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*Taming Your Private Thoughts*

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Dennis, Jay, 1959-

Taming your private thoughts : you can stop sin where it starts / Jay Dennis and Marilyn Jeffcoat.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-310-23811-0

1. Thought and thinking—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Temptation. 3. Sin.

I. Jeffcoat, Marilyn. II. Title.

BV4598.4 .D46 2002

241'.3—dc21

2001005897

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Softcover ISBN 0-310-26359-X.

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*Interior design by Todd Sprague*

*Printed in the United States of America*

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04 05 06 07 / ❖ DC/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# It Began Just as a Thought

**N**EVER HAVE I FELT MORE UNDONE. Hot streams of tears cascaded down my cheeks as I sobbed. I repeatedly cried aloud, “Oh, my God, what have I done, what have I done!” Each mile that I drove, I became more consumed with sheer panic coupled with overwhelming remorse and unbridled anger at myself for allowing this to happen. Unable to drive any farther, I found myself slamming on the brakes and pulling over because I was feeling physically ill from the gut-wrenching pain.

The place where I stopped my car is the place to which I regularly retreat for solitude and quiet time with God. It is the idyllic location where I run after work and unload the day’s burdens on an understanding heavenly Father. It is also the beautiful setting where I regularly lead a men’s discipleship group in the challenge to embrace uncompromising devotion to the Lord. Now, from the perspective of where I was crouched beside my car, my favorite place—where so many things in my mind had been settled—seemed foreign and anything but peaceful. I could not believe I was there and in this horrible mess.

When I was finally able to stumble back into the car, I turned off the engine and just sat there in the darkness. All I could hear was my rapid breathing and pounding heart. *Okay, let me think. I have to pull myself*

together. *What am I going to say? The first question she is going to ask me is "Why, Jay?"—a question I now am forced to stop and ask myself.*

We had often talked about how we didn't have to worry about this happening to us. Now, here I was being faced with sharing something that would break her heart into a thousand pieces. This is the woman who was there for me during the sacrificial seminary years when I was preoccupied with graduate and postgraduate courses. She is the one who stood beside me through unbelievably tough church situations where most people would have said, "I didn't sign up for this." What a fool I have been! I just crushed her trust and communicated by my actions that "I don't love you like you think I do." *Oh, God, I have given up all we had taken years to build. . . and for what? An adrenalin rush? A testosterone thrill? A short-lived pleasure? An adolescent fling?* I now realize—all too late—that I got major ripped-off in that exchange.

Things will never again be the same. How will I tell my son . . . my daughter? How can I possibly look into the eyes of that young man who implicitly trusts his dad and say, "Son, Dad has been unfaithful to your mother. Life as we have known it has ended." How can I peer into the loving eyes of a young lady who has put her dad on a high pedestal and say, "Honey, Dad has made a selfish choice that is going to change our family's future."

What about the people I serve as pastor, who look to me as their spiritual leader? Will their view of God—and Christian leaders—be forever altered? Will the people that came to Christ under my ministry somehow feel that their decision wasn't valid? Will those I baptized or married feel like it wasn't God-blessed? I'm through! I'm done! It's all over! I've thrown everything away! What took many years to build was torn down by one choice . . . one disastrous choice. There's no rewind button on this one.

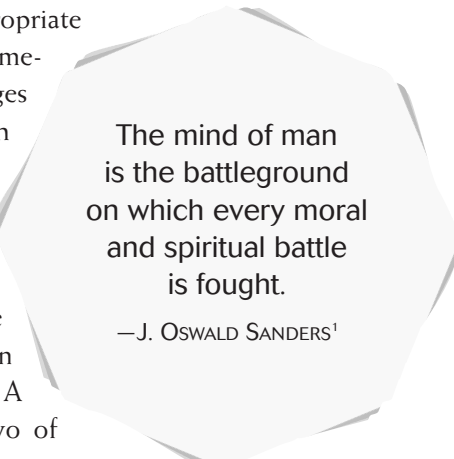
But there is a S.T.O.P. play. I cannot tell you the pleasure—and relief—it gives me to tell you that none of this has happened. I have often used such mental rehearsals of potential consequences as a deterrent to dwelling or acting on sinful thoughts. Such a painful exercise has often served as a powerful reminder to me that I never want to go there. It's not worth it. Unfortunately, I have known too many

Christian men and women who either did not adequately rehearse the consequences of potential sinful choices—or simply chose to act in spite of their better judgment.

