

EVERY THOUGHT CAPTIVE

**CALM THE MENTAL CHAOS
THAT KEEPS YOU STUCK,
DRAINS YOUR HOPE,
AND HOLDS YOU BACK**



KYLE IDLEMAN

**ZONDERVAN
BOOKS**

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Every Thought Captive

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*To my son and sons-in-law—
men who understand that the greatest battles
are fought in the quiet chambers of the mind,
and the noblest victories won in moments
no one else can see.
In you, I see the brave surrender of men
who have learned that strength flows
from yielding every thought to Jesus.*



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INTRODUCTION

Over the years, I've walked alongside countless individuals desperate for transformation. Their stories, while unique, often share a common thread of frustration and discouragement. Here are just three examples.

Jacque, a young professional, is battling anxiety that threatens to derail her career. Despite years of undergoing therapy and reading self-help books, she still finds herself paralyzed by racing thoughts and worst-case scenarios.

Mark, a recovering addict, has been clean for months but constantly fears relapse. He has been down this path so many times before, and more than anything, he wants this time to be different. His mind seems to wage war against him, replaying memories of past failures and tempting him into old patterns.

Helen, a mother of three, struggles with anger issues that have stretched her family relationships to the breaking point. She promised herself she would do things differently than her mother, but she seems unable to break the cycle and feels powerless against the surge of emotions that control her words and actions.

These stories represent a universal human struggle. All of us, at some point, find ourselves at war with our own minds. We know what we want to do and who we want to be, but our thoughts seem to have a will of their

own. Every reader of this book, and the author as well, knows the reality of this struggle.

While this internal battle is real, it is not new. The apostle Paul wrote about it nearly two thousand years ago: “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). But in our modern world of constant distraction and information overload, this ancient wisdom has never been more relevant—or more challenging to apply.

That’s why I’ve written this book. Through years of pastoral counseling, diving deep into Scripture, and my own personal journey, I’ve discovered that the key to lasting transformation lies not in behavior modification or willpower alone, but in learning to take our thoughts captive.

The stakes couldn’t be higher. Our thoughts shape our emotions, drive our actions, and ultimately determine the course of our lives. Left unchecked, they can lead us down paths of destruction or, at best, stagnation and mediocrity. But when we learn to harness the power of our minds, aligning our thoughts with God’s truth, we unlock the potential for profound change and abundant living.

What’s particularly exciting is that modern neuroscience is catching up to what the Bible has been teaching for millennia. For centuries, the human brain was believed to be a fixed, unchangeable organ. However, recent research has shattered this misconception, revealing the brain’s astounding capacity for change—a phenomenon known as neuroplasticity. This scientific discovery aligns perfectly with the biblical concept of mind renewal, as expressed in Romans 12:2: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

This convergence of scriptural wisdom and neuroscientific discovery offers us unprecedented hope and practical strategies for personal transformation. As you embark on this journey of taking your thoughts captive, you’re not merely reading a book or even engaging in a spiritual exercise; you’re actively reshaping the physical structure of your brain.

2 EVERY THOUGHT CAPTIVE

In the pages that follow, we'll explore biblically grounded and scientifically verified strategies for:

- identifying toxic thought patterns
- interrupting negative mental loops
- replacing lies with truth
- harnessing the power of neuroplasticity for lasting change
- implementing practical daily habits to reinforce healthy thought patterns
- leveraging the supernatural connection between thoughts, emotions, and physical well-being
- cultivating a mindset that leads to true peace, joy, and purpose

This isn't just another self-help book; it's an invitation to a radical rewiring of your mind—that has the power to transform every aspect of your life. Whether you're battling anxiety like Jacques, fighting addiction like Mark, struggling with anger like Helen, or facing any other mental stronghold, this book, through the wisdom of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit, offers a road map to freedom.

I'm going to make a promise based on Romans 12:2: If you commit to the principles and practices outlined in these pages, you will experience a renewed mind and a transformed life. You'll develop the ability to not just react to life's circumstances but to proactively shape your reality through the power of intentional thinking.

