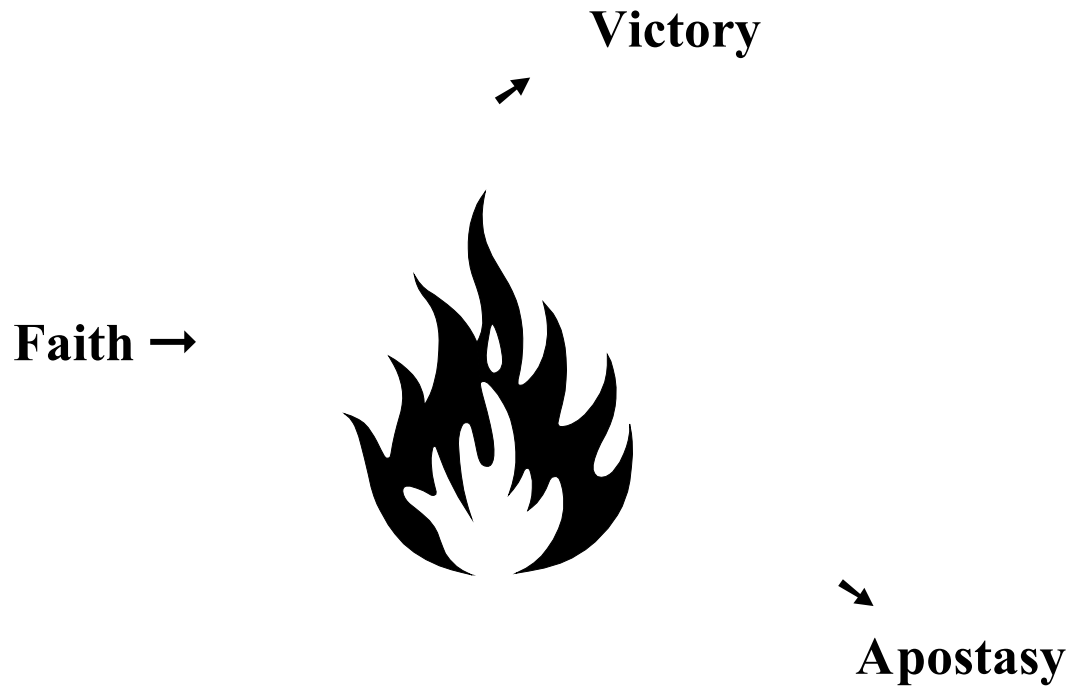


Peter's Epistles #26

Reactions to Personal Tribulation

(also available on-line at Ichthys.com)
by Dr. Robert D. Luginbill



The Two Choices

Translation of 1st Peter 1:6-9:

In anticipation of this ultimate deliverance, your joy overflows, though at present it may be your lot to suffer for a time through various trials to the end that your faith may be shown to be genuine. This validation of your faith is far more valuable than gold, for gold, though it too is assayed by fire, ultimately perishes. But your faith, when proven genuine in the crucible of life, will result in praise, glory and honor for you at the glorious return of Jesus Christ. Though you have never laid eyes on Him, yet you love Him. And though you cannot see Him at this present time, yet you have faith in Him. For this reason you rejoice with an inexpressible joy that bespeaks the glorious future to come, when you shall carry off in victory *the ultimate prize – the deliverance of your lives* – which is the very purpose and objective of this faith of yours.

Introduction: The historical examples of the persecution of believers discussed in our previous lesson (along with the predictions of the intense persecution to come in the time of the Tribulation) should underscore the fact that our faith *is going to be challenged* here in the world. Whether the *tribulation* we experience will be of a strictly personal nature, or part of a more generalized persecution of our collective faith, we must **at all costs** hold on to that faith. We must **at all costs** hold fast to this anchor that secures us to eternity, for this and only this is the victory that can overcome the challenge of life and bring us safely home: namely, our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb.6:19; cf. Rom.8:35-37; 1Jn.5:4-5).

