

In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away." And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" And he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them. And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.

Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

(Mark 8:1-21)

Introduction

Mark 8 brings us to the halfway point in the book and to the end of Act One of Two.

The narrative has been building since the first verse of the book. Jesus had come preaching the gospel of the kingdom. He had demonstrated, in numerous ways, that he was indeed the Messiah of God. His miracles, his exorcisms, and primarily his preaching, demonstrated irrefutably that Jesus was the long-awaited Christ the King. Anyone with ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to understand would believe this. They would repent and bow the knee to him. But as we have seen, the vast majority did not understand. It seems that there was a pandemic of hardening of spiritual arteries. Most did not believe.

The masses appreciated what Jesus could do for them: healing, providing, restoring to society, and lifting from disadvantage. Further, they appreciated that he spoke with clear-headed authority because he had the personal integrity to back up what he said. And yet most did not seek him as the Saviour from their sins. Their hearts seem to have been hardened to the real reason for which he came.

Most Pharisees and other religious leaders hated him. They resented his criticism of the spiritual state of the people (reflecting poorly on them). They resented his popularity. They resented his direct criticisms. They resented his refuting of their manmade traditions. That is, they resented his refusal to submit to their opinions. The bottom line is, they resented his authority, because they loved theirs. Therefore, they would not hear what he said. They would not hear what they should hear. Their hearts are heartened. It was a sad state of affairs; it was enough to cause one who loves God to sigh.

Though the disciples were in a different category than the Pharisees, they still seemed very far from the kingdom. Yes, they had answered his call to follow him as Messiah. They had left careers, and some had left family. They had been with him observing miracles, including the recent ones of calming storms and feeding multitudes from one little lunch sack. They had listened to his teaching and, no doubt, like the crowds, they were struck with the authority both of what he said and how he said it. And yet, when it came to his identity, they just didn't get it. Their hearts, too, were hardened. How would Jesus deal with them?

The Structure Speaks

The structure of this section (8:1–38) is very similar to the previous section (6:3–7:37): miraculous feeding of a multitude (6:30–44; 8:1–10); crossing of the sea followed by provocation with Pharisees (6:45–7:13; 8:10–12); dullness of the disciples (7:14–23; 8:14–21); leaving Galilee followed by miraculous healings (7:24–35; 8:13, 22–26); confession of Christ (7:36–37; 8:27–38).

Mark is making a point. As a writer, Mark is driving home themes, and one of those is the spiritual deafness and blindness of those who were confronted by the Lord Jesus Christ—both in the lives of his enemies and his friends.

Why would Mark want to highlight this? What purpose would it serve? Among other things, it would equip his readers to remember how Jesus confronted the hardened in his day so that we will know how to confront the hardened in our day. In a world filled with hardened hearts when it comes to the things of God, how should Christians respond?

Further, we need to examine our own hearts: Are they hardened? May God use this text to help us become more like our Lord, who never had a hardened heart, yet who helps multitudes who do. This passage reveals three responses as we confront hardened hearts.

Always be Compassionate Despite the Hardened

The first response that is called for – always – is to be compassionate despite the hardened.

In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away." And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" And he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them. And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

(Mark 8:1–10)

Debate exists among commentators whether this is a repeat of the earlier miracle in which Jesus fed a multitude (6:30–44). Some feel that Mark is borrowing from that event, repeating some details in order to round out his teaching about Jesus. Others have suggested that an editor inserted this material.

Granting that there are similar details in the two narratives, there are also pointed differences, which clearly suggest that these are two different events.

In the former account, Jesus fed five thousand men, while here there were only four thousand. Unlike the earlier account, there is no reference here to green grass, perhaps suggesting that this miracle took place in a different season. In this account, unlike the previous, Jesus is the sole focus, with little mention of the disciples' involvement. Formerly, his disciples asked him about feeding the crowd, while here he took the initiative. The amount of bread is different in this account, and the fish are mentioned almost as an afterthought. The word translated "fishes," in fact, is different, describing a different kind

of fish. The amount of the leftovers is different. Mark uses significantly different words for “baskets.” In the first account (6:43), the word describes the common basket of the Jews; 8:8 uses a word describing a basket that was used by all in that part of the world, including Gentiles. Most importantly, Jesus claimed two distinct miracles (vv. 19–20), even using the two different Greek words for “baskets” when he spoke.

The first feeding was on the west side of Galilee, while the second was on the east side (Decapolis). The second miracle involved the feeding of a mixed multitude, if not primarily Gentile, while the first feeding was a primarily Jewish multitude.

