

*On The Deceitfulness
Of
The Heart*

JOHN NEWTON

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John Newton

DISCOURSES (OR SERMONS).

SERMON I.

ON THE DECEITFULNESS OF THE HEART.

JER. xvii. 9, 10.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

THE prophet Jeremiah had a hard task. He was appointed to inculcate unwelcome truths upon a vain insensible people. He had the grief to find all his expostulations and warnings, his prayers and tears, had no other effect than to make them account him their enemy, and to draw reproach and persecution upon himself. He lived to see the accomplishment of his own predictions; to see the land of his nativity desolated, the city destroyed, the people almost extirpated, and the few who remained, transported into a distant country, to end their days in captivity.

Those who have resolved, honestly and steadily, to declare the word of the Lord, have, in all ages, found a part of his trial: the message they have had to deliver has been disagreeable and disregarded. It is no hard matter to frame discourses that shall meet with some degree of general approbation; nor is it difficult to foresee the reception which plain truth must often meet with: but

those who undertake a charge must perform it; and ministers are bound to declare to the people every thing that regards their welfare, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear. If the watchman sees the danger coming, and does not blow the trumpet, to give the most public notice possible, he is answerable for all the evils that may follow. This is applied as a caution to the prophet Ezekiel; and, undoubtedly, every one who administers in holy things is concerned in it. "So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me. When I say unto the wicked man, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood will I require at thine hand;" Ezek. xxxiii. Let this awful passage plead our excuse, if, at any time, we seem too urgent, or too plain, in our discourses. Too plain or urgent we cannot be. Our business is most important: opportunities are critical and precious. It is at the hazard of our souls if we speak deceitfully; and at the hazard of yours if we speak in vain.

In the preceding verses, the prophet gives us a striking image of the opposition between the righteous and the wicked, in their present state, their hopes, and their end. The one is compared to a tree; the other to heath and stubble; the one, *planted* by streams of water; the other, *exposed* on the salt burning desert: the one, green, flourishing, and full of fruit; the other, parched and withering: the hope of the one, fixed on the Lord, the all-sufficient Almighty God; the rash dependence of the other, on a frail feeble arm of flesh. Suitable to this difference is their end: the

one, blessed, provided against all evil, so that he shall not be careful in the year of drought; the other, cursed, and cut off from the expectation of any amendment. "He shall not see when good cometh." The immediate design was, perhaps, to shew the Jews, that there was no way to avert the judgments of God, and to avoid the impending evils which threatened them, but by returning to the Lord, who had begun to smite, and who alone was able to heal them. But this they refused. They preferred their own contrivances: "they leaned upon an arm of flesh;" sometimes upon Egypt, sometimes upon Assyria: one while presuming upon force; another while upon cunning. They were fruitful in expedients; and, when one broken cistern failed them, had recourse to another. But the prophet denounces the curse of God both on them and their supports, subjoining the words of my text; which may be understood, either as a farther proof of what he had said, or an assigned cause of that obstinacy and perverseness he had complained of: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

But, without confining the words to the first occasion of their delivery, I shall consider them, as teaching us a doctrine, abundantly confirmed by many other passages of Scripture, "That the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked:" which I shall endeavour to illustrate in a plain familiar way. I shall, secondly, from the next verse, enforce this observation, That the heart (bad as it is) is incessantly under the Divine inspection and examination: "I the Lord search the heart and try the reins." I shall, thirdly, consider the issue and design of this inquest; that "every man" may, in the end, receive "according to his ways, and

according to the fruit of his doings." And may the Lord enable us so to try and examine ourselves here, that hereafter we may be found unblameable and without rebuke before him, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

1. The heart is here characterized, first, As deceitful, and that above or in all things: second, As desperately wicked: in so dangerous, so deplorable a state, as is not to be conceived or found out. "Who can know it?" The word in the original [was], which we translate *desperately wicked*, signifies a mortal, incurable disease; a disease which, seizing on the vitals, affects and threatens the whole frame; and which no remedy can reach. This idea leads us to that first transgression, whereby man, departing from God, fatally destroyed his soul's health, and sunk into that state so pathetically described by Isaiah, chap. i. "The whole head is sick;" all the powers of the understanding disordered: "and the whole heart faint;" all the springs of the affections enfeebled. "From the sole of the foot, even unto the head, there is no soundness, but wounds, bruises, and putrefying sores;" the evil growing worse continually, and no help or helper at hand: "they have not been closed nor bound up, nor mollified with ointment." In consequence of this deep-rooted disorder, the heart is deceitful;—that is, it deceives and fails us in every instance: it promises more than it can perform: it misleads us with vain desires; and mocks us with unsuccessful efforts: like the faint attempts of a sick man, to perform those actions which require a state of sound health and strength. That this is indeed the case, will, I think, appear from the following particulars; to which I entreat your attention.

