

INTRODUCTION

This is part two of a message I started last week on "The Danger of a Hardened Heart." I mentioned that the #1 cause of death in the U.S. is heart disease, and one coronary problem is arterial sclerosis, or hardening of the arteries. This happens when plaque builds up in the arteries. It doesn't happen overnight, it is a gradual process. The English word sclerosis is the same word that appears twice in this passage of scripture.

Almost two years ago, I went to the cardiologist and he scheduled a heart catheterization for me. I was lying on a bed fully awake as I looked at this huge high definition television screen to my left. I watched as they inserted a catheter all the way into my heart, and then they injected dye into the arteries of my heart. It was the first time I'd ever seen my heart. It looked like a huge multi-legged spider crouching with every heartbeat. They also discovered some blocked arteries and inserted three stents to open up the arteries that had become blocked and hardened. I felt better immediately. I still feel great. Sometimes there are enough blockages that the doctors will perform surgery to bypass those clogged arteries. Many of you have had bypass surgery and are healthy today. It's almost miraculous what doctors can do these days. And we have some of the greatest heart doctors in the nation right here in Tyler.

The Bible speaks of a spiritual condition called a hardened heart. It's not talking about the fist-sized pumping organ in your chest. The word "heart" appears over 700 times in the Bible, and it refers to the control center of your life. It's where you make moral decisions that affect you.

Physically speaking, your heart is an important organ. Take care of it. Spiritually speaking, your heart is very important as well. You should take care of it. In Proverbs 4:23 we read, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."

Like plaque in your arteries a hardened heart doesn't happen overnight, it occurs gradually. Let's perform a personal spiritual heart cath today so you can see the condition of your heart. If you find you have a hardened heart, call on Dr. Jesus, and He can fix it. He can do miraculous things to your heart if you surrender yourself to His surgery.

Hebrews 3:7-19. "So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, "Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest." See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.""

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in

the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his REST if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. That's them; but what about us? Let's sneak a peek at Hebrews 4:1 to see what we'll be studying next week: "Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it."

This passage refers to a pivotal event that happened when Moses was leading the Hebrew people from Egypt toward the Promised Land. But this isn't just a historical event. The Exodus is a powerful parable of salvation. The locations of the Exodus mirror our experience or redemption. Let's review our spiritual geography lesson from last week.

Egypt represents a person who is lost, and living in bondage. The Hebrew people were slaves and had no hope for a better life. A person who doesn't know Jesus Christ is living in slavery to sin, and their only hope is for someone to deliver them.

The Red Sea represents deliverance and baptism. God used the blood of a lamb to save the Israelites and they were set free and as they walked on the miraculous pathway through the Red Sea, it is a symbol of our baptism. It was only through the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, that we are delivered from slavery.

Kadesh Barnea represents the challenge of trusting God to move forward in faith. It was on the borderline of blessing. After ten of the twelve spies reported that there were gigantic warriors in the Promised Land, the people were too afraid to trust God. So they turned their backs on the living God. Then they wandered in the wilderness for forty years until God raised up a new generation who would trust Him.

The Wilderness represents a Christian with a hardened heart. God has brought them OUT of their bondage, but they haven't trusted God to bring them INTO the blessing and rest of the Promised Land. So what is Canaan? It's not death. It's rest. The title of next week's message is "Finding the Best Rest of Your Life." The word "rest" appears twelve times in Hebrews 4, that's more times than it appears in any other entire book of the New Testament.

As you follow Jesus, it all boils down to what we do when God brings us to our own Kadesh Barnea where He tells us to move forward in faith. These are often called "the turning points of life." Remember, their story is our story. Are you living in the wilderness today? The great Bible scholar Warren Wiersbe wrote: "The wilderness wanderings represent the experiences of believers who will not claim their spiritual inheritances in Christ, who doubt God's Word and live in restless unbelief. To be sure, God is with them, as He was with Israel; but they do not enjoy the fullness of God's blessings. They are 'out of Egypt' but not yet 'in Canaan.'" (*Be Confident*, p. 39)

If you are suffering from a hardened heart, it's a sure sign you're in the spiritual wilderness when it comes to God's plan for your life. Let's take a few minutes and take an honest look at our hearts today. Let's answer two simple questions.

I. HOW CAN I RECOGNIZE IF I HAVE A HARDENED HEART?

You've probably read the warning signs for heart disease. They include shortness of breath, tightness of the chest, nausea, and pain radiating in your chest arm or jaw. If you have any of these symptoms you should see a doctor.

