

EMBLEMS OF THE WORD: HAMMER

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This emblem of the Word of God is an implement held in the hand of a workman. There are few references to hammers in the Bible, though these tools have always been in use. The first mention is well-known. In the time of the Judges God chastised the disobedient Israelites by delivering them over to the Canaanite king Jabin. His general was a man named Sisera who with his nine hundred iron chariots "mightily oppressed the children of Israel" (Judges 4:3). Barak, with the men of Zebulun and Naphtali, was able to rout Sisera, who fled to the tent of a woman named Jael. She provided him rest and refreshment, but while he slept she "took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground...So he died" (Judges 4:21). This hammer was an effective instrument, even though it was wielded by a "weaker vessel."

A hammer of course has a constructive use as well as a destructive one. It may be wielded with subtle skill as well as with brute strength. Both the stonemason and the smith are found in Scripture. When Solomon built the temple of the Lord the stones were cut and prepared at a distance, "so that there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house, while it was in building" (1 Kings 6:7). These hammers were pointed in shape, to hew the rough blocks of quarried stone into a regular form. The smith's hammer was of a different shape and for a different purpose. Isaiah describes the goldsmith as "he that *smootheth* with the hammer." Before the gold could be used in decorative work it had first to be carefully beaten out into thin sheets.

There are spiritual lessons in these things, for God compares His own word preached by His own servants to a hammer in its effect. "Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and *like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?*" (Jeremiah 23:29). How is this so?

Heart

There is that in man which may be likened to a rock for its hardness. When Adam sinned he died spiritually and his heart became like a stone. Once it was beating with love to God but after his fall it became cold, unfeeling and dead. This is the heart we have all received from Adam our first covenant head. John Gill wrote of man's heart as "being hardened by sin, confirmed in it; destitute of spiritual life; stupid and senseless; stubborn and inflexible; on which no impressions are made, and is impenitent." When ministers preach the gospel, in case they should imagine that by their own power they will prevail upon their hearers, they should remember as they plead with and persuade sinners that they preach to hearts which are as lifeless as rock. In the light of this how absurd are those forms of evangelism in vogue today, when music, drama and other gimmicks are relied upon to stir the sinner's emotions, move his will and secure some sort of decision for Christ! These methods all operate on the basis that there is something in fallen man which may be induced to respond to the call of the gospel. But our whole nature is corrupt and there is no influence from man which can overcome our natural enmity against God and all that He is.

Even the pure truth of itself does no more than scratch the surface of a stony heart. Saul of Tarsus was familiar with the Scriptures from his birth and was schooled in the Jewish religion. "After the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee" (Acts 26:5). He studied the law, sang the psalms and attended the Passover. But none of this brought him to Christ. In his defiance of the gospel he would have hardened his own heart "as an adamant stone" (Zechariah 7:12) – as hard as diamond – had not the Lord in His mercy intervened.

Under the gospel there are those who listen to the word attentively and receive it joyfully. We may be hopeful for them, that they have truly believed upon the Saviour. We should remember that time is the test of every conversion. Sadly many go back when the demands of discipleship become apparent to them. They are seen to be unregenerate after all and still in their sins. In the Parable of the Sower there were some seeds which "fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth" (Matthew 13:5). How many for a time show a superficial piety, which is later blown away to reveal a barren heart underneath!

There is but one solution. It is in the gracious promise of the new covenant: "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes...ye shall be my people, and I will be your God" (Ezekiel 36:26-28). This is the sinner's only hope.

Hand

The Lord says through Jeremiah that His word is able to *break* the sinner's hard heart. This is a strong term, meaning to dash in pieces or shatter. What makes the gospel such a mighty hammer? What makes it different from all man-made religion, which is powerless to turn a sinner to righteousness? The answer is the Spirit of God. When the preaching of the word is accompanied by His omnipotent power, both sinners and saints are made to feel the force of its truth. The finest hammer cannot operate by itself or do any useful work. It cannot break a rock in pieces unless wielded by an appropriate workman. So the Scriptures are passive and powerless until taken up and used by their Author, according to His sovereign good pleasure. It is God's Spirit alone who can truly apply the Scriptures to our hearts. We long and pray to see the hand of the Lord at work in the gospel, as He once worked in Antioch (Acts 11:20,21).

In the mining industry it was sometimes the practice to "fire" stones containing the ore before subjecting them to the hammer to pulverise them. After the intense heat the hammers easily reduced the stones to powder, allowing the metal to be obtained. Fire and hammer represent that conviction and renewal which are necessary in conversion. Gill's words explain this work of God: "The word of the Lord, in the hand of the Spirit, is a means of breaking such hard hearts, and taking away the obduracy and hardness of them. There is a legal contrition of it, through the law part of the word, by which there is a knowledge of sin, and the soul is wounded with a sense of it, and sore broken, but without any view of pardon, righteousness, and salvation by Christ; and there is an evangelical contrition or brokenness of heart, through the gospel part of the word, by means of which the stony heart is not only broken, but melted and dissolved into true evangelical repentance for sin, through the discoveries of a Saviour bruised and broken

for its sin, and through a view of free and full pardon by His blood, and justification by His righteousness."

The Lord is the flawless workman. He has both great skill and great strength, like the blacksmith. "The smith with the tongs both worketh in the coals, and fashioneth it with hammers, and worketh it with the strength of his arms" (Isaiah 44:12). He breaks up the old and ruined foundation of our lives, our self-righteousness. He knows our hearts perfectly and aims his blows accordingly, sending always whatever conviction of sin is necessary to bring us to repentance. He is not deterred by our stubbornness and backsliding but perseveres by His word and Spirit, fashioning us patiently into His own image. And when we are discouraged because of our lot in providence, we should remember that our trials too are sent by God for our good and for our growth in grace. We should say to ourselves as Spurgeon did to himself: "This is not my rest. This is the place of the furnace, and the forge, and the hammer. My experience tallies with my Lord's words" (John 16:33).

House

The kingdom of God is a great project, begun in this world and to be completed in the next. At its centre is a magnificent edifice, the church, founded upon Jesus Christ. Like every great building it is meticulously designed and executed. The chief stone was chosen in eternity and laid in time, when the Son of God assumed our nature and placed Himself under the law, to obey its precept and suffer its penalty on behalf of His people. "Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste" (Isaiah 28:16). His death for sin and resurrection after the power of an endless life make a sure foundation for guilty sinners to rest upon. "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). On that Rock of salvation our gracious God is laying living stones by the gospel, His elect people as they are called by grace; together they make up His spiritual temple. Never was such a grand building produced from such poor material! His workmanship is only glimpsed now but in eternity all shall admire the infinite wisdom which planned and built the church.

Friend, the word of God must break your heart to repentance now or it will be as a crushing hammer to you on the Day of Judgment: "And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder" (Matthew 21:44). Faced with such an awful danger, will you not sorrow over your sin now, that you might be made whole in righteousness, saved and complete in the Lord Jesus Christ.