

THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL

Illustrated in a Series of Discourses

by

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE HEART OF STONE

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

There is a mine of sound sense in the adage of an old, divine, “seriousness is the greatest wisdom, temperance the most efficient physic, and a good conscience the very best estate.”

Early, habits of self-restraint, total abstinence from all excess, diligence in business, attention to our duties, and that tranquility of mind which piety breeds, and which those enjoy who are at peace with God—these, we confidently affirm, would do more to abate disease than all our physicians, much more to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked than our poor laws and charitable institutions, and very much more than any acts of Parliament to promote the comforts of the people, and preserve the liberties of the of the commonwealth. The older we grow, and the more our observation enlarges, the deeper grows our conviction, that “**godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.**”

One of the most remarkable instances of the truth, which it was ever our good fortune to see, presented itself in the immediate vicinity of this church. A weary day had passed in visiting a degraded neighborhood. The scenes were sad, sickening, repulsive. Famine, fever, want, squalid nakedness, moral and physical impurities, drunkenness, death, and the devil were all reigning there. Those only who have known the sickness and sinking of heart which the miseries of such scenes produce, especially when aggravated by a close and foul atmosphere, can imagine the gratification and surprise with which, on opening a door, we stepped into a comfortable apartment.

Its whitewashed walls were hung round with prints; the furniture shone like a looking glass; and a bright fire was dancing merrily over a clean hearthstone. It was an oasis in the desert. And we well remember, ere question was asked or answered, of saying to ourselves, “Surely the fear of God is in this place; this must be the house of a church-going family.” It proved to be so. A blind man dwelt there. It was a home where squalid poverty might have been excused. And from it we carried away with us a lively sense of the temporal advantages of piety; and felt inclined to chalk these words on the blind man’s door, as a lesson to his neighbors—“**The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.**”

Suppose—and we suppose nothing impossible, nor in coming days improbable, for the promise waits fulfillment, “**a nation shall be born in a day**”—suppose, then, that in the plentitude of divine grace, God should bend an eye of pity on the wretched inhabitants of our immediate neighborhood, and pour down his Spirit on them in showers from heaven. At present, with a few bright exceptions, they are the votaries and victims of dissipation—I say votaries and victims, because vice is such a damning thing, that he who begins by ministering at her altar always ends by becoming the sacrifice.

Around us thousands live who never enter a house of God. Their children, unless they are fortunate enough to die early, are reared in ignorance, vice, and crime; and by habits of intemperance, many of them have reduced themselves to pinching hunger. Relieved by the uncertain supplies of charity, and the most squalid wretchedness.

Now, suppose that God were pleased to send life to these “**dry bones,**”— but from lip to lip, and house to house, the cry were pausing, “**Oh, sirs, what must I do to be saved?**”— that the last shilling that vice had left, were spent for the purchase of a Bible; that, like water by men parched in the desert, and dying of thirst, God’s word were bought, borrowed, or begged, and that, rising to the summons of the Lord’s Day bell, these streets, where only a solitary worshiper may now be seen, were filled with the unaccustomed spectacle of a ragged crowd pouring into the houses of God;—how soon would their common aspect change? A few weeks, and we should hardly recognize them.

Save these picturesque and old-fashioned tenements, the blue heavens above, that rocky citadel with its frowning batteries, yonder noble arm of the sea, and the same green fields, rich valleys and romantic crags, of the everlasting hills around us, all old things else would have passed away. Prisons, that now complain of crowded cells, would be found too large; and many churches, cold now with empty pews, would be found too small. The smoldering fever would, like an unfed fire, go out for want of fuel; and rank churchyards would grow green at Christmas, for lack of their too-frequent burials.

The brutal features of dissipation would give place to an expression of intelligence and humanity; roses would blow on childhood’s pallid cheek, and mother’s smiles would chase the sadness from many a poor, sallow, infant face. Then, under the patronage of religion, and the sign of the Bible, the craft of the honest mechanic, and the trade of the useful merchant would flourish, while the panderer to vice would fall into unpitied bankruptcy, and the voice of a virtuous people would tell him to shut shop and be gone. Furniture would crowd these empty rooms, the rags, through whose loopholes poverty stared out upon a pitying world, would change into decent attire.

