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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 41

Wandering Thoughts

"Bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." 2 Cor. 10:5.

1. But will God so "bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ," that no wandering thought will find a place in the mind, even while we remain in the body So some have vehemently maintained; yea, have affirmed that none are perfected in love unless they are so far perfected in understanding, that all wandering thoughts are done away; unless not only every affection and temper be holy and just and good, but every individual thought which arises in the mind be wise and regular.

2. This is a question of no small importance. For how many of those who fear God, yea, and love him, perhaps with all their heart, have been greatly distressed on this account! How many, by not understanding it right, have not only been distressed, but greatly hurt in their souls; -- cast into unprofitable, yea, mischievous reasonings, such as slackened their motion towards God, and weakened them in running the race set before them! Nay, many, through misapprehensions of this very thing, have cast away the precious gift of God. They have been induced, first, to doubt of, and then to deny, the work God had wrought in their souls; and hereby have grieved the Spirit of God, till he withdrew and left them in utter darkness!

3. How is it then, that amidst the abundance of books which have been lately published almost on all subjects, we should have none upon wandering thoughts at least none that will at all satisfy a calm and serious mind In order to do this in some degree, I purpose to inquire,

I. What are the several sorts of wandering thoughts

II. What are the general occasions of them

III. Which of them are sinful, and which not

IV. Which of them we may expect and pray to be delivered from

I. 1. I purpose to inquire, First, What are the several sorts of wandering thoughts The particular sorts are innumerable; but, in general, they are of two sorts: Thoughts that wander from God; and thoughts that wander from the particular point we have in hand.

2. With regard to the former, all our thoughts are naturally of this kind: For they are continually wandering from God: We think nothing about him: God is not in all our thoughts: We are, one and all, as the Apostle observes, "without God in the world." We think of what we love; but we do not love God; therefore, we think not of him. Or, if we are now and then constrained to think of him for a time, yet as we have not pleasure therein, nay, rather, as these thoughts are not only insipid, but distasteful and irksome to us, we drive them out as soon as we can, and return to what we love to think of. So that the world, and the things of the world, -- what we shall eat, what we shall drink, what we shall put on, -- what we shall see, what we shall hear, what we shall gain, -- how we shall please our senses or our imagination, -- takes up all our time, and engrosses all our thought. So long, therefore, as we love the world; that is, so long as we are in our natural state; all our thoughts, from morning to evening, and from evening to morning, are no other than wandering thoughts.

3. But many times we are not only "without God in the world," but also fighting against him; as there is in every man by nature a "carnal mind which is enmity against God:" No wonder, therefore, that men abound with unbelieving thoughts; either saying in their hearts, "There is no God," or questioning, if not denying, his power or wisdom, his mercy, or justice, or holiness. No wonder that they so often doubt of his providence, at least, of its extending to all events; or that, even though they allow it, they still entertain murmuring or repining thoughts. Nearly related to these, and frequently connected with them, are proud and vain imaginations. Again: Sometimes they are taken up with angry, malicious, or revengeful thoughts; at other times, with airy scenes of pleasure, whether of sense or imagination; whereby the earthly, sensual mind becomes more earthy and sensual still. Now by all these they make flat war with God: These are wandering thoughts of the highest kind.

4. Widely different from these are the other sort of wandering thoughts; in which the heart does not wander from God, but the understanding wanders from the particular point it had then in view. For instance: I sit down to consider those words in the verse preceding the text: "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God." I think, "This ought to be the case with all that are called Christians. But how far is it otherwise! Look round into almost every part of what is termed the Christian world. What manner of weapons are these using In what kind of warfare are they engaged;

While men, like fiends, each other tear; In all the hellish rage of war

See how these Christians love one another! Wherein are they preferable to Turks and Pagans What abomination can be found among Mahometans or Heathens which is not found among Christians also" And thus my mind runs off, before I am aware, from one circumstance to another. Now, all these are, in some sense, wandering thoughts: For although they do not wander from God, much less fight against him, yet they do wander from the particular point I had in view.

II. Such is the nature, such are the sorts (to speak rather usefully than philosophically) of wandering thoughts. But what are the general occasions of them This we are, in the Second place, to consider.

