

Jeremiah 17:9: "The Heart Is Deceitful" – The Self-Refuting Objection

"If you can't trust your heart, how do YOU know Christianity is true?"

THE SCENARIO

You say to a Muslim: "You can't rely on your conviction because Jeremiah 17:9 says 'the heart is deceitful.'"

Your Christian friend responds: "If the heart is deceitful, how do YOU know the Bible is true? Aren't you also relying on your heart?"

WHAT JEREMIAH 17:9 ACTUALLY SAYS

The Text (Multiple Translations)

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

ESV: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"

NRSV: "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?"

The Context (Jeremiah 17:5-10)

v. 5-6: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD."

v. 7-8: "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD."

v. 9: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick."

v. 10: "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind."

What It's Actually About

- **Misplaced trust** in human strength vs. trusting God (vv. 5-8)
- **Self-deception** about spiritual condition (Judah thought they were righteous while idolatrous)
- **Need for God's examination** and transformation (v. 10)
- **Moral depravity**, NOT epistemological skepticism

Hebrew "heart" (לֵב, lev) = center of will, intellect, moral character
NOT just emotions or feelings

What It's NOT Saying

- ❌ That all spiritual experiences are unreliable
- ❌ That Christians can never have genuine spiritual knowledge
- ❌ That regenerated hearts are still deceitful
- ❌ General epistemological skepticism

THE SELF-REFUTING OBJECTION

If Jeremiah 17:9 means "never trust spiritual conviction," then the entire Christian faith becomes unknowable!

1. Salvation Becomes Unknowable

Romans 10:9-10: "If you confess with your mouth... and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified."
→ If heart is always deceitful, belief "in your heart" is unreliable

Romans 8:16: "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."
→ This is internal, subjective experience. If all internal conviction is unreliable, this witness is meaningless.

2. Assurance of Salvation Is Impossible

1 John 5:13: "I write these things... that you may know that you have eternal life."

2 Timothy 1:12: "I know whom I have believed."

→ If we can't trust internal conviction, we can't KNOW we're saved

3. Inner Witness of Holy Spirit Negated

John Calvin (Institutes 1.7.4): "Scripture is self-authenticated... The testimony of the Spirit is superior to reason... these words will not obtain full credit until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit."
→ Protestant theology REQUIRES internal witness

1 Corinthians 2:10-14: "The Spirit searches everything... The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit... they are spiritually discerned."

John 16:13: "The Spirit will guide you into all truth."

1 Thessalonians 1:5: "Our gospel came... in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

4. Scripture Interpretation Impossible

1 John 2:20, 27: "You have been anointed by the Holy One... The anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie."
→ Internal teaching is described as "true, no lie"

5. The Reformation Unjustifiable

Martin Luther (Diet of Worms, 1521): "Unless I am convinced by Scripture or clear reason... my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience."
→ Luther's break from Rome was based on personal conviction

6. Knowing Bible Is God's Word = Circular

The circle:

Q: "How do you know the Bible is God's Word?"

A: "The Holy Spirit witnesses to me internally."

Q: "How do you know that's the Spirit, not self-deception?"

A: "Because the Bible says the Spirit guides me."

→ Circular if we can't trust internal witness

FALLEN vs. REGENERATED HEART

The Standard Evangelical Response:
Jeremiah 17:9 describes the UNREGENERATE heart (fallen condition).
The REGENERATE heart (transformed by Spirit) is different.

Biblical Support for "New Heart"

Ezekiel 36:26-27: "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you."
→ New heart enables obedience and understanding

2 Corinthians 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

Philippians 2:13: "It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."
→ Regenerate will is God-directed, not self-deceived

Hebrews 8:10: "I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God."
→ God's work on the heart is reliable

The Distinction

Fallen Heart	Regenerated Heart
Deceitful (Jer 17:9)	New creation (2 Cor 5:17)
Self-deceived about spiritual state	Spirit bears witness (Rom 8:16)
Idolatrous, rebellious	God writes law on heart (Heb 8:10)
Spiritually blind	Anointing teaches truth (1 John 2:27)

EVERY TRADITION USES SPIRITUAL WITNESS

Protestant: Inner Witness of Spirit

- Scripture is "self-authenticated" (Calvin)
- Spirit provides internal testimony
- Ultimate certainty from Spirit's witness

Catholic: Church Authority + Experience

- Church established canon (councils)
- BUT also: internal grace, sacraments, saints' testimony
- Still relies on spiritual experience

LDS: Personal Revelation

- **Moroni 10:3-5:** "Ask God... he will manifest the truth... by the Holy Ghost"
- **D&C 9:8-9:** "Your bosom shall burn within you"
- More explicit about experiential marker

Eastern Orthodox: Liturgical Experience

- Truth known through Church participation
- Theosis (union with God)
- Consensus of Fathers

The irony: If evangelicals criticize LDS "burning in the bosom," they face the same challenge with "inner witness." Both are spiritual/subjective confirmation.