Scripture and reason do jointly assure us, that

semble. To such I say, Think not to satisfy the Divine justice by any poor performances of your own; think not to cleanse or expiate the evil of your hearts by any of your own inventions; but, "behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world," John i. 29. He died, that you may live: He lives, that you may live for ever. Put, therefore, your trust in the Lord; for with him is plenteous redemption. His sufferings and death are a complete final propitiation for sin. "He is able to save to the uttermost;" and he is as willing as he is able. It was *this* brought him down from heaven; for *this* he emptied himself of all glory, and submitted to all indignity. His humiliation expiates our pride; his perfect love atones for our ingratitude; his exquisite tenderness pleads for our insensibility. Only believe; commit your cause to him by faith and prayer. As a *Priest*, he shall make atonement for your sins, and present your persons and your services acceptable before God. As a *Prophet*, he shall instruct you in the true wisdom, which maketh wise to salvation: he shall not only cause you to know his commandments, but to love them too: he shall write them in your hearts. As a *King*, he shall evermore mightily defend you against all your enemies. He shall enable you to withstand temptations, to support difficulties, to break through all opposition. He shall supply you with every thing you need, for this life or a better, out of the unsearchable riches of his grace. He shall strengthen you to overcome all things; to endure to the end: and then he shall give you a place in his kingdom; a seat near his throne; a crown of life; a crown of glory; incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.

performed perfect obedience to the law of God in our behalf: He died, and satisfied the penalty due to our sins: He arose from the grave as our representative: He is entered into heaven as our forerunner. "He has received gifts for men, even for the rebellious," Psalm lxxviii. He is "exalted" on high, to "bestow repentance and remission of sins," Acts v., on all that seek to him. He has established his ordinances for this purpose: He has commanded his people, not to "neglect assembling themselves together." He has charged his ministers, at such seasons, to declare first the guilty, deplorable condition of mankind, and then to proclaim the glad tidings of salvation, "by faith which is in him." He has promised to be with them in this work to the end of the world. He has promised, that where his word is faithfully preached, he will accompany it "with a spirit and power," that shall bear down all opposition. He has promised, that while we are speaking to the ear, he will, by his secret influence, apply it to the heart, and open it to receive and embrace the truth spoken, as in the case of Lydia. Who would venture to preach a doctrine so unpalatable to the carnal mind, as Jesus Christ, and him crucified? Who would undertake so ungrateful a task, as to depreciate that noble creature *man*, and arraign him publicly of insensibility, ingratitude, pride, and deceit; were it not that we have, first, a *command*, and that at our peril, to speak plain; and, secondly, a *promise* that we shall not speak in vain? Not that we can expect to be universally received: the time *is* come, when many "will not endure sound doctrine," 2 Tim. iv. 3; but some there will be, whom God is pleased to save by the *foolishness of preaching*, so called. Some such I would hope are in this as-

all we see is the work of an Almighty Being:—the heavens and the earth, the sun, moon, and stars, and even the grass and flowers of the field, loudly proclaim the presence, the power, the wisdom, and the goodness of God: yet behold the extreme *insensibility* of man. The wisest of our species, in those places where Divine revelation was not known, ever mistook the *effect* for the *cause*; and ascribed that honour to the creature which is due only to the Creator. This was the very best of the case; for, in general, they sunk still lower, to worship stocks and stones: nay, to the eternal reproach of the natural understanding in the things of God, the more civilized any nation was, the more renowned for arts and arms, the farther they were removed from those they termed *barbarians*, so much the more vile and contemptible the idolatry they established generally proved. The wisdom of the Egyptians paid divine honours to cats, monkeys, and the vilest reptiles. The fine taste of the Greeks consecrated those for gods, who, if they had lived amongst men, would have been deemed the pests of society; gods who were, professedly, both *patterns* and *patrons* of the most shameful vices. The prowess of the Romans established altars to fear and paleness. So deeply were they infatuated, so totally lost to common sense, that the Apostle Paul's worst enemies could find no more plausible accusation against him, in one of the politest cities then in the world, than that he had ventured to affirm, "they were no gods who were made with hands."