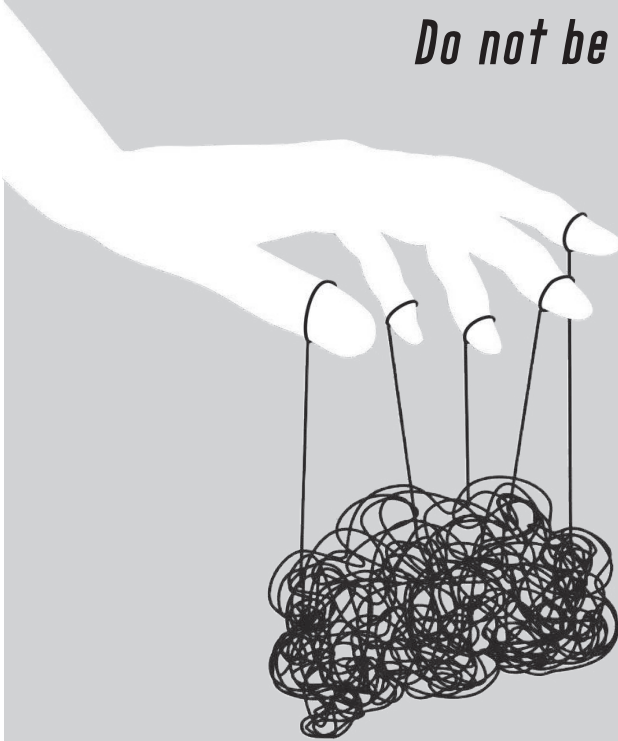
Are you ready to take every thought captive and step into the life you were meant to live? Let's begin this journey together.



SECTION 1

THE POWER OF OUR THOUGHTS

Do not be conformed . . .





Our minds are being molded.

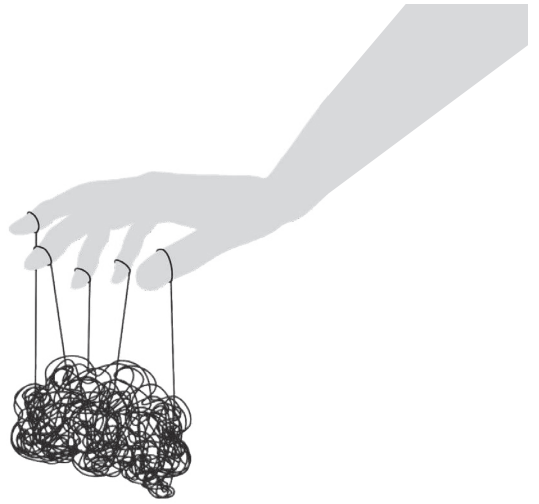
Every moment of every day, whether we realize it or not, our thoughts are being shaped by forces both seen and unseen. The shows we watch, the social media we scroll through, the conversations we have, the memories we revisit—all of these experiences are literally wiring our brains, forming neural pathways that will determine how we think, feel, and live.

This isn't just ancient wisdom or modern psychology; it's actually both. The apostle Paul wrote about it two thousand years ago when he warned us to “not conform to the pattern of this world.” Today, neuroscientists can observe this conforming process happening in our brains through neuroplasticity—our brain's ability to be reshaped by repeated thoughts and experiences.

In the chapters ahead, we'll explore three fundamental truths about the power of our thoughts: First, we'll discover how our minds are constantly being molded, whether we're aware of it or not. We'll see how the things we think about most deeply shape who we become. Second, we'll examine the law of cognition—how our thoughts create beliefs, which generate emotions, which drive behaviors, which ultimately determine our lives. Finally, we'll uncover the rule of exposure—how what we allow ourselves to be exposed to becomes the raw material for our thoughts and the blueprint for our lives.

Understanding these principles isn't just an academic exercise; it's essential for anyone who wants to break free from destructive thought patterns and experience true transformation. Because here's the reality—either you will take your thoughts captive or your thoughts will take you captive.





CHAPTER 1

MIND MOLDING

WHATEVER SHAPES YOUR BRAIN SHAPES YOUR LIFE

Have you ever paused to consider how much of your life is shaped by your thoughts? The struggles you face, the emotions that overwhelm you, the habits you can't seem to break, the relationship drama that wears you out—all of these have their roots in your mind.

