MAX LUCADO

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TAME YOUR THOUGHTS

THREE TOOLS TO RENEW YOUR MIND

AND TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE



Also by Max Lucado

Inspirational

3:16

A Gentle Thunder
A Love Worth Giving
And the Angels Were Silent
Anxious for Nothing
Because of Bethlehem
Before Amen
Come Thirsty
Cure for the Common Life

Facing Your Giants Fearless Glory Days God Came Near

God Never Gives Up on You Grace

> Great Day Every Day He Chose the Nails He Still Moves Stones Help Is Here

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> Max on Life More to Your Story Next Door Savior

No Wonder They Call Him the Savior On the Anvil

Outlive Your Life Six Hours One Friday The Applause of Heaven

The Great House of God Traveling Light Unshakable Hope What Happens Next

When Christ Comes When God Whispers Your Name

You Are Never Alone You'll Get Through This You Were Made for

ou Were Maae for This Moment

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Thank You, God.

for Blessing Me

Thank You, God,

for Loving Me

The Crippled Lamb The Oak Inside the Acorn You Are Special Where'd My Giggle Go?

Young Adult Books

3:16

It's Not About Me
Make Every Day Count
Wild Grace
You Were Made to
Make a Difference
Anxious for Nothing
(Young Readers Edition)
One God, One Plan, One Life
Unshakable Hope
Promise Book
You Can Count on God

Gift Books

Calm Moments for Anxious Davs Fear Not Promise Book God Is with You Every Day God Thinks You're Wonderful God Will Help You Grace for the Moment Grace for the Moment Family Devotional Grace for the Moment for Moms Grace Happens Here Нарру Today Let the Journey Begin Live Loved Praying the Promises Safe in the Shepherd's Arms Trade Your Cares for Calm You Can Count on God

THREE TOOLS TO RENEW YOUR MIND AND TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

MAX LUCADO



Tame Your Thoughts

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For Buckley, Thum, Calhoon, Pete, McMahan, and Jon.

Here's to more fairways, birdies, mulligans,
good talks, and dumb jokes.

In heaven we will all break par.

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And to you, dear reader. Thank you. As you think about your thoughts, I'll be thinking about and praying for you. Happy reading!

ONE

THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT

Just for the fun of it, I attempted to count them. Thoughts. How many thoughts bounce around inside my head? As long as I can recall, I've had them, heard them, heeded them, and, at times, hated them. But I've never counted them.

No simple task. Try it sometime. Take a pen and paper and make a mark each time you have a thought. Mark. Mark. Dot. Dash. Stroke. That's what I did. I felt like a telegraph operator from a century past.

I'm hungry. Dot.

What's he going to think? Dot.

It looks like rain. Dash.

Was I supposed to feed the dog? Dash.

Politics is going to be the end of us. Dot. Dash. Dot.

Counting thoughts was a stupid idea. Dash. Dot. Dash.

Thoughts. They heckle; they help. They remind us of regrets. They remind us to take out the trash. They convene committee meetings in the middle of the night. Like a swarm of bees, they buzz about, some making honey, others inflicting pain. No way could I count them.

The researchers at the Laboratory of Neuro Imaging, University of Southern California, did, however. According to them, your brain is a three-pound computer that processes seventy thousand thoughts each day.¹

That is a bunch. You know them. You hear them. Thoughts begin to bray when we wake up and refuse to shut off until we sleep. (Though some of them seem to keep needling while we sleep.) They are the

inner chatter, the internal narrator who calls play-by-play on our deeds. Sometimes happy, other times grumpy. Some constructive. Some intrusive. They render verdicts on our choices. They rehash our failures, doomsday our future, and do their darndest to sour the here and now. Thoughts are everywhere.

And we are the sum of them. Positive thoughts generate positive actions. Negative thoughts activate negative behavior. Behind every angry outburst is an angry belief. Behind every kind gesture is a kind notion. Behind every jealous comment is a . . . well, you get the idea.

We are what we think. The proof is in the polygraph. The test measures the physical manifestations of invisible thoughts. During the lie detector test a person is attached to equipment that measures everything from hand temperature to breathing rate.

"Were you at such and such place on such and such day?" the tester asks. If you lie, your body tells the truth. Your hands get cold or your breathing accelerates. Not because of something you say, but simply because of something you think.

Thoughts have consequences, which prompts this question: Can we manage our lives by managing our thoughts?

Neuroscience says as much. Those who study the brain talk about *neuroplasticity*, the mutability of the brain. It is less like a chunk of concrete and more like a ball of putty. Malleable. Adaptable. The brain creates neurons and connections between those neurons throughout life. The brain is not a published book, completed early in life. It is an editable manuscript. You can, quite literally, change your mind. Just as a sculptor shapes a ball of putty, it's possible to sculpt your brain.