Thus stood the case with Heathens: let us now come nearer home. It is to be feared, the greatest difference between them and the generality of us called *Christians*, is, that we do not partake in their gross *outward* idolatry. In other respects,

our insensibility is perhaps as much greater than theirs, as our superior knowledge renders it more inexcusable. We acknowledge a God; that there is but one; that he is the cause of all things; that in him we live, and move, and have our being. Had the poor Heathens known this, we may judge, by their application to their mistaken worship, it would have had some influence on their practice. But what numbers of "us" live altogether as "without God in the world." I come not here to make invectives; let conscience judge, and give evidence accordingly. What do we think of the perpetual *presence of God* around us, and within us? We know that he is acquainted with all our thoughts, words, and actions; yet are we not more effectually restrained and awed by the presence of our fellow-worms, than by the regard of that Eye which is ten thousand times brighter than the sun? How are we affected by the *works of God*? Has not the appearance of a fine day, or the beauty of an extensive prospect, a force to *excite* a sense of satisfaction from every one? but how few are there of us that can realize and acknowledge the hand of the glorious Author of these things? How *seldom* and how *faintly*, do we adopt the reflection of David? "When I consider the heavens, the work of THY fingers, the moon and stars which THOU hast ordained; Lord, what is man that thou shouldst be mindful of him?" Ps. viii. What is our judgment of the *word of God*, that glorious message of love, in which he has pointed out to us the way of salvation? Is not this book the least read, the least admired, and the least understood, of any? We are presently affected, we enter with all our spirit into the moving incidents (as we term them) of a romance or tragedy, though we know they are not founded on truth, nor have any rela-

every one, without exception of person or circumstance, *that continueth not*, from the beginning to the end of life, *in all things*, great and small, *to do them*, τὸν ποικίλῃ ἁρῆ, to finish them, to do them completely, without any defect either in matter or manner. Most uncomfortable doctrine indeed, were there no remedy provided! For the law of God is as eternal and unchangeable as his nature: it must not, it cannot be attempted or brought down to our capacities; neither can the penalty be evaded: for the God of truth has said, has sworn, that "the soul that sinneth shall die," Ezek. xviii. 4. Here then we must receive "a sentence of death in ourselves," 2 Cor. i. 9. Here, "every mouth must be stopped, and all the world become guilty before God," Rom. iii. 19. Here we must say with the Apostle, "Therefore, by the deeds of the law, there shall be no flesh justified in his sight," Gal. ii. 16; "for by the law is the knowledge of sin," Rom. iii. 20. O that we could all sincerely say so; that we were brought to this, to feel and confess our lost, undone estate, and our utter inability to save ourselves! then, with joy, should I proceed to what I have had in my eye all along. For with what view have I said so much upon so disagreeable a subject? Why have I attempted to lay open some of the depths of the heart? but that I might more fully illustrate the wonderful grace and goodness of God, vouchsafed to us in the Gospel; and, at the same time, shew the utter impossibility, not of being saved at all, but of finding salvation in any other way than that which God has appointed. For, behold! "God has so loved the world," John iii., that he sent his Son to accomplish that for us, "which the law could not do through the weakness of our flesh," Rom. viii. Jesus Christ

avail, that we have never assaulted the life of our neighbour, if every angry word, every degree of ill-will or revenge, is considered as murder in God's sight? It will not suffice to say, I am no thief or extortioner, unless we can clear ourselves of the most distant wish of possessing what was the property of another. If we are sure that we have not forsworn ourselves, but have performed to the Lord our oaths, it is only thus far well, that we shall not be condemned for open and actual perjury. But if we have at any time mentioned, or even *thought* of, the name of God, without the highest habitual reverence, we have taken his name in vain; and he has declared he will not hold us guiltless. That this is no gloss of my inventing, but the very words of truth, the declaration of Him by whom we must be one day judged, the fifth chapter of Matthew will inform you. There a wanton glance is styled adultery; an angry expression censured as murder; and to speak unadvisedly, even of the hairs of our head, is deemed a branch of profane swearing. And why? Because all these spring from the heart, which is "naked and open," without either covering or concealment, "in the sight of him with whom we have to do;" Heb. iv. This is thought uncomfortable doctrine, and not without reason, could we go no farther. For there is nothing in heaven or in earth, in time or eternity, that affords the least glimpse of comfort to fallen man, if either God is strict to mark what is amiss, or if he, trusting in himself, presumes to plead with his Maker. The Divine law requires perfect, unremitted, unsinning obedience: it denounces a curse upon the least failure. "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them;" Gal. iii. 10;