Two Reactions to Intense Suffering: Whenever disaster strikes (the personal tribulation of lesson #25), it inevitably provokes a reaction from those it touches. The nature of this reaction is of especially critical importance when the victims of such personal disaster are believers in Christ. In such circumstances, our spirituality, our spiritual momentum and our spiritual growth, are greatly affected by how we react to the crisis, whether for good or for ill. Two basic reactions to intense suffering or personal tribulation are:

1) *to complain about it:* This is a natural enough human reaction, isn't it? In adversity, it is very easy to develop a bad attitude – about life, about oneself, even about God. But reacting in a negative fashion to personal tribulation, as perfectly understandable as this is, is nevertheless a course fraught with spiritual peril. Especially in difficult times, **God expects us to trust Him, not blame Him**, and this is the essence of true humility:

All of you, gird on a humble attitude toward each other, for “God opposes the arrogant, but gives grace to the humble.” So humble yourselves under God’s mighty hand so He may exalt you at the proper time, and cast all your care on Him, for He cares for you.
1st Peter 5:5-7

Let us not put Christ to the test, as some of them (i.e., the Exodus generation) did and were killed by serpents. And let us not complain, as some of them complained, and were killed by the Destroyer. These things happened to them as an example to us, and were written to warn us – we who live at the culmination of the ages. So let him who thinks he stands firm beware lest he fall. You have not suffered any testing beyond normal human [experience]. And God is faithful. He will not allow you to be tested beyond your capacity, but will give you a way out along with the test so that you can bear up under it.
1st Corinthians 10:9-13

2) *to embrace it:* Put our arms around suffering and personal tragedy? This is an entirely unnatural human reaction, isn't it? Better yet, it is a *supernatural* reaction, and the one we're commanded to have. Rather than getting negative and “blaming our lot” (Jude 16), we should strive in times of crisis to hold on even tighter to our faith in God’s mercy and fairness, realizing that we cannot possibly understand all of His reasons for allowing adversity into our lives (Rom.11:33; and consider the example of Job). If we accept in a spirit of humility whatever comes from his hand (Job 2:10), and trust Him at these times when it is hardest to trust Him, we increase our spiritual momentum and accelerate our spiritual growth:

In anticipation of this ultimate deliverance, *your joy overflows*, though at present it may be your lot to suffer for a time through various trials to the end that your faith may be shown to be genuine.

1st Peter 1:6

And not only this, but *let us glory in our tribulations*, knowing that tribulation produces patience, and patience produces proven character, and proven character produces hope – and this hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us.

Romans 5:3-5

Consider it a genuine joy, my brothers, when you are beset with a variety of trials, knowing that this proof of your faith is producing patience. So let patience do its perfecting work, that you might be perfect and whole, lacking in nothing.

James 1:2

In confronting intense suffering (or “personal tribulation”), therefore, the issue is essentially one of faith, of the patient exercise of faith, and of the preservation of one’s faith, *even in the face of difficulties we cannot understand and can hardly bear*. And although we have previously discussed the doctrine of *the perseverance of faith* (see lessons #13, 21, 24 and 25), we will take some time here to review the issue in summary form, for “to write the same things to you”, as the apostle Paul says in a similar context “is not bothersome to me, but is beneficial for your [spiritual] security” (Phil.3:1; cf. 2Pet.1:12-15). The point about spiritual security is especially true in this case, since the issue in question is the protection of our faith under severe pressure. Reacting negatively to suffering, even blaming or questioning God, is obviously detrimental to our faith. But without continued faith in Christ, there is no deliverance, no salvation, no life after death. These are high stakes indeed – there are none higher. That is why we cannot afford to have any doubts about the necessity for the perseverance of our faith or of the implications of the collapse of that faith under the pressures of the *personal tribulations* of this life.

The Danger of Apostasy: How do believers who love the Lord Jesus Christ come to deny Him (Matt.10:33; 2Tim.2:12)? How do believers end up making themselves “enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil.3:18-19)? These are chilling questions indeed. Clearly, true believers in Christ do not turn renegade overnight. Genuine believers in Christ are generally more resilient in their faith than that. But as Christians here in the devil’s world, our faith will be tested, our beliefs will be put under pressure. In short, our free-will continues to be an issue even after we have believed. Set-backs of faith – apostasy (i.e., a complete falling away from God) in the extreme case – inevitably begin with either a negative reaction or a negative response to some stimulus. Whether it is a test of adversity that the believer fails (e.g., the Israelites at Kadesh: Num.14), or yielding to the pressure of temptation (e.g., Adam and Eve in the garden: Gen.3), some specific event usually acts as a stumbling block to throw the believer off balance and upset his spiritual walk:

You were running well! Who knocked you off your stride so as not to believe the truth?
Galatians 5:7

