

A
STILL
and
QUIET
MIND

*Twelve Strategies for Changing
Unwanted Thoughts*

ESTHER SMITH



P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865

© 2022 by Esther Smith

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Smith, Esther (Biblical Counselor), author.

Title: A still and quiet mind : twelve strategies for changing unwanted thoughts / Esther Smith.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: “Do you experience unwanted thoughts that you can’t shake? Learn how to use biblically faithful strategies to overcome a variety of different thought struggles and live at peace”-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021048178 | ISBN 9781629959214 (paperback) | ISBN 9781629959221 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Thought and thinking--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Habit breaking--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4598.4 .S65 2022 | DDC 152.3/3--dc23/eng/20211130

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021048178>

To those who have trusted me
with their deepest unwanted thoughts
and taught me how we can courageously work toward
quieting our minds

Contents

Introduction: A Loud and Restless Mind	9
Part 1: General Approaches for Changing Thoughts	
1. Know Your Thoughts	23
2. Pray Your Thoughts	35
3. Rest Your Thoughts	45
4. Disentangle Your Thoughts	57
Part 2: Holistic Approaches for Changing Thoughts	
5. Focus Your Thoughts	71
6. Capture Your Thoughts	79
7. Calm Your Thoughts	93
8. Repair Your Thoughts	105
Part 3: Specialized Approaches for Changing Thoughts	
9. Set Aside Your Thoughts	119
10. Dismiss Your Thoughts	133
11. Medicate Your Thoughts	147
12. Sit with Your Thoughts	159
Acknowledgments	165
Notes	167

Introduction

A LOUD AND RESTLESS MIND

Why does God hate me?

It's not a thought you want to have in the middle of the night, but there I was. Sitting in the bathroom unable to sleep, my head dropped into my hands. Frustration flooded my face, and I felt my stomach turn. *Why does God hate me?*

For several months, I had experienced head and neck pain that felt all-consuming. By day, I struggled to sit upright or concentrate. As evening approached, the pain only intensified. By 7 p.m., I had curled up in bed trying to sleep the burning sensation away, but the hours dragged on without relief. Physical pain was a familiar struggle for me, but this neck problem was new. I didn't want to deal with it. I was done. Yet another sleepless night without relief was too much. *Why me? What is wrong with me? Why does God hate me?*

Even as these thoughts raced through my mind, I could have quoted half a dozen Scripture passages about God's love for me. Every rational part of me would have told anyone who asked that, yes, of course God loves me. But despite my rational knowledge and theological convictions, my uncontrolled pain felt like proof that God's love was a lie. Unwanted thoughts that painted God as

uncaring and hateful materialized out of the dark. I *knew* God was loving. He didn't *feel* loving. What was I to do with the dissonance that had settled deep in my soul?

I had a few options. I could become alarmed that my theology was in danger. *How can you doubt the Word of God that speaks over and over again of his love for you?* I could berate myself for allowing such an unbiblical thought to come to mind. *How can you think such things? How ungrateful! Do you realize what Christ has done for you?* Or I could try to push the thought away and remind myself of how untrue it was. *No, Esther. Stop it. Of course God loves you.*

I'm fairly certain that none of these responses would have been helpful in my exhausted state. Wondering if God hated me was no insignificant thought, but even in that disoriented moment, I realized that the thought didn't need to be a big deal right then. Not at midnight. What I really needed was sleep. So I walked back to bed and plugged in a heating pad. Lying down on the comforting warmth, I set the unwanted thought aside. I took in several deep breaths, closed my eyes, and focused on the weight of my body as it began to relax.

Each deep breath in through my nose filled my abdomen. Each slow breath out through my mouth settled me a little deeper into my mattress. I began to pray, describing what I was experiencing to God. *God, my neck is on fire. I hate this. I don't want to deal with this anymore.* My heating pad and deep breathing took my pain down the smallest notch. My honest lament calmed my soul. My tears stopped flowing. My anger began to dissipate.

