Dr. David Stoop, Change Your Thoughts, Change Your Life
Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your minds leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.

~ Romans 8:5–6
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The unifying word for our world today is stress. It is a common condition that affects us all, regardless of age. We want to be in control and we don’t want to worry, but it seems that peace eludes us and stress overwhelms us. As Christians, we want the peace that Scripture describes as that which surpasses all understanding, but the harder we try to find it, the more we do not experience it. Why would the apostle Paul write so much about that kind of peace in the book of Philippians? What are we missing here? Why would he tell us we are to renew our minds in order to find that kind of peace? How does one go about such a process?

Paul gives us the outline in 2 Corinthians 10:3–5. He uses the metaphor of a battleground. We are to battle against the proud arguments that set themselves against God. Paul is
echoing a theme found throughout the Bible—that there are two paths open to us. On one path, we believe those proud arguments against God, and on the other path, we think God’s way. But how can we change paths?

The work being done by today’s brain scientists can give us added insight into ways we can rethink how we think, and in doing so, we can unlock the power that God has made available to us when we hide his Word in our heart.

Part 1 describes some of the incredible things our brains can do—all of which are part of God’s design. Like the psalmist David, you will be amazed at how wonderfully God has made each of us.
The day I became a new father, I made a vow. Our first son had just been born, and I can remember it as if it were yesterday. After leaving the hospital, I parked the car and was walking to our apartment. Filled with joy, I exclaimed, “I’ve got a son! Wow!” My next thought was, And I’m going to have a different relationship with him than my father had with me. I made a serious vow that afternoon to change something about which I cared deeply.

As time passed, I remembered my vow. Over the years, I did all kinds of things with my firstborn, and later with his two brothers, that my father had never done with me. I remained determined to do things differently. Though my father took me to church, and faithfully at that, he never came to any school event. He never let me help him do work, like painting, around the house. He was always too busy, too impatient, or too tired. I understood his resources were limited because he
worked long, hard hours in a factory. But understanding that didn’t change the hurt and unfulfilled desire in my heart to have had a dad who was involved in my life. I felt as though he didn’t accept me as a son.

It wasn’t until my oldest son was graduating from high school that I realized I had failed miserably in fulfilling my vow. Though I had been involved in all kinds of ways in my sons’ lives—going to all their school and sporting events, even coaching their Little League team—I really hadn’t changed the pattern of my father’s relationship with me: I had stayed emotionally disconnected from my sons. Though it appeared different on the outside, on an emotional level my relationship with them was no different than the empty relationship I had had with my own dad. My vow hadn’t worked!

I was frustrated because I knew the verse in Scripture that says, “Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (2 Cor. 5:17). Where was this new person I was supposed to be? I had placed my trust in Christ the summer after I graduated from high school. Then, soon after my first son was born, I entered the ministry, leading a parachurch youth program. Remembering my vow to be a different kind of father, I had prayed to be transformed.

As my sons were growing, I was busy doing “ministry” with other people’s sons and daughters, unable to recognize the ways I’d imitated my father’s pattern of non-involvement. Why wasn’t I able to be different in the way I related with my sons? Why, even though I had made a very serious vow and worked hard at keeping it, did nothing change?
Have you ever had that kind of frustration in your life? Have you ever questioned why having a relationship with Christ really didn’t change some important areas of your life?

Part of this struggle led me to write a book titled *You Are What You Think*. Over the years a lot of people have let me know that they have been helped by that little book. It says that if we can change the way we think, we can change the way we live. What’s good news for some, though, sounds like bad news for others. Like me, many have discovered firsthand that changing the way you think and act is not always an easy task! We may want to change our thoughts and the resulting behaviors—especially those thoughts that lead to sinful behaviors—and we may even succeed for a short time. But then we seem to fall back into the old patterns again, frustrated at the lack of transformation in our lives. There has to be more. To get at the “more,” we need to define just what it is that we need to change in order for our lives to be transformed.

### Is Change Possible?

Have you ever vowed to change something in your life? Yet no matter how committed you were to making that change, nothing really changed, or the changes you did make didn’t last very long. As a counselor, I’m often asked, “Can people really change?” Many today are frustrated when they’re not able to bring about lasting changes in important areas of their own lives. Until recently, our inability to make changes was usually chalked up to weak willpower. Today, though,
research is showing that the strength of our willpower is not the issue. Everyone’s willpower eventually fails, and the old problems simply return. So then what is it that makes it so hard for us to achieve even the most desirable and critical changes in our lives?

The prophet Jeremiah gives us a vivid snapshot of how hard it is for people to change, even when they are facing disaster. He was called by God to warn the people of Israel of coming destruction. In spelling it out for his listeners as clearly as he could, Jeremiah delivered to them a universal principle. He said there were two paths—opposite paths!—open to all people, and that whether they knew it or not, they would choose one or the other. Jeremiah boldly announced, “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it” (Jer. 6:16 NIV). Other translations call it the “godly way.” In other words, Jeremiah is exhorting them—and us—to choose a path carefully!

Jeremiah continues to detail the benefits of walking on this ancient path. Promising peace, he offers of the good way, “Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls.” Rest for your souls! His words offer the relief for which we thirst. Two paths. We get to choose. In reality, we are choosing all the time which path to take. One path ends in destruction, and the culmination of the other ancient path is “rest for your souls.” You might be scratching your head right now and wondering, “Why would these ancient travelers not choose the good way?” But just like us, the people of Jerusalem, out of selfish desires, made the wrong choice. Because they wouldn’t change, they said to Jeremiah, “No, that’s not the road we want!” (6:16).
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And even though road signs all along the path they’d chosen warned “Death!” and “Destruction!”—while the road toward which Jeremiah pointed was marked “Rest” and “Peace”—they couldn’t, or wouldn’t, change paths.

It’s the choice we’ve faced since the beginning of time. Our ancestors in the Garden of Eden chose the path of disobedience, and too often we blindly follow in their steps. We read in the Bible about the transformed life, but we fail to experience it. In frustration, most of us settle for a life filled with limits. Though we’ve tried to find peace in the midst of stress, time and time again it just hasn’t worked. So we give up, and settling for what is, we accept what we call “reality.”

But not everyone gives up. There are others, a lot like you and me, who still want and still believe that there is a different way to live life. The ancient biblical path hasn’t been hidden away in some anachronistic dimension. It can be found and traveled today! Like me, you may have had your share of discouragement and frustration, but you still want to live out the reality of a transformed life. You may even believe it’s possible because the Bible promises it, but like a traveler without a GPS, you just don’t know how to get there. The words of Paul in Romans 12:2, that we are not to “copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform [us] into a new person by changing the way [we] think,” point us toward the godly way. The King James Version of Paul’s exhortation instructs, “Do not be conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.” And while we long for transformation, yearning for changed lives,
the truth is that we aren’t even certain what a renewed mind looks like, or how it thinks.

**Changed Hearts or Renewed Minds?**

Let’s look first at what really has to change. Paul tells us we are to renew our minds. That’s clear enough, but Proverbs 23:7 mentions thoughts as being in our heart. The passage says, “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (KJV). But don’t minds think and hearts feel? How does a person think in his or her heart? To find out, one must understand what the Hebrew words translated as heart and mind meant to Paul, a Jew. The Hebrew word lev, used in Proverbs and elsewhere, is translated as “heart.” But it is also translated as “mind” in other places! If you were a native Hebrew speaker, that wouldn’t bother you. You’d think beyond either the singular word heart or mind to the actual meaning of the word. Lev could be translated more accurately as “the center of our being.” So whenever you encounter either heart or mind in the Bible, if you think like a person who spoke Hebrew, you’d interpret the reference as “the center of our being.” For example, you’d understand Proverbs 23:7 as saying that as a person thinks in the center of his or her being, so is that person. Or, as in Romans 12:2, we are transformed by having the center of our being renewed. If we know what needs to be renewed, we’re one step closer to experiencing real transformation.

In the last twenty years, those who study the brain have confirmed much of what Scripture has been telling us all along.
Some of these discoveries have helped to explain why it is so hard to transform, or renew, our minds. They’ve also identified why some of our sinful patterns are so hard to change, even when we’re desperate to change them. The Bible describes how we, by faith, come into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and then it also refers to a continual process of being transformed by the Holy Spirit of God. Much of that process has become clearer as a result of the insights we now have into how the brain works. Two major problems in the way we think have been identified.

**Our Negative Bias**

Jerry is a salesman who has successfully survived the economic downturn, but to talk with him, you’d think he was a total failure. All he can see are the potential problems. He just knows his latest sale will fall through for some reason or other, and there won’t be any commission check at the end of the month. He is so negative about everything that his co-workers have labeled him “the eternal pessimist.” His response is to say that he is only being a realist. “After all,” he argues, “deals do fall apart at the last minute.” He will quickly remind people that three months ago he had two deals fall apart at the last minute. One year, he was so certain a deal would close that he even spent part of the commission check he expected to get, only to have to return what he bought because there was no commission check. He said he learned an important lesson that year—don’t trust any deal until it is completed and shipped and payment...
has been received! He is convinced that his “realistic pessimism” works.

Jerry illustrates the first problem we encounter when we want to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The truth is we all have a natural proclivity to the negative. In fact, we’re hardwired to focus on it! The brain is like Velcro when it comes to a negative experience, and it is like Teflon when it comes to a positive experience. This is true for even the most optimistic person. In the next chapter we’ll look more closely at what we are learning about how the brain works, but for now know that there are basically three systems in the brain. The first system seeks to avoid danger and harm; the second system approaches situations looking for reward; and the third system, which we will look at in chapter 7, forms attachments and connections with other people.

The system that seeks to avoid danger and harm has been called the “fight-or-flight response.” When we are threatened by something dangerous or harmful, our brain prepares our body to either fight against the danger or take flight from the danger. Blood is taken from the brain and sent to our extremities—arms and legs—to prepare us to fight or run. These dangerous circumstances always have a sense of urgency about them. If we are confronted by a dangerous or harmful situation, we must deal with it quickly, for our survival as human beings depends on our vigilance and preparation. So we are perpetually on guard against danger or harm.

In days gone by, our ancestors faced dangers different than the ones we face today. Some of them may have lived through the Great Depression, barely being able to survive. Other
ancestors may have faced physical danger as their wagon train moved west. Some of us have faced bullies in school or other situations that we experienced as potentially harmful. We have all, at some time or other, experienced a fight-or-flight situation. While you might now be tempted to dismiss some of these situations you experienced as a child, just remember how fearful or how aggressive you were in those situations.

Think back to the last thing you thought about as you went to sleep last night. Most of us think about some negative thing we faced during the day, or some negative things we might possibly face the next day. If we experienced, say, twenty situations in a day, and ten of those situations were positive, nine were neutral events, and only one was negative, we’d inevitably dwell on the single negative experience!

We’re also quicker to show negative emotions on our face than we are to show positive emotions. Those who study the emotional language of the face can detect a split-second expression of anger. The look quickly washes over our faces and disappears in a flash. Even though the expression might be there for only a microsecond, scientists can show it to us on video.

And the final reason we so easily get tangled up in the negative is that we learn things much faster when we experience pain than when we experience pleasure. Painful experiences imprint more deeply on our brain than do positive experiences. We all struggle with this tendency to the negative, and our mind will take the shape of whatever we put in it. So when we ruminate, worry, feel resentment, feel we’ve been treated unfairly, or have any other negative response,
we’re downloading the negative and we end up hardwired to focus on it.

**The Powerlessness of Our Willpower**

Jessica struggled for years with panic attacks. She was determined they would not impact her day-by-day behavior. When she felt her anxiety starting to rise, she would brace herself and will herself not to panic, usually to no avail. The panic would eventually win the battle over her will, and she would end up powerless and in the grip of a frightening panic attack.

Jessica was face-to-face with the second system at work that can block the renewing of our minds. She found that she really was powerless when it came to her willpower. Though we know it’s true, we hate to admit it. Think back to your last diet. How long did it last? And what about your commitment to keep that weight off? How long did that last? Our willpower runs out of energy and lets us down. Why is that? It’s because we really have two minds that can be at war with each other! Paul describes this battle in Romans 7: “I want to do what is right, but I can’t. I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway” (vv. 18–19). Paul calls one mind “the sinful nature,” or the flesh, and the other he calls “God’s good commands.” Here we’ll say that the part of the mind that wills the good is called the conscious mind, and the part of the mind we can’t control is called the subconscious mind.

Many of us recoil at the idea of the subconscious, for somehow along the way we picked up the Freudian *interpretation* of
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the subconscious. We may feel scared because we think of the subconscious as some powerful, dark, evil part of our mind that is obsessed with sex. Thankfully, that’s not what I’m talking about at all. In fact, in this discussion about the subconscious, those ideas are totally meaningless! What brain scientists call the subconscious mind is very different. It is a very safe and understandable part of our mind. Without emotion, it is simply the database of our stored experiences, those things we experienced very early in our life. In fact, we can think of the subconscious mind as being similar to the hard drive on a computer. The hard drive contains all the programs that make the computer work, and our subconscious mind is what makes a large part of our life work the way it does. This early programming of our subconscious mind directs most of our behavior.

We’ve all had the experience of getting caught up in a conversation with someone while we are driving. For miles, our conscious mind carries on this enjoyable conversation. While this is happening, what is our subconscious mind doing? It’s doing the driving. And our subconscious mind does a very good job of driving, for we arrive at our destination safely even though our conscious mind hardly noticed that we were driving the car. Our conscious mind only handles about 5 percent of what goes on in our daily lives, while the subconscious mind handles the other 95 percent of what goes on.

