



J. HEINRICH ARNOLD

FREEDOM
FROM
SINFUL
THOUGHTS

Freedom from Sinful Thoughts

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J. Heinrich Arnold



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If anyone is thirsty
let him come to me and drink.

If anyone believes in me
streams of living water shall flow
from out his body.

Jesus of Nazareth

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To the Reader

ALTHOUGH twenty-four years have passed since the publication of my father's first book, *Freedom from Sinful Thoughts*, I remember the occasion vividly. He had worked on the book for months, and even though it was a slim little volume, much love, energy, and thought went into it. I had already been working with him in the ministry for two years, but the project of putting together the book cemented our relationship in a wonderful way.

One thing always seemed to concern my father in a special way: the pastoral task of counseling, comforting, and encouraging members of the community who were going through a particular struggle or a hard time. For him, *Freedom from Sinful Thoughts* was a book that had to be written: he had seen too many people whose struggles dragged on in endless

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frustration or despair, and he wanted to share his conviction that there was a way out.

Even before the book appeared in print, it found an amazing echo among readers; using the unfinished manuscript as an outline, he held a series of talks on the struggle for a pure heart. The response was unexpected: letters poured in, and it soon became clear that even if this was not a topic of conversation, it was certainly one of widespread concern, and not only among new or younger believers, but among mature, committed Christians as well.

Once the book was published, the flood of letters only increased. Strangers and prison inmates wrote, telling my father that reading the book had been a turning point in their lives, or that it had given them new courage. More than one person claimed that reading it had saved them from committing suicide. And the book sold, without fanfare, but steadily – year after year.

My father died in 1982, and in the years since, many unpublished materials have come to light and been made accessible: tapes, transcripts, notes, outlines, and volumes and volumes of letters. If this new edition appears unrecognizable to readers familiar with the first edition, it is because the original text has been reorganized and vastly amplified in order to make use of these sources. The heart of

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the book – my father’s insistence that Christ brings relief from struggle, healing from the wounds of evil, and freedom from the bondage of sin – remains unchanged.

Freedom from Sinful Thoughts contains significant insights into a universal and most crucial struggle, in language simple enough for anyone to understand. More than that, it holds out the promise of new life to readers whose self-concern, secret sins, and feelings of guilt or fear block their prayers and keep them from loving God and their neighbor with a free and undivided heart. In a world that often seems dark enough to make one despair, it carries a message of joy and hope.

Johann Christoph Arnold
Rifton, New York, 1997

Foreword

THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION is filled with wisdom concerning the handling of thoughts and emotions, and J. Heinrich Arnold's *Freedom from Sinful Thoughts* is a wonderful example. In a manner not unlike St. Augustine in the West, and the monastic fathers of the East, Arnold confronts the realities of battling temptation and sin from his own communal tradition. His insights are honest and realistic, yet they are infused with an uncompromising faith in the Spirit's power to renew and transform.

We are what we think. This is why we should never underestimate what we allow to enter our minds. It is by means of thoughts that the spirits of evil wage a secret war on the soul. Thus the fifth-century bishop Maximus warns us, "Just as it is easier to sin in the mind than in action, so warfare through our

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impassioned conceptual images of things is harder than warfare through things themselves.”

Jesus says, “From the thoughts of the heart stem evil designs.” He also says, “Wherever your treasure lies, there your heart will be.” For too many of us, including those of us who call ourselves Christians, our private thoughts or fantasies are our treasure. We do not want to sin, but we do not want to give up our private fantasies either. Yet it is precisely in our thought-life where the struggle for good and evil is won or lost. The apostle Paul understood this and so wrote: “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind; then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will” (Rom. 12:1–2). For Paul, the transformation of our actions begins with the transformation of our thoughts – that is, freedom from sinful thoughts is paramount to freedom in Christ.

Arnold’s attention to sinful thoughts must be seen in this greater context of transformation. His is not a morbid preoccupation with perfection. All of us struggle with unwanted images and thoughts. But as Arnold assures us, tempting thoughts are not in and of themselves sinful. It is what we do with them that matters. James says, “Once passion has conceived, it gives birth to sin.” Therefore the question is, Do we nurture the evil thoughts that come to us, linger on

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them, and so feed them; or do we take them up as in a battle and strive to overcome them in Christ?

It is Christ who alone breaks the curse of sin. It is he who gives the struggle meaning—for he is the purpose and goal of all our striving. Therefore Augustine writes, “Let us sing alleluias here on earth...even here amidst trials and temptations and anxiety...not in order to enjoy a life of leisure, but in order to lighten our labors.” It is by praising God in the midst of temptation that we will be freed of heaviness within our souls.

In the end, our struggle is a joyful one. Even when we fail—and we will—we have the assurance that God’s rule of love is greater than our hearts and minds. And further, we can have, as Arnold urges us, “absolute trust in Jesus, so that even if we feel nothing yet, we will give ourselves absolutely and without reserve to him with all we are and have...Then he will give us forgiveness, cleansing, and peace of heart; and these lead to a love that cannot be described.”

To be freed from sinful thoughts is a great gift, a gift of God’s love that every reader may experience in pondering the wisdom of this book. Without it, we are left floundering in frustration. With it, we are more than conquerors.

John Michael Talbot
Eureka Springs, Arkansas, 1997

I

The Struggle

THE PROBLEM of sinful thoughts concerns every believer at one time or another. For the man or woman who is repeatedly plagued with unwanted feelings or images, however, it is a special burden. Every idea presses for realization, and this is a curse if the idea is an evil one. I know of people who, when troubled by an evil desire or idea, would rather die than allow it to become reality – and yet this resolve seems unable to spare them struggle; it is as if they are pursued by the idea. With some it is a matter of envy, spite, or mistrust; with others, sexual fantasies; with still others, hatred, blasphemy, or even murder.