I turned to a familiar verse that often gave me comfort in the middle of the night and began to meditate on it. "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD" (Ps. 27:14 NIV). The Scripture soon became synced with my breath. Breathe in—*wait for the Lord*. Breathe out—*be strong and take heart*. God did not feel loving, but if I waited long enough, maybe I would

experience what I believed to be true. The longer I meditated on this verse, the more my body and mind began to calm. Slowly I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I revisited the thought that had intruded on my peace and theology the night before. Armed with strong black coffee and the strength that comes with sunshine, I was ready to investigate. *Where did that thought come from?* A memory soon crystalized in my mind. A Facebook post I had seen earlier that week had been lingering just beneath my conscious awareness.

An acquaintance had posted a story of her miraculous healing. After a time of prayer, fasting, and repentance, the chronic pain she had been experiencing since childhood had miraculously disappeared. The moment I read the post, I closed my computer and shut off my thoughts. *Of course. Of course she got better. I can't even think about that right now.*

My attempt at thought suppression didn't succeed as intended. Underneath the surface lingered an unacknowledged thought that God loved the person he had miraculously healed more than he loved me. The thought bubbled up at midnight. *God must not love me like he loves her. Maybe he actually hates me.*

Simply realizing the origin of my thought brought some clarity that helped me to investigate further. Remnants of a prosperity gospel had lodged themselves in my heart. This false gospel whispered in my ear that the Lord heals those he loves and hates those he leaves in pain. That he rewards good behavior with desired outcomes and heals only those who pray longer, fast better, and repent harder.

Over the next weeks and months, I processed, prayed about, and worked through this thought in a variety of ways. I can't say the thought never came to mind again or guarantee it won't ever arise in the future. What I can say is that many of the strategies I used that night and in the weeks to come have helped me to keep thoughts like this at bay when my circumstances feel overwhelming.

Instead of feeling alarmed when I experience difficult thinking, I have learned to slow down and observe my restless thoughts. I calm my body, call out to God, and meditate on Scripture. I get curious about where the thoughts might have come from and practice other strategies you will learn in this book.

COMMON TYPES OF UNWANTED THOUGHTS

How about you? Do you experience thoughts you don't want?

Like me, do you ruminate on beliefs about yourself, the world, or God that feel true even though you know they are not? Like many people I meet, do you feel tormented by depressed, anxious, or intrusive thinking? Like everyone, are you uncertain about what to do with some of the thoughts that enter your mind?

For some people, unwanted thoughts feel like a mere annoyance. Other people experience them as problematic daily interruptions, and still others would describe them as a brutal and invisible form of torture. No matter the level of your distress, unwanted thoughts of all kinds often seem better kept inside. Perhaps you have the feeling that if you opened up about what went on in your head, no one would understand. Perhaps people would judge you or even think you are crazy.

No matter how stubborn your thoughts may feel, you are not alone. We all walk around with thoughts we just can't get out of our heads. Consider some of the most common categories of unwanted thoughts people experience.

Worried and Anxious Thoughts

Everyone experiences worried and anxious thoughts from time to time. Mild worry over life circumstances may briefly appear. Anxious thoughts may cause heart palpitations and stomach pain. Full-blown panic attacks may lead to fears of dying. *What if I don't know what to say and look stupid? What if my baby*

gets sick? How will I pay these bills? Am I having a heart attack? Am I dying?

Self-Deprecating Thoughts That Assign a False Identity

Self-deprecating thoughts arise when we see ourselves differently from how Scripture describes us. *I'm not good enough. I have to be perfect. I'm worthless and I hate myself.*

Depressed, Hopeless, and Suicidal Thoughts*

Life circumstances, difficult relationships, and dysfunctions in our bodies and souls can lead us to depression and hopelessness. *This is too hard. I'm not sure I can forgive myself. Nothing will ever get better. People would be better off without me. I just want to die.*

Racing Thoughts and Incessant Mental Chatter

Sometimes it's hard to turn off our brains. There may or may not be anything upsetting about the content of our racing thoughts. Either way, we wish we could stop the incessant chatter. *I should cook lasagna for dinner. I can't forget to change the oil in the car. What should I be doing with my life? I just want to leave everything and never come back.*

Daydreams, Fantasies, and Mental Pictures of Past and Future Events

We may rehearse mental images of past events that we wish had gone differently. Other times, we fantasize about an ideal version of the future or predict every disaster we can imagine. *I can't believe*

* This book will not address suicidal thoughts in detail. If you find yourself ruminating on thoughts of death, reach out to a friend or counselor. If your thoughts turn into a plan to kill yourself, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room. For further help, consider reading *I Just Want to Die: Replacing Suicidal Thoughts with Hope* by David Powlison (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010).