THE TU QUOQUE ("YOU TOO")

Everyone faces epistemological challenges:

- **Muslim:** "Quran's eloquence + inner conviction confirm it"
- **Atheist:** Must assume reason to argue for reason (circular)
- **Catholic:** Must interpret history to conclude Church authority
- **Hindu:** Spiritual experience + guru testimony

Point: Everyone has foundational commitments that can't be "proven" neutrally.

BIBLICAL DISCERNMENT, NOT SKEPTICISM

The Bible does NOT say: "Reject all spiritual experience."

It says: "TEST spiritual experiences to discern truth from error."

1 John 4:1: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God."
→ NOT rejection, BUT discernment

1 Thessalonians 5:21-22: "Test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil."

Acts 17:11: "The Bereans... received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."

Criteria for Testing

- **Doctrinal consistency:** Aligns with Scripture?
- **Confession of Christ:** Affirms Jesus as Lord? (1 Cor 12:3)
- **Moral fruit:** Produces righteousness? (Matt 7:16, Gal 5:22-23)
- **Prophetic accuracy:** Predictions come true? (Deut 18:21-22)
- **Community discernment:** Body of Christ tests together (Acts 15)

ANSWERING YOUR FRIEND

Short Answer:

"Jeremiah 17:9 is about the **FALLEN**, unregenerate heart's self-deception about spiritual condition—not a prohibition against spiritual knowledge."

If it meant we can NEVER trust spiritual conviction, then:

- **No one could know they're saved** (Rom 10:9 – "believe in your heart")
- **Spirit's witness would be meaningless** (Rom 8:16)
- **Assurance impossible** (1 John 5:13)
- **Reformation unjustified** (Luther's conscience)

Your objection undermines Christian faith itself. The biblical distinction is **FALLEN heart (deceitful) vs. REGENERATE heart (Spirit within)**. Christians trust the **SPRIT'S witness, not fallen nature.**

Key Points to Make

1. Context matters:

- Jer 17:9 contrasted with trusting the LORD (vv. 7-8)
- About misplaced trust and self-deception about spiritual state
- NOT blanket condemnation of spiritual knowledge

2. Regenerated heart is different:

- God gives NEW heart (Ezek 36:26)
- Spirit bears witness (Rom 8:16)
- Anointing teaches (1 John 2:27 – "true, no lie")

3. Your friend's argument is self-refuting:

"If you can't trust spiritual conviction per Jeremiah 17:9, how do YOU know you're saved? How do you know the Spirit has regenerated you? How do you interpret Scripture correctly? How was the Reformation justified?"

A BETTER APOLOGETIC APPROACH

DON'T say: "You can't trust your heart because Jeremiah 17:9."
(This is a double-edged sword that cuts both ways)

DO say:

"Both Christians and Muslims claim spiritual confirmation. So let's examine:

- **Historical evidence:** Which texts are reliable? (5,800+ NT manuscripts vs. few early Quran manuscripts)
- **Prophetic fulfillment:** 300+ OT prophecies fulfilled in Jesus
- **Founder's claims:** Jesus (sinless, miracles, ROSE FROM DEAD) vs. Muhammad (no miracles, moral failings, stayed dead)
- **Philosophical coherence:** Which worldview explains reality?
- **Moral fruit:** What does each produce? (Matt 7:16)

The Cumulative Case

Christianity offers:

- ✓ Historical evidence (resurrection)
- ✓ Prophetic fulfillment
- ✓ Philosophical coherence
- ✓ Moral transformation
- ✓ Spirit's witness (confirms the evidence)

Not either/or, but BOTH/AND:

External warrant + Internal witness = Cumulative case for truth

THE BOTTOM LINE

Your friend has raised an argument that, if valid, would destroy the foundation of Christian faith—the ability to know God, know Scripture, and know salvation through the Spirit's witness.

The proper response: Show that Jeremiah 17:9 doesn't mean what they think, and their objection applies equally to their own Christian knowledge.

A more nuanced epistemology includes BOTH spiritual witness AND evidential/rational warrant—the biblical model.

1 Peter 3:15: "Always be prepared to make a defense... with gentleness and respect"