

LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF THE WORD — 2

GUARDING THE HEART

Last issue we considered Proverbs 4:20-22 on Life and Health in the Word. This time we come to verse 23:

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

Other translations would render it:

Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life. NKJV

Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life. NASB

Keep and guard your heart with all vigilance and above all that you guard, for out of it flow the springs of life. AMP

What *is* the heart? We can readily give a biological answer about pumping blood around the body, but our use of the term is much wider. When someone sings, "I left my heart in San Francisco", no one thinks that the flow of blood is suspended until the forgotten organ can be recovered! When we talk of the heart and giving our heart to another, we're usually thinking of our love, our affections. "Losing our heart" is falling in love; "breaking someone's heart" is to causing deep grief; "taking heart" is being encouraged so we *feel* better. We tend to use the *heart* for the seat of emotions and affections in contradistinction to the *head*, which is the seat of our rational capability, the place of cool, logical thought. "Don't let your heart rule your head!" is a saying that makes sense to us.

And so we bring our concept and understanding to the Bible, often not realising that the Biblical understanding of the term is different. In the Biblical understanding, the seat of emotions and affections tends to be the *bowels*, *kidneys* or other such internal organs, whereas the *heart* is more the seat of rational thinking. You *think* in your heart. Recognising this, the Good News Bible translates the above verse as:

Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts.
Prov 4:23, GNB

Yet the affections are not excluded. Rather than dividing us up (like some kind of spiritual butcher), Hebrew thought views man as an integrated whole. Thus, particularly in the Old Testament, the *heart* really is representative of the whole inner person.

The flow of life is from the inside out, that is from the *heart* out. Get the heart right and everything else should drop in to place. Conversely, ignore the heart and deal with outward behaviour, and it's at best an uphill struggle—ultimately one we will lose.

We speak of following God *wholeheartedly*, *half-heartedly*, or *nominally*. Jesus, quoting Isaiah, said, "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." (Mt 15:8) It's all about the heart.

And Proverbs 4 says: "*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*"

When to guard the heart

"Don't lock the stable door after the horse has bolted!" We guard what's worth guarding before we lose it. But equally we could say: "Don't lock the stable door before the horse has entered!" Don't guard the heart if the heart is not renewed yet.

It must begin with a radical change. The problem of unbelievers is essentially heart trouble. The unregenerate heart is described as hard (Eph 4:18), darkened (Rom 1:21), arrogant (Dan 5:20), rebellious (Jer 5:23), unrepentant (Rom 2:5), and evil (Gen 6:5).

The solution is a heart transplant. *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."* (Ezek 36:26,27)

Change comes from the inside out — it's deeper than behaviour. Outward behaviour can be *evidence* of inward change, or it can be present in the *absence* of inward change. *"Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."* (1 Sam 16:7)

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, we read, *"... if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation"*. The logical consequence of this is that if anyone is *not* a new creation, he is *not* in Christ.

We have a Divine Plumber! In our natural state, whenever we turn on the internal tap (*faucet*, for American readers!), out comes dirty water. It's not that God changes our tap — He connects us to a different supply pipe of clean water. While still connected to a dirty water source, we can jump into a clean pool (perhaps a Sunday meeting), and we'll soak in clean water to an extent. But it'll only be surface, not *heart*. Life flows from the heart, and we must be *individually* connected.

Guard your heart *after* it's been renewed!

Why to guard the heart

What kind of car is your heart? If it's a clapped-out mini—all rust and no motion—it doesn't need to be restored, but changed. If you change it for a brand-new white Rolls, and then go for a drive in the fields or the stock-car races, it might well lose its shiny newness! Even normal road driving gets it dirty. With our new heart, it's similar—and even normal life results in the need for regular cleansing. So guard your heart as your prize "possession"—it's worth taking care of.

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

If life really issues forth from the heart to the rest of our being, it becomes critically important that we monitor what flows *in* to the heart.

Computers are funny. They don't think, they just act as they're programmed to. For years I received mail shots from a publishing company addressed to, "Mr Alexander, Liberty Church". Then they re-wrote the database programme to "improve" things, and for several more years I received mail shots addressed to, "Mr A.L. Church"!

You may have a top-of-the-range mail shot programme able to do all kinds of things and avoid the error above. But if your database information is corrupted, scrambled letters will result. From the very earliest days of computers, the acknowledged principle has been GIGO (that is, garbage in [results in] garbage out).

Why should we think the heart is any different?

How to guard the heart

Picture your heart as a fortress with gates. Then guard the gates! There's the "eye gate", the things you see; the "ear gate", the things you hear; the "nose gate", the things you breathe; and the "mouth gate", the things you taste.

Once you're guarding your heart in these more obvious areas, there are two further things to consider: worldly contamination and lies.

Life on a fallen planet can sully us, even if we behave well. We need on-going cleansing.

"... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word"
Eph 5:25,26

It's washing with the water of the Word that cleanses us from stains and spots. As we *read* the Word, as we *study* the Word, as we're in an environment where the Word is preached and talked about, as we deliberately *obey* the Word in prayer, in worship, in righteousness, we're being cleansed from worldly contamination.

"Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place." Ps 51:6

If the truth sets us free, then it's lies that bind us, even in the heart. So we guard the heart by rooting out lies—things we believe contrary to the Word—and replacing them with truth.

And we further guard the heart by holding truth at the gates, and rejecting as false the lies of the enemy, however tempting to believe they may be, by the clarity of truth.

In this way, we guard our heart and the life flow that springs from it.

*²⁰My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words.
²¹Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart;
²²for they are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body.
²³Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.
(Prov 4)*

Next issue, we'll look at *how to live in the light of the Word*.

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