

LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION

- 1 What are some things that may cause your heart to become hard?
- 2 What consequences have you seen in your life when your heart has become hard? How should these motivate you to keep your heart softened?
- 3 What can you begin to do that would open your heart to more of God's softening work in your life?

SUNDAY WORD

APR. 02, 2023



Do you know that there is such a thing as spiritual heart disease? This disease is real and dangerous and can afflict us at any time. The Bible says a lot about the heart and its spiritual condition. Proverbs 23:7 - "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he." (NKJV)

It means that whatever is in your heart will come out eventually. What you are on the inside won't stay there forever. Sooner or later, the thoughts of your heart will be on your lips. That's why the Bible tells us in Proverbs 4:23 - "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." (NIV)

Hebrews 3:7-8 offers a warning we must pay attention to. Hebrews 3:7-8 - "7 So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness." (NIV)

Any Christian may develop a hard heart. It happens gradually, over time. You can start out with Christ and have a heart filled with love toward the Lord. But the trials of life and the temptations of the world may steal your joy and make you hardened toward the Lord. When that happens, you lose your passion for Christ. Apathy leads to disinterest, and disinterest leads to hardness. You become stagnant or inactive spiritually, but it happens so slowly that you hardly notice it.

When Moses first called on Pharaoh to let Israel go, Pharaoh responded with this, Exodus 5:2 - "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go (NIV)." While this verse said nothing specific yet about Pharaoh's heart, it showed that Pharaoh was unwilling to listen to what God had to say. The scene was the beginning of Pharaoh setting himself up in opposition to God.

From the start, God made it clear to Moses in Exodus 3:19 - "But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him." God called Pharaoh to humble himself and acknowledge that God is his authority and that he cannot redefine good and evil based on his terms.

WE DO LIFE TOGETHER!

If you haven't been involved in a LIFE Group yet, send us a message us thru Fb, and we will get you connected to a small group.

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But Pharaoh's response in Exodus 5:1-2 showed refusal and resistance to the God of Israel. God gave Pharaoh five opportunities to repent and humble himself in the first five plagues. And five times still, Pharaoh hardened his heart.

One of the central causes of human suffering is that we insist that we are in charge of our lives. We do not want to serve anyone else unless of course there is something to be gained in doing so for us. We climb the corporate ladder, seeking power through position. We acquire lots of money, so we can live independently and self-sufficiently. In pursuing all of these material desires, we often find out that they do not satisfy us, so we need more money, more power, and more objects to satisfy our lusts.

The cycle is never-ending when we are in charge of our lives. Pharaoh had all of these things in abundance. Undoubtedly, he could put someone to death on an impulse, if he chose to. All of this power, along with his hard heart, made for a very frightening and cruel man. Pharaoh made it clear through his rejection of God's warnings that he was in charge and not God.

He would not bend the knee to some strange foreign God when he, as Pharaoh, was a living god (small g) himself! God knew Pharaoh's heart well. Better than Pharaoh even. Scripture tells us that there are certain times and conditions under which God will stop guiding or warning us and let us be in charge of our lives. Romans 1:24 says: "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another (NIV)." When God gives us over to our own charge, our own control, we become hard of heart toward the will of God. It is the natural result of fallen humans refusing to allow God to control our lives.

Most parents have experienced a situation wherein their son or daughter was insistent on a particular course of behavior or a decision or consequence that the parent knew would lead to disaster. No amount of warnings, reasoning, or persuading would change the child's mind or turn them from their chosen actions. At that point, all a parent can do is step back and allow their son or daughter to experience the pain of a bad decision. Sometimes the child learns that lesson and does not repeat it. Others, sadly, will continue to insist on having things their way, no matter what warnings they might have received. Pharaoh had to experience pain and disaster before he gave in, and even then, he refused to admit he was no match for the Almighty God of the Israelites (Exodus 14:9-28).

Why did God harden Pharaoh's heart? Let us not make the mistake of crediting evil behavior to the holy God. Just as the parents in our example cannot be blamed for the result of their adult son or daughter's choices, neither can God be blamed for Pharaoh's hard heart. God tried, again and again, to reason with him, to warn him, but Pharaoh refused. Do not be like Pharaoh, heed the warnings God provides in Scripture. Do your best to live in God's will and you will avoid a hard heart.

