

# To soften the effects of sin, get spiritual Armor All

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**By David F. Maas**

HAWKINS, Texas—Picture in my hand a bagel, one allowed to harden for about a week. During the Days of Unleavened Bread we examined one metaphorical aspect of sin, the fermenting or puffing-up process.

This article focuses on another aspect of sin just as deadly as leavening or puffing up: the hardening, stiffening or deadening process.

This characteristic of sin has the potential of putting us beyond feeling, beyond remorse, beyond the ability to repent.

## **Lessons of the bagel**

The bagel symbolizes our potential for becoming complacent, hardened and cynical as the society at large has become.

God's Word has quite explicit admonitions that we do not allow ourselves to allow our feelings, our heart, our mind to become hardened.

Psalm 95:8 instructs: "Do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion, and as in the day of trial in the wilderness, when your fathers tested me."

In the same context the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:17 warns us: "You should no longer walk as rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind."

Skipping down to verse 19, we continue reading about people "who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to licentiousness."

Before we commit wanton willful sins, a process of hardening (initially more passive than active) must take place.

Notice in Verse 32 Paul admonishes us to become tenderhearted. We find it nearly impossible to live in a lawless society without developing a cynical, callous, tolerant attitude toward sin.

In Deuteronomy 28:54-56 Moses foretold that the tender, sensitive and refined men and women in our society would become hardened, brittle, insensitive and callous. Such often occurs when people do not retain God's law in their consciousness.

Most of us undoubtedly know people who initially seemed to demonstrate a soft, pliable and yielded demeanor but who have since become hardened and cynical. Does anyone think it could never happen to him or her?

Anyone who has made a daily observation of news and news commentary realizes how hardened and cynical our people have become of leaders, laws and ideals. An ugly crust of cynicism engulfs our society. Over the past several decades the cynical film has crept up so gradually that most of us can't recognize how hardened we have become. It resembles an emphysema patient who still has a fraction of his lung functioning or an alcoholic whose liver has nearly become deadened by cirrhosis. It takes a major shock to the nervous system before we realize that the deadening process may have enveloped us.

### **Insulated prisoner**

Back in 1973, when I was a dues-paying member of the Rapid City Jaycees, we had as one of our guest speakers former POW Leo Thorsness, who spent nine years in the protective custody of the Vietcong in the Hanoi Hilton. He was protectively insulated there while the rest of us received daily exposure to the antics of hippies, yippies, Joan Baez, Jane Fonda, Woodstock, pot, LSD and Kent State.

Mr. Thorsness, with a gimpy leg—a result of Vietcong torture, still believed in old-fashioned American ideals: freedom, apple pie, motherhood. It seemed as if Richie Cunningham from *Happy Days* had entered a time capsule and got out 20 years later. The sensitive childlike survivor of the Vietcong POW camp seemed an anomaly even in the placid rural society of South Dakota.

I felt a mixture of admiration and pity for Mr. Thorsness. His refreshing wholesomeness seemed woefully out of place in a society whose mind-set had become polluted with Haight-Ashbury, free love, sexually transmitted disease, race riots and potheads. George McGovern made mincemeat out of him in the a senatorial election.

### **Passive hardening**

We cannot help becoming victims of the hardening process. Like a smog bank or marine fog, it envelopes us so gradually we are largely unaware until it has swallowed us.

One of the admonishments laid to the Christian by the apostle James is to keep ourselves uncontaminated by the world (James 1:27). Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:17, quoting Isaiah 52:11, admonishes, "Go out from there, touch not the unclean thing."

The central lesson of Titus 1:15 consists of the warning that exposure to sin will pollute and defile the mind even though we have committed no active sins. Passively absorbing the ways of the world through television, magazines, newspapers, Internet borderline smut and porn and conversations at work, we could develop a hardened cynical mind-set. We're not even talking

about the stage at which we begin to sear our consciences. As a matter of fact, we can become hardened while not actively participating in sin at all.

It becomes a matter of taking a passive, indulgent, tolerant attitude toward the sin in society, much the same as the Corinthians had done:

"I don't care whether my neighbor gets AIDS, just so he doesn't wash his hands in my sink."

One of the distinguishing characteristics about the Laodicean attitude is the complacency, the complete insulation and unconcern about anyone other than oneself. The Laodicean mind-set, surfeited on materialism, becomes unmotivated, apathetic and callous. In such a state of mind we find it impossible to sigh and cry for the abominations.

### **Value of water**

How can we safeguard ourselves from hardening?

Two dominant metaphors of God's Spirit help us see how it serves as a solvent or softening agent, like water and oil. Though the metaphors of water and oil are apparent opposites, they do share a common characteristic: that of making something soft and pliable that was once hard.

In the potter-and-clay analogy in Isaiah 45 and Romans 9, water has the function of making the clay pliable and yielded to God's direction. In the oil metaphor the Holy Spirit has the function of protecting and sealing, much the same as a skin conditioner, hair conditioner or sunscreen.

Whether we're talking about Oil of Olay or cocoa butter, the main ingredient is oil or fat. Lanolin is a fancy name for sheep fat. A famous comedian, Milton Berle, received injections of chicken fat to smooth out the wrinkles in his face. Back on the farm we used to coat new lumber with linseed oil to protect it from the elements. I knew a book collector who used to coat old leather book covers with neat's-foot oil to keep them in mint condition.

### **Protective sealant**

The metaphorical application of the Holy Spirit as a protective sealant against sin appears as much more than coincidence. We could compare God's Spirit as a kind of spiritual Amor All. Back in Ephesians 1:13-14 Paul describes the Holy Spirit as a seal or sealant, given at baptism following the laying on of hands. In Ephesians 4:30 Paul again refers to the or sealant, but this time he accompanies the sealing with an admonition to remain tenderhearted.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 provides us further substantiation of the softening properties. In verse 27: "I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgments and do them."

Notice that the ability to keep God's laws of necessity must be preceded by the sealing and softening of God's Spirit. Otherwise His laws become disjointed stony tables of dos and don'ts. Paul insisted that the letter kills but that the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:3-6).

God's Spirit does not keep the law for us. That is not its function. The preceding scriptures have shown the Holy Spirit is symbolized metaphorically as oil-rendering our fleshly minds soft and resilient so we can keep God's laws.

### **Daily supply**

We need to stay spiritually pliable by asking for and using a daily supply of the Holy Spirit. In Luke 11, where Jesus teaches His disciples to pray, He admonishes us to do some things on a daily basis. We need to ask for a daily supply of physical and spiritual bread.

I should have consumed this bagel in my hand while it remained soft and pliable. Now it is too late. In the same context, our elder brother, Jesus Christ, instructs us to ask our Heavenly Father for a continual supply of His Spirit.

We need to work in and massage into our minds the daily ration of God's Spirit continually like spiritual Amor All. In Ephesians 4 Paul admonishes us to become renewed in the spirit of our mind. We perform this daily operation to ensure that our hearts will not eventually become seared and hardened beyond hope.

On a can of Amor All softener we read this instructive precaution:

"Amor All will protect materials in good condition, but will not restore materials which are already damaged."

If we allow the hardening process to continue until we can no longer repent, it is too late.

Softening has always served as a symbol (spiritually speaking) of humility and yieldedness. Hardening has always stood metaphorically for rebellion and resistance.

If we desire to play a part when Christ sets up His Kingdom, we need to make sure we become saturated with a liberal supply of spiritual Amor All.