Think about it. The recurring anxiety that keeps you up at night? It starts with a thought. The relationship conflicts that leave you feeling drained and misunderstood? They're fueled by thought patterns. The spiritual stagnation you can't seem to shake? It's rooted in your stagnant thoughts. Even that goal you've been chasing for years but can't seem to reach—your thoughts are likely playing a significant role.

If you could transform your thinking, how would your life change? If the mental narratives holding you back were replaced with biblical thoughts of hope, confidence, and purpose, how would it begin to mold your life? The truth is, your life is being molded right now, in this very



moment, by your thoughts. The question is, are you actively participating in that molding, or are you letting it happen by default?

In this chapter, we're going to dive deep into the principle of mind molding. We'll explore how our thoughts shape our reality and understand why it's so vital to learn to take each thought captive.

I want to begin this exploration with a story that requires a quick disclaimer: *Neither my wife nor I promote or sell marijuana or marijuana-related paraphernalia.*

With that out of the way, let me tell you what happened a few years ago. My wife received Christmas cookie molds. As a Christmas gift. On Christmas day. (Which is kind of like giving celebratory diapers to a toddler who just became potty-trained or a bicycle to a sixteen-year-old who just got a driver's license.)

We put the Christmas cookie molds into deep storage, aka the kitchen drawer where we keep other cookware and miscellaneous items that we can't bring ourselves to get rid of. Like the pair of oven mitts that read, "Resentment is my secret ingredient."

As Christmas approached the following year, we decided to get into the Christmas spirit by making some Christmas cookies for our neighbors and the local nursing home residents. My wife remembered the Christmas cookie molds and dug them out of the drawer, trusting that their lovely leafy shapes would all somehow celebrate the Christmas season.

When I got home, a sampling of the Christmas cookies was set out on our kitchen island, and I immediately recognized what my innocent and virtuous wife failed to realize—she had made dozens of marijuana leaf-shaped cookies to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior.

And that's how I almost became the pastor who passed out marijuana Christmas cookies to his neighbors and nursing home residents as a way to celebrate the incarnation.

There was a brief moment of panic as I tried to confirm that no weed-shaped Christmas cookies had been disbursed. I was imagining a news story with cameras in front of the nursing home. I subconsciously started to prepare my defense:

**We didn't know!
It wasn't intentional.
It was just a mold someone gave us.**

My defense would be true, but regardless of our intention or awareness, the mold *was* a marijuana leaf. And of course, our cookies would come out in the shape they were molded in. That's how molds work.

Molds have power—they cause things to take their shape, and it never works the other way around—but like my wife and me with the marijuana leaf mold, we don't pay much attention to the molds we are given that end up shaping our lives, governing our emotions, regulating our relationships, and determining our future.

SQUEEZED

It may sound obvious, but the most important thing about you is who you are becoming. I love how the brilliant Christian philosopher Dallas Willard said it: “Your life is the person you're becoming, and we so often think of our life in terms of our accomplishments, but I think that's a very tragic mistake. What you get out of your life and what God gets out of your life is the person you become.”¹

Yet for most of us, who we are becoming is something that just *happens*. We don't really think about it. That's what it means to be “molded.” We are shaped by things beyond our control. The shape of our lives is something that *happens* to us.

We may assume who we are becoming is determined by our intentions. When our lives aren't what we had hoped they'd be, we let ourselves off the hook because we know our intentions were good. But our lives are not molded by good intentions. Chances are you had intentions of being a certain kind of person, or maybe of *not* being a certain kind of person. You had ideas about the man or woman, the husband or wife, the father or mother, the follower of Jesus you would become. So is that who you are?

I want to ask you to do something you're probably not going to want to



do. In just a moment I'm going to ask you to set this book down, go find a mirror, and look at yourself for at least a minute while thinking about two incredibly important questions:

**Who am I becoming?
Is this who I want to be?**

The reason I know you probably won't do this little exercise is that I know me. If I had just started reading a book and was told to set it down and go stare at myself in the mirror while asking myself some existential questions, I would either roll my eyes and keep reading or assume I already know the answers to these questions. But if we are going to understand how our lives have been shaped by our thoughts, we need to be honest about the shape our lives are in. So take a moment, set this book down, go look in the mirror, and think about these two questions: *Who am I becoming? Is this who I want to be?*

Okay, go ahead and do it.

