

Hope for the Frozen Heart

Has your heart subtly grown cold? I know from personal experience that God can reignite His passion in you.

There is nothing more important than your relationship with the Lord. Nothing.

Yet sin, in its very essence, is an assault on that relationship. That's why sin must be uprooted from your life. Its goal is to steal the one thing you cannot live without: intimate communion with God.

You can lose your friends and still be blessed. You can lose your possessions and still be rich. You can even lose your health and still be fruitful.

But if you lose your relationship with Jesus, if you forfeit your communion with Him, all the friends in the world, all the possessions in the world, all the health in the world won't buy you a moment's joy or true satisfaction.

We were created to know and serve the Lord, to walk with Him, to love Him, to enjoy Him, to work for Him. But we chose instead to go our own way, trying to find satisfaction and fulfillment through everything other than Him—money, achievements, food, sex, education, sports, music, arts, family, work, religion.

In view of our rebellious condition, the Father, in His infinite love, sent His Son to seek and save us, giving His own life as the bridge that stretched across the gulf of our sins, making the way for us to come home to God.

What is to be our response? We must pursue intimacy with the Lord. Knowing Him and walking with Him must be our highest goal, our No. 1 priority.

All the ministry, spiritual activity, gifts and power cannot substitute for a solid relationship with God. In fact, ministry, “anointing” and service without intimacy is just performance, showmanship, religiosity or good works—if it doesn’t flow from our heart for God.

Everything we do—praying, studying, soul-winning, discipling, worshiping, preaching, teaching, parenting, serving, giving—must flow out of our love for God. He is the source, the motivation and the foundation of it all.

Return to Your First Love

Consider the Lord’s rebuke of Ephesus in Revelation 2. Here was a congregation that excelled, that worked hard, that hated false doctrine, that persevered. In many ways, they were a model church, rich in good works, attentive to the warnings of Paul their spiritual father (see v. 2) and willing to endure hardship for Jesus’ sake.

And they did all this without growing weary. These Ephesian believers certainly outclassed most of us.

“‘Yet,’” Jesus said to them, “‘I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place’” (Rev 2:4-5, NIV).

Hard work was not enough. Sacrifice was not enough. Doctrinal

purity was not enough. Fine pastoral oversight was not enough. Perseverance in the midst of suffering was not enough.

This congregation had left its first love, and if it didn't repent—notice this is a corporate call—the Lord would actually remove it from its place. There would no longer be a church of Ephesus! Do you see how important it is in the eyes of the Lord that we maintain our first love?

He speaks of our first love as a height—a glorious, wonderful height—from which we can fall. He calls us to return to that height. We forsake—not “lose”—our first love. We voluntarily leave the place of spiritual passion by the choices we make and the lifestyles we adopt.

So what must we do to be restored, to make that return, to regain our first love? Jesus gives us the answer: “Repent”—meaning make an about-face—“and do the things you did at first” (Rev 2:5).

There are things we can do to restore the intimacy. We can set aside quality time to meet with Him, pour out our hearts to Him in prayer, share our innermost thoughts and burdens with Him.

We can lift our voices to Him in worship and adoration, singing the songs and hymns that have been so precious to us through the years, expressing our appreciation to Him with thanksgiving and praise.

We can saturate our minds and hearts with His Word, meditating on His truths, learning of Him, receiving from Him, growing in knowledge and grace.

We can think back to the awe and wonder of those early days and seek to recapture that sense of divine nearness. And whenever we feel prompted, we can share our faith with those who don't know the Lord.

According to Matthew Henry, believers who have left their first love "must return and do their first works. They must ... begin again, go back step by step, till they come to the place where they took the first false step; they must endeavour to revive and recover their first zeal, tenderness, and seriousness, and must pray as earnestly, and watch as diligently, as they did when they first set out in the ways of God."

Over a period of time, as we do these things, His Spirit begins to flood our hearts, and before we know it, He becomes the most precious One in our lives. He becomes the reason for all we do, the center of our attention, the highest object of our affection.

Then all our good works become expressions of the overflow of a heart enamored with the Master. That's what it means to "do the things we did at first." That's what it means to return to the height from which we have fallen, to repent and return to our first love.

God eagerly awaits our move back toward Him, and He will abundantly pardon. The Lord will receive us again, no questions asked.

As He said through Jeremiah, "'Turn back, O backturning children; I will heal your backslidings'" (see Jer 3:22). That

is the Word of the Lord.

The Backslidden Heart

Does anything hold you back? God has promised to draw near to those who draw near to Him (see James 4:8). Now is the time to pursue the Lord with all your being.

God Himself—not His reward, His blessing or His anointing—must be our goal. Therefore, each of us must cultivate a relationship with Him. Each of us must settle in our hearts once and for all that anything of eternal good we can do and anything truly good within us is birthed in Him.

So why are we spending so much of our time laboring and planning and running in our own strength and wisdom? Why aren't we communing more with Him in prayer, spending more time in worship and taking counsel more through His Word?

It could be that our very zeal for truth and purity coupled with our penchant for hard work and sacrifice has robbed us of our love for God and man. Evangelist Charles Finney commented on this, saying even with a backslidden heart a believer could remain active in Christian service.

For Finney, backsliding consisted of: (1)?"taking back that consecration to God and His service, that constitutes true conversion"; (2)?"the leaving, by a Christian, of his first love"; (3)?"the Christian withdrawing himself from that state of entire and universal devotion to God, which constitutes true religion, and coming again under the control of a self-pleasing spirit."