In the quotation above, the apostle Paul upbraids the Galatians for abandoning the true gospel of Christ for the false gospel of works being preached throughout Asia by his “Judaizing” adversaries (i.e., men who taught that one must keep the Mosaic law in order to be saved). Although Paul does not explicitly say what it was that “knocked them off stride” and compromised their faith, there are indications elsewhere in the book that the problem may have been one of hostility and strife within the church brought about by some unknown cause (cf. Gal.5:15; 5:19-21; 5:26; 6:1-5; 6:9). Whatever the reason (or combination of reasons), many believers in the Galatian church were in danger of losing their faith: either through reaction to personal suffering or direct response to the siren song of the Judaizers, they began to find the idea of trading the simple faith of the gospel for a system of self-improvement they found very attractive. Whenever truth is rejected (for whatever reason), a false substitute is never far behind:

Look, I, Paul, am telling you that if you are circumcised [as a means of salvation], then Christ won't do you any good at all!
Galatians 5:2

No temptation, no test of adversity will ever come into our lives that is beyond our ability to handle in faith (1Cor.10:13). And our God is a God of compassion, who is here to comfort us in all the pressures we do face (2Cor.1:2-7). Nevertheless, we would do well to consider the Galatians and their failure, for the race-running analogy used by Paul in the quotation above is just as applicable to us today. When the devil throws an obstacle in our path (whether adversity or enticement), if we do not hurdle it in faith, then we allow our faith stride to be interrupted. Now oft times this will be just a momentary lapse on our part. We will soon admit our failure (confession of sin; 1Jn.1:9: see lesson #15), and we will get back to our race after having gotten up off the ground (i.e., having accepted our punishment), assuming that we don't react negatively to our failure or to the divine discipline which inevitably follows it. The writer of Hebrews also uses the race-running analogy for perseverance through personal tribulation, making a particular point of the necessity of avoiding wrong reactions to divine discipline when we stumble on the course:

Since then we too [just like the believers of chapter 11] have such a large audience of witnesses surrounding us [men and angels], let us put off every hindrance – especially whatever sins habitually affect us – ***and run with endurance the race set before us***, turning our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith, who, for the joy set before Him endured the shame of the cross, treating it with despite, and took His seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Keep in mind all the terrible opposition He endured against Himself at the hands of sinful men, so as not to grow sick at heart and give up. You have not yet resisted to the point of [having to shed your] blood in your struggle against sin. And you have forgotten the encouragement scripture gives us as to the sons we are: “My son, do not treat the Lord's punishment lightly, and do not lose heart when

you are rebuked by Him. For the Lord punishes those He loves, and flays everyone He receives to Himself as a son.” So take your punishment in this spirit – God is behaving towards you as to sons. For what son has never been punished by his father? And if it should be that you are not receiving punishment (in which all [true sons] share), then you are illegitimate and not sons at all. Now we all had human fathers who punished us and we respected them for it. How much the more then shall we not submit ourselves to the Father of our spirits and live? For while our human fathers meted out our punishment for a relatively short time according as they saw best, when He punishes us it is definitely for our own good – that we might partake of His holiness. Now no punishment is a cause of rejoicing as it is being experienced, but rather of regret – only later does it bear fruit for those who have been trained through it – the fruit of [personal] righteousness that makes one whole and complete. Therefore, [going back to our race analogy] pick up those hands hanging slack at your side, put some strength back into your weak knees, and make straight tracks for your feet, so that [even though you fell down] what you sprained might not be twisted completely out of joint, but might instead work its way back to health.

Hebrews 12:1-13

Good advice – but, unfortunately, not always what we do immediately after “falling to the ground” from a spiritual trip-up. This is true even of great believers, as the example of the prophet Elijah shows us. After suffering through long periods of personal tribulation as a fugitive from king Ahab and queen Jezebel (1Kng.17), and immediately after experiencing his greatest triumph in defeating the priests of Baal (1Kng.18), Elijah reacted in fear rather than in faith to the threats of Jezebel and went into a deep spiritual funk (1Kng.19). It seems that even this great prophet finally reached a breaking point, and Jezebel’s threats were for him the “final straw”. It seems to be a quirk of our human nature that often we pass the big tests only to stumble over lesser ones. Elijah’s reaction brought him to the place where he found himself blaming God. He did recover, of course, but if we react similarly to adversity and sit down in the dirt too long (blaming God for our lot – whether our suffering is for testing or divine discipline for sinful behavior – Heb.12:1-13), then we are taking the risk of falling headlong into the dark chasm of apostasy. For such behavior – if left unchecked – can be catastrophic to our faith.

