

How to Deal with

HARDENING
of the
HEART

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The Israelites

(Heb. 3:8-11, NKJV) Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, {9} Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years. {10} Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, “They always go astray in their heart, And they have not known My ways.” {11} So I swore in My wrath, “They shall not enter My rest.”

In this Scripture, Paul exhorts the Hebrew church not to harden their hearts as Israel had in the wilderness. In this condition, they could not respond to God, as they ought. They could not hear His voice and faith was impossible. The result was their inability to accomplish what God had for them in their generation. I am convinced that many Christians suffer from this same condition. They are believers. They trust the Lord and believe His Word, but the grind of living life has worn them down to the point

where they are hard. They are unresponsive to the moving and dealing of the Spirit.

Israel saw the works of God over and over again, but in each instance, their first reaction was unbelief and complaint against the leaders God had given them. The more this process repeated itself the harder they got.

I am not sure we would do much differently under their circumstances. The people of Israel had a difficult time of it. They were a nation of slaves who knew nothing of the ways of the world. They were used to doing what they were told, but they were thrust into a place where they had to learn and learn quickly.

Think of the experience with manna. Looking back we say, “Tisk tisk, those unbelieving Israelites. God gave them manna and they still did not trust Him.” They were faced with believing for the needs of their family everyday. There was nothing but manna to eat. If it did not appear, they would starve. I wonder how we would hold up under that kind of pressure. I am sure that I would have taken as much as I could store on that first day. I would not have

wanted to risk not having something for my family tomorrow. When it rotted, I would have wondered if I would have another meal. Year after year, they had to believe every day for just that day's bread. We look back in judgment saying, "But God came through every day."

Are we really so different. In my life, I have been through many times of financial challenge. I have wondered how I would feed my family. I have wondered where the next meal was coming from. Every time the Lord has met the need. I often tell people "what if" has never happened in my life. "What if we can't pay the bills? What if we lose the car?" It has often looked like "what if" might happen, but it never has. Still when the financial challenges come, I cannot say my first reaction is always faith. I would really rather not have to believe for a miracle, although God has been faithful to give them for many years. Think how you would hold up under years of knowing you and your children would starve if a miracle did not happen daily.

Then we look at how Israel complained that they got nothing but manna to eat. How ungrateful those Israelites

were. Really? Today in America we complain if we get the same cut of beef too often. We complain if things do not go exactly as we think they should. We complain if God does not meet our need at the time we want and in the way we want. I think if most of the church faced what Israel had to deal with, our record would not be much better.

The truth is that hardness of heart comes gradually. We do not become hard after one or two bad things happen in our lives. It takes years and many disappointments for us to come to that place. It is a result of the every day grind of living. Things happen in every life. No one lives in a perpetual paradise where nothing ever goes wrong. Where tragedy never strikes. We trust God and it does not work out. Sometimes it is because the devil hindered. Sometimes it is because other people let us down. Most often it is because we have been foolish or lacked knowledge or maybe even had sin in our life blocking God's ability to help us. It really does not matter. If we live long enough we are going to be disappointed. If we are not careful, the result will be hardness of heart.

Israel made continual choices to doubt God. Eventually those choices made them so hard they could not enter the Promised Land. There was nothing to do but let their hard hearts die off resulting in a new generation taking their place. I do not want that to be my epitaph—“He could not go in because of the hardness of his heart.” I want God to be able to deal with me in any way necessary to bring about the necessary changes so that I can fulfill my destiny in my generation.

In the above Scripture, we are exhorted not to harden our hearts. This must mean there is a way out. We can live life and not give into the hardness that can come with disappointment. Hardness of heart is a decision or a series of decisions that bring us to a place in ourselves where we shut down. If we can decide to be hard, we can decide not to be. We simply need to know how.

Interested?

Hardness of Heart Defined

We will more likely deal with hardness of heart if we recognize what it is. Most of us have allowed this condition in our lives to some degree. We may be hard in one area and very responsive in another. We may be in different stages of hardness of heart. Defining the problem will allow us to diagnose it and then treat it.

