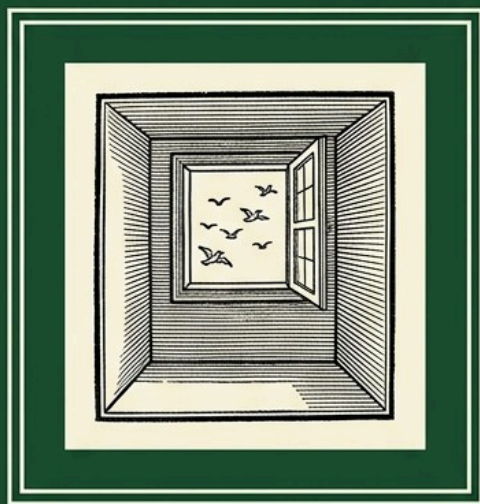


THE VANITY OF THOUGHTS DISCOVERED

THOMAS GOODWIN



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ABOUT THIS BOOK



A searching Puritan examination of the **sinfulness of vain thoughts**, grounded in Jeremiah 4:14. Goodwin probes the heart as a lodging-house where idle, corrupt, and wandering thoughts dwell unchallenged. He defines thought broadly, demonstrates why thoughts constitute genuine sin before God, and traces **seven marks of mental vanity** — from unprofitableness and levity to independence and lust-fulfilling fantasy. The treatise closes with practical **remedies**: furnishing the mind with heavenly knowledge, watchfulness in prayer, and diligence in calling.



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TITLE PAGE



The Vanity of Thoughts Discovered: With Their Danger and Cure.

By Thomas Goodwin, B.D.

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THE VANITY OF THOUGHTS



Jeremiah 4:14. How long shall your vain thoughts lodge within you?

In these words, Jeremiah compares the heart to a house of common resort — a place with many large rooms built to lodge and entertain crowds of guests. Before conversion, all the vain, light, wanton, profane, and dissolute thoughts that roam freely through the world find open access to this house. The heart keeps open house for them, welcoming and entertaining them eagerly. It travels the whole world to find the finest pleasures to feed them. These thoughts lodge and settle there — like unruly revelers — rioting day and night, defiling the rooms they occupy with their loathsome filth. How long, asks the Lord, shall they lodge there? Meanwhile, He stands at the door with His Spirit, His Son, and the train of His graces, knocking (Revelation 3:20), unable to find admittance. Of all this filthiness, the heart — this house — must be washed. Wash your heart from wickedness. Washed, not merely swept of the grosser evils (as in Matthew 12:43, where the house that the unclean spirit re-enters is said to be swept of sins lying loose on the surface), but washed and cleansed of the deeper defilements that stick close, incorporated into the very spirit itself. Second, those vain and unruly guests must be turned out without

warning — they have stayed too long. How long? The time past is more than enough, as the Apostle says. They must lodge there no more. In conversion, the soul — the house — is not to be demolished, only these guests driven out. Though they cannot be kept out entirely while we live in these bodies of clay, they must not be allowed to lodge. If thoughts of anger and revenge enter in the morning, they must be expelled before night. Let not the sun go down upon your wrath (Ephesians 4:26), for by allowing them to stay you may lodge a far worse guest with them: give no place to the Devil (as the verse continues), for he will bring seven worse spirits with him. If impure thoughts press in as you lie down at night, do not let them lodge with you. To sum up: what matters is not that vain thoughts enter your heart and pass through it, but whether they are given lodging. Many good thoughts and impulses may pass like strangers through a wicked man's heart, and likewise many vain thoughts may burst through a believer's heart, disturbing him during good duties with knockings and interruptions. But they do not lodge there — they are not fostered or harbored.

In the ordinary course of this treatment, my aim is to expose the wickedness and vanity of the heart by nature. We are still in the upper parts of the heart — the understanding — and the defilements thereof which must be washed out. The next defilement I intend to address is the one specified here: the vanity of your thoughts. I chose this text as my foundation solely to expose that vanity, and it is therefore what I will chiefly dwell on. This is a subject that, I confess, could prove the most vast of all. To make a thorough particular discovery of the vanities in our thoughts — to travel the whole creation and survey all the vanity that abounds in every creature — was the task of the wisest of men, Solomon, and

the crowning achievement of his studies and labors. Yet the vanity of our thoughts is multiplied many times over within us. This little world of the human mind holds more varieties of vanity than the great world outside. Our thoughts made the creatures subject to vanity (Romans 8:20); therefore our thoughts themselves are subject to vanity far more. In treating this subject I will show you: 1. What is meant by thoughts. 2. What is meant by vanity. 3. That our thoughts are vain. 4. Wherein that vanity consists, both in general and in particular.

First, what is meant by thoughts — especially as the intended subject of this discourse, which in so vast an argument I must necessarily limit. 1. In Scripture, thoughts comprehend all the internal acts of the human mind, of whatever faculty — all the reasonings, consultations, purposes, resolutions, intents, ends, desires, and cares of the mind, as opposed to our external words and actions. Isaiah 66:18 divides all acts into those two: 'I know their works and their thoughts.' What is transacted within the mind is called thoughts; what manifests itself and breaks out into action is called works. So in Genesis 6:5, 'every imagination of the thoughts' — all the things the mind frames within itself: purposes, desires, and so on (as noted in the margin) are evil. Thoughts here means all that comes within the mind (as Ezekiel 11:5 phrases it), and this is indeed how we commonly use and understand the word: to remember someone is to think of him (Genesis 40:14); to have planned something we say, 'I thought to do it'; to take care about a matter is to take thought (1 Samuel 9:5). The reason all these things can be called thoughts is that all affections, desires, and purposes are stirred up by thoughts — bred, nourished, and sustained by them. No single thought passes without stirring some affection of fear,

joy, care, or grief. However, even though thoughts are taken broadly in that sense, I do not at present intend to handle their vanity in that full scope. I must confine myself as closely as possible to the vanity of what is more properly called the thinking, meditating, and considering power of man — which resides in his understanding or spirit. In this sense, thoughts are opposed not only to works, but also to purposes and intents, as in Hebrews 4:12, where the soul and spirit, and thoughts and intents, appear to be contrasted. And in Job 20:2-3, thoughts are attributed specifically to the spirit of understanding. And even more precisely, within the understanding I do not intend to speak of all thoughts in general, nor of reasonings or deliberations about our actions, but only of those musings in the speculative part of the mind.

I can express these thoughts to you in no better way than this: they are the first, simple apprehensions and conceptions that arise in the mind — those fancies and meditations that the understanding, aided by the imagination, frames for itself about things. They are the thoughts on which your mind ponders, dwells, and muses. That is what I mean by thoughts. I mean those conversations of our minds with the things we know — what Scripture calls it in Proverbs 6:22: those inner dialogues, interviews, and exchanges the mind has with the things it has received, with what we fear, with what we love. Our minds make companions of all these things, and our thoughts hold them in ongoing discourse, entertaining a thousand ideas about them. That is what I mean by thoughts. Beyond the reasoning and deliberating power — that more inward faculty by which we constantly ask ourselves what we shall do, reasoning and examining things, the inner cabinet and private council of the heart — there is a more outward reception

chamber that entertains all comers. This is the thinking, meditating, musing power of man. It supplies material for deliberation and reasoning, holds objects before the mind until we examine them, and receives everything that comes to speak with any of our affections.