Piety, descending like an angel from the skies, would come to these dwellings with a prophet’s blessing; beneath her celestial feet happiness would spring up like summer flowers; plenty would pour her horn into the lap of poverty; there would be meal in every household barrel, and oil in every widow’s cruse. Underneath the benign and blessed influences of religion, this wilderness would be glad; our city Ishmaelites would change into Israelites, and these moral deserts would rejoice and blossom like the rose. “**Even so, come, Lord Jesus!**”

The truth is, the world's great want is the want of religion. Perhaps men want more equal laws, more liberal institutions, and through their happy influence, better and more stable governments. The greatest want of nations is, however, that without which liberty has no solid pedestal to stand on—a genuine, mass-pervading piety. To drop all reference to foreign countries, I am sure that he who attempts to cure our own social maladies, independently of this best and most sanatory element, may be a philanthropist, but is not a philosopher. We had almost said he is a fool. He is an idle schemer, who would fain make bricks without straw, and heal the waters of Jericho without the prophet's salt. His theories are as baseless and unsolid as if they conceived of man as a creature without a soul—of the solar system as without its Central sun—of the universe without its God.

But while religion is thus the mortar that binds society together,—while the poor man may remember to his Comfort, that if he leave his family no inheritance but his prayers and the priceless legacy of a godly example, he leaves them rich indeed,—while an education of domestic piety is better than all Greek and Roman lore—and while godliness is the most stable basis on which to erect an earthly fortune—I pray you to observe that the change promised in the text does not necessarily imply any temporal advantage—any improvement either in our bodily condition or worldly circumstances.

We live in a world of mysteries. We sometimes see religion languishing neglected on a bed of sickness; and piety, in other cases than that of Lazarus, may be found clad in rags and covered with sores, sitting a beggar at the rich man's gate. The change is on the man within. The change is on the tenant, not the tenement; on the heart, not the body; on our circumstances, not so much in this life as in the life to come. If by faith in Christ you come to God, I cannot promise for him that he will pour health into your veins or money into your purse. But he will endow you with infinitely better gifts.

Hear what he promises in the text—“**A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you ; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.**”

Having already illustrated the greatness of this change, I now proceed to examine its nature; and remark—

I. The old heart is taken away, and a new one put in its place.

The head was justly considered by the ancients to be the residence of the intellectual faculties, where the soul sat enthroned, as in a palace—presiding over all.

On the other hand, they regarded the affections of having dwelling in the heart—that other great organ of our system. Within the breast, love and hatred, grief and joy, aversion and desire, generosity, jealousy, pity, revenge, were supposed to dwell; and thus (to dismiss the metaphor), that substitution of one heart for another which is promised in the text, just implies an entire change in the character and current of our affections. Now, a change may be simply a reform, or, extending farther, it may pass into a revolution.

The spiritual change, which we call conversion, is not a mere reform. It is a revolution—a mighty revolution, if aught was ever worthy of that name—a revolution greater than the tomes of profane history, or any old monuments of stone or of brass record. It changes the heart, the habits, the eternal destiny of an immortal being.

On the banner, borne in triumph at the head of this movement, I read the words that doom old things to ruin, “Overturn, Overturn, Overturn.” For the old mischievous laws which it repeals, it introduces a new code of statutes ; it changes the reigning dynasty, wrenches the scepter from a usurper’s hand, and, banishing him forth of the kingdom, in restoring the throne to God, restores it to its rightful monarch.

The Gospel is indisputably revolutionary;—there can be no doubt of the fact. The old charge brought against its preachers is true. **“These that have turned the world upside down, are come hither also.”**

The world requires to be turned upside down. Like a boat capsized in a squall, and floating keel uppermost in the sea, with men drowning around it, the world has been turned upside down already ; and to be set right, it must just be turned upside down again. If the order which God established has been reversed by sin—if in our hearts and habits time has assumed the place of eternity—the body of the soul—earth of heaven, and self of God;—if that is first which should be last, and that last which should be first—if that is uppermost which should be undermost, and that undermost which should be uppermost, then happy the homes and the hearts of which, in reference to the entrance of God’s Word, Spirit, and converting grace, it can be said, **“These that have turned the world upside down, are come hither also.”**

Where, it may be asked, lies the inevitable necessity for a change so pervadingly elementary, so radical, so revolutionary? such an inward and total change? We must seek for that necessity in the records of a distant past.

It lies in an old event—in the Fall. By reason of that great crime and sad calamity, the condition of our hearts has become naturally so bad— in reference at least to spiritual objects and interests—as not to admit of repair.

We understand how this may be true of a house. The tenement may have fallen into such utter decay, so many cracks may gape in its bulged and tottering walls, the timbers may be so moth-eaten, the foundations so shaken, post, pillar, and lintel so moldered away, that nothing remains but to pull it down level with the ground, and on its old site to erect a new and stately edifice.

