

SERMON V.

*“O Lord, why hast thou made us to err from thy ways,
and hardened our heart from thy fear?”*

Isaiah 63:17

IT is likely, if we all knew how it were with us, and if it were given to every man and woman in this assembly, to know our own sores, and the plagues of our wicked hearts, it is, I say, more than probable, that there would be a very harmonious joining in presenting this unto God, as the matter of our sad complaint, that our hearts are hardened from His fear. But it may be, that it is with the most part of us, as it was with those that Elihu speaks of when he says, “The hypocrites in heart heap up wrath; they cry not, when the Lord bindeth them.” Many are bound with the bond of a very hard and obdurate heart. It is an evidence that it hath gone a great length, and is come to a very great height with us, that we are not sensible of our bonds, and are out of capacity to cry unto God, because of this strong binding wherewith we are bound.

Now, these words are very sad words; the very mention of them, especially when they are so descriptive of our own condition, might make our hearts to tremble. It is one of the heaviest and saddest troubles from the hands of God upon men and women, to have their hearts hardened from His fear. And yet the business is not desperate, or past remedy, so long as there is so much softness of heart as to perceive or take up the hardness of our hearts, and to be capable of regretting it before God. Hard softness, as we may call it, is not the worst kind of hardness, or at least it is not the greatest degree of it. But alas! to be so hardened that all sense of discerning or feeling of it is worn away is very sad. Although the people who spoke these words were very far under this stroke; yet the Lord had so graciously set bounds unto it, that it had not gone the full length that it would

have done. Hence they take notice of it, and say, “Why hast thou suffered our hearts to be hardened from thy fear, and to be so hard that we should not fear thy name?”

But before we come to any observations from the words, lest the expression should be mistaken, and lest any of our apprehensions should be intermingled with wrong thoughts of the majesty of God, ye should know and consider,

1. That whenever it is said that the Lord hardens, it is not meant that He does so by infusing any sinful qualities into the heart of man: as it is expressed by the apostle, “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.” For He is incomprehensibly holy, and infinitely removed from being accessory to anything that is sinful in the creature. But,

2. It is said He hardens when He not only permits and leaves the man to the hardness of his own heart, which is natural unto the sons of fallen Adam, but also when He withholds or withdraws somewhat of that grace given to the creature, on which hardness of heart follows; and the majesty of God being under no obligation to give grace unto the creature, either by a natural necessity of Himself, or yet by merit in the creature, that hardness of heart cannot be charged upon Him, nor yet can He be blamed for the withholding of abused grace from them. Besides this, He may present objects occasionally, which may be good, nay, are good in themselves, and yet by the person’s own corruption abusing them, they may harden the heart. For instance, professors may make use of the ordinances of Christ, and their own gifts, unto their own hardening. Also, He may give up a person to his own lusts, and to the power or hand of Satan, to be hardened, as a punishment of his

former sins and iniquities. As the Psalmist says, “My people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts’ lusts; and they walked in their own counsels.” And as this may come to a great height in the case of natural men, even so it may be in some degrees incident unto the people and children of God.

Having thus premised these few things for guarding against mistakes, ye must look upon the complaint as not being spoken in a way of proud or ill-natured expostulation laying all the blame upon God, and evading or shifting it off themselves; no, the words intimate the Lord’s carriage towards the church members who are speaking here. Nor are we to think that these words are spoken irreverently in the way of complaining of God; but only in the way of expostulation with themselves; as if they had said, “Lord, what have we done that hath provoked Thee to deal thus with us?” There is an insinuation of a desire to know what sin in them it was that had brought on this plague or stroke of hardness of heart, which was grievous to them beyond anything in their external condition and captivity.