Dan Harris came to believe this.

On June 7, 2004, with five million people watching, Harris had a meltdown. He was broadcasting a segment on *Good Morning America* when a wave of panic paralyzed his muscles and garbled his speech. Harris was a rising star at ABC, and the event threatened to ruin his career. In hopes of finding a solution for his crippling anxiety, he

Think About What You Think About

searched for ways to regain control of his mind. He immersed himself in the science of the brain. His findings led him to write this paragraph.

Many of us labor under the delusion that we're permanently stuck with all of the difficult parts of our personalities—that we are "hot-tempered," or "shy," or "sad"—and that these are fixed, immutable traits. We now know that many of the attributes we value most are, in fact, skills, which can be trained the same way you build your body in the gym.²

The apostle Paul was more succinct. Our attitudes and thoughts can be "constantly changing for the better" (Eph. 4:23 TLB). Victims of our inner voices? Not necessarily. Indeed, harnessed and helpful thoughts can change our lives.

Are your days ever so gloomy? You can change that. Perpetually

anxious? Abundant peace is an option. Heavied by regrets? Your past need not define your future. Hounded by inner critics? You can defang those voices in your head. You can tame your thoughts! A new "you" will appear as new thoughts begin to emerge.

A new "you" will appear as new thoughts begin to emerge.

PLAY-DOH AND CATERPILLARS

The term *neuroplasticity* is not in Scripture. But "change your thoughts and change your life"? That idea embeds every chapter. It is the promise behind Paul's well-known words: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2 ESV).

The apostle contrasts two types of people: one who is *conformed*, the other who is *transformed*. One is shaped by society; the other is renewed by the work of God.

The word *conformed* reminds me of the Play-Doh kit I played with as a kid. It came with a dozen or so containers of modeling compound. Assorted colors of clay could be pressed, smooshed, squished, rolled, squeezed, and shaped. We made ropes, rainbows, reptiles, and robots. We "conformed" the shape of the clay to our preferences.

The box also contained a set of molds. A puppy mold, a hot dog mold, and a person mold. Place the Play-Doh in the mold, close the lid and, ta-da, you have a perfectly shaped puppy, hot dog, or person.

Nothing in the Bible would incline us to think that the apostle Paul played with Play-Doh. But abundant messages from his pen allude to the very real pressure to be conformed to the world.

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.

Remember what he did with Judas? "Jesus and his disciples were eating supper. The devil had already *put an idea into the mind* of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son. The idea was to sell Jesus to his enemies" (John 13:2 EASY). Judas, himself no picture of faith, opened the door of his thoughts to Satan.

When Ananias and Sapphira deceived the apostles, Peter said, "Ananias, why did you let Satan *rule your thoughts* to lie to the Holy Spirit?" (Acts 5:3 NCV).

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The classic example of the devil's influence occurred in the garden of Eden. According to Paul, Satan seduced Eve by hijacking her thoughts. "I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3 ESV).

There it is. Satan implanted a virus in Eve's mental software. He commandeered her mind by infecting her thoughts. He uses the same playbook today. "[The devil] was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44 ESV).

Satan aims to derail our thinking with unruly and ungodly thoughts. When our thinking goes off-track, so does our life. Hence Paul's challenge: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould" (Rom. 12:2 PHILLIPS).

No one wants to be squeezed, right? By the power of Jesus, you can avoid being *conformed* and, instead, be "*transformed* by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2 ESV).

What a choice word! Paul, writing in the Greek language, chose the verb *metamorphoo*, from which we translate the noun *metamorphosis*. Anyone who paid attention in middle school science class remembers that the process of turning a caterpillar into a butterfly is called metamorphosis. The squirmy, furry worm is transformed into a winged, colorful, high-flying butterfly.

God promises you an even greater transformation.

Stuck in your head? Ticked off at the world? On edge like DEFCON 1? There is hope! The thoughts that have characterized your past need not characterize the rest of your life. God will move you from worm to butterfly, from clay-like to Christlike.

The second half of the scripture, "be transformed by the renewal of your mind," is in the passive voice, meaning that God does the work! A new mind is less the result of human effort and more the result of divine

intervention. *He* renews our mind. He reroutes our thought patterns. He rewires our synaptic circuitry. He tweaks our attitude. He creates a new way of thinking. Heaven marshals its finest forces to help us.

As Paul stated, "Let God re-mould your minds from within" (Rom. 12:2 PHILLIPS).

