

Evil Thoughts

by John Newton

John Newton's sermon addresses the nature of evil thoughts, the source of temptation, and the assurance of God's compassion and forgiveness in our struggles.

Scripture: Psalm 34:17, Luke 15:20, Romans 5:20, 1 Corinthians 10:13, Hebrews 4:16

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Gods Love"

Description

John Newton, in a letter dated August 20, 1776, addresses a woman who has been struggling with dark thoughts and temptations, assuring her that her experiences are not uncommon among Christians. He encourages her to see these trials as opportunities for growth and a deeper understanding of God's love and faithfulness. Newton uses the analogy of a child being rescued from a gypsy to illustrate God's compassion and willingness to forgive, emphasizing that God's love far surpasses any human love. He urges the woman to resist the devil's lies and to hold fast to the promises of God's forgiveness and salvation, reminding her that grace abounds where sin abounds.

Transcript

August 20, 1776.

Madam,

Though, in general, I think myself tolerably punctual when I can answer a letter in six or seven weeks after the receipt, yet I feel some pain for not having acknowledged yours sooner. A case like that which you have favoured with an account of, deserved an immediate attention, and when I read it, I proposed writing within a post or two, and I can hardly allow any plea of business to be sufficient excuse for delaying it so long; but our times are in the Lord's hands: may He now enable me to send you what may prove a word in season.

Your exercises have been by no means singular, though they may appear so to yourself; because, in your retired situation, you have not (as you observe) had much opportunity of knowing the experience of other Christians; nor has the guilt with which your mind has been so greatly burdened been properly your own. It was a temptation forced upon you by the enemy, and he shall answer for it.

Undoubtedly it is a mournful proof of the depravity of our nature, that there is that within us which renders us so easily susceptible of his suggestions; a proof of our extreme weakness, that after the clearest and

most satisfying evidences of the truth, we are not able to hold fast our confidence if the Lord permits Satan to sift and shake us. But I can assure you these changes are not uncommon. I have known persons, who, after walking with God comfortably, in the main, for forty years, have been at their wits' end from such assaults as you mention, and been brought to doubt, not only of the reality of their own hopes, but of the very ground and foundation upon which their hopes were built. Had you remained, as it seems you once were, attached to the vanities of a gay and dissipated life, or could you have been contented with a form of godliness, destitute of the power, it is probable you would have remained a stranger to these troubles. Satan would have employed his arts in a different and less perceptible way, to have soothed you into a false peace, and prevented any thought or suspicion of danger from arising in your mind. But when he could no longer detain you in his bondage, or seduce you back again into the world, then, of course, he would change his method, and declare open war against you. A specimen of his power and malice you have experienced: and the Lord whom you loved, because He first loved you, permitted it, not to gratify Satan, but for your benefit-to humble and prove you, to show you what is in your heart, and to do you good in the issue. These things, for the present, are not joyous, but grievous; yet, in the end, they yield the peaceable fruits of righteousness. In the mean time His eye is upon you; He has appointed bounds both to the degree and the duration of the trial; and He does and will afford you such support that you shall not be tried beyond what you are enabled to bear. I doubt not but your conflicts and sorrows will, in due time, terminate in praise and victory, and be sanctified to your fuller establishment in the truth.

I greatly rejoice in the Lord's goodness to your dying parent. How wisely timed, and how exactly suited, was that affecting dispensation, to break the force of those suggestions with which the enemy was aiming to overwhelm your spirit! He could not stand against such an illustrious demonstrative attestation, that the doctrines you had embraced were not cunningly-devised fables. He could proceed no farther in that way; but He is fruitful in resources. His next attempt, of course, was to fix guilt upon your conscience, as if you had yourself formed, and willingly entertained, those thoughts, which, indeed, you suffered with extreme reluctance and pain. Here, likewise, I find he succeeded for a time; but He who broke the former snare will deliver you from this likewise.

The dark and dishonourable thoughts of God, which I hinted at as belonging to a natural state, are very different from the thoughts of your heart concerning Him. You do not conceive of Him as a hard Master, or think you could be more happy in the breach than in the observance of His precepts. You do not prefer the world to His favour, or think you can please Him, and make amends for your sins, by an obedience of your own. These, and such as these, are the thoughts of the natural heart-the very reverse of yours. One thought, however, I confess you have indulged, which is no less dishonourable to the Lord than uncomfortable to yourself. You say, "I dare not believe that God will not impute to me as sin the admission of thoughts which my soul ever abhorred, and to which my will never consented." Nay, you fear lest they should not only be imputed, but unpardonable. But how can this be possible?

Indeed I will not call it your thought, it is your temptation. You tell me you have children. Then you will easily feel a plain illustration, which just now occurs to me. Let me suppose a case which has sometimes happened: a child three or four years of age, we will say, while playing incautiously at a little distance from home, should be suddenly seized and carried away by a gypsy. Poor thing! how terrified, how distressed must it be! Methinks I hear its cries. The sight and violence of the stranger, the recollection of its dear parents, the loss of its pleasing home, the dread and uncertainty of what is yet to befall it. Is it not a wonder that it does not die in agonies? But see, help is at hand! the gypsy is pursued, and the child recovered. Now, my dear Madam, permit me to ask you, if this were your child, how would you receive it?

Perhaps, when the first transports of your joy for its safety would permit you, you might gently chide it for leaving your door. But would you disinherit it? Would you disown it? Would you deliver it up again to the gypsy with your own hands, because it had suffered a violence which it could not withstand, which it abhorred, and to which its will never consented? And yet what is the tenderness of a mother, of ten thousand mothers, to that which our compassionate Saviour bears to every poor soul that has been enabled to flee to Him for salvation? Let us be far from charging that to Him, of which we think we are utterly incapable ourselves.

Take courage, Madam; resist the devil and he will flee from you. If he were to tempt you to anything criminal you would start at the thought, and renounce it with abhorrence. Do the same when he tempts you to question the Lord's compassion and goodness. But there he imposes upon us with a show of humility, and persuades us that we do well to oppose our unworthiness as a sufficient exception to the many express promises of the word. It is said, the blood of Jesus cleanseth from all sin; that all manner of sin shall be forgiven for its sake; that whoever cometh He will in no wise cast out; and that He is able to save to the uttermost. Believe His word and Satan shall be found a liar. If the child had deliberately gone away with the gypsy, had preferred that wretched way of life, had refused to return, though frequently and tenderly invited home; perhaps its parent's love might, in time, be too weak for the pardon of such continued obstinacy. But indeed, in this manner we have all dealt with the Lord, and yet, whenever we are willing to return, He is willing to receive us with open arms, and without an upbraiding word, Luke xv. 20-22. Though our sins have been deepened with scarlet and crimson, enormous as mountains, and countless as the sands, the sum total is, sin has abounded; but where sin hath abounded, grace has much more abounded. After all, I know the Lord keeps the key of comfort in His own hands, yet He has commanded us to attempt comforting one another. I should rejoice to be His instrument of administering comfort to you. I shall hope to hear from you soon; and that you will then be able to inform me He has restored to you the joys of His salvation. But if not, yet wait for Him, and you shall not wait in vain.

I am, &c.,

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