

## **Open Heart Surgery**

**By Bruce Smith**

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How does one know when open heart surgery is required? For most, the need is discovered only as a result of a traumatic event—a heart attack. What we know, both intuitively and scientifically, is that such a traumatic event did not come all at once. On the contrary, a heart attack comes about as a result of a deep rooted problem that has gone unattended or unnoticed for a long time. Often, heart failure occurs as a result of a lifetime of abuse, neglect, improper care, and poor nutrition. Occasionally, as was the case for Pistol Pete Maravich, massive heart failure occurs when an undiagnosed problem has existed for a lifetime. In those instances, only a post-trauma complete medical evaluation unveils what the problem was. In all cases, what we know is that a cause and effect relationship existed and brought about the infirmity to the heart.

I am no doctor and I have never had any formal medical training of any sort (though my grandmother's constant "doctoring" would, in her mind at least, qualify as some sort of informal training). However, I have watched many people close to me suffer with various illnesses including heart disease. Those I have seen struggle with heart issues were smokers, obsessive eaters, non-exercisers, and otherwise generally unhealthy people. Many warnings were given to these people for years forecasting the ultimate outcome of persistent patterns. Doctors, friends and family consistently warned these folks that a day was coming when they would ultimately reap what was being sowed physically. Scientifically speaking there is no debate about the need for individuals to monitor their health habits as it pertains to general health and longevity of life. No one debates, anymore, the risks associated with smoking, obesity, and a lack of exercise. The medical verdict is firmly in place, a lack of attention, and a lack of intentionality with regard to the health of our bodies, results in a breakdown and a loss of vitality. Often, that breakdown is severe even fatal.

This kind of fatality is all too common in our world. People are dying of heart failure at a staggering rate. Even as people are dying as a result of heart disease, many more it would appear, are dying of a broken heart. I witness both edges of this blade inflict severe punishment in my own family a number of years ago. My grandmother on my father's side, after years of smoking, died a horribly slow and suffocating death. Along with many other physical problems, including emphysema, her heart continued to breakdown until she finally lost the battle and her entire system shut down. On the heels of this loss her husband, my grandfather, was diagnosed with a potentially fatal illness. His grief had already been so deep, and his heart so broken by the loss of his wife, that rather than fight the illness and make his best effort to beat it, he chose to end his life with handgun and a bullet to the head. In the end, he died of a broken heart. Sadly, his heart had been "hard" by any account for many years. The way it all ended was merely the logical unfolding of a life given to an improper strategy for life. For all of us wrong ideas leads to wrong choices which leads to bad outcomes which results in a devastated

heart. Sometimes that devastation is physical, and too often it is also spiritual, emotional, and relational.

What does this brief medical discussion have to do with the issues we have been investigating, namely, the love of God and our understanding of love in general? Everything! God's love, redeeming love, fundamentally, is a matter of the heart. The heart I speak of is not that of our physical heart, but the core of who we are. Essentially, God is seeking the transformation and redemption of our heart. Why? Our hearts are not what they ought to be. We have need of a thorough evaluation of our spiritual health. Until and unless we are willing to assess the condition of our hearts we remain open to ongoing heart damage which eventually will result in a full scale attack of our souls. The arteries of our spiritual heart, apart from the intervention of God, and apart from our intentional care, will harden thereby leaving us without the capacity to continue living as we ought. Such a hardening of the heart is the story of our culture. As a people, we have turned a deaf ear to the diagnosis of God about the condition of our souls, and as a result, we have become a people who choose to blind ourselves to the less than promising outlook for our future, personally and globally. We refuse, too often, to acknowledge reality. We want to affirm rules in education, relationships, and business, yet we seem addicted to the idea that spiritual guidelines cannot be absolute. In embracing such a course, we find ourselves misdirected, misinformed, and miserable. We are broken. Our spiritual heart is holding on by a thread. We need an honest diagnosis and a sure cure.

