

23. Hardened hearts and stiff necks

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Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva, a.k.a. FOP is a very rare inherited connective tissue disorder characterized by the abnormal development of bone in areas of the body where bone is not normally present, such as the ligaments, tendons and muscles. The abnormal development of bone may lead to stiffness in affected areas and may also limit movement in affected joints, like knees, wrists, shoulders, spine and neck. FOP usually begins during early childhood and progresses throughout life. Most cases of FOP occur randomly. However, researchers believe that the defective gene(s) responsible for this disorder may be inherited as a genetic trait.

This FOP disease makes a human body stiff as board and traps a person inside of his or her own stiffened body like a prisoner. The patient gets to have a stiff neck, bend spine, fixed elbows and knees in 90 degrees. The patient becomes bed bound.

As tragic as this physical disease, we find another tragic disease many people have in the Bible. This disease doesn't harden their bodies, but their hearts. It may not stiffen one's neck physically, but stiffen the will against God. We all have been caught in this disease a few times and some of you might be still in it. We often stiffen our will against God's, as if we can fight against Him.

What is so mind boggling about this is that these Hebrew people had the first hand experience in the front row seats of God's majestic miracle gallery. Within a year period, they saw more miracles than other could in their lifetime:

- 1) God used one miracle after another to destroy the will and strength of the Pharaoh and the Egyptians.
- 2) The Israelites themselves walked across the bottom of the Red Sea in between the walls of sea water.
- 3) When the Egyptian army came after them, the same walls of sea water stood up for the Israelites came down upon these idol worshipping soldiers and there was not one survivor.
- 4) When their mouths were parched because of no water in the desert of Sinai, God graciously provided them fresh water coming out of the Rock.
- 5) When they were hungry, God sent them food from heaven and brought quails from the sea.
- 6) Then God came from the heaven and made His presence known to them on the top of the Mount Sinai and spoke to them.

It is my earnest desire and prayer that all of us learn from these Israelites' sin that may we never harden our hearts and stiffen our necks against God.

A. BACK TO THE IDOL WORSHIP

Exodus 32:1-6 Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." 2 And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." 3 So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. 4 And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then

they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" 5 So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord." 6 Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

While Moses was on the Mount Sinai to hear from the Lord, the children of Israelites were panicking. Fear spreaded throughout the camp like a contaminating disease. They started to come up with their own decisions what needed to be done in the wilderness.

Moses was gone for forty days. This probably seemed like a long time to the people. How we handle God's ordained delays is a good measure of our spiritual maturity. If we allow such delays to make us drift off into sin, then we react poorly to His ordained delays. If we allow such times to deepen our perseverance in following God, then they help us to grow in Christ.

Romans 5:3-5 And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

At least three times during the months at Sinai, the Jewish people had promised to obey whatever God told them to do. The Lord knew that it wasn't in their hearts to keep their promises, and the tragedy of the golden calf proved Him right.

Even though they had promised to obey God's Law, but in making a golden calf and indulging in a sensual celebration, the nation broke the first, second, and seventh commandments.

1st You shall have no other gods before Me. – Exodus 20:3

2nd You shall not make for yourself a carved image – Exodus 20:4

7th You shall not commit adultery. – Exodus 20:14

B. THE STIFF NECK PEOPLE

Exodus 32:7-14 And the Lord said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. 8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!' " 9 And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! 10 Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation." 11 Then Moses pleaded with the Lord his God, and said: "Lord, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, 'He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.' " 14 So the Lord relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people.

It was not their fear troubled God. It was the response to their fear trouble Him. Just like FOP spreads out in a human body because of overreacting bone genes, these people's hardened hearts were also spread because of the overreacting response to fear. God had proven to them His faithfulness and loyalty day after day with one miracle after another. Somehow God couldn't penetrate their hardened hearts.

Three thousand years later, we would laugh at these Israelites. Even though we wouldn't worship a farm animal, some of us have a tendency to make a pledge to serve other idols, such as alcohol, money, jobs, spouse and you fill the blank.

God blesses us with one blessing after another. He has the sun to rise every morning, keeps our hearts beat regularly, allows us to live in this great country. Yet when a sudden problem comes, fear arrests us and we tend to run to everything else except God. In other words, we start to make our modern day golden calf to worship instead of the one true God. That is the hardened heart and stiff neck God hates.

Hard hearted and stiff necked people, according to the Bible, are hopelessly confused. Their closed mind is full of darkness. They shut their minds and harden them against God's grace, mercy and love. They don't care about right or wrong. They don't care about honoring God with their lives. They wouldn't hesitate for one second when it comes to sinning against God. But at the same time, these people would think that God would forgive their sins no matter what. Yes, He would forgive us our sins, but we have to face the consequences of our sins.

Do you know that hardened heart and stiff neck not only ruin the individual's life but also ruin the family's life? According to Jesus, in Matthew 19, hardened heart doesn't mind to destroy the marriage with divorce that God joined them together. Stiff neck doesn't turn to God when the marriage is going through difficulty, rather it turns to a golden calf – in this case, jumping out of the marriage.

Do we only have hardened heart and stiff neck in marriage? No, many turn their hearts against God spiritually. These people don't know whether they are going to heaven or not. They are spiritually starving and blind. They are utterly lost. They might even have some religious background, but without Jesus which translates that they are going to be ended up in hell when they die. They are confused. Their marriages are in shamble. Their lives are falling apart. Then here comes God and He offers them His help. Do you know what do they do? They run away, they reject His loving hand with their hardened hearts.

Why? Is it your pride that gets in the way to God? If so, that means you have a hardened heart and stiff neck against God.

Oh my friends, let's keep our hearts tender toward God.

C. GOD DOESN'T CHANGE HIS MIND

In v14, we read, "So the Lord relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people." After Moses appealed to God's mercy and grace to save these miserable Israelites, God chose to spare them.

However, if you have a KJV, this is how it goes:

Exodus 32:14 And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.

Based on this, some believe God sometimes needs to repent of evil, or that God changes His mind. It is helpful to read other translations of this passage:

- *Then the Lord relented* – NIV & NKJV
- *The Lord was moved with compassion to save His people.* – Septuagint Bible

Does it mean that God had to repent because He had an evil thought or change His mind because of our prayers? No, He never has an evil thought, nor He ever changes His mind.

Numbers 32:19 God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?

In other words, it was not a correct translation in KJV's part.

D. MOSES' FIRST INTERCESSION

God deliberately put Moses into the crucial place of intercession, so that Moses would display and develop the heart of God for the people, a heart of love and compassion. Moses prayed just as God wanted him to – as if heaven and earth, salvation or destruction, depended on his prayer. This is how God waits for us to pray.

We are not to think of Moses as altering God's purpose towards Israel by this prayer, but as carrying it out. Moses was never more like God than in such moments, because he shared God's mind and loving purpose. That is what our intercessory prayer does.

E. SO MUCH FOR THE GOLDEN CALF GOD

Exodus 32:15-20 And Moses turned and went down from the mountain, and the two tablets of the Testimony were in his hand. The tablets were written on both sides; on the one side and on the other they were written. 16 Now the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets. 17 And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." 18 But he said: "It is not the noise of the shout of victory, Nor the noise of the cry of defeat, But the sound of singing I hear." 19 So it was, as soon as he came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing. So Moses' anger became hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. 20 Then he took the calf which they had made, burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder; and he scattered it on the water and made the children of Israel drink it.

The breaking of the stone tablets was a symbolic act. Israel had broken the covenant with God and would have to face discipline.

Moses ground up the calf and made the people drink it for three reasons:

- To show that this "god" was nothing and could be destroyed easily
- To completely remove this idol
- To make the people pay an immediate consequence of their sin

F. DEALING WITH SINS IN THE CAMP

Exodus 32:21-29 And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?" 22 So Aaron said, "Do not let the anger of my lord become hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. 23 For they said to me, 'Make us gods that shall go before us; as for this

Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' 24 And I said to them, 'Whoever has any gold, let them break it off.' So they gave it to me, and I cast it into the fire, and this calf came out." 25 Now when Moses saw that the people were unrestrained (for Aaron had not restrained them, to their shame among their enemies), 26 then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, "Whoever is on the Lord's side--come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. 27 And he said to them, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.' " 28 So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day. 29 Then Moses said, "Consecrate yourselves today to the Lord, that He may bestow on you a blessing this day, for every man has opposed his son and his brother."

Before he dealt with the people, Moses confronted Aaron, because the privilege of leadership brings with it both responsibility and accountability.

We need to remember that an excuse was the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie. Aaron gave the classic "it just happened" excuse. But it didn't just happen. His feeble excuses didn't convince Moses.

There is no greater danger than for people to cast off all restraint and do whatever seems right in their own eyes. I am sure that you have noticed that nowadays everything and anything is a "GO." From injustice in the courtrooms to adultery of people's inner rooms, from the Capital Hills to back of the streets, everybody is doing whatever please them.

Proverbs 14:12 There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death.

God still asks us if we would stand with Him. Those who stand with this world will perish with this world. But those who choose to stand with the Lord in spite of unpopularity, will have eternal life in heaven.

G. MOSES' SECOND INTERCESSION

Exodus 32:30-35 Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. So now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." 31 Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! 32 Yet now, if You will forgive their sin--but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written." 33 And the Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book. 34 Now therefore, go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you. Behold, My Angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit for punishment, I will visit punishment upon them for their sin." 35 So the Lord plagued the people because of what they did with the calf which Aaron made.

Moses did not minimize the sin of the people or put it in soft terms. They were guilty of worshipping a god of gold. Moses knew the enormity of the people's sin, yet he still asked for forgiveness. This was an appeal to the mercy and grace of God.

Moses asked God to forgive Israel on the basis of his own sacrificial identification with the sinful people. If God would not forgive, Moses asked to be damned in sacrificial identification with his sinful people. Of course, this sacrificial heart was the same heart Jesus had in dying for our sins.

John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

When a person dies, his or her name is removed from the book of life. The book of life should not be confused with the Lamb's Book of Life, which records the names of the saved.

Psalms 69:28 Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, And not be written with the righteous.

H. APPLICATIONS

1) Let's make sure we remember what God has done for us.

Ingratitude hardens our heart to God. But gratitude keeps us tender toward Him. The Israelites forgot what God had done for them in the wilderness. Consequently, when they faced fear, they didn't face God. Our short memory about God's faithfulness leads us to hardened hearts and spiritual amnesia leads us to stiff necks. Write your burdens in the sand, but blessings on the stone.

2) Let's acknowledge what we have done against God.

1John 1:10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

Hardened heart and stiff necked people are quick to point their fingers to someone else for their sins and always have excuses rather than admitting their sins.

A tender hearted person is quick to ask for forgiveness, quick to accept God's correction, quick to get out of the problem with God's help and quick to give his or her heart to God.

3) Let's come to God and give our problems to Him.

We don't want to have a hard heart or stiff neck, because we are the ones who are going to be miserable, not anyone else.