As critical as it is for us today to be on alert for challenges to our faith, the danger of apostasy will be multiplied dramatically at some undisclosed point in the future. One of the opening trends of the Tribulation (the seven year period preceding the return of Christ: Matt.24:21, 24:29; Mk.13:19, 13:24; 2Tim.3:1; Rev.3:10), is “The Great Apostasy”, an unprecedented falling away of believers from the faith (Dan.8:12-13; Matt.24:10-13; 2Thes.2:3; 1Tim.4:1). A primary reason for the astonishing abandonment of the Lord predicted by scripture is an unprecedented degree of deception to be unleashed by the devil and his earthly minions, the antichrist and his false prophet (Dan.11:32-35; Matt.24:11, 24; Mk.13:22; 2Thes.2:9-12; 1Tim.4:1-5; 2Tim.3:8-9 with Ex.7:11, 22; Rev.13:13-14; 19:20). The pattern of the Great Apostasy (massive personal tribulation coupled with extraordinary enticements to a false, anti-Christian system) is at least similar to the pattern which has always been discernable in the devil’s world and continues to be obvious today, though the degree of difficulty to be encountered at that future time and the intensity of the false enticement will be far greater. This pattern is:

- 1) reaction of the believer to some setback (personal tribulation, discipline, temptation).
- 2) acceptance of some false system in the place of true faith in Christ.

Both elements of the pattern of apostasy (loss of faith in Christ) are important to consider. We are only vulnerable to accepting the lie after we reject the truth, and, conversely, if – instead of reacting to the tests and tribulations to which we are all as believers in Christ subjected here in Satan’s realm – we continue to trust God through the hard times, we will not become vulnerable to replacing the truth of the gospel with some false system designed by the devil to take us captive (2Tim.2:26). Such false systems are often precisely those which we had previously rejected in order to accept the gospel of Christ (analogous to the Israelites desiring to return to Egypt: Neh.9:16-18):

For if after having escaped the defilements of this world by recognizing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ they should be overcome [spiritually] by becoming involved again in these foul things, then they have become worse off than they were before. For it would have been better for them not to have accepted the Righteous Way in the first place, rather than – once having accepted this holy command [for faith in Christ] committed to them – to turn their backs on it now. And so in their case this proverb is true:

The dog has returned to his vomit.
and
The sow, though washed, to her muddy sty.

2nd Peter 2:20-21

The Process of Apostasy: Christians do not usually turn apostate overnight. Between the believer’s heartfelt profession of Jesus Christ as Savior, and an ultimate denial of Him lie certain predictable steps. The lapse to loss of salvation, or apostasy, generally proceeds in the following, discernable stages:

- 1) faith is challenged; the believer reacts.
- 2) the heart is hardened.
- 3) a substitute is accepted.
- 4) faith is destroyed.

1. Faith is challenged; the believer reacts: As we saw above, stumbling blocks of various kinds can trip the believer up, interrupting his faith walk, upsetting his stride as he runs toward the goal. Sometimes these stumbling blocks are *personal failings* large or small (i.e., personal sins which result in divine discipline to which the believer reacts instead of repenting and responding). Sometimes these stumbling blocks are *tests and trials* designed to strengthen faith and accelerate growth (failed tests, in this case, to which the believer reacts in a negative way instead of trusting God to bring him through the hard times). Whatever the exact stumbling block or stimulus that challenges a person’s faith, causing him to react, despair, and lose faith,

each of us no doubt does know one person or another who has stumbled in this way. Often this involves some terrible experience that has occurred to them, and for which they blame God (even if they don't say so in so many words). We must keep in mind that such a perspective is patently *wrong*: God is not the problem, nor has He proved unfaithful, nor could He (2Tim.2:11-13). No matter how "unfair" circumstances may seem to us, we must not forget that we never have the entire picture (Job 38-41), and that God is right and righteous, even if we can't explain every event and setback to our own satisfaction or to the satisfaction of others.