### **Redemption of a broken heart**

When we see ourselves as we truly are and see God for who He is, we enter the journey of transformation. The transformation is one that reveals much about us in order that drastic change might take place. This change which God initiates is, metaphorically, open heart surgery. This is at once sobering news, and at the same time, the most exciting news we could receive. This reality is akin to going in for an annual checkup and having your doctor make you aware of a potential problem. His sobering advice is for you to take certain measures that, once taken, will lead to greater health than you have ever experienced. The bad news, the real news, is that your habits (which are merely actions that grow out of who you *are*) have gotten you to this place of concern. The good news is that change can take place. This change, once in place, has the potential to renew you in ways you never would have dreamed.

I have previously written about two pieces of artwork which hang on the walls of my dining room. The third piece I would like to make you aware of is, like the others, part of the Love Suite. Like the two previous pieces I have written about, this third piece focuses on the monkish journeyman who is clearly in need of a deeper understanding of love in general and the nature of redeeming love in particular. In this third piece the figure is shown, close-up, sitting upon a precipice with legs dangling over the side, in deep thought. It is clear that a number of things are at play in the mind of this pilgrim. First of all, the figure seems to be fatigued. This is why no movement occurs in the piece. Second, the seeker is obviously in deep thought. Third, this tired and battle-

wounded traveler is apparently done looking for answers along the road of life. Lastly, it appears that this lonesome figure has finally come to a place where a bigger reality can come to bear on the issues of life and love. This is clear in that just as the journey has come to a halt, a huge heart looms behind this frozen figure, seemingly presented as a cure to fatigue, weariness, cynicism, hopelessness, and hardness of heart. The heart in this picture, in contrast to the heart of the wounded thinker, appears to be full of life, and appears ready to impart something to this one who so desperately needs a new outlook on life.

I humbly submit that this third piece of art represents each of us and our journey in life. At some point we all come to a similar place along the roads we travel. Each of us face events in our lives which leave us emotionally battered, fatigued, and ready to just quit, just like my grandfather. These are the moments of transcendence intended to urge us to consider what all of this is really about. None of us can escape the reality that if this is all there is then it pretty well “sucks”, to use a crude phrase. Eventually, we are all called to consider the big “What if?” What if this really is not all there is and something much bigger is out there? What if God does exist and He can actually be known? What if the ways I have gone about doing life really have contributed to my disease of the heart? What if my own choices, a by-product of who I am, have led to my spiritual, relational, and emotional dissolution? What if God’s love is pure, forgiving, restoring, and life-giving? What if I stop trying to pretend I am the measure of all things and trust God to work out the plans for my life? What if the hardness and callousness of my heart is keeping me from opening myself up to a new way of living and a new future of promise? What if?

This answer to such “What if?” questions lies in our ability or inability to genuinely open ourselves up to God’s activity in our lives. He is seeking to redeem (repurchase, buy back, release from distress, atone for, restore) our hearts and lives from our present reality. The word redemption is so crucial to the story of our lives because without something (that something being our lives) being rescued or bought back we are destined to live the life of the lost angel. But how is it that we are in need of being released from distress? What is the nature of this atonement?

What should be abundantly clear from even a cursory evaluation of humanity on a daily basis, let alone historically, is that something is amiss. We, as a human tribe, are clearly bent on cruelty, revenge, selfishness, power, murder, dark cravings, and so many other “illnesses of the heart”. What else explains the murderous rampages of dictators, the actions of abusive mothers and fathers, the self-serving greedy behavior of powerful and deceptive business leaders, the illicit affairs of married men and women, and on and on? In a world where we crave the ability to determine on our own what is right and wrong, we all clearly hold to some standard even if its one that we draw up in our own minds. The call to embrace all things as being neutral and all truth as being conditional clearly does not work in the real world.