I said something so stupid in that meeting. How much better would life be if I had a different wife? I just know my son will get sick and die.

Irrational Thoughts That Don't Match Reality

We all experience times when our thinking becomes biased or impaired and we struggle to see certain situations or people clearly. Sometimes this thinking can become obsessive. In other cases, people experience delusional thinking that breaks from reality. *No one likes me. If I touch that doorknob, I will get sick. The FBI is following me.*

Sinful Thoughts

Our sinful thoughts can be judgmental, envious, and bitter. Other times they are lustful, angry, deceitful, and prideful. *I hate him. One lie won't hurt. I'm better than all of them. This will be the last time . . .*

Thoughts That Contradict Professed Theology

Sometimes our thoughts contradict our theology in shameful or anxiety-provoking ways. *If I just _____, God will accept me. Does God love me? Is heaven real? Am I even a Christian?*

Intrusive Thoughts and Images

Many people experience shocking thoughts and images that seem to spontaneously appear out of nowhere. These thoughts are typically highly distressing and feel shameful to admit. Oftentimes, they revolve around sensitive themes such as violence, sexuality, and faith. *I could walk across the room and stab my daughter. I just had a sexual thought about my pastor. I hate God. What if I jumped off this building?*

Thoughts Related to Traumatic Experiences

Trauma occurs when distressing events overwhelm our ability to cope. Following a traumatic incident, it's common for our

thinking to become clouded by thoughts that fit into many or all of the categories listed above. Thoughts filled with shame, doubt, fear, anger, and sadness may linger just beneath our conscious awareness. It takes careful examination to realize they are coloring our overall mindset far more than we realize. *I am dirty. God doesn't love me. I'm going crazy. I never feel safe. Will the pain ever stop?*

Unwanted Thoughts about Unwanted Thoughts

Sometimes our most distressing thoughts happen when we start to feel bad, guilty, or ashamed that we are experiencing unwanted thoughts. *God must be so disappointed in me for being anxious. I'm a bad Christian for being depressed. Why can't I just stop thinking that?*

Which category resonates with you the most? Many of these categories overlap, and you may find yourself struggling with more than one category at the same time. No matter the type of thoughts you tend toward, it's likely your efforts to find relief haven't been completely successful. As hard as you try, you can't stop thinking, feeling, or believing the unwanted thoughts that cross your mind. What should you do next?

A MULTIFACETED APPROACH

There is no single magic solution to changing our thoughts. When unwanted thoughts linger, we need a multifaceted approach that draws on a range of biblically faithful strategies. I hope to offer such an approach in this book. While considering these strategies, I have found it important to keep the following principles in mind.

First, our approach to thought change should be faithful to Scripture. *All of Scripture*. Instead of relying on a handful of isolated passages, we should attempt to understand how thought change fits into the overall biblical narrative. This broader perspective

compels us to look at our thoughts in light of who God is, what he says about us, and how he relates to us. It opens our eyes to see our thoughts in light of God's love for us and his plan of redemption for all parts of ourselves, including our minds.

Second, not all unwanted thoughts are the same, which means they should not all be treated the same. Strategies that work for mild anxiety likely won't be sufficient for thoughts connected to a serious trauma. If you treat intrusive thoughts with biblical guidance meant for sinful thoughts, you will get worse, not better. When painful thinking clouds our minds, we need a variety of strategies that address the varying causes and consequences of our thoughts. These strategies should take into account the influence of our bodies, minds, souls, and relationships.

