Guided by His Eye

On the Heart God Heals First

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Heart First, Then the Legs

There is a story in Luke 5 of a paralyzed man whose friends, unable to get him through the door because of the crowd, climb onto the roof, take it apart, and lower their friend down on his bed at Jesus' feet. And what is the very first thing Jesus says to him?

"Man, your sins are forgiven you" (Luke 5:20).

Only after that, and after the religious leaders raise their objections in their hearts, does Jesus say:

> ". . . that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins": He said to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." (Luke 5:24)

Heart first. Then the legs. Jesus deals with the deeper thing before he deals with the visible thing. And how often it is the same with us. The man was reaching out to Christ in faith for his physical healing. But there was something deeper. God needed to get the heart right before the legs would walk again.

"When I Kept Silent, My Bones Grew Old"

David knew this dynamic from the inside. Psalm 32 is his reflection on what happened to him before he repented:

"When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer" (Psalm 32:3–4).

There can be a physical manifestation to sin. When we persist in hardness toward God, when we refuse to turn our heart, something happens. A cloud of darkness. The bones groan. Psalm 51, the other psalm written out of the same wreckage, names the deeper need:

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51:10–11).

David recognizes that the problem is a heart problem, and the solution is a heart God himself has to create. Notice the verb: *create*. Not repair. Not adjust. Create. He needs God to do something he cannot do for himself.

We Become What We Worship

Psalm 115 names the same dynamic from another angle. Talking about idols and those who make them:

> They have mouths, but they do not speak; eyes they have, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear; noses they have, but they do not smell; they have hands, but they do not handle; feet they have, but they do not walk . . . Those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them. (Psalm 115:5–8)

We become what we worship. When we turn to the idols of this world, and idols come in many forms now, we begin to take on their attributes. The idol has eyes that don't see; we lose the ability to see. The idol has feet that don't walk; we become stove up. Lameness becomes evident in us. That paralyzed man Jesus healed had a heart issue *and* a leg issue, and the two

were not unrelated. Ezekiel 14 describes a people whose hearts are filled with idols, and inevitably their actions and their words begin to manifest those idols.

But God comes after the heart first. “And the Lord will guide you continually,” says Isaiah 58, on the other side of repentance. The heart healed; then the legs.

“Circumcise the Foreskin of Your Heart”

At every threshold moment in the lives of God’s people, the call comes to the heart. Israel had journeyed forty years in the wilderness and stood three days from entering the Promised Land. Listen to what Moses tells them in Deuteronomy 30. Just before, in chapters 27 and 28, he has set out a long list of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. We can read those chapters and start off in faith thinking we have it all together, that we’ll take that hill for God. But Deuteronomy 30 begins with God already making provision for what he knows is coming:

> Now it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God drives you, and you return to the Lord your God and obey His voice, according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul, that the Lord your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the Lord your God has scattered you. (Deuteronomy 30:1–3)

Look at the move God makes there. He has just laid out the blessings and the curses, and immediately he is making provision for the failure he knows is coming. “When I remove you from your land (and I will, because you’ll fail) *I want you to remember*, and I will gather you again.” Before they have ever had the opportunity to fail, God has already shown them door number three. “When you fail, here is the door. Come back through this one.”

And then comes the line that anchors everything:

"And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deuteronomy 30:6).

Why do we need a circumcised heart? Why do we need that softness, that sensitivity? Paul gives the answer in Romans 2: It is not those who are circumcised in the flesh that count, but those who are circumcised in the heart. *They* are the children of God. *They* are the descendants of Abraham. The mark of the people of God is a heart sensitive to God's actions in the world: a heart that, when we sin, feels the burden, feels the prick.

Guided With His Eye

Right after the "my bones grew old" verses in Psalm 32, after David has acknowledged his sin and felt the heavy hand lifted, God speaks:

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye" (Psalm 32:8).

Stop on that. "I will guide you with My eye." That is a father getting down beside his little child and saying, "Look, over there. See where I'm pointing? Look at that." That is the closeness of the God we serve when he wants to instruct us. It is not the eye of a God who stands back austerely, shaking a finger and demanding, "What's the problem with you? Why don't you grow up? Why haven't you learned to walk yet?" When you walk into a room with little babies, you don't say that. You say, "Come here. Come on. Come to me." When the little ones take a stumbling step, you don't say, "What's your problem? Get up! What are you, a moron?" You don't talk that way to a child learning to walk. You encourage. Every step is celebrated.

