

Examining and Keeping the Heart

*“Keep thy heart
with all diligence;
for out of it are the
issues of life.”
—Proverbs 4:23*

THE START OF ANOTHER

year is a most appropriate time, we believe, for each of God's consecrated children to sincerely and soberly examine their heart condition, as to its conformity with the principles laid out in the Scriptures. The Bible clearly teaches that the attaining of eternal life is possible only through the merit of the precious blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:21; 6:23) From this standpoint, life is a gift of God. This gift, however, is available only to those who believe, and belief must be of the heart. Paul wrote, “With the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”—Rom. 10:10

The word “heart” appears in the Bible about 800 times, and in most instances it is used in a symbolic sense. In describing the various heart conditions which are possible, many expressions are used. In various passages of the Old and New Testaments, the Scriptures speak of such things as: heart integrity; a heart that fainteth; a hardened heart; a willing

heart; a heart that is discouraged; a grieving heart; and a heart that is filled.

The Bible also speaks of: blindness of heart; astonishment of heart; hearts that are melted; glad, merry and rejoicing hearts; hearts of understanding; singing hearts, and sorrowful hearts. Also mentioned are clean hearts, and hearts that are strengthened. There are enlarged hearts, lonely hearts, and burning hearts. Broken and contrite hearts, and singleness of heart, are likewise identified in the Scriptures.

It has been suggested that the heart is the seat of our affection. This thought is in harmony with many Bible passages referring to the heart. A more comprehensive thought would be that the heart embodies what we truly are, in contrast with what we may outwardly appear to be. The Christian will endeavor always to have his outward demeanor conform to his inward heart sentiments. However, because of the imperfections of the flesh there will be mistakes of word and deed which do not reflect what we really desire to be. How thankful we should be that the Lord does not judge his people according to what can be seen and heard by man, but that he is able to look upon the “hidden man of the heart.”—I Pet. 3:4

We are reminded of this in connection with Samuel’s anointing of David to be King of Israel. Samuel made his selection from among the sons of Jesse, choosing his eldest son Eliab. However, the Lord said to Samuel, “Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.”—I Sam. 16:7

FIXED, ESTABLISHED, PREPARED

Psalm 57:7 reads, “My heart is fixed, O God.” The word “fixed” has the thought of being established. We are to be prepared to meet all the experiences of life, not in our own wisdom and strength, but in the wisdom and strength of the Lord. This heart preparation is one of our daily needs. We are fortified through our study of God’s Word, and by noting and taking to heart the wonderful promises by which he assures us of his loving care in all the affairs of our lives.

Study of the Scriptures will also equip us to know and do the Heavenly Father’s will in the various circumstances of life. We are not to study the Word with the thought of finding justification for the direction in which we want to go, but to be guided in the Lord’s ways. This will test our sincerity of heart. As Christians, we have dedicated our all to the doing of our Heavenly Father’s will, and doing his will is often difficult and costly. If we are to be ready to accept his providences, our study of his Word must be with a genuine desire to have his precepts and principles come into our hearts more fully each day.

Our hearts are also readied for the experiences of life through prayer, especially that which reflects an earnest desire to know and to do God’s will. Thus, through prayer and the study of the Word our hearts are prepared for all the various experiences of life. If our hearts are properly schooled, we will rejoice in the sunshine of our Heavenly Father’s smile. If, at times, storms are permitted to come upon us through his providences, we will accept these experiences also as being from him, with the full assurance that

he knows exactly what is best for us as New Creatures. If we have learned to trust God's wisdom, we will not be discouraged by our trials, but will endeavor to use them as a means of drawing nearer to the Lord.

STEADFASTNESS

Paul wrote, "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end." (Heb. 3:12-14) Here it is indicated that an unbelieving heart might very well manifest itself by a tendency to waver in steadfastness for the Lord and for the Truth.

Seemingly Paul had good reason to write in this way to the Hebrew brethren, for elsewhere in his epistle he indicates that they were to some extent wavering. Later in his epistle he exhorted them, saying, "Call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves [in your hearts] that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance. Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise."—Heb. 10:32-36

That the apostle should urge the Hebrew brethren to call to remembrance the former days suggests that they had lost some of the zeal they then had, and were not now so willing to suffer for the cause of Christ. The reason for this was a loss of confidence. He said they needed patience, or perseverance, that they might more faithfully do the will of God, and thus receive the fulfillment of God's promises to them.

How wonderful is the Lord's testimony to certain brethren in the church at Thyatira: "I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first." (Rev. 2:19) The Lord knew this of these brethren because he could look into their hearts, and know them as they really were. What a wonderful commendation he gave them! Instead of losing their first love, instead of falling away from their steadfastness, they had increased in love, faith, patience and works.

Why should this not be so with us? As we continue in the study of the Word, and in prayer, we should become better acquainted with the Heavenly Father, and all his glorious attributes. This should increase our faith in him and our love for him. This, in turn, should lead to an increase in our works of faith and labors of love. (I Thess. 1:3) Rather than loving the Lord, the Truth, and the brethren less, we should be loving them more. Rather than slackening our work in the vineyard, we should be increasing it to the extent of our opportunities and abilities.

THE LORD HELPS

As Christians we know of the many promises of the Scriptures which assure us of the Lord's help

in our every time of need. (Heb. 4:16) However, these promises are not fulfilled on behalf of any who are not sincere in their heart devotion to the Heavenly Father. The Bible states, “The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him.”—II Chron. 16:9

It is vitally important to have a sincere heart toward God, for it is on the basis of what we really are that he is judging us and fulfilling his gracious promises on our behalf. As Paul states, “The word of God ... is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Heb. 4:12) This would be a frightening thought were it not for our realization of the Lord’s mercy. We have the assurance that he knows we are but dust and takes into consideration our fleshly imperfections. Knowing this, we can have confidence, for we are assured of God’s justice and his love, as he deals with us on the basis of the Redeemer’s blood.