This is obvious when we are honest. Real estate transactions cannot be legitimized without contractual standards, degrees cannot be obtained without certain measures being overcome, science proceeds by laws, families live or die according to

boundaries being maintained, civil society is maintained by adherence to laws and the bearing of penalty where and when those laws are broken, and speech makes sense only when something real is being said. Languages, as a form of intelligence, can and do make sense only so far as a standard for such communication is in place.

Behind all of life we have to recognize design in order to function. The existence of design speaks of a designer. Our freedom then, the rescue we need, is in essence, a freedom from the stance that our ideas are sufficient for the outworking of our lives. What must be bought back or redeemed is that which is within us compelling us to make ourselves the measure of all things. With six billion varying truth standards on the planet, is it any wonder why our world is such a dangerous place? This is the original issue, sin, revealed in the beginning with Adam and Eve. “Did God really say...?” We are still asking the same question today. Does God really mean we are literally dead in our sins? Is a hard heart truly a problem? Can we not harden our hearts for protection measures and still live healthy lives? Is it truly vital that we view Jesus as the only way to God? In the hardness of our hearts we remain bent on creating a way beyond *the way* offered to us. And because we remain committed to our own way, we wind up emotionally, spiritually, and relationally spent, stranded as it were on the road of life, wondering if we should just jump, give up, or merely harden our hearts (which is another form of death). There are many clues that we are broken. We must be open to acknowledging them. Like the heart patient who has neglected reality for too long, its time to pay attention to the reality of our predicament. That pain in our arm, the pressure on our chest, the shortness of breath and the fatigue are telling us something about the condition of our lives. We are sick, we need healing.

### **What is the cure for a hardened heart?**

Self-help books are all the rage, aren't they? Have you ever thought why this is? Surely, we all are aware that to some extent we must take action and move ourselves toward goals we have set for ourselves. Yet, it is evident that all the three step, five step, and 30 day programs to a better life still leave us with something missing. What do we do, after all, when this month's program offers a remedy which contradicts last month's self help guide? In the end, all of our self help remedies amount to our continual quest to try and find a fix within ourselves. But with thousands of self help authors and thousands of contradictory approaches, where do we find a concrete approach to help us navigate the seas of life? Can we not just “enjoy” ourselves, stop thinking so deeply, and just let life happen? To this last question, I would remind us that ignorance is not bliss for the patient with any serious malady. Ignorance can spell death, and it often does. Ignoring reality, in fact, is always fatal. Just as one cannot ignore contractual obligations in business and expect success, neither can one ignore spiritual truth while expecting things to just pan out in the end. It is foolish to think otherwise. The release from the pressures you feel in life comes not from having more fun and escaping each time tough things appear, rather, the release comes when we view life properly, and respond accordingly.

These questions and realities become central to our well being when it is our spiritual heart at risk. When life has left us confused, numb, tired, and empty, where do we go for a cure that is trustworthy and efficacious? Further, where do we go to find an approach to life that fits all of us when our circumstances can vary so much? Is there a common cure for the hardened heart? I believe there is. The cure is a Person, not a product or program.

What was it that was so utterly unique about the person of Christ? I am not posing this question from a strict doctrinal or theological perspective. Yes He was both God and man, and as such is THE unique personality of history. There is something profound we must recognize, however, amidst His remarkable humanity which should leave us hungering for some taste of His character to be imparted to us. The uniqueness of which I write is His singular love ethic. His love, which is what draws us to Him, is a demonstration of the condition and character of His heart. His heart, unlike ours, was pure. This is what enabled Him to be despised, yet, return kindness. His heart is what equipped Him with the resources to pray for the very ones who were driving nails into His hands and feet. His heart is what empowered Him to reach out to the poor, destitute, unlovely, and unwanted around Him. His heart is what gave Him the hunger to reach those others wanted dead. His love, His heart, was unique in that it always remained soft toward those around Him. His heart, His love, was and remains the cure for the hardened heart. Kyle Strobel writes,