2. I add that thoughts are what the mind frames within itself — Scripture expresses their origin and manner of arising in this way. Proverbs 6:14 says that stubbornness is in his heart and he forges mischief, as a smith hammers iron out of shape. Thoughts are the materials of this stubbornness within us. Upon everything presented to us, the mind begets thoughts and imaginations. Just as lusts are conceived (James 1; Isaiah 59:4), so too are thoughts — they conceive mischief, bring forth iniquity, hatch serpents' eggs, and weave spiders' webs. And verse 7 speaks specifically of thoughts of wickedness, because our thoughts are spun out of our own hearts — they are eggs of our own laying, even though the things presented to us come from outside.

I add this to distinguish our own thoughts from those injected and cast in from outside — which are fathered by another and often rejected at the door. Such are blasphemous thoughts cast in by Satan, in which if the soul is entirely passive (as the word 'buffeting' implies in 2 Corinthians 12:7), they are not your thoughts but his. The person is in the position of someone locked in a room with a person who swears and curses, unable to leave. Such thoughts, if they come only from without, do not defile the man. Nothing defiles a person except what comes from within (Matthew 15:18-19), or what the heart has begotten upon itself under the devil's influence — as with thoughts of impurity, where the devil may be the father, but the heart is the mother and womb. These thoughts af-

fect the heart accordingly, as one's own children do. We can distinguish them from the other kind by this: if the heart has a soft inward love toward them — if it kisses the child, so to speak — then they are our thoughts. Or if the heart broods upon these eggs, they become our thoughts, even if they came from outside.

Yet I should add this: even those thoughts in which the soul is passive — those Satan casts in, which we in no way own, where he ravishes rather than begets them upon us (if there is no consent in us, it is, as in law, only a rape) — even these are often the punishment of our neglect of our thoughts, of our allowing them to wander. Just as Dinah, because she went out on her own to see the daughters of the land, was taken and ravished against her will — yet it was a punishment for her curiosity — so such invasions may punish our spiritual carelessness. Or they may be the punishment for neglecting the good impulses of the Spirit. When we resist those impulses, we grieve the Spirit, and He deals with us as we deal with our own children: He permits us to be frightened and troubled by Satan, that we may learn what it means to neglect Him and harbor vanity. Lastly, I add that thoughts are what the mind, in and by itself or through the imagination, begets and entertains — because whenever likenesses of things appear in our imaginations, they are at the same moment reflected into the understanding also. It is like two mirrors placed facing each other: whatever image appears in one appears also in the other.

Second, let us consider what vanity is — taking it in all its meanings — for all of them are true of our thoughts.

1. Vanity means unprofitableness. So in Ecclesiastes 1:2-3, all is vanity because there is no profit in anything under the sun. Our thoughts by nature are the same: the wisest of them will not help

us in time of need — in temptation, in distress of conscience, at the hour of death, or on the day of judgment. 1 Corinthians 2:6 — all the wisdom of the wise comes to nothing. Proverbs 10:20 — the heart of the wicked is worth little, not a penny for all of it. By contrast, the thoughts of a godly man are his treasure: out of the good treasure of his heart he brings them forth. He mints them, and they are stored up as his riches. Psalm 139:17 — how precious are they? There the psalmist speaks of our thoughts of God as their object: your thoughts of us are precious.

2. Vanity means lightness. Psalm 62:9 uses the phrase 'lighter than vanity' — and of whom is it spoken? Of men. And if anything in them is lighter than the rest, it is their thoughts, which swim in the uppermost parts and float at the top like the scum of the heart. When all the best, wisest, deepest, and most solid thoughts of Belshazzar the prince were weighed, they were found too light (Daniel 5:17).

3. Vanity stands for folly. So Proverbs 12:11 — vain men are treated as the same as men void of understanding. Such are our thoughts. Among the evils that are said to come out of the heart (Mark 7:22), foolishness is counted as one — that is, thoughts such as madmen and fools have: thoughts that go nowhere, that cannot be traced to any source or directed toward any end, with no logical connection.

4. Vanity stands for inconstancy and frailty. This is why vanity and a shadow are made synonyms in Psalm 144:4. Our thoughts are just like this — fleeting and perishing, like bubbles. Psalm 146:4 — all their thoughts perish.

Lastly, thoughts are vain in the sense of being wicked and sinful. In the text, vanity is paired with wickedness, and 'vain men' and 'sons of Belial' are treated as the same thing (2 Chronicles 13:7). Such are our thoughts by nature. Proverbs 24:9 — the thought of foolishness is sin. And therefore a man should be humbled for a proud thought (Proverbs 30:32), since laying the hand on the mouth (as in Job 40:4) signifies being vile in one's own eyes.

Because this is the sense I must chiefly dwell on in treating the vanity of thoughts — and also because people commonly think that thoughts are free — I will prove to you the only doctrine at stake here: that thoughts are sins.

1. The law judges them (Hebrews 4:12), rebukes a man for them (1 Corinthians 14:25), and therefore they are transgressions of the law. Christ also rebuked the Pharisees for their evil thoughts (Matthew 9:4), which demonstrates the excellence of the law, that it reaches even to thoughts.

2. Thoughts are capable of pardon and must be pardoned, or we cannot be saved (Acts 8:22). This speaks to the greatness of God's compassion, given that our thoughts are so countless.

3. Thoughts must be repented of — indeed, repentance is described as beginning with them. So Isaiah 55:7 — let the wicked man forsake his thoughts. A man is never truly and thoroughly transformed (as 2 Corinthians 10:4-5 shows) until every thought is brought into obedience, which proves that thoughts are naturally rebellious and contrary to grace. This also shows the power of

grace, which is able to rule and subdue so vast an army as our thoughts, and will one day command them completely when we are perfectly holy.

4. Thoughts defile a man. And nothing defiles except sin (Matthew 15:18-19) — out of the heart proceed evil thoughts; these defile the man.

5. Evil thoughts are an abomination to the Lord, who hates nothing but sin and whose pure eyes cannot endure to look on wickedness (Proverbs 15:26). Just as good meditations are acceptable to Him (Psalm 19, last verse), so by the rule of contrast, bad ones are abominable.

6. Vain thoughts hinder all the good we should do and spoil our best efforts. They draw the heart away from God, so that when a man should draw near to Him, his heart — because of his thoughts — is far from Him (Isaiah 29:13). A man's heart goes after his covetousness when he should be listening, as the prophet says, because his thoughts are running elsewhere. And what separates and estranges us from God is sin — it is enmity toward Him.

7. Our thoughts are the first movers of all the evil within us. They make the initial move, and they also bring the heart and the object together. They act as brokers for our lusts, holding up the object until the heart has played the adulterer with it and committed folly. In speculative impurity and in other lusts, they hold up the images of the idols they create, before which the heart bows down and worships. They present credit, riches, and beauty until the heart has worshiped them — and this even when the things themselves are absent.

Now I come to the particular ways in which the vanity of the thinking and meditating power of the mind consists.

First, I will expose it in regard to what is good — how unable and unwilling it is to produce good thoughts. Second, I will address its readiness to think of evil and vain things.