## How Could a Man of God Do That?

It began just as a thought—and then a fantasy. Jack thought he could handle indulging in a mental fantasy world. After all, his marriage was shaky—it had been for years—and he craved the intimacy and excitement he lacked with his wife. In interviewing him for this book, Jack painfully recounted how at first it was “just thoughts” that he let linger. While this caused him feelings of great guilt, he began to desire stimulation beyond what his mind alone could supply.

Jack began watching inappropriate shows and movies on television—sometimes peering at the scrambled images of cable premium channels to which he did not subscribe. This initially did the trick in satisfying the growing sexual appetite in him. During this time, Jack and his wife were living separate lives—under the same roof. For a long time they had been functioning—and growing—apart. A sexual relationship between the two of them had been nonexistent for years.



The mind of man  
is the battleground  
on which every moral  
and spiritual battle  
is fought.

—J. OSWALD SANDERS<sup>1</sup>

One day a young woman came to see Jack for marriage counseling. Up to this point in his ministry, this seasoned pastor had consistently followed all appropriate counseling guidelines. This session, however, proved to be a turning point by opening up a world of fantasy that he did not know existed. A shift happened as a result of a decisive session that day: Jack was introduced to the Internet as a vehicle for sexual exploration in a way that enticed him to check it out for himself.

Concerning this turning point, Jack explains, “At first it was simple. I had never been unfaithful in the entire sixteen years of marriage—even even remotely close. I swore I would never be. I discovered I could see

pictures on the Internet, and no one would ever know. It was terribly wrong, and I cannot believe I let it happen." He soon became involved in cybersex via Internet chat rooms. This led to telephone calls to cyberpartners and ultimately to a rendezvous with a woman he had met online.

Jack was serving as the president of a denominational conference when he met this woman in another city. They ended up committing adultery. Jack says, "There was no excuse for it. It was wrong and it was sin. We both knew it!" But they kept on meeting each week—on his golf days and any other time he could possibly arrange in his schedule.

Eventually Jack's wife found out about the affair. Soon his church leadership was informed of the double life Jack had been leading. He lost his pastorate, his marriage, and his family. Jack now looks back with remorse over losing everything. "I walked away with nothing. Everything in my life was gone. I lost everything of value to me. I was unemployed. I became completely broke with no job, no skills, and no reputation. Calamity after calamity came. I felt all alone. I would not pray, because I knew God would not listen. I talked to no one. There were only one or two people I ever saw. I continued in the relationship I was in. I did not try to hide it. I made foolish decisions on top of the ones I had already made. Sin is very blinding." Jack's thought life became master of his real life—and his world was never the same.<sup>2</sup>

## Thought Genesis

"In the beginning was . . . a thought." Everything begins with a thought. God thought it. God spoke it. It happened: The world came into being. The book of Genesis is replete with accounts of beginnings: the beginning of creation, the beginning of humankind, the beginning of humankind's fall into sin, the beginning of the redemptive process for humankind, the beginning of the Israelite nation. In fact, the first phrase in the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1 is *bereshith*—"in the beginning"—which is also the Hebrew title<sup>3</sup> of the book.<sup>4</sup> God thought and acted on his thoughts. Man and woman thought and acted on their thoughts.

In fact, everything we see and everything that happens began with someone having had a thought and then acting on it. The Empire State

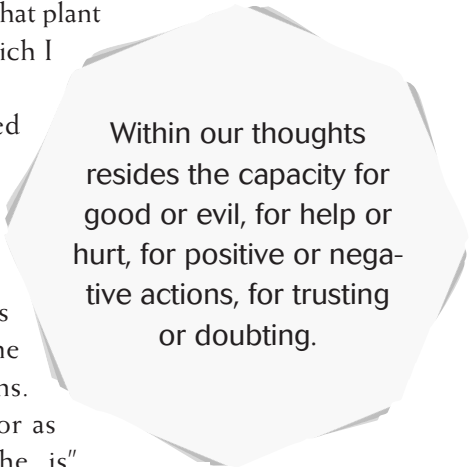
Building and the Golden Gate Bridge didn't "just happen." The Super Bowl and U.S. Open don't "just happen." Planners and dreamers, promoters and builders have creative thoughts and act on those thoughts. A what-if, an imagine-that, an I-wonder-about-this begins the process and ultimately compels the thought-meister to act.

