

# TAME YOUR THOUGHTS

THREE TOOLS TO RENEW YOUR MIND  
AND TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

BIBLE STUDY GUIDE | SIX SESSIONS

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WITH SAM O'NEAL

 HarperChristian  
Resources

*Tame Your Thoughts Bible Study Guide*

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# A NOTE FROM MAX

“You are what you eat” is a scary slogan for most of us. We like the idea of chowing down on a cheeseburger with all the fixings, but we’re less thrilled about those fixings forming the foundation of our physical health. Seeing ourselves as a *cheeseburger* is not a pleasant image, which is why we need to eat the right kinds of food.

However, as unsettling as this image might be, “you are what you think” is an even scarier slogan for those of us on a typical diet of worldly thoughts. This is because most of us savor what we think about in secret—the angry accusations, the extravagant excuses, the furtive fantasies, and so on. The notion of our private notions being made public for all to see? Terrifying. The idea that those inner thoughts go a long way toward shaping who we are at the very core of our being? Horrifying.

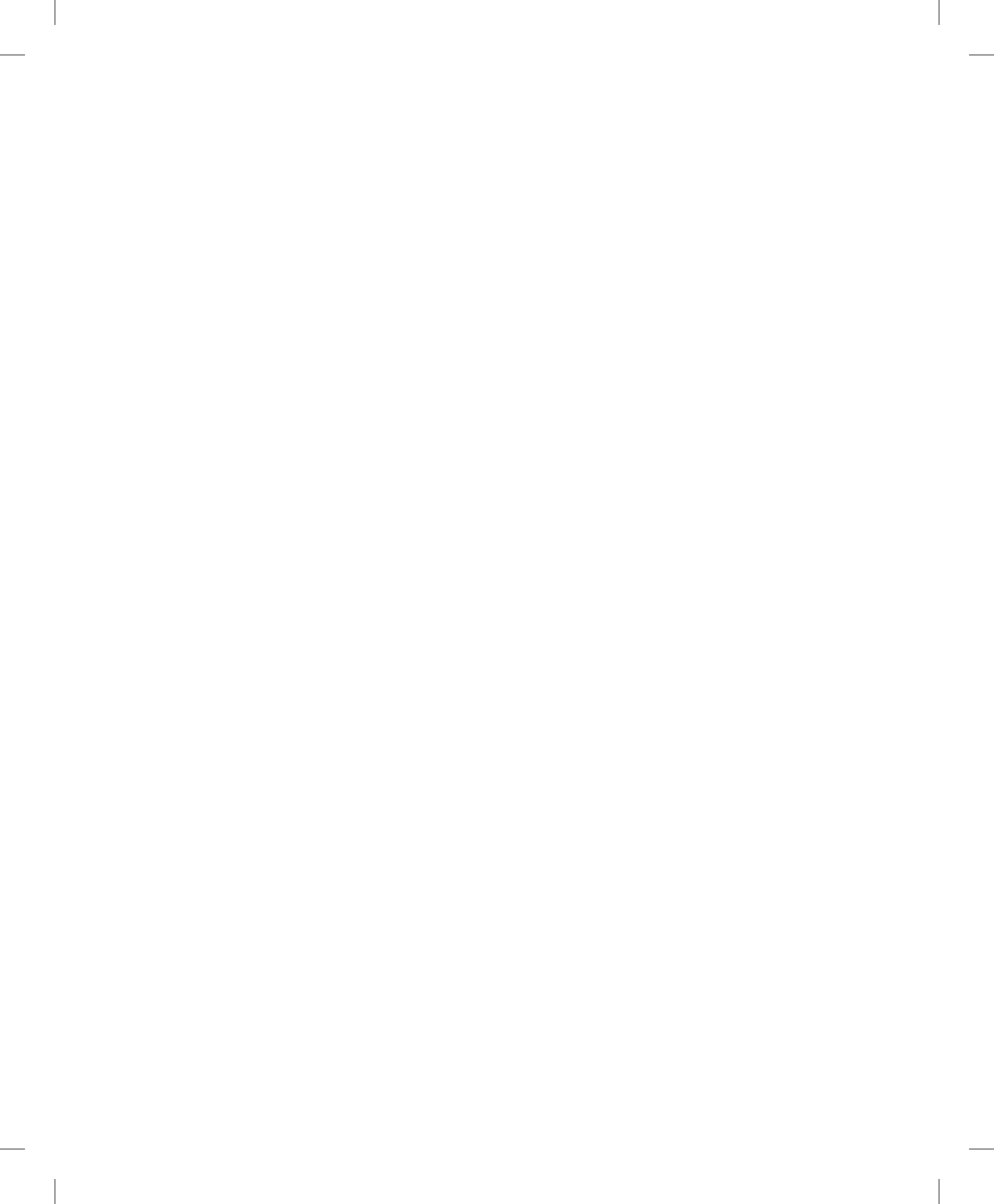
Even so, it’s true. We *are* the sum of our thoughts. So it’s no wonder God urges us, “Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts” (Proverbs 4:23 GNT).

Maybe this is why so many of us today are in such dire straits. Filling our bodies with harmful food leads to heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and more. Likewise, filling our minds with harmful thoughts leads to anxiety, addiction, despair, and more. Toxic thoughts affect every aspect of who we are, including our mental health, our relationships with others, and our relationship with God.

Thankfully, we don’t have to stay stuck in the rut of toxic thoughts. We can do a better job of managing our lives when we do a better job of managing our thoughts. And we have the opportunity to better manage our thoughts because we don’t have to do it alone. God is with us! He designed our brains, and he has equipped us with everything we need to stop being conformed to the world and start being transformed by his way of thinking.

Sound good? Then get ready to get serious about what you think about. It’s time to learn how to truly tame your thoughts.

— MAX LUCADO



# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Do you control your thoughts, or do your thoughts control you? It's not an easy question to answer, largely because the answer seems to change from day to day or even moment to moment. Sometimes, it seems as if we have control over what goes in and out of our minds. Other times, we feel like a wind sock being thrown about by a cavalcade of contemplations.

It's no fun living with out-of-control thoughts. The good news is that you *can* tame your thoughts. This resource will equip you with three critical tools for managing your mind. It will also walk you through different ways to use those tools in some of the most common battlegrounds of life—anxiety, lust, overwhelm, rejection, and more. The goal is to help you change your thoughts so you can change your life.

Before you begin, keep in mind that there are a few ways you can go through this material. You can experience this study with others in a group (such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or any other small-group gathering), or you may choose to go through the content on your own. Either way, know that the videos for each session are available for you to view at any time by following the instructions that are provided on the inside cover of this study guide.

## GROUP STUDY

Each of the sessions in the *Tame Your Thoughts Bible Study* is divided into two parts: (1) a group study section and (2) a personal study section. The group study section provides a basic framework on how to open your time together, get the most out of the video content, and discuss the key ideas that were presented in the teaching. Each session includes the following:

- **Welcome:** A short opening note about the topic of the session for you to read on your own before you meet as a group.
- **Connect:** An icebreaker question to get you and your group members thinking about the topic or your takeaways from the previous week.

## Tame Your Thoughts

- **Watch:** An outline of the key points covered in each video teaching along with space for you to take notes as you watch each session.
- **Discuss:** Questions to help you and your group reflect on the teaching material presented and apply it to your lives.
- **Respond:** A short personal exercise to help reinforce the key ideas.
- **Pray:** A place for you to record prayer requests and praises for the week.

If you are doing this study in a group, make sure you have your own copy of the study guide so you can write down your thoughts, responses, and reflections—and so you have access to the videos via streaming. You will also want to have a copy of the book *Tame Your Thoughts*, as reading it alongside this guide will provide you with deeper insights. (See the notes at the beginning of each group session and personal study section on which chapters of the book you should read before the next group session.)

Finally, keep these points in mind:

- **Facilitation:** If you are doing this study in a group, you will want to appoint someone to serve as a facilitator. This person will be responsible for starting the video and keeping track of time during discussions and activities. If *you* have been chosen for this role, there are some resources in the back of this guide that can help you lead your group through the study.
- **Faithfulness:** Your group is a place where tremendous growth can happen as you reflect on the Bible, ask questions, and learn what God is doing in other people's lives. For this reason, be fully committed and attend each session so you can build trust and rapport with the other members.
- **Friendship:** The goal of any small group is to serve as a place where people can share, learn about God, and build friendships. So seek to make your group a safe place. Be honest about your thoughts and feelings, but also make it a point to listen carefully to everyone else's thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Keep anything personal that your group members share in confidence so that you can create a community where people can heal, be challenged, and grow spiritually.

If you are going through this study on your own, read the opening Welcome section and reflect on the questions in the Connect section. Watch the video and use the

prompts provided to take notes. Finally, personalize the questions and exercises in the Discuss and Respond sections. Close by recording any requests you want to pray about during the week.

