

“Thoughts” (Renew Your Mind: Gospel Hope for Mental Health – Pt. 1)
(Romans 12:1-2)

- **The Open Seat**

- Do you know what it feels like to have someone invite you to take that open seat and talk about yourself? It can be relieving and refreshing—it can also be intimidating and uncomfortable. You’ve probably (hopefully?) had this experience at least once, with a friend, a confidant, a mentor, a pastor, a counselor. You knew you needed to talk to someone, but maybe it took you a while to build up the courage. And somewhere, at some time, in some chair, you opened up—you talked about things that perhaps you never told anyone else. And maybe (hopefully) that simple conversation set you on a path of *renewal*.
- There was a time in my life when I found it *very hard* to get vulnerable—to articulate what I was really thinking and feeling and going through as a person. I carried a lot of shame, performance pressure, perfectionism, desire for control—a lot of anxiety. And I really didn’t know myself. All kinds of things were happening inside me that I was hardly aware of. It’s taken a lot of time with life, and with Jesus, to just become *aware* of my “stuff,” let alone *deal with it*. But I’ve learned that sitting in the chair and talking can sometimes be the best thing I can do, not just for me, but for all the people around me who I influence for better or for worse.
- Mental health is such a prevalent issue today, and we desperately need biblical wisdom and hope. Sometimes in the church, we completely avoid this topic—other times we downplay it, or trivialize it, or address it in unhelpful ways. This month, we want to focus on this big, complex, multifaceted issue from the perspective of *the Gospel*. Our last summer series is, **Renew Your Mind: Gospel Hope for Mental Health**. Today we’re talking about **Thoughts**. Let’s pray.

- **Fearfully and Wonderfully Made**

- I want to put in perspective how marvelously complex our mental life is. In recent years, scientists have discovered incredible things about the human brain. One renowned neuroscientist claimed, **“The human brain is the most complex object in the known universe.” (Christof Koch, 2012)** Here’s more context: **“The**

human brain has a 100 billion neurons, each neuron connected to 10,000 other neurons. Sitting on your shoulders is the most complicated object in the known universe.” (Michio Kaku, 2014)

Our Milky Way Galaxy has between 100-400 billion stars; our brain contains 100-500 *trillion* synapses (or neural connections)—all in 3 pounds of tissue floating in your skull. It’s astounding to think that this wrinkly, pinkish-gray ball of matter somehow gives rise to a *mind*—billions of individual cells working together to enable *memory, knowledge, feeling, creativity, consciousness, personhood*—a *unified* stream of thought. It’s nothing short of a miracle of God’s creation—and a mystery.

- You know A.I. requires *insane* amounts of energy to power. By 2028, we’ll have nearly 900,000 acres of data centers in the U.S. to power internet and AI. We’re talking advanced power supplies, cooling systems, billions of gallons of water. Using current technology, it’s estimated that in order to truly replicate the processing power of an actual human brain, it would take a dedicated nuclear power plant just to handle it. In contrast, your brain runs on about 20 Watts of biological power (the same as an LED lightbulb), and it’s fueled by about 500 calories a day. Two donuts and a lightbulb, vs. a nuclear power plant. *This is the amazing creation that you are.*
- This is awesome to comprehend, but people of biblical faith aren’t surprised: we’ve always known there’s something utterly unique about humans. **“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.” (Ps. 139:13-14) “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Gen. 1:28) “What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.” (Ps. 8:4-5)** You are *fearfully and wonderfully made*. You are more precious in His sight than all the creatures of the world, than all the stars in the sky, you have a universe of complexity within you, you are one of a kind. You are worth *the death of God’s only Son*, that’s how much He values you, loves you.

- What happens when this complex, delicate, powerful thing called the *human mind* is subjected to the effects of sin, the fall? If, through the fall, the body is subject to sickness and death (that's what the Bible teaches)—then through the fall, the mind is also subject to sickness and death. Whether a person has a mental health disorder, a sickness of the mind, or they're mentally healthy, from a biblical perspective, all of us are naturally bent away from God—dominated by sinful thought-patterns. We're all in need of salvation, healing, renewal.
- If you look at mental health specifically, according to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, nearly 1.2 billion people worldwide live with a mental health disorder, which is double the amount recorded in 1990. Mental health is now the leading cause of disability globally. 1 in 8 people. In the U.S. the ratio is higher, almost 1 in 4. Younger populations are the most affected. We could go on and on—but you can do your own research if you're curious just how far it goes. The point is, it's something that affects us all because it affects our world—if you're not personally impacted, you know someone who is. And whether someone is psychologically well, or unwell, all of us are *sin sick*, all of our minds are affected by it. And the mind is the primary place where the battle takes place. Everything flows from there.
- **Renew Your Mind**
 - That's the bad news. But here's the good news. If minds can get marred and broken by sin, then through the Gospel, minds can be healed and restored—partly in this life, and fully in the life to come. Romans 12 is profoundly hopeful for this age of mental crisis—this truth is going to be the foundation for the whole series: ***“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Rom. 12:1-2)***
 - Paul starts by saying, *in view of God’s mercy—or as a response to everything Jesus has done for us*—the only appropriate response is to *lay your entire life*

(body, mind, and spirit) on the altar, an act of worship and surrender. *He gave everything*, now we surrender everything back to Him.