As for the first: the mind in its natural state lacks the ordinary ability to draw holy and useful reflections from everyday events and occasions — something a sanctified mind naturally does. A heart in which true grace is kindled will distill holy, sweet, and useful meditations out of all of God's dealings with it, out of what it sees and hears, and out of every object placed before its thoughts. It does this naturally and consistently, to the degree it is sanctified. So our Savior Christ — every remark He overheard, every incident and event — gave rise in Him to heavenly meditations, as we can see throughout the Gospels. When He came by a well, He spoke of the water of life (John 4), and many other examples like it. In His thoughts He translated the book of creation into the book of grace. This is what Adam's heart did in innocence too: his study of the natural world was truly a kind of divinity, because he saw God in everything, and everything lifted his heart to thankfulness and praise. Our minds, to the degree they are sanctified, will do the same today. As the philosopher's stone was said to turn all metals into gold, as the bee draws honey from every flower, and as a healthy stomach draws nourishment from whatever it receives: so a holy heart, to the degree it is sanctified, converts and digests everything into spiritual and useful thoughts. You can see this in Psalm 107, last verse. That psalm gives many examples of God's providence and wonderful works for the sons of men — deliverances at sea, where men see His wonders; deliverance of captives;

and so on. The refrain throughout is: 'Oh, that men would praise the Lord for the wonderful works He does for the sons of men.' At the end of all those examples, the psalmist concludes that while others pass over such events with only passing thoughts, the righteous will see them and rejoice — that is, they extract joyful thoughts from everything. Whoever is wise observes these things, making holy reflections from them all. From a principle of wisdom they understand God's goodness in everything, and so their hearts are lifted to thoughts of praise, thankfulness, and obedience. Compare this now with Psalm 92, composed for the Sabbath — when in imitation of God, who on that day surveyed His works, we on the Lord's day are still to lift holy, praising thoughts to His glory. The psalmist did just that in verses 1-2 and verse 5: 'How great are Your works!' A brutish man does not know this, nor will a fool understand it. Being a beast, with no sanctified principle of wisdom in him, he looks no further than a beast into all the works of God and the happenings of life. He sees all blessings as things God provided for man's pleasure. But he rarely draws holy, spiritual, or useful thoughts from them — he lacks the skill to do it.

When others wrong us, what do our thoughts distill from those injuries but thoughts of revenge? We think about how to pay them back. But see how naturally David's mind drew other thoughts from Shimei's cursing (2 Samuel 16:11): God has allowed it, and it may even prove a sign of God's favor — God may repay good for it. When we see judgments fall on others, our minds are quick to raise harsh judgments against them, as Job's friends did. But a godly man whose mind is much sanctified draws other thoughts from the same events (Proverbs 21:12) — he wisely considers and reflects.

When outward blessings come to us, our first impulse is to plan for ease from our wealth: 'You have goods laid up for many years.' When troubles come, we quickly fill our minds with complaints, fears, and plans for escape. But what were Job's first thoughts when he received the news of losing everything? 'The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'

Thoughts like these — which every occasion hints at — a good heart is quick to perceive and naturally draws out for its own benefit. So far as our thoughts are barren of such responses, so far they are vain.

Second, the vanity and sinfulness of the mind appears in its reluctance to entertain holy thoughts — its unwillingness to begin setting itself to think about God and the things belonging to our peace. Our minds are as reluctant to do this as schoolboys are to open their books, their heads full of thoughts of play and unable to settle on their lessons. Just so are our minds unwilling to enter into serious reflection, into the solemn thoughts of God, death, and eternity. Men are as reluctant to think of death as thieves are to think of the gallows, and as reluctant to think of God as they are to think of their judge. And when it comes to reviewing their own actions — reading over the blurred record of their hearts and communing with themselves at the end of the day (as David did, Psalm 119:59) — men are as reluctant to do this as schoolboys are to review their lessons and the errors they have made. Job 21 — 'Depart from us,' they say to God, meaning it in their thoughts, for it follows: 'We desire not the knowledge of Your ways.' They would not think of Him or know His ways if left to their own desires. Our minds, like a weak stomach, are nauseated at the very scent of

good things and quickly cast them up again (Romans 1:28) — they do not want to retain the knowledge of God. Try to wind your soul up to holy meditation — to think on what you have heard, what you have done, or what your duty requires — and you will find your mind like the tuning pegs of an instrument: they slip between your fingers as you turn them and fall back down before you realize it. You will find that your mind labors to avoid whatever might occasion such thoughts, just as a person takes a different path to avoid meeting someone he does not want to speak with. Indeed, men dare not be alone for fear that such thoughts might return to them. Even the best of us will gladly seize on any excuse to knock our thoughts off what is good. By contrast, when thinking of vain earthly things, we feel the time passes too fast, the clock strikes too soon, and hours slip away before we notice them.

Third, the vanity and sinfulness of the mind appears in this: even when godly people do entertain good thoughts, the mind will not stay fixed on them for long. There are things we can be fully absorbed in — things we dwell on at length. Job 17:11 calls such thoughts the 'possessions' of the heart (as the original indicates, noted in the margin) — thoughts that please us, the heart dwells on them. We can be so intent on them that they keep us from sleep, as Solomon says of the wealthy man who cannot rest for the multitude of thoughts in his head (Ecclesiastes 5:12). Solomon also says (Proverbs 16:30) that when a man devises wicked schemes, he shuts his eyes — that is, he is intensely focused, poring over his plots. We naturally close our eyes when we want to concentrate, which is why it is expressed that way. But set the mind to work on good things and the things belonging to our peace, and how unsteady it becomes — though these are the very things that should

most draw out the mind's full attention. The more excellent the object, the stronger our attention should be. God is the most glorious object our minds can fix on — the most beautiful. His presence should swallow up all other thoughts, which are not worthy to be seen beside Him. But I appeal to your own experience: are not your thoughts of Him the most unsteady? It is as if you are trying to look at a star through a telescope held in a trembling, palsy-shaken hand. It takes long to bring the mind to any sight of Him, and once you do, the hand shakes and you lose sight of Him again and again. And while we are in the most serious conversation with Him — when everything outside should stand back and not dare to intrude — how many cracks are there in the heart through which other thoughts slip in? Our minds leave God and chase after them, going after our covetousness, our reputation, and so on, as the prophet describes (Ezekiel 33). When we are hearing the Word, how often does the mind slip out of the service and drift back again, so that we miss half of what is said? When we are at our work — which God commands us to do with all our might (Ecclesiastes 9:10) — our minds, like idle truants or careless servants sent on serious business, wander off the path to watch any passing amusement, chase the hares that cross the road, and follow after any butterfly that buzzes nearby.

When we come to pray, Christ commands us to watch (Mark 13:33) — that is, to post a guard at every door so nothing enters to disturb or distract us. But how often does the heart nod off and fall asleep, wandering into another world as people do in dreams? Indeed, distractions come so naturally to us during holy duties that — as bodily weakness causes a person to lose control without noticing — worldly thoughts escape from us before we are aware of

it, and we are swept out of the good stream our mind was running in and pulled into a side channel before we realize what has happened.

Fourth, the vanity of the mind appears in regard to good things in this: even when the mind does think about them, it does so at the wrong time. It is with your thoughts as with your words — their value lies in proper placement and order (Proverbs 25:11). A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver. Just as a man must bring forth his actions in due season, so too should his thoughts — like fruit, they should bud and bloom in their proper time (Psalm 1). The vanity of the mind shows itself in thinking of some good things at the wrong moment. When you are praying, you should have no worldly thoughts enter — not even any thought other than thoughts directed toward prayer. But at that very time, perhaps some insight for a sermon suddenly comes readily to mind. So too when hearing a sermon — a man often has good thoughts that are unconnected to the matter at hand. Or when someone is about to go to prayer, whatever was forgotten at the proper moment rushes in, or some pressing concern enters to divert the mind. This misplacement of thoughts — even good thoughts — still springs from a vanity of the mind. If those same thoughts came at another time, they would be welcome. We find that our minds are ready to spend thoughts on almost anything rather than what God is presently calling us to. When we go to a sermon, we find we could more willingly spend our thoughts on reading, or perhaps examining our hearts — to which, if actually called at another time, we would be most resistant. We are content

to roam freely over the fields of miscellaneous meditations — even good ones — rather than to be held to the task at hand and kept on one set path.