Let me share with you at least three symptoms of a hardened heart. There are more, but if you have these, then it's time to call on the Great Physician, Jesus.

A. Rebellion

The Bible calls the act of turning back at Kadesh Barnea as "The Rebellion." When I was a sophomore in High School our youth choir was going to present the musical "Good News." Because we were going to use drums and guitars, the deacons of our little church said we couldn't perform it in the sanctuary. So we presented in our High School gym, which was a great idea so that more of our friends would come. I had a solo in the musical and I can still remember the words. "I'm a rebel; that's me, man. I'm a rebel, yes I am. It doesn't matter what you say, 'cause I'll be headed in the other way."

James Dean wasn't the only one who was a rebel without a cause. We all have the heart of a rebel. We exhibit a spirit of rebellion when God tells us to go a certain way and do a certain thing, and we go our own way and do our own thing. Rebellion is our default reaction because we are all born with sinful, rebellious hearts. When it comes to a sinful heart, we aren't breaking bad; we're bad to the bone. You can put a three-year-old on the floor with a bag of candy. And you can then let two or three other toddlers approach him. Is he going to say, "Here, let me share my candy with you?" Nope. He's going to grab it and say, "Mine!"

Even when we come to know the Lord, we still possess the urge and propensity to rebel against God. You may be a little skeptical and still wonder what that event in a Saudi desert 3,500 ago has to do with those of us who are New Testament believers? The answer is found in 1 Corinthians 10. Paul wrote, "For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud...Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did." (1 Corinthians 10:1, 5-6)

Rebellion is both the symptom and the cause of a hardened heart. Is there rebellion in your heart today, or are you quick to follow and obey God?

B. Unbelief

There is a kind of unbelief that is called atheism. That describes someone who doesn't believe God exists. But like these Israelites, it is possible to believe IN God, but not BELIEVE God. That's the kind of unbelief that reveals a hardened heart. The Israelites had seen God deliver them from slavery and split the Red Sea. They had seen and heard the thunder and lightning on Mt. Sinai as God gave them the Law. They believed in God. And then they came to Kadesh

Barnea and God said, "Go in, I will deliver the people into your hands." They didn't BELIEVE God, and they turned back.

Moses was frustrated and I believe God must have become weary with these people. The Bible says in Numbers 14, "And the Lord said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? Will they never believe me, even after all the miraculous signs I have done among them?" (Numbers 14:11)

You may be a believer, but when it comes to trusting God for the impossible, you may practice unbelief. Let me give you a practical example. Take tithing for instance. God asks us to honor Him with our first fruits, by giving the first ten percent of our income to Him and for His work. He has promised if we will obey Him when it comes to tithing, that He will open the floodgates of heaven and pour out a blessing so great that we can't contain it. Many of us believe that, so we give a tithe and beyond the tithe to the Lord. It requires faith to believe that 90% of your monthly income will go further with God's power than 100% of your monthly income if you don't tithe. Some people say, "I can't afford to tithe." Many of us have come to the place where we say, "We can't afford NOT to tithe!" Do you believe God will do what He says He will do if you obey Him? Or do you have a hardened heart of unbelief?

C. Self-deception

The writer of Hebrews warns about the danger of being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin in verse thirteen. Deception of any kind is dangerous, but self-deception is disastrous. Sin hardens our hearts and blinds our eyes until we get to the point where we deceive ourselves. We think we are doing fine when there is sin in our lives.

I've heard people say, "You can fool other people but you can't fool yourself." That's not true. The Bible speaks of the possibility of self-deception. James writes, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (James 1:22) John wrote these words to believers who were deceiving themselves about sin. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8)

People who struggle with addiction of any kind also struggle with self-deception. They convince themselves that what they are doing is okay, or that they can stop at any time. Denial is not just a river in Egypt. Jesus had some strong words for lukewarm Christians in Revelation 3. He said, "You say you are rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing." That's self-deception. But Jesus said, here's your true condition, "You don't realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." That's quite a difference. A Christian with a hardened heart says, "I'm doing great. I don't even have to confess sin that often. I don't need to pray or study God's Word because I'm prayed up and know enough truth." That's the danger of self-deception. Do you have a hardened heart today? The problem with those with a hardened heart is that they seldom admit it because they have convinced themselves that everything is just fine and dandy.

II. HOW CAN I MAINTAIN A TENDER HEART?

God can remove the calluses of your hardened heart and give you a tender heart. You've got to admit that your heart has become hardened and ask the Great Physician to perform radical surgery. But there are some things you can do to maintain a healthy heart spiritually.

