

P O R T R A I T
O F T H E
H E A R T



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P O R T R A I T
O F T H E
H E A R T

101 DAILY STUDIES FOR GROWING IN WISDOM AND CHARACTER

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D A V I D B A L L


REDEMPTION
PRESS

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To those who love, and to those who care . . .





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But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.
—Luke 8:15



PRELUDE

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HEART

New Year's Eve—Sydney Harbour. A large crowd gathers expectantly around the foreshore and on a giant flotilla of boats. It has been an exciting and joyful year for some, a difficult and draining year for others.

Picnic hampers are unpacked and champagne corks popped. Old friends are greeted and new introductions made. Thoughts also turn to what may lie ahead for the coming year—to New Year's resolutions (which everyone knows will be broken by the second week of January) and to more enduring hopes and dreams. Will this be the year for new romance? Will it be the year where we land our dream job? Will it be a year of happiness, or a year of trial, or perhaps both at once?

As the clock ticks down to midnight, all eyes turn towards the Sydney Harbour Bridge—the centrepiece of the pyrotechnic display that will soon light up the harbour. Everyone will soon be held spellbound by a spectacular burst of colour, light and sound that will literally welcome in the New Year with a bang.

At the stroke of midnight, fireworks erupt from barges on either side of the bridge and up and down the harbour. The bridge itself is transformed into a glorious birthday cake, with candles

shooting heavenwards across the top of the arch, and a rainbow waterfall underneath.

And, in the centre, a gigantic heart towers over the harbour like a beacon. Reddish-pink in tone and full of radiant energy, it captivates the attention of all who gaze on it. For it speaks to our own hearts as if saying, “Press on, press on, my friend, and live your life to the fullest.”

The Vitality of the Heart

The human heart is a wonderful and precious thing. Without it, human life literally stops. The heart pumps our blood around our bodies using a type of involuntary muscle that is found nowhere else in our physiology. Via the bloodstream, it delivers oxygen to our cells and collects carbon dioxide to be exhaled from our lungs. Our hearts will beat several billion times if we have an adult lifespan.

Symbolically, the heart represents our deepest desires and impulses. For early Greek philosophers, led by Aristotle, the heart was the centre of thought (or intellect), emotion (or feeling) and reason. It was only later—from Plato onwards—that reason and thought began to be associated with the brain instead, with the heart becoming the repository of the emotions only.

In contemporary English usage, the heart remains an important symbol of our emotions, but also of our energies, attitudes and commitments. A wide variety of words and phrases are derived from it. When someone is kind or generous, for example, we say they are “all heart”. Our intimate conversations are “heart to heart”. When we act with enthusiasm and unreserved commitment, we do so “wholeheartedly”.

When we want to let someone know we are sincere, we say we are speaking “from the bottom of our heart”. Our deepest personal feelings are held in our “heart of hearts”. If we display our feelings openly, we are said to “wear our hearts on our sleeves”. When we are merciful, we “have a heart”, and we gain energy from eating “hearty” meals.

We can break someone’s heart by rejecting his or her love, and our hearts are lonely where we have no one to love, or no one to love us.

Grief causes heartache, and despondency—or loss of hope—makes us heartsick. We lose our hearts to another when we fall in love, but sometimes we simply lose heart altogether.

If we are generous, compassionate, or sympathetic, we are said to be kind hearted or tender hearted. Our hearts are warmed by pleasant news or by gratitude for another person's kindness. We suffer heart attacks, and have heart-stopping moments of panic when we fear that disaster may be about to strike. We have heartburn when we cannot digest our food.

If we are cruel, callous, or uncaring, we are said to have hearts of stone, or to be altogether heartless. We have black hearts, blue hearts and hearts of gold. If we care deeply about someone who is in need, we promise that we will be there in a heartbeat. There can be rain in our hearts, or sunshine. Our hearts can be icy, or they can be aflame with passion. If we do not put our heart into our various plans and activities, we will be doing no more than going through the motions, for all our endeavours must come “from the heart” if we want them to succeed.

Why Another Book About The Heart?