Did you do it? If you did, then you can skip this next paragraph. *Still reading?* Not surprised. Look, this book about thinking is going to challenge you to stop and think about some things. Part of our problem is that we have allowed our minds to be *consumers* rather than *processors*. If you consume this content without thinking, you will have missed the point.

So here's what I'm going to do for you readers who want to get through several pages every time you sit down to read: I'll provide a number of places where you'll find several blank lines so you can stop reading and do what I like to call "thought thinking." That's when you stop, and without any distractions, think about your thoughts. The more challenging this is for you, the more you need to do it.

The average reader takes 1.7 minutes to read one page. Based on the reasonable assumption that my readers are above average, I'm going to round that down to 1.5 minutes. That means by giving you blank lines in places along the way, I'm giving you three minutes to practice taking your

Now here's the follow-up question I want us to think through: *How have I become who I am?*

We'll explore this question in the pages ahead, but let me give you the bottom line. The answer not only tells you how you have become who you are, but *how you are becoming who you will be*. Here it is:

You are being molded.

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 12:2, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The original Greek word Paul uses, which is translated "conform," is *suschematizo*. (Pronunciation: Take the tip of your pointer finger and connect it to the tip of your thumb, forming a circle. Now try saying that word with an Italian accent.) *Suschematizo* means to be molded by something external. *The New Testament in Modern English* reads, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within" (PHILLIPS).

Paul starts with "do not," which in the Greek is written in the present imperative verb tense, to convey "stop doing this." The command implies the believers in Rome were already allowing themselves to be shaped by the pattern of the world.

I am spending this year going through the book of Romans with our church. In preparation I spent some time in the city of Rome. I would describe ancient Rome as a "mold machine." Rome brought people from many different cultures and backgrounds with the intention of molding them so they'd all become more *Roman*. Rome seemed to know something Paul alludes to in Romans 12—*conforming happens*. If you can influence the way people think about things, they will be conformed, whether they want to be or not.

That was true then, and it is true now.

I am not a culture basher. I watch TV and movies, know the moves to the cupid shuffle, and may have even seen a TikTok video or two, but I'm convinced we need to understand that the world has certain patterns.

And it is constantly trying to squeeze us into its mold. As you think about how your life has been molded, you may find yourself becoming defensive:

**I didn't know.
It wasn't intentional.
It was just a mold.**

That may be true, but whether or not it was intentional, our lives always come out in the shape they are molded in. To a great extent, this mold is determined by our thoughts. Proverbs 4:23 (GNT) puts it this way: “Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts.” Neuroscience is finally catching up with the wisdom of Scripture, and we are discovering just how true that is.

Dr. Caroline Leaf is a communication pathologist, audiologist, and clinical and research neuroscientist who specializes in psychoneurobiology and metacognitive neuropsychology. In other words, she’s an expert in the science of how our lives are shaped by our thoughts. She contends that the average person may have more than thirty thousand thoughts per day. Of those, so many are negative, she posits, that the vast majority of the illnesses that plague us today are a direct result of a toxic thought life.² And not only that. Most of these thoughts can be repetitive, which implies that the most likely scenario is that we will continue to think the thoughts we have been thinking. These thought patterns eventually form a mold that shapes much of who we are.

Let’s identify some ways our thoughts mold our lives, and along the way, I’ll ask you some questions to help you think about your own “thought mold.”

Our Thoughts Establish Our Emotions

It can often seem as though our emotions are outside of our control, and therefore we can’t help the way we feel. Or we assume we would feel differently if our circumstances were different. But there is an intricate relationship between our thoughts and our feelings. God created our

brains with a limbic system, specifically the amygdala, which helps us process our emotional and behavioral responses. These responses are intimately connected to our ability to survive. If you've ever felt that immediate response in a situation of sudden fear or danger, that's your limbic system kicking into gear. It's very powerful, even shaping our memories to help us understand and avoid danger.