HOW DOES A HEART GET HARDENED?

How do our hearts grow hard, unfeeling, disobedient, and cold? Sin is a major factor. If we keep on doing something or things that are wrong and don't repent or stop, our hearts will get hard. Our conscience will no longer get stung by these wrong acts or attitudes. They just become habits and no big deal.

You've probably heard of the concept of the "frog in a kettle." If you put a frog in boiling water, he'll jump out immediately. But if you put him in a pot of lukewarm water and gradually warm the water until it reaches boiling, he'll probably die in it as he won't perceive that danger is increasing. Sin is this way: If we do wrong things a little bit at a time, gradually they get a hold of us until we don't think about the wrongness of our actions.

In one of his crusade sermons, Billy Graham painted a clear word picture of how the heart grows hard: "The same sun that melts the butter hardens the clay." This relates to our dealing with God. The same Gospel that softens some hearts and submits to Christ also hardens the hearts of others.

It's possible for you to harden your heart by delaying to receive Christ until it is so hard that, when God speaks, you no longer hear Him.

God's patience doesn't last forever. God warns and calls and pleads with people to turn to Him. But if, after many pleas and many opportunities, a nation says, "God, we don't need you," then God will step out of the way and leave that nation to its own devices. God will not stand in our way if we want to drive off the cliff. His judgment is often to do nothing as we fall to our own destruction. When we decide we don't need God and don't want Him, the Lord will say, "Have it your way, but you won't like the result."

What are the other ways that harden the heart? Ingratitude and disappointment also hurt the heart. Jesus accused the disciples of the hardness of heart when Jesus multiplied the bread to feed four thousand people in Mark 8:17-19. Jesus had just performed a miracle of feeding 4,000 men, and yet, the disciples were concerned about having one piece of bread left for them as they cross to the other side. Their excitement over a miracle tended to be short-lived. They forgot.

A lot of us can be this way. God moves in our lives. We have a revelation of His love and help. Then, a short time later, we've forgotten and are complaining again. This can be the way any one of us behaves. Ingratitude is deadly.

Another way that we develop a hard heart is through disappointment. You pray for something. It doesn't happen in the way you were hoping. You get disappointed. Or, perhaps, someone betrays or hurts you. Suddenly, you begin to hold in question the whole idea of being intense in your faith. "Why bother?" you're thinking at some level. We can all get disappointed. People are imperfect. Life is not predictable. What's important is to get back up, dust yourself off, and keep trying. Developing grudges, resentment, or bitterness always hurts us far more than anyone else. Jesus told us entry into the kingdom could only be done with a childlike, expectant mindset, that we must forgive.

SOLUTIONS TO A HARDENED HEART

What should we do to repair our stony hearts? To cure the hardness of our hearts, first, we need to humble ourselves and repent. Repentance does not just mean that we feel bad about something and regret it, but it means primarily, that we turn in the opposite direction. We "go completely the other way." Second, we need to dive deeply into God's Word. The Bible renews our minds and brings our thoughts into an agreement with God's heart. Third, we need to obey what we hear and read from God, by applying it in our everyday lives.

God is a God of surprises for us. In those times of our lives when we get worn out from people letting us down or from setbacks when we've failed and given into temptation, God has a way of touching our lives and bringing us back. God breaks into our lives with truth, through kindness, healing, resources, and unexpected help. Through these things, our hearts soften because of Him.

God must do the decisive, miraculous heart transplant, and even heart replacement. If we are going to escape the hardness and deadness of that heart, the old heart has to be taken out, a new heart has to be put in — and we can't do that surgery on ourselves. That is the point. This is God's sovereign, gracious, saving work, and the effect of it is new, tender, obedient love toward God. And Deuteronomy puts it a little differently in Deuteronomy 30:6 - "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live." (NIV)

So, if we are going to turn around, stop hating God, and start loving God, he has to do that heart transplant and that heart circumcision. Work out your tenderness of heart. For God is the one who is at work in you to remove the hardness of heart and give you a tender heart of seeing and hearing and trusting. Keep in mind the promise of Ezekiel 36:26 - "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (NIV)