Just as the word “heart” is widely used in contemporary English, so also in the Scriptures. A quick search through a comprehensive word index—or concordance—reveals that, after the various words for God (Yahweh, Lord, Christ, Holy Spirit, etc.), the word “heart” is referenced approximately one thousand times in the Old and New Testaments combined. It is just about the most common substantive word in the Scriptures as a whole, other than words for “God”, and “Israel”. By comparison, there are around 800 references to “sin”, around seven hundred references to “love”, and around six hundred references to the human soul. There are also over 100 different adjectives associated with the heart—from love to hate, from pride to pain, and from sorrow to joy.

Despite, or perhaps because of, our apparent familiarity with the heart as an image of human nature and of life itself, it appears there have been few, if any, recent books that attempt to examine thoroughly the Scriptures' perspective on the human heart. At one end of the spectrum, there are many Christian books that use the heart as a symbol of inspiration or motivation. They tend to be based on the idea that, if we are true to our hearts, and seek to do good, then all will be well and we will be

able to overcome whatever challenges life may bring. The weakness of these books is that they often do not include a focused examination of the Scriptures, but are instead primarily based on motivational psychology and on accounts of personal experience.

At the other extreme, there are plenty of Christian books that are based on a rigorous understanding of the Scriptures. These books tend to focus on the nature, character and actions of God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit), and on the great biblical themes of love, grace, sin, salvation and restoration. However, it appears that few of these writings, at least in recent times, have attempted to address the teachings of the Scriptures about the human heart in a systematic way.

Of course, God being God, it is appropriate for Christian theology to take God himself as its primary subject. God's majesty and holiness—as evidenced in creation, in the Scriptures themselves and in Christ's life, death and resurrection—are glorious themes, and it is fitting that Christian writers devote their energies to examining and celebrating them as fully as possible.

That said, the Scriptures also make it clear that we humans matter to God. He has made us only a little lower than heavenly beings and has crowned us with glory and honour (Ps. 8:5). He has formed our hearts (Ps. 33:15) and has given us responsibility over all the earth—bird and beast, fish and forest (Gen. 1:28). When it comes to fully understanding the Scriptures, it is therefore important that the riches and depths of their teachings about the human heart not be overlooked.

Explaining the Gap

When writing this book, I asked a number of people in my immediate church circles here in Sydney to name what they thought the most common word in the Scriptures—besides words for God himself—might be. Most respondents went for love, sin, or grace. No one suspected that the “heart” might come close. Of course, one possible explanation for why the word “heart” did not figure in the answers to my ad hoc survey is that my sample size was tiny, and was taken from just one small segment of the global Christian community.

It is probable, however, that this result also has other, much deeper, explanations. These include not only the Scriptures' primary focus on

the glory of God, as noted above, but also the prominence of “sin” in the Scriptures, the lack of a pattern in the biblical references to the human heart, and the competing importance of “the mind” in western Christian thought.

The Scriptures contain many examples of wicked, evil and corrupt human behaviour that dishonours God by rejecting and disobeying his holy and perfect commands. It may therefore be tempting to think the human heart is a rather depressing and unproductive topic, and that our energies would instead be better spent on other, more worthy, subjects, such as God’s graciousness in offering us salvation and redemption through faith in Christ.

Even though there is plenty of truth in the view that the human heart is in dire need of God’s cleansing and healing, the Scriptures do not allow us the option of simply writing off the heart, or ignoring it altogether. It is not right for us to honour God while at the same time cursing human beings, who have been made in his image, or likeness (James 3:9-10). As befits his own holiness and perfection, God has created and designed us for good and noble purposes, including making his love known to one another and taking care of the world he has made.

It is also important to appreciate that although the depiction of sin in the Scriptures focuses primarily on our thoughts, actions and motives, and although our motives shape the thoughts of our minds (1 Chron. 28:9), the Scriptures also tell us that the heart is the “wellspring” of our lives (Prov. 4:23). We will miss a full and proper understanding of ourselves, and of our actions, if we do not also turn our attention to our hearts as the ultimate source of those actions.

Assumed Knowledge?

Another reason why inadequate attention may have been paid to the portrait of the human heart that is presented to us in the Scriptures is that there are few, if any, passages in the Scriptures that expressly focus our attention on the human heart in any sustained way. There is no “heart” equivalent to Paul’s description of love in his first letter to the church at Corinth, or his depiction of sin at the start of his letter to the church at Rome, or his portrayals of faith later in Romans and in his letter to the church at Galatia.