A. Forgive one another

The Bible says, "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32 NKJV) Holding grudges is a mark of a hardened heart. When you're holding a grudge your hands aren't free to catch God's blessing. Is there anyone against whom you are holding a grudge? It's so tiring and emotionally demanding to hold onto that animosity. Let it go. That's what forgiveness means. You release them from your desire to punish them.

A few days ago I got an unusual letter from a pastor in another state. I have never met this man, and I won't share his name with you. He was writing to ask me to forgive him. He confessed to me that for years he had been stealing my messages off our website and preaching them word-for-word as if they were his. He had already confessed it to God and received God's forgiveness, and now he was seeking my forgiveness. He said he planned to ask his congregation to forgive him. So I wrote him a letter saying, "Of course I forgive you my brother, because God has forgiven me." When there is personal conflict someone has said, "The first to apologize is the bravest. The first to forgive is the strongest. And the first to forget is the happiest." Are you quick to forgive?

B. Encourage one another

The Bible says, "Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them." (Ephesians 4:29 NLT) The writer of Hebrews says we should encourage each other as long as it is Today. That means don't wait until tomorrow to encourage someone. Do it today. Who needs encouragement today? All of us need it. So whom can you encourage today. When I wrote to that pastor who used my messages, I also encouraged him. I encouraged him to study to show himself approved of God, a workman who doesn't need to be ashamed. I encouraged him to attribute quotes and sermon material to the proper source. A hardened heart seldom encourages others, but a person with a tender heart never misses an opportunity to encourage others.

C. Trust and obey God until the end!

We read, "We have come to share in Christ IF we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first." (Hebrews 3:14) What was the problem of Kadesh Barnea? They didn't trust God; therefore they didn't obey Him. When I was a kid in Sunday School, we had an opening assembly with boys and girls until we divided up into our smaller classes. One of the ladies who taught could play the piano, but she only knew one song, so we sang it every Sunday morning. I'm not complaining because I'll remember the words of that song all my life. It went this way,

"When we walk with the Lord; In the light of His Word; What a glory He sheds on our way;
While we do His good will; He abides with us still; And with all who will trust and obey. Trust
and obey. For there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." That's still true
today. There's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey!

CONCLUSION

It's amazing what heart doctors can do these days. They can fix the problem of hardening
arteries with stents or bypass surgery. But sometimes a person suffers from a degree of heart
disease that it requires a heart transplant. The first heart transplant was performed in South
Africa in 1967. Today, about 3,500 heart transplants are performed annually around the world,
with about half of those done here in the U.S.

The Great Physician has been performing heart transplant surgery for centuries. And at one
time all of us need to have our old heart of sinful stone removed and replaced with a tender
heart of love and obedience. Do you need a heart transplant from God? God says, "And I will
give them singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their stony,
stubborn heart and give them a tender, responsive heart. A heart to obey me." (Ezekiel 11:19)

Do you have a hardened heart? Will you ask God to perform a heart transplant and give you a
tender heart?

I don't often conclude a message with a poem, but I found one that's so classical and
sophisticated, I couldn't resist. The original version comes from an unknown author, but I've
changed it enough to make it even classier. I shared it several years ago, but it really applies to
what we're talking about today—getting a new heart.

Mary had a little pig
Whose skin was white as snow
That is when Mary washed her pig,
Which was often, you must know.

And Mary had an awful time
To keep her piggy clean.
For he really was the dirtiest pig
That you have ever seen.

She'd wash him and she'd scrub him,
And he would squirm and squeal,
As if he tried to let her know
That clean was not his deal.

And then outside in his backyard,
He'd scheme from morn to night;
Then he'd sneak away from home

And lose himself from sight.

And then when Mary found him,
He'd be dirtier than before.
So she would grab the soap and brush
And clean her pig some more.

Poor Mary thought and wondered much
What she could ever do;
Until she figured out a plan,
And this she carried through.

She took her pig to a local Vet
Who put the pig to sleep,
He took the pig's heart right out,
But not of course to keep.

And then he took a dying lamb
And took his heart out too
And put it in the little pig
Before the piggy knew.

When little piggy did awake
He had no more desire
To wallow in the mud again
Or ever in the mire.

And try as hard as he could think
He never understood
How such a dirty pig as him
Could ever be so good.

And so you see, dear friend of mine
You need a new heart too
Just like the little piggy did;
The old will never do.

So if you want a brand new heart;
Well, here is what you do;
Just give your heart to the Lamb of God;
And He'll give His heart to you.

OUTLINE

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Corinthians 10:1, 5-6

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes