

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
God's Heart Softener
Hebrews 3:7-19

Several weeks ago we were meeting as a pastoral staff. Every now and then, we'll jokingly jab at one another. It's all in good fun and we really like one another and find a lot of encouragement in being together. So on this particular morning I found my perfect opportunity. We were all gathered in Daniel Plesha's office. After all, he has the best and most attractive of all the offices and we like meeting there.

Daniel came a little late to our Staff meeting that morning. But as he came into the office, my eye caught something rather strange. Something white and fluffy was hanging out of Daniel's pant leg. At first, all kinds of thoughts went through my mind. Is this a new style of sock? After all, musicians can be a little alternative at times. Or maybe his long underwear don't fit quite right! Or did he pick up something that stuck to his shoe and then somehow worked its way up into his pants as he came into the building?

I took a closer look and still couldn't quite figure out what this white, fluffy thing was. I mean, after all, most pastors don't walk around the building with white, fluffy things hanging out of their pant legs. Right about that time, Daniel crossed his leg in such fashion that it gave me a closer look. At that point, I reached over and pulled on this white, fluffy thing. By that time, all eyes of the other staff members were honed in on this white, fluffy thing. And as I pulled it out, I discovered that it was a...fabric softener!

This morning I want to talk to you about a "softener" that God has given to us. Not a fabric softener, but a heart softener. And just like that little white, fluffy thing that Daniel was conspicuously but unknowingly carrying around in his pant leg, we are to have this biblical "heart softener" constantly on our lips. As we read this passage, see if you can discover just what it is. This morning I've asked Amber Johnson to read our passage for us.

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 desert, ⁹ where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. ¹⁰ 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.' ¹¹ So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" ¹² See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. ¹⁵ As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion." ¹⁶ Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ¹⁷ And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? ¹⁸ And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? ¹⁹ So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. Hebrews 3:7-19

What is God's heart softener? Did you catch it? That's right...it's found in verse 13. It's encouragement. But before we look at encouragement, what it is and how it works, we need to look first of all at the malady for which encouragement is the remedy. And in this passage, the malady (the sickness) for which encouragement is the remedy is a hard heart. And in verses 7-11 and then again in verses 16-19 we find some of the unmistakable signs of a hard heart.

SIGNS OF A HARD HEART

Rather than just listing these out, the writer he calls our attention to an example – and in this case a negative example – of God's people in the Old Testament. The writer to the Hebrews loves to use examples and illustrations. In verses 1-6 he gave us two positive examples: Moses and Jesus. But now, beginning in verse 7, he turns to the negative example of the Jewish nation. But rather than taking us to the exact Old Testament passages where the specific examples are recorded, he prefers to quote Psalm 95:7-11.

To get the full force of what he's saying, I would like you to turn to that Psalm. If you don't have a Bible with you, take the Bible found in the pew pocket in front of you. The page number is listed on the screen.

When you read this Psalm in its entirety, you begin to realize just how appropriate this passage is to what the writer to the Hebrews is trying to say. He has just emphasized the importance of gathering together as the "house" of God, i.e. the visible, gathered worshipping community. And now he quotes a Psalm that also talks about that.

The psalmist begins this way: "*Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord*" (v.1). He begins with a call to congregational worship. And this worship is not a personal thing, it is a corporate thing. It's not about "me and God." It's about "us together and God."

Such worship is also vocal: "*Let us shout aloud...*(v 1)." We somehow have in our minds that to sing a song worshipfully is to sing a song slowly and quietly. The average Israelite would have been quite puzzled by such an idea. Finally, this worship is humble: "*let us bow down in worship* (v 6);" "*let us kneel....*(v 6)."

I don't know about you, but my heart longs for such vibrant, authentic, corporate, and humble expressions of worship in God's "house," among fellow believer-priests who are gathered with one intent – to pour out our hearts in worship. But what keeps us from such profound experiences of worship? The writer tells us beginning in verse 7: "Today, if you hear His voice, do no *harden* your hearts..."

Just what are the signs of a hard heart? The following verses, cited in Hebrews 3, refers us to two incidences in Israel's history that depict the state of their heart. In fact, the psalm mentions these two events by name. It says, "Don't harden your hearts, as you did at *Meribah* and as you did at *Massah*" (Psalm 95:8). Meribah and Massah are not just the names of two places; they represent two evils, two unmistakable signs of a hard heart. Massah is a place named from a Hebrew word meaning "to test." And Meribah comes from the Hebrew word meaning "contention" or "rivalry."