The thousand or so references to the heart in the Scriptures are widely scattered, from Genesis chapter 6 to Revelation chapter 18. Even in the book of Proverbs, where the greatest number of them appear, they are quite dispersed and not easy to compile. And even Proverbs has its own outward-looking agenda, which is more focused on the practicalities of everyday life than on the inner workings of the heart. Proverbs seeks to describe the various types of behaviour that arise from the contents of our hearts, but it makes no direct attempt to explain them.

One other reason why there are so many references to the heart in the Scriptures, but no focused discussion of the heart in any particular passages, may be that the various biblical writers simply assumed that their readers knew what the heart was, and that the cognitive, emotional and spiritual role of the heart in their lives was well understood. If so, they may not have seen the need to spend any specific time focusing on it themselves. Of course, it goes almost without saying that the many centuries that have now elapsed since the Scriptures were written mean that this assumption can no longer be justified.

The Competing Influence of “The Mind”

Contemporary Christian thought emphasises loving God with our minds. The mind is supposed to both control and stimulate our emotions, not the other way around. In part, this rightly reflects Paul’s exhortation that we should be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). It is appropriate that we cultivate logical and rational thought, and bring all our mental energy and discipline to bear on the task of understanding and interpreting the Scriptures, so that we might be better able to discern the Lord’s will.

In the Old Testament, however, the idea that the mind is separate from the heart does not find much support. Its writers did not draw a clear distinction between “heart” and “mind”, but mostly used the same word for both. Where a separate word for “mind” is used in English translations, it usually refers to conscious and focused recollection, as in “bear in mind” or “kept in mind” (Ex. 16:29, Gen. 37:11), and even in these cases the word “mind” usually does not appear in the Hebrew at all. Some English translations occasionally even use the word “mind” to

translate the Hebrew word for “heart,” thereby implying a distinction that did not exist (1 Sam. 14:7, Ps. 83:5).

The Old Testament Scriptures tell us to love God firstly with all our hearts, and then with all our soul and strength and might (Deut. 6:4-5). Only in the New Testament, which was written after the Greeks separated the heart from the mind, are we specifically exhorted to love God with our minds as well as with our hearts. Even in the New Testament, however, our hearts still come first (Matt. 22:37).

The primacy of the heart in the Scriptures means that it would be a mistake to think that the products of the “mind”, such as logic, reason and rationality, can tell us everything we need to know about how to live our lives. The collective human mind has brought us many benefits and is to be celebrated accordingly, but a great novel cannot be produced using logic alone, and we cannot love our family and friends solely through the power of rational thought. Accordingly, it would be most unfortunate if we allow our focus on the “mind” to filter or obscure what the Scriptures also say about the deeper and less “rational” motivations of our hearts.

Reclaiming the Heart

This book delves into the rich treasure trove of information about the human heart that is presented in the Scriptures, primarily via the Hebrew words *leb* and *lebab*, and the Greek word *kardia*. Occasionally, it also draws on various other infrequent Hebrew words for our “inward parts”, and on a few scriptural uses of the Hebrew word for “soul”—in reference to human desires—that are often translated as “heart” in modern English versions. The Bible’s portrayal of the human heart illuminates the full spectrum of human behaviour for us. It also depicts, precisely and sometimes graphically, the full impact of our innermost thoughts and desires on our attitudes towards God and on the way we treat other people.

By carefully studying the teachings of the Scriptures about the human heart, we will find that we are in a much better position to understand both ourselves and other people, and to improve our ability to love other people as God has first loved us. We will find that God has been gracious in giving us writings that not only enable us to see him more clearly, but ourselves and others as well.

As well as illuminating our own hearts, the Scriptures also offer us a window into God's own heart—his love, his mercy and compassion, his justice, and his offer of redemption and ultimate restoration in Christ. Thus, they also tell us the story of the relationship between God and man from both perspectives—God's perspective, and ours.

Of course, any relationship is a two-way street, with joy and disappointment on both sides, and the relationship between God and humankind is no exception. There are frustrations, delights, longings and hopes, all of which make for a complex relationship, and which defy any glib or impatient answers. The stories of God's love for us, and of our response, are closely intertwined, and our own interpretations of his behaviour may not always be accurate.