*In Jesus we find the mystery of God wrapped up in human form, the wisdom of God not in law or proposition but in flesh. Instead of teaching about mercy, God came and was merciful; instead of demanding faithfulness, God showed himself as faithful. Jesus knew who he was, and he knew how to live a life that was constantly being developed with a kingdom focus, rather than a worldly one.*

The difficulty in our coming before God and asking that Jesus' heart be implanted within us is that it is a counter-intuitive move. Our culture and our very essence tells us that we ought to return unkindness with more unkindness, anger with rage, theft with justice, infidelity with revenge, and any wrong with similar medicine. Jesus demonstrated another approach, a new way of living. If we are to embrace the life we were meant to live we must take His approach, His life. This is not the embrace of a new "model" or technique. This is actually a drawing near, becoming one with a real person. We do not need another formula for life success. Rather, we need to be made new, to have our hearts restored and brought back to health if we are to have the life we were meant to live.

This is the real issue for all of us. In a world where education and information are the commerce of life, we have to choose another way for heart construction. Yes, we need clear guidelines for understanding the realities of life, and we need biblical information to keep us on the right track. Yet, we must always remember that Jesus was the "Word made flesh, living and dwelling among us". We cannot find a whole heart simply by reading more, knowing more, and believing the right things about God. We

must know Him, love Him, and enjoy Him. The Pharisees knew a great many things about the God they professed to follow. Yet, Jesus' strongest criticisms, by far, were reserved for these misguided spiritual leaders. He called them "white-washed tombs full of dead men's bones"! Basically, Jesus was saying, "You guys look great on the outside. You say the right things. You do the right things. But you do not know God and your motives are false. The exterior is impressive, but you are decayed and dead on the inside".

There is more than ample evidence for the follower of Jesus to fall back on. The weight of historical, scientific, and philosophical evidence for belief in God and for Jesus being who He said He was makes it harder to reject Him than it does to embrace Him from a strictly academic basis. Yet, it comes down to the condition of our hearts. Our hearts must be for Him along with our minds. Jesus' message is for the whole person. He is not a technique, a model, a formula, a tactic for greater personal happiness and success. In fact, He told us that in following Him we open ourselves up to all kinds of trouble and opposition in a world that by and large rejects His way. The "few" that take Him at His word find life abundantly. The *many* continue worshipping themselves and continue to make a mess of their own lives, our society, and our world. That is not to say that those who are traveling on *the way* will always get it right—we don't. But, its about the focus, the pursuit of the right journey. Moreover, its about who we are following on our journey. The travel guide, as a person, is our focus.

So what difference does it make in a life when one comes to know and love and follow Jesus as a person? The excerpt below demonstrates the nature of the Christian "heart" as it appeared to many in the early church as it was developing. The leap to our modern time is not as severe as one might think. Jesus' life still affects lives in this modern age in ways equally relevant and compelling to onlookers. From Kyle Strobel's book *Metamorpha*, I take the following quote of Diognetus who wrote these words in the Second Century,

*For Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language or customs; you see, they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect, or have some peculiar lifestyle...They live in both Greek and foreign cities, wherever chance has put them. They follow local customs in clothing, food, and the other aspects of life. But at the same time, they demonstrate to us the wonderful and certainly unusual form of their own citizenship. They live in their own native lands, but as aliens; as citizens they share all things with others; but like aliens, suffer all things. Every foreign country is to them as their native country, and every native land as a foreign country. They marry and have children like everyone else; but they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table, but not a shared bed. They are at present "in the flesh" but they do not live "according to the flesh." They are passing their days on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey appointed laws, and go beyond the laws in their own lives. They love everyone, but are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and gain life. They are poor and yet make many rich. They are short of everything and yet have plenty of all things. They are dishonored and yet gain glory through dishonor. Their names are blackened and yet they are cleared.*

*They are mocked and bless in return. They are treated outrageously and behave respectfully to others. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given a new life. They are attacked by Jews as aliens, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them cannot give any reason for their hostility. To put it simply—the soul is to the body as Christians are to the world. The soul is spread through all parts of the body and Christians through all the cities of the world. The soul is in the body but is not of the body; Christians are in the world but not of the world.*

Essentially, what Diognetus has offered here is a picture of followers of Jesus who have not allowed the realities of life to harden their hearts. These early Christians, and many today, find that a relationship with Jesus enables them to joyfully embrace a new way of life despite the tough realities of living in a broken world.

