

Jeremiah 17:9

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

Analysis

This is one of Scripture's most penetrating assessments of human nature. The Hebrew *aqov* (אָקוֹף, "deceitful") comes from the same root as Jacob's name, meaning "heel-grabber" or "supplanter"—one who deceives and tricks. The heart is not merely mistaken but actively deceptive, skilled at self-justification and rationalization. "Above all things" (literally "from all") indicates the heart surpasses everything else in its capacity for deception.

"Desperately wicked" translates *anush* (אָנֹשׁ), which can mean incurably sick, frail, or mortal. The heart's condition is terminal—beyond human remedy. The rhetorical question "who can know it?" emphasizes the depth and inscrutability of human corruption. We cannot even accurately diagnose our own hearts, let alone cure them.

This verse is foundational for the Reformed doctrine of total depravity. Not that humans are as evil as possible, but that sin affects every faculty, including moral judgment. The heart, which should guide us, is itself corrupted. This explains why all humanity sins (Rom 3:10-18, 23) and why regeneration must be God's sovereign work (Ezek 36:26, 2 Cor 5:17). Only divine omniscience can truly know the heart (Jer 17:10), and only divine power can transform it.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern thought often located emotions, will, and moral consciousness in internal organs—heart, kidneys, liver. The Hebrew *lev* (לֵב, heart) encompassed the whole inner person, including intellect, affections, and will. Jeremiah's radical assessment of the heart's depravity challenged both ancient and modern assumptions about innate human goodness. This text became central to Reformed theological anthropology and debates about human nature.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. How does this verse expose the inadequacy of trusting your own moral intuitions or emotions as guides for life?
2. In what ways have you experienced your heart's deceitfulness through self-justification or rationalization of sin?
3. How does the doctrine of the heart's depravity drive us to Christ as our only hope for transformation?

Interlinear Text

עָקֹב	הַלֵּב	מִפֶּלַע	וְאֵלֶּיךָ	הוּא
is deceitful	The heart	H3605	above all things and desperately wicked	H1931
H6121	H3820		H605	
יִדְעוּ	יִדְעוּ			
H4310	who can know			
	H3045			

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 15:19 (Evil): For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies:

Hebrews 3:12 (Evil): Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.

Proverbs 28:26 (Parallel theme): He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered.

Ecclesiastes 9:3 (Evil): This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

Genesis 6:5 (Evil): And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Genesis 8:21 (Evil): And the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done.

Matthew 13:15 (Parallel theme): For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.

Jeremiah 16:12 (Evil): And ye have done worse than your fathers; for, behold, ye walk every one after the imagination of his evil heart, that they may not hearken unto me:

Psalms 51:5 (Parallel theme): Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.