Cultivating a Heart of Wisdom

As will become apparent throughout this book, the key to a healthy heart lies in cultivating wisdom, so that we can see ourselves and the realities of the world around us more clearly. Our hearts are the place of our deepest desires, ambitions and thoughts, and are the source of our energy and motivation for living, but they are vulnerable to various limitations on our ability to discern what is good, and they must be guarded carefully.

Without wisdom and discipline, the Scriptures tell us that our hearts can fall into various traps that can substantially damage our lives and relationships. We are in great need of God's unfailing love, compassion and faithfulness. Fortunately for us, he is both willing and able to transform our hearts, and breathe new life into them, when we put our faith in Christ. As we shall see, Christ himself is the greatest available source of joy and wisdom, for only in him can the path of life and peace be found.

The Eyes of Our Hearts

The world God has made, and in which we live, has enormous variety in it, and each person who dwells in it is unique. There will be countless ways in which the content and character of our hearts find their expression in day-to-day life and in human dreams, desires and

actions. We should celebrate the diversity of God's world, rather than fearing or attempting to control it, for it displays God's power, majesty and creativity. Accordingly, it would be a great shame if the portrait of the human heart, as set out for us in the Scriptures, were to be domesticated into do's and don'ts. Where legalism replaces love, our ability to see and experience God's power, majesty and creativity is diminished, for it inevitably focuses us on our own efforts instead.

Given the richness of all that the Scriptures say about the human heart, countless books could be written about practical application. The contemporary examples and illustrations at the start of each chapter of this book are therefore indicative, not definitive. Except for "gold fever" at the start of chapter 1, they are short fictionalised stories that bring many of the relevant scriptural themes to life, and will hopefully prompt the reader to identify further examples based on his or her own experiences.

My hope is that these illustrations, and this book as a whole, may serve as a starting point for further reflection and action in other situations, and might promote greater awareness and understanding of human behaviour. My prayer is that God may open the eyes of our hearts (Eph. 1:18) to see ourselves as we really are, to enable us to obtain wisdom and understanding, and to appreciate more fully the heights and depths of the love, mercy, justice and compassion that he has shown us in Christ.

How to Get the Most out of This Book

The remainder of this book is divided into 101 short studies. Most of them depict a commonly observed character trait, or behavioural trait, of the human heart. The remainder depict either the consequences that those traits have for us in our day-to-day lives, or a characteristic of God's own heart.

This structure is intended to make it easy to read one study each day, to dip in and out, and to find particular topics that may be of special interest from time to time. That said, this book has also been written as a unified whole, and you will probably gain significant additional value by reading it cover to cover. One way to do this might be to read it straight through first, as if the reflection questions at the end of each

study were not included, before returning to each study in more detail. You will also probably get more from the introductory stories if you read them again after finishing each chapter.

The reflection questions on the next page, and at the end of each of the 101 studies, could also readily be used on a chapter-by-chapter basis as discussion questions for home Bible study or fellowship groups.

The remainder of this book is also divided into five parts—A to E. In some respects at least, each part has its own unique flavour:

- Part A describes the key role that our hearts play in deciding how we should live our lives, the various mistakes we can make along the way, and God's own heart towards us.
- Part B examines our struggle to attain wisdom and discipline, and to avoid making similar mistakes in the future.
- Part C explores the darker and more painful aspects of the human condition—evil and suffering. Some readers may wish to move through this section relatively quickly, while others may be content to take more time.
- Part D focuses on the blessings—particularly love, joy and peace—that God has in store for those of us who have put our faith in Christ, and on their transforming effects on our lives.
- Part E is a short epilogue about the central importance of Christ as the true source and fulfilment of wisdom.

It would be helpful to have a Bible with you as you work your way through this book, so you can explore for yourself the various scriptural text references included throughout, and the context in which they occur. My prayer is that God will bless you abundantly as you do so.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What does the heart represent for you?
2. Why has the heart been a neglected biblical topic?

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HEART

3. Why is the Bible's teaching about the heart important?
4. What do you see as the key characteristics of the heart?
5. What is the relationship between the heart and the mind?
6. How do our hearts influence our actions towards other people?