In Adam and in Christ, no thought was ever misplaced. Though their thoughts were as many as the stars, they moved in their courses and kept their order. But our thoughts are like meteors, darting and dancing within us. This disorder is both vanity and sin, no matter how good the thought may be in its content. Not every actor, however talented, should step onto the stage out of turn — each must wait for the right cue. In printing, even the finest letters mar the meaning if they are not set in proper order. Soldiers may under no circumstances break their ranks — and neither should our thoughts. Proverbs 16:3 contains a promise to the righteous man that, as some read it, his thoughts shall be ordered.

So much for the first part — the privative sinfulness in our thoughts with respect to what is good.

Now second, I proceed to expose the positive vanity that appears in our thoughts with respect to what is evil. It is not to be expected — nor indeed can any man accomplish it — to enumerate every particular vain thought that runs through the human heart. I will dwell only on some broader categories to which the particulars may be reduced, giving a taste of the rest.

First, the vanity of thoughts shows itself in what Christ calls 'foolishness' in Mark 7:22 — that is, thoughts such as madmen and fools have. This foolishness is seen in the unsettled restlessness and instability of the mind in its thinking: like mercury it cannot stay fixed. As Solomon says (Proverbs 17:24), a fool's eyes are in the ends of the earth — they are restless, darting up and down

from one end of the earth to the other, shooting and streaming like the meteors you sometimes see blazing across the sky. Now the mind of man is genuinely nimble and able to range from one end of the earth to the other, and this is one of its strengths. But God did not intend this quickness to be spent on restless tumbling and disordered wandering. He meant it to be directed steadily toward His glory, our own salvation, and the good of others. He gave the mind its quickness to turn away from evil and its first appearance. Just as we are to walk in the paths God calls us to, so every thought — like every step — should be steady. Make straight paths for your feet, says the Apostle (Hebrews 12:13) — turn neither to the right nor to the left, until we reach the end of the matter we are thinking about. But our thoughts, at best, are like playful spaniels who do accompany their master and eventually reach the destination with him, but along the way chase every bird and run wildly after every flock of sheep they see. This restlessness comes from a curse on the mind like the one placed on Cain: driven from the presence of the Lord, it becomes a vagabond, and so men's eyes wander to the ends of the earth.

This foolishness also appears in the disconnectedness of our thoughts — they hang together like ropes of sand. We see this most clearly in dreams. But we see it when awake too, even when we are trying to be most serious. How our thoughts jangle and run backward! Like mischievous boys who pick up pens and scribble broken, unconnected words, so do our thoughts. If you could review the record of your thinking, you would find as much nonsense there as you hear in the speeches of madmen. This madness and disorder has been in the human mind since the fall — though it does not show in our words, because we are careful enough to con-

ceal it. If notes were taken of our thoughts, we would find them so scattered that we cannot trace how they entered, where they came from, or where they are going. But God does all things in weight, number, and measure, and His image in us — so far as it is renewed — does the same. Because of these two faults — the foolishness and disconnectedness of our thoughts — we often bring them to no conclusion, no completion. We wander our time away in thinking of, as people say, nothing. As Seneca says of men's lives tossed about at sea — they have been much tossed, but have sailed nowhere — the same can be said of our thoughts in this respect. Or as a person who makes imperfect scrawls and writes nonsense is said to scribble, not to write: so in these follies and disconnections, we wander and lose ourselves — we do not truly think.

But 2. on the other hand, when a strong lust or violent passion is stirred, our thoughts become too fixed and intense, running so deeply into sinful objects that they cannot be pulled out or turned aside. This is a different kind of vanity. Our thoughts and our understanding were designed to moderate, cool, and pull back our passions when they run too high — to rule and govern them. But our thoughts have instead become subject to our affections, and like fuel poured beneath them, only make them boil the more. Even though our thoughts first stir up our fears, joys, and desires, once those passions are aroused they chain our thoughts to their objects so tightly that we cannot free them again. So Christ says to His disciples: 'Why are you troubled, and why do thoughts arise in your hearts?' For disturbances in the affections cause thoughts to rise like fumes and vapors. When a fear takes hold, it summons a crowd of haunting thoughts that we cannot banish or look away from. They follow us everywhere we go, so that a man ends up flee-

ing from his own thoughts, his heart consumed with terror — as Isaiah 33:18 describes. When sorrow rises, it makes us dwell obsessively on the trouble pressing down on us, when forgetting it would bring the mind some relief. But our passions force our thoughts to rehearse the pain over and over, as though demanding we never forget it. When love and desire are aroused — for whatever has captured us, whether position, reputation, beauty, or wealth — our thoughts are set to work examining the object from top to bottom, attending to every detail and circumstance that makes it desirable, as though composing its portrait. When joy is up, we read the thing we rejoice in over and over, as we do a book we love, marking every word and dwelling on every detail. So excessive is this absorption that we often cannot sleep for thinking on it (Ecclesiastes 5:12) — as Solomon says of the covetous man: an abundance of riches will not let him sleep for the multitude of thoughts in his head. How thoughts torment the Belshazzars and Nebuchadnezzars of the world (Daniel 4:19)? So Proverbs 4:16 — such men cannot sleep unless they have done mischief; their unsatisfied desires disturb their thoughts like restless children crying through the night. So often, what men think of as free — as most people think of thoughts — proves in reality the greatest bondage and torment on earth. Thoughts hinder sleep, the nurse of nature; they consume and feed on the heart that bred them; they exhaust the spirits, so that when a man says (as Job 7:13), 'My bed shall comfort me' — hoping to put a pause on his waking troubles — yet his thoughts haunt him even then, and as verse 14 says, terrify him. A man cannot lay his thoughts aside as he does his coat.

When men die, their thoughts will follow them into hell and torment them far worse there. Your thoughts are among the greatest executioners there — they are the worm that never dies.

Third, the vanity of the mind appears in curiosity — a longing and itching to know and dwell on things that do not concern us at all. Take scholars as an example (whose chief work is done in the realm of thought) — how many precious thoughts are wasted this way? The Apostle repeatedly rebukes this love of curiosity in knowledge, as in 1 Timothy 6:4, 20 — oppositions of science falsely so called, curiosity about things not seen. So in Colossians 2 and 1 Timothy 4:7, he calls the elaborate inventions men's minds produce and dote upon 'old wives' fables,' because just as fables entertain old women, so these speculations delight such minds. They have an itch for novelty like a pregnant woman's food craving — never satisfied with what is available and in season, but longing for some unheard-of rarity, far-fetched or entirely out of reach. So men, not contenting themselves with the wonders of God revealed in the depths of His Word and works, launch into another sea of their own making and sail there with pleasure. Many of the medieval scholastics did precisely this in some of their speculations, spending their fine minds spinning elaborate webs from their own imaginations.

Consider also those who have the leisure and ability to read widely. They should be filling their hearts with the Word and taking in the most precious truths of wisdom and sound knowledge — for their own growth, for the benefit of others, and to be equipped to serve their communities. But what does their restless curiosity carry them to read instead? Plays, mocking satires, romances, and fictional stories — the elaborate needlework of idle minds. They

load their heads with frivolity instead of pearls and precious gems. As Solomon says (Proverbs 15:14): the heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouth of fools feeds on foolishness. Foolish stories please their ears and eyes, and all these are merely suppliers — caterers, as it were — feeding the thoughts. Like chameleons, such men live on air and wind.

Then there are those who, out of sheer curiosity, chase after every piece of news floating through the world, skimming all the froth that floats on foolish men's lips, and content themselves only with talking about it, thinking about it, and hearing of it.

I do not condemn all of this: some people have good motives and can put such knowledge to good use — as Nehemiah did, who asked how things were in Jerusalem so that he could rejoice with God's people, mourn with them, pray for them, and shape his prayers accordingly. But I do condemn the restless itch in men when they pursue news for no other reason than to please their fancy, which delights in novelty for its own sake. The Athenians were just this way (Acts 17:21). Some men wait all week to hear outcomes and results, and make it a chief source of happiness to study political affairs more than their own hearts and their proper duties. They take political events as their text, studying and preaching on them wherever they go. I am speaking of those who yet do not lay to heart the sufferings of the Church of Christ or help them with their prayers, even when such occasions arise.

A similar curiosity appears in many who desire to know other people's secrets — things that would do them no good to know — and who study other men's actions and motives not to help or correct them, but simply to know and to muse on them privately with pleasure. This is curiosity in its purest form, a vanity of the think-

ing power that mainly gratifies itself. It is indeed a great sin when much of a man's most pleasurable thinking is spent on things that are none of his concern. The things we ought to know, the things that truly concern us, are already more than enough to occupy all our thoughts — we will have none to spare. And thoughts are precious things — the immediate fruits and first products of an immortal nature. God has given us the power to form them and to invest them in things that concern our own good, the good of our neighbors, and His own glory. To fail to use them this way is the greatest waste in the world. Examine what grain you put in to grind, for God ought to receive His portion of all. Proverbs 24:8 — he who devises evil will be called a troublemaker — not only he who commits a wicked act, but he who plans it. And verse 9 intensifies the charge by comparison: if every thought is sin, then a combination and conspiracy of wicked thoughts is far worse.

But 4. there is a worse vanity than this, the one hinted at in Romans 13, last verse — making provision for the lusts of the flesh, planning and scheming to satisfy them. Thoughts are the providers for our lusts, laying in all their supplies. They scout out the best markets, the best opportunities to sin in any way, the best bargains for reputation, position, and wealth. For example, would a man rise in the world? His thoughts study the art of it. Men invent their own ladders to climb — thinking through ways to advance — though it often turns out, as with Haman, to be the gallows they built for themselves. Would they get rich? What do they study? Every trick of the trade — all the cunning schemes of the world, all the ways of oppressing, defrauding, and cheating those they deal with, so that they come out the winners and everyone else the losers (Isaiah 32:7) — it is said that the instruments of the selfish

man are evil, and he devises wicked plans to ruin the poor. Would a man undermine a rival who stands in his way and threatens his reputation? He will dig and burrow with his thoughts like an engineer working in secret, digging a pit (as Scripture phrases it) and carefully concealing his plans until the moment he can blow up his opponent in a way that leaves the man not knowing who struck him. This calculated, deliberate villainy is worse than all the rest. The more calculated the sin, the worse it is. Consider: in David's case it was the matter of Uriah — not the matter of Bathsheba — that is laid most heavily against him, because he used deliberate strategy in it. He took thought for it. In the matter of Bathsheba, the thoughts took him.

Fifth, there is the acting out of sins in the thoughts and imagination — mentally performing those pleasures you do not currently enjoy in reality, imagining yourself carrying out sinful practices you have no outward opportunity to commit. Theologians call this speculative wickedness. That the imagination has this power is obvious from your dreams, where the fancy plays its part most fully and — to borrow the prophet's imagery — makes you believe you are eating when you are hungry and drinking when you are thirsty (Isaiah 29:8). I do not mean to speak only of the power and corruption of this as it appears in our dreams. It would be well enough if, as the Apostle implies about drunkenness, this speculative wickedness were confined to the nighttime. But corrupt and inflamed passions cast men into such waking dreams. When awake, there are — to borrow the Apostle's language — filthy dreams (Jude 8) that defile the flesh. When the passions lack outward occasion, the imagination builds them a stage, and a man sets his thoughts and fancy to work entertaining his impure and

corrupt desires with shows and plays of his own making. His reason and the full attention of his mind sit as spectators, watching with pleasure while his thoughts inwardly act out his unclean desires, his ambitious schemes, or whatever else he has a mind to.

So empty and vain has the heart of man become, so impatient are our desires and lusts of any interruption, so sinful and corrupt.

First, the heart's emptiness is revealed in this: take all the pleasures of sin even when they are most fully, solidly, and really enjoyed — they are still only shadows, a mere surface and image, as the Apostle calls the world. It is opinion and imagination that casts that varnish of goodness on them, a goodness that is not truly there. Felix and Bernice's grand display is called precisely that — a show. But now this speculative enjoyment of such pleasures purely in imagination (which gives so much pleasure to many men's hearts) — the mere entertaining of thoughts and imaginations about them — is nothing but a shadow of these shadows. The soul, like Ixion, embraces and commits adultery with clouds alone. This is a vanity beyond all other vanities, one that makes us emptier than any other creature. Though other creatures are subject to vanity, none is subject to vanity of this kind.

Second, this reveals our desires to be deeply impatient of being kept from or interrupted in their pleasures. When the soul is so hungry that, even when cut off from the things it desires — lacking the means or opportunity to act out its lusts — it still cannot wait, and turns to imagining them instead: setting the fancy to entertain the mind with empty pictures of those desires drawn in its own thoughts.

3. This also reveals our hearts to be exceedingly sinful and corrupt. An outward act of sin is as fornication with the creature when really committed. But this is incest — defiling the very soul and spirit with imaginations and likenesses begotten in our own fancy, being the children of our own hearts.

And yet, my brothers and sisters, the human mind is full of precisely this speculative enjoyment of pleasures and inward acting out of sins, as the following particulars will show.

First, consider the comforts and advantages a person currently possesses and can draw on: men love to be alone to think about them. Even when they are temporarily cut off from using them, they will keep returning to add them up and survey them, congratulating themselves on their good situation. Just as those who love money love to look at it and count it over, so men love to tally up the comforts and privileges they enjoy that others lack — how rich they are, how important, how they excel others in gifts and abilities. Oh, how much of the precious sand of our thoughts runs out this way! Consider the man in the Gospel — he holds an accounting in his heart: 'Soul,' he says, 'you have goods laid up for many years.' So Haman (Esther 5:11) takes stock of his honors and possessions, recounting the glory of his riches and all the ways the king had promoted him. So Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:30), apparently walking alone and talking to himself like a fool, said: 'Is not this the great Babylon that I have built by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'

Men do the same with their personal excellencies — their learning, wisdom, and gifts. They love to stand and admire these qualities in the mirror of their own self-regard, the way beautiful faces love to look long and often in a looking-glass. This springs

both from the self-flattery within us and from the desire to keep their happiness fresh and continually before their eyes. When such thoughts do not lift the heart in thankfulness to God — when instead they only fan the flames of pride — they are vain and abominable in God's eyes. This is clear from how God dealt with those just mentioned. To one He says, 'You fool, this very night.' The other He strikes with madness and brutishness while the proud word was still in his mouth, giving no further warning. And Haman, as you know, was like a swelling wall — it bulges outward just before it cracks, crumbles, and falls.

Second, this speculative enjoyment of pleasures and inward acting out of sins appears also in regard to things yet to come. When we have something in view or some hope of obtaining it, our thoughts rush ahead to meet it. Men's thoughts entertain their desires with eager anticipation — making vain promises to themselves and feeding on the expectation of pleasures that seem within reach. So the people in Isaiah work themselves up to a higher pitch of celebration even as they drink, because their hearts told them and promised them, 'Tomorrow shall be as today, and much more abundant' (Isaiah 56:12). So those in James 4:13 say to themselves, 'We will go to such a city and spend a year there and make a profit.' The promise of this — the mere thought of it in advance — feeds them and keeps their hearts cheerful. When men rise in the morning, they look ahead with great pleasure to whatever carnal enjoyments the day or week holds: going to such company and making merry, taking a pleasant journey, satisfying some desire, hearing some welcome news, and so on. Just as godly men live by faith in God's promises (Habakkuk 2:4; Isaiah 38:16) — as Hezekiah says, 'By these things men live, and the life of my spirit is

in them' (verse 15), meaning what God has spoken — so carnal men live largely on the promises their own hearts and thoughts make to them beforehand. (This kind of vain self-promising falls under this category of vain thoughts; Psalm 49:11 — their inward thought is that their houses will continue forever, and this thought pleases them.) Is there almost any pleasure a man values highly that he does not first act out privately in his own thoughts? And in this way men foolishly take their own words and promises as binding, befooling themselves in the end, as Jeremiah describes (Jeremiah 17). They borrow in advance — taking in their thoughts the pleasures they expect, like spendthrifts who spend their income before it arrives, or heirs who draw on an inheritance before they come of age to claim it. So when the pleasures they anticipated finally arrive, either they prove to be nothing but dreams (Isaiah 29:6) — the soul wakes up empty — or they fall so far short of expectation, so stale and flat, that there was far more in the imagination than in the reality. This happens because of the vastness and greediness of men's desires, which swallow everything up at once. So in Habakkuk 2 — enlarging his desires like the grave, he swallows up all nations in his thoughts. So does an ambitious scholar devour in his mind all the positions and honors that come into his sight.

Third, this speculative wickedness operates in the same way toward things past — calling back to mind and reviving in thought the pleasure of sinful actions long since committed. The mind runs over the details and circumstances of those same sins with fresh delight. Men raise up their dead actions, long since buried, in the same form they were committed, and hold conversations with them — as the witch and Saul called up Satan in Samuel's likeness.

Instead of drawing a cross over those old sins and blotting them out through faith in Christ's blood, they copy them out again in their thoughts with the same satisfaction. So an impure person studies and reviews every detail of some past act committed with such a person. So a vain scholar mentally replays some impressive performance of his, recalling every passage in it that was most elegant. And in the same way, men chew the cud on any word of praise others have spoken about them. All of this mirrors what a good heart does when it recalls good things heard or read — remembering the particular moments of insight, recalling with what warmth and feeling it was moved when it heard them. Or as a godly man calls to mind the actions of a life well lived, as Hezekiah did: 'Lord, I have walked before You with a perfect heart' — and in doing so stirs and provokes his heart to the same spirit again. So on the contrary, wicked men call back and revive the most pleasurable sinful moments of their lives, sucking a fresh sweetness from them. Nothing reveals more hardness and wickedness of heart than this, and nothing provokes God more.

First, it reveals deep wickedness of heart — a kind that, when it becomes habitual, is not compatible with grace. Romans 6:21 shows that a good heart draws no such fruit from past sinful actions: 'What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed?' The saints reap and distill nothing from those flowers but shame, sorrow, and grieving sighs. When Ephraim remembered his sin, he was ashamed and repented. Can you really reap a new harvest of pleasure from those same sins, again and again?

Second, it reveals great hardness of heart. Nothing is more opposed to true repentance than this, since repentance at its core means calling past sin to mind with shame and sorrow — recalling it with far more grief than there was pleasure in committing it — and whose nature is to hate the very appearance of it, inflaming the heart with zeal and righteous anger against itself. By rehearsing past sin with pleasure, we stain our hearts with fresh guilt and stand by our former act. Just as we provoke God to remember it with renewed displeasure and to send fresh judgment — when, if we had recalled it with grief, He would remember it no more. We show that we take delight in probing the wounds we have already inflicted on Christ. To view the sins of others with pleasure (Romans 1:32) is counted worse than committing them. How much more, then, to revisit and revive our own sins with fresh delight. Therefore understand this: however much you may take pleasure now in replaying your old sins to yourself, in hell nothing will torment you more than their memory. Every detail of every sin will then be as a dagger in your heart. This was the rich man's torment in hell — to remember the good things he had received and the sins he had committed in abusing them. And if godly men here are made to possess the sins of their youth with horror, as Job was, and to have them ever before them, as David had — how constantly will wicked men be terrified by theirs in hell? Their punishment is in great part described to us in Psalm 50:21: 'I will set them in order before you.'

Fourth, this speculative vanity appears in the acting out of sins on the basis of imaginary scenarios — situations a man invents and constructs for himself in his own mind. He first imagines what he would be, and then what he would do. Men build themselves fool's

paradises and then stroll through them. If only they had enough money, what pleasures they would enjoy! If only they held such-and-such a position, how they would conduct themselves! This calls to mind what Absalom said (2 Samuel 15:4): 'Oh that I were made judge in the land, I would do justice for everyone' — he said this with enormous pleasure, almost as much as if he had actually obtained it. This may well be the meaning of Psalm 50:18, where the hypocrite — who outwardly avoids gross sins — is said to consent with the thief and take his share with the adulterer. He does so in his heart and imagination, placing himself alongside them and desiring to be doing what they do. Take a man who is naturally ambitious — one whom his nature, abilities, and upbringing have all fitted to be, at best, a bramble that never rules over the trees, fixed in a lower sphere as incapable of rising higher as the earth is of becoming a star — yet in his own heart he will assume the role of a great man, erect a throne, and sit down upon it, thinking through what he would do if he were a king or a powerful ruler. Take a man who is impure, but now grown old and powerless, no longer able to act his lust as before — yet his thoughts will supply what his strength and opportunity no longer can. He makes his own heart serve as every role in the transaction. So a man who is naturally pleasure-loving but lacks the means to purchase pleasures will entertain himself with thoughts of what combination and mixture of delights he would choose if he could have whatever he wished. He draws up his own bill of fare, mentally composing the perfect cup of pleasure. So a man who is by nature vengeful, but has no power to strike, will please himself with thoughts of vengeance and compose bitter speeches in his mind against the one he hates, rehearsing them when the object of his hatred is not present. A man in

love will mentally court his beloved though she is absent. In his imagination he will make her present and frame careful, composed speeches to her.

In a word, whatever kind of inclination or disposition a man has, no matter how impossible or unlikely it may be that he will ever become what he desires, his fancies and thoughts will reveal what he truly longs to be. Men draw maps of their desires in their minds, calculate their inclinations, and sketch out an imagined life that fills their hearts — and they take pleasure in it. And there is no surer way to know a man's true nature than by this.

First — and this is itself as great a folly as any — this imitates children. Is it not childish to make mud pies and play with puppets? What else are these fantasies? And yet men act out the parts of great lords and powerful figures in their own hearts. Such childishness lives in grown men's hearts.

