

## 39 | The Hardening of the Heart

Uphold me with a willing spirit.

PSALM 51:12

Could there be a scarier spiritual dynamic than the hardening of the heart? Could anything be sadder to watch than a warm and tender man become cold and hard? Could anything be more spiritually dangerous than the capacity of a sinner to grow quite comfortable with doing what would have once assaulted his conscience? What's worse than coming to a place where you actually have the capacity to feel right about what God says is wrong? What could be more threatening than the thought that, as sinners, we have an amazing capacity to deceive ourselves? David's story is a case study of this kind of danger. David prays for a broken heart because, in his confession, he's realized that his heart has become hard.

When you read the story in 2 Samuel 11 and the words of confession in Psalm 51, you can't help but ask, "How did David get from the anointed king of Israel to a murdering adulterer? How could this good man end up in such a bad place? Such is the dangerous deceitfulness of sin and the disaster of the hardening of the heart. Here's the thing we all need to remember: sin isn't an event; no, it's a progressive movement of the heart that results in disobedient behavior.

Let's consider David's story. David inadvertently saw Bathsheba bathing. The fact that he saw her wasn't sin, but what he did with what he saw began the process of sin. It's clear that David wasn't repulsed by the temptation. It's clear that he didn't seek God's help. Why is this clear? Because of what he does next. David sends a servant to try to find out who this woman is. This isn't the action of a man who's running away from temptation. David immediately begins to move toward what he knows is wrong, and so in his heart he would have to be justifying what he was doing. David finds out that this

woman he was lusting after was married. But again he doesn't stop; he doesn't run. No, he uses his political power to bring her to the palace. What did David tell himself he was going to do next? How did he justify what he was about to do with a married woman?

As you read the story, at each point you want to scream, "David, stop; don't do what you're thinking of doing!" But he doesn't stop. Upon bringing Bathsheba to the palace he has sexual relations with her. As you read the account, you find it hard to believe that this is the same man that Samuel anointed to be king because of the character of his heart. But the plot thickens as Bathsheba becomes pregnant. Once more, instead of the pregnancy awakening David from his self-deception, it becomes the occasion of even deeper and greater sin.

David does his best to use Uriah to cover what he has done. If he can get Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba then perhaps the pregnancy will be attributed to Uriah, and David's sin will be hidden. But Uriah refuses to participate in David's scheme. So what David does next, in lust-driven anger, is hard to imagine, even though by this time you know that sin now has a firm hold on him. David has his soldiers set up Uriah so that he'll die on the battlefield. And then David marries Bathsheba.

It's a tawdry and disgusting story, one you wouldn't read if it were a paperback at your local bookstore. But the story is helpful, for it pictures how sin is a progressive system of sinful desire and self-deception. It stands as a pointed warning to us all.

I know you're like me, and you too would like to tell yourself that you're not like David; but you know you are. Like me, you too get attracted to things that are outside of the boundaries that God has set for you. Like me, you're quite skilled at covering, minimizing, rationalizing, justifying, defending, or otherwise explaining away your sin. Like me, you don't always stop at the first warning that something is wrong. You permit yourself to step even closer to evil, telling yourself that you'll be okay. Like me, you allow yourself to meditate on things you should repudiate. Like me, you participate in the hardening of your own heart even as you tell yourself that you can handle it, that you'll be okay.

The physical acts of sin are not actually where the real action takes place. By this I don't mean that behavioral sin isn't sin. What

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I mean is that the real moral war of sin and obedience is fought on the turf of the heart. It's when the battle for the heart is lost that the battle of physical resistance to sin will be lost as well. When the heart becomes hard, the system of internal restraint that keeps one pure ceases to function as it was designed to function, and we say yes to that which God has called us to say no.

But there's hope for us. Jesus came to give sight to blind eyes. He came to release the captives from their prison. He came to give us new hearts. He came to break sin's dominion over us. He came so that we'd have the power to say, "No!" when temptation comes our way. He came so that we could live with open eyes and soft hearts. He came so that we could turn to him in confession and receive his forgiveness, just like David.

#### Take a Moment

1. Is there a place where you need to experience the heart-softening power of God's grace?
2. Where has your conscience grown hard to something that ought to prick and trouble it? Conversely, is there a place where you have been unwilling to do what God is calling you to do?

## 46 | The Amazing Grace of Self-knowledge

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For I know my transgressions.

PSALM 51:3

I have counseled people for many years, and one of the things that has impressed me over and over again is how self-deluded people (including me) can be. It's amazing how hard it is to see ourselves with accuracy. It's been my experience over and over again that we see the other person with a fairly high degree of accuracy but can't seem to see ourselves with the same precision. I have had angry people get quite angry when I've suggested that they are angry! I've had controlling people posit that they think themselves to be quite serving. I've watched vengeful people seem unaware that they lived to settle the score with others. I've worked with men eaten with the cancer of lust who tell me that sex isn't a big struggle for them. I've had bitter wives give me the litany of ways they think that they are loving their husbands. I've counseled a gymnasium full of teenagers who really do think that they are wiser than the surrounding authorities. I've sat with ungracious and legalistic pastors and heard them talk of their allegiance to a theology of grace.