PART A





CHAPTER 1

THE ENERGIES OF THE HEART

Gold Fever

In January 1848, the great California gold rush began with the discovery of gold at Coloma, about 140 miles northeast of San Francisco. Over the next few years, several hundred thousand people flocked to the surrounding hills and valleys, all seeking their fortunes. They came not only from other parts of America, but from all over the world, including Europe, Asia, South America and Australia.

For some, the decision to leave their former lives would have been an easy one: energetic and youthful men and women with no family ties, or who were unhappy with their current circumstances and felt they had nothing else to lose. For others, the decision to follow the lure of the gold would have been more difficult, as it involved uprooting their families from their homes and walking away from stable employment.

The journey to California, whether by land or by sea, was an arduous, dangerous and risky one. Once there, the only certain prospects of success lay with the earliest arrivals, who were able to collect large quantities of the most easily accessible gold.

Even for those who came later, however, the real possibility of a far more comfortable and prosperous life in the future made the hardships and risks of dislocation, physical challenge and discomfort, a price that many were willing to pay.

Not surprisingly, the impact of the gold rush on California's development was enormous. San Francisco expanded from little more than a village to a booming commercial hub, supporting the numerous other smaller towns and settlements that sprung up throughout the region. Enterprising businessmen saw there was plenty of money to be made—not from gold prospecting itself, but from selling food, clothing and other provisions to the hopeful miners. The state was soon able to sustain a wide range of other businesses, including large-scale agricultural activities, which would not have been profitable otherwise. All in all, the lure of the gold made mid-nineteenth century California one of the most colourful and dynamic places in the world.



Stuart and Amy

For Stuart and Amy, it was almost love at first sight. Stuart was transfixed by Amy's incandescent smile, and also admired her waist-length golden brown curls. Amy adored Stuart's confident but relaxed demeanour and his obvious physical strength. Once they got the chance to meet and talk, their conversation flowed smoothly and easily. They laughed at each other's jokes, and shared similar views on a wide variety of topics, including the importance of education, family and having fun.

Stuart and Amy soon found themselves longing more and more for each other's company. They lived in towns several hundred miles apart, and Amy often travelled to other parts of the country for work, but they were not about to let small inconveniences get in their way. The weekends and vacations

they spent together were filled with laughter and contentment, and the only difficult part was always having to say goodbye. Their phone bills soared, but neither of them really cared. They found in each other both energy and inspiration, and could hardly wait for when they would next be together.

One activity Stuart and Amy particularly enjoyed was taking weekend country drives, with the wind whistling through their hair, their favourite music on the stereo, and the prospect of a pleasant meal awaiting them at their destination. At Amy's prompting, Stuart was soon on the lookout for a new set of wheels, and the old-style convertible at the local dealer's yard quickly caught his eye. Amy was a little cautious about it at first, but she loved the bright yellow colour, and she relished the thought of travelling with Stuart on the open road in an open-top. Stuart knew he would savour the power of the high-performance engine, and he was delighted that Amy would be happy also.

A few days later, Stuart and Amy took their new pride and joy for an extended weekend drive, and they soon realised that all was not as it seemed. The high-capacity engine made refuelling expensive, and the combination of high-performance engine power and low body weight made handling difficult, especially on narrow or wet roads. Towards evening, when a summer thunderstorm hit—and the roof closure mechanism failed—Amy and Stuart suddenly found themselves drenched.

These misadventures proved to be only the beginning. Over the next few months, Stuart found himself without transport for days at a time, and sometimes up to a week or two, as the local garage did all that they could to keep him on the road. The car's age meant that spare parts were almost impossible to obtain. Fortunately, Stuart's father was able to lend him a spare vehicle from time to time, but the burden of inconvenience still fell squarely upon his own shoulders, and on Amy's also.

Stuart and Amy didn't exactly blame each other outright, but they could both sense a new and unwelcome note of tension between them over their misfortune. Their conversations, particularly about travel arrangements, were somehow a little cooler—and more defensive—than before. Five months later, Stuart traded in the convertible for a newer model recommended by Amy's father, who had counselled them against the convertible in the first place. Their transport worries came to an end, and they remained ardently in love with each other, even though restoring their previous level of mutual trust took quite some time.