The definition of the Greek word used here can help us. It means to “render stubborn.” I am not speaking of general stubbornness. Some people simply have a stronger will than others do and that translates into inflexibility particularly where their opinions are concerned. That can be an irritating character trait, but it is not hardness of heart. This definition says to *render* stubborn. In other words, we make ourselves stubborn due to certain circumstances or the actions of certain people. This can happen in our marriage, relationships with friends and most critically with God. We are hurt, often not by the one who has to endure our stubbornness. We close people out. We

refuse to be moved from our anger or depression. Nothing can touch us and woe be to anyone who tries.

When we come to this place with God, it is particularly destructive. In the case of Israel, God had met every need but had not given them what they wanted. They remained in an uncertain and uncomfortable situation. In our case, the living of life can bring us to places in which we never thought we would find ourselves. Life has not been what we expected. Ministry or business has not been successful. Any number of life pressures may contribute to bring us to the point where we simply do not wish to try any more. We have our little “pity party” and we do not want out. We must recognize this as stubbornness due to hardness of heart.

This word can also be defined as dry, hard or tough. Sometimes we experience periods in our walk with God that are dry. There can be many causes for this, but we should ask ourselves, “Have I become hard of heart?” Sometimes we are hard towards others. Men often feel the need to maintain a tough exterior. If this need to be

“manly” keeps us from yielding to God, it may be that we have allowed ourselves to become hard of heart.

In looking at this aspect of hardness of heart, two symptoms often manifest. First, we become unresponsive. It does not really matter what the Lord is doing in the service; we do not respond. If there is an altar call, we will not move from our seat. We do not respond in worship. We do not respond to the Word. Others may be excited about the things God is doing, but we are not. When we find ourselves in this condition, we need to examine our heart. God will not move in our lives if we do not want Him to. When we allow past failures or disappointments to keep us from responding to God, hardness of heart is present.

The second symptom is the lack of a sense of need in our lives. Speaking to the church at Laodicea, Jesus tells them they are lukewarm. They said, “I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing” (Rev. 3:17). When we no longer have a sense of our need for God, we are lukewarm. We have hardened our heart. I believe in all the promises in the Bible. I believe that God has

provided us with wonderful blessings both materially and spiritually, but I can never lose my sense of need for God. When I think I have it all or I have arrived, I am on the verge of trouble. I have become hard in my heart.

Finally, the word for hardness can mean “fierce.” We may say, “I just have a bad temper.” We may be having a difficult time and the manifestation of it is a harsh word for everyone around us. Often we feel justified in our actions. After all, look what has happened to me. However, there is never a valid excuse for treating people badly. We need to recognize it for what it is. That ill temper is hardness of heart.

As we honestly look at the definitions of the words in the Bible, I think many of us will see our actions and ourselves. What we thought were just personality flaws or phases we were going through were really manifestations of a hard heart. This is tough to take I know, but when we recognize a problem for what it really is and accept the truth, we can effectively deal with it.

The Effects of a Hard Heart

As I have studied this condition, I have found the effects on our lives of a hard heart. None of these effects are things to be desired. First, we will look at Hebrews 3. In the 17th verse, Paul asks this question: (Heb. 3:17, NKJV) “Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness?” Israel wandered in the wilderness because of the hardness of their hearts. The result was that God was angry with them. I do not want God angry with me. There is no way that we will be blessed or succeed when God is angry with us.

We could think this is awfully harsh on God’s part. When we understand the source of the anger and the type of anger, we realize that it is a manifestation of the love of God more than the wrath of God. To illustrate, let me use my family. There is no time more traumatic in the life of a parent than when a teenager learns to drive. We live in an area where there can be very hazardous driving conditions, particularly in the winter. When my children started to

drive, I would always tell them when they had to be home. It would always be a snowy night when they would choose to harden their heart against my council.

I might say 11:00 was the time to be in the driveway. A storm would come up and I would start looking out the window. 11:00 would come. Then 11:30. Then midnight. Finally, I would hear the car door close and I would meet my late child at the door. I would always have two reactions. I would hug them in relief that they were home and then I would inform them that they would never drive again. On the one hand I was relieved, but I was just as angry as I was relieved. Why? Because I love them.

You see, when my children fail to follow my council or my rules I get angry with them because I have placed those rules there for their protection, not to take away their fun. When they are away from me and they ignore them, I cannot help them or protect them. This is exactly why God gets angry with us when we harden our heart.

God will not override our hard heart. When we are hard, he cannot reach us. He cannot protect us. He cannot

provide for us. He tries, but we hinder Him with our hardness. This causes Him to become angry with us. His anger is designed to cause us to realize the seriousness of our situation and bring about changes in our attitudes so that God can again be our strength and our help.