Think about it. Thoughts have produced . . .

- the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, as well as Hiroshima.
- a cure for polio, as well as World Trade Center Towers and Pentagon terrorist attacks.
- Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, as well as crack cocaine.
- communism's fall, as well as Bosnia's ethnic cleansing.
- Dr. DeBakey's heart-bypass surgery, as well as Dr. Kevorkian's death machine.

Psychologists say that ten thousand thoughts go through the human mind in one day. That is 3,500,000,000 thoughts a year!<sup>5</sup> Someone has said that every kidnapping was once one of those thoughts, and every extramarital affair was first a fantasy.<sup>6</sup> Within our thoughts resides the capacity for good or evil, for help or hurt, for positive or negative actions, for trusting or doubting. How we respond to life events and possibilities has its genesis in our thought life. We are bombarded with sounds and sights that plant thoughts within our mind—to which I will refer as "thought plants."

That to which we are exposed often dictates what we think about. "Left on their own," our thoughts have a tendency toward that which is wrong instead of heading in the direction of what is right. Sinful thoughts are just one step removed from sinful actions. The book of Proverbs asserts, "For as he thinks within himself, so he is"



Within our thoughts resides the capacity for good or evil, for help or hurt, for positive or negative actions, for trusting or doubting.

(Proverbs 23:7 NASB). Control your thought life, and you control your actions.

How does the sin problem begin in the life of an individual? Is there a prescribed formula for how a typical person falls into sin? No, it's different for each one of us. There seems to be, however, a diabolical, unique design based on what will most likely tempt each one of us personally to give in to sin. The Garden of Eden account (Genesis 3) illustrates a broad pattern of the temptation-sin process. Satan used a "thought plant" to tempt the world's first female, Eve. She spotted in the middle of the garden a tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—a thought plant. Satan would use this off-limits, stay-away-from-it-or-else, super-desirable-but-totally-forbidden fruit tree to plant the thought of sinning against God.

How did the tempter operate? He insinuated that Eve was missing out on so much because of God. He implied that God was not good, that God's Word was not totally true. These are the thought plants planted by Satan, seeded in the mind of Eve—and which, by the way, he continues to plant in our minds today:

- Thought Plant #1:** "You're free to do as you please."  
*"You will surely not die" (v. 4).*
- Thought Plant #2:** "No one has a right to tell you what to do."  
*"Indeed, God has said, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the Garden'?" (v. 1 NASB).*
- Thought Plant #3:** "Let me show you another way to think about it."  
*"Did God REALLY say that?" (v. 1).*
- Thought Plant #4:** "God doesn't want you to have any fun."  
*"For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (v. 5).*

While we will not be confronted by a talking snake today, we will encounter a smooth-talking, deadly-as-a-snake enemy. Satan continues to employ this method effectively. So we need to be alert and recognize his *modus operandi* with the following two steps.

1. The seed of the sin problem is planted in our thoughts. Utilizing the power of suggestions, Satan plants thoughts that are often unrelenting and enticing, seductive and captivating:
  - "Go ahead, everybody else does it."
  - "If it feels good, do it."
  - "Nobody else has to know."
  - "You deserve it."
  - "One time won't hurt."
  - "You can't live your life based on an outdated book."
  - "You can sin and get by with it."
2. If these thoughts are allowed to become runaway—unchecked and uncontrolled—they will eventually lead to sinful actions. Then it is not a matter of if, but when.

How alluring! In a variety of beautiful shapes, sizes, and colors, the new genus of "thought plants" has its roots in the old ones. Old and new bear definite similarities. They still need to be fed in order to grow and flourish. Their fruit, while tantalizing, is still forbidden and deadly. The garden of our minds can become overgrown with these more-vociferous-than-Kudzu Satan-thought plants that can choke out God-thought plants if left unattended.