Now having taken the words in this sense, we come shortly to draw some doctrinal observations from them. And,

I. In general, we observe, that a child of God, when in his own proper latitude, will be very diligent in taking notice of God’s dispensations about and towards his own heart, and is in some case to make a representation to God how it is with his soul. Oh, how sad is it when God is dealing with our hearts, and yet we are not so much as taking notice what either God or the devil is doing about them! If the Lord reach not the carcass with some extraordinary judgment, heart-maladies never trouble many. It seems to be one of the evils of the time wherein we live, that many, even good folk, are become strangers in a great measure

unto their own heart's case and condition. We are so seldom in our approaches to God, in any case to make a serious representation of the posture of our spiritual affairs, but just as if we were in one country, and our hearts in another, we are become so great strangers unto them. But,

II. And more particularly, I observe, that hardness of heart, or heart-hardening, is an evil incident unto the people of God. It is by such that this complaint is made, "Why hast thou made us to err, and hardened our heart from thy fear?" And we think that much hardness of heart, or blindness of mind, could not have seen and felt such a weight; and we think it is with much bashfulness uttered; being spoken by those who before were ashamed, that they could not plead an interest in God as their Father, being so much degenerated from their ancestors. Yet they are necessitated to lay claim to God. They are such as give much credit; as if the look of His eye could redress their condition, and they are in case to observe the former dispensations of God, and to compare them with their present case. They likewise take up a great alteration of His kindness towards them. The case of David is a proof of this, who for near the space of a year was bound up under hardness of heart. Solomon is a proof of this, who for some time was inclined unto idolatry. Asa is a proof of this, who imprisoned the prophet, and oppressed some of the people, and under his disease sought unto the physicians, and not unto the Lord. It is probable the time wherein we live affords us likewisemany a sad proof of the truth of it. Oh! hardness in part, and in many degrees is incident even unto the people of God. But that ye may the better understand this, we shall hint at a few symptoms and evidences of it. And,

1. Take this for one. When challenges for sin do not easily make impression upon us, that is, when we are more hard to be wrought upon by challenges than formerly we were wont to be, and become like green wood that, you know,

is long a-kindling. For instance, when David was in a good case, and his heart tender, he was instantaneously alarmed with any evil, such as the cutting off the lap of Saul's skirt; but when he was under hardness of heart, there was much ado to get him convinced in general. Though the case was particularly pointed out in the parable used by Nathan, yet that would not do; he takes little notice of it in the way of applying it to himself, until the prophet said, "Thou art the man." And is it not the case of not a few that a challenge doth not so easily grip, or draw blood upon them, as formerly it used to do? And,

2. When challenges are taken with, and sins acknowledged, without persons being so affected therewith, as to be made better thereby, it is true there may be a conviction that will extort a confession, but in this case the eye that sees the sin doth not affect the heart.

3. Another evidence of it is, when a challenge is much more easily put off than sometimes it was wont to be—that is, when the impression of a sin or challenge for sin is easier worn off than formerly it used to be. I think if there were a spiritual dexterity learned of sinking challenges for sin in the blood of Christ, there were no great skaith. But when the challenge is thrown off through deadness, passes away we know not how, or else is forgot before any satisfying views of pardon, our case is not right. It is likely this is very common. We have frequent challenges that things are not right with us; that corruption is strong, and grace is under a decay; but we let them go. Such a course evinces hardness of heart, and hath a great influence in hardening the heart still more.

4. When the conscience hath lost a great deal more of the power of reflecting upon ourselves, or our case, as to what is sin or duty, this is another symptom of hardness of heart. But,

5. There is another great symptom of hardness of heart, and that is, when we are under cross dispensations, and yet prayer is restrained before God. This the people of God, or the prophet in their name, regrets. “There is none that calleth upon thy name, or that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee.” The same is signified by Daniel. “All this evil is come upon us, yet made we not our prayer before the Lord our God, that we might turn from our iniquities, and understand thy truth.” And,

6. It is another great symptom when fear is in a great measure cast off; yea, this is the first degree wherein hardness of heart doth appear. The soul can scarcely be under any degree of hardness of heart, but it will soon appear in the want or decrease of true fear. Say they, “Why hast thou hardened our heart, from thy fear?”