2. Second, this is also a vanity because a man sets his heart on what does not exist. The things themselves are nothing, even if a man had them (Proverbs 23:5). To please yourself with the mere supposition of having them is far worse.

Third, this reveals the greatest possible discontentment of mind: when men in their own thoughts place themselves in a condition that God has never ordained for them.

USE 1



Having exposed the vanity of your thoughts and the condition of your heart that it reveals, be humbled by them. I ground this on Proverbs 30:32, where Agur teaches us to humble ourselves for thoughts as much as for actions. If you have acted foolishly in exalting yourself, or if you have thought evil, lay your hand upon your mouth. Just as striking the thigh signifies repentance, shame, and sorrow in Ephraim (Jeremiah 31:19), so laying the hand on the mouth signifies a deeper and fuller humiliation — the complete silencing of every excuse (Romans 3:19): every mouth must be stopped. There is nothing left to say — no plea that thoughts are free, no claim that it is impossible to be rid of them. Rather, as Ezekiel 16:63 says: to remember, and to be confounded, and never to open your mouth again. To be vile in your own eyes and not answer back, as Job 40:4-5 describes — this is what it means to lay your hand on your mouth, that is, to humble yourself.

And indeed there is great cause, for your thoughts are the firstborn and eldest children of original sin — and therefore carry its greatest strength, as Jacob called Reuben the firstborn. They are also the parents and originators of all other sins, their younger siblings. They are the first plotters and schemers — the Ahithophels — behind all the treasons and rebellions of our hearts and lives.

They are the bellows that fan all disordered passions into flame. They are the brokers for all our lusts, providing for their satisfaction. They are the disrupters of all good duties, breaking in on and tainting our prayers so that they stink in the nostrils of God.

If their wickedness is not enough to move you, consider their sheer number, for they are constantly rising: this makes our sins more numerous than the grains of sand. The thoughts of Solomon's heart were as the sand — and so are ours. Not a minute passes without as many thoughts leaving us as grains pass through an hourglass in a minute. So even if each thought, taken individually, is the smallest and least of your sins, their sheer multitude makes them greater and heavier in total than all your other sins combined. Nothing is smaller than a grain of sand, yet a heap of them is nothing heavier (Job 6:3) — 'my grief is heavier than the sand.' Suppose each thought is, by itself, worth only a small coin compared to gross defilements. Yet because the mint never rests — not sleeping, not waking — these small coins make up the greatest part of the treasury of wrath you are storing up. And know that God will account for every one, and in your punishment will not cancel a single vain thought. That God looks upon our thoughts in this way is shown in His indictment against the ancient world, which stands on record (Genesis 6). When He pronounced the heavy judgment of destroying that world, did He charge murder, adultery, and gross offenses as the chief cause? Rather, He charged their thoughts — which, because they were so many and so continually evil, provoked Him more than all their other sins. So go down into your heart and consider your thoughts carefully — to humble you and make you vile before God. If in one room of the heart such a treasury of wickedness is found stored up, what must be found in

all those other chambers that Solomon calls 'the innermost parts'? Consider them to humble yourself — but not, for all their multitude, to discourage you. For God has more thoughts of mercy than you have had thoughts of rebellion (Psalm 40:5) — 'Your thoughts toward us' — speaking of thoughts of mercy — 'are more than can be numbered.' You only began yesterday, as it were, to think thoughts of rebellion against Him; but His thoughts of mercy have been from everlasting and reach to everlasting. Therefore in Isaiah 55:7, having mentioned our thoughts — 'let the wicked man forsake his thoughts, and He will have mercy on him' — God purposely adds, because the objection of their multitude might discourage men from hoping for mercy: 'He will abundantly pardon.' And to assure us that His thoughts of mercy far exceed our thoughts of sin, He adds: 'For my thoughts exceed yours as the heavens are higher than the earth.'

USE 2



Let us from now on make it a matter of conscience to guard our thoughts, as Job did (Job 31:1) — 'I made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman?' Solomon gives this special charge above all others: above all keeping, guard your heart (Proverbs 4:23).

First, you are to keep the Lord's day holy, to keep yourself unstained by the world, to keep your neighbor, to keep all the commandments — but above all to keep your heart and, within it, your thoughts. This is the great commandment because it reaches as a foundation to all the others. Just as the commandment that forbids murder also forbids a malicious thought — and so with the rest — so in keeping your thoughts you are in effect keeping all the commandments. Just as original sin is said to be addressed by all the commandments, so too are your thoughts covered by every one of them.

Second, out of the heart come the issues of life. Thoughts and affections are the spring; words and actions are the stream. As your thoughts are, so will your affections be — for thoughts are their bellows. So too will your prayers be, and everything else, for

thoughts are to the soul what the body's spirits are: they run through everything, move everything, and set everything in motion.

Third, consider your relationship to God. Our thoughts are the one territory He claims as His sole domain, and knowing and judging them is one of His greatest titles. Kings may attempt to rule your tongues, bind your hands, and control your actions — but God alone rules your thoughts. It is chiefly through our thoughts that we honor Him in our hearts, and through our thoughts that we walk with God. Shall we then not make conscience of them?

Fourth, consider the work and power of grace. Where does it truly operate but in bringing every thought into obedience (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)? This is the glory of our faith above every other in the world. What makes it difficult and demanding? What makes it so hard a task? The disciplining and confining of the thoughts. What is the difference between sincere Christians and all others? The keeping of the thoughts — without which all religion is merely outward exercise. Catholics may mumble through their prayers; hypocrites may talk — but this is what true godliness looks like.

Fifth, consider the things you are already careful about. If you are careful about your words, because Christ said you will answer for every careless word — why should you not, for the same reason, be careful about your thoughts? Thoughts are the words of the mind; they only lack a form that makes them audible to others, which the tongue supplies. For your thoughts you will answer just as surely as for your words (Hebrews 4:12; 1 Corinthians 4:5). If you are careful about what companions you keep and whom you allow in your home — whom you welcome into your closest com-

pany — then how much more careful should you be about your thoughts, which lodge in your heart. That heart is not yours but God's — built for Himself and for Christ and His Word to dwell in. The things you think about have the most intimate and close fellowship with you. And so, when you think about the Word, it is said to talk with you (Proverbs 6:22). If you are careful about what you eat, because what you eat becomes your blood, then be careful what you think — for thoughts are the food of the soul, as Cicero calls them. 'Your words I did eat,' says Jeremiah, speaking of meditating on the Word.

Sixth, consider where all things are headed. What will be the subject of the great inquiry on the day of judgment? The thoughts and counsels of hearts (1 Corinthians 4:5). And after the judgment, a man's thoughts will prove his greatest executioners. What are the cords with which God binds the condemned for eternity? Their own thoughts — accusing thoughts by which they endlessly review every sin, each one like a dagger (Isaiah 33:18). The torment of the hypocrite is to meditate on terrors — to dwell on God's wrath, the blessedness of the saints, and their own sins and misery without end.