Last night a small grandchild of ours was at our house, and I was trying to get her to see the moon outside the window. She kept looking at the cartoon on the screen. “No, not the cartoon. Look at the moon. Look at the moon.” And finally: “Oh, the moon!” You get right next to them. You focus their eye on what you want them to see. That is the love of God. He gets close. He guides. He woos.

“A Heart of Flesh”

Israel did fail. The whole laundry list of curses came to pass, and they ended up in Babylon under another oppression. And right there, in the middle of the captivity, Ezekiel writes some of the most extraordinary words in the Bible. God speaks through him:

> Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (Ezekiel 36:25–27)

All we have to do is open ourselves to him. If you give him that much space, even a little, the power of God’s presence will get inside there. He will get inside the smallest opening you create. He will come in, take that stony heart out, and give you a heart of flesh. He will put his Spirit within you and *cause you to walk*, there it is again, to walk in his ways.

Cut to the Heart

Acts 2 is the moment when this promise begins to land in the church. Peter has just preached the death and resurrection of Jesus to a crowd of Jews from every nation under heaven who had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost. And Luke records what happens to them as they listen:

> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” (Acts 2:37–39)

“Cut to the heart.” That word *cut*: sometimes the word cuts, and we feel it precisely there. The word cuts to the heart, the heart turns, and Peter has the next word ready: *return.* Repent. Be baptized. Receive the Spirit. The promise is to you, and to your children, and to all who are afar off.

“To All Who Are Afar Off”

Peter quotes that line, but it takes the church a while to digest what “to all who are afar off” actually means. By Acts 10 the Spirit has come on Cornelius and his household, and by Acts 15 the church is in council in Jerusalem trying to sort out what to do about all these Gentiles streaming into the kingdom. Some of the believing Pharisees stand up in the council and insist that Gentile converts be circumcised and made to keep the law of Moses. The apostles and elders meet to consider it. After much dispute, Peter rises to speak:

> Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. (Acts 15:7–9)

“God, who knows the heart.” There it is again. God reads the room at the level of the heart, not at the level of the religious credentials. The Gentiles, who had been every bit as bound

to idols as Israel had been, were finding Christ through faith in the words Peter had spoken, and God had given them the Spirit on no other basis than their believing hearts.

So whether you are King David, the Jew of the Jews, or a small-town Gentile of no account who first felt the burden lift at five years old: God can reach into your heart, strike something there, and grow faith. He does not give us a new set of brains the day we come to him. He begins what Eugene Peterson called "a long obedience in the same direction": a long walk toward God, one day at a time. Deal with what God is dealing with you about today. He will give you tomorrow what you need for tomorrow. He will guide you with his eye for the rest of your life.

Sin Abounds; Grace Much More Abounds

Listen, Satan does not win. Where sin abounded, Paul says, grace much more abounded (Romans 5:20). Do you really think God is going to lose? Do you think you can be taken from the grasp of God's powerful grace and his unilateral act to make sure the doors of your salvation are wide open? You cannot. Paul says it directly in 2 Corinthians 3, talking about the hardness of the human heart and the veil that lies over it:

> Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away . . . But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Corinthians 3:16, 18)

When the heart turns, the veil is removed. The cloak of darkness is taken away. We see, with unveiled face, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and we are transformed. We begin to walk in newness. We become new creation.

The Brooding Dove and the New Creation

Picture Jesus coming up out of the waters of the Jordan. The dove descends on him. That is not just a passing image: It is a deliberate reenactment of Genesis 1, where the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. The Hebrew word for that hovering is the word for the brooding of a bird over its nest. And out of that brooding came land rising up out of the deep, seeds, plants, birds, animals, fish, humanity, the original creation that God called good.

That is what is being staged at the Jordan. Jesus comes up out of the water. The Spirit, like a dove, lights upon him. The Father's voice declares, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." New creation has begun. The waters of baptism, the Spirit of baptism, the fire of Pentecost, they all work together now to create sons and daughters of God.

So let's walk in that newness of life. That is the new creation. The old has passed away; behold, all things are becoming new. The possibilities of life in the Spirit, the unlimited vision of God for his creation through that Spirit: what does that look like in your life and in mine, as we let the Spirit of God light upon us and animate us? It is a life of infinite possibilities. Let's live into it.