

XXXIV.

Temporary Hardening.

“Lord, why hast Thou hardened our heart? “—*Isa. lxiii. 17.*

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That there is a hardening of heart which culminates in the sin against the Holy Spirit can not be denied. When dealing with spiritual things we must take account of it; for it is one of the most fearful instruments of the divine wrath. For, whether we say that Satan or David or the Lord tempted the king, it amounts to the same thing. The cause is always in man’s sin; and in each of these three cases the destructive fatality whereby sin poisons and destroys the soul can not be severed from the government of God.

However, in studying this matter, we should remember for our own comfort that the hardening is not essentially and invariably absolute and irreparable. We should distinguish between a *temporary* and a *permanent* hardening. The latter is absolute; the former passes away and dissolves into saving faith.

Crying, “Lord, why hast Thou hardened our heart?” Isaiah represents persons who are now in glory before the throne; moreover, the question itself, the sorrow expressed, and the longing after God of which it speaks, suffice to assure us that Isaiah was no Pharaoh. That Israel is exhorted, “Harden not your hearts as in the provocation” (*Psalm xcv. 8*), proves that the hardening spoken of had not been intended forever. And the hardening that, according to St. Paul, had come “*in part*” to Israel was not absolute, as appears from the words “in part.”

The *temporal* and the *permanent* hardening should not be confounded. This would drive the guilty sinner into spiritual despair, and raise the Cain-thought in his heart—a danger that requires the most earnest and watchful care. Satan, the enemy of souls, thoroughly understands all the weaknesses of the human heart. In this respect he knows more than the best informed among men. He knows whether to attack a man in the front or from behind, to ruin him with threats or with flattery, to frighten him with despair or to ensnare him with the prospects of peace. This is why he delights again and again in making a man either trifle with the deadly danger of his soul, or to believe that he is hopelessly lost and beyond the power of redemption.

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How many souls has not Satan terrified with the sin against the Holy Spirit!—souls who never thought of such a thing; who, on the contrary, had a tender regard for the Holy Spirit’s honor in the hope of their salvation, but whom nevertheless he decoyed into the fearful belief of being utterly cast away, of having committed the unpardonable sin. Of course, if such souls had lived nearer the Word, more earnestly searched it, and adhered more closely to the guidance of the Church’s interpretation of this dark mystery, they would not have fallen into this snare. But as it was, Satan whispered it into their ear, and, almost smothering their spiritual life, kept them, sometimes for years, languishing in the mortal fear of being lost

forever. And so dark was the spiritual night that it seemed that no ray of light would ever pierce it.

And the same is true of the hardening. Even with this awful spiritual operation Satan plays his horrible game of robbing God's children of their spiritual peace. Of course, this is never without their own fault. All the spiritual distress of the saints is the necessary result of their transgressions, whether public or private. But he that sowed the hurtful seed, in the field fertilized by sin, was no other than the tempter of souls, who stealthily came to their side and suggested that their grievous state was worse than being merely "*forsaken*"; that there must be signs of *hardening* which would steadily increase; wherefore the flower of hope was withered and all expectation cut off.

And for this danger the soul must be prepared by the clear and definite distinction between the *temporary* and the *permanent* hardening. The former comes to every one of God's children. There is not one, among those grown old in the way, who can not recall the time when he felt the love of God drawing him to separate him from some sin or unbelief; but this seemed only to incite him all the more to resist that love, to close his ears to it and with greater energy to embrace the evil. It was not with the intention to persist in it, but merely to gain time wherein to enjoy the sinful delights a little longer, while the divine love is resisted. We say: "Once more, and then we will stop our resistance." In reality, while we thus trifle with the love of God, we believe that it is quite strong enough to endure this little opposition.- And this may result in a temporary hardening, which is sometimes very serious, and which is marked by and consists in the fact that the saint who intended the next time to break with his sin, then discovers, to his dismay, that by his temporary indulgence the power to resist has been lost.

And this is God's righteous reward. The love that the disobedient saint resisted for the sake of sin is insulted and refuses to be trifled with. Altho he did not expect it, yet by his obstinate resistance of that first love the power of sin was strengthened, the soul's tender sensitiveness was dulled, and the heart was made callous. What was first a mere sliver in the flesh became a malignant boil. An evil power developed itself imperceptibly and unexpectedly. He fights against it, but in vain. After repeated falls, he ceases the fight, and gradually lapses into a condition of hardening so grievous that he can not discover in his heart the least trace of the divine love.

However, this hardening is only partial, for it has reference only to some special matter; and this is the difference between it and the permanent hardening. Apart from this matter, he can still burn with love and zeal for his God; he can still open his heart for the operation of the gracious powers of eternal life, and even have blessed communion with the Lord. But these slowly disappear. The malignant abscess gradually imparts its fever-heat from one part to another. The blood in the veins of the soul is kept in restless tension, and to this partial hardening is added a sense of general forsakenness that causes his communion to

become more rare and less refreshing. There may be an occasional drop of oil, but there is never a full, fresh anointing. As a result, he feels himself poor, dry, and dead; he goes about with the sentence of condemnation in his conscience; but in the midst of his anguish his soul groans unto God.