Our hearts do not need to shrivel up and die. We do not have to give in to those experiences which seek to suck the life out of us. The woman who has been stung by love can embrace life in Christ and open her heart to giving and receiving love again. The man who has given his life to the “right” things only to see hardship at every turn can look forward to the future with a soft heart equipped by the love and hopeful promises of God. The girl who has been abandoned by her parents emotionally, physically and otherwise, can find healing in the life of Jesus. Those who have blown it time and time again and made a mess of everything in their lives can turn to Jesus for restoration and renewal.

He will not turn away those who come to Him for forgiveness and hope. The individual who has sold out to the pursuit of money and pleasure and found life lonely despite all the toys and accolades can look into the eyes of Jesus and find a new way of pursuing life. Healing the hardened heart is what Jesus is all about. It is why He came. He seeks, actually longs, to open up the treasures of life as people turn to Him amidst their condition. He is the good healer, the ultimate physician, the consummate Life Coach.

### **Practical Heart Diagnosis**

In an attempt to offer some practical help for assessment of your heart I would like to encourage you to consider the questions below. Remember, embracing the life you were meant to live and having the heart you are meant to have comes from your embrace of a person and not a program. Yet, I have found in my life that important questions often provoke me to think in important ways about critical issues. So, with that in mind, answers these questions for yourself, as you sit honestly before God, and as you evaluate yourself in light of the person of Jesus as revealed in the gospels. Seeing rightly, and acting appropriately in light of your answers will help you on your way to renewal and restoration. This is a form of open heart surgery that leads to health and a life worth living. Open up, allow God to show you who you are and who He is calling you to be.

How do I typically respond to wrongs inflicted upon me?  
Who have I not really forgiven?  
Do I consider myself a product of my past?  
Is there a way forward despite my past?  
Would I describe my heart as open, soft, teachable?  
Have I chosen to close my heart off to others in order to “protect” myself from further wrongs? Does this actually help me as a person?  
When was the last time I experienced a strong sense of pure joy?  
How long has it been since I cried? Laughed hysterically? Does anything move me anymore?  
How often do I do “good” when no one is looking?  
How often do I do “bad” when no one is looking?  
Do people close to me feel as if they can be honest with me about my life, character and decisions without fear of my response?  
Do I have a community of people I feel it important to be a part of?  
How many of my relationships are conditional?  
Have I maintained any true friendships for a long period of time?  
Would people describe me as loving? Hard? Other?  
Are the kind of people that should be admired attracted to me as a person?  
Do I enjoy those things that God would enjoy if He were with me while I was enjoying them?  
What do I spend my time pursuing, really pursuing? Relationships, things...  
Can I honestly say that my life is pointed in the right direction?  
Am I willing to consider that life could be more vibrant than I ever imagined? Or, am I scared to even dream or try to pursue life as it was meant to be lived?  
When was the last time I really focused on my spiritual condition?  
Am I willing to even search for spiritual answers to life’s issues?  
Am I willing to open myself to the possibility that God may actually have a plan in mind for me?  
Am I willing to acknowledge that maybe I have, to this point, hindered what God is attempting to accomplish in my life?  
Do I believe that Jesus was who He said he was?  
How can I know if Jesus was and is actually THE way to God?  
Will I set time aside to consider this issue?  
Who are the people in my life who would lovingly and honestly help me answer any or all of these questions?  
When was the last time I had an honest conversation with myself, a friend, or God about who I am and where I am going?

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