

Hard Words or Hard Hearts

HN/SS 30/01/05 am

Reading: Ezekiel 36:16f, John 6:60f

Study: John 6:60-63

Psalms: 84:1-3, 42:1-4, 143:5-9, 63:1-4

Have you ever put some corn seeds in cotton wool on a saucer, poured on a little water and watched them germinate? They immediately start to swell as they imbibe water and in a few days a root appears and then a shoot. It is amazing how the 'dead' seeds come to life.

But did you know that some types of seeds will not germinate in this way. You can put them on the saucer and pour on the water but they will not germinate. They will not allow the water to enter their thick outer coat. They are called hard seeds. In order to get them to germinate you have to break this outer coating- a small cut or abrasion will suffice.

Our hearts are like those hard seeds. Sin has made them hard. Sin has made them resistant to the water of life. Hard hearts, hearts that are proud and selfish repel the truth.

Jesus was seeking to reach the hearts of these Jews with the truth – the truth about himself and his heavenly Father. He told them that he had come down from heaven – he was sent by the Father. He came down to give life to the world. *I am the bread of life* he told them. Come to me, believe in me and you will have eternal life.

In vivid language which reminded them of a sacrifice, and indeed pointed forward to the sacrifice of Calvary, Jesus said *unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you* (6:53). They complained that this was a hard saying. But was it a hard saying or was it rather that their hearts were hard?

The people who heard him and who now complained are called disciples here in this passage. They had followed him and heard all that he said. But they did not like what they heard. They were following Jesus on their own terms, not his. Focused solely upon outward things, their bellies and their oppression, they wanted Jesus as a king who would deliver them from the Romans and also give them more of that bread he gave at Bethsaida.

They felt no need of food for their souls. They were children of Abraham, they had the Law of Moses, they were keeping up the rituals, and they were not sinners like other people. Such self righteous people often have the hardest hearts of all. Me a Jew, a slave to sin! Me a Jew in need of the truth! How preposterous.

Hard saying

They murmured among themselves – *this is a hard saying, who can hear/accept it*. The adjective *hard* does not mean hard to understand but 'harsh' or 'offensive'. Literally it means 'to dry or make hard', a picture of their hearts rather than the words of Jesus. As Calvin commented 'the hardness was in their hearts not in the saying'. They had their own idea about the way to God and were not

going to be shaken out of it. They were set in their ways and those ways were offended by what Jesus said.

Jesus knew they were grumbling again and said *does this offend you?* The word here is *skandalon* which is not easy to translate. It refers to the stick that is placed on a trap door to prop it open. When the bird or rodent comes along and knocks the stick the door closes and it is caught. So the word means to ‘trigger off a trap’. Or we might say to cause to stumble, to make trouble.

Isaiah (8:14) spoke about the Lord being a stone of stumbling, and a rock offence. Peter applied these words to Jesus – *they stumble being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.* This is exactly what we see here in this interaction. These disciples were offended by Jesus saying they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. They would not accept that he came down from heaven; nor did they seek with all humility to grasp these words of life.

We must all learn from this passage and take care not to sit above the word of God. There are things in Scripture that are difficult to understand but we must accept such things with humility, knowing that all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful according to his purposes.

We are warned against a false sense of security in our standing before the Lord. *Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall* (I Corinthians 10:12). And in the letter to the Hebrews church members are told to exhort one another daily lest like their fathers they hear the gospel but do not mix it with faith (Hebrews 4:1).

Hard hearts are not easy to detect. Hard seeds look just like other seeds but the time of testing will come. It came to the Jews as they were confronted by the claims of Jesus Christ the Son of God. He revealed their hard hearts. Sooner or later the test will come. You will be put on the saucer as it were, and water will be poured on. Will you imbibe the water of life, will you receive Jesus Christ or will your hard heart reject him and remain dead – dead eternally.

Of what use is a seed that does not germinate. Without life it produces no fruit. It is cast out, good only for refuse, for fuel to be burned in the fire.

Ascension

Flesh and blood speak of sacrifice. The Jews were preparing for the Passover sacrifice. Jesus was pointing forward to his sacrifice of atonement for sin. Jesus came down from heaven for this very purpose. They must believe in him and accept his sacrifice as atonement for their sin. This is what Jesus meant when he said *whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.*

Jesus pointed even further ahead to his ascension here in 6:32. *What then if you should see the Son of man ascend to where he was before?* The ‘what’ is not in the original so it is not a complete question. What did he mean by this question?

He may have been saying in effect – if you see me returning to heaven will you not be troubled even further? Or he may be saying if you see me returning to heaven will not that solve your difficulty? But it is unlikely that seeing him ascend to heaven would soften their hard hearts – only the Holy Spirit could do that.

Rather Jesus is simply announcing the whole gospel – the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension. All belong to the one package that is Jesus Christ. All are essential parts of the great saving act that is Jesus Christ. God so loved the world that he gave his only son – he sent him down from heaven to be our sacrifice. Yet death would not hold him. He rose again and ascended into heaven, returning to the glory of the Father (cf. I Corinthians 15). Those who believe in Jesus will also be raised to glory on the last day.

Spirit gives life

What was the essence of their unbelief? Carnal thinking, worldly thinking. Even these religious Jews who claimed to worship God were carnal. They did not worship in spirit and in truth for they rejected the truth. Sure they said the right things and did the right things. They never missed a meeting but they had no life in them. For all their piety they were dead – spiritually dead.

The flesh profits nothing said Jesus. The institution, the ceremonies, the fine clothes, the excellent singing, and the long prayers – all were useless when there was no true life.

How is that life obtained? It is the Spirit, God the Holy Spirit that's gives life. The Holy Spirit must break open the heart. The heart that is hard because of sin cannot open itself. It needs an external force; it needs great power, the power of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit will *convict the world of sin, and of righteousness and of judgment: of sin because they do not believe in me* (16:8).

In breaking the hardness of seeds I would take each one and with a sharp knife cut into the hard outer later. A small nick would allow water to enter the seed and it would burst into life.

The Holy Spirit must touch your heart if you are to have life. You must be broken, crushed in the inner man from all pride and self righteousness. At Pentecost they were cut to the heart and cried out what must we do (Acts 2:37)? You must be convicted of your sin; you must feel the guilt of your sin. This is the work of the Spirit of God.

The Spirit and the word. *The words that I speak to you are spirit and they are life* (6:63). The broken seed takes in the water and comes to life – it begins to live. So it is that the work of the Holy Spirit must be accompanied by the word, the living word of God. Jesus was speaking such words to these disciples. He was pouring out the life giving water. He who was touched by the Spirit of God (3:8), he who was called by the Father, would drink that word, he would believe and live. *I planted, Apollos watered but God gave the increase.*

Jesus Christ, God the Son, knew who would believe. But mere men like the apostles and like all preachers of the gospel do not. But they faithfully preach the word praying that the Holy Spirit would convict men and women of sin and that the word they proclaim may enter such hearts and bring life.

What a wonder, what a joy it is to see life come into a persons heart and to see them grow just as surely and as visibly as that seed that was cut, took in water and sprang to life.

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