1. And it is easy to observe, that the occasion of the former sort of thoughts, which oppose or wander from God, are, in general, sinful tempers. For instance: Why is not God in all the thoughts, in any of the thoughts of a natural man For a plain reason: Be he rich or poor, learned or unlearned, he is an Atheist; (though not vulgarly so called;) he neither knows nor loves God. Why are his thoughts continually wandering after the world Because he is an idolater. He does not indeed worship an image, or bow down to the stock of a tree; yet is he sunk into equally damnable idolatry: He loves, that is worships, the world. He seeks happiness in the things that are seen, in the pleasures that perish in the using. Why is it that his thoughts are perpetually wandering from the very end of his being, the knowledge of God in Christ Because he is an unbeliever; because he has no faith; or at least, no more than a devil. So all these wandering thoughts easily and naturally spring from that evil root of unbelief.

2. The case is the same in other instances: Pride, anger, revenge, vanity, lust, covetousness, every one of them occasions thoughts suitable to its own nature. And so does every sinful temper of which the human mind is capable. The particulars it is hardly possible, nor is it needful, to enumerate: It suffices to observe, that as many evil tempers as find a place in any soul, so many ways that soul will depart from God, by the worst kind of wandering thoughts.

3. The occasions of the latter kind of wandering thoughts are exceeding various. Multitudes of them

are occasioned by the natural union between the soul and body. How immediately and how deeply is the understanding affected by a diseased body! Let but the blood move irregularly in the brain, and all regular thinking is at an end. Raging madness ensues; and then farewell to all evenness of thought. Yea, let only the spirits be hurried or agitated to a certain degree, and a temporary madness, a delirium, prevents all settled thought. And is not the same irregularity of thought, in a measure, occasioned by every nervous disorder So does the "corruptible body press down the soul, and cause it to muse about many things."

4. But does it only cause this in the time of sickness or preternatural disorder Nay, but more or less, at all times, even in a state of perfect health. Let a man be ever so healthy, he will be more or less delirious every four-and-twenty hours. For does he not sleep And while he sleeps, is he not liable to dream And who then is master of his own thoughts, or able to preserve the order and consistency of them Who can then keep them fixed to any one point, or prevent their wandering from pole to pole

5. But suppose we are awake, are we always so awake that we can steadily govern our thoughts Are we not unavoidably exposed to contrary extremes, by the very nature of this machine, the body Sometimes we are too heavy, too dull and languid, to pursue any chain of thought. Sometimes, on the other hand, we are too lively. The imagination, without leave, starts to and fro, and carries us away hither and thither, whether we will or no; and all this from the merely natural motion of the spirits, or vibration of the nerves.

6. Farther: How many wanderings of thought may arise from those various associations of our ideas which are made entirely without our knowledge, and independently on our choice How these connexions are formed, we cannot tell; but they are formed in a thousand different manners. Nor is it in the power of the wisest or holiest of men to break those associations, or prevent what is the necessary consequences of them, and matter of daily observation. Let the fire but touch one end of the train, and it immediately runs on to the other.

7. Once more: Let us fix our attention as studiously as we are able on any subject, yet let either pleasure or pain arise, especially if it be intense, and it will demand our immediate attention, and attach our thought to itself. It will interrupt the steadiest contemplation, and divert the mind from its favourite subject.

8. These occasions of wandering thoughts lie within, are wrought into our very nature. But they will likewise naturally and necessarily arise from the various impulse of outward objects. Whatever strikes upon the organ of sense, the eye or ear, will raise a perception in the mind. And, accordingly, whatever we see or hear will break in upon our former train of thought. Every man, therefore, that does anything in our sight, or speaks anything in our hearing, occasions our mind to wander, more or less, from the point it was thinking of before.

9. And there is no question but those evil spirits who are continually seeking whom they may devour make use of all the foregoing occasions to hurry and distract our minds. Sometimes by one, sometimes by another, of these means, they will harass and perplex us, and, so far as God permits, interrupt our thoughts, particularly when they are engaged on the best subjects. Nor is this at all strange: They will understand the very springs of thought; and know on which of the bodily organs the imagination, the understanding, and every other faculty of the mind more immediately depends. And hereby they know how, by affecting those organs, to affect the operations dependent on them. Add to this, that they can inject a thousand thoughts, without any of the preceding means; it being as natural

for spirit to act upon spirit, as for matter to act upon matter. These things being considered, we cannot admire that our thought so often wanders from any point which we have in view.