7. A seventh evidence of hardness of heart is when persons become rash, heedless, precipitate, and fearless in worship and in walking, rushing forward without ever considering their own condition, without fearing lest God’s name be taken in vain by them, in their worshipping of Him—or, at least, without fearing lest they should be deserted of God—strengthening their own hands in their way, as if there were no hazard in people’s walk and conversation; taking every little discourse or common tale by the end, without fear of being indisposed for worship, or any kind of duty. When folk are become thus fearless, it is a great length they are come in hardness of heart. And,

8. In the eighth place, It is an evidence that there is much hardness of heart in this generation, that there is much fearlessness in our preaching, and that we have in a great measure cast off that reverential fear that we ought to have. We are grown very rash and foolhardy, as we used to say, as if we lived not in the midst of snares and manifold temptations, or as if we had not hearts ready to comply with every

snare and temptation. We are not afraid of catching skaith by our excess of mirth and jollity. So that walking in the fear of the Lord all the day long is become a rare thing among Christians now-a-days. Standing in awe to look with the eye, speak with the mouth, and to do or forbear doing anything that may be displeasing to a holy God, without leave asked of Him and obtained. There is little fear of abusing God's goodness, which says that there is little fulfilling of that promise, "And they shall fear the Lord, and his goodness in the latter days."

III. The third observation is, That felt hardness of heart is, in the account of God's children, one of the heaviest and greatest of strokes that come upon them from the hand of God. It is pitched upon here as the worst of judgments. I think their hearts were at their mouths, and the tear in their eyes, when speaking out these words, "Why hast thou made us to err from thy ways, and hardened our heart from thy fear?" Here they do not complain to the majesty of God of their outward calamity, though it was more than ordinary; but this was the stroke that affected them, even hardness of heart. "And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee; for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us because of our iniquities." And "All this is come upon us; yet made we not our prayer before the Lord our God, that we might turn from our iniquities, and understand thy truth."

Now, the reasons why the people of God look upon this as a sad stroke are these:

1st, The first reason is, because it is a sad and angry-like stroke, and hath somewhat judicial in it. As there is displeasure or anger in a stroke, so it is sad and grievous to a gracious heart. But of all strokes, hardness of heart hath most of God's displeasure in it.

2ndly, Because it borders very near upon the condition of the reprobate. I say it comes near to that which is their lot or condition. God gives up His children unto some degree of a reprobate mind, as He delivers them up to walk in the lusts and counsels of their own heart. Hence it comes to pass, that it is in a singular manner puzzling in that case for a child of God to get himself kept from concluding that he is none of His, and he is ready to say, "My spot or provocation is not like the spot of His children, and consequently my stroke is not like the stroke of His children, but only like that of reprobate or wicked men." And,

3rdly, Because this keeps back from a kindly resenting of all the evils done by them that are labouring under it. Yet though they see and know that they are in the wrong, yet they cannot mourn for them before God. They sin, and cannot repent; repentance is, as it were, "hid from their eyes." So that if a child of God be any time in his own proper altitude, his light always leads him to look upon that as a most grievous stroke unto him.

4thly, Because, while under this stroke of hardness of heart, there is no profiting under any of God's dispensations. But let Him smite as He will, their hearts grieve not. So that they, in this case, may say, "That all this is come upon us, yet have we not made our prayers unto thee."

USE. For use, I would in short pose you, and desire you to put it unto yourselves: What think ye of such a stroke as this, and how doth it affect you? Do ye feel it, and think it one of the heaviest and saddest strokes? Do you seriously think that if it were meet for you to enter into a paction with God, ye would be content to take any other stroke from His hand, upon condition that this were removed? If ye were kept tender, and your heart melting before the Lord, it were a good token. Ye will conceive that there is a merciful difference to be discovered betwixt a person that

is plagued with hardness of heart, and one who is smitten with it in a kind of fatherly displeasure; that is, there is in the one a looking upon it as a grievous stroke, whereas in the other there is not. And therefore, I would say unto you that are under these bonds, and yet not affected with them, wrestle with Him that hath the keys of hell and death in His hand, that He would loose your bonds. If ye be grieving for it, and yet your grieving is not adequate, or according to your stroke, yet if it be looked on as a stroke, and lamented by you as such, so that ye are sensible of it, and that sense puts you upon making your complaint unto God—such exercise says that there is so much softening as that you have the knowledge of it. A quick feeling of hardness says ye are not given up altogether of the Lord, and “that there is yet hope in Israel concerning this thing,” and ye are in the way of getting your captivity turned back, as the streams in the south, and ye should not look upon your case as desperate.