The second effect is also in Hebrews 3 but in verses 18-19. (Heb. 3:18-19, NKJV) “And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? {19} So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.”

Here we see that hardness of heart kept them from entering what God had for their lives. The rest that He is referring to here is the Promised Land of Canaan. Canaan was the will of God for Israel. God had a purpose for the wilderness, but He delivered Israel from Egypt to bring them into Canaan. The Bible says that they never entered that will. When we are hard of heart, we cannot fully enter the will of God for our lives. We may enter in somewhat, but we will never see the fullness of God’s will manifest in our lives.

Paul also speaks of the rest in Hebrews 4 as something every believer can have in his life. In this context, the Greek word for rest carries the meaning of all parts of the person (spirit, soul and body) functioning according to God's purpose. This is a wonderful picture of peace and harmony. There is no stress for one who can enter this kind of rest. The one who is hard of heart never does. He is constantly agitated. Things do not seem to work. His life is out of balance. This is not the lifestyle I want, but if I do not deal with hardness of heart, it is the lifestyle I will have.

In Job 9:4 we see another effect of a hard heart. (Job 9:4, NKJV) "God is wise in heart and mighty in strength. Who has hardened himself against Him and prospered?" It is impossible to prosper if we harden ourselves towards God. Could this be the problem in your finances?

In Proverbs 38:14 the one who hardens his heart falls into "mischief." The New King James says "calamity," but I like "mischief" better. When we harden our heart, we make ourselves vulnerable to the little temptations that plague us. When we are not hard, we would just shrug

them off, but when our heart is hard, we seem to have no resistance. We fall into every little trap, and each time we give in, we get a little harder until we finally fall altogether.

In Daniel 5:20, we see that the king lost his throne because of his hard heart. Believers have authority in the Name of Jesus. We should be able to rule over demons, temptations and circumstances by the Word of God. Romans 5:17 says that we can and should “reign in life.” We are called “kings and priests” to a holy God in Revelation 1:5-6. Why are we unable to walk in or demonstrate that authority? One reason may be that we have allowed our hearts to be hardened.

In Matthew 13:15 we see a people whose hearts have been hardened, and consequently they cannot hear, they cannot see and they are not healed. Many of the people I have dealt with in 21 years of ministry are in this position. They never “get the victory,” and part of the reason is the hardness they have allowed to develop in their heart. They cannot hear the Word of God because their hearts are hard. Romans 10:17 tells us faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. If our heart is hard, this process does

not work and we do not have faith developing in our lives. We do not seem to be able to see ourselves as God sees us. We do not receive, and we are not healed.

Proverbs 29:1 is even more distasteful. (Prov. 29:1, NKJV) “He who is often rebuked, and hardens his neck, Will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.” If we choose to continue in our hardness, we open ourselves to this result. We are destroyed suddenly, and there is no remedy for the destruction. Oftentimes I have seen people fall into sin or some kind of ruin seemingly overnight. There would seem to be no help for them. The truth is it was not overnight. It was a continual hardening of the heart to the point where God had no access to help them, and consequently they were destroyed.

There is nothing in this list of results that I want in my life. How do we come to such a bad place? One step at a time.

The Steps that Lead to a Hard Heart

As we look once more at the third chapter of the book of Hebrews, we can see the steps that bring us to the place of hardness of heart. Let me say again that this is not something that happens all at once. This is a process that life takes us through. We may be at various stages in different areas of life. I believe, however, that there is a common set of steps outlined in Hebrews 3:7-19 that lead us to this place. As we identify them, we can recognize where we are in the process and do something about it. It is easier to correct one wrong step than a dozen. The earlier in the process we identify our situation, the easier it will be to turn it around.

Step One: Improper response to times of testing and trial

(Heb. 3:7-9, NKJV) Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says:
"Today, if you will hear His voice, {8} Do not harden
your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the
wilderness, {9} Where your fathers tested Me, tried
Me, And saw My works forty years."

Everyone goes through trials. There is no way around it. Some would teach that Christians should always be above them. Some would say that if we had real faith we would never go through trying times. Jesus taught something quite different. In Matthew chapter 7, He told a story of two houses - one built on the rock and one on the sand. The same storm affected *both* houses. Jesus never promised that the storms of life would not come. He did promise that if we built on the Word of God, we would be able to get through them and overcome. It is not whether we have trials but how we respond to them that is important. Israel responded to their time of trial with grumbling and complaining.