Could there be a greater promise to ponder? Could there be a greater time to ponder it?

OUR STINKING THINKING

Our thoughts have gone down the tube! The numbers will stagger you. According to one study, 42 percent of high school students "experience persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness." And 22 percent have "seriously considered attempting suicide."³

Feel the full force of those statistics. Imagine yourself sitting in a restaurant. Ten teenagers walk in. They carry phones and backpacks. But, according to this survey, they carry much, much more. Four of them buckle beneath feelings of despair. Two of the ten have given thought to killing themselves. Unspeakably tragic. Adolescence should be a time of dreams and fun, but for many young people it is a swampland of fog and fear.

And adults? We don't fare much better. One in five reported symptoms of anxiety and depression.⁴

Mental health problems impact every element of life. People who battle depression are 40 percent more likely to have cardiovascular issues. Of those who struggle with mental health, one-third experience substance abuse. High school students who struggle with depression are more than twice as likely to drop out of school and three times more likely to repeat a grade.⁵ Studies reveal that "75 percent to 98 percent of mental, physical, and behavioral illness comes from one's thought life."⁶ Stinking thinking is sucking the life out of us.

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One study found that fear, anger, and frustration cause the DNA to tighten up and become shorter, switching off genetic codes. Conversely, the health of those codes was improved by feelings of love, gratitude, and joy. HIV patients who have positive thoughts and feelings are 300,000 times (!) more resistant to the disease than those whose thoughts were negative.⁷

Thoughts. We cannot see them. We cannot buy them. We cannot always predict them. But we cannot deny this about them: They define our lives. Think well, live well. Think poorly, live poorly.

It's no wonder that God urges us to "be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts" (Prov. 4:23 gnt). He has not left us alone in this battle of the mind. God loves us too much to let us lead a life marked by poor thinking. He made our brains. He can retrain our brains.

Full disclosure. I am a Christian. You've likely picked up on the fact that I embrace and cherish a Christian worldview. Namely: God made us, saves us, pastors us, and is coming back for us. I love being a Christian. I truly do. Thanks to Jesus, life makes sense, has purpose, and is a lot of fun. The promise of heaven thrills me, and the assurance of God's love sustains me.

This book is rooted in Christian hope. If you are not a Christian, I hope you'll read it anyway. I hope you'll consider this idea: The secret sauce for thought management is a genuine faith in the God of the Bible.

THE HELMET OF SALVATION

He invites us to don "the helmet of salvation" (Eph. 6:17).

In the act of salvation, he wraps himself like a helmet around our heads. He declares to the enemy, the devil: "This mind is mine. I saved it. I own it. I am renewing it." In fact, one paraphrase of Paul's words

invites us to "embrace the power of salvation's full deliverance, like a helmet to protect your thoughts from lies" (Eph. 6:18 TPT).

Paul's original audience was well acquainted with the Roman helmet. It was a leather cap with a strap. Metal reinforced it. The helmet was essential to the survival of the soldier. His opponent carried a shorthandled axe called a battle-axe. If the soldier went to battle without a helmet, his head would roll. If we go into the daily battle of life without ours, something equally serious will happen.

I can testify to the importance of a helmet. I love to ride my bike. I'm not a fan of biking on a busy road. A two-wheeler stands no chance against a truck. But I feel safe on the empty blacktops of the South Texas Hill Country where I live.

Even so, I still wear my helmet. Here is why. On one occasion I pedaled to the side of the road to take a break. When I did, I hit a patch of gravel, and my wheels slipped. Since my shoes were clipped in, I couldn't remove them fast enough to keep from falling. I fell, and fell hard, right on my head. I saw stars. I saw flashing lights. I think I saw Jesus. Once I caught my breath, I pulled myself up, removed my helmet and examined it. It was deeply dented. Had I been helmetless, I would have been knocked out.

It's a dangerous thing to ride a bike without wearing a helmet.

It's far more dangerous to go through life without the helmet of salvation. Yet, most people do exactly that. They wear no supernatural protection. When they slip and stumble, when life slips out from under them, they get hurt.

Please don't be among them. Don't go into battle without your armor.

How does one acquire this helmet? Simple: Ask for it. The gift of salvation is yours to receive. Turn your heart toward Jesus in prayer. Tell him you are a sinner in need of a Savior and he will gladly and immediately receive you into his family. It really is that simple—and marvelous.

Once he saves you, God enrolls you in his mental training course.

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Stinking thinking is a spiritual problem and requires a spiritual solution. God provides it!