In addition, our subconscious mind is incredibly quick. It makes our conscious mind seem lethargic and slow in comparison. In fact, our subconscious mind can process internal
and environmental stimuli at the rate of 20,000,000 per second! That’s right—twenty million! That’s incomprehensible. Our subconscious mind constantly scans and observes the internal and external stimuli all around and within us. In contrast, the conscious mind can process environmental stimuli at the rate of only forty per second. It’s clear which part of our mind is more powerful.

Our conscious mind is also slower than the subconscious mind. It takes the conscious mind between five hundred and six hundred milliseconds to experience something. That means that everything that we experience happening has already happened between five hundred and six hundred milliseconds ago. But the subconscious mind registers these experiences in less than fifty milliseconds. So by the time we are consciously aware of something happening, our subconscious mind has already been processing it.1

An important difference between these two minds is that the conscious mind is the “self” that we are. Who we are and how we see ourselves is a product of the conscious mind. It also has the ability to be aware of events in the past as well as ones we anticipate in the future, whereas the subconscious mind learns from the past and is based on past experience but only deals with the present. It is always “on duty” in our here and now. And the subconscious has no awareness of the self, of who we are.

Ever have someone “push your buttons”? All of those buttons that other people push are in our subconscious. And since the subconscious processes so quickly, when someone pushes one of our buttons, we often react before we even think.
For example, Bruce Lipton tells of his first experience with kinesiology—a chiropractor was testing his muscle strength. He was told to hold out his arm and to resist the downward pressure the chiropractor would put on his arm. He was able to resist easily. Then he was asked to say, “My name is Bruce,” while the pressure was applied to his arm. Again, he resisted easily. When he was asked to say, “My name is Mary,” he says his “arm sunk like a stone.”

Of course, he thought it was due to not being ready, so he asked to do it again. As he said, “My name is Mary,” his arm was again powerless to resist the pressure. The chiropractor explained that when his conscious mind encountered a belief that was against something he knew to be true—something held as truth in the subconscious mind—the conflict would express itself in a weakening of the body’s muscles. That’s how powerful our subconscious mind is.

In a very real sense, it is the subconscious mind that is running most of the activities in our lives. So what happens when the conscious mind wants to do something, but the subconscious mind doesn’t want to? Eventually, the subconscious mind will win the battle. That’s why willpower only works for a short time. What we are “willing” to take place is often at odds with what is programmed into our subconscious.

Look again at the example of wanting to lose weight. We go on a diet. We are determined. Our conscious mind has made the commitment. But our subconscious mind was programmed to see food as an emotional reward. When we were good, or when someone hurt our feelings, our mother made special cookies for us, and we would sit and eat them and talk...
with Mom. So our conscious mind says “lose weight,” but our subconscious mind remembers the warm feelings we had with cookies, milk, and Mom. Eventually the subconscious wears down the conscious mind and our diet simply fails. The subconscious has won the battle.

Typically, by the time we are six years old or so, the programming of our subconscious mind is pretty much completed. The hard drive appears to be full. It is programmed by what we saw our parents doing, by what they and other adults were saying to us, and by other early experiences. For example, if during this period of our life a parent was often angry with us and called us “stupid,” that got programmed into our subconscious mind. Later, in adulthood, we may often be haunted by the sense that we are stupid. Until we deal with it, it will be part of our program.

That program also includes things like how our parents played with us or disciplined us. All kinds of words and looks and behaviors we saw in them became a part of our hard drive. In addition, traumatic experiences that happened during later stages of life also get programmed into our subconscious.4

Think back to the last time someone said something to you that really caused you to react negatively. When they pushed your button, what were you really reacting to? As you look back on it, you may be embarrassed by the intensity of your reaction. If you think back as far as you can to identify similar feelings related to that experience, in almost every case your “button” will take you back to something hurtful that happened to you, or something painful you saw or experienced, prior to age six.
The power of our subconscious mind is why simply using positive thinking doesn’t always work the way we think it should. It’s why we can only maintain the change for a short time. When we are trying to change our thoughts or behaviors without factoring in the impact of our subconscious mind, our conscious mind will always lose the battle. What we most need is something that will change the programming of our hard drive!

When our conscious mind and our subconscious mind are in sync with each other, we’re finally working with all cylinders firing. When this happens, unlike when our beliefs are in conflict with those imbedded in our subconscious mind, our beliefs at last have great power. It also explains why, when we read the Bible, we may skip over the parts that are in conflict with what we believe in our subconscious mind and unwittingly search for what is consistent with the beliefs of our subconscious.