I doubt if anyone can really explain what goes on in his or her own heart. God alone knows the state of each soul. But we do know that according to the

The Struggle

Gospel, “wicked thoughts proceed from the heart,” and that it also says, “Blessed are they whose hearts are pure.” These simple words of Jesus are fundamental to understanding this book.

I have counseled many men and women who are afraid to admit that they struggle with unwanted thoughts; they think they are the only ones afflicted by such things. Actually, in a certain sense, all of us have an evil nature. All of us can, at one time or another in our lives, succumb to the devil, who is not just an abstract idea, but a real force of evil who attacks each person at his or her weakest point. Once the devil wins a place in our heart, the evil that takes root there may lead to words, which in turn will lead to deeds.

As a child growing up in Germany in the 1920s, I heard hateful remarks against the Jews, especially at the Gasthaus across the road from my parents’ house. Most people in the village brushed the anti-Semitism aside, but my father protested it vehemently: “It may only be evil talk now, but it will lead to evil deeds. One day they will really do what they say.” And they did.

Some people are so frequently beset by evil thoughts that they live in what can only be called torment. They, too, must trust that God sees deeper

The Struggle

into the heart. God surely recognizes that despite the wavering of our imagination, our inmost heart does not want the evil thoughts burdening us. And if we remain unsure even of that, we can take comfort in the words of the 13th century mystic Eckhart, who writes: “In order to be set aflame by God’s love, you must long for God. If you cannot yet feel this longing, then long for the longing.” Clearly, any longing for purity, however new or undefined, is the beginning of God’s working in the heart.

There is, of course, a significant difference between deliberately entertaining evil thoughts and struggling against them. I have counseled people who felt so hounded by unwanted thoughts or desires that they told me they would walk around the whole earth, if they could, to be freed of them. They would give anything to find peace of mind and a pure heart.

Such determination is good, but it is important to recognize at the same time that we cannot liberate ourselves in our own strength. The struggle between good and evil is not only something “in the mind,” but a battle of cosmic proportions between sin, which Paul calls “another law at work in the members of our flesh,” and the Spirit. To win this fight demands faith in Jesus, who promises us victory “wherever two or three gather in my name.”

The Struggle

Many Christians do not believe in the reality of this fight, let alone in the reality of evil. This book will be of no use to them. Rather, it is intended for those who have known sin, who earnestly seek to be freed of its weight, and who long for purity of heart.

As a subject for a book, “sinful thoughts” is not a fashionable one; yet I have come to see, over many years, that it is something thousands of people battle with. If this little book can help guide even one of them toward the freedom of the cross, it will have served its purpose.

Temptation

WHERE DOES temptation end and sin begin? If we are plagued or tempted by evil thoughts, that in itself is not sinning. For instance, if we feel tempted to lash out at someone who has wronged us, yet then find strength to forgive him, we have not sinned. But if we refuse to let go of our hurt and hold a grudge against him, that is sin. In the same way, if we are aroused by a lustful thought but reject it, we have not sinned. Naturally it is quite different if we willingly pursue that thought, for instance by buying a pornographic magazine.

It is always a question of what we do when temptation comes. Martin Luther once wrote that evil thoughts come like birds flying over our heads. We cannot help that. But if we allow them to build nests on our heads, then we are responsible for them.

Temptation

We will never be completely free of temptation; we should not even expect it. Even Jesus was tempted. Satan came to him in the wilderness disguised as an angel, and used words from scripture to tempt him – and only after the third temptation did Jesus recognize him and say, “Be gone from me, Satan! For scripture says, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him alone.’” When the devil realized that he had been recognized, he left Jesus. Then angels came to him and brought him food (Matt. 4:10–11).

At one time the idea of Jesus being tempted like an ordinary human being seemed blasphemous to me. Yet there is no question: he was, although he never sinned. This is of crucial importance, in the first place for our own inner lives, but also in the way we treat others who battle severe temptations:

As we children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. For surely it is not with angels that he is concerned but with the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might

Temptation

become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. And because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted (Heb. 2:14–18).

The writer of the letter is so concerned that this is clear to the reader, that he says it again in chapter 4, verse 15:

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning.

Jesus never sinned. Even in the severest battle of his life—at Gethsemane, where he must have contended with forces of darkness beyond our power to imagine, with whole armies of evil spirits fighting for his heart—he never swerved from his love to his Father. He remained obedient and loyal.

For us, the struggle against darkness in our hearts will remain as long as we live. That is the bitter truth, and it means that we can never overcome the evil besetting us with our own strength. The issue is not merely thoughts, feelings, or images, but warring spirits—Paul calls them “powers, authorities, and potentates of darkness.” We will need to pray for God’s protection again and again; and

Temptation

when temptations come in spite of our prayers, we will have to ask for an answer to each of them. Yet there is no reason to despair:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way of escape so that you can stand up under it (1 Cor. 10:13).

No one of us will ever have to undergo a battle as desperate as the one Jesus fought for us on the cross. In this struggle he took the full weight of our condition, including temptation, upon himself in order to redeem us. Temptation is not sin.

Deliberate Sin

IT IS ONE THING to be tormented by ideas or images we do not want, but quite another to pursue them intentionally. People who deliberately watch violent films or read pornographic literature for the pleasure it gives them are not simply struggling with temptation; they are sinning. I am assuming, in what I write, that the reader does not want those things he knows to be evil!

When we willingly entertain an evil thought, we are playing with forces of darkness whose power we may be unaware of. It is easy (and commonplace) to shrug off this idea; people say, “It doesn’t hurt anyone, does it?” or “It’s all in your head...” Yet there is a reason for the saying, “Thoughts are giants” – they press toward concrete realization, and if they are evil thoughts, they will lead to evil