If he can resurrect the dead, can he not resurrect hope? Defy depression? Clarify confusion? Flush out shame? Destroy doubt? Overcome insecurity? Download discipline? Eliminate lust? Banish bitterness? Take God at his word: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a *sound mind*" (2 Tim. 1:7 NKJV). He will perform a butterfly miracle in you. He will renovate your thought life. No more caterpillar crawling through the dirt—it's time to receive your new wings.

But how does he do this? What choices can we make to help facilitate the change?

Search "thought management" on the internet and you will find a Pacific Ocean of answers. Magazine articles, TED Talks, podcasts, blogs, and books. They explore meditation, medication, and transcranial magnetic stimulation. Better your brain by running more, eating right, sleeping longer, taking supplements, reading Lucado books. (Who added that last one?)

There's a lot to wade through. I seek neither to promote nor debunk these treatments. I prefer to focus on three tools, an ancient trio of strategies that I know well and I know work well. Call them what you wish: *Thought management 101. Your mental tool kit. Mental floss.* However you tag them, they make a difference—a huge difference.

TAME YOUR THOUGHTS TOOL KIT



PRACTICE PICKY THINKING

Guard your thoughts.



IDENTIFY UFOS

An Untruth creates

a **False** narrative that leads to an **Overreaction**. Shine God's truth to

expose Satan's lies.



UPROOT AND REPLANT

Weed out your most unhealthy thought patterns and replace them with divine truth.

These tools will empower you to think clearly and rightly. Sometimes all three are needed. At other times just one or two will suffice. Either way, these tools will rescue you from the quicksand of ungovernable thoughts.

Having explored the tools in section I, we will put them into practice in section II. We will delve into the most common thought problems: anxiety, guilt, rejection, lust, and others. The list is not exhaustive but is exemplary of the types of mental marsh that can pull us under.

The big news is this: You have a choice. Your parents don't control your thoughts, you do. Your ancestry doesn't dictate your attitudes, you do. The weather may tell you what to wear, but you and only you tell yourself what to think about the weather. Mind management is God's gift to you. But the gift means nothing until you use it.

We all nod in agreement at this maxim: You can't help a person who doesn't want to be helped. But what do we mean when we say that?

Suppose a person is a classic worst-case scenario personality. Suppose that person is you. Your glass is not only half empty but also broken

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into a thousand pieces and never to be refilled. Your self-assigned job description is to point out the inevitable casualties and catastrophes in life. People cringe when they see you, the congenital pessimist, coming. It's just a matter of time before you disgorge your negativity, and they know it.

No number of pep talks and lectures will change you. No matter how many times your straight-talking friends tell you that you are a real pain, nothing is going to happen until you decide, really decide, to change.

The moment you choose to change, however, change begins to happen! The moment you act, the benefits of that action commence. As one professor of neurology wrote:

The mere act of making an effort can do wonders. . . . Clinically depressed people feel significantly better simply by scheduling a first appointment to see a therapist—it means they've recognized there's a problem. It means they've fought their way up through the psychomotor quagmire to actually do something, it means they've turned a corner.⁸

The fact that you are holding this book says something. The fact that you've read this far says even more. Thanks for sticking with me. Before we go further, can we be clear on something? No one can help a person who resists help. Our Maker wired us in such a way that healing happens when we seek it. This is as good a time as any to ask: Do *you*? Do you want it?

You will discover how to

- interrupt self-sabotage and self-doubt,
- let go of anxiety and tap into God's peace,
- snap the spiderweb strands of unpleasant impulses,
- disarm negative thoughts before they explode,

This book has a simple yet lofty goal: a life made better by better thoughts.

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- defuse guilt and embrace grace,
- break free of self-critical thought loops and doubt, and
- relish the energizing truth of God's love.

In short, you will learn how to tame your thoughts. No matter who you are. No matter what you have done. No matter if you are filthy rich or dirt poor. No matter if you are in therapy, incarcerated, or in a penthouse. Married or single. Old or young.

Progress is possible. I believe that with all my heart. I also believe that progress might require professional help. If that's the case for you, please seek it.

With God as your helper, you will discover a new way of thinking. Those whirlpools of gloom and doom? He will stop them. That unhappy habit of craving what is not yours? God can fix that. Your tendency to mislabel yourself with words God doesn't use about you? I am thrilled to say, those days are numbered.

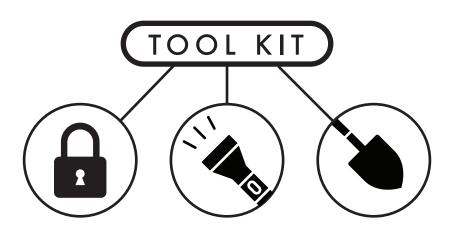
A new you is about to emerge.