But we're not at its mercy. The prefrontal cortex, which is where we do our intentional, high-level thinking, can modulate the amygdala's response. MRI scans have demonstrated that when participants reframe negative images using intentional thinking, there is a reduction in negative and unwanted emotions. What does that mean? *God has given us the tools to help shape our behavior.* This is an incredible gift of freedom. We are not just bundles of reactions in a mechanistic world. We have agency, dignity, and choice.

Here's what this looks like. Stephanie feels intense anxiety before a job interview. Her heart begins racing (amygdala response). But then, by intentionally reminding herself of her qualifications and thinking about past successes, she reduces her anxiety and feels more confident (prefrontal cortex modulating the amygdala). As a result, she presents as calmer and more competent in a business setting and performs better in the interview.

Mark feels frustrated and angry when stuck in traffic and late for a dinner date. He begins gripping the steering wheel tightly (amygdala response). But then, by realizing what he's doing and consciously deciding to view this as an opportunity to listen to an audiobook, he feels calmer and even a bit positive about the delay (prefrontal cortex intervention). He shows up to the meal ready to enjoy the time, despite the additional twenty minutes on the freeway.

Our neurotransmitter system also connects our thoughts with our emotions. What we think about can trigger the release of neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, all of which can influence our emotional state.

Here's how that connection might play out: Emily thinks about her upcoming vacation to Hawaii. Neurotransmitter effect: This triggers the

release of dopamine, the “reward” neurotransmitter. Emotional result: Emily feels excited and motivated, looking forward to her trip.

Alex spends a few minutes each morning thinking about the things he’s grateful for. Neurotransmitter effect: This practice increases serotonin levels, often associated with mood regulation. Emotional result: Alex experiences an improved mood and a greater sense of contentment throughout the day.

This is the way God has made us, and when we understand it, we can begin to take a more intentional role in experiencing the emotions of life. (It will also help us appreciate the Bible’s encouragement to set our minds on things above and similar statements. *Oh, yeah. God knows how our brains work.*)

Here are some questions to think about as you process the connection between your mind and your emotions:

- What situation consistently triggers a strong emotional response in me?
- What is the situation, and what is the response?
- How do my emotions shift when I intentionally change my thinking?

Our Thoughts Direct Our Decisions

Have you ever made a decision and then tried to understand what led you to make it? It turns out that just like our emotions, our decisions are largely determined by what’s happening in the prefrontal cortex. In fact, this part of the brain is often referred to as the executive center because that’s where decisions get made. Our thoughts assign benefits and consequences to different actions based on what we think about, what we have experienced, and what we think about what we have experienced. The more we become aware of our own thought patterns, the more deliberate and objective we can be in making decisions.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt tells the story of the elephant and the rider to help us understand the connection between our thoughts and

actions.³ He asks us to imagine a rider on top of an elephant. Think of the rider as our conscious rational mind, while the elephant in this case represents our subconscious or automatic decisions. The rider may think they are in charge, and the elephant may go along with their direction, but in reality, the elephant has the power to go in any direction it wants—and there is nothing the rider can do about it. At least in the moment. But what if that rider had spent time and care to *train* the elephant? Perhaps once in a while, there would still be a problem—that’s only natural—but the situation would be totally different from that of the untrained elephant.

We like to think we can be in charge of our own direction and decisions in any given moment, but in reality, the thoughts we have been thinking have established neural pathways that will decide which direction we go. This is why we can all think of decisions we’ve made that don’t align with what we say we want. Our established thought patterns are guiding our behavior in ways we underestimate. The way we change our decision-making patterns is to take the time to train the elephant by changing our thinking and redirecting our neural pathways.

You commit to eating healthier and plan to have a salad for lunch, but when lunchtime comes, you find yourself hungry for the fast food you’ve been eating for the past several months.

You set your alarm for 6:00 a.m. to spend time reading the Bible and praying before you start your day, but when the alarm goes off, your body reaches for the snooze button without a second thought.

You decide to have a calm and rational discussion with your wife about finances, but during the conversation, your emotions take over. You start raising your voice and being defensive.

In all these examples, your established thought pattern is making the decision for you. Lasting change requires more than behavior modification; it requires intentional and consistent thought transformation.