In allowing challenges to our faith to shake us up, we inevitably forget all the good things that God has done for us. Though He had rescued them from slavery, given them abundant, miraculous demonstrations of His power and love for them, fed them with "the bread of heaven" and given them drink with "water from the rock", nurtured and cared for them in a barren desert, still the Israelites of the Exodus generation could never quite pass the test of faith. Ten times they "tested God in contempt" reacting now to testing from God, now to the temptation of their own desires, until finally they had thrown away their chance to enter the promised land themselves, and God instead "slew them in the wilderness" (Num.14:20-23; 1Cor.10:1-13):

Make sure, brothers, that none of you develop an evil heart of unbelief [lack of faith] by turning away (lit., "apostatizing") from the living God. Rather keep encouraging each other every day as long as we still call it "today" (i.e., remain in this world), lest any of you be hardened [in heart] by the deception of sin. For we all have a share in Christ, as long as we hang onto that original confidence [of our faith] firmly to the end, as it says:

Today if you hear His voice,
Don't harden your hearts as they did at the provocation [at Meribah].

For who provoked Him, though they had heard? Did not all of them who came out of Egypt under Moses' leadership do so? And with whom was He enraged for forty years? Wasn't it the very people who had sinned, then dropped dead in the desert? And to whom did He swear that they would never enter into the [place of] rest [He had promised], but to those who had been disobedient to Him? Now we see that they were unable to enter into this [place of rest] *because of their unbelief* [lack of faith].

Hebrews 3:12-19

Yes, this generation of Israelites forgot all the good things that God had done for them. They allowed daily pressures and desires to challenge their faith, and suffered the consequences. We should learn from their negative example, and not forget all the good things that God has done for us, even though we too will inevitably experience hard times. Now the chief "good thing" that God has done for us is to give us the gift of His own Son, Jesus Christ – that He should die in order that we might live forever with Him. No suffering, no setback, no slight, no lust, no desire, no potential gain of any kind, though it be the entire world, is worth compromising the eternal life we have through our faith in Jesus Christ. We simply cannot afford to become bitter, or frustrated, or bored, or apathetic, or finally to allow any emotion or reaction into our lives that

alienates us from the One we should love above all others. We must preserve *this* relationship at all costs. And the challenge is a subtle one amidst the confusing currents of life. It is not enough that we remain “mentally aware” of someone named Christ whom we allegedly worship on occasion. Even the demons recognize the existence of God, but this will not keep them out of hell (James 2:19). We must at all costs maintain our true relationship with Jesus Christ – our allegiance, our loyalty, our love, our commitment, our discipleship, our trust, *our unshakeable faith in Him*.

For just as it is unbelief that keeps a person out of the family of God, without continuing faith we too will be separated from it (Rom.11:20-21). We have ample opportunity as Christians to stop following our Master, to turn around and head back to the “country of unbelief” (Heb.11:15). The challenge is to keep following Him when our faith is put under pressure. And there is no other way. We cannot abandon our faith in Christ and still be Christians, for the very definition of Christians in the Bible is “those who believe” (e.g., Rom.3:22). So we must be alert and on guard so as not to turn aside to the right or to the left, but to follow our Lord by the straight path, examining ourselves to see whether or not we “are in the faith” (2Cor.13:5). Some seeds of faith (see Matt.13:1-23; Mk.4:1-20; Lk.8:4-15; and Peter lesson #12) never sprout because they are beguiled by lies, but we must believe God’s Word; others never take root, because they are dried up by trouble, but we must trust Him in times of difficulty; others never bear fruit, because they are choked by the worries and deceptions of this life, but we must strive to rise above the opposition of the devil’s world. Now the devil definitely knows where our faith is likely to be its most vulnerable, and where best to put our faithfulness to the test. We can see something of Satan’s tactics in his temptation of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and we should make it our goal to follow His example in testing (Matt.4:1-11):