We are not the victims of our thoughts. We can be transformed, not conformed. We can find protection by wearing God's helmet of salvation. We can use our tool kit and learn to tame our thoughts—all seventy thousand of them!

Let's get going.

SECTION I

THREE TOOLS FOR THOUGHT MANAGEMENT



TWO

PRACTICE PICKY THINKING



For years it wasn't much to look at. A charmless, cramped conference room with a trio of smaller ones off to one side. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called it "a tiny, uncomfortable, low ceilinged, windowless room." Another official described it as a "pig pen." Early photos depict cherrywood paneled walls, dark gray carpet, and an acoustic ceiling.

The room once housed a bowling alley. The dining room, where staffers go for coffee and meals, is only a few steps away. Proximity to the food may explain why the room was home to the occasional cockroach and rat.

Nothing about it would signal its significance. Yet, one wonders if a more significant room has ever existed. Its walls have witnessed conversations of the highest level centered around nuclear threats, assassinations, assassination attempts, wars, and the attacks of September 11. Its chairs have held top-ranking military officers, cabinet leaders, security advisers, vice presidents, and, of course, presidents of the United States.

The room was God's idea. Not the God who created heaven and earth but an air force brigadier by the name of Godfrey McHugh. He went by "God" for short. (Apparently his ego was healthy.) "God" was an adviser and close friend of John F. Kennedy. So close that First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy requested he stand guard over the casket of her slain husband while she stood at the side of Lyndon Johnson as he was sworn in as president on Air Force One.

In the spring of 1961, McHugh proposed to the president a "situation room" to handle the matters of the Cold War. It would be a clearing house for crisis management. Kennedy gave it the green light. Two weeks

and \$35,000 later the basement bowling alley was transformed, and the situation room was open for business.

Though it has since enjoyed multiple updates, expansions, and sophistications, the purpose of the White House situation room remains unchanged: filter facts and make decisions.²

You have one of those rooms. It occupies about six inches, the space between your ears. Your "Sit Room" buzzes with nonstop activity, processing data, issuing commands, making selections, and determining the course of your life.

Like the one at the White House, your room exists to filter facts and make decisions. And, like the one in Washington, it was designed and built by God. Only in your case, God is not an adviser to a president; he is the creator of the universe.

Whether the situation room is in Washington or in your skull, one rule matters above all others: truth. Good decisions depend upon reliable information. The White House control center does not open its door to just any random person who wants to spout an opinion or give advice. Only personnel of the highest caliber, armed with the most accurate intel, are allowed to speak. Inaccuracy invites catastrophe.

Isn't the same true with our thoughts?

Where did we get the idea that each thought needs to be thought? That each idea deserves a hearing? Who came up with the notion that each notion warrants a chair at our mental table?

We don't do this with food. Just because you see chocolate doesn't mean you have to eat chocolate. We don't open our homes to every stranger who happens to saunter past. Do we buy every item in the

Just because you have a thought, you don't have to entertain it.

clothing store? If we do, we will soon be penniless. Common sense dictates that we practice discretionary eating, hospitality, and shopping. How much more must we do the same with our thoughts?

They do not deserve free rein. They do not

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warrant unlimited access. They do not have the right to strut and swagger unchallenged through our mental Sit Rooms. Just because you have a thought, you don't have to think it.

It's much wiser to tame those thoughts!

Tool number one in your thought management tool kit is this: Practice Picky Thinking.

EVERY THOUGHT CAPTIVE

"The weapons we use in our fight are not the world's weapons but God's powerful weapons, which we use to destroy strongholds. We destroy false arguments; we pull down every proud obstacle that is raised against the knowledge of God; we take every thought captive and make it obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4–5 GNT).

Is this a Bible verse or a paragraph from a combat manual?

- The weapons we use
- The world's weapons
- God's powerful weapons
- Destroy strongholds
- *Pull down* every proud obstacle
- Take every thought *captive*
- Make it obey

This is wartime terminology! The implication is clear: The battle is on! A high-stakes contest for the health of your mind. At issue are the strongholds that have a strong hold in your life.

The Greek term for *stronghold* has a dual meaning. First, it refers to a prison. It carries with it the image of a citadel with tall gates and thick walls. You can't get out. You can't move forward. You are stuck, incarcerated in a towering jail. Held hostage.

The word can also be translated *fortress*. A fortress has high, impregnable, thick walls that defy access. No one can enter.

You've likely seen (perhaps in your own mirror) the person who resists assistance. Even friends, counselors, and helpers are turned away. Such people refuse to listen to advice or learn from their mistakes. They refuse counsel. They are stuck in a stronghold.

