

"I hate vain thoughts, but thy law do I love."

Psalm 119:113

The fall of man has misplaced his affections. Love was originally made for God and *his law*;--hatred, for sin. Now man loves what he ought to hate (John, iii. 19. Rom. i. 32; vi. 12), and hates what he ought to love. (Job, xxi. 14. Ps. xiv. 1. Rom. viii. 7.) The work of Divine grace is to restore the disordered affections to their proper centre, and to bestow them on their right object;--*hating vain thoughts, and loving the law of God*. Few think of the responsibility of their thoughts; as if they were too trifling to be connected with any solemn account. The enlightened soul, however, learns to make a conscience of his thoughts. Here is the seminal principle of sin. (Gen. vi. 5. Prov. xxiii. 7; xxiv. 9.) How must a radical remedy be applied?

Vain thoughts are the natural produce of the unrenewed heart, and of the yet unrenewed part of the believer's heart. Who that "knows the plague of his own heart," and the spirituality of the Christian walk with God, does not constantly complain of their baneful influence? The child of God longs that his "every thought may be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ." (2 Cor. x. 5.) But he "sees another law in his members, warring against the law of his mind;" so that "when he would do good, evil is present with him." (Rom. vii. 21, 23.) When he would "attend upon the Lord without distraction" (1 Cor. vii. 35); many times, even in a single exercise, does he forget his sacred employment. Sin seems to enter into every pore of his soul; and a cloud of *vain thoughts* darkens every avenue to communion with God. He would gladly say, "My heart is fixed, my heart is fixed" (Ps. lvii. 7); but he finds his affections wandering, as "the eyes of the fool, in the ends of the earth" (Prov. xvii. 24), as if there were no object of Divine attraction to his soul. We do not hear the worldling, or indeed the servant of God in his worldly employments, complaining of this burden. He can bring to deep, important, and anxious concerns of this world, all that intensity and fixedness of attention which the emergency may demand. Indeed, the wily adversary would rather assist than hinder this concentration of mind, as diverting the soul from the far more momentous and interesting subjects of eternity. But never do the "sons of God come to present themselves before the Lord," except "Satan comes also among them." (Job, i. 6.)

Vain thoughts are his ceaseless hindrances to our spiritual communion with God. Are we aware of the subtlety, and therefore the peculiar danger, of this temptation? We should instinctively start from an enticement to open transgression. The incursion of defiling or blasphemous thoughts would be such a burden, that we should "have no rest in our spirit," while they remain undisturbed within us. But perhaps neither of these temptations are so formidable as the crowd of thoughts of every kind, incessantly running to and fro in the mind; the indulgence of which, though not actually sinful in itself, yet as effectually restrains the soul from intercourse with God, as the most hateful injections. These are "the little foxes, that spoil the tender grapes." (Cant. ii. 15.) Nay--the *thoughts* may be even spiritual in their nature, and yet *vain* in their tendency; because unsuitable to the present frame, and calculated, and indeed intended by the great enemy, to divert the mind from some positive duty. Who has not felt a serious thought upon an unseasonable subject, and an unseasonable time, to be in its consequences a *vain thought*--the secret

impulse of the false "angel of light" (2 Cor. xi. 14), dividing the attention between two things, so that neither of them may be wholly done, done to any purpose, done at all?¹ If at any time "iniquity has been regarded in the heart;" if the world in any of its thousand forms has regained a temporary ascendancy; or if lusting imaginations are not constantly "held in" as "with bit and bridle;" these *vain thoughts*, ever ready to force their entrance, will at such seasons "get an advantage of us." Restless in their workings, they keep no sabbaths: and can only be successfully met by a watchful and unceasing warfare.

It may indeed be sometimes difficult, in the midst of this continual trial, to maintain a clear sense of adoption. But this is the distinctive mark of Christian sincerity:--Do we cordially *hate* them, as exceedingly sinful in the sight of God (Prov. xxiv. 9), hurtful to our own souls (Cant. ii. 15, and Scott, *in loco*) and contrary to our new nature? (Rom. vii. 22.) If we cannot altogether prevent their entrance, or eject them from their settlement, are we careful not to invite them, not to entertain them, not to suffer them to "*lodge within us?*" (Comp. Jer. iv. 14.) This active *hatred* is a satisfactory proof that they are not so much the natural suggestion of the heart, as the injections of the enemy of our peace. They are at least so directly opposed to our better will and dominant bias, that we may say, "If I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me." (Rom. vii. 20.) Our affliction and conflict with them prove that they dwell with us--not as welcome guests, or as the family of the house--but as "thieves and robbers." Their indulgence *constitutes our sin*. Their indwelling may be considered *only as our temptation*. They supply, indeed, continual matter for watchfulness, humiliation, and resistance; yet so far as they are abhorred and resisted, they are rather our infirmities than our iniquities, and leave no stain of actual guilt upon the conscience. An increasing sense of the sinfulness of sin, and of the extent of duty, will indeed show their deeper aggravations and more persevering opposition. Still, however, even while we groan under their defiling, distracting influence, in our best services, we may assure our confidence in him, who "spareth us, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him" (Mal. iii. 17), and who will gather up the broken parts of our prayers with merciful acceptance.