1. Desire

Our hearts are home to our deepest desires.

You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.

—Song of Sol. 4:9

Our hearts are the source and location of our deepest desires. We express our deepest longings in our hearts, even those that we are not willing to make public (1 Sam. 1:13). Our hearts reflect on the events and blessings of days gone by (Ps. 77:6), and wait expectantly for our hopes to be fulfilled (Luke 3:15). We desire steadfast love and kindness in other people (Prov. 19:22), even though we know that these qualities can be difficult to find.

In our search for steadfast love, we readily fall in love with other people, in the hope that they might love us in return, and in the hope that their love might prove to be both reliable and enduring. The heart that truly loves another person yearns to be with them. Love can be as strong and unyielding as the grave, and burns with a blazing fire that cannot be quenched (Song of Sol. 8:6).

The lover in the Song of Solomon sees his beloved as a precious treasure, and he holds her close to his heart. She has captivated his heart with a single glance, and he delights in her love. To him, her love is more

pleasing than wine, and the fragrance of her perfume more pleasant than any spice. Her sweetness is like honeycomb, and she brings forth streams of flowing water, and an orchard of the finest fruit (Song of Sol. 4:9-15).

The beloved in the Song of Solomon spends all night keeping a look out for her absent lover. She even gets up early to search the city streets and squares at an hour when, besides the city watchmen, there is no one else around (Song of Sol. 3:1-3). Once she finds her lover, she holds onto him, and will not let him go until she has brought him back to the safety of her mother's house (Song of Sol. 3:4). Her love for him keeps her awake, so that she can hear her lover when he knocks at her door and calls for her (Song of Sol. 5:2). She begins to pound inwardly as he approaches, and she sinks inwardly when he leaves (Song of Sol. 5:4-6).

What are your strongest and deepest desires?



2. Ambition

Our hearts pursue ambition and achievement.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

—Matt. 6:21

The ambitions and achievements that our hearts pursue are many and varied. We delight in amassing gold, silver and other possessions (Matt. 6:19-21), and in having easy access to music and to opportunities for sexual expression (Eccl. 2:8, 6:2). We treasure our possessions and our pleasures because they enable us to live “in the moment”, temporarily free from other cares and concerns.

Our hearts also desire honour, a high reputation, and respect or esteem. A man on whom honour is bestowed is given fine robes, and is publicly praised as he passes through the city (Esther 6:6-9). He rejoices in his heart, because the king—or other respected authority—has chosen to delight in him. Our hearts can be stirred in admiration for a ruler who exercises his power and authority in a noble manner—who does justice, hates wickedness, and uses his decrees to bestow grace on others

(Ps. 45:1-7). We can be confident that such a ruler will act lovingly in his people's best interests.

In the same manner, our hearts can propel us to become involved in grand projects, as the exiled people of Israel were when they returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls (Neh. 3:1-32). When they were in exile in Babylon, Jeremiah had exhorted them to set their hearts on Jerusalem in the hope that they might one day return (Jer. 51:50). We obtain joy and delight from being in places of apparent strength or safety (Ezek. 24:21, 25), such as a well-defended city or other stronghold. Strength and safety not only promise us security and peace, but also the prospect that other people will want to be with us and will love us for being able to provide it.

In practice, our hearts follow our treasures wherever they may lead (Matt. 6:21, Luke 12:34). Our plans and activities flow from our desires (Ps. 20:4). We take delight in the work we do, for we anticipate the pleasures and other rewards it will eventually bring us (Eccl. 2:10). Our hearts grow faint when obtaining our daily bread is dangerous or extremely costly, or is altogether beyond our reach, or where we are subjected to oppressive labour (Lam. 5:2-13).

Our desire for honour also extends to honour achieved by family members, because we enjoy love and praise by association. A wise son brings joy to a father's heart (Prov. 27:11). Mary treasured Jesus in her heart when he was still a young boy, because her son's enthusiasm and understanding—even at such a young age—in the temple courts at Jerusalem were already drawing respect, and even amazement, from everyone who heard him (Luke 2:46-51).

What are your ambitions at the moment?



3. Innermost Thoughts

Our hearts are a place of deep contemplation.

Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honour than me?"