It is clear that Jesus performed two similar miracles (which is hardly unusual for his miracles) and Mark records both because he is making a point: Jesus’ compassion was not only for those who were sons of Abraham but rather for all peoples.

We have met this characteristic of Jesus before: when he was compassionate towards a leper (1:41), and when he was compassionate for sheep without a shepherd (6:34). Later, this word will be used with reference to a young man who was demonised, whose father assumed compassion from the Lord (9:22ff). There are many other examples of Jesus being compassionate (though the word does not always appear). Jesus felt in his gut the pangs of a broken world. After all, he created the world (John 1) and so he is not detached from the way it has gone.

But Jesus did more than merely feel bad for the hungry; he did something about it.

Jesus took charge and instructed the crowd to sit down. He took the offered seven loaves, with a few fish, and fed this vast crowd. The creator of the universe fed the multitude; the King fed his subjects; the Bread of Life provided sustenance for his people. He acted just like Yahweh did in another wilderness in a previous era. As then, it seems that those who lay for the foundation the new Israel were just as hard-hearted.

Really?

What amazes me is the questioning of the disciples, “How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?” (v. 4). Really?

Jesus doubtless discussed the challenge with his disciple in hopes that they would say, “No problem! You are Lord of all. You can feed this multitude.” Sadly, they didn’t.

Having witnessed, having in fact participated in Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the five thousand, how could they even ask such a question? After all, how long could it have been since that miracle? Perhaps a few weeks? Essentially, like Israel of old, they were asking, “Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?” (Psalm 78:19).

What forgetfulness! What blindness! What hardness of heart! What a sobering reminder to you and me of the same propensity!

I wonder if, as they served the food (v. 6), the disciples remembered and perhaps were chastened in their spirits about the Lord's ability? But in the light of what would take place a little later, perhaps not!

The Heart of the Matter

I am persuaded that this question is at the centre of Mark's purpose in writing this section. God, through Mark, wants the church to be confronted with its own propensity towards unbelief. He wants us to guard our hearts from the hardening of our spiritual arteries. Not only does chapter 8 warn us of a complete hardening, which, as we will soon see, leads to abandonment by God, but it also equips us to face our own spiritual dullness, which all too often comes upon us. I think Mark may intend for his audience to read this and to respond, "Really? What's wrong with these guys?" And then to realise, "Wait, this reminds me of me!"

Everything else that follows in the Gospel points to the ebbs and flows of spiritual perception. Note the miracle that follows (vv. 22-26) (as well as the miracle preceding this section!).

Earlier, Jesus healed a man who was blind. Even after the initial touch, his vision is not all that it could be. So, the Lord touched him again. Finally, he could see clearly. Isn't this so true of you and me as we follow Christ? Sometimes we get it, and other times, not so much.

But what follows this? Peter's bold and clear confession (vv. 27-30). The Father had opened his eyes to recognise the identity of his Son. Peter was tremendously blessed! But almost immediately, his heart was hardened and his spiritual eyes blinded as he audaciously rebuked the Lord he had just confessed! Does that sound familiar? I can relate.

I can relate to experiencing a wonderful time in the word and in prayer and then driving to work, grumbling about the way people drive as I entertain unkind, unchristian thoughts.

I have experienced the Lord meeting with me during a church gathering and an hour later feeling anxious about what is happening in my life or in my family or in the church.

Perhaps I have read a book on the sovereignty of God, which encourages me that he is indeed in control of everything in the world. Merely hours later, I find myself anxious about the elections, the economy, people leaving the country, or people leaving the church.

I may be struck by the gracious forgiveness that God extends to me and shortly after I am embittered towards someone who has wronged me.

I might be reminded about the glorious grace of God in his gospel, resting in the doctrine of justification by faith alone and that I am accepted by God – always – because of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Then I fall into despair over my failures, as I embrace a performance-based approach to God.

God may provide for my needs in a most remarkable and undeserved way and a week later I am anxious about some new providential challenge.

I think we get the point. We too are forgetful. This no doubt is why Peter would write, many years later, burdened to help his readers to remember certain truths (2 Peter 1:12). He personally experienced spiritual dullness and even obtuseness at times. Isn't it encouraging to know that an apostle struggled with the same things we do?

What miracle, provision, or divine intervention do you need to remember? May God deliver us from spiritual amnesia!

The Eucharist

Another indication that Mark is recording a separate event than the earlier feeding, is the words “having given thanks” (v. 6). In 6:41 we are told that Jesus “said a blessing.” That was a common Jewish phrase, whereas here Mark employs the word *eucharisto*. This became a euphemism in the early church for what we call the Lord's Supper.

