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THE HEART OF THE MATTER

*It is a wonder what
God can do with a broken heart,
if He gets all the pieces.*

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SAMUEL CHADWICK

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If you were to meet Wayne and Gwyn Stanford today, you would find a tenderhearted, warm, compassionate, humble couple. If you conversed with them for any length of time, they would undoubtedly tell you something fresh that God was teaching them or doing in their lives.

It wasn't always that way. When I first met this couple more than twenty years ago, they were in their early fifties. By the world's standards, they had it made. Wayne was a successful businessman; he and Gwyn had a lovely home in the Midwest and a vacation home in Florida. They were respected leaders in their community and were active in their local church and their denomination. But, as they later said publicly, they were both afflicted with a deadly

heart condition that they didn't realize they had—a malady known as *pride*.

Today they are able to see what they were blind to at the time. Gwyn admits,

I was proud of my reputation and my position. I was known at the country club where I was an officer, known among the elite of the community, and known as a leader at my church. I was at the church every time the doors were open. It was important to me to have everyone notice me and what I was doing. I was extremely self-righteous and thought I was more spiritual than others. Others had needs, but not Gwyn Stanford. Others needed revival, but not I!

Though they both appeared to be spiritually prosperous, the truth was that their hearts were hollow, hard, and spiritually starved. “Right in the middle of religion, I was so very far away from God,” Gwyn says with regret.

Though Wayne was oblivious to his own spiritual need, it was readily apparent to those around him. His pastor at the time remembers the Wayne Stanford of those days as “a cold, calculating, highly opinionated man. He almost demanded that I follow his ideas for leading the church. He was extremely judgmental and critical. Our attempted fellowships

together generally ended in frustrated anger. There was a deep chasm between us.”

Gwyn’s heart condition manifested itself in more subtle ways:

I was unteachable; although I was a leader, I wasn’t in the Word; I lived, acted, and operated based on the world’s way of thinking. I didn’t know what it meant to be honest, open, and transparent before God and others. The one thing I did know was how to play church—I knew how to pretend.

Wayne and Gwyn might well have lived the rest of their lives in that condition—spiritually deceived, hardened, and unusable—had not the Lord graciously intervened to show them their need and rescue them from their pride.

In 1982 I was part of a team that was invited to minister in Wayne and Gwyn’s church for a concentrated two-week period of seeking the Lord.¹ During that time, church members were challenged to face the reality of their spiritual condition. The Stanfords’ lives would never be the same again as a result of that honest look.

The second Sunday morning of that series of meetings is indelibly etched on Wayne’s mind. The message was based on the Old Testament story of Naaman (2 Kings 5). As the respected, capable commander

in chief of the Syrian army, Naaman appeared to have it all together—except for the fact that he had leprosy. Naaman wanted to be healed, but not at the expense of his pride. Wayne was stopped short as he saw himself in this proud general:

He did what I probably would have done: he loaded up six thousand shekels of gold and ten talents of silver, and he went down to buy his way out of his problem. Right in the middle of that message, God said to me, *You're just like Naaman! You've got spiritual leprosy and you need to be healed. You can be restored, but you're going to have to do it My way.*

That morning, in the middle of the service, Wayne made his way to a room that had been designated for those who needed prayer—that in itself was a big step of humility, as he had previously determined he would not go to that room. As he arrived at the prayer room, this respected leader fell on his knees and cried out to God to have mercy on him; he confessed his sin of pride and pretense, and surrendered himself to do whatever God wanted him to do.

That same week, Gwyn attended a special prayer meeting for the women of the church. It was there that she had a life-changing encounter with God. That morning the leader spoke three words that

penetrated her heart: “God is alive!” That simple phrase wakened her from her spiritual sleep and transformed her life. She remembers thinking, *Gwyn, you’re living as if God is dead*. For the first time, she saw herself as God saw her—and it wasn’t the Gwyn who had it all put together. She saw herself as sinful and desperately needy of His grace.

The conviction of God’s Spirit was intense. For the first time in her life, she responded to that conviction in humility. In fact, she realized that, in spite of her religious appearance and activity, she had never been truly born again. She cried out to God to save her and received assurance that He had given her a new, clean heart.

ISSUES OF THE HEART

What took place in Wayne’s and Gwyn’s lives more than two decades ago was nothing short of major heart surgery. In Gwyn’s case, she had been deceived for years into believing that she was a child of God, simply because she was a faithful, active church member. She needed—and received—a heart transplant. In Wayne’s case, his spiritual arteries had become hardened—clogged and crusted over with self, pride, religious works, and “keeping up appearances.”

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah understood that the heart was what mattered to God, and that if

the heart were sick, the whole body would be in trouble. Relentlessly, persistently, he addressed the matter of the heart. There are more than seventy references to the heart in his writings. God gave him discernment to see beyond the impressive, external religious life of His people. Jeremiah penetrated and probed and held the people's hearts up to the light; he pleaded with them to see what God saw.

From all appearances, the Jews—God's chosen people—were deeply religious; but Jeremiah proclaimed that their hearts had turned away from the God who had redeemed them: "This people has a defiant and rebellious *heart*" (5:23, italics added, and so with all references in this chapter).

The Old Testament Jews dutifully performed countless rituals of ceremonial cleansing. But Jeremiah understood that all those physical washings were merely intended to be a picture of purity of heart, so he urged: "O Jerusalem, wash your *heart* from wickedness" (4:14).

Though God had revealed Himself and His law to the His people, their hearts were stubborn and they had become desensitized to His Word: "Each one follows the dictates [walks after the stubbornness; marginal reading NKJV] of his own evil *heart*, so that no one listens to Me" (16:12).