- *he attacks our faith when we are vulnerable due to **pressure or privation***: The devil tempted Christ (v.3) to use His powers for His own benefit (by turning stones to bread), out of keeping with God’s plan. When we face difficulties and want, we must not allow our faith to succumb to the pressure. While we can’t turn stones to bread, we are tempted to similar violations of God’s plan, to sin, for example, when pressured by events (such as pressing needs and privation). Instead of succumbing to such pressure and *using it as an excuse* to act faithlessly, we must instead stay faithful and trust God as Christ did, remembering that “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes forth from God’s mouth”.
- *he attacks our faith when we are vulnerable due to **temptation or lust***: The devil tempted Christ (vv.5-6) to act impulsively and put God in a position of having to rescue Him out of a difficult circumstance. When we are presented with “opportunities” for impulsive sin, we must recognize them for the trap that they are and reject them as Christ did, remembering the command “Don’t put the Lord your God to the test”.
- *he attacks our faith when we are vulnerable due to **ignorance and spiritual drifting***: The devil tempted Christ (vv.8-9) to accept from him something that was indeed due Christ, that is, the mastery of the world. Very often we too will be subject to extremely cunning

temptations where right things will be presented to us in wrong ways. Christ *is* the coming Ruler of the world, but worshiping Satan was clearly wrong. We too can expect to be presented with the temptation of accepting “right things” we want or need “in wrong ways”. Only a thorough knowledge of the scripture and continued spiritual growth and vigilance will reduce our vulnerability to such subtle temptations, so we too can say as Christ did: “Get away from Me, Satan. For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him’”.

2. The heart is hardened¹: Between the believer’s initial negative reaction to some stimulus of suffering (whether deserved or undeserved) and rejection of the Way, lies a dangerous psychological process which the Bible calls the “hardening of the heart”. Hardening of the heart is a process of gradually increasing spiritual blindness which is always marked by an *increase* in sin and a corresponding *diminution* of faith. “Hardening of the heart” is essentially the reassertion of attitudes negative to God and His will, eventually leading back to the original state of unbelief. Even in its initial stages, “hardening of the heart” is a terrible complication to our spiritual lives and a very real threat to our salvation. Just as the hardening of the arteries in the body restricts the flow of blood and endangers the physical heart, often leading to physical death, so the hardening of the spiritual heart restricts the flow of truth within it and poses an equally perilous threat to the Christian’s spiritual life. In the most severe cases, it can lead to the spiritual death of apostasy, where the truth is entirely rejected for the lie and where the person who was once a believer retains no shred of his former faith in Christ.

a. *The heart in biblical terms:* As we saw in a previous study (lesson #16), in the Bible, the heart represents the inner person. In a strict sense, it is a place distinct from both the spiritual and the physical parts of our nature. Specifically, the heart is where our physical body and our eternal spirit interact (1Cor.14:14; cf. 1Cor.2:12; for passages which assume this interaction, see for example Duet.2:30; Ps.7:9; cf. Matt.18:35; Phil.4:7). As the “junction” of our present body and our eternal spirit (which will at the resurrection be clothed in an incorruptible, perfect body), the biblical heart is the place of all human thought and emotion, whether good or ill (Prov.23:7). The heart is where we honor God, but also the place from which “proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and slanders” (Matt.15:18-19). Only believers in Christ have the true potential to overcome the old patterns of secular thought to which the heart is accustomed (1Cor.2:14-15), and indeed we are commanded to do so (Rom.12:2). In short, the heart is “who we really are”, the entire, internal person, with all our thoughts, hopes and dreams, emotions, weaknesses and character flaws. As long as we are in this body with its corrupt tendencies, we cannot entirely isolate our spirits from temptation and weakness (Matt.26:41; Rom.7:14-25; see lesson #15 on sin and confession), but we can transform our inner-selves, that is, our hearts, by the power of God’s Spirit and God’s Word (Rom.12:2; Eph.4:21-24; & see especially lesson #17).

¹ For a detailed case study of the process, see the special series “Exodus 14: Hardening Pharaoh’s Heart”.

b. *The natural heart:* As unbelievers, we chose not to respond to God, and as a result our “hard and unrepentant heart” earned us God’s wrath (Rom.2:5). Designed to receive God’s light, our hearts became filled with darkness (Matt.6:22-23), designed to understand the truth about God, they became senseless (Rom.1:21). We walked “in the vain foolishness of [our] minds, darkened in [our] understanding and alienated from the life of God” and our hearts became hard (Eph.4:18; see also Rom.11:7, 11:25). We became spiritually blind (Mk.6:52; 8:17-21). Though this hardness of unbelief had (and has) its degrees (Ex.4:21; 7:13; 8:15), to one degree or another, all of us found ourselves hardened in heart, unable to see or appreciate God’s truth – until His Spirit brought us the illuminating gospel of Jesus Christ, and the eyes of our hearts were opened to see Him and accept Him as our Savior (Jn.1:8-9; 2Cor.4:4; 2Tim.1:10).