IV. The fourth observation is, that there will be in a child of God, while under this stroke of hardness of heart, some serious search or enquiry accomplished concerning what hath been the procuring causes of it, and what hath provoked God to smite with this stroke. Therefore they say here in the text, “Why hast thou hardened our heart from thy fear?” Now there will and should be some search made into the cause where there is anything of God. And I would commend this unto you that have hardness of heart as your burden, that you would take it as a favour from God that it was or is your burden. Perhaps that it is so little your burden makes you question if there be anything promising like in your case and condition. Search then into the causes; and for your help in this, I shall only touch at a few things, which I conceive have much influence for the most part in many degrees of hardening the heart, even in the case of the godly, and which may ere long bring this hardness upon those who are yet in any measure free of it. And,

1. Not taking notice of challenges of conscience and convictions, and trying to quench the motions of the Spirit, gradually harden the heart, and provoke God to let such a person alone. Smiting of this kind may sometimes befall a child of God. But where conscience tables a challenge, oh, then, let it speak out, and smite it not upon the mouth; when God hath given His deputy in the soul a charge to arraign, then it well becomes you to listen to what it hath to say. It is likely that David had his own stirrings of conscience at the beginning of his fall, but because he listened not unto them, he is smitten almost year and day with a benumbed and silent conscience.

2. Another cause may be this: When the Lord's calls are very urgent and pressing upon us to entertain grace, communion, and fellowship with God, when these are borne in upon a person or people, and the soul listens not but lets them pass by, and takes no notice of God's entreaties at all. This is observed by the Psalmist, "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it." There is the offer. "But my people would not hearken to my voice, and Israel would none of me; so I gave them up unto their own hearts' lusts, and they walked in their own counsels." There is nothing hath more influence in hardening than this. Hence people that live under an entreating gospel, if they get not God's grace, or if they shift the offer of it, are the most hardened of all people. And when this deadness in the people of God prevails, and they are gadding after their idols, it brings on many degrees of hardness of heart upon them.

3. A third cause is: When any sin that we know to be a sin is not seriously opposed, but gets leave to sit down upon the conscience unrepented of. As every act of sin strengthens the habit of sin, and disposes unto more acts of sin, so it hardens exceedingly, thrusts out from God, and keeps the soul still under its dominion; and therefore says the apostle to the Hebrews, "But exhort one another daily, lest any of

you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”

4. A fourth cause is: A continual custom of formal worshipping of God, either in public, in the family, or in secret; and when ye use no ejaculations in the time of your worship, and when ye reflect not upon it when it is over. Alas! we are killed in these days with much formality. There are symptoms of it in this place, in regard that there is so much sleeping even among good folk. There is much of it even where that evidence is wanting. And oh, what lightness is in the duty of family worship, even to such a degree that strangers may observe it! And,

5. The fifth and last cause we shall at present observe is: When people get a way of expostulating with themselves in the duty of prayer, and are near the putting of themselves unto the door, making the grace of God that is in them debatable; but then they leave it so, and immediately fall a-talking or laughing, but never mind or ask what becomes of these evils that they expostulated with themselves for; and so lie down, and as it were leave the door open unto wrath, &c. No marvel that, many a night, floodgates should break in upon them before the morrow. This is a very subtle cause. Many good folk have a custom of complaining of evils, who wrestle not with God for their pardon and victory over them; and hardness of heart is one of these evils. It is true there is a number under this evil that never complain of it, and it is a doleful prelude that it will be their death at last; but it is a good token, and some ground of hope, when a person is puzzled about it and burdened with it. The Lord convince us more thoroughly of it, and teach us to make use of the right remedy through Christ Jesus. Amen.