Israel was in a wilderness. They were going through a difficult time, but they *chose* to respond in fear and unbelief. Often we go through some kind of wilderness

trial. How do we respond? If we choose to question God's love for us, we are taking a step towards hardness of heart. If we choose to meditate on how we do not deserve to be in this situation, we are taking a step towards hardness of heart. If we choose to grumble against leadership or other people, we are taking a step towards hardness of heart. If we choose to blame others for the problem, we are taking a step toward hardness of heart. I am not saying that we are hard of heart at these points, but we are moving in that direction.

What is the proper response to times of testing and trial? First, we must recognize that complaining will not help. All that does is reinforce the negative feelings and weaken our faith. Instead, we should cultivate thankfulness. There is nothing more miserable than an unthankful Christian. You might say, "What do I have to be thankful for in the middle of a trial?" The truth is we always have a great deal to be thankful for, but it is difficult to remember the specifics, especially when we are under pressure. If there is nothing you can think of for which you can thank God, thank Him that you will not

spend one day in hell. We are saved and heaven is our eternal home. In the end, we will not care what we went through on earth as long as we end up in heaven. If we start there, our thinking will begin to change and we will see much more for which we can be thankful.

Another key is the perspective from which we approach a trial. God spoke something to me once in one of the financial battles we went through early in our ministry. He reminded me that I like competition. When I was a teenager, we played a lot of sandlot basketball. I had one friend I could beat easily in one-on-one. I had another friend who was taller than I was and always seemed to play just well enough to win. I only beat him a few times, but I always wanted to play him instead of my other friend because it was more of a challenge. If I beat the lesser player, I did not accomplish anything, but if I beat the better, I felt good about it.

God said to me, “Why don’t you consider this a competitive challenge instead of just a trial?” Some might point out that there is much more at stake than a game of one-on-one basketball. If we lose in life, real things

happen that can cause real harm. That is true, but we must remember that God is for us. He will never leave us nor forsake us. That is what His Word says. I can go ahead and face the challenge because I know that God will not allow me to fail if I keep my faith in Him. Even if I have some temporary setbacks, I will always come out on top because He loves me. That is what Paul was saying in Romans 8:37. We are more than conquerors through Him who loves us. Bad things may happen to us. Trials may come into our lives, but if we remember that God is for us and with us, we can face them with joy knowing that in the end we will be victorious.

Let me pass on one more thought on this subject. In Luke 8 we read about a storm that came up when Jesus and the disciples were in a boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was asleep in the back of the boat, but the disciples were quite awake. Finally they woke Jesus and informed Him that they were all about to die. Jesus calmly got up and rebuked the wind and the waves. The seas became calm and the danger was over. Then He rebuked

the disciples. Why? Because they should have known that there was no real danger as long as Jesus was in the boat.

Verse 25 is very revealing. They turn to one another and say, "Who can this be? For He commands even the winds and water, and they obey Him!" Their problem was that they did not understand Who was in the boat with them. What trial are you facing? Jesus is in the boat with you. Call on Him in faith and He will help you through. The trial will not last forever. If you choose fear, complaining or blaming, you will be taking a step towards a hard heart.

Step Two: Allowing our hearts to go astray

(Heb. 3:10-11, NKJV) Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, "They always go astray in their heart, And they have not known My ways." {11} So I swore in My wrath, "They shall not enter My rest."

The second step taken by Israel toward hardness of heart is allowing their hearts to "go astray." I think this is a very interesting and descriptive statement. I have experienced this in my own life and, as a pastor, watched it

happen to many others. We find ourselves in a difficult circumstance. Things are not going well. We are under pressure. Instead of running to God who is our help and our strength, we begin to go astray.

As I was meditating on this term, I began to think about the times when I have been tired but had to drive anyway. As you begin to doze off, the car does not go directly off the road. Most of the time it just begins to drift a bit. The sleepier you get the more it drifts. You might say the car was going astray. It is wandering from the path. If this condition is not corrected you are heading for a real problem, but at first it does not seem that bad. Today, many of our highways have something called a rumble strip built into the shoulder of the road. When the tires hit this strip, there is a loud “rumble” that shakes the steering wheel and goes through the whole car. Its purpose is to say, “Hey, wake up or you’re headed for trouble!” Thank God for some heavenly “rumble strips.”