## PERSONAL STUDY

The personal study is for you to work through on your own during the week. Each exercise is designed to help you explore the key ideas you uncovered during your group time and delve into passages of Scripture that will help you apply those principles to your life. Go at your own pace, doing a little each day—or tackle the material all at once. Remember to spend a few moments in silence to listen to whatever God might be saying to you.

If you are doing this study as part of a group and are unable to finish (or even start) these personal studies for the week, you should still attend the group time. Be assured you are still wanted and welcome even if you don't have your "homework" done. The group studies and personal studies are intended to help you hear what God wants you to hear and learn how to apply what he is saying to your life. So . . . as you go through this study, be listening for him to speak to you about the practice of managing your life by managing your thoughts.

## WEEK 1

<b>BEFORE GROUP MEETING</b>	Read chapter 1 in <i>Tame Your Thoughts</i> Read the Welcome section (page 3)
<b>GROUP MEETING</b>	Discuss the Connect questions Watch the video teaching for session 1 Discuss the questions that follow as a group Do the closing exercise and pray (pages 3-8)
<b>STUDY 1</b>	Complete the personal study (pages 10-13)
<b>STUDY 2</b>	Complete the personal study (pages 14-17)
<b>STUDY 3</b>	Complete the personal study (pages 18-20)
<b>CATCH UP AND READ AHEAD</b> (BEFORE WEEK 2 GROUP MEETING)	Read chapters 2-4 in <i>Tame Your Thoughts</i> Complete any unfinished personal studies (page 21)

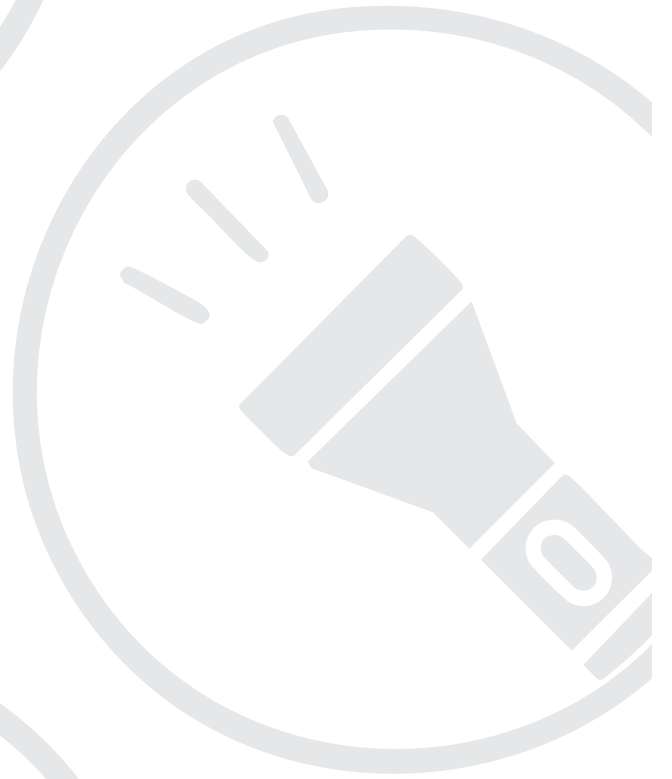
SESSION ONE

# THE POWER OF YOUR THOUGHTS

*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.*

COLOSSIANS 2:8





## WELCOME [READ ON YOUR OWN]

Have you ever considered the power of your thoughts? It's kind of a difficult thing to do—to think about your thoughts. But it's important. Why? Because everything you have ever done was rooted in your thoughts. Every single thing. This includes every word you've spoken, every step you've taken, and every time you stopped yourself from speaking a word or taking a step.

All of your triumphs were preceded by thoughts. So were each of your failures. Your entire life has been processed and prioritized by impulses racing through the network of neurons that makes up your brain. It's all been based on your thoughts.

Of course, you're not the only one. Every single thing that has ever been attempted or accomplished through human effort was preceded by human thoughts. Inventing the wheel required thoughts. Creating works of art requires thoughts. Interpreting the complex interactions between young women and young men requires lots and lots of thoughts. The point is that you should never underestimate the power of your mind, both for good and for ill. And you should never forget your mind is a potent gift from your Creator.

In this session, you will explore what it looks like to be a good steward of that gift. This includes identifying and rejecting the huge amounts of negative thoughts swirling around the currents of our culture. It means choosing to be transformed by godly thinking rather than conformed to worldly thinking. And it means equipping yourself with the helmet of salvation—a necessary protection both now and for eternity.