Both of these words are found in Exodus 17:1-7. Rather than reading the passage, let me tell you the story. It all takes place soon after the exodus from Egypt. The people are in the Sin desert. The problem is they don't have any water. So they begin once again to complain to Moses, "Give us water, or we'll die of thirst!" Moses told them, "Look, why are you arguing with me and why are you testing the Lord?" So Moses pleads with God, "Lord, what am I supposed to do? These people are ready to stone me!" So the Lord told Moses, "Take the elders, go to Mt Horeb and I'll meet you there at the rock. Then take you rod, strike the rock and plenty of water will come out." And that's exactly what happened. But the passage also says, "Moses named the place Massah (meaning "to test Jehovah") and Meribah (meaning "argument" or "stife")."

What is the first sign of a hard heart? We could call it the "Massah mentality." What is the "Massah mentality?" It's *the refusal of God's parental hand in our life*. And when we do that, we test God. Israel saw adversity as a sure sign of God's absence. For these believers, every crisis was one more good reason to die, rather than be developed in their faith. And they concluded that they would have been far better off back in Egypt, or even dead in the grave, than out in this stinking, waterless dessert.

What they failed to realize, however, is that God was far more concerned about their character than their comfort. God's desire was to humble them, but they were becoming hard of heart. God's desire is that they become dependant upon his fatherly care, but they were becoming more and more independent, even rebellious. This is the "Massah mentality."

Later on, Moses describes God's purposes in adversity in Deuteronomy 8:2-3.

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.
Deuteronomy 8:2-3

If you're inclined to believe that adversity is a sign of God's absence, think again. Moses says otherwise. In the case of God leading his people through adverse circumstances in the wilderness, it was *not* a sign of God's absence, but of his parental care. So don't grow hard of heart by refusing God's parental care in your life. And remember, God's parental care is often demonstrated by taking us through adversity. No wonder we read in Hebrews 12:7 "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons."

But here we see not only a "Massah mentality," but also a "Meribah mentality." Massah means "to test God," but Meribah means "to strive, to argue." That's the second sign of a hard heart: *a complaining, quarreling, critical spirit*.

Usually a "Meribah mentality" is a sure sign of an underlying "Massah mentality." For when we refuse to trust God in our difficult circumstances, it's then that we begin to strike out at others. So the second sign of a hard heart is a complaining, critical spirit. And when there is a complaining, critical spirit among God's people, we know that we are already well down the road to a "Meribah mentality."

Here's the third sign: outright *disobedience*. This is emphasized in Hebrews 3:16-18:

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*? Hebrews 3:16-18

Massah is a refusal of God's parental hand in our lives through adversity. Meribah is a complaining, critical spirit towards others. But Kadesh-Barnea speaks of outright disobedience. What happened at Kadesh-Barnea? The people of Israel got scared and disobeyed. God told them to take possession of the land. They said, "No way, there are giants in the land!"

And when the LORD sent you out from Kadesh Barnea, he said, "Go up and take possession of the land I have given you." But you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. You did not trust him or obey him. You have been rebellious against the LORD ever since I have known you. Deuteronomy 9:23-24

And what underlies our disobedience? It's essentially *unbelief*. That's the fourth sign of a hard heart. The last verse of Hebrews 3 says this: "So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their *unbelief*."

Do you have a hard heart? Are you running from God's discipline in your life? Are you developing a critical, complaining spirit? Is God speaking to you, telling you to step out in faith in an area of your life, but you're saying, "Oh no, not me God. There are too many 'giants' in the land!" Are you slipping into unbelief?

God's Word is telling you and me: Don't go down that road. The consequences are disastrous! What happened to the people of Israel? They failed to enter God's rest. In fact, that entire generation dropped dead in the wilderness.

GOD'S REMEDY FOR A HARD HEART

So what's the remedy for this malady of a hard heart? It's called *encouragement*. Notice beginning in verse 12:

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But *encourage* one another Hebrews 3:12-13

What is encouragement? Notice what is in the middle of the word – it's the word "courage." We've already read in verse 6, "We are his house, if we hold on to our *courage* ..." To "encourage" is to give courage to one another through our words, either in the form of exhortation or consolation. In the language of the New Testament, the word means literally "to call alongside or near." It's related to the word for the Holy Spirit as our *comforter*, "the one who comes alongside" of us.