Or—to vary the illustration—a watch, which has slipped through careless fingers, and crashed on the pavement, may be so shattered as to have its works damaged beyond repair. It passes the skill of the most accomplished mechanic to mend them. He must clean out the shell, take away the old works, and substitute new machinery. In that case, although wheels, axles, and levers, move within the old casements, the watch, in fact, is new; even so, when converted, although there is no loss of personal identity suffered, he who gets a new heart becomes, in a sense, a new man: to use the Apostle’s words, **“He is, in Christ, a new creature.”**

It is no doubt true that there are many, and some] very serious injuries which admit of repair. A steady, honest, enterprising merchant may repair a bankrupt fortune; a sagacious statesman may solder a broken crown; a physician may patch up a worn-out constitution; even some Mary Magdalene, returning to the paths of virtue, may repair that most fragile of all things—a woman’s character; and, with time and God’s grace given me, I will undertake to heal a broken heart.

In the divine government we see that most remarkable provision made for the reparation of those injuries to which his creatures are exposed. The bark grows on the peeled surface of an old elm or oak, so as in time to obliterate the letters that friendship or fond love has carved. From the lips of the gaping wound a liquid flesh is poured, which, receiving nerves and blood vessels into its substance, solidifies, and at length fills up the breach. From its shattered surfaces, the broken limb discharges a fluid bone—a living cement—which, growing solid, restores the continuity of the shaft, and gives the sufferer a leg or arm, strong as before.

In some of the lower animals, indeed, this power of reparation is equal to the task, not only of repairing a broken, but of even restoring a lost member. With such renovating powers has God endowed certain creatures, that, if by accident or otherwise, the writhing worm, for example, is divided, the headless portion not only survives such a formidable lesion, but, strange to see! produces and puts on a new head ; and offers us an example of animal life, which, besides being fortified against the most formidable injuries, is actually multiplied by division—“**How marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty!**”

There are many striking and very interesting analogies between grace and nature. But there is no analogy between these cases and the case before us. So far as man’s natural and inherent powers are concerned, his heart sustained an irreparable injury by the Fall. Sin is a disease which our constitution has no power to throw off; and which no human skill can remove.

The preacher is here assisted by none of that “healing power of nature “ which is the physician’s best ally. Not only so, but God himself—with whom in a sense all things are possible, and to whom nothing is too hard—does not attempt its repair.

In the work of conversion, it is not an old heart which is to be mended, but a new one which is to be given. In any attempt to patch up the old garment, the new cloth is lost, and the rent gapes but wider. On the old, frail, musty bottle, heaven wastes not her costly wine.

The truth is, man does not admit of being repaired; and the more we become acquainted with our hearts, the more ready shall we be to describe their desperate and deplorable condition in the words of Holy Scripture—“**The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.**”

The first thing, therefore, which you, who are seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness, have now to seek, is what God promises in the text, and David pleads for in this prayer—“**Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.**”

Let me press this truth upon your thoughtful attention. May God impress it upon your hearts!

A lively and profound sense of it is of the highest importance. To feel our need of a new heart, and to feel that this old one will not mend nor make better, is, in fact, the first step in salvation; and the deeper our impression of the reality of the truth, the more diligently shall we labor, and the more earnestly shall we pray to be renewed day by day. It is a conviction that will secure our cordial assent to the memorable saying, with which one of England's greatest men, her bravest and noblest spirits, closed an illustrious career on the scaffold of an ungrateful country.

When Sir Walter Raleigh had laid his head upon the block, he was asked by the executioner whether it lay right. Whereupon, with the calmness of a hero, and the faith of a Christian he returned an answer—the power of which we all shall feel, when our own head is tossing and turning on death's uneasy pillow—“It matters little, my friend, how the head lies, provided the heart is right.”

Now, as the view of the old heart, given in my text, is eminently calculated, with the divine blessing, to show us how much we need a new one, let us consider—

II. *The view which our text gives of the natural heart.*

It is a heart of stone. “**I will take the stony heart out of your flesh.**” We shall best understand the meaning of this figure, in its application to the heart, by considering, in a popular point of view, some of the characteristic properties of a stone.

A stone is cold.

Coldness is characteristic of a stone. The lapidary, using his tongue to test the temperature, can, by that simple means, tell whether the seeming jewel is paste, or a real gem; and when our eye has been deceived by the skill of the painter, the sense of touch has informed us, that what seemed marble was only wood.

It is a common saying, “As cold as a stone.” But what stone so cold as that in man's breast? Cold is the bed of the houseless, who lies stretched on the wintry pavement, and cold the cell within whose dank stone walls the shivering prisoner is immured; but colder far by nature is this heart of ours to God and Christ.