c. *A fresh start for the heart:* At salvation, everything becomes new. The hardness and darkness and senselessness of our inner-selves is done away with in the instant that we accept Christ as our Savior. We get a new lease on our spiritual lives – in a moment of time. Our hearts are “cleansed by faith” (Acts 15:9), and we can now perceive God’s truth. We have, in a sense, “new hearts” (Ezek.11:18-21). The former state of unbelief has passed away, and in Christ we are “new creations”, with hearts untrammelled by the previous hardness and blindness (2Cor.5:17; Gal.6:15). This essentially means that the power of the old attitudes of negativity against God, all the old shackles on our spiritual perception, are broken, and we, our faith, is free to pursue God without hindrance. Along with the gift of eternal life we are given the chance and opportunity to think in accord with that pure life. This does not mean we now know everything we need to know as believers – far from it: we still need to grow spiritually. But it does mean that we are now not hindered from doing so. God has given us a clean start in the heart. We must always be on our guard, however, against the reestablishment of the old, bad attitudes that alienated us from God in our state of unbelief.

d. *Don’t harden your heart:* Sad to say, salvation is not the end of the story. There remains the dangerous potential of future hardening of our hearts, even as believers. The culprit in all instances of returning spiritual blindness, negativity and insensitivity to God is personal sin. It stands to reason that sin, by definition the rejection of God and His authority, should alienate us from Him and reduce our sensitivity to His will and the guiding of His Spirit (see lesson #15 & 16). Now none of us is exempt from temptation or from the commission of personal sins (Prov.20:9) – as long as we live in the “body of sin” we will sometimes succumb to temptation (Rom.7). But there is a big difference between the occasional lapses (for which we are disciplined by God and then, hopefully, respond positively to His reproof through confession) of the advancing believer and a full-fledged giving up of oneself to sin without repentance. When we face our sins, admit them to God and turn away from them, we can expect healing along with punishment, and cleansing of our hearts. But if, on the other hand, we tolerate sin in our lives and let it grow up in our hearts, it begins to clog our faith, and renewed hardness of heart is the result. For this reason scripture warns us “don’t harden your hearts ...” as the rebellious Israelites of the Exodus generation did (Heb.3:8; 3:15; 4:7), for their tragic end is to be an example to us all of the perilous nature of such a course of action (1Cor.10:11). Renewal or revival is always possible when we turn back to Him in confession of sin, but if we persist in a hard-necked opposition to God, hardness of the heart is the inevitable result.

e. *The hardening of the heart:* We see the process of hardening of the heart very clearly in the book of Hebrews (quoted above) where the anonymous author discusses the mechanics:

Make sure, brothers, that none of you develop an evil heart of unbelief [lack of faith] by turning away (lit., “apostatizing”) from the living God. Rather keep encouraging each other every day as long as we still call it “today” (i.e., we remain in this world), lest any of you be ***hardened [in heart] by the deception of sin.***
Hebrews 3:12-13

In his analysis, apostasy (turning one’s back on God) has a catastrophic effect upon the heart, rendering it “wicked”. And the agent in the process of hardening is “the deception of sin”. The issue is clear. A life of sin (not an occasional fall, but a headlong pursuit of sin) is incompatible with belief, for belief or faith cannot be separated from obedience. We cannot serve sin and God, so that if we turn from God to sin, we will inevitably stop following Christ, stop obeying Christ, stop believing in Christ. As John tells us, “no one who is sinning has been born from God” (1Jn.5:18). That is, a life of sin is an indication that sin has swamped faith and that the person is no longer a true believer in Christ (or is at the very least in imminent danger of falling away).

f. *The hard heart:* And so, if we persist on the wrong road long enough, there comes a point in our spiritual degeneration when we no longer will (or can) look God in the face, so to speak (Jn.3:19-20). Whatever the initial stimulus or setback that we allowed to turn us away from Him, off the path of eternal life, our consciences are now seared to the point of justifying anything we please (2Tim.3:8; Tit.1:15), our hearts are darkened, empty and hardened (Eph.4:18-19), and we are no longer interested in having a meaningful relationship with God on His terms – faithfully following Jesus Christ (Rom.1:18-21).