## CONNECT [15 MINUTES]

If you or any of your group members don't know each other, take a few minutes to introduce yourselves. Then discuss one or both of the following questions:

- Why did you decide to join this study? What do you hope to learn?

— or —

- On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), how would you rate your ability to control your thoughts? Why did you rate yourself at that number?

## WATCH [20 MINUTES]

Watch the video for this session, which you can access by playing the DVD or through streaming (see the instructions that have been provided with this study guide). Below is an outline of the key points covered during the teaching. Write down any key concepts or takeaways that stand out to you.

### OUTLINE

- I. Our thoughts have great power in how we perceive reality and define our existence.
  - A. The philosopher René Descartes is best known for his statement regarding the power of our thoughts: *cogito, ergo sum* (Latin for “I think, therefore I am”).
  - B. Modern science supports this idea with discoveries such as *neuroplasticity*, which describes the brain’s ability to reshape its physical structure over time.
  - C. It is literally possible to change your mind . . . which is good news!
- II. The negativity in our world leads to “stinking thinking” in our minds.
  - A. Toxic thoughts are damaging our mental health and are harming our relationships.
  - B. Forty-two percent of high school students experience persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness. Twenty-two percent have seriously considered attempting suicide.
  - C. Two in five adults report symptoms of anxiety and depression. We need some help!
- III. God has a solution for toxic thoughts: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).
  - A. We are not to be *conformed*—to allow the world to squeeze us into its way of thinking.
  - B. The devil is constantly seeking to enmesh us in a web of unhealthy thoughts.
  - C. Satan infected the thoughts of Peter and Judas, who were among Jesus’ disciples.
- IV. The alternative is to be *transformed* by the renewing of our minds.
  - A. God does the work of transformation. A new mind is less the result of human effort and more the result of divine intervention.
  - B. Whenever we are threatened by stinking thinking, heaven marshals its finest forces to protect our heads.
- V. God has provided us with spiritual protection to protect our minds.
  - A. It is dangerous for us to expose our minds to the pressures and priorities of this world without donning spiritual protection. This comes through the “helmet of salvation.”
  - B. We acquire this helmet by asking for it. The gift of salvation is ours to receive.
  - C. No matter who you are, no matter what you have done, progress is possible when you invite God to transform your mind and equip you with the helmet of salvation.



## DISCUSS [35 MINUTES]

Discuss what you just watched by answering the following questions.

1. The focus of this study is on our “thoughts,” but the term can be difficult to define in a practical way. In your own words, how would you describe a *thought*?
2. Our thoughts can be both helpful and harmful. What some experts call “toxic thoughts” include comparing ourselves to others, dwelling on the past, refusing to trust, being negative, and so on. What are the roots of these kinds of thoughts? Where do they originate?
3. Ask someone in the group to read aloud 1 John 2:15-17. The world pushes conformity to its values, priorities, and ways of thinking. What is the problem with allowing ourselves to be conformed in this way and “love” the things of this world? What are ways you have been pressured to not only behave in a certain way but also *think* in a certain way?
4. Now ask someone to read Romans 12:1-2. Rather than conform to the pattern of this world, God wants us to be transformed through the renewing of our minds. Given it is God who actively does the transforming, what role do we play in the process? In other words, what role do we play in moving from stinking thinking to engaging in healthier kinds of thinking?
5. In Ephesians 6:13-17, the apostle Paul describes the armor of God—the equipment the Lord has given us to stand strong against the attacks of the enemy. Included in this armor is the “helmet of salvation” (verse 17). What does this helmet do for us? How do we acquire it?

## RESPOND [10 MINUTES]

In this session, you've explored the difference between being *conformed* to the thinking of this world and being *transformed* by God as he renews your mind. In the following passage, Paul compares minds governed by the flesh—meaning sinful and selfish natures—and minds governed by God's Spirit. It goes without saying the latter is preferable to the former, for the Spirit-driven thinking produces life while flesh-driven thinking leads to all manner of death. Take a few minutes on your own to read this passage and then answer the questions that follow.

<sup>5</sup> Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. <sup>6</sup> The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

ROMANS 8:5-8

How would you describe “what the flesh desires” (verse 5)? What do you begin to pursue or focus on when your mind is controlled by your sinful nature?

How would you describe “what the Spirit desires” (verse 5)? What does Paul say you pursue or focus on when your mind is under the influence of God's Spirit?