- Then, he gives this profound charge: ***Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*** “World” here can also mean “age,” like when we say “the spirit of the age.” From Biblical perspective, there are 2 ages: *the present age*, where sin and death reign in the world, and *the age to come*, when God’s Kingdom will transform all creation so His goodness and righteousness have the full say again. While we are waiting for the *fullness* of that age to come, because of Jesus, *that age is already breaking in* through His people who respond to the Gospel and give their lives to Him. That’s why the New Testament says *for anyone who is in Christ the new creation has come!* Heaven has begun to invade earth for everyone who says yes to Jesus Christ.
- Paul is saying: don’t allow the world to form you, to mold you into its own patterns, anymore. The patterns of the world are based on *sin and death*. Instead of that, now that you are in Christ, *you can be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. On the one hand, there’s a mind molded by patterns of *sin and death*—the mindset of *hell*. On the other hand, there’s a mind molded by patterns of *holiness and life*—the mindset *heaven*.
- In the beginning of Romans, Paul described humanity’s “sin problem” in terms of our minds and thoughts: ***“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images [idols]...”*** (Rom. 1:21-23) Later on, in Ch. 8 it says: ***“So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.”*** (8:6)
- In today’s world, this is profoundly hopeful: ***Your mind can be renewed according to the grace and truth of God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.*** The Greek word for *transformed* in this passage is where we get the word “metamorphosis”—the same word used to describe Jesus’ when the disciples saw His glory on the mountain, and in 2 Corinthians when it talks about us being

transformed from glory to glory. That kind of transformation *in our mind*. And the word “renew” means *a total renovation*. The verb is expressed in a *passive* form: *be transformed by the renewal of your mind*. **It’s not something we do, it’s something He does in us**. But it takes our *active cooperation*. We can either cooperate with the patterns of this world to let it conform us to its ways, or we can cooperate with the power of God and be *transformed* by His grace. It’s a *passive, active process*, where we receive God’s work on our behalf, and where we work with Him to work it out in our lives. Some things don’t change in this life, some things we have to bear, some crosses we have to carry, some thorns don’t get taken away. But because of the Gospel of Jesus, *we can be transformed by the renewal of our minds*. In fact, the Bible says that now, *we have the mind of Christ*. If we allow His Spirit to lead us, if we learn by putting His grace into practice, dwelling on His Word, His truth, His presence—we can allow *His thoughts* to dominate our lives, instead of broken thought patterns of sin.

- You know something else amazing about your brain? We have a trait called *neuroplasticity*. It’s the brain’s ability to change, grow, reorganize and rewire itself *according to your thoughts*—for good and bad. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy talks about *automatic thoughts*—those patterns, those “mental ruts” we get into. We can become aware of our automatic thoughts, and then we can decide what the *next* thought will be: we can learn to counter that *lie* with *truth*; you can hand the influence over from your *former sin nature* to *the Holy Spirit*. Scripture talks about this again and again, like 2 Cor. when it says “take every thought captive.” It’s not always easy, but with time, grace, and surrender to the Spirit, we can actually *rewire* our minds with grace and truth. This is *Gospel hope* for mental health.

- **My Journey**

- Let me take a seat on this couch again. I spent a lot of my early life surviving by trying hard to do a good job. I was able to mask some of my struggles by convincing myself I was performing well. But I had some inner-demons that I didn’t really understand, that afflicted me from an early on, it’s just how brokenness came into my story. I carried some serious pressure and anxiety all through life. The broader family system I come from has been impacted by lots of different mental

health struggles. It's taken me until my late thirties to sit on the couch and realize that I actually struggle too. And once I realized it, I've also found I don't have to be captive to it. I can identify the lies, where it's rooted in my story, and slowly, patiently, dismantle it by the power of the Gospel. I can position myself to become receptive to His Spirit working in me, and I can become responsive to His truth, replacing the automatic negatives with *a renewed mind in Christ*.

- This has been a long-delayed *renovation*, and I'm just getting started. But Jesus is walking me through it, along with some wonderful, godly mentors and counselors. Some of the best advice I've gotten is this: ***If you want to grow as a leader, and as a believer, get a good mentor, and get a good counselor***. Maybe you need to take a journey like I did. Maybe you need to find a place to sit and talk with someone you know is going to look back at you through the eyes of Christ. Maybe you need to realize that *renewal is possible* with Jesus—maybe you need to recover your hope and patiently live it out. Whatever the case, this journey in August is going to have something important for all of us. As we approach Communion today, I want you to remember that if you are in Christ, *you now have the mind of Christ, and you can be transformed, step by step, from glory to glory, by the renewing of your mind. Let's pray.*