Third, as we engage this process of change, we should be patient with ourselves. If you have struggled with unwanted thinking for a long time, it can be easy to berate yourself for not getting or doing better. Instead, I encourage you to curiously consider some of the reasons why you may be struggling to make progress. You don't need to fast-track your way to healing or relief. Getting upset when you are unable to change your thoughts builds up anxiety and frustration. These emotions then feed back into your thoughts, fueling greater levels of distress. As you read on, I will help you to consider some of the common reasons people get stuck. I will remind you over and over again of Jesus's love for you, which remains faithful before, during, and after your attempts to change.

Finally, as you continue reading, it's important to remember that none of the strategies in this book will change your thoughts on their own. Rather, the strategies I offer "allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us."¹ Romans 12:2 teaches that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. This renewal does not happen through willpower or even by replacing our thoughts with Scriptures. This renewal is a work God does in

us as we are united with him and receive from him the grace and energy we need to change (see 1 Cor. 15:10; Phil. 2:12–13).

We are transformed when we stand in God’s presence with unveiled faces—with intimacy and vulnerability (see 2 Cor. 3:18). As we encounter his glory, we are transformed into God’s image, and this transformation “comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” Our thoughts are changed as we enter the presence of a good and loving Father who helps us believe the truth found in Scripture and who does the work of transformation for us. You will find that many of the strategies in this book are tools to help you enter God’s presence. There, the Holy Spirit can take over the transformational work you have struggled to achieve on your own.

TWELVE STRATEGIES FOR CHANGING UNWANTED THOUGHTS

Each chapter in this book will offer a strategy to help you with the process of changing your thoughts. We will start by looking at some general approaches to changing thoughts that focus on your relationship with yourself, God, the world, and other people. You will *examine* your thoughts through self-reflection (chapter 1), *pray* your thoughts to God (chapter 2), *rest* your thoughts in God’s creation (chapter 3), and *disentangle* your thoughts in community (chapter 4).

The middle chapters will look at a series of holistic approaches to changing thoughts that focus on your mind, heart, body, and life story. You will learn to *focus* your thoughts on God’s Word (chapter 5), *capture* your thoughts and heart with a right knowledge of God (chapter 6), *calm* your thoughts by using strategies that address the body (chapter 7), and *repair* your thoughts by inviting God’s presence and God’s Word into your story (chapter 8).

Toward the end of the book, we will discuss more specialized approaches to dealing with thoughts that can be especially

problematic. We will discuss how to *set aside* your thoughts when they are connected to trauma (chapter 9), *dismiss* your thoughts when they are intrusive and obsessive (chapter 10), and determine those times when *medicating* your thoughts may be a good option (chapter 11). In the final chapter, you will consider how to *sit with* your thoughts when they linger far longer than it seems they should (chapter 12).

PRACTICE THE STRATEGIES AS YOU READ

Some of the strategies in this book are challenging. Others are time-consuming. Some will seem so simple you may doubt they will be effective. Many will feel easy to skip. *The strategies will work only if you use them*, so I encourage you to consider your mindset as you continue reading. I hope you will read each chapter slowly, practicing the strategies in real time instead of resolving to come back later.

As you practice, the goal is not for you to do each strategy perfectly or to get anything “exactly right.” Instead, simply experiment and notice what resonates with you. Some strategies will work better for you than others, depending on the type of unwanted thoughts you experience as well as your personality and preferences. If a strategy doesn’t work or even seems to make things worse, feel free to make modifications to it that make sense to you or even pass on it for the time being.*

You can get started right now. Grab a journal or a piece of paper. Go back to the categories of unwanted thoughts listed on pages 12–15 and consider two questions. Which categories do you struggle with the most? What specific unwanted thoughts do you most want to change? Write down any thoughts that come to mind.

* This is particularly important if you have experienced trauma or if you are experiencing intrusive thinking patterns that may be connected to obsessive-compulsive disorder. We will discuss more specialized approaches to dealing with thoughts connected to these experiences in chapter 9 and chapter 10.

Once you finish journaling, pick just one of your unwanted thoughts. Hold it in your mind and simply allow it to be there.* Don't struggle against it or push it away.