It is interesting that the word “eucharist” replaced the old covenant Passover Feast and it became the word most associated with the multi-ethnic new covenant church. Again, keep in mind that Jesus performed this miracle of feeding the hungry multitude in the region of Decapolis, a predominately Gentile region (though many Jews lived there as well). Why is this important?

It seems that Mark recorded this event, and that Jesus performed this miracle, to encourage Gentiles that the gospel of God is for all peoples.

What we have before us is a scene in which the Bread of Life is being shared amidst an ethnically mixed congregation, much like Paul spoke about in Ephesians (2:11–22). Here we have an early picture of what Jesus would do in establishing his multi-ethnic, every-nation-included church.

As a side note, the interaction that Jesus had with the Syrophenician mother (7:24–30) is hinted at here. Jesus, having fed the children of God (6:30–44), now fed the dogs under the table. The numbers fed were smaller, and the amount of crumbs leftover was less than the previous feeding. Perhaps Mark wants his (primarily Gentile) readers to remember that God had a plan to include them in his gracious and compassionate gospel.

Grace in Galilee

After the leftovers were collected, the Lord Jesus climbed into a boat with the disciples and headed for the other side of the Sea of Galilee, v. 10 (cf. 6:45–52 for a similar action). The Lord was going to give unbelievers in Galilee a second chance. Though in the presence of the hardened, Jesus maintained his composure; he kept his compassion. Perhaps hearts had softened that were once hardened.

There is some debate about the precise locale of Dalmanutha. The debate is unimportant for our purposes. We need only know that it was somewhere in Galilee. That is the important point.

We have noted before that Jesus had by this time shifted his attention away from Galilee. Largely rejected by the religious leaders there, he headed elsewhere. He would not stay where he was not wanted. And yet he was full of compassion, and so even when he was rejected, sometimes he gave it another shot. As here. Jesus was back.

He had perhaps been absent for as much as eight months, according to some scholars. He had ministered in a predominately Gentile region. He had been well-received. And now he returned to Galilee. Had things changed? When he withdrew from them, had they thought about their error and were they now more receptive? Sadly, the next verses answer those questions in the negative.

Sometimes Cut Off the Hardened

The second appropriate response is to, sometimes, cut off the hardened. We see this in the brief narrative that follows the miracle.

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.” And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.

(Mark 8:11–13)

Having arrived on the other side, Jesus encountered a group of Pharisees, who perhaps had been just waiting for this opportunity to once again confront in order to heap contempt upon him.

It is a sad reality that religious people – supposedly orthodox religious people – can be so hateful. But the Gospels, the book of Acts, all the epistles, and the last book of the Bible all record that most spiritual warfare occurs within the context of the church. Yes, those who claim to be followers of God – even Christians – can be the biggest and most painful source

of opposition to the ministry of Jesus. We should not be surprised. Pained? Yes. Shocked? No.

The Pharisees were not interested in following our Saviour. They were not truly seeking either the truth or to trust in God's appointed Messiah. Rather, they were interested in discrediting him. They were intent on arguing with him, on testing him. James Edwards observes that the word translated "test" "does not mean an objective test to discover the merit of something, but an obstacle or stumbling block to discredit." These Pharisees, in other words, were Satan's pawns who sought to continue tempting Jesus.

Signs and Wonders

When they asked for a sign, they were not asking for a miracle. They were well aware of his supernatural acts. They had witnessed his healings and even his exorcisms – though they attributed those to his being in league with Satan (3:22-30).

The word "sign" is never used by Mark to refer to a miracle. The sign they were seeking was something in the way of a divine authentication. Perhaps something along the lines of Deuteronomy 18:15–22.

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers – it is to him you shall listen – just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, "Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die." And the LORD said to me, "They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die." And if you say in your heart, "How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?" – when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

(Deuteronomy 18:15–22)

Moses records God's promise that one day he would send a prophet "like Moses" and yet different. The prophecy refers to the coming of Messiah (Acts 3:17–26; 7:37ff).

Interestingly, there is no mention in this passage of a miracle; rather, the emphasis is upon the spoken word. According to God's law, the divine authentication of a prophet occurred through God fulfilling the word that he spoke. If his message came to pass, he was authenticated as a prophet of the Lord. If not, or, if he led people to a false god, he was not an authentic prophet. It was that simple (cf. 1 Samuel 3:19). They were asking for an

“outward compelling proof of divine authority.” They reasoned that, if Jesus was working in God’s name, then “God should divinely authorize his work” (Edwards).

Though we cannot be certain what kind of a sign of authenticity they were looking for, Jesus would ultimately authenticate his Messiahship, and he provided a clue to this in 8:31 when he prophesied his death and resurrection. Further, when the temple was destroyed some 35 years later, they would have final evidence that the Prophet had been among them (see Matthew 26:62–64).