Going astray in our hearts is very much the same process. We do not fall away all at once, but little by little. We let things slip. We are not quite as faithful in church as

we once were. We do not have the same desire to pray. Bible study is less important than it used to be. When we are in church, we do not participate in praise and worship. We clap half-heartedly. We sing a little but with no zeal or faith. When the Word is preached, our mind wanders. We are increasingly critical of the church, the pastor and the brethren. We are going astray.

As the process continues, we begin to entertain the world. We are not in sin exactly, but worldly things begin to make more sense to us than they did before. I Corinthians 2:13 says that the natural man cannot receive the things of God because they are foolishness to him. To him the things of the world make more sense. The believer who is going astray in his heart begins to revert. The things of God begin to appear foolish while the things of the world start to make sense. This is a dangerous step. When you are at this point, you are headed for an accident. If you are reading this and you recognize yourself, consider this one of God's "rumble strips." You need to wake up before you find yourself in real trouble.

Why did Israel go astray? The above Scripture says they did not know God's ways. When you and I go astray in our hearts, it is for the same reason. It begins with a difficult time. This may be in our outward life or our inward life. It may be circumstances or just a dry time in our walk. We may be under financial pressure or emotional pressure. It makes no difference. Whatever the cause of the pressure, we go astray because we do not understand the ways of God.

God had a purpose for Israel in the wilderness. He was forging a nation. Sometimes in our lives, God leads us into the wilderness. Other times the wilderness is an attack of the devil. Most often the wilderness is a result of our own bad choices. How we got there does not matter. The point is that if we trust God, He will use it to our advantage. Romans 8:28 tells us that even what is meant for our harm, God can and will use for our benefit. When we do not understand God's ways, we begin to get discouraged and we go astray in our hearts.

God will not leave us in the wilderness. I Corinthians 10:13 is a promise from God that we will not be tempted or

tested beyond what we can bear. It is also a promise that God will always make a way of escape. We must remember, however, that it is God who is making a way of escape. How can we find it if we are going astray from Him in our hearts? Take a close look at your actions lately. Are you going astray in your heart?

Step 3: The deceitfulness of sin

(Heb. 3:12-14, NKJV) Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; {13} but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

Once our hearts have gone astray, we are vulnerable to the deceitfulness of sin. In the case of Israel, they began to see Egypt as a solution to their problems instead of the cause of them. "Let us go back to Egypt. At least there we had leeks and garlic." Yes, but you also had harsh bondage. You had slave labor. You had whippings and beatings. Your children were not free to grow up and fulfill their destiny. "Yes, but we had leeks and garlic."

The deceitfulness of sin is that it begins to look like relief from the trial, when in reality it is both the cause of the current problem and the bearer of much worse. When our hearts are astray, we cannot recognize the truth. We begin to justify the sin that is tempting us. We are tired of fighting, and giving in seems like a rest from the battle. After all, if God had not let us get into this situation everything would be different. We deserve this indulgence. We have been good little troopers for *so* long. Just a little sin will not matter. I can always repent in the morning. Be careful! You have just passed the rumble strip and are on the shoulder of the road headed for a cliff! You do not want to go there.

Sin is never what it seems to be in the temptation stage. The Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). It is always death. It is never life. It is never rest. It is never a way out. It is the way into more and more trouble. When we have gone astray in our heart, we do not see the truth. Sin becomes like a mirage in the desert. It looks like cool refreshing water. It looks so inviting, but in reality it is just more sand. When we have

been through a difficult time and allowed our hearts to go astray, sin will look inviting, but it is just a pool of destruction.

Step 4: Rebellion

(Heb. 3:14-15, NKJV) For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, {15} while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

As we continue on the path toward hardness, the next step is rebellion. Rebellion is selfishness. When we are rebellious, we are really saying that we are more important than anyone or anything else. We are at the center of the universe. As we progressed from improper response during trials to allowing our hearts to go astray and finally to falling into areas of sin, the inevitable result is rebellion.

When we come to this stage, we begin to justify our actions. Our tendency is to think that God has failed us. We say things like, "I deserve a break from things. After all, what has God done for me recently." We tell ourselves

that the fault is with our husband or wife. If our children would just act right, we would not have this problem. We blame everyone but ourselves. We become increasingly irritable. Everything begins to bother us. This is rebellion.