—Esther 6:6

Our hearts are the place where our most ardent hopes and our deepest fears reside, and are also the place where we speak our innermost thoughts to ourselves. Haman hoped in his heart that the king would honour him (Esther 6:6). Saul had worry in his heart over the fate of the donkeys his father had lost (1 Sam. 9:3-5, 20). At times, Abraham could scarcely believe in his heart that God's promises that a son would be born to him would come true, since both he and Sarah were already so old (Gen. 17:17).

Our hearts are also home to our innermost concerns and convictions (Eccl. 1:16, 3:18)—indeed, the Old Testament sometimes uses the word “heart” to refer to a person speaking those thoughts to himself. When the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon, she spoke with him about all the hard questions that were burdening her heart (1 Kings 10:2). When misfortune comes upon us, we contemplate this in our hearts also, as we ponder why it has befallen us (Jer. 13:22).

The innermost convictions of our hearts can also give us strength and confidence. Caleb was convinced in his heart that God would deliver the land of Canaan to the Israelites, and he advised Moses accordingly (Josh. 14:7). Daniel's inner confidence in God empowered him to refrain from consuming the royal food and wine in the courts of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, even though this put him in significant danger (Dan. 1:8-16).

What are your deepest concerns and convictions?



4. Plans and Purposes

Our hearts form many plans.

Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

—Prov. 19:21

The range and complexity of our desires, ambitions and innermost thoughts make it inevitable that our hearts are filled with many plans

(Prov. 19:21). Our plans and projects inspire us to labour with energy, strength and skill to bring them to fruition, while those who are lazy are lacking in heart, or sense (Prov. 24:30). We get up in the morning, and go about our daily business, because we know that our heart's desires will not be achievable otherwise.

We are energised and alive when our longings are fulfilled, but we become sick at heart when our hopes are deferred or thwarted (Prov. 13:12). The anger and frustration we experience may also lead us to make plans to hurt or harm others. Esau, for example, made plans in his heart to murder his brother Jacob, who had wrongly received his father's blessing (Gen. 27:35, 41).

The plans and purposes of our hearts are often the result of careful deliberation. When Nehemiah heard complaints of starvation from those who were helping rebuild Jerusalem's walls, he pondered them carefully before making misconduct accusations against the Israelite officials (Neh. 5:7). David's flight to the land of the Philistines, so Saul would not be able to kill him, was the product of a careful strategic assessment of the various available options (1 Sam. 27:1).

The purposes of our hearts are deep waters (Prov. 20:5) and are not easily discerned by others. The hearts of kings, and of other rulers or leaders, are particularly unsearchable (Prov. 25:3), for their plans are supremely complex and must take many people's interests into account. After Saul died, the prophet Nathan encouraged King David to do whatever he had planned in his heart. Nathan knew that, for the time being at least, God would be with David in whatever he decided to do (2 Sam. 7:3). Later, King Hezekiah made plans in his heart to return to God and serve him only, for he knew that faithfulness to God was the only true source of hope for his people (2 Chron. 29:1-10).

What are you planning at the moment?



5. The Limits of Human Striving

Our hearts can deceive us.

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

—Jer. 17:9

To improve our chances of obtaining our hearts' desires, we seek to discern what is good, and we devise various tests and strategies accordingly. King Solomon, for example, tested his heart, both with pleasure and with hard work, to gain such discernment (Eccl. 2:1). Despite our best efforts, however, we are far from competent at this most important task. Solomon himself eventually concluded that all his toil had been meaningless and had gained him nothing (Eccl. 2:11).

The Scriptures give us a couple of reasons why our ability to correctly identify what is good is extremely poor. Firstly, our control over the direction of our hearts' desires is limited. We do not choose where our hearts will go, and then merely hope to find satisfaction there—our hearts follow our treasure, not the other way around (Matt. 6:21). We also convince ourselves that what we are doing must be good; otherwise, we would not be doing it at all!

Secondly, it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to truly understand the motives of our hearts. Our hearts are deceitful, and they deceive even ourselves. We all have our reasons—some good, others not so good—for our actions and for the decisions we make, but it will often not be possible to untangle one from the other. We may even sometimes hide our true motivations from ourselves, let alone from other people, to convince ourselves that all our actions are entirely well-meaning and honourable.

In what ways are our hearts unreliable?