We are born lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. God is not an object of our love, nor do we make any return to Jesus for his warm and fond affection. Blessed Lord! he had many a cold lodging on this ungrateful earth; his couch was oft the open field, where his locks were wet with the dews of night; drenched with the spray of the sea, and the lashing rain, his weary frame found sleep on the hard benches of a fisher's boat; yet on these he lay not on so cold a bed as he would find in the dark, dreary chambers of an unrenewed heart. Sin has quenched a fire that once burned bright and holy there, and has left nothing now on that chill hearth, but embers and ashes—cold as death.

“The carnal mind is enmity against God; is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.”

A stone is hard.

- Fire melts wax, but not stone;
- Water softens clay, but not stone;
- A hammer bends the stubborn iron, but not stone.

Stone resists these influences; and, emblem of a heart crushed, but not sanctified by affliction, it may be shattered into fragments, or ground to powder, yet its atoms are as hard as ever. It is with the dust of diamonds that the diamond is cut. We have stood on a sea rock, when every billow, swung on by the tempest; broke against it with the roar of artillery, and shot up a shower of snowy spray; we have looked to the crag, on whose bald brows the storm was bursting, and wondered how these could, have braved for so many thousand years the war and wear of the elements; and yet there is more, cause to be surprised at what a man's heart will stand.

He sits in the church under a series of affecting sermons—or a succession of affecting providences like great sea waves breaking over him, and he is unshaken, at least unaltered, and to all but divine grace unalterable. , He can be saved; but he can only be saved, because there is nothing impossible to God. Sitting there, so, hard, so cold, he reminds us of a mountain crag, cut by nature's fantastic hand into the features of a man, which looks out with a cold and stony eye upon the gathering tempest, prepared; as it has already weathered a thousand storms, to weather a thousand more.

The man who remains unmoved under, a ministry of mercy, who is insensible to at once the most appalling and appealing lessons of providence, who fears no more than a rock the thunders and lightnings that play round his brow, and feels no more than a rock the influences that fall like summer sunbeams from the face and cross of Jesus, is manifestly beyond all human power. I would despair of his salvation, but for the omnipotence and, benevolence of God; and because I know that he, who of the stones of the street could raise up children of Abraham,. can turn that heart of stone into a heart of flesh. What need here of the Spirit of God!

Oh! there is an obstinacy, an obduracy, a strength of resistance, an impenetrability to impression in the unconverted, before which man, however anxious to save, is utterly powerless. In dealing with such a case, we seem to hear the voice of God addressing us in his words to Job— **“Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook? or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down? Canst thou put an hook into his nose? or bore his jaw through with a thorn? . . . wilt thou take him for a servant for ever? Wilt thou play with him as with a bird? or wilt thou bind him for thy maidens? . . . His scales are his pride, shut up together as with a close seal . . . his eyes are like the eyelids of the morning. Out of his mouth go burning lamps, and sparks of fire leap out . . . The sword of him that layeth at him cannot hold: the spear, the dart, nor the habergeon. He esteemeth iron as straw, and brass as rotten wood. The arrow cannot make him flee: slingstones are turned with him into stubble. Darts are counted as stubble: he laugheth at the shaking of a spear . . . He maketh the deep to boil like a pot: he maketh the sea like a pot of ointment. He maketh a path to shine after him; one would think the deep to be hoary . . . His heart is as firm as a stone; yea, as hard as a piece of the nether millstone.”**

A stone is dead.

It has no vitality, no feeling, no power of motion. It lies where it is laid. The tombstone above and the dead man below undergo, no change, other than that both, by a slower, or speedier decay, are moldering into dust. In that hall of nobles the marble forms of departed greatness look down unmoved upon scenes where once they themselves played a distinguished part, and all, alike unmoved, whether their statesmanship be reviled or praised.

In this statue—however skillful the sculptor's imitation—there is no life; no speech breaks from these mute lips; the limbs seem instinct with power, yet they never leave their pedestal; no fire flashes in the dull, gray eyes, nor passions burn within the stony breast. The stone is deaf, and dumb and dead. In grief's wild and frantic outbursts affection may address the form of one deeply loved, and forever lamented.

Speak to it, it returns no answer; weep to it, it sheds no tears; image of a lost and loved one, it feels not the grief that itself can move. Now, how many sit in the house of God as unmoved? Careless as mere spectators who have no concern in what takes place before them, they take no interest in anything that was done on Calvary! Is it not sad to think that more tears are shed in playhouses than in churches: and that by those who call themselves Christians, the new novel is sought more eagerly, and devoured more greedily than the New Testament”?