And the Lord hears that groan. There may be no prayer, and the Holy Spirit may be too far gone to enable his soul to pour itself out in supplications; yet so long as there is a smoking flax and a broken reed that vainly tries to lift itself, so long as there is a sense of shame and an inward groan to God for deliverance, the Lord inclines His ear, full of compassion, and the hour approaches when the Sun of Righteousness shall dispel the clouds and melt the hardness of his heart. The love first resisted now returns with irresistible power to gladden his soul. The crust of ice begins to melt. A blessed emotion unknown for years makes itself felt. The dry eye becomes dim and the inflexible knee and stiff neck bend in prayer. And the mercy and long-suffering of God cause the fresh oil to flow, and, with a self-abasement hitherto unknown, the soul believes and praises and adores once more the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the rich mercy of His God.

Altho a real hardening, yet it is like that which falls upon the streams and fields in winter, when the yellow leaves fall from the trees, the sun-rays slant, and the waters congeal. But that winter does not last forever. Spring is coming soon. And when the grass is green again and the birds sing in the woods, it seems as tho, after its winter sleep, nature is quickened into a richer and more glorious life. Such is the temporal hardening of the called of God: a winter followed by spring, until the dawn of the eternal morning in the realms of the everlasting light.

But the permanent, the eternal hardening is not so. This causes us to think of the world of eternal snow and ice in the polar regions, where it freezes never to thaw, and where nature is covered with somber cerements, to be uncovered only when the Lord shall come upon the clouds, and the whole world shall melt with fervent heat.

It is true, even amid that eternal snow and ice, a singly ray may for a while pierce the darkness, the icicles may drop, and the ice-fields may separate; but the heart of that ice-world remains unaffected and its eternal foundations unmoved. One iceberg may get loose from the rest, but it remains an iceberg. It can not thaw out; eternally hardened, even in nature!

And that world of ice is the awful image of the Sihons and Pharaohs, and of every one who is permanently hardened and given over to the judgment of God. The Love of God has been sinned against forever, and every expression of life only adds to the callousness of the heart, until all feeling, conception, and sensibility with reference to spiritual things are utterly gone. And if there be any life and growth left, they are the life and growth of the mildew which poisons, of the parasite which destroys. So fearful is the hardening that the subject



himself is utterly insensible of it. In his temporal hardening the child of God shall weep at last; but the other moves on with boisterous laughter to meet his doom.

The Lord God have mercy on us! God's judgment of hardening is such an awful thing!

XXXV.

The Hardening of Nations.

“The election hath obtained it, and the rest were hardened.”— *Rom. xi. 7.*



St. Paul's word, at the head of this article, is strikingly impressive, and its content exceedingly rich and instructive. It clearly announces the fact that the hardening is not exceptional or occasional, but *universal*, affecting all, who, being in contact with the divine Love, are not saved by it.

The last limitation is necessary, for of the heathen it can not be said that they are hardened. Only they can be hardened who live under the Covenant of Grace. It is true that the heathen develop a reprobate mind. Their heart is darkened. Walking in their own ways they are impelled irresistibly, for the process of sin can not be stopped; but this is not the proper conception of the hardening as the Scripture presents it.

Heathen nations and individuals may come in direct contact with the Lord and His Anointed, as Pharaoh and Sihon through their relations with Israel; and as the Turks and the peoples of India and China who now are in touch with Christian nations and missionaries. Of course, we do not mean to say that mere casual contact with a Christian nation or missionary makes a Mohammedan or heathen nation responsible. This is impossible. When in Epirus the Turks meet hordes who call themselves Christians, but are utterly devoid of the Spirit of Christ and in savagery rather surpass the bashi-bazouks, then no ray from the cross falls upon the crescent by this meeting. The fact that a missionary settles in an obscure corner of a heathen nation, opens a little school, and talks about the Scripture with a few individuals, in a manner which betrays his ignorance of human nature, does not make that nation responsible. They know nothing about it; it leaves the national life wholly untouched.

The Christian nations, their governments, their churches, and their missionaries, may well ask themselves whether by such playing at missions they do not increase their own responsibilities rather than those of the heathen nations. How serious these responsibilities, especially regarding the heathen and Mohammedan nations! Owing to the divine pleasure the Christian nations possess a moral and material superiority. England alone is perfectly able to control China, Japan, the whole of India and Turkey besides. There is not the slightest prospect that the heathen nations will, for a long time to come, be able to cope successfully with the nations of Christendom. In their own native jungles they may be able to maintain themselves, but as soon as they come in the open field they are vanquished. We may harass the Chinese, but it never enters our minds that they will effect a landing upon our shores.



Whether this will so continue is another question. As the Christian nations return more and more to Judaism, and thence to heathenism, it is very possible that they will lose also their material superiority. There are already signs showing that China may some time seri-