The challenge is that we’ve been thinking the way we’ve been thinking for a long time, and our thinking becomes ingrained. If you think about it, the easiest thoughts to think are the thoughts you’ve already been

thinking. But for things to change, you have to change your thinking. That's a lot to think about.

This is why we so often *don't* change.

We assume the path to transformation is behavior modification, so we set a New Year's resolution or make a vow to quit a bad habit. We swear, "We really mean it this time!" and then . . . we go back to doing the same old thing, all over again.

Why? You really meant it when you said you were going to change, so why didn't you? Because you focused on changing your behavior but not your thinking. And what you do is primarily determined not by your intentions but by your thoughts.

Here are some questions to think about as you process the connection between your thoughts and your decisions:

- What habits am I trying to break but keep falling back into?
- When do I find myself saying, *I don't know why I did that?*
- In what areas of my life is there a disconnect between what I do and what I want to do?
- What strategies have I implemented to try to make changes?

Our Thoughts Regulate Our Relationships

Cognitive interpretation is how your mind explains events and situations—everything from what pops up in your news feed to the passing comment of a coworker. How we think about others' words and actions directly influences how we treat and emotionally respond to them. If we allow our thoughts to habitually be negative, even when the person's behavior or words are ambiguous, we will often react in a way that is defensive or overly sensitive and puts a strain on the relationship.

Can you see how cognitive interpretation largely determines how we treat the people around us? Our thoughts provide a filter that interprets what people say and do, which in turn determines our emotional response and personal connection.

When I was struggling with some of my relationships at work, a friend



challenged me. He explained that my mind was “filling in the gaps” with negative assumptions and critical explanations. In all of our relationships, we have certain gaps to fill. Sometimes it’s an information gap, where we don’t have all the information we need to make a certain decision. It could be a context gap, where we don’t understand the context in which a certain comment was made. Other times, it’s a connection gap, where our lives have gotten so busy that we haven’t spent time together.

With our thoughts we are constantly filling in gaps, and we have to decide if we are going to presume the worst or assume the best. Are we going to give a cynical or a generous explanation? Are we going to think positive or negative thoughts? The point is that when we fill in the gaps, how we think will significantly impact our relationships.

When I pull in the driveway and see that my wife has ordered another item on Amazon that has been delivered to the house but I don’t know what’s in the box, my next thoughts will fill in the gap. I can think to myself, *How can we possibly need something else? We’ve had deliveries every day this week. Doesn’t she care how much money we’re spending?* Or I can think a different thought: *I never have to wonder if we are going to have what we need in our house. My wife is thoughtful to take care of everything, and no one loves a good deal more than she does.*

What I think in that moment has the power to regulate my relationship with my spouse and determine the course of our connection for the rest of the evening. It is also likely to be more accurate to the situation, as we are able to adopt a more rational perspective that can help make sense of the whole context and all pertinent information, not just your emotive response.

Here are some questions to think about as you process this connection between your thoughts and your relationships:

- When I make assumptions about someone’s intentions, do I assume the best, or do I assume the worst?
- When I think about my past with this person, what do I remember?



- What narrative do I tell myself about this person when I have to fill in the gaps?

Our Thoughts Guide Our Goals

Our thoughts about our possibilities can determine the goals we set and the purposes we pursue in our lives. When our thoughts align with our desired goals, we are much more likely to take the appropriate action.

Think of one or two goals you have for yourself right now. If you take time to think about how accomplishing them can have a positive impact on your life, it triggers the neurotransmitter dopamine. Dopamine neurons respond not only to experiencing rewards but to thinking about rewards. So by thinking about our goals, we are more motivated to pursue them. The more we think about our goals, the more aware we become of our current state vis-à-vis our desired outcome.

This is why a prime advertising strategy for diet and exercise programs is to show before and after pictures. They want you to think about your current state and focus on a desired outcome. The more you think about the desired outcome, the more motivated you will be to live in a way that aligns with that goal.