But the subjugation of this evil--even though we be secured from its condemnation--is a matter of the deepest concern. Forget not--oh, may the impression be indelible!--that it was for these *vain thoughts* that the Saviour was nailed to the cross. Here lies the ground of self-loathing--the quickening principle of conflict and exertion. Let the heart--the seat of this evil disease--be continually washed in the cleansing blood of Calvary; for until the corrupt fountain be cleansed, it must ever "send forth bitter waters." (Comp. 2 Kings, ii. 19-22. Jer. iv. 14.) Let it be diligently "kept" (Prov. iv. 23), and carefully filled, so that it

1 Greenham (one of the most valuable of the Puritan writers upon experimental subjects) used to bring distractions of mind to this test--"If they brought any past sin to mind for his humiliation, or any comfort to excite his thankfulness, or any instruction suitable to the present moment--he took them to be of God. But if they *drew off his mind from present duty* to rove after other subjects, he suspected their source, and girded himself to prayer for increasing steadiness of application to the matter in hand." See his Works, folio, p. 23. Being asked to account for distractions in holy meditations, he said--"It was either want of preparation and sanctifying the heart by prayer before we set upon so holy an exercise, and therefore a rebuke from the Lord for our 'presumption in being bold to work upon holy matters in our own strength'--or else a dependence upon a general purpose of thinking good, or restraining evil, without fastening our minds upon some particular object, but rather ranging up and down,' leaving some part of our mind and meditation void for other matters, without wholly and seriously setting on a thing propounded. When any complained to him of blasphemous thoughts, he would say--'Do not fear them, but abhor them.' "

may be a "good treasure bringing forth good things." (Matt. xii. 35.) Let there be the continued exercise of that "watchfulness" "which is unto prayer" (Matt. xxvi. 41), combined with an unflinching adherence to plain and obvious duty. Let the temptation to desist awhile from services so polluted, that they appear rather to mock God than to worship him, be met on the onset with the most determined opposition. Once admit this suggestion, and our active enemy will pour in successive incursions of *vain thoughts* into our perplexed and yielding minds, to turn us back step by step in our attempts to approach God. If, therefore, we cannot advance as we could wish, let us advance as we can. If a connected train of thought or expression fails us, let us only change--not surrender--our posture of resistance; substituting sighs, desires, tears, and "groanings"--for words, and casting ourselves upon our God in the simple confidence of faith, "Lord, all my desire is before thee, and my groaning is not hid from thee. Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?" (Ps. xxxviii. 9; lvi. 8.) It is far better to wander *in* duty than *from* it. For if *any duty* be neglected on account of the defilement that is mingled with it, for the same reason we must neglect *every other duty*, and, as the final consequence, the worship of God would be abolished from the earth.

Much of our successful warfare, however, depends upon an accurate and well-digested acquaintance with our own hearts--upon a discovery of the bias of the mind in our unoccupied moments, and of the peculiar seasons and circumstances that give most power to temptation. This once known, set a double watch against those doors, by which the enemy has been accustomed to find his most convenient and unobstructed entrance.

But we must not forget the effective means suggested by David's experience--the *love of God's law*. Here rises the native enmity against God--not as the Creator, but the Law-giver--and therefore against his law as the dictate of his will. (Rom. viii. 7.) Here, then, is the power of grace subduing this enmity. Not only I fear, and therefore through fear I keep, but *I love thy law*. And 'He that loves a holy law'--remarks an excellent old writer--'cannot but hate a vain thought.'² For if the law be the transcript of the image of God, the thoughts affectionately drawn out towards him must naturally fix the image of the beloved friend upon the mind, and by a sweet constraint fasten down the thoughts to Divine contemplation. Are we then ever winged with an elevating love to the Saviour? And do we not find our hearts start out from their worldly employments with frequent glances and flights towards the object of our desire? And will not this communion of love gradually mold the soul into a fixed delight, exciting our *hatred*, and strengthening our resistance of every sinful affection? Thus, as *love to the law* stirs up the powers of the renewed man, "spiritual wickedness" will be abhorred, conflicted with, and overcome.

Yet these defilements will remain to die with the last breathings of the old man; which, though crucified indeed and expiring, will struggle with fearful strength and unabated enmity to the end. And let them remain, as humbling mementos of our unclean nature, "shapen in iniquity, and conceived in sin" (Ps. li. 5); and as enlivening our anticipations of that blessed place, where "shall in no wise enter anything that defileth" (Rev. xxi. 27);

2 STEELE'S Antidote against Distractions.

where *vain thoughts*, and whatever beside might "separate between us and our God," will be unknown for ever. Meanwhile let them endear to us the free justification of the Gospel; let them lead us daily and hourly to "the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness" (Zech. xiii. 1); and enhance in our view that heavenly intercession, which provides for the perfect cleansing and accepting of services even such as ours.

Blessed contemplation! Jesus prays not for us, as we do for ourselves. His intercession is without distraction--without interruption. If we are then so dead, that we cannot, and so guilty, that we dare not, pray, and so wandering in our *vain thoughts*, that our prayers appear to be scattered to the winds, rather than to ascend to heaven--if on these accounts combined, we "are so troubled, that we cannot speak" (Ps. lxxvii. 4): yet always is there One to speak for us, of whom "a voice from heaven" testified for our encouragement, "saying--This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matt. iii. 17.) With such hopes, motives, and encouragements, let us "continue instant in prayer" (Rom. xii. 12), *until we pray, and that we may pray*. Let us supplicate our Lord with restless importunity, that his omnipotent love would take hold of these hearts, which every moment sin and Satan seem ready to seize. At the same time, conscious of our hatred of every interruption to his service, and of the simplicity of our affection to his holy law, let us hold fast that confidence before him, which will issue in perfect peace and established consolation.