It should be clear, and it will become very clear as we continue our journey through Mark, that the Pharisees were not looking for a reason to believe Jesus. Rather, they were looking for an excuse to not believe. They were entirely unreasonable. “The call for a sign amounts to a radical denial of the summons to have faith” (Witherington). In fact, in most cases, those with signs and wonders are false prophets (see Deuteronomy 13:1–5; Mark 13:22)!

The Pharisees’ hard hearts had become hateful hearts. Be careful how you respond to Jesus. Be careful how you respond to his word. Be careful with what you do with God’s gospel when you hear it.

Sorrowful Sigh

The word behind the phrase “he sighed deeply” occurs only here in the New Testament. It is a strong word, which speaks of a groan from the gut. Jesus sighed earlier (7:34) and he sighed at Lazarus’ grave (John 11:33), but neither word is quite as strong.

Jesus sighed because he was deeply grieved at the unbelief of “this generation.” Paul comments, years later, that the Jews “demand signs” (1 Corinthians 1:22). Still in Paul’s day, the generation was spiritually hardened. As are many in our day.

Again, be careful—especially those who are exposed to so much of God’s word. The demand for more than Scripture always puts one in a precarious position.

Hebrews 13:17 includes a similar word for “sigh.” There, it is translated “groaning.” The writer references a possible outcome of the elders’ account to God for those in the flock. Joyfully, elders shepherd those with soft hearts towards the things of God. “Sighingly,” they also sometimes shepherd those with hard and even hateful hearts. Such hearts sometimes need to be cut off, as our Chief Shepherd did with these haters.

Evidence that Demands a Verdict

Jesus very strongly asserted that they would not be given a sign. The Greek terminology is strong: “There is absolutely no way that this generation will be given more evidence.”

The appearance of the word “generation” is rather biting, and Jesus would refer to this again later in the final days of his ministry. In Matthew 16:4, a parallel passage, Jesus referred to them as “an evil and adulterous generation.” In fact, their generation was little different from a previous generation with hardened hearts: the wilderness generation before entrance to the Promised Land.

You will recall that the Jews had plenty of evidence that made trust in God the only legitimate response. Yet despite of God’s word, and despite his many miracles substantiating his word, they had a history of unbelief (see Exodus 17:2; Deuteronomy 32:5; Numbers 14:10–23; Psalm 95:8–11).

Is it any wonder that Jesus caustically referred to them with the pejorative phrase “this generation”? They were just like that generation so long ago. Later, Peter would warn Jews at Pentecost to “save yourselves from this crooked generation” (Acts 2:40) That is, save yourselves from this condemned, though religious, generation.

The generation to which Jesus appeared was so blessed with the incarnation, and yet they chose crucifixion. The generation blessed with the Light of the world chose darkness. The generation blessed with the offer of salvation chose condemnation.

A recurring theme in the New Testament (which also often in the Old Testament) is the opposition to God and his purposes that arises from the religious, even from those who claim to be orthodox. For example, as becomes clear to anyone studying the New Testament, it was not Rome that presented the most opposition to the church but Jerusalem—not the Romans but the Jews.

As we saw recently, the Jews, and not the Romans, were the most culpable in the crucifixion of Jesus. For this reason, God destroyed Jerusalem decades later.

Sadly, when it comes to God and the gospel, it is often those who are the closest who are the furthest away. It is often those at the table who are the least hospitable (Psalm 41:9). It is often those of the household who are the haters. This was clearly the case here in Dalmanutha. How would Jesus respond? By abandoning them.

Abandoned by Ship

Verse 13 reminds us of 7:24, where Jesus also left by sea. As we saw then, Jesus does not stay forever where he is not wanted, so “he left them, got in the boat again, and went to the other side.” Galilee, a region that sat in darkness and had yet seen a great light, would suffer another spiritual eclipse. Jesus was gone. France puts it like this: “Those who have not yet been convinced of his message will not now be offered any further incentive to believe.”

Friend, be careful how you respond to the message of Jesus. If you want more evidence than his authoritative word, you will die without a Saviour. Bertrand Russell famously said that, if his atheism was proven wrong at Judgement Day, he would demand to know why God did not provide more evidence. Unfortunately, unless he had a deathbed conversion, Mr. Russell will find himself silent before God's judgement bar.

Church, be careful how you respond to the words of God. There may be hell to pay. After all, judgement begins at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17).

Before proceeding, let it be noted that the disciples got into the boat with Jesus. They were leaving the comfort zone of their homeland; they were identifying with Jesus in his rejection of the Pharisees. Eduard Schweizer helpfully observes that "faith comes when one steps into the boat with Jesus and does not prefer to remain in safety on the shore."