3. A substitute is accepted: As we choose to abandon God and the means of salvation He has ordained, faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, so God eventually abandons us, giving us over to the natural and sinful impulses we have chosen to follow instead of His Son (Rom.1:24, 1:26, 1:28; Eph.4:19). It is a bitter irony that instead of freedom (from the restraints of doing God’s will), those who opt for the dubious course of apostasy find themselves enslaved instead to another master: sin (Jn.8:34; 2Pet.2:19; and cf. Gal.4:8-11). For it is a fact of our human nature that we must choose to serve one master or another, and if we choose to reject God, we must necessarily choose to accept some sinful substitute for Him which then becomes our “god”, whether or not we call it by that name (it is for this reason, for example, that the scripture calls greed idolatry: Col.3:5; cf. Eph.5:5). Inevitably, we must choose for Christ or against Him (Matt.12:30); we can’t serve God and Mammon at the same time, (Matt.6:24; Lk.16:13); we are either drawn to Mount Sinai or the Heavenly Jerusalem (Gal.4:21-5:1). Just as the Israelites turned to false gods (Deut.8:10-20), the Galatians to the false doctrines of the Judaizers (Gal.1:6-9), the early church to the teachings of the Nicolaitans and Gnostics (e.g., Rev.2:6), and contemporary former believers in Christ turn to their own ways (whether to serve the latest cult or their own particular desires) so choosing against God, against Christ, of necessity means choosing something else, and making an idol of it, whether this is overtly done or not. In the end, if we turn our backs on God and the faith in Christ that we once professed, we inevitably turn back to Egypt, back to the

former darkness of our hearts, back to what we had previously vomited up as spiritually unhealthy, and become worse off than we were before (2Pet.2:20-21; cf. Ezek.16).

4. Faith is destroyed: To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is no light or easy matter. Our Savior told us to “count the cost” before taking on the challenge of a life of following Him in this world (Lk.14:26-35). The picture He painted was so challenging that many have avoided it (Jn.6:60-66; cf. Matt.10:32-39), yet He also reassures us that His yoke is easy (i.e., “well-suited” just for us: Matt.11:29-30), that if we only have faith, all things are possible with Him (Matt.19:23-26). Once we have entered into the bargain, accepted His promise of eternal life by faith in Him, the issue becomes one of continued faith, *of living by faith* (Rom.1:17; Heb.10:38), and one of loyalty, of *obediently following Him* (1Pet.1:2; 4:17).

The end of the process of apostasy, of faith under pressure, resulting in hardness of heart, resulting in the acceptance of a substitute for God and His Son, is the eventual death of our faith. The one-time believer who allows pressure on his faith to turn him away from God and into sin, who falls aside and hardens his heart against God’s truth, experiences the same thing that occurred to the one-time believers of the Exodus generation. They did not enter the land of promise 1) because of their *lack of belief in Him* when things didn’t work out as they expected (Heb.3:19); 2) because of their *disobedience to Him* when He tested them to see if their faith was genuine (Heb.4:6). Essentially, faith and obedience are one and the same thing (Jn.3:36). If you really do believe, you will obey, and if you obey, it is because you really do believe. You have eternal life in Jesus Christ through faith in the gospel, but only “if you hold fast to it” in obedience to Christ (Matt.10:33; Lk.12:9; 1Cor.15.2; cf. also Col.1:23; 2Tim.2:11-13). As we who believe in Jesus Christ stand because of our faith, so they that do not stand do not stand because of their unbelief (Rom.11:20-23), but, as the apostle tells us, this is subject to reversal. Hardening of the heart, the increasing spiritual blindness that accompanies sin and disobedience to God, will, if left unchecked, snuff out our faith. And so we are warned:

Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion during the time of testing in the desert where your fathers tested me.
Hebrews 3:7-8

Let us therefore be on the alert against any “shadow of turning” away from our God. Let us take pains to stay close to our God, confessing our sins whenever they occur, and accepting all things from His hand, whether good or ill, knowing that by His power they are all working together for our good (Rom.8:28). And let us avoid every slippery path to apostasy, the turning away from our God, by a knowledge and consideration of the process that brings it about:

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do in the futility of their thinking (e.g., unbelief). They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to *the hardening of their hearts*. And having once lost all sensitivity [for what is right], they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of

impurity, with a continual lust for more (e.g., accepting a substitute for God). ***This is not how you learned to follow Christ.***
Ephesians 4:17-20