

Are We Getting it Yet?

Many years ago I did a first aid course and one of the things we were taught was the different levels of consciousness a person can be in. On the one extreme is death. Next to death is someone in a sustained coma. Less serious is temporary unconsciousness. More responsive even than this is a person in a stupor – who is awake but not fully conscious of his or her surroundings. Less serious than this is someone who is drowsy, but understands their surroundings. And then you have a person fully conscious, fully aware of what is going on.

Let's consider these same physical states on the spiritual level. There are some who are spiritually dead – they do not respond to God at all, have no desire for His life, because according to Ephesians 2 – they are spiritually dead.

Then there are Christians who are alive, but seem to exist in varying degrees of spiritual awareness. Some seem to be in a coma – almost no concept of love for God, no perception of spiritual realities, no relish for God.

Some seem to be in a stupor – they are awake, but not fully aware. They cannot see spiritual realities – what they are doing to their souls, what they are doing to their families, what they are doing to their eternity. They live awake in the physical world, but spiritually, they are numb, half there, half not. The preaching of the Word always seems 'out of touch' to the Christian in a stupor, because he is in fact out of touch with spiritual realities.

And there are some Christians who seem to be spiritually drowsy – they are sluggish to believe, slow to react to God's Word; a heaviness comes over their spiritual eyes.

The Bible has a way of describing this differing level of spiritual awareness – or being awake to the things of God. It describes it as hardness of heart, or dullness of heart. The harder the heart, the less responsive we are to spiritual realities. The softer the heart, the more aware we are of spiritual realities.

Now, no man can do well in the physical realm in a coma or a stupor or even permanently drowsy. And no person can live in a universe created by God and do well if spiritually they are drowsy or in a stupor or unconscious. *How do we get from being spiritually dull to being spiritually sharp?*

This miracle of the feeding of the 4000, compared to the feeding of the 5000, gives us the answer.

This miracle is different enough for us to know it is no mistaken repetition of the previous miracle. Here there are 4000 men fed, earlier there were 5000. Here they are in Decapolis, earlier they were in Galilee. Here they have seven loaves and a few fish; in feeding the 5000 they had five loaves and two fish. After feeding the 4000 there are 7 baskets left over; in the earlier miracle there were 12 baskets left over. In that miracle the crowd had been with him for one day; here they had been with him for three days. After this miracle no one tried to make Him king whereas earlier they had, probably since the 5000 were mainly Jews; here they were mainly Gentiles.

So we know it is not an error by Matthew and Mark. But at the same time the miracles are similar enough to make us ask, 'What's going on?' A great multitude has followed him. They are faint; it will be cruel to send them away. Jesus wants to feed them; the disciples ask where they can get food for such a great crowd. Jesus asks what food they have, they bring it, He

blesses it, the disciples distribute it, and everyone is fed with food left over. So it is different, yet it is the same.

Now consider who is present at this scene that is seeing this thing again? Not the 4000 - this is the first time they are experiencing this. Jesus Himself does not need to learn; He knows why He is doing what He is doing. So who does that leave? It leaves the disciples. They were there at the earlier miracle, and they are here at this one.

Clearly Jesus is seeking to teach them something - something which they are not seeing, something which, because of the hardness of their hearts, they do not understand.

Anytime you keep coming back to the same lesson – you need to ask, ‘What am I not getting here?’ You keep coming back to the situation with the unreasonable manager, or the job that keeps falling through, or the same frustration in the marriage, or the same sin which doesn’t seem to get fixed. And if you find God seems to be repeating Himself, you need to ask, ‘What didn’t I get the first time? What didn’t I get the second time?’

The disciples had hard hearts. They were not as hard as that of the Pharisees, or that of the unbelieving people, but they were still hard. There are levels of hardness and consequence receptivity. And it all unfolds a little while after the miracle.

The Pharisees have asked Jesus for a sign, and Jesus rejects their request. In the boat, disturbed by the unbelief of the Pharisees, Jesus says to the disciples, ‘Beware the leaven of the Pharisees.’

Now I’m not certain what the disciples thought He meant, but they concluded He was rebuking them for not having bread. They didn’t understand what Jesus meant. They had ears – they heard what He said; they had eyes - they had seen what He had done; but they missed the meaning.