Recently we saw the New York Giants propelled to the Super Bowl. They were clearly the underdogs...but they won! At the beginning of the season they appeared to be headed nowhere. Injuries and discouragement plagued the team. But then there was a turn-around. What inspired it? It came from a man that doesn't even play football. Greg Gadson is a Lt. Colonel in the Army and a veteran of the Iraq war. From his hips up he looks like a linebacker. The only thing he lacks physically is legs. They were blown off in Iraq as he road in a Humvee. But what saved Gadson's life were the people around him; his fellow soldiers who pulled him to safety, the doctors who rescued him medically, and the friends and family who stood by him in his suffering. What does all this have to do with the Giants? Well, the receivers coach for the Giants, Mike Sullivan, was a West Point classmate and football teammate of Gadson. After the Giants had lost the first two games of the season, Sullivan recounted Gadson's story to coach Tom Coughlin. He was so moved that he decided to ask Gadson to come and speak to the team. Gadson spoke from his wheelchair. He told his story about what his Army team meant to him and the encouragement he had received to press on in life in the face of adversity. The next day the Giants came from behind to defeat the Redskins and then to overcome one challenge after another until they finally won the Super Bowl. At every playoff game, except one (because he needed surgery), Gadson was on the sidelines encouraging his new teammates on to victory. One of the Giants players said that if the team doesn't give Gadson a Super Bowl ring, then he would give him his.¹

That's encouragement. And that is what is needed among God's people. And this encouragement will keep you and me from a sinful, unbelieving heart.

But notice what characterizes this encouragement. It is first of all *intentional*. It is a command. This is only one of twelve specific "one another" commands that we are given in the New Testament. And commands are given to you and me to obey. This and the other eleven one another commands of the Bible don't just happen. We are called to be intentional in our obedience. Intentional encouragement is the first remedy to the malady of a hard heart.

This encouragement is also *mutual*. Verse 13 says, "Encourage *one another*..." Excuse me if I underscore the obvious. But we're not talking about you *as an individual* suddenly feeling encouraged one day. We're talking about a mutual thing, not a personal thing. To encourage one another we have to *be* with one another and be willing to speak into one another's lives. Unfortunately, Israel in the Old Testament was characterized more by mutual *discouragement* rather than my mutual *encouragement*. We are to lay the Meribah mentality aside, and put on mutual encouragement.

That is why every believer needs some kind of small group in which these "one another" commands can be carried out. Is it really possible for 400 people on a Sunday morning to really enter into one another's lives and speak encouragement? It's really not realistic to think that we can be "intimate allies" in such a large group setting. Do you have a small group of others, a "band of brothers," where you can receive this kind of encouragement? It's maybe inspiring to experience vibrant worship with a crowd. But it's probably not the unknown person on the other side of the room who will rally to your side in the tough times. Mutual encouragement is the second remedy to a hard heart.

We are to encourage one another intentionally and mutually; but also *daily*. Some of you think that you can live the Christian life just “checking in” on Sundays every now and then. I have news for you. It’s impossible. When you stand consistently alone without others speaking into your life, the devil is going to eat you up and spit you out. And he’ll do it by hardening your heart, towards God and towards others in the Body of Christ. Daily encouragement is the third remedy to a hard heart.

We are to encourage one another *urgently*: “as long as it is called Today...” You see, God judges sin. He eventually disciplines those of us who continue in a Massah mentality, or a Meribah mentality, or a Kadesh-Barnea mentality. Those who tested God and mutually discouraged one another dropped dead in the wilderness. And God has not changed. He will discipline us as individuals and he will discipline us as a church. Urgent encouragement is the fourth remedy to a hard heart.

Finally, we are to encourage one another *purposefully*. Verse 13 says, “so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” Encouragement in the church is the remedy to the malady of a hard heart. Encouragement is God’s “heart softener.” You see, left to ourselves, we are so easily deceived. We can begin to conjure up all kinds of things in our minds about God and about other people. And we grow hard. This is the deceitfulness of sin. And God is saying, “Don’t go there; it’s destructive.”

But in the next verse we have the positive purpose of our mutual encouragement (verse 14): “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly to the end the confidence we had a first.” The purpose of our mutual encouragement is that we hold firmly, to the very end, so that we come to “share in Christ.” Hardness of heart leads to loss of reward. What happened to Israel? Because of the Massah, Meribah and Kadesh-Barnea mentality, they failed to experience the rich reward of entering God’s promised rest in God’s promised land.

And for us today? As believers, if our hearts grow hard, we too will experience a similar loss of reward. Here it is termed having a “share in Christ.” In the next chapter it is called “entering into God’s rest.” But they both refer to the same thing.

But that topic is for next week. For today, I hope you’ll take seriously this command to “encourage one another.” Remember, encouragement is God’s heart softener, and we’re to carry it around with us wherever we go.

ⁱ Craig Brian Larson, editor of PreachingToday.com; source: Greg Garber, "Source of inspiration: Injured soldier produces Giant emotions," www.espn.com