REMEDIES AGAINST VAIN THOUGHTS



The first remedy is to fill and enrich your heart with a good store of sanctified, heavenly knowledge in spiritual and heavenly truths. As Christ says, a good man has a good treasure in his heart (Matthew 13:35) — that is, all the graces and precious truths stored there like gold in the ore, which his thoughts, like a mint, beat out and refine, and which his words bring forth. A good man brings good things out of the good treasure of his heart. If there are no mines of precious truth hidden in the heart, no wonder that our thoughts produce nothing but dross — frothy, vain thoughts arise from a lack of the good materials that should feed the mint. So Solomon says that wicked men forge, mint, or hammer wickedness (Proverbs 6:14). If men have a store of natural knowledge but lack spiritual knowledge useful to themselves — even though in company they may produce good things in speech — when alone their thoughts do not run on them. For this, consider Deuteronomy 6:6-7, which shows that storing the Word in the heart and growing deeply familiar with it is an effective means of keeping our thoughts well occupied when we are alone. The reason the Word is commanded to be laid up in the heart (verses 5-6) is not only to teach it to others, but to fill our thoughts during the times we are most withdrawn and alone — when a man can do

nothing but exercise his mind in thinking. When riding, walking, lying down, or rising up (which are often the times most given to solitary thought — many ride alone, lie down alone, and so on) — even then, God says: 'You shall talk of the Word.' Since a man alone cannot do this by speaking to others, the 'talking' meant here is not only outward conversation with others (though that is included), but talking to yourself — for thoughts are the talking of the mind. And comparing Proverbs 6:22 with this passage (which helpfully interprets it), the point becomes clear. Solomon urges the same duty of binding the Word to the heart and offers this fruit of it: 'When you awake, it shall talk with you' — that is, by thinking of it, the Word will hold conversation with you when you are alone. You will need no better companion; it will keep suggesting something new.

Second, work to maintain lively, holy, and spiritual affections in your heart, and do not let them cool. Do not fall from your first love, your first fear, or your first joy in God. And if you have grown cold, strive to recover those affections again. For as your affections are, so necessarily will your thoughts be. Your affections pull the mind toward the objects that please them. This is why David says (Psalm 119:97): 'Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.' His love for it was what made him think of it so constantly. So Malachi 3:16 — those who feared the Lord and thought on His name are joined together. We often think about what we fear, and we also speak of it often — the verse adds, 'They spoke with one another.' Fear made them think much of His name, and thinking of it made them speak of it. Such are our affections, such are our thoughts, and such are our words — they all correspond. Indeed, thoughts and affections are the mutual causes of each

other. 'While I mused, the fire burned' (Psalm 39:3) — thoughts are the bellows that kindle and inflame affections. And when affections are inflamed, they in turn make thoughts boil over. This is why those newly converted to God, whose affections are fresh and strong, can think about God with greater pleasure than anyone else.

Third, above all other impressions, get your heart possessed with deep, strong, and powerful apprehensions of God's holiness, majesty, omnipresence, and omniscience. If any thoughts have the power to settle, fix, and draw in the human mind, they are thoughts of Him. Why is it that the saints and angels in heaven have not a single vain thought for all eternity, not one wandering glance? His presence holds them fixed — their eyes are never off Him. Take a wanton, restless, undisciplined spirit and place him in the presence of a superior he fears and respects, and that presence steadies and sobers him. This is why Job made careful conscience of his thoughts and dared not look in a wrong direction (Job 31:1-2) — because God sees it, he says. This drew in and anchored David's thoughts (Psalm 139). From the first verse through the twelfth, he unfolds what a constant sense he had of God's greatness, majesty, and omnipresence. And what was the effect? 'When I awake, I am still with You' (verse 18). Whatever objects have made the strongest and deepest impressions on the mind are the ones a man thinks of first when he wakes. David's thoughts had been so powerfully impressed with God that when he woke, he was immediately with Him. We find this confirmed by experience: one of the most effective means of avoiding distraction in prayer is to

expand the mind before or at the beginning of prayer by considering God's attributes and His relationship to us. This will make us serious and steady.

Fourth, do this especially when you first wake, as David did — 'When I awake, I am still with You.' To prevent gas that rises from an empty stomach, people take a good drink in the morning, which gives the stomach something to work on. In the same way, to prevent those vain, airy, and frothy thoughts the heart naturally produces — which rise from inner emptiness — first fill your heart with thoughts of God. Go down into His wine cellar. Observe it whenever you will: the moment you open your eyes, many suitors stand waiting to speak with your thoughts — like clients crowding a lawyer's door. Many vanities and concerns are pressing in. But speak with God first. He will say something to your heart and settle it for the whole day. Do this before the crowd of business comes rushing in upon you. Of some people in the ancient world it is said that whatever they first saw in the morning, they would worship as their god for the rest of that day. The same is true of the idols of men's hearts.

Fifth, keep a watchful eye on your heart throughout the day. Even though thoughts crowd in, observe them — let them know they do not pass unseen. If a man wants to pray rightly, he must also watch what comes in and what goes out. Where strict watch is kept and attentive guardians are posted, examining every vagrant who passes through, you will find few idlers present. The reason such swarms of wandering thoughts gather and march through is that no strict watch is being kept.

This is more or less all you can do, for thoughts will pass regardless — but still: complain about them, resist them, and send them on their way.

Sixth, do not indulge your fancy too much with vanities and curious sights — this breeds vain thoughts. This is why Job says (Job 31:1) that he made a covenant with his eyes, to keep himself from thinking of a young woman. Proverbs 4:25 — let your eyes look straight ahead.

Seventh, be diligent in your calling, and whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might (Ecclesiastes 9:10) — putting the full attention and strength of your mind into it. Let all the stream run to turn your mill. Keeping your thoughts in that channel prevents them from overflowing into vanity and foolishness. 2 Thessalonians 3:11 — those who do not work are busybodies. And 1 Timothy 5:13 — they are called not only idle, because they are not busy with what they should be, but restless, running after what they should not. They go from house to house, their bodies following where their minds wander, having no center to rest in. When David walked alone and unoccupied, what extremes did his spirit run to? Leave ground fallow, and what weeds will quickly grow in it? God has appointed us our callings to occupy our thoughts, to give them work, and to keep them busy in the intervals between acts of worship — because the spirit and thoughts of men are restless and must be engaged somehow. Just as kings keep men of active spirit in constant employment lest their minds turn to plots and mischief, so God appointed even in paradise an occupation for Adam's active spirit to keep him productively busy. By this God hedges in a man's thoughts and sets them to walk a narrow lane, knowing that if they are left unconfined and at liberty, they would

be like wild donkeys sniffing up the wind, as Jeremiah describes (Jeremiah 2:24). Only take care not to overload your mind with more business than you can handle. This is what caused Martha to lose sight of the one thing necessary — she was distracted with many things (Luke 10:41-42). Overload breeds anxiety, which divides and scatters the mind (as the word itself implies), causing wandering thoughts above almost anything else, so that the mind is no longer itself. For this weakens and drains the mind. It is a vanity (Exodus 18:18) — as Jethro said to Moses when he was overwhelmed with work — and you will wear away like a leaf that has lost its moisture. Even the vitality that should be preserved for holy duties will be exhausted. As dreams come from too much business (Ecclesiastes 5:3), so a flood of distracting thoughts comes from an overload of business.

Eighth, in your work and all your ways, commit your work to God for its outcome and success (Proverbs 16:3) — commit your way to the Lord, and your thoughts shall be established and ordered. That is, kept from the confusion, disorder, and swarms of anxious cares that trouble others — and your aims may still be just as well achieved. A few thoughts of faith would spare us many thoughts of anxiety and fear in the work we pursue, which prove vain precisely because they do nothing to advance the work we intend. When waves toss the heart and storms of passion rage, a few thoughts of faith entering the heart will calm everything at once.

The End.

THANKS FOR READING



If you spotted a typo or have feedback, the email is **sam@goodsoilapps.com** — or use the in-app feedback form in *Christian Reader*.