Our concern should be that our professions of love for the Lord and for his cause are genuine, and that they are a reflection of our true selves. The Apostle John wrote, “Let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.” (I John 3:18,19) Loving the Lord and his people merely in “word” and in “tongue” are not enough to warrant the Heavenly Father’s inclusion of us among those upon whom he is showering his rich blessings. Rather, our love must be in “deed” and in “truth.” That is, it must be a genuine love springing from a heart that is completely devoted to God and to the doing of his will.

DECEIVED HEARTS

James gives us one clue as to how we know that we love in deed and in truth rather than merely by word and tongue. He says, "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain." (James 1:26) Here is a very searching text, which suggests the possibility of self-deception. This means that while we may have concluded that we are very sincere in our devotion to God, we could be wrong, and that one test would be the extent to which we bridle our tongues and keep them under control, particularly when speaking of the Lord's people.

We would not think of slandering God. Yet, because of self-deception, we might conclude that it is perfectly proper to speak evil of the Lord's people. How do we measure up to this test? Do we find ourselves engaged in speaking negatively of our brethren? Our hearts should be so filled with the love of God and love for his people that we find it distasteful to cast such reflections upon them. Do we find ourselves saying that a brother is going out of the truth simply because he does not see eye to eye with us on every detail of Scripture? The love of God in our hearts should prompt us to leave our brethren in the Lord's hands. Meanwhile, we should do all we can to uphold the banner of truth that others may be helped to see the way of the Lord more clearly.

Jesus stated the matter very clearly and bluntly when he said, "Everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated. But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man." (Matt. 15:17,18,

New American Standard Bible) As a rule, we talk about those things which seem the most important to us. If we have allowed our hearts to become corrupted, then we will delight to talk about those corrupt things. This will further add to our own corruption of heart, and might well defile others.

Jesus said that by our words we are justified, and that by our words we are condemned. (Matt. 12:37) God knows our true heart condition even if we were to say nothing. However, when we express ourselves, others can discern our character, at least in a measure. If they are Christians, they know that speaking evil is not right, and that speaking the truth in love is a reflection of that which is good within. (Luke 6:45) Thus, words from the good treasure of our hearts lead to righteousness and life.

We read in Jeremiah 17:9 that the heart is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” This is true of all of us by nature, for we are members of the sin-cursed and dying race, and it is a lifelong struggle to purify the heart. It can be done only through prayer and earnest study of God’s Word, and with his help. Hence, our earnest prayer at all times should be, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” (Ps. 51:10) Indeed, God does help as we cooperate with him through a sincere use of his Word. Through the Scriptures, the Heavenly Father is speaking to us. Only as we listen and obey will the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit “create” that “clean heart” within us which we so much desire.

THE LORD EXAMINES

We have noted the possibility of deceiving our own hearts, which simply means deluding ourselves.

However, nothing that we can say or do will deceive the Lord, so it is well to seek his assistance in the examination of our hearts. The psalmist did this, saying, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts." (Ps. 139:23) It may take courage to make a request like this of God. Not only will he answer our prayer, but in his loving providences he will overrule in our affairs to remove any impurities of heart which he may find, and sometimes these providences may be in the form of trials.

The Bible speaks of sorrowful hearts, and at times we may well feel mournful because of our trials. It is at such times that we can comfort one another. The source of our comfort is the Lord. Paul wrote, "If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind."—Phil. 2:1,2

HEARTS ENLARGED

To the church at Corinth, Paul wrote, "O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged." (II Cor. 6:11) It is a serious thing for the literal heart to become enlarged, but Paul was speaking of his symbolic heart, of his inward feelings of determination to continue laying down his life for the brethren at Corinth and elsewhere.

Speaking of his own experiences in the ministry, and what should be the attitude of all the consecrated, Paul wrote in the preceding verses, "In all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults,

in labours, in watchings, in fastings; By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by love unfeigned, By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true; As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.” (vss. 4-10) These were the realities of the Christian life which led Paul to exclaim to the Corinthians, “Our heart is enlarged!”

BROKEN HEARTS

The psalmist wrote, “The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.” “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” (Ps. 34:18; 51:17) A broken heart is the opposite of a stubborn heart. A contrite spirit is a spirit of humility in the light of one’s own weaknesses and shortcomings. Hearts that are proud and hard are not fit soil for the operation of the Holy Spirit of God. Such hearts resist the Spirit, or as Paul symbolically states, they “grieve” the Spirit.—Eph. 4:30

What a reassuring promise God makes to those who are of a contrite spirit. “Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.” (Isa. 57:15) How wonderful it is to realize that God dwells with those who are humble

of heart, and whose chief desire is to know and to do his will. He dwells with us by his Spirit, through his Word. He dwells with us through his people, who, as they live up to their privileges, help to comfort and revive us when we are downhearted and discouraged.

This rich blessing of God's presence is ours only if we keep our hearts with all diligence. God does not dwell with the evil-hearted, or with the hard-hearted. He dwells only with those whose hearts have been strengthened through faith, and who apply themselves diligently to their privilege of obeying his words and precepts. It is thus that they are kept humble, pure and rejoicing.

It is such rejoicing and enlarged hearts that find themselves fully in accord with those blessed sentiments of humility and obedience so beautifully stated by David: "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward. Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression. Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer."—Ps. 19:7-14 ■