



"When a man is wrapped up in himself, he makes a pretty small package."
—John Ruskin

11-May-18

The Endurance of the Firstfruits (Part Three)

"Hardness of heart" is used several ways in Scripture, but a person can develop this sinful attitude toward both [God](#) and man. A quick review of several verses in which the phrase or its equivalent appears will provide a range of its biblical usage.

In [Psalm 95:8](#), it is linked with the rebellion of the Israelites, who refused to trust God despite seeing His frequent miracles. [Proverbs 21:29](#) says that a wicked man "hardens his face," meaning that his visage is bold and unfeeling—unmoved by what God thinks or by the plight of others. [Proverbs 28:14](#) declares that the man who hardens his heart will fall in calamity (as the Parable of the Sower in [Matthew 13:5-6](#) shows), in contrast to the reverent man, who is happy.

In [Ezekiel 3:7](#), a hard heart is connected to "impudence," which is simply contempt and disregard of others. *Impudence* derives from a Latin word that means "not feeling any shame." [Daniel 5:20](#) describes Nebuchadnezzar as having a spirit hardened in pride. His roots were in himself rather than God, who humbled him mightily. Finally, in [Hebrews 3:13](#), hardening of the heart is related to the deceitfulness of [sin](#), which denotes believing that sin can

deliver what it promises. If we believe this, our heart becomes hardened, and we stop believing God and His Word.

As mentioned in Part Two, the basic problem of hardness of heart is unbelief. Faith—belief, trust—must be firmly anchored in Christ Himself, rather than in a man or group of men. If our "roots" are in family, friends, or a social environment rather than in Christ, over time, it will give rise to disillusionment, discouragement, and despair because those things will always disappoint. When things go wrong, an improperly rooted individual becomes hard and cynical. This cynical disillusionment can happen if our hope, trust, or confidence is in an organization or leader rather than in the Head of the Body ([Colossians 1:18](#)).

Those familiar with the events in the [Worldwide Church of God](#) following the death of Herbert W. Armstrong have a ready example. The turmoil that ensued in the church over the next decade led to many people giving it all up and walking away. If God had indeed called and converted them, they apparently did not have the depth of root in [Jesus Christ](#) to survive the pressure. Using the parable's wording, "they withered away" ([Matthew 13:6](#)).

Another bedrock of unbelief is a preoccupation with the self, which can emerge as self-concern, self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-promotion—any of which testify that an individual's roots are unhealthy. A person fixated only on himself cannot be properly focused on God. Only by being rooted in Jesus Christ can we withstand the tribulations of life, let alone bear good fruit. Because human beings simply do not have the wherewithal to form themselves into God's image, even the utmost of human strengths and abilities prove insufficient in growing in God's character while enduring tribulation.

The critical factor is an individual's relationship with God: being adequately rooted and drawing upon that abundant Source rather than relying on the self. Narcissists will not survive the rocky road to the Kingdom, nor would they be allowed in, as they would compete with God!

Further examples of rocky soil—hardness of heart—can include:

- » A person choosing his own will over God's; stubbornly refusing to comply or obey.
- » [Ingratitude](#): complaining against God for the way He handles our lives and arranges our circumstances; finding fault with the way He leads us.
- » Fault-finding, habitual criticism, and censure of others.
- » A mindset of perpetually seeing only the dark, painful side of life.

If we see these things popping up in our lives, it can indicate that our spiritual roots have stopped growing, and our ability to patiently endure tribulation may be waning.

Since the essence of a hard heart is unbelief, it follows that a pliable heart grows in true belief, which is crucial to the success of the harvest. In [John 6: 29](#), Jesus defines the work of God as instilling belief. That belief—that trust—is what produces deep roots that allow us to endure the slow, grinding pressure that [Satan](#) and this world put on God's people.

God, then, gives us gifts along the way to ensure a successful harvest. One, in particular, has already been mentioned in these essays: the weekly [Sabbath](#). Recall that Pentecost looks back on a period of seven such Sabbaths. In the Sabbath command found in [Deuteronomy 5:12-15](#), God reminds us of our slavery and the fact that He brought us out of our former life, redeeming us. But we have not been fully redeemed; we are awaiting another redemption.

When we remember this—that God is still working with His firstfruits—it should help us to resist hardness of heart toward other [firstfruits](#) whom God is also redeeming. So each week we are reminded that God *has* delivered us and *is* delivering us. If we internalize that, it will bolster our belief and trust that God knows what He is doing with us, no matter what appears to be occurring. In this way, we will not develop hardness of heart toward God.

Similarly, in the Sabbath commandment in [Exodus 20:8-11](#), God ties the Sabbath back to creation, reminding us of His power and genius in making

the environment in which we live. It should also remind us that our spiritual creation is continuing and that He is making us into His complete image. He is making us perfect, blameless, upright, sincere, and without blemish. And we know that He is faithful to complete the good work He has begun in us ([Philippians 1:6](#)), as long as we do not resist Him through hardness of heart.

Every week, then, He gives us a mile-marker along our path of seven Sabbaths as a way to rejuvenate our belief and trust. Strengthening our [faith](#) breaks down the hardness of our hearts so God's work in us can continue, and He can have, not only a successful early harvest, but also one that includes us.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Willingness to Believe](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Americans (indeed most of the industrialized world) tend to be skeptical, cynical, and jaded, demanding mountains of evidence before becoming convinced of anything. We run the risk of losing our childlike credulity, becoming calloused, hardened, and stiff-necked like our forebears on the Sinai, even though God Almighty supplied a plethora of evidence in His desire to create in His people a humble, teachable spirit. We need to emulate Abraham, who strengthened and confirmed his faith when he stepped out in childlike credulity. We believe, obey, then understand. The proof comes after we believe. Following the apostle Paul's admonition in II Corinthians 4: 18, we place the preponderance of our trust in the eternal things we cannot see rather than the temporal physical things we can see.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[God's Sovereignty and the Church's Condition \(Part Two\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Having shown that God is involved in world affairs, John Ritenbaugh concludes by showing that God's hand was definitely involved in the scattering of the church. Our reaction needs to be positive: that, if He felt it needed to be done, we should respond by growing and preparing ourselves for His Kingdom.

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