Pause to reflect

Close your eyes and take a deep breath to help you to rest and feel calm. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Do this several times.

Pause to breathe

Begin to meditate on Psalm 46:10, which says, "Be still, and know that I am God." As you breathe in, remind yourself—*be still*. As you breathe out, remind yourself—*and know that I am God*. Do this about five times.

Pause to breathe and meditate

Repeating these words is not a mindless mantra. It is a purposeful remembering of the Holy Word of God. Be still in his presence. Quiet your mind with his truth. Then open your eyes and notice: What happened in your mind? What happened to your body? What happened to the unwanted thought?

* At various points throughout this book, I will ask you to purposefully bring to mind some of your unwanted thoughts. If you are struggling with a thought that seems inappropriate to dwell on purposefully or feels too distressing to bring to mind, you can instead bring to mind a general awareness of the fact that you struggle with that particular type of thought.

Part 1

GENERAL APPROACHES
for Changing Thoughts

1

KNOW YOUR THOUGHTS

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to do this exercise with my head facing forward?”

I was lying on my back, and my physical therapist had positioned my head for an exercise. I couldn’t figure out why he had tilted my head to the side so that I was no longer looking straight ahead. Or so I thought. He laughed and said, “Your head actually is facing forward. It just doesn’t feel that way because your neck is misaligned.”

He went on to explain the anatomy of our necks and how certain problems can lead us to lose accurate awareness and perception of our bodies. He also had neck problems and described how he once walked into the office completely unaware that his head was tilted halfway down to his shoulder. A coworker pointed out his crooked posture, but his perception of being upright felt so real that he didn’t believe her until he looked in a mirror.

We have all, on occasion, walked around like my physical therapist—unaware that our heads weren’t on straight. Except often it’s not our bodies that we perceive inaccurately in these

instances. It's the true nature of our thoughts and minds that sometimes escapes our awareness.

People often say to me at the end of a counseling session, "I didn't realize I thought that until I just said it out loud." Other times they muse, "I can't tell if this thought is accurate or not." We all experience thoughts that lie just beneath our conscious awareness. We all, at times, think thoughts that are more inaccurate or unhelpful than we would like to admit.

TWO COMMON TENDENCIES

Why do we remain unaware of our thoughts? It often has to do with our tendencies toward avoidance and overthinking.

Some days I like to shove my dark thoughts into a little box and pretend they do not exist. *Everything's fine. I'm fine.* For many of us, constant busyness and distraction techniques help us to suppress our actual thought patterns. We don't know what we think because we don't pause long enough to notice.

Other days, I like to spiral into an abyss of unproductive thinking. My mind wanders, and I barely even realize it is happening. *Hello, midnight! Welcome to my brain.* You might think constant thinking would help us to know our thoughts better, but often this is not the case. We become so caught up in our thoughts that we don't slow down to observe them. The speed, number, and intensity of our thoughts can make it difficult for us to gain an accurate picture of our thinking tendencies and patterns.

Are you an avoider or an overthinker? A suppressor or a spiraler? A lot of us are a combination of both, and it can be helpful for us to identify our personal tendencies.

KNOWING BEGINS WITH OBSERVING

Changing our thoughts begins when we move out of these tendencies and get to know our thoughts well by observing them closely.

Imagine that each of our thoughts is a train traveling a set of tracks. Our natural tendency is to ride inside the train. We get caught up in whatever we happen to be thinking and let our thoughts control where we go. When we let our thoughts carry us along, it's difficult to change them. But we have a choice. We can exit the train. We can sit on a bench next to the tracks and watch each train—each thought—pass by.

Knowing our thoughts starts with observing them. With practice, it's possible for us to step outside the trains of our thoughts and watch them as outside onlookers. We observe our thoughts by allowing ourselves to look at what we are thinking without making judgments or trying to change what we find quite yet. Observing our thinking like this is one way we become aware of those thoughts that dwell just beneath the surface.