The problem with rebellion is that it leads us farther and farther away from God. The more we rebel, the harder our hearts become. The more we justify our actions, the harder it is for us to turn around. Rebellion is very dangerous. Rom. 13 tells us that rebellion brings terrible things to our lives. Perhaps the worst is the hardness that it brings to our hearts.

1 Sam. 15:23 tells us that rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft. In its essence, witchcraft is manipulation. When we give ourselves over to rebellion, we are doing our best to manipulate those around us. We are right and everyone else is wrong. We have to have our way and we will do what it takes to get it. When we come to this point on the road, it is a long way back.

Step 5: Unbelief

(Heb. 3:19, NKJV) So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

The final stage of this process is unbelief. In the 19th verse of Hebrews chapter three, we see that the children of Israel could not enter the promise land because of their unbelief. As we give ourselves over to rebellion more and more, we find we believe less and less. We find that we are not leaning on God the way we used to. Instead of believing God for healing, we lean more towards medicine. Instead of believing God for finances, we choose the credit card company.

Another effect of unbelief is that we are annoyed with anyone who is believing. We begin to think those who walk by faith are foolish. Praise and worship begins to annoy us. You see, praise is an expression of our faith. Since we are in a place of unbelief, we do not want to praise God. We do not want to hear the preaching of the Word. When we do hear it, we do not believe it. We get angry with a preacher. We begin to wonder if we really need to go church at all.

The way back from rebellion is difficult, but once we come to unbelief, it is even harder. We find ourselves in a frame of mind where we seem to have no approach to God. We do not want to pray. We do not want to read the Word. We really do not want to hear from God.

If you are at any point in this process, now is the time to repent. Recognizing the problem is half of the solution. Do not let pride get in the way. Even if you go on all the way to the end and find yourself in the place of unbelief, God has provided a way out.

The Way Out

How do we get back from this place of hardness? Better yet, how do we avoid getting there to begin with? As I have already pointed out, we need to realize that God is in the trial. If we trust Him, we will not only see the other side, but we will be stronger for it. As I have also pointed out, we must learn God's ways. To really know someone, you must spend time with him. To know God, you must spend time in His Word and in His presence with prayer, fasting and worship. I want to give special consideration to some other thoughts. These thoughts will help when we find ourselves past the "rumble strips" and farther down the road of hardness.

First let me draw your attention to verses 12 and 13 of Hebrews 3.

{12} Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God;
{13} but exhort one another daily, while it is called

"Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

One key to freedom from hardness of heart is to exhort one another. I see this as twofold. First, we need to find someone else and tell him or her what we know. Even if we are not sure we believe it at the moment. I remember walking to visit a friend and feeling very sorry for myself because of my financial situation. When I got to his place of business, he was also feeling pressed where money was concerned. Now this friend was just a baby Christian and I knew I could not just complain along with him, so I gathered myself and began to share what the Bible said about tithing and giving. I told how we could trust God when we were givers because Philippians 4:19 tells us God will meet all our need. I must have preached to him for at least a half-hour.

When I left, I knew that he had been encouraged, but I found that I had as well. The situation did not look so bleak. My faith was stirred by my sharing what I knew with someone else. This is a powerful truth if we get a hold of it. When we are pressed, we think we would be

hypocritical if we tried to share with others. The truth is that how we feel does not change the reality of the Word of God. When we share with others we reinforce our own faith and declare the devil a liar. That is one reason I have survived and overcome in some of the situations I have found myself. I have no choice but to preach to others. When I do, I am always encouraged.

The second side of this is particularly important when we are deeper into the process of hardening of the heart. Not only should we exhort others, but we must also be willing to be exhorted. Somehow, when we get down we just do not want to hear from others, but that is the time we need them most. We *must* allow someone to speak to us. We *must* listen to correction and encouragement. We may get angry with the one bringing the correction, but we must listen. No one is alone in his Christianity. We are all in this together. Whether it is husband, wife or just a brother or sister, we must listen. If it is an elder in the church or our pastor, we must listen. Each of us, particularly those in leadership, must have someone who can “speak into his life” to whom he will respond.