- A prison keeps people in.
- A fortress keeps people out.
- Strongholds (unmanaged thoughts) do both.

Wouldn't it be great to be done with them? To, as the apostle wrote, "*destroy* strongholds"? Such a muscular verb. The Greek word for *destroy* means to "pull down by force."³

Consider another version: We "[smash] warped philosophies, tearing down barriers erected against the truth of God" (2 Cor. 10:5 MsG).

The image is that of a warrior, a soldier, a fighter. Our enemy is the unsolicited, unhealthy, and unwelcome idea. Rather than indulge such thoughts, we take a wrecking ball to them. Once the stronghold is shattered, we "take every thought captive and make it obey Christ."

We filter. We screen. We inspect. We monitor. We discriminate. We challenge. The literal rendering of the phrase is "to take one captive with a spear pointed into [the] back." We poke a spear against the spine of toxic thoughts, march them outside, and toss them on their derrieres. We take seriously the high and holy honor of thought management.

Viktor Frankl did. In his classic book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Dr. Frankl revealed what he discovered during his three years of captivity in World War II concentration camps. "We wondered," he wrote, "... what caused some men to survive and others to perish." Prisoners of a less hardy makeup endured while more robust men did not. Why? He found the answer:

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We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.⁶

You don't find yourself in a concentration camp. However, you likely find yourself slugging through the mud of challenges, conflicts, and fears. You aren't surrounded by barbed wire and Nazis. But you are surrounded by aggravations, temptations, and self-doubt. Your

Discipleship, at its core, is Christlike thinking.

first and highest call is to stand vigil over your mind. Discipleship, at its core, is Christlike thinking.

Some years ago, WWJD bracelets were all the rage. What Would Jesus Do? The acronym was a wonderful device. However, might I suggest we change one word? Rather than ask what Jesus would do, let's ask WWJT. What Would Jesus Think? Actions are the offspring of thoughts. Behavior follows belief. So, if we want to improve our behavior, let's go upriver and monitor our minds.

My wife's favorite author said it this way:

You can be the air traffic controller of your mental airport. You occupy the control tower and can direct the mental traffic of your world. Thoughts circle above, coming and going. If one of them lands, it is because you gave it permission. If it leaves, it is because you directed it to do so. You can select your thought pattern.⁷

Satan's strategy is simple: poison your thinking with stinking doubts, deceit, and discouragement. If he can master your mind, he will

master your life. The more minds he can control, the more portions of society he can influence. Tell him to get lost.

Do with your thoughts what I do with emails. Until a couple of years ago, I didn't know I could block emails. Delete them? I knew that. But block them? I missed that tip.

Consequently, I couldn't clean out my inbox. Unsolicited emails kept coming. I tried to delete them daily, but I just couldn't keep up. They cluttered my computer.

Then I was told about the Block This Sender command. *You mean I can block a sender?!* I did exactly that.

Politician? Blocked.

Shoe store? Blocked.

Sales pitch? Blocked.

I spent the better part of an afternoon erecting Do Not Enter signs to turn away nuisances. It took time, but I emptied my inbox of unneeded and unsolicited emails. It's one of the greatest achievements of my life.

These days, when one or two or ten sneak in, I stand them down. No more clutter for me. And no more clutter for you, my friend.

Anxiety? Blocked.

Regret? Blocked.

Insecurity? Blocked.

You can do the same! You can "take every thought captive and *make* it obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5 GNT).

EVERY THOUGHT TESTED

Once we capture a thought, then what? What should we do with it? We evaluate it. Test each thought against the teachings of Jesus. He occupies the highest throne. He is the grand master of life. We report to him. We defer to his Word. The Bible is the God-given standard against which all thinking is measured.

Practice Picky Thinking

"All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). The literal (and beautiful) rendering of this passage means that the Bible is God's very word, breathed out of his mouth.

Can we believe that? The immensity of this question cannot be overstated. Can we genuinely believe that the Bible is the word of God? The unique and ultimate standard? Many people don't. They've concluded that the Bible is full of superstitions and stories. Consequently, their seedbed of truth is a horoscope, bar buddy, lover, or social media post.

Others of us, however, have come to accept the Bible as the source of God's truth. We do so for good reasons. Here are mine:

Jesus Believed It

When the devil came to tempt him, Jesus quoted Scripture (Matt. 4:1–10). When Jesus rose from the dead, he taught from Scripture.

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

If Jesus considered Scripture to be reliable in fighting Satan and explaining his Messiahship, if he set upon it his own stamp of approval, what else is needed?