In their book *Untangling Emotions*, Alasdair Groves and Winston Smith suggest a similar method for approaching emotions. They suggest that, instead of prejudging an emotion, you should “look at it, see what you find, and *then* (not before!) decide how to respond.”¹ We need to observe before we judge so we don't miss anything important. No matter how well we think we know ourselves, we can be certain that if we watch closely, some of the passing trains will surprise us.

Many Christians avoid this process of looking closely and immediately jump to judging and changing. You might fear that taking time to observe untrue, unhelpful, or unbiblical thoughts is counterproductive or sinful. But observing thoughts is not the same as indulging in sinful thinking or succumbing to an unhealthy belief. Observing closely before responding is how we determine

the true nature and full extent of our thoughts. We can't change what we don't fully understand. The story I shared in the introduction is a great example of how important this is.

PRACTICE OBSERVING YOUR THOUGHTS

Our thoughts come in two forms. We experience mental images and mental talk. Mental *images* are pictures we experience in our minds. These pictures may represent memories or projections about the future. They may be images of faces or places or of experiences we have had or anticipate having. Mental *talk* is the running commentary we hear in our minds. We might remember words that were spoken to us or make sense of something “out loud” in our minds.

Let me show you what I mean. Close your eyes and count to ten inside your head. Did you *hear* the numbers or *see* the numbers?² If you *heard* the numbers, that was mental talk. If you *saw* the numbers, those were mental images. Now, count one more time. If you heard the numbers last time, see if you can visualize them this time. If you saw the numbers last time, try to hear them this time.

How did that go? What did you notice? We each experience thoughts a bit differently. Some people are very visual. Their thoughts almost solely take the form of pictures. Other people may struggle to know what I even mean when I mention mental images. Their thoughts almost solely take the form of an inner dialogue. Many people experience a somewhat even combination of both. No tendency is better or worse than another. We are all just a little different.

Let's try one more exercise. We're going to try to observe these two types of thought as they happen in real time. Don't worry if this exercise doesn't come naturally. We're just experimenting, and this exercise can take practice. Close your eyes and let your mind drift wherever it wants to go. Notice what happens without attempting

to change or judge your experience. At first your attention may be drawn to sounds around you. Then you may notice your attention rest on emotions or physical sensations in your body. Sit for a few minutes until you start to notice thoughts emerge.

Keep your eyes closed and observe these thoughts as a bystander. You are sitting on a bench, watching them pass by. Observe each thought closely by noticing and labeling it. Each time you notice a thought that forms as a mental picture, say to yourself *see*. Each time you notice a thought that forms as mental talk, say to yourself *hear*. Some of these thoughts may disappear quickly, and others may linger. Avoid any urge to push away or hold on to any one thought. Instead, after you label each thought, let it naturally pass through your awareness as you are drawn to the next thought, sound, or sensation.³

How did that go? It can be interesting to simply rest and observe the thoughts that cross our minds.

KNOWING REQUIRES EXAMINATION

Observation is the first step of knowing our thoughts, but it is insufficient on its own. God invites us into an even deeper process that Scripture calls *examining ourselves* (see Lam. 3:40; 2 Cor. 13:5). Examination is one way for us to “keep a close watch” on our lives and our doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16). It is how we discern the accuracy and helpfulness of the thoughts we have just observed. Through examination, we enter the beginning stages of the change process.

We often think of examination as a process of searching our hearts for sin. But the goal of discerning our thoughts “is not to simply avoid the evil in this life; it is to learn what is good so that we might embrace and enjoy it.”⁴ Yes, one of our goals is to take sinful thoughts captive. But the larger goal of examination is for us to cultivate still and quiet minds filled with enjoyable thoughts that are pleasing to God.

PRACTICE EXAMINING YOUR THOUGHTS

You can practice examining your thoughts by observing one unwanted thought you struggle with, looking at it curiously, and asking yourself the following questions.

Question №1: Is This Thought True?

God directs us to think thoughts that are true (see Phil. 4:8). We can assess if a thought is true by seeing whether it aligns with Scripture (see John 17:17) and by asking people we trust if we are seeing things clearly (see Prov. 12:15). This is an important question, because we experience much heartache and trouble when we hold on to thoughts that aren't accurate.