When we open the New Testament, we encounter the Lord Jesus, God's final Prophet, picking up the

same theme that reverberates throughout the pages of the Old Testament. During His earthly ministry, He upset the whole religious system of His day because He refused to be impressed with the things that men esteem most highly and insisted on exposing the hearts of people as what really mattered.



IF THEIR *HEARTS*
WEREN'T RIGHT,
THEY WEREN'T
RIGHT.

He looked the most religious men of His day in the face and confronted them with the fact that they were obsessed with putting on a good appearance and a good performance, while their hearts were empty and corrupt:

*Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying:
“These people draw near to Me with their mouth,
And honor Me with their lips,
But their heart is far from Me.
And in vain they worship Me.”*

—Matthew 15:7–9

When the disciples asked Jesus to explain why He had been so hard on the Pharisees, He pointed out that they were fastidious about washing their hands before eating, so as not to become ceremonially defiled, but were oblivious to the corruption of their hearts: “Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness,

blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man” (Matthew 15:19–20).

Over and over again, He kept coming back to the issue of the *heart*. It didn’t matter if they circumcised their bodies and tithed everything they owned, down to their herbs; it didn’t matter if they washed their hands every time they ate and could quote the Law from beginning to end; it didn’t matter if they scrupulously observed every feast day, every fast day, and every Sabbath day; it didn’t matter if everyone else respected them as devout believers—if their hearts weren’t right, *they* weren’t right.

The medical profession stresses the importance of regular physical checkups. Anyone with a family history of heart disease is encouraged to get his cholesterol tested. We don’t assume that because we look fine outwardly, we have nothing to worry about. If our heart is not functioning properly or there is blockage in our arteries, we want to know about the problem so we can do whatever is necessary to deal with the situation. We know that neglecting our physical heart condition could be fatal.

Should we be any less concerned about our spiritual heart condition? The fact is, when it comes to spiritual matters, we all have a family history of “heart disease.” We must be willing to let Him exam-

ine our hearts and diagnose that which we may be unable to see for ourselves.

The good news of the gospel is that the Great Physician has made available a cure for our deceived, diseased hearts. Jesus came to do radical heart surgery—to cleanse and transform us from the inside out, by the power of His death and resurrection. “I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new *heart* and put a new spirit within you; I will take the *heart* of stone out of your flesh and give you a *heart* of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you” (Ezekiel 36:25–27).

A COMPLETE TAKEOVER

The transformation that took place in Wayne and Gwyn Stanfords’ lives when God gave them new, clean hearts was dramatic. As another friend said after having a similar encounter with God, “Revival is not just an emotional touch; it’s a complete takeover!”

Gwyn remembers some of the first evidences that her heart had been changed: “Immediately I became so hungry for His Word that I could hardly wait to get up in the morning to see what He was going to reveal to me. I wanted to spend time with Him. I found myself loving people I’d never loved before.”

In Wayne’s case, when God changed his heart, his

whole demeanor changed. The same pastor who had felt the brunt of Wayne's controlling, critical spirit later wrote: "It is difficult to believe that the Wayne Stanford I first met is the same Spirit-filled, gentle, long-suffering, compassionate, prayer warrior we know today."

God began to deal with Wayne about his business and financial affairs, resulting in a radical change of values. He began to lead his family spiritually—by his example and by his words. As they began to see the reality of Christ in their parents, Wayne and Gwyn's three grown daughters—already professing believers—all came to genuine faith in Christ.

Rather than living for themselves and accumulating things for their own pleasure, Wayne and Gwyn began to look for ways to invest their time and resources to further the kingdom of Christ. A self-centered lifestyle was replaced with a sacrificial lifestyle.

The personal revival Wayne and Gwyn experienced in 1982 was not short-lived. For more than twenty years, they have continued to walk humbly with God and to love and serve Him and others. That initial "breaking point" has become an ongoing process of daily brokenness. Gwyn acknowledges that there have been ups and downs in that process:

I'm not going to tell you that I have it all together. I will tell you that I have needs and struggles. But I'm learning to acknowledge my need to God and others, and to be open, honest, and transparent. My attitude used to be, "I don't need you, but you very much need me." I was willing to help, but I was not willing to unmask and be helped. Now I know that when I humble and unmask myself, then, and only then, can I truly experience God's grace and be victorious and free.

Wayne and Gwyn discovered a secret that delivered them from religion and released them to enjoy the fullness of life in the Spirit—they learned what kind of heart God revives. They learned that God's values are not the same as man's values. They learned that real life, freedom, and joy are not to be found in climbing up the socioeconomic ladder, but in humbling ourselves; not in being self-sufficient, but in acknowledging need. They were willing to take off their religious masks and get real. And when they did, God met them in a way they had never experienced before.

HEART CHECK

What about you? What is the condition of your heart? Could it be that you, like Wayne and Gwyn,

have been going through the motions, playing church, pretending that all is well, when the truth is that you need major heart surgery—perhaps even a heart transplant?

Would you be willing to make an appointment with the Great Physician, place yourself on His table, and ask Him to examine your heart? If so, pray the prayer of the psalmist: “Search me, O God, and know my heart” (Psalm 139:23).

He wants to revive our hearts. However, there is a condition that must be met if our hearts are to be revived. The truth you will read on the following pages may turn your world and your thinking upside down, as it did to those who heard it in the Bible days. At first, God’s way may seem negative, confining, or painful. But, as my friends Wayne and Gwyn discovered, it is actually the pathway to freedom, fullness, victory, fruitfulness, and joy.

NOTE

1. Since 1971 teams from Life Action Ministries have conducted more than a thousand extended revival meetings in local churches. For more information about this ministry or to inquire about scheduling a team in your church, contact Life Action Ministries, P.O. Box 31, Buchanan, MI 49107; 269/697-8600; e-mail: info@lifeaction.org; www.lifeaction.org.