing, which occurs. He then invites the man of God to come to his home for a meal and a gift.

[vs. 8] But the man of God answered the king, “Even if you were to give me half your possessions, I would not go with you, nor would I eat bread or drink water here. For I was commanded by the word of the Lord: ‘You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came.’”

So the man of God returns to Judah by another way. Meanwhile, a certain old prophet living in Bethel hears about these events. He saddles up his donkey and goes off in pursuit. He finds the man of God resting under an oak tree and invites him to return with him for a meal.

[vs. 16] The man of God said, “I cannot turn back and go with you, nor can I eat bread or drink water with you in this place. I have been told by the word of the Lord: ‘You must not eat bread or drink water there or return by the way you came.’” The old prophet answered, “I

too am a prophet, as you are. And an angel said to me by the word of the Lord: 'Bring him back with you to your house so that he may eat bread and drink water.' ”

What would you do if you were the man of God? You've been under a lot of stress. You're tired, hungry, and thirsty. And now the Lord speaking through an unexpected channel offers you relief. Do you go? How do you know what to do? The man of God does go back to Bethel, eats and drinks, and during the meal, a sudden prophetic utterance from God proclaims judgment on his great error. He will die before arriving home.

[vs. 23] When the man of God had finished eating and drinking, the prophet who had brought him back saddled his donkey for him. As he went on his way, a lion met him on the road and killed him, and his body was thrown down on the road, with both the donkey and the lion standing beside it. [vs. 28, the Bethel prophet] went out and found the body thrown down on the road, with the donkey and the lion standing beside it. The lion had neither eaten the body nor mauled the donkey.*

What do you make of this? Does the simple act of eating a meal before returning home justify such drastic punishment? If these experiences were for our learning, what should we learn from this drama that occupies most of chapter 13?

I believe this incident shows the importance God places on obeying Him and not others. Most every one has a pretty good idea what's right in most situations. The fact that a friend, a relative, or even an elder feels differently doesn't change that. If we go against our conscience or what we have every reason to know to be true, there will be a price to be paid. Sooner or later we will be sorry.

I personally know of decisions that were based not on whether it was right but on what someone else thought or what someone else might do. Surely you know when others try to get you to do something they want that you don't think is right. Do you do it anyway? Do you think it doesn't matter? Will you do it again? And again?

There is such a thing as individual responsibility in the sight of God. He expects every one of us to speak up when something is wrong. When Moses was away so long, it was natural for the nation to be concerned. But did no one object when there was a call for the making of a golden calf? If anyone did object, we don't read about it in the scriptures. If a comment is made in a study you think is wrong, speak up. If your spouse or parent wants you to do something you think is not right, speak up. Love or loyalty has nothing to do with it. You will not get into the kingdom based on decisions others make for you! The hardening of one's natural arteries takes place over a long period of time. So does the hardening of one's spiritual arteries.

The Lord Wants Your Heart

Prov. 23:26 My son, give me thine heart.

The brain is never mentioned in scripture. The heart is mentioned 693 times. It is the heart that God wants. In the biblical sense, human life is centered in the heart. The psalmist in a time of great affliction,

* Stating what the lion did NOT do clearly showed everyone that this was the hand of the Lord.

personifies the drying up of physical strength by saying, “My heart is smitten and withered like grass.” (Psa. 102:4)

Our life-sustaining organs are hidden away from ordinary sight. When animals were sacrificed in Israel’s Tabernacle arrangement, these organs were sacrificed on the brazen altar. All these special organs are collectively called the “inwards,” but not all “inwards” were treated equally.

Lev. 8:16 And he took all the fat that was upon the inwards, and caul *above* [the **liver**], and the two **kidneys**, and their fat, and Moses burned it upon the altar. [vs. 21] And he **washed the inwards** and the legs in water; and Moses burnt the whole ram upon the altar: it was a burnt sacrifice for a sweet savour, and an offering made by fire unto the LORD; as the LORD commanded Moses.

When the liver and kidneys are particularly mentioned, they were never washed. But when no specific inward organ is specified, washing occurs before they are acceptable. This pictures our need for washing before we can be sacrificed.

Psa. 51:6 Behold, Thou desirest truth in the inward parts: . . . [vs. 7] Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. [vs. 10] Create in me a **clean heart**, O God.

The opposite of a clean heart is a hard heart:

Prov. 28:14 [NIV] Blessed is the man who always fears the Lord, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.

In Psalm 73 the psalmist becomes aware that the purity of his heart was endangered because he envied those who had so much, those who lived apart from God. He says:

Psa. 73:1,2 Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

It is not just envy that contributes to heart disease. A lack of self-discipline, particularly concerning what comes out of our mouth, can do grave injury to our own heart:

James 1:26 (RSV) If any one thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man’s religion is vain.

In the seventh chapter of Mark, the Pharisees ask Jesus why his disciples eat food with unwashed hands instead of following the traditions of the elders. Jesus replies:

Mark 7:6,7 [NIV] Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Then he goes on to say that nothing a man eats can defile him (though of course the law had much to say about clean and unclean foods). This was such a hard saying that the disciples considered it a parable and asked for a further explanation:

[vs. 18-23] Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean? For it doesn't go into his **heart** but into his stomach, and then out of his body. . . . What comes out of a man is what makes him "unclean." For from within, out of men's **hearts**, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man "unclean."

Prov. 4:23 Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.

The Chinese have a proverb conveying this same thought: "Keep a green tree in your heart and perhaps the singing bird will come."

It seems that most brethren [at least in the western countries] live better today than the rich of a century years ago. So prosperity becomes a potential agent in the hardening of one's arteries [one's heart]. Who needs God when you have everything? Moses warned Israel about the need to remember the Lord in a time of prosperity:

Deut. 6:12 [When the Lord brings you into a prosperous land...] Beware lest thou forget the Lord which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

Brethren, we also have been brought forth out of the house of bondage into a new house, the house of God. Let us guard against all the influences that could affect our hearts and take our affections away from God. If we do anything because we want the approval of a person, that will harden our heart. If we do anything for personal advantage, that hardens our heart. If prosperity turns us from God, the hardening process could lead to a heart attack and even spiritual death.

Gal. 6:7-9 [RSV] Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart.

Matt. 5:8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

HEART work is HARD work, indeed!

Closing Hymn: #310—Triumphant Zion

[first delivered in Los Angeles in August, 1993]