Untrue thoughts about our identity pull us into despair. *I am worthless.* False predictions about the future and inaccurate assumptions about other people enslave us in anxiety. *I'm going to fail that test. She must hate me.* Wrong beliefs about God and our standing in the world leave us wallowing in hopelessness. *God must not care that I am suffering. People would be better off without me.* The first step of examining a thought is to determine whether it is accurate.

Question №2: Is This Thought Helpful?

It's not enough to think thoughts that are true. We have to apply wisdom and sensibility to our true thoughts by thinking them at the proper time in the proper context and with the proper motive.

It may be true that you have a meeting tomorrow, but the middle of the night probably isn't a helpful time to ruminate on what you will say. It's true that you struggle with sin, but it likely won't be helpful to think about your sin nature over and over again when you are feeling depressed. It may be true that your neighbor has a beautiful house that you wish you had, but fixating on this truth won't help your personal sanctification. After you determine whether a thought is accurate, your next

step is to ask yourself, “Is it *helpful* to think this thought? Is it helpful for reducing my suffering? Is it helpful for increasing my holiness?”

Question №3: Is This Thought Appropriate to My Situation?

When a difficult thought arises, we should also remember that our ultimate goal is not necessarily to make our thoughts more positive. It can be appropriate and biblical to think sad, negative, unpleasant, angry, or fearful thoughts.

If a bear is chasing you in the forest, you will hopefully and appropriately have thoughts filled with fear. Those fearful thoughts may keep you alive. If you witness abuse, it is appropriate to have thoughts filled with anger. Those angry thoughts could lead you to seek safety and justice for the victim. If you are facing extreme trials in life, it will often be more appropriate for you to let your thoughts wander toward cries of lament than to force your mind toward positivity. Our thoughts should appropriately reflect our circumstances. Biblically faithful thoughts are sometimes difficult and unpleasant thoughts.

Question №4: Is This Thought Complete?

Sometimes we assess a thought and find that it checks all the boxes. The thought is, indeed, true, helpful, and appropriate. But our examination should not end there. We still need to consider if the thought is complete on its own.

One reason we need this question is because we sometimes begin to think that half the truth represents the whole truth. In reality, “a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth.”⁵ In your struggle with unwanted thoughts, what half-truths have you started to believe? Yes, it’s true you are a sinner. But what gospel truth do you need to hold in tandem with that reality? Yes, it’s true that you are suffering, but what truth about

God might be helpful for you to hold beside your pain? Yes, your problems may be too big for you to handle, but what encouraging words are also true about your situation?

Asking ourselves, “Is this thought complete?” often leads us to remember or observe thoughts we had forgotten or downplayed that are relevant to the situation. “This is sad” may be true, helpful, and appropriate. But “This is sad *and* God is faithful” is true, helpful, and appropriate and offers us a more complete perspective.

Here’s another way to ask this question that I have found helpful. As you examine a thought, ask yourself, “And what else?” I learned this question from a wise counselor, my friend Eliza Huie.⁶ When we ask, “And what else?” it prompts us to consider other questions: What other thoughts are true? What other thoughts are helpful and appropriate to my situation? What noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy thoughts am I missing (see Phil. 4:8 NIV)?

INTERRUPT YOUR THOUGHTS IN REAL TIME

Knowing the right questions to ask is a good place to start, but the real challenge is to develop the ability to bring these questions to mind when we need them the most. We want to be able to interrupt our thoughts in real time with these questions. Here’s what that might look like.

James is standing in the kitchen making dinner. A thought pops into his head. *No one likes me*. Normally he would hop right on that train. It would carry him unawares into spiraling thoughts of hopelessness, depression, and self-loathing. But this time, he steps off the train and looks at the thought curiously. He asks himself the four questions and answers them honestly.

Is this thought true? Not completely. Some people do like me. My wife. My kids. My friend Ben. Most people when they first meet me. But

it's legitimately true that people at work seem to dislike me. It's so hard to go to work when the rest of my team ignores me and talks about me behind my back.