What a deplorable account of the human heart! One would think it is of stones, and yet it is of living men, too like, alas! to many of ourselves—these words are spoken—“**Having eyes, they see not; having ears, they hear not; neither do they understand.**”

We have described a stone as cold, hard, dead. Is this, some may ask, a fair and just picture of the human heart? The question is a fair one, and deserves a frank answer. I should hinder a cause I desire to help, and do injustice to divine truth, were I to answer that question by simply affirming, that the picture is a true portrait of the natural heart in all its sentiments and emotions.

Human nature is bad enough without exaggerating its evils. There is no need to exaggerate them. In one sense, they do not admit of exaggeration. And, if we dared, instead of exaggerating, we should be happy to excuse them, and to our mother nature, render the kind and filial office of casting a cloak upon her shame.

We know as well as others do, and would ever remember, that although man be dead to gracious affections, until sin has had work, he is not dead to many tender and lovely emotions of nature. Many beauties are lingering about this ruin—the engaging, but melancholy vestiges of its former glory. We freely admit, that, be far as regards father and mother, wife and children, brother and sister, and the beloved friends of our social circles, an unrenewed heart may be the warm nest of kindest affections. There can be no doubt, I think, that the Christian will prove the best father, the best husband, the best wife, the best master, the best servant, the best citizen, the truest, trustiest friend. Nay, for their pith and truth, notwithstanding their homeliness, I will venture to quote the words of Rowland Hill, who said, “I would give nothing for the Christianity of a man whose very dog and cat were not the better of his religion.”

Still, it is no treason against the Gospel to believe that one, yet unhappily a stranger to the grace of God, may be endowed with many most pleasant and lovely virtues.

Away among the rough moors, by the banks of tumbling river, or the skirts of green wood, or on sloping acclivity, or steep hillside, we have gathered, remote from gardens and the care of men, bunches of wild flowers, which, although very perishing, were exquisitely beautiful, and steeped in fragrant odors; and such as these are some men and women, who have never yet been transplanted from a state of nature into a state of grace. There is no sin in loving them. In the young ruler who declined to take up his cross and follow Christ, was not there so much that was amiable, gentle, lovely, that Jesus' own heart was drawn to him? It is said that he "loved him;" and the emotions of a Saviour's bosom cannot be wrong in mine. Nor is his a rare phenomenon—a solitary case.

We have seen men who made no great profession of religion, who certainly were not pious, but who were yet so kind, tender, affectionate, generous, large-hearted and open-handed, that it was impossible not to love them. Nature never asked our permission. Whether we would or not, we felt drawn to them, as Jesus was to the amiable youth who refused to follow him. And as we have rooted up from the moor some wild flower to blow and shed its fragrance in a sweeter than its native home, have we not longed to do same with these fine specimens of the natural man?

Transplanted by grace into the garden of the Lord, baptized with the dews of heaven, converted to the faith, they would be flowers fit to form a wreath for the brow that men wreathed with thorns. I am compelled to acknowledge that I have known some, who even charity could not reckon among true Christians, who, yet in point of natural virtues, put Christians to shame. In some beautiful traits they were more like Jesus than not a few of his real disciples.

Let there be no mistake, then; when I speak of the heart as a stone, I am looking at it as it looks on God, a Saviour, salvation, and eternity. However distressing it is (and it is most distressing) to think that persons otherwise most lovely and of most loving heart are so cold and callous to the claims of Jesus, yet, so far as divine love to sinners, and so far as the kindnesses of saving mercy are concerned, I am convinced that among the rocks which beat back the roaring sea—up in the crags where dews, and rain, and bright sunbeams fall—down in earth's darkest and deepest mines, there lies bedded no stone colder, harder, less impressible, more impenetrable, than an unrenewed heart.

Does unbelief suggest the question, Why, then, preach to the unconverted? as well preach to stones? as well knock with thy hand upon a door which is locked on a coffin and a corpse? In a sense, true; and altogether true, but for the promise—"**Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.**"

That promise is the soul of hope and the life of preaching. It forbids despair. And should coward ministers, yielding to despair, hold their tongues, and pulpits all be silent, Christ still were preached.

Strange evangelists would start up in these streets to break this awful, unbelieving silence.

Asked by an envious priesthood to silence the hosannas of the multitude, Jesus turned on them and said, **“I tell you, that if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.”**

Thus assured, not only of our children, not only of our people, not only of the dead womb of Sarah, but of the very stones of the street, that **“God can raise up children to Abraham,”** despair we cannot feel, and dumb we cannot be. He who shall raise the dead in churchyards can waken the dead in churches.

Therefore we expect conversions and in hope offer Christ to the chief of sinners, beseeching you, **“Be ye reconciled to God.”**

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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