III. 1. What kind of wandering thoughts are sinful, and what not, is the Third thing to be inquired into. And, First, all those thoughts which wander from God, which leave him no room in our minds, are undoubtedly sinful. For all these imply practical Atheism; and by these we are without God in the world. And so much more are all those which are contrary to God, which imply opposition or enmity to him. Such are all murmuring, discontented thoughts, which say, in effect, "We will not have thee to rule over us;" -- all unbelieving thoughts, whether with regard to his being, his attributes, or his providence. I mean, his particular providence over all things, as well as all persons, in the universe; that without which "not a sparrow falls to the ground," by which "the hairs of our head are all numbered;" for as to a general providence, (vulgarly so called,) contradistinguished from a particular, it is only a decent, well-sounding word, which means just nothing.

2. Again: All thoughts which spring from sinful tempers, are undoubtedly sinful. Such, for instance, are those that spring from a revengeful temper, from pride, or lust, or vanity. "An evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit:" Therefore if the tree be evil, so must the fruit be also.

3. And so must those be which either produce or feed any sinful temper; those which either give rise to pride or vanity, to anger or love of the world, or confirm and increase these or any other unholy temper, passion, or affection. For not only whatever flows from evil is evil; but also whatever leads to it; whatever tends to alienate the soul from God, and to make or keep it earthly, sensual, and devilish.

4. Hence, even those thoughts which are occasioned by weakness or disease, by the natural mechanism of the body, or by the laws of vital union, however innocent they may be in themselves, do nevertheless become sinful, when they either produce or cherish and increase in us any sinful temper; suppose the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, or the pride of life. In like manner, the wandering thoughts which are occasioned by the words or actions of other men, if they cause or feed any wrong disposition, then commence sinful. And the same we may observe of those which are suggested or injected by the devil. When they minister to any earthly or devilish temper, (which they do, whenever we give place to them, and thereby make them our own,) then they are equally sinful with the tempers to which they minister.

5. But, abstracting from these cases, wandering thoughts, in the latter sense of the word, that is, thoughts wherein our understanding wanders from the point it has in view, are no more sinful than the motion of the blood in our veins, or of the spirits in our brain. If they arise from an infirm constitution, or from some accidental weakness or distemper, they are as innocent as it is to have a weak constitution or a distempered body. And surely no one doubts but a bad state of nerves, a fever of any kind, and either a transient or a lasting delirium, may consist with perfect innocence. And if they should arise in a soul which is united to a healthful body, either from the natural union between the body and soul, or from any of ten thousand changes which may occur in those organs of the body that minister to thought; -- in any of these cases they are as perfectly innocent as the causes from which they spring. And so they are when they spring from the casual, involuntary associations of our ideas.

6. If our thoughts wander from the point we had in view, by means of other men variously affecting our senses, they are equally innocent still: For it is no more a sin to understand what I see and hear, and in many cases cannot help seeing, hearing, and understanding, than it is to have eyes and ears.

"But if the devil injects wandering thoughts, are not those thoughts evil" They are troublesome, and in that sense evil; but they are not sinful. I do not know that he spoke to our Lord with an audible voice; perhaps he spoke to his heart only when he said, "All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me." But whether he spoke inwardly or outwardly, our Lord doubtless understood what he said. He had therefore a thought correspondent to those words. But was it a sinful thought We know it was not. In him was no sin, either in action, or word, or thought. Nor is there any sin in a thousand thoughts of the same kind, which Satan may inject into any of our Lord's followers.

7. It follows that none of these wandering thoughts (whatever unwary persons have affirmed, thereby grieving whom the Lord had not grieved) are inconsistent with perfect love. Indeed, if they were, then not only sharp pain, but sleep itself, would be inconsistent with it: -- Sharp pain; for whenever this supervenes, whatever we were before thinking of, it will interrupt our thinking, and of course draw our thoughts into another channel: -- Yea, and sleep itself; as it is a state of insensibility and stupidity; and such as is generally mixed with thoughts wandering over the earth, loose, wild, and incoherent. Yet certainly these are consistent with perfect love: So then are all wandering thoughts of this kind.

IV. 1. From what has been observed, it is easy to give a clear answer to the last question, -- What kind of wandering thoughts we may expect and pray to be delivered from.