Finally, I want to tell you the only way to recover from rebellion and unbelief. Repent. In this chapter, Paul calls unbelief an evil heart. We know that rebellion is sin. The only way to break the power of sin is to repent. What does it mean to repent? Turn around and go the other way. You will never be free of sin while you are focused on the sin. You do need to turn from it, certainly. However, you will never *leave* it until you actively pursue something positive. Turn and *go* a different direction.

One major ingredient in repentance is the ability to accept being wrong. For many of us this is very difficult. We feel if we admit to being wrong about something, we will look weak or foolish. We feel that being wrong makes us somehow less than the person who is right. This is not at all true. Being wrong simply makes us wrong. The tragedy is to *stay* wrong, not to *be* wrong. I have been wrong often. Admitting it did not weaken me; it made me stronger. I like to have our church practice every now and then. Maybe you could practice with me. Let's say it together - "I am wrong." Once more now. "I am wrong." There, that wasn't so hard, was it?

In the case of rebellion, there are some definite steps we can take to break it in our lives. First, we must seek to submit. If you find yourself in rebellion, admit you are wrong and find a way to submit. I am the leader of a local church, but I still have a pastor over my life. If I sense some rebellion developing, I like to call him up or see him and find some way I can actively submit my life to him. I might ask for some advice. If I am having a sin problem I might confess it and ask for prayer. I might seek to do something for him to demonstrate my appreciation. Whatever I do is designed to attack rebellion with the opposite force of submission.

Another way to attack rebellion is to find a way to serve someone else. Rebellion is "me" centered. I cannot rebel and serve at the same time. If you sense a rebellious, selfish attitude, find someone in more difficult straits than yourself and pour out your life for him. Nothing will stop rebellion faster.

When it comes to repentance from unbelief, we must first recognize it as sin. God calls it an evil heart. We do not like to think of ourselves that way, but that is what God

says. We want to see unbelief as just weakness or just the way we are. We feel that we just do not have the faith someone else does. That might be true if God had not already done so much for us. Again, I would point out your salvation. If you have served God more than a very short time, you know that He has always come through for you. Sometimes it was in ways you did not expect and some times in ways you did not want. Nevertheless, He blessed you. To doubt Him now is sin. Once you accept this and repent of it, there are four steps to fully overcoming unbelief.

Step one is the Word of God. Step two is the Word of God. Step three is the Word of God. Faith is a product of the Word of God. Faith is the opposite of unbelief. You cannot have both in operation at once. To overcome unbelief, we *must* fill our heart with the Word of God. We must go where the truth is preached. We must read the Word for ourselves. We must meditate on the Word until faith rises. This is the last thing we want to do when our heart is hard, but if we recognize the need for change, we

must. The Word of God is a supernatural thing and when we give ourselves over to it, it will root out unbelief.

Step 4 is to yield to faith. For most of us, hardness has come because of disappointment. We are afraid to trust again. We have been hurt. If we do the other necessary things, we will come to this last and most difficult step. We must trust God. I have thought long and hard on how to explain trust to people. I have searched for some way to release it in their lives, but in the end, the only way to learn trust is to trust. You may feel that God has let you down, but He has not. You must trust him again. The alternative is unacceptable.

The first steps back into trust may be faltering. You may be afraid, but do it anyway. God is not a man. He will not let you down. If people have failed you, join the club. They have failed me too. Find other people and forgive those who failed you, but trust again. Trust is at the heart of Christianity, and trust is what the devil is after.

Right now, right where you are and in the condition you are in, open your heart to God. You do not have to stay

hard. The past is past. Do not let the devil use it to ruin the future.

Conclusion

I see hardness of heart all around me. I feel it at times in my own life. It is a maneuver of the devil to rob us of faith and trust in God. Hebrews 3:14 says we *partake* of the life of Christ by maintaining confidence in Him. Hebrews 10:35 tells us not to cast away our confidence because in the end we will be rewarded. Hardness of heart seems like a protection to the one who is there, but it is instead a trap. It takes away our confidence and robs us of our reward.

Examine yourself. If you are anywhere on this road, get off it now. Repent where necessary. God is faithful to forgive and cleanse (1 John 1:9-10). Begin to do what is necessary to change your attitudes and your responses. Open your heart again to God and to those who care for you. Neither is your problem. Attack the devil (the one who is bringing the hardness) with submission, love and the Word of God. You will be victorious. I do not say it will be easy. I do say it will be worth it.