

99 Thoughts for Junior Highers

Biblical Truths in Bite-Sized Pieces

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Credits

Authors: Mark Oestreicher and Brooklyn Lindsey

Executive Developer: Jason Ostrander

Chief Creative Officer: Joani Schultz

Editor: Rob Cunningham

Cover Art and Production: Laura Wagner and Veronica Preston

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1. The first step in the process of writing a book is to choose a topic. This is often the most difficult part, as there are so many possibilities. The author should choose a topic that is both interesting and relevant to the audience.

2. Once the topic has been chosen, the next step is to research the subject. This involves reading books, articles, and other sources of information. The author should also talk to experts in the field to get their perspective.

3. After the research has been completed, the author should create an outline for the book. This will help to organize the information and ensure that all the important points are covered.

4. The next step is to write the first draft. This is often the most challenging part, as the author is trying to put all the information into a coherent and readable form.

5. Once the first draft is complete, the author should revise it. This involves making changes to the content, structure, and style. The author should also get feedback from others to help improve the book.

6. Finally, the author should edit the book. This involves checking for errors and making sure that the book is polished and professional.

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READ THIS FIRST

Junior highers are amazing. Really. We think so, and we're completely confident that God thinks so.

But let's be honest: Being a junior higher can be super confusing, wildly uneven, and as frustrating as a pop quiz.

We want to help. That's why we wrote these 99 thoughts—a collection of short, honest, and right-to-the-point ideas and advice to help you out in every area of your life.

You can read all 99 of them in order. Or you can jump around and read whatever interests you. There's no right or wrong way to read this book. Well, actually, reading the book while you're wearing a bathing suit made of bacon, and underwater in a tank of sharks—that would be a wrong way to read this book. Besides, the pages aren't waterproof—duh.

You'll also notice, sooner or later, that in addition to the 99 thoughts, each chapter ends with a story from one of us (Marko or Brooklyn) as junior highers. These are completely real and true stories that happened to us and reflect what we remember thinking and feeling. But we wrote them as if we were still in junior high (even though, we're *not* in junior high anymore—that would be *really weird* if we were).

Allow us to introduce ourselves:

My name is Marko. Actually, it's Mark, and my last name starts with an O (it's that weird-looking name on the

book cover); but everyone, even my mom, calls me Marko. It's just easier. I'll be honest—I'm kind of old. In fact, I'm probably older than your parents. But I still completely love hanging out with junior highers. And I get to do that all the time, since my work involves doing just that and helping other people learn about you. I live in San Diego, California, which is every bit as wonderful as it might sound. My wife and I have two kids—one of 'em, the girl, is 19 and in college; and one of 'em, the guy, is 15 and a sophomore in high school. And I have a ridiculous beard. Really. It's massive. It even has its own Twitter® account.

Hello. I'm Brooklyn. If you're reading this, then you're one of my favorite people on Earth: a junior high-age person—winner! You have no idea how much I would like to meet you. If we could hang out tomorrow and chat about your life, I'd love it. But since we may not be able to do that right away, we can hang out together in this book. I live in Florida right now, with my ridiculously wonderful husband and adorable little girls. And we also have hundreds of adopted teenagers who we care for big-time—our youth group! Consider yourself an honorary member. I hope the words you find here are helpful and fun to read. You've got a lot of potential and we'd love to see you reach it!

As you read, if you have questions or need anything, let us know. We'd love to connect with you, pray for you, and be your biggest cheerleaders.

Are you ready to read and think and pray and be encouraged? We sure hope so. Let's do this thing.

Marko and Brooklyn

This is a good place to start, and not only because it's near the beginning of the book. You're in an awesome and semi-crazy time of life, when you're on the road to figuring out who you are, what you like, and who you want to become.

THOUGHT #1

YOU'RE ONE OF A KIND

You've probably heard this before. "You're special!"
"There's only one you!"

But as cheesy as those statements might sound to you, they express something both important and true: God didn't make thousands of you, or hundreds, or even two (even if you're a twin!). No other person in history has your exact genetic makeup, no other person has the physical stuff that makes you, you.

But at a deeper level, there never has been and never will be another person with the same combination of skills, interests, personality quirks, and experiences. Only you.

That's an amazing reality, and one that says something about how much God is into you. God *loves* your uniqueness.

Being unique also has a sense of potential and potency to it: *No one else* can leave a mark on the world like you

can; no one else can create the same beauty (or evil) that you can create. And when you grow to understand your uniqueness more, you can learn to embrace that. You can make the choice to be your own one-of-a-kind self.

THOUGHT #2

YOU'RE MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE

When God was inventing everything in the world, he did something wild and massively gorgeous: He chose to make humans "in his own image."

Think of it like this: Imagine being an expert in robotics. One day you unveil a robot like no one has ever seen. In fact, the entire scientific world is blown away by your robot, because it can think for itself and is amazingly human-like in the ways it acts, feels, and responds. And as people start to interact with your robot, they realize something else: It's very much like *you*. It's not that the robot necessarily *looks like you*, but there's something about the robot's *character* that constantly makes people think of you—almost like they're interacting with you when they're actually interacting with your robot.

It would be fair to say that you made your robot "in your own image."

But you're not a robot made by God. You're much more than a robot!



And because you're made in the image of God (not accidentally, by the way—this was God's plan), you have human-sized portions of God's abilities and character in you.

THOUGHT #3

YOU ARE KNOWN

Junior high can be a lonely time. You might even have a bunch of friends but still feel lonely from time to time.

And as you start to get to know yourself better, it's pretty normal to sometimes wonder if anyone else really knows you. Your friends might do things that make you wonder this. Even your parents might sometimes treat you in a way that makes you feel like they don't know you.

But have confidence in this: God knows you.

God isn't just a distant spiritual presence, off fighting cosmic battles or juggling planets on the other side of the universe. Jesus tells us, in the Bible, that God knows more about you than you even know about yourself. God even knows how many hairs are on your head. That doesn't mean that God has a big database of weird details about every human; it means that God knows your deepest joys and fears, your secrets that you don't even admit to yourself, your hopes and