## **Eve Bit the Apple and They Both Bit the Dust**

Genesis offers so few details of what transpired between that first husband and wife in the Garden of Eden as they contemplated sin. In our off-the-wall way of reenacting the sequence of events in our minds, Marilyn and I have imagined what might have transpired if the Eden scene were somehow scripted for twenty-first-century television instead of the Hebrew Pentateuch.

*It was an ordinary day in Paradise. Adam and Eve rode together in their Bronco SUV for their morning commute in to the office, where they both worked for the Big Boss. Traffic was moving as slow as snails on the freeway, plus this idiotic mule-of-a-driver had just cut him off—all of which made Adam consider inventing road rage as a solution for dealing*

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with this early morning vehicular challenge. Eve was oblivious to it all as she read the day's newspaper and listened to a favorite CD.

The couple did not talk to each other until they reached the parking garage of 100 Garden Office Tower. As they grabbed their briefcases, they kissed each other on the cheek and said, "See ya later." And off they went into separate directions. Adam dashed for the elevator as Eve stopped by the coffee shop for a bagel and latte.

Once in his corner office, Adam began checking his e-mail and voice mail. Within minutes he was responding to two messages from L. E. Fante. Upon reaching Mr. Fante, Adam was reminded of a luncheon meeting at the Oasis Country Club for the purpose of planning this year's charity rodeo.

As Eve settled at her desk, she began syncing her pocket PC with her desktop computer. After retrieving today's appointments and downloading some must-read periodicals, she began the arduous task of doing the layout for this month's issue of Better Homes and Gardens. While she was playing phone-tag with one of her photo journalists, Ima Swann, she began surfing the Net. During this process Eve ran across a new site: Apples R Us. Listed on their homepage were many products they carry, including apple pie, apple muffins, apple butter, apple sauce, apple cobbler, apple cider, Apple Jacks, apple preserves, apple fritters, Apple computers, and Apple Surprise.

Interested in Apple Surprise, she clicked on the product icon for a description of this item. Instead seeing of a product description, she was linked to a chat room with a visitor, with the screen name "Lou C. Furr," who was already present and who immediately addressed Eve.

Lou: "Hello, Eve."

Eve: "Hello."

Lou: "I am glad you entered this chat room. I have been wanting to meet you ever since you and your husband moved into Garden Estates."

Eve: "Are you a neighbor of ours?"

Lou: "I have a place there, but I come and go a lot. I am what you might call a traveling salesman."

Eve: "What do you sell? Apple products?"

Lou: "Actually. I represent an organization called God-Makers."

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Eve: "What! I only know of one God. Are there others?"

Lou: "Well, there certainly can be. You seem like a smart young woman who would know a good opportunity when she saw one. Would you care to join me for lunch today at Applebee's and learn all I can do to improve your life?"

Eve: "That sounds intriguing! Oh . . . why not. It looks like I have some white space around 12:30. Would that work for you? At which restaurant location would you like to meet? "

Lou: "Twelve-thirty works for me as well. I will meet you near the hostess stand at the Applebee's on Knowledge Tree Avenue South."

Eve: "Great. See you there."

*Eve signed off her computer and buzzed Adam's office. Adam was out of his office gathering information for the next day's meeting with the Man Upstairs. Eve left a voice mail for her husband informing him of her luncheon engagement and inviting him to join her. Running late for his lunch date, Adam neglected to check his messages when he returned to the office. He dashed out of the office with no knowledge of Eve's invitation.*

*Around noon, Eve tried to reach Adam again. Unsuccessful, she left a voice message on his cell phone and then left work to drive to Applebee's, where Lou was already waiting on her.*

Lou: "Hello, Eve. I am Lou C. Furr."

Eve: "It's a pleasure to meet you. Am I running late?"

Lou: "Oh, no. You are right on time. In fact, they just told me that they have our table ready."

*Eve followed Lou to a table under a lovely tree on the patio. Lou informed Eve that he would like to take the liberty to order for them both. Soon the server arrived to take their order and shortly returned with their drinks. A consummate pitchman, Lou enthralled his dining companion as they leisurely ate their lunch with his dazzling ideas of how she could be*