Fulfilled Prophecies Confirm It

In his life Christ fulfilled 332 distinct prophecies from the Old Testament. The mathematical probability of these prophecies being fulfilled by one man is one in 840 . . . not trillion, not zillion. One in 840 *untrigintillion*. That's 840 followed by 96 zeroes.⁸

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Amazing!

Christ's place of birth, his manner of death, his burial in the grave of a rich man. These and hundreds of other specific prophecies were fulfilled centuries after they were recorded. You can trust the Bible. Prophecies authenticate it.

Changed Lives Affirm It

No other book has impacted people like the Bible. From Augustine, who was a scoundrel; to John Newton, who was a slave-trader; to Abraham Lincoln, who was a simple farm boy; to Max Lucado, who was an ungrateful prodigal until he read about God's love for anyone who has wandered from home and landed in a pigpen.

Radio host Dennis Prager once made a point about the power of a Bible. He asked:

If you were stranded on a street alone at night, your car had broken down, say at 2:00 a.m. on a lonely street in Los Angeles . . . pitch dark blackness, and you get out of your car and suddenly, you see ten big burly men coming out of a house and walking toward you. Would it or would it not be comforting for you if you knew they were just coming out of a Bible study?⁹

The Bible changes lives. See for yourself. Apply the biblical principles of stewardship to your budget and see if you don't get out of debt. Apply the principles of fidelity to your marriage and see if you don't have a happier home. Apply the principles of forgiveness to your relationships and see if you aren't more peaceful. Apply the principles of honesty at school and see if you don't succeed. And, for the sake of our discussion,

Practice Picky Thinking

apply the Bible to your thought life and see if you don't agree—the Bible works.

We need an authoritative voice. We need more than the opinions of other people; we need the declarations of our Maker. He, and he alone, has authority over how we should think.

Scripture provides an unchanging standard for living. The Bible is trustworthy for another reason.

Plan B Is a Train Wreck

I've tried plan B. I've listened to lesser voices. Locker-room know-italls. Godless teachers. Messed-up movie stars. Self-absorbed talk show hosts. They don't know what they are talking about.

I need an authoritative voice. I need an owner's manual. So do you. We need an unchanging, immutable home plate.

I played catcher in Little League baseball. I was a catcher in Pony League. I was a catcher on the high school squad. When I was in college I played catcher on an intramural softball team. I spent a lot of time hunkering down behind home plate—hundreds of hours, thousands of innings, thousands upon thousands of pitches.

During all those games and practices, I noticed something: The width of home plate never changed. It was always seventeen inches wide. This was true in Little League. This was true in Pony League. This was true in high school. It is true in college ball, minor league baseball, and major league ball. It is true in Japan, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba.

The dimensions of home plate never change. Its size is not up for discussion. As a catcher, I could not bring a homemade home plate with me from the dugout. I could not draw a larger, temporary plate in the dirt.

We players could choose our uniforms, hats, shoes, and bats. But when it came to the plate, the size was unchangeable and nonnegotiable. When a pitcher couldn't throw the ball over the seventeen-inch-wide mark, the umpire didn't offer to widen it. He never said: "Hey, buddy, I'm going to get a new plate just for you. Would twenty-five inches help?"

The width of the plate was permanent.

So is the truth of God. It is the true north on the compass of our hearts. "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'" (John 8:31–32).

Freedom comes as we know the truth. The strategy for destroying strongholds boils down to this: Take thoughts captive and test them against God's Word.

Healthy thinking happens as we submit to Scripture. The Bible is God's word on paper. Do you want to know his thoughts about anything? Open the book!

Yesterday I had lunch with Pastor Ed Newton, a dear friend, who has battled the stronghold of rejection. No one likes rejection, but my friend often becomes defensive and irritated with the slightest appearance of it. His fear of rejection was shaping his soul to feel a sense of inadequacy and inferiority. Ed was constantly trying to win people's approval. Not a great way to live.

He sought the help of a therapist. Over a five-day period for five hours a day, Ed, his wife, and their Christian professional set out to disentangle this pattern, to trace it back to its origins. Ed's parents both had disabilities. Neither could speak or hear and, consequently, were often dismissed by unsympathetic people. Ed, himself able to speak and hear, internalized the rejection his parents endured. The rejection they embraced, he embraced. Their pain was his pain. Combine that with a list of shortcomings, disappointments, and the life challenges we all face, and a residue of rejection will reside within you, every day, never going away.

What can Ed do? He is putting Paul's word into practice. I am so proud of him. When thoughts of rejection appear in his mind, he denies them entry. He demands that they "obey Christ." He defers to God's Word and dismisses Satan's lies. He practices Picky Thinking.