SESSION ONE

# PERSONAL STUDY

The goal set before you in this study is to learn how to tame your thoughts, which means learning how to manage your life by managing the way you think. The Bible is the best resource available when it comes to understanding a healthy way of thinking—which is to say, thinking like God thinks. For that reason, the personal study portion of each session will offer a deeper look at several passages and principles you touched on during the group time that support godly thinking connected with all manner of circumstances. As you work through these exercises, be sure to write down your responses to the questions. (If you are engaging this study as part of a group, you will be given time to share your insights at the start of the next session.) If you are reading *Tame Your Thoughts* alongside this study, first review chapter 1.

## STUDY 1

# CONFORMED LIKE CLAY

Do you remember the last time you played with modeling clay (such as Play-Doh or some other similar squishable substance)? If you're a parent or a grandparent, you might have done so recently. Or it might have been decades now since you've indulged yourself in that particular luxury—maybe all the way back to your own childhood.

Either way, chances are you can recall the sensation of making “snakes.” You start by working a chunk of clay between your fingers to get everything smooth and even. Then, once you've worked the clay into an approximation of a ball, you lay it on the counter and begin to roll it flat with your palms. You don't crush the clay by pressing down so hard that it squishes into a flat plane. Instead, you apply gentle and steady pressure as you roll up and down with your palms, gradually shaping the clay into a longer and longer tube.

*Voila!* You've created a snake. Or the beginnings of a rainbow. Or whatever else your imagination can make out of a colorful clay cylinder.

In many ways, this experience demonstrates the ways the world tries to conform you to itself. Very rarely does Satan (or society) attempt an all-at-once attack against God's children. You won't typically be faced with a singular moment of choice between living a life that honors God and a life that kowtows to the values and priorities of your culture. Instead, the process happens gradually. You feel a gentle-but-consistent pressure to value what everyone else seems to value and do what everyone else seems to be doing. Over time, that pressure works into your mind, encouraging you to think the way everyone else thinks and believe what everyone else believes. The process is subtle, and slow, and deliberate.

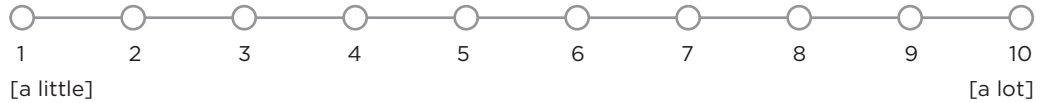
This is what Paul is talking about when he writes, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). When the pressure to conform is all around you, it takes an active choice to *resist*—to determine to both live differently and think differently.

This is the choice that God calls you to make each day.

Session One: The Power of Your Thoughts

1. How much pressure do you feel to conform to a worldly way of thinking (moving away from a godly way of thinking) in the following spheres of life?

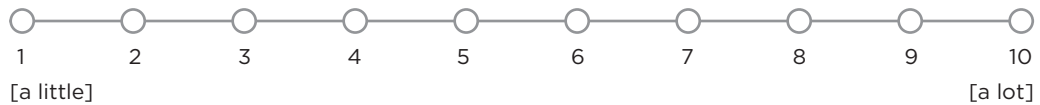
Pressure from your work or school:



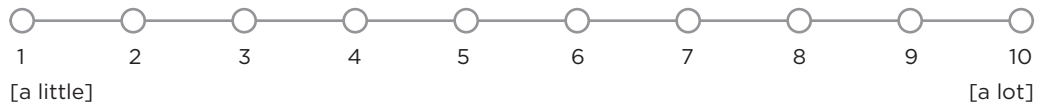
Pressure from media:



Pressure from your family:



Pressure from your friends:



2. What are some ways lately that you have felt pressured to move away from what God says is right and move toward what the world (or culture) says is right? What are the issues or circumstances that create the most pressure in your life?

We were not made to be pressed, smooshed, squished, rolled, squeezed, and shaped into the image of society. Culture prompts us to . . .



- value money over people,
- grade people by looks, awards, and bank balances,
- judge a person by the color of their skin,
- manipulate truth to fit our desires, and
- place our value in what we wear, drive, own, or achieve.

The mastermind behind these attacks? The devil. Satan has one primary aim: to entangle us in a web of unhealthy thoughts. He wants to corrupt, contaminate, and confuse our minds with a false system.<sup>1</sup>

3. Paul describes Satan as “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:2). How do you understand the connection between Satan and the world? In other words, to what degree does Satan—“the ruler of the kingdom of the air”—influence or control people outside of God’s kingdom?

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-8

