# Mind Games, Part 1: Seeing Clearly

Joel Thomas · 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

## AT A GLANCE

Opening a series he calls Mind Games, Joel Thomas argues that the feelings we name most confidently — betrayed, abandoned, inadequate — are usually verdicts our brain renders after the true ninety-second emotion has already passed. Drawing on his own collapse after a toxic ministry turnaround and on Paul's command in 2 Corinthians 10 to take every thought captive, he shows that clear sight requires measuring our filtered, familiar stories against what Christ reveals as real, and he points ahead to more next week.

- The physiological life of an actual emotion lasts about ninety seconds; everything after that is a judgment your brain has constructed, not the feeling itself.
- Your brain filters roughly eleven million bits of information a second down to about fifty, favoring what's familiar over what's actually true.
- Testing and evaluating your thoughts helps, but only measuring them against what Christ reveals as reality has the power to set you free.

> *"The truth is, you've never felt any of those things. You've not felt them as emotions, because those aren't real emotions."*

## EXPOSITION

### Scripture engaged

> 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 — [3]We live in this world, but we don’t fight our battles in the same way the world does. [4]The weapons we use are not human ones. Our weapons have power from God and can destroy the enemy’s strong places. We destroy people’s arguments, [5]and we tear down every proud idea that raises itself against the knowledge of God. We also capture every thought and make it give up and obey Christ. (ERV)

### The argument

### What You Call a Feeling Is Often a Verdict — the correction that reframed a season of burnout

Joel Thomas tells of collapsing after leading a church through a toxic, traumatic turnaround in Arizona — wanting to quit just as things turned positive. Sent to a four-day intensive with Dr. John Walker, he listed his feelings: abandoned, betrayed, inadequate, devalued, forgotten, judged. Walker's response reframed everything: "the truth is you've never felt any of those things… those aren't real emotions." They were conscious, subjective judgments about someone's behavior, not authentic emotion. Thomas builds his whole framework on this distinction: an event triggers a real, biological feeling that rises and falls in ninety seconds, but the labels we attach — the interpretations — are something else entirely, and they are what actually drive how we react.

> **Insight —** *The strongest feeling you can name may be a judgment wearing the disguise of an emotion.*

### The Brain Filters For The Familiar, Not The True — the reticular activating system and the story-making machine

Thomas locates the mechanism in the reticular activating system, which filters roughly eleven million bits of sensory information a second down to about fifty that reach conscious attention. That filtering runs on "past experiences, our past beliefs and previously held judgments," not on present fact. His conclusion is blunt: "your brain is actually in real time editing based on what's familiar, not what's true… The brain doesn't believe what's true." After the six-second chemical rush of an actual emotion, the brain immediately jumps past the feeling to construct a story layered with old data — and that story, not the event, is what we react to.

> **Insight —** *What feels like perceiving reality is often just recognizing a familiar pattern the brain has already decided to see.*

### Taking Thoughts Captive Requires A Standard Outside The Thought — why metacognition alone cannot set you free

Reading 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, Thomas highlights Paul's word for "arguments" — logismos, the root of our word logic — as a direct name for the reasoning process itself, the internal case-making our filtered brain performs. Paul's command to "take captive every thought" anticipates by nineteen centuries what psychology now calls metacognition, thinking about your thinking, which Thomas calls the highest form of intelligence. But he insists Paul goes further than modern therapy does: "metacognition alone doesn't have the power to help us see clearly… evaluating your thoughts can be helpful, but aligning your thoughts with true reality is indispensable." Paul supplies the missing benchmark — obedience to Christ, reality as it exists in God's mind.

> **Insight —** *Examining a thought only exposes it; it takes a standard outside yourself to correct it.*

### Contamination Stories And Redemption Stories Produce Different Bodies — the tennis players' sixteen-second cure

Thomas distinguishes two narrative postures we default to after pain: contamination stories, where "this bad thing happened and nothing good can come from this," and redemption stories, where "this bad thing happened, but maybe there's something I can learn from this." He cites sports psychologist Jim Loehr's study of elite tennis players, who differed from merely successful ones not in training or diet but in what they told themselves between points — brief, realistic, redemptive self-talk that preserved energy and kept them relaxed across a match. His conclusion: "biologically, your body starts solving for the story that it believes." The story is not neutral; it is metabolized.

> **Insight —** *The account you narrate to yourself after loss is not commentary on your biology — it becomes your biology.*

### Freedom Is Not Only From Sin's Penalty But From Distorted Sight — what EMDR loosened without erasing

Thomas discloses his own recourse: EMDR treatment for memories his brain "didn't file properly," so that anything similar reopened them on the surface of his mind. "It was very painful to go through that process," he admits, "but… it didn't erase the memory, but it loosened the grip that those memories had on me." He roots this in Jesus's own mission, that the blind would see and captives go free, and reframes the gospel's scope: "he doesn't just want to pay for your penalty of sin so you can go to heaven one day. He wants you to see your life in the world clearly and he wants you to live freely."

> **Insight —** *Christ's freedom addresses not only guilt before God but the distorted stories a wounded mind keeps replaying.*

### Cross-references

- Luke 4:18 — cited to frame Jesus's mission as giving sight to the blind and freedom to captives, extending it to freedom from distorted perception

## DEVOTIONAL

A desk with unfiled papers. That is the image Joel Thomas leaves us with — memories that never made it into their proper folder, so they sit out in plain sight, resurfacing every time something faintly resembling them walks past. Most of us are living off papers like that: old verdicts about ourselves, rendered once in a moment of pain, filed nowhere, and now mistaken for permanent facts every time a new situation brushes against them. What if the sting you feel today is not proof of what's true, but evidence of what's familiar? The body only holds an emotion for ninety seconds. Everything after that is interpretation, argument, story — the mind doing its ancient, efficient, survival work of matching the present to the past and calling the match reality. Paul knew this before anyone had a name for the brain that does it. He simply said: take the thought captive. Interrogate it. Do not let it stand unchallenged just because it

arrived first. But captivity to what? Not to willpower, not even to insight — to Christ, who alone sees the situation, the person, the wound as it actually is. He came as a rabbi precisely to say, you've heard it said, but I tell you. He is still saying it over the stories we've enshrined as settled truth. The invitation is not to deny what happened, but to let the King reattach the meaning — to write, over the contamination, a redemption that was true all along, waiting to be seen.

### Reflection

- What story have you been telling yourself about a wound from your past — is it a contamination story or a redemption story, and how can you tell?
- Where have you mistaken a familiar judgment for a genuine feeling, and what might it look like to separate what happened from what you decided it meant?
- What recurring thought about yourself, someone else, or God would you need to hold captive this week and measure against what Christ actually says?

### Closing prayer

*God, there are people in this room and beyond it chained to stories of unreality — things that are not true but feel true. Help us see as you see, to believe your version of what has happened and what is happening, so we can see reality clearly. Free us from narratives, from judgments and beliefs that keep us tied to our past; that is not what you want for us. For whoever needs professional help, a friend, or a community to talk to, give us the wisdom to know what to do with what we've heard, and the courage to do it. In Jesus's name, amen.*

## FORMATION

### One thing to remember

Your reaction is rarely about the event in front of you; it is about the story your brain already decided the event means.

### This week

This week, when a strong reaction rises in you, wait out the ninety seconds, then write down what actually happened versus the story you told yourself about it. Take that story to God in prayer and ask what Christ actually says about the situation, per 2 Corinthians 10:5.

*Return to* 2 Corinthians 10:5