James Nesmeth, a United States Air Force pilot, was held as a prisoner of war in Vietnam for seven years. He was an average golfer before he was captured, usually shooting in the mid-90s, which I would be thrilled with. But during his seven-year imprisonment, when he was often in solitary confinement, he passed the time and maintained his sanity by visualizing himself playing at his favorite golf course. Nearly every day for those seven years, Nesmeth would play in his mind a full eighteen holes on that course he knew so well. He would think through the details—the clubs he would use, the smell of the grass, and the flight of the ball. Sometimes he would spend four hours thinking about playing those eighteen holes.

When he was finally released, he returned home and went to that golf course. Despite not having played golf for seven years, he shot a 74, better than his best score before he was captured.⁴

The thoughts we think are always taking us somewhere. They can get

us closer to our goals, or they can move us in the opposite direction. Paul understood the power of this dynamic when he wrote in Philippians 3 that he was intentionally *not* thinking about what was in his past but instead thinking about what lies ahead.

Here are some questions to think about as you process this connection between your thoughts and your goals:

- What are my most important goals right now?
- How often do I think about them?
- When I think about these goals, do I focus more on the obstacles or on the desired outcome?
- Do I pray about my goals to make sure my thoughts are aligned with what God wants for my life?

TRANSFORMED

If your life is shaped by your thoughts, what mold are you being squeezed into? In Romans 12:2, Paul tells us not to be conformed and then juxtaposes that with an alternative: “but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

We like to think we are nonconformists. *You are not the boss of me. No one tells me what to do. I'm living my own truth.* But everyone conforms to something. When Paul tells us not to be conformed but rather to be transformed, he is implying that it will be one or the other.

Choice A: Conform to this world.

Choice B: Be transformed by God into the image of Jesus so you can live out God’s “good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).

Choice C: There is no option C.

Transformed is the English word that translates the *metamorphoo*, a word that may seem familiar, because it’s where we get *metamorphosis*. Remember in elementary school when you learned about how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, transforming from something kind of icky that crawls around in the mud into something beautiful that soars through

the sky? That's a picture of God's goal for you. Instead of being molded by something external, we can be transformed by God from the inside out.

God intends for your life to be beautiful. You are God's workmanship, his poetry (see Ephesians 2:10). He has something amazing in mind for your life, but if it is to become reality, you need to be transformed to become who God desires you to become. What could be better than that?

You should do this for you so you can become the person you want to see in the mirror someday, the best version of you for the people you care about, but there's another reason, and, honestly, it's even better. *You should do this for God.*

Romans 12:1 says that the motivation to be transformed by the renewing of our minds is God's mercy and grace toward us. That verse begins, "In view of God's mercy." Often our motives for self-improvement revolve around ourselves, and while this reason for transformation will help us, it's not the primary why. Instead, we want to be transformed because of God's love so we live in a way that may be opposite and offensive to the world around us but will be holy and pleasing to him.

It's also important to note that "be transformed" uses the passive imperative tense. The word *passive* means we are not the ones who do it; it is done *to us*. God is the only one who can do this, and he wants to do it in you and me. We will talk at length about taking our thoughts captive and renewing our minds, but let me be clear from the beginning that this is not a self-help approach to transformation. It is a spiritual journey empowered by the Holy Spirit. As we renew our minds, God is the one who brings about the transformation.

The word *imperative* shows that it is a command, which is interesting because, again, it's not something we can do. Remember, this action is expressed in the passive tense; it's done to us. Typically, we're not commanded to do things we can't do, but here we have a different story. Why? We have a part to play, a choice to make. Transformation is not something God will do in us against our will. Taking every thought captive means submitting every thought to him. As we learn to do that, he will bring about transformation.

Being transformed by the renewing of our minds is not something that happens automatically or accidentally; it takes intentionality and effort. This is not a stroll in the park; it's a tug-of-war. Our spiritual formation is *countertransformation*. We battle against our flesh, our old sinful habits, the world we live in, our enemy who rules over it, and the mold that always seems to be squeezing us.* If we don't choose transformation, we won't just sit in neutral; we will be left to the persistent molding of the world, dragged in the opposite direction of who we wanted to become.

If we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, the real transformation question is this: *How do we renew our minds?* Here's the answer: We learn to take every thought captive.

* The Bible says that Satan is "the god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4 NLT; see also John 12:31; Ephesians 2:2; Colossians 1:13).