tion to ourselves; but we can read the history of Jesus Christ, his life and doctrines, his death and passion, with indifference, though we say, all he spoke, or did, or suffered, was for our sakes. What are our thoughts of *that eternity* to which we are posting, and to which, for aught we know, a few hours may introduce us? Is it not in the power of the meanest trifle that occurs, to hide this important point from our view? It were easy to multiply particulars; but are not these sufficient to shew the deceitfulness, the desperate wickedness, of the heart? Let me add one more: the judgments of God are now abroad in the world for these things. We have warnings all around us. We know that many fruitful lands in our neighbourhood are, in a manner, turned into a wilderness, for the sins of the inhabitants. Every post brings us tidings of some new desolation, and we cannot tell how soon the case may be our own; but we have neither sympathy for our fellow-creatures, nor concern for ourselves. We hear, we pity, we forget, in the same instant. But these things are remote. Is then what we see and *feel* more laid to heart? Our friends and acquaintances are taken from amongst us daily; some of them suddenly, in the midst of their warmest pursuits, or just upon the accomplishment of their most favourite schemes: we drop an unmeaning tear, and fly to every officious vanity for relief. Perhaps we are visited ourselves, and brought down to the borders of the grave: but, even against this, we are, for the most part, proof; or, if we feel a slight impression, it gradually wears off with the disease; and we return, as soon as we recover, to our former follies with redoubled ardour.

This is a slight view of the *invisibility* of the

human heart. Let us now consider its *ingratitude*. The Israelites were a sample of all mankind in this respect. God visited them, in Egypt, in the midst of their affliction. Without any application on their part, he undertook and effected their deliverance: he brought them from among their enemies "with a high hand, and a stretched-out arm;" he led them safely through the wilderness: he screened them with a cloud, from the piercing beams of the sun: he gave them light by night, in a pillar of fire: he fed them with bread from heaven, and caused streams to flow in the sandy desert: he made a covenant with them, and chose them for his peculiar people: he destroyed all their enemies before them; and, at length, put them in the full and peaceable possession of a land flowing with milk and honey. Intwoven with the history of God's gracious dealings with *them*, we have an account of their behaviour towards *him*; which was a continual series of rebellion, perverseness, murmuring, and disobedience. And are we better than they? In no wise. If we had leisure to consider the natural, civil, and religious advantages we enjoy as a nation, it would appear that *we* likewise have long been a peculiarly favoured people. The eye of the Lord our God has been upon us continually for good; and we have reason to say, "He has not dealt so with any nation." The history of all ages and countries, affords us no instance of national prosperity that can be compared, either for degree or continuance, with what we have enjoyed since the Revolution: nor would it be easy, I fear, to find a parallel, in any history, of our great ingratitude. What I have said in the former article will necessarily infer this: for it is impossible that those who have so little sensibility, either of the value of the

served; and neither Scripture nor experience give us reason to hope it has been better since, or is now. The Apostle Paul has assured us, "That, in the last days (a character which it is likely coincides with our days), perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God: having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof." 2 Tim. iii. Surely, I say, if these are marks of the *last days*, they must be already commenced. However, we see, upon the whole, how vile and hateful our hearts must appear in the sight of a heart-searching God.

III. One thing more we have to consider: That the Lord does not observe the heart of man with the indifference of a mere spectator, but as an impartial and inflexible Judge; "that he may give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings." This was the third particular to be spoken to.

But, alas! what can be said to this? Is it not sufficient to fill our souls with astonishment, and to cause *all faces to gather blackness*; to hear, that the Lord has purposed to render to every man according to his works; and that he sits Judge, not only upon outward actions, but examines the very thoughts and intents of the heart? Dare any of *us* abide the issue of such a trial? Which of us will presume to say, I am clean? To what purpose can any of us plead, I have not committed adultery, if God charges us with every inordinate desire, with every offence of the eye? What will it

vocation, which they could hardly, upon any terms, prevail with themselves to express. The Lord has mercifully kept us from the knowledge of each other's hearts, any farther than we are willing to disclose ourselves: for was every man compelled to speak all he thinks, there would be an end of society; and man would no more venture to dwell with man, than with tygers and bears. We know what mischief one unguarded tongue may sometimes occasion: now, the tongue can do no evil, any farther than as it is an instrument of disclosing the hidden things of the heart; yet it is but a small part of these the worst tongue is capable of disclosing. What then would be the case, if all our hearts were open, all our desires known to one another? What a mixture of confusion, and defiance, shame, rage, fear, and contempt, would overspread every countenance! and yet thus we are exposed to the searching eye of a pure and holy God. The Lord knows the thoughts of man's heart, that they are vain. He long ago declared the result of his observation. "God saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth; and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually;" Gen. vi. And, though the world was drowned for this, matters were not mended afterwards: for, upon a second survey, the judgment amounts to the same. "The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside; they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre: with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips," Ps. xiv., Isa. lix. Compare Rom. iii. How it was in our blessed Saviour's time we have already ob-