From the former sort of wandering thoughts, -- those wherein the heart wanders from God; from all that are contrary to his will, or that leave us without God in the world; every one that is perfected in love is unquestionably delivered. This deliverance, therefore, we may expect; this we may, we ought to pray for. Wandering thoughts of this kind imply unbelief, if not enmity against God; but both of these he will destroy, will bring utterly to an end. And indeed, from all sinful wandering thoughts we shall be absolutely delivered. All that are perfected in love are delivered from these; else they were not saved from sin. Men and devils will tempt them all manner of ways; but they cannot prevail over them.

2. With regard to the latter sort of wandering thoughts, the case is widely different. Till the cause is removed, we cannot in reason expect the effect should cease. But the causes or occasions of these will remain as long as we remain in the body. So long, therefore, we have all reason to believe the effects will remain also.

3. To be more particular: Suppose a soul, however holy, to dwell in a distempered body; suppose the brain be so thoroughly disordered, as that raging madness follows; will not all the thoughts be wild and unconnected as long as that disorder continues Suppose a fever occasions that temporary madness which we term a delirium; can there be any just connexion of thought till that delirium is removed Yea, suppose what is called a nervous disorder to rise to so high a degree as to occasion at least a partial madness; will there not be a thousand wandering thoughts And must not these irregular thoughts continue as long as the disorder which occasions them

4. Will not the case be the same with regard to those thoughts that necessarily arise from violent pain They will more or less continue, while that pain continues, by the inviolable order of nature. This order, likewise, will obtain, where the thoughts are disturbed, broken, or interrupted, by any defect of the apprehension, judgement, or imagination, flowing from the natural constitution of the body. And how many interruptions may spring from the unaccountable and involuntary association of our ideas! Now, all these are directly or indirectly caused by the corruptible body pressing down the mind. Nor, therefore, can we expect them to be removed till "this corruptible shall put on incorruption."

5. And then only, when we lie down in the dust, shall we be delivered from those wandering thoughts which are occasioned by what we see and hear, among those by whom we are now surrounded. To avoid these, we must go out of the world: For as long as we remain therein, as long as there are men and women round about us, and we have eyes to see and ears to hear, the things which we daily see and hear will certainly affect our mind, and will more or less break in upon and interrupt our preceding thoughts.

6. And as long as evil spirits roam to and fro in a miserable, disordered world, so long they will assault (whether they can prevail or no) every inhabitant of flesh and blood. They will trouble even those whom they cannot destroy: They will attack, if they cannot conquer. And from these attacks of our restless, unwearied enemies, we must not look for an entire deliverance, till we are lodged "where the wicked cease from troubling, and where the weary are at rest."

7. To sum up the whole: To expect deliverance from those wandering thoughts which are occasioned by evil spirits is to expect that the devil should die or fall asleep, or, at least, should no more go about as a roaring lion. To expect deliverance from those which are occasioned by other men is to expect either that men should cease from the earth, or that we should be absolutely secluded from them, and have no intercourse with them; or that having eyes we should see, neither hear with our ears, but be as senseless as stocks or stones. And to pray for deliverance from those which are occasioned by the body is, in effect, to pray that we may leave the body: Otherwise it is praying for impossibilities and absurdities; praying that God would reconcile contradictions, by continuing our union with a corruptible body without the natural, necessary consequences of that union. It is as if we should pray to be angels and men, mortal and immortal, at the same time. Nay! -- but when that which is immortal is come, mortality is done away.

8. Rather let us pray, both with the spirit and with the understanding, that all these things may work together for our good; that we may suffer all the infirmities of our nature, all the interruptions of men, all the assaults and suggestions of evil spirits, and in all be "more than conquerors." Let us pray, that we may be delivered from all sin; that both the root and branch may be destroyed; that we may be "cleansed from all pollution of flesh and spirit," from every evil temper, and word, and work; that we may "love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul, and with all our strength;" that all the fruit of the Spirit may be found in us, -- not only love, joy, peace, but also "long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, temperance." Pray that all these things may flourish and abound, may increase in you more and more, till an abundant entrance be ministered unto you, into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ!

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Table of Contents

[Español](#)

[What is Wesleyanism?](#)

[John Wesley](#)

[The Journal of John Wesley](#)

[The Life of John Wesley by John Telford](#)

[A Compendium of Natural Philosophy](#)

[The New Testament - John Wesley's Translation](#)

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[The Letters of John Wesley](#)

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[Charles Wesley](#)

[Arminianism](#)

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