OK, what about helpful? Is this thought helpful, and is it appropriate to what I'm going through? Well, yes and no. It's not helpful to exaggerate and say that no one likes me. But it could be both helpful and appropriate to think about the fact that people at work are mistreating me so I can figure out how to respond to them. It's also understandable this is making me upset. I'm making difficult but honest work decisions that people don't like, and the fallout has been awful. Of course I'm going to have difficult thoughts about it.

Is this thought complete? Definitely not. People at work don't like me, but their opinion of me doesn't define me. It helps when I remember my family and all my friends who love me and appreciate me. More important than that, I have to remember that pleasing people isn't the goal of my life. I can't place my peace on people liking me. At the end of the day, I am to be faithful to what God asks of me at work and then rest in his love for me. God, can you help me remember that? I know you are here with me right now, and I am really struggling to not be so affected by this. Please help me to remember how you see me and let your opinion feel more important than what other people think of me.

Do you see how James used the questions to interrupt his exaggerated, black-and-white thinking with constructive self-talk? His self-talk then turned into prayer—an important step we will discuss in the next chapter.

STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU TO OBSERVE AND EXAMINE YOUR THOUGHTS

Many people find the hardest part of this process to be remembering to stop and ask the questions. How do we remember to do this in real time? We remember by practicing. We practice with strategies that help us to observe and examine our thoughts until

the questions turn into habits. Pick one of the following strategies to try today.

Strategy №1: Journaling

Take about fifteen minutes to sit down and write whatever thoughts happen to be on your mind.⁷ Sit down without any agenda or focus. Whatever pops into your head, write it down. *The dog needs to go to the vet. What will I have for dinner? I've been thinking about the Trinity and what that means for my life.*

Silly thoughts. Deep thoughts. Random thoughts. Observe your thinking by writing out your train of thought, wherever it goes, without trying to direct it. Afterward, read back through what you've written with the four questions in mind. Repeat this journaling exercise once a day for a week, and you will likely be surprised by the thoughts you find dwelling just beneath your conscious awareness.

Strategy №2: Mental Reflection

Take intentional time to reinforce the four questions while you are lying in bed at night, taking a shower, or engaging in some other mindless activity. Allow your mind to wander, and observe your thoughts as you practiced earlier in this chapter. Notice each mental image and each instance of mental talk.

This time, instead of labeling each thought *see* or *hear*, ask yourself the four self-examination questions. You might choose just one question to focus on during a time of practice, or you might decide to use any combination of the four depending on what thoughts come up. There is no right or wrong way to bring these questions to the exercise. Just experiment.

Sometimes this will feel silly. Asking yourself, "Is this true?" as you think about what you had for breakfast may feel like a pointless exercise. But there is a point. You are forming a habit. The more you ask yourself the questions, the more effortlessly they will arise when you really need them.

Strategy №3: Feedback

Sometimes, to truly know yourself and your thoughts, you need feedback from trustworthy people. Remember my physical therapist? He was so certain his perception was accurate that he needed a coworker to help him see things clearly. We will talk more about the importance of bringing other people into your thought life in chapter 4. For now, you may notice times when you ask yourself the four questions and feel stuck. When this happens, consider talking through them with someone you trust.

Other people can help you to discern whether your thoughts are true, helpful, and appropriate. You may especially need a trusted friend or counselor to talk to as you consider the fourth question—“Is this thought complete?” Perhaps there is an additional perspective on your situation or your thoughts that you haven’t considered. Maybe there is an insight that is easier for someone with an outside viewpoint or different set of information to determine. Sometimes we need to humbly recognize that we do not have all the information and ask those around us what other thoughts we need to remember.

The more you practice these strategies, the more you will increase your ability to interrupt your thoughts when it really matters. Later today, you may get caught in a loop of anxious, worst-case-scenario thinking. *Everything always goes wrong for me.* If you have taken the time to practice, you may find yourself spontaneously pausing to ask, *Is this true?* Next week, an unwanted thought may come to mind. *I completely failed.* Perhaps this time you will stop and wonder, *Is this thought complete?* You have just created space. You have just created a foundation for all the other strategies we will use in the chapters to come.