gifts of God, or of his hand in bestowing them, can be grateful. The *seat* of gratitude is in the heart; the *proof* appears in the words and actions. Now, what are the prevailing subjects of conversation amongst us? Are the great things that God has done for us, the high obligations we are under to him, the comforts of our holy religion, and the nature of that blessed hope set before us by the Gospel, in the number? On the contrary, is not the least hint of these things in company, for the most part, received with reserve, if not with contempt and disgust? "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." God, and the things of God, have little place there; but levity, detraction, ill temper, and, not seldom, profaneness and obscenity, in our discourses, too plainly discover the nature of the fountain from whence they flow. And if we look upon the actions of men in general, they are but of a piece with their words: engrossed by business, or enslaved to pleasure, for a season, all upon the stretch in amassing treasures; and then, perhaps, as restless and eager to dissipate them. Whatever passion rules them for the time, or whatever changes they may admit in their schemes, it is too plain, that a principle of gratitude to God, and a conscious desire to please him, has little influence either in forming or executing their plans. If these things are so, we have another instance of the deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of the heart: it is full of the blackest ingratitude.

Need any thing be added to these two charges? Have we not said enough to confirm the prophet's assertion? If not, we can name a third particular, if possible, more absurd and inexcusable than either of the former. Man is not only insensible of the greatest part of those things which most con-

cern him, and ungrateful and disobedient to his Maker and Preserver, his best and only friend, but he is *proud* too. Though he has nothing but what he has received, has received nothing but what he has perverted and mismanaged, and must render a strict account of his mismanagement, yet he is *proud*. We have already seen his blindness and baseness; there wanted only pride to make him a monster indeed. And need we spend time to prove this? No. *This*, at least, is an universal evil. Any man may easily perceive it in every man but himself; and every *thinking* man may perceive it working within himself incessantly. Whether we are alone or in company, whether with friends or enemies, with those above us or those below us, pride will insinuate. Nay, in the immediate presence of God, when we come together to implore his mercy, while the most humbling confessions are upon our lips, and we are charging ourselves as most miserable, helpless sinners, even here pride will find us out. Those must be great strangers to themselves, who are not sensible of this. Now, "why is dust and ashes proud?" proud of our failings! proud of our infirmities! Is it not from hence, because the heart is deplorably diseased, desperately wicked, and deeply deceitful?

I shall pursue this point no farther. I shall not attempt to enumerate, at present, those "evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, and blasphemies," Mark vii. 21, which our Lord assures us do perpetually "proceed from the heart." I chose to insist on insensibility, ingratitude, and pride; because these are the vices which, in common life, we most condemn, are willing to think ourselves most free from, and can the least bear to be charged with. And it must be

allowed, that, between man and man, there is often the appearance of much generosity, gratitude, and condescension. But what will it avail us, that we stand upon some tolerable terms towards each other in these respects, if we are guilty before God? "The Lord seeth not as man seeth," I Sam. xvi.: he cannot be deceived or put off with a fair appearance; for he "searcheth the heart, and trieth the reins." This is the next point to be considered.

II. That the heart, with all its workings and all its faults, is incessantly under the Divine inspection and examination: "I, the Lord, search the heart, and try the reins." The *heart* and *reins*, as distinguished in Scripture phrase, signify those different powers of the mind, the affections, and the thoughts. The words *search* and *try* have an emphasis in the original, which cannot be reached without a paraphrase, if at all.

The Lord *searches* [חַרַּץ] the heart: he traces, investigates, the inmost principles of our souls to their first rise, with (if I may so speak) a mathematical accuracy. He *tries* [נִסָּה] the reins: he watches every rising thought; he brings it to the test of his most pure law: he examines it with the utmost exactness; as a refiner essays his metals, with a purpose to reject whatever is inferior to the prescribed standard. To form a more just idea of this scrutiny, let us ask ourselves, how we could bear to be obliged to declare aloud, in full company, every thought which passes through our minds every wish and desire of which we are conscious, without the least reserve or exception? I am persuaded there are few people so lost to shame, but, if they were brought to this trial, they would rather choose to die than comply with it. Some things they would perceive, especially upon such a pro-