I recently spoke with a man who was very angry with God. Unable to find God, he said he felt like David must have felt when he was running away from King Saul. Though I tried to get him to see that it was okay for him to be angry with God, he would agree for a moment and then negate anything I had said. I finally suggested he read through the Psalms to see how David reacted when he was angry and disappointed with God.

I wanted this man to see that even when David expressed his anger and frustration, he ultimately affirmed his faith and trust in God. I wanted him to see that he could be angry with God while remaining in relationship. Though rising to
the challenge, working through all the Psalms, the man still didn’t get the point. Instead, he focused on Psalm 88, the one Psalm where the writer did not end with an affirmation of God’s faithfulness! That Psalm matched the beliefs of his subconscious: if he was angry, he was bad and God would reject him. He failed to take in the message of the overwhelming number of other Psalms that affirmed what I had wanted him to see. In the end, they made little impact on his thinking.

For any one of us, though, there are plenty of things we believe that aren’t necessarily in conflict with our subconscious. One example is the power of what is called the placebo effect. A placebo is a fake medication that a patient believes to be real. It might be used as a control when a new medication is first being tested. In these studies, one group takes the new medication, and the other group, unaware they’re not on the new medication, takes a sugar pill, a placebo. To the frustration of the pharmaceutical companies, about 55 to 60 percent of those taking the placebo will experience the same changes that are supposed to come only from taking the actual medication. They experience real change because of the power of their beliefs. Though pharmaceutical companies would prefer to eliminate from testing those who might respond to a placebo—an impossible agenda—it might be more interesting, though less profitable, if they discovered instead why a placebo can be almost as effective as the real medication!

Another example of the power of belief is illustrated in a number of commonly reported studies. For example, a teacher is told that several kids in his or her classroom, who are really
average, are identified as being brilliant. In one case in which three students were identified as brilliant, the teacher was told she was going to be monitored to make certain she gave no special attention to those three children. And although the monitors had trouble identifying exactly what had changed, the teacher’s confidence in those three children was nonetheless communicated. Each of the three identified students not only outperformed the rest of their class, they also continued to do so in their subsequent years of schooling. Past records of these three students confirmed that they were not brilliant, just average. But the belief of the teacher was communicated in such a way that the children responded positively. The placebo effect relates to something positive happening that isn’t supposed to happen, given the circumstances.

The opposite of the placebo effect is what is called the nocebo effect, a negative belief that also has power. Think what happens when a doctor tells a cancer patient that he has six months to live, or lets a woman know that due to her genetic makeup she will most likely develop breast cancer. Because a doctor is seen as an authority, people will often believe what they are being told. One man was told by his doctor that he had a severe form of cancer and had only a couple of weeks to live. He died several weeks later. But when the autopsy was done, the medical examiner could not find any of the cancer that was supposed to have killed him. The doctor had been mistaken in his diagnosis. What an incredible example of the power of negative beliefs!

Another study on the power of beliefs was done by a surgeon who specialized in knee surgery. He got permission to
do an experiment in which he studied three groups of people suffering severe disabilities related to their knees, all of whom were in great pain. Most of them needed a cane to walk, and none of them were able to do any exercise that required the use of their legs. Those in one group were given the full surgical treatment on their knees, a complete knee replacement procedure. Following surgery, they improved as expected. The second group had only minor surgery, their knees being only cleaned out of any irritants. Following surgery, they improved the same as the first group. The third group was given “fake surgery.” The doctor made the incision but did nothing to the knee. Not knowing exactly what a person remembered while under anesthesia, he pretended to go through the whole process as if he was doing a full surgery on the knee. Amazingly, everyone in this group saw the same improvement as those in the other two groups. Each group believed they’d had the full surgery treatment.

This third group wasn’t told about the fake surgery until two years later. At that point, everyone in that group was functioning well. When told he had been given fake surgery, one man in this group, who was now playing basketball, simply said, “Well, miracles do happen.” In the follow-up two years later, no difference was found between the groups in what the individuals experienced and how they improved. Yet another amazing example of the power of belief in what an authority figure tells us that is consistent with the beliefs of our subconscious mind.

Can we be transformed by the renewing of our mind, the center of our being? Can we overcome our negative bias?
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Can we effectively in some way reprogram our subconscious mind? What about my vow? Could I become the father to my sons that my father never was to me? It seems as though Paul is saying that transformation is a cooperative effort between us and God when he says, “Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him” (Phil. 2:12–13). Let’s examine what actually goes on in the brain when we cooperate with God in this process of being transformed.