Practice Picky Thinking

It took time, but the walls of the stronghold collapsed, and Pastor Ed's situation room was decluttered of deceit.

May the same be said about yours and mine.

MONITOR YOUR DEFAULT THOUGHTS

I recommend you start with this exercise: *Monitor your default thoughts*. Most of us are unaware of the inner dialogue we carry on with ourselves each day. Appraisals. Criticisms. Assumptions. They are knee-jerk, instinctual reactions. Maybe you label yourself quite often. "I'm so stupid." "You did it again, dummy." Perhaps you issue yourself daily forecasts of dark skies. "I'll never get this under control. I have no discipline." When self-criticism or worry plays like a tape in your head, there is always a reason. Someone trained you to think this way.

Strongholds don't pop up overnight. They are the result of injury after injury, influence after influence, regret after regret—days, years, decades of immobilizing notions until a person can't escape.

Challenge those inner voices. Test them against God's Word.

Might I share a time when I did so? By the time I was twenty years old, I was a disaster waiting to happen. I chummed with troublemakers, consumed too much beer, brawled, and boasted like I was God's gift to the world. My parents had taught me better. Deep inside I knew better, but I was a rebel.

Still, even rebels have a conscience. Mine did a number on me. Do you recall the story about the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32)? The boy who abandoned home, squandered his inheritance, and ended up feeding pigs? His name was Max. And, like the son in Jesus' story, I spent more than one night smelling like slop. Like the young man Jesus described, I came to my senses.

For the first time in a long time, I asked myself, Why am I messing up my life?

Unlike the main character in the story, I did not get up and return to my father. No, I hesitated. I feared that God would never forgive me. I'd been raised in a good home, taught to respect others, yet I'd chucked it all for nightclubs and rabble-rousing. Could God forgive someone like me?

The voice in my head said, No way.

My friends agreed. I expressed my remorse to a couple of drinking buddies. They, in essence, said, "We are too far gone, Max."

So, I didn't give myself a chance. My pals didn't give me a chance. But there was a pastor who offered a different opinion. By now, I'd returned to church. I sat on the back row, often suffering from a hangover. Not deacon material, but at least I was in attendance.

This preacher loved to talk about grace. A grace that never ends. A grace that redeems and renews. A grace that is greater than our sin. He shared scriptures. His favorite: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

It soon became clear I was at a fork in the road. I could heed the voices of my inner critic and beer buddies, or I could trust the authority of the pastor and God's Word.

I've not always made the right choices, but on that occasion I did. That was over fifty years ago. God's grace has sustained me every single day of my life.

Does the voice in your head speak with proper authority? Odds are good that many of your thoughts emerge from an unqualified origin. I hope you come to view each thought through the lens of God's Word. He, and he alone, has the authority to tell you how to think.

FILTER FACTS AND MAKE DECISIONS

The situation room has undergone remarkable changes since it first opened its doors in 1961. Numerous screens now project images and updates.

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Glass-walled directors' offices sit to the side. A Sanitize button can clear screens of secret intel should a person without proper clearance enter. Even the name is different. Situation Room has given way to WHSR—pronounced "whizzer"—for White House Situation Room.

The equipment in the room has changed, but the purpose has not: filter facts and make decisions.

Your situation room serves the same function and demands equal vigilance. Say goodbye to unmanaged thoughts. It's time to capture them, tame them, and blow up a few strongholds.

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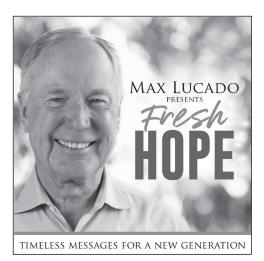




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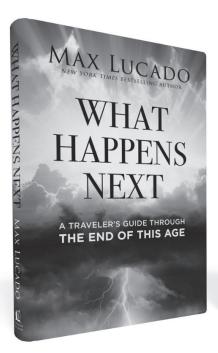
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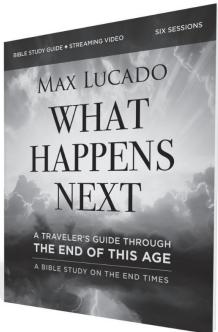
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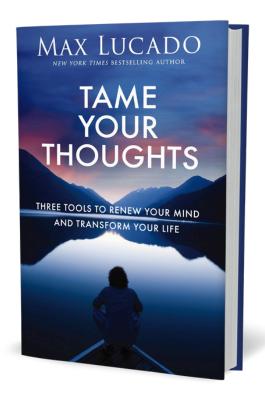
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