Backsliding can be subtle, but its origins are always the same—something has broken down in our relationship with the Lord. Somehow, our love has grown cold and our devotion has waned.

“But how can I know the state of my heart,” a troubled believer asks, “if I can seem to be on fire for God and yet be backsliding at the same time?”

Here are some symptoms of a backslidden heart, some tangible tests by which you can examine yourself. Ask yourself:

1) Is there a decrease in my personal devotion to Jesus? This will be evidenced by a decreased desire for intimate and private times with the Lord (especially in prayer and worship) and decreased hunger and passion for the Word.

When you were hot, Jesus was everything. You couldn't wait to spend time with Him. Praising Him—even with the simplest little choruses—was pure joy.

If there was a prayer meeting, you were there. You devoured the Word. You could relate to the words of Paul: “I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8, NKJV).

You might still enjoy the forms of worship—good music, singing, dancing, being part of the exciting corporate experience—but what about the object of worship? What about the Lord?

2) Is there a decrease in my personal satisfaction in God?

This will be reflected in the need for other things to gain fulfillment, an increased social orientation in place of private devotions, and an increased desire for recognition and acceptance by flesh and blood.

The Word says that “if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). What do you desire? What brings you satisfaction? Do you love God, or do you love the world?

3) Is there a decrease in my passion for spiritual work? This will be reflected in a decreased burden for the lost, a decreased burden for revival and visitation (often replaced by good works, and more subtly, by good spiritual programs), and a penchant for respectability in place of radicality.

How often do you share your testimony? You used to seek opportunities to talk about Jesus. Witnessing used to come naturally. But now, you almost avoid the subject.

And what about revival and visitation? How would you feel if the Spirit fell in power? Are you hungry anymore for a real move of God?

4) Have I lowered my standards of holiness? Do you permit things in your life, family, or congregation that would have been unthinkable when you were on fire and felt compelled to avoid certain activities, movies and other forms of entertainment?

Beware! This type of backsliding is often done in the name of spiritual maturity. I warn you as one who once fell into this

very error: It is a trap and a lie!

Absence of divine conviction does not mean absence of divine displeasure. It may actually point to a withdrawing of His presence.

5) Am I backsliding in my spiritual authority and personal victory? This will be reflected by a lack of victory over the flesh, falling back into old habits and lusts, and the inability to resist and drive out the devil from strongholds in your life or the lives of those to whom you minister.

You can fool others, but you can't fool the flesh and you can't fool the devil. As Leonard Ravenhill often asked, "Are you known in hell?"

Are you moving from victory to victory, or do you find yourself more and more entangled every day (or month or year)? Peter taught that "a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him" (2 Pet. 2:19, NIV).

Ask yourself if Jesus is your Master or if you are mastered by sin. Are you an overcomer, or are you overcome? Is Jesus your Lord, or are you ruled by your belly, your sexual lust, your temper, your greed, your bitterness? Who or what governs you?

You once chased the devil; now you tremble at his shadow. You once cast off fear like a dog shakes off water; now you are paralyzed by anxiety and dread. You once forgave from the heart instantly; now you remember and hold a grudge.

My friend, you are backsliding.

You once made effective inroads into the devil's kingdom. Now he's making inroads into you.

What has become of your victory? You are backsliding from the place of spiritual authority. How tragic that Satan has paralyzed you, be it with theological questions or fear of failure or massive self-doubt.

Press back in to Jesus. He is as victorious today as He ever has been. He will restore your faith.

At one time in my walk (in the late 1970s and early 1980s) I began to backslide, all the while claiming to be growing and maturing. My prayer times decreased; my devotional reading of the Word decreased. My fasting all but stopped; my witnessing dropped off.

I became more interested in social action than in spiritual action. I had less and less control over the flesh. I virtually never took authority over the devil. I fell in areas I had never fallen in before. I even became addicted to video games.

I felt the presence and joy of the Lord less frequently and less abundantly, yet I was an active leader in the church, I taught the Word with conviction, I preached with fervor (and even some anointing), I ministered actively, I sought to keep a pure testimony before the world, I was considered by many to be zealous, and I was engaged in many good and even sacrificial works.

I will be eternally grateful to my sister-in-law who, without my knowledge, helped to pray me back on fire.

How I praise God for His miraculous intervention, planting the first seeds on New Year's morning 1982, lovingly rebuking me in March of that year, awakening me with a vision of a spiritual outpouring in May, showing me how far away I was drifting in September, calling me to lay everything on the altar in October, and then sending a visitation November 21, 1982. I have not been the same since then.

I encourage you in the words of Psalms and Hebrews, "'Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts'" (Ps 95:7-8; Heb. 4:7, NKJV).

Respond fully to the Lord today. Pour out your heart to Him. Pray through. Allow His Spirit to move freely.

Don't be ashamed. He can—and will—fully restore. Obey whatever He speaks to you. Set a new pattern for your life beginning now. And then, every day, whenever you can, take another step closer to the Lord, one step at a time.

Pray more (and with more focus and direction), read His Word more, speak His Word more, share your faith more. Listen to tapes, watch videos and read books that will help keep the fire burning.

Keep your conscience clear. If you know something is displeasing in God's sight, don't do it. Be sensitive. He understands your weakness, and He will give sufficient grace.

But He will not put up with determined and willful hardness. Bow your knee to the Lord, and He will lift you up. Your future can be just as bright as the promises of God.

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