Sometimes the congregation is called upon to cut off the hardened. The doctrine of church discipline makes this clear. It is hard, but necessary when the hard-hearted refuse the soft heart of repentance.

Sometimes individual Christians need to cut off relationships because the hard-hearted and their hatefulness is tending to harden their own heart. As Solomon teaches us, hanging around the foolish will make you foolish (Proverbs 13:20).

But as commendable as the disciples' loyalty appears, "disbelief is also fermenting among the disciples in the boat" (Edwards).

As we will see, while it is righteous to sometimes cut off the hardened, we need to examine our own hearts as well. After all, no Christian's heart is fully soft.

Usually, Correct the Hardened

The third appropriate response to the hardened is, usually, to correct them:

Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

(Mark 8:14–22)

With the words “they had forgotten to bring bread and they had one loaf with them in the boat,” Mark is making a connection with all that has happened before in this chapter. It is an important link if we will understand this matter of the hardness of heart.

As the disciples crossed the lake with Jesus, he used the time to teach. He warned them to stay away from the influence (“leaven”) of the Pharisees and of Herod. Both had wrong views about Messiah. Both rejected God’s word and wanted a Messiah that they could domesticate, whom they could use for their own purposes. Jesus’ refusal to be so controlled would lead to the joining of these and other disparate forces in condemning Jesus to death (v. 31).

The disciples didn’t grasp this. Rather, they were too concerned with bread. They were thinking materially rather than spiritually. I’m not sure exactly what they were thinking, but clearly they weren’t listening. As France comments, “To them, unlike the Pharisees, [signs] have been given in abundance, but they have not yet profited from them.” Clearly, they just didn’t get it!

Jesus would have been disappointed earlier at the response of the disciples when he raised the issue of a hungry multitude and they responded with gross unbelief. This would have added to his disappointment. They seemed as hardened as the Pharisees (v. 17). Would he also cut them off? Thankfully, no. But he did ask them some very hard questions, which would eventually produce a softening of hearts.

Jesus fired off nine questions at them with a view to softening their hearts. Rather than cutting them off, Jesus confronted them to correct them. He would not give up on his disciples. He had patiently worked with them and would continue to do so. In the end, they would get it.

The most pointed and perhaps painful of the questions was, “Are your hearts hardened?” (v. 17).

In our day, this is a provocative question, particularly in a society governed by political correctness. It can also be a rather provocative question among Christians who have erroneous ideas concerning the niceness of Christianity. But of course, Jesus wasn’t concerned about either of those expectations. Rather, he was concerned about the honour of God and the souls of his people. Therefore, he was willing to ask the hard questions and to say the hard things. And it is imperative that each of us hear this question. It is imperative that we correctly answer the question. It is imperative that we not harden our hearts. And, if your heart is hardened, you must plead with God to soften it today.

If your heart is hardened, let it be softened by the gospel.

Confronting the Hardened

Mark 8:1–21

Doug Van Meter

By God's grace our hearts can be softened to confess our deepest hunger, not for food but for forgiveness. By God's grace our hearts can be opened to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, who died to forgive us and to reconcile us to God. By God's grace our hearts can be softened to repent of our sins and to trust in Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead to make us forever right with God.

By God's grace our hearts can be softened to make this wise response. Ask God today for a softened heart.

Christian, the same conclusion applies to us. Has your heart become hardened? Are you consumed with physical bread rather than with the Bread of Life, the Lord Jesus Christ? Then repent and express your repentance by asking God for a softened heart towards Jesus and his gospel.

In other words, don't stay on the shore with the hardened. Rather get in the boat with Jesus and his disciples and experience the gracious softening you so desperately need. As Mark makes clear to his readers, God has a wonderful history of showing grace to those who were once hardened.

There are great lessons here for us.

First, soft hearts require that we not focus on the material. Though we need to beware of Gnosticism/dualism, nevertheless we also need to beware of being distracted by the physical. Rather, we must "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:24–33).

Second, don't write off those who don't get it but are still in the boat with Jesus. Work patiently with them. They may be your children, or a lost loved one, or a neighbour, or a work mate, or a friend. If they are committedly in the boat, row with them.

Third, don't be intimidated from the need to sometimes say the hard thing.

Finally, don't give up hope for others, or for yourself. Those who are God's sheep, will eventually understand. If you are one of his sheep, you have a long way to go, yet Jesus will confront and correct until we get it (Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24). It might be painful at times, but it will be fruitful (Hebrews 12:3–11). See what follows. And see the end of the book!

AMEN