Why are we so deluded? The reasons are many. We make the mistake of comparing ourselves to the diluted standards of the surrounding culture, standards that fall far below God's will for us. We also make the mistake of comparing ourselves to others, always able to find someone who appears to be more sinful than we are. We spend so much time arguing for our righteousness that it leaves little time to reflect on the reality of remaining sin. Add to all of this the basic nature of sin. Sin is deceitful. It hides, it defends itself, it wears masks, it bends its shape into more acceptable forms, it points fingers

of blame, and it even questions the goodness of God. Sin always first deceives the person who is sinning the sin.

So, since sin is by its very nature deceitful, we need help in order to see ourselves with accuracy. Another way to say this is that personal spiritual insight is the result of community. We don't get it all by ourselves. We need a ministry of two communities in order to see ourselves with the kind of surgical clarity with which David speaks in this psalm. First, we need community with God. He's the ultimate opener of blind eyes. Through the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit we begin to see ourselves with accuracy and become willing to own up to what we see. But the Spirit uses instruments, and this is where the second community comes in. God employs people in the task of giving sight to other people. For David, that was the prophet Nathan. With the skill of a seasoned pastor, he got inside of David's defenses and told him a story designed to engage his heart and stimulate his conscience. Through the words of this wise man and through the lens of this simple story, David's heart broke as he saw who he was and what he'd done.

There are a whole lot of people who are blindly stumbling their way through life. But their blindness is made even more powerful and dangerous by the fact that they tend to be blind to their blindness. A physically blind person is never blind to his blindness. He's immediately confronted with the fact that he's unable to see, and he gives himself a whole catalog of ways to live inside the boundaries set by this profound physical deficiency. The scary reality is that one of the things that keeps spiritually blind people blind is that they're not only convinced that they see, but they're also convinced that they see quite well! And so they don't seek help for their blindness. Why seek help for a condition from which you are convinced you don't suffer?

So, whenever you encounter a person who sees him- or herself with precision, clarity, and accuracy, you know for sure that grace has visited that individual. It's only God's grace that can enable blind eyes to see, and it's only God's grace that can produce in us the willingness to accept what we've seen.

From the very first words of Psalm 51, you know you're reading the words of a man of unusual personal insight. From the beginning you know you're listening to a man who's humble and clear. People

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simply don't talk about themselves with such clear and self-indicting words. And so you know this man's been visited by a God of grace and one of his tools of grace, because sinners simply don't arrive at this kind of clarity alone.

#### Take a Moment

1. In what ways has God's grace enabled you to know yourself better today than you once did?
2. Where do you still tend to participate in your own blindness? Pray that God, in his love, would continue to open your eyes and give you a willing and humble heart to own what he reveals.

## 8 | Aren't You Glad You're Not Like David?

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To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

TITLE OF PSALM 51

Aren't you glad you're not like David,  
Such blazoned sin, how could he?  
Aren't you glad you're not like Saul,  
Making up his own rules; what was he thinking?  
Aren't you glad you're not like Cain,  
Violence against his own brother?  
Aren't you glad you're not like Rebekah,  
Such planned deceit?  
Aren't you glad you're not like the Israelites,  
So easily seduced by idols?  
Aren't you glad you're not like Absalom;  
How could he be so jealous?  
Aren't you glad you're not like Elijah;  
How could he forget God, be so depressed?  
Aren't you glad you're not like Nebuchadnezzar;  
How could he be so obsessed with power?  
Aren't you glad you're not like Samson;  
How could he be so easily deceived?  
Aren't you glad you're not like Jonah;  
How could he run from the Father's call?  
Aren't you glad you're not like the Pharisees,  
So religiously right yet spiritually wrong?  
Aren't you glad you're not like Judas,  
Selling the Messiah for a little bit of silver?  
Aren't you glad you're not like the Corinthians,  
So much better at division than at serving the Lord?

But wait.  
You are like them, and so am I.  
There is simply no denying it.  
Their stories are a mirror into which we see ourselves.  
We too are jealous and easily deceived.  
We too are proud and obsessed with power.  
We are better at division while we run from God.  
We too get angry and get seduced by idols.  
In sorrow we must say,  
We stand with David,  
And Saul,  
And Rebekah,  
And Jonah,  
And Elijah,  
And the rest.  
These stories are for us to look into and see us,  
so that we are not able,  
to buy into,  
the lie of our own righteousness.  
But instead,  
Run to His mercy,  
Hold onto His unfailing love,  
and finally rest,  
In His great compassion.  
Aren't you glad you can step out of the darkness of self-deceit,  
and admit who you are?

### Take a Moment

1. When you read the Bible, do you intentionally try to use it as a mirror that is able to show you as you actually are?
2. Do you humbly identify with the weakness, foolishness, and failure of the characters of Scripture, or do you tend to tell yourself that you are essentially different from them?