To this carnal focus, Jesus rebukes them with nine questions. The bottom line is - Jesus expects them to have learned something which they haven’t. He repeated the lesson for them, and their response in the boat shows they still haven’t got it. And it reveals the condition of their heart – *hard heartedness*.

I want us to see the cause of the hard heart, and the cure.

The hard heart does not seek understanding.

Mark 8:16-21 *And they reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have no bread.¹⁷ And when Jesus knew it, he saith unto them, Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your heart yet hardened?¹⁸ Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember?¹⁹ When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? They say unto him, Twelve.²⁰ And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? And they said, Seven.²¹ And he said unto them, How is it that ye do not understand?*

Jesus describes them this way: ‘Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened? Having eyes – do you not see, and having ears, do you not hear?’

Consider what Jesus is saying. What they were supposed to know was plainly observable. If they used their eyes for seeing, they would see it. If they used their ears for hearing, they

would hear it. Nothing is hidden here, it is only hidden in the way a man in a stupor cannot recognise all the objects in a room.

With Jesus in front of them, seeing and hearing Him, they did not see and hear the meaning. In other words, they are observing, but they are not applying their hearts to *understand* what they are seeing. They are being dull, lazy, sluggish with the senses of their heart, to not look into what they are seeing and hearing,

The meaning was: 'If Jesus can feed 5000 with 5 loaves, and 4000 with seven loaves, can He not feed 12 with one loaf? If the crowd following Him was fed by Jesus for their faithfulness, would there be any doubt as to His disciples?' So if they had used their eyes to see the meaning, and used their ears to hear, they would have seen the truth, and concluded – 'Jesus can't be speaking about physical bread. He must mean the false teaching of the Pharisees.' But their lack of desire to know the spiritual meaning of things led them to only think about the here and now, the everyday – what was in front of them.

But the tone of Jesus words suggests they had not used their eyes and ears to look into what was there. Like there is a camel in the room and you say to someone, 'Did you see the camel?' And they say, 'No'. You will say, 'How could you not see it?' Jesus is saying, 'If you only looked and heard with a view to understanding it would be so completely plain to you.'

We see an example of this in **Romans 1** – the creation speaks. Seeing and hearing reveals a plain truth.

Romans 1:20-21 *For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: ²¹ Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened*

I often thought about the simplicity of that statement, 'He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.' The idea there is – use your ears to not simply pick up sounds, but to understand.

And therein lies our problem, and the answer to how we correct it: Dull, hard hearts see, but do not understand. We hear, but do not understand.

A baby sees a sign saying, 'Do not touch,' but does not understand it. An Eskimo might hear an announcer say in English, 'Please evacuate the building,' but not understand. That's not their fault. But when someone is responsible is when they could understand, but do not choose to.

You see, it is very possible to listen to something without seeking understanding. You can listen to a maths teacher for a whole half hour and come out with no understanding of the arithmetic. You can watch a person demonstrate safety procedures on an aeroplane and have no understanding of what to do in an emergency. Everyday we see and hear things, but taking in information is not the same thing as seeking understanding.

Christian, do you seek to understand the things of God, or just hear about them? Being at church, do you listen to a sermon for information, or to gain understanding? There are Christians who like knowledge, but are not seeking understanding.

Many Christians think that it is enough to stock up on some information, to gain a bit of knowledge every week – they kind of like the good in it - to get some exercise in every week.

But to see or hear and not seek understanding is to remain dull, like these disciples.

Have you ever noticed how you can tune out sounds? We are able to tune out the real meaning and implication of God's truth.

A person seeking understanding is saying, 'How do I live this Christian life? How am I supposed to worship God? How do I please God in my parenting? How do I overcome a sin in my life? How do I use my finances for God's glory? What is God doing in my life right now? What does God want from me now? What is my ministry in this local church?' And they seek understanding, so their eyes and ears are used, not to passively take in information, but because they seek understanding.

Proverbs 2:1-5 *My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee;² So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; ³ Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding;⁴ If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures;⁵ Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God.*

Here is the trinity of knowledge, wisdom and understanding. Knowledge is the facts. Wisdom is how to use those facts in relation to each other. Understanding is what results.

2 Tim 2:7 Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things.

Seeking understanding is the difference between a man who studies a book on mechanics because he has to write an exam the next day, and a man who does so because his car is broken. Knowledge for its own sake puffs up. Knowledge used skilfully becomes understanding – which is awareness of what is.

Some Christians complain of getting nothing out of reading the Bible, but on close examination they will find they are not seeking understanding; they are seeking to calm their conscience, to get an emotion, to get a kind of good luck for the day, to get some thoughts, to just accumulate more knowledge. How many are saying, 'What does it mean? What is God saying?'

Don't be content to not understand.

Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables – and it seems they were content to hear them, not inquire as to the meaning and go their way. The disciples at least confessed their ignorance and asked Him, 'What does it mean?'

Don't be content to just get by with surface level meanings. Whether it is at church, or at home, or at work or school, or as you run your errands, recognise that God is always seeking to teach you. Don't be a person who when Jesus says, 'Leaven of the Pharisees,' you think only about physical provision.

Jesus often spoke in metaphors, and people often missed what He was saying. For example when Jesus spoke of the temple of His body; of living water with Samaritan woman; rebirth with Nicodemus; of eating His flesh; when He described Lazarus as sleeping.

God is seeking to reveal Himself, His ways, His nature. Be a contemplative person that sees the two-sidedness of things. Shallow Christians are content with surface meanings. The heart that God blesses with more illumination searches into what things mean.

Eph 5:14-17 *Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light. See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.*

The hard heart does not reflect on what God has done.

Mar 8:18 *Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember?*

What should they have remembered? God had already worked in the feeding of the 5000. Now He repeated it in the feeding of the 4000. Had they remembered, how would it have affected their hearts? Here they are in a boat with one loaf and just the few of them – what should memory have served to do?

Throughout the Bible God told His people to remember, not to forget. He instituted weekly Sabbaths, feasts like Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, to remind Israel. The daily and monthly sacrifices were a reminder. The Law being read out was a reminder. In fact, the whole book of Deuteronomy is a repeat of the Law. God instructed the kings of Israel to write out a copy of the law for their own use.

Israel began to complain shortly after the parting of the Red Sea.

Psalms 78:11 *And forgot His works And His wonders that He had shown them.*

Remembering what God has done in the past produces faith in the present. Past grace makes us expectant for future grace.

Sometimes we have already learnt a lesson, but we quickly forget it unless we are reminded of it.

We have very short spiritual memories. And a lack of recall makes us dull, spiritually unaware.

To illustrate - a man with amnesia cannot really understand the world around him, because it is memory which helps him recognise, categorise and respond to things. When his memory is not with him, things are confusing, complicated and chaotic.

It is our knowledge of what God has done in the past which helps us see and respond to God in the present. Whenever God's people recalled God's works, it inflamed their hearts, softened their hearts, and made them rejoice in God. Some of the longest Psalms of praise are reminders of what God has done.

One of the terrible things about our modern culture is that it obsesses about the new and the now. If something is new – it is better – ‘new and improved’; ‘novelty and innovation.’ If your software is two years old, it is inferior.

Not only must everything be new, we must have it now. Get it now at this store. Don't wait – call now, have it delivered to you. No delay, no fuss. Myriads of time-saving devices testify to the fact that we want everything now. And if you grow up in a culture that lives for the new and the now, it does not teach you to reflect on what God has done - to reflect not only on what God has done for you, but on what God has done for His people through the ages.

Read the Word to see what God has done. Read through the Bible. Don't let the accounts of God's work with His people be foreign to you.

Reflect privately on how God has worked in your life. Use your devotional time to sometimes think on what God is doing in your life. Devote portions of your prayer to thanksgiving. As you begin to thank the Lord, you start to see more and more evidences of God's works, and this only opens and softens your heart.

Report to other believers what God has done and is doing. A time of testimony in Church is excellent for this - to tell others, and to hear what God is doing. This reinforces the lessons God has already taught us. It sharpens us – **Proverbs 27:17** *Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.*

Partake in the Lord's Supper if you are a baptised believer. Here you are reminded again of the Supreme Act of God towards you – Christ dying on the cross.

If you are the sort of person who considers the acts of God in the past, and who continually seeks understanding of what God is saying and doing in your present, what kind of heart will you have? Not a dull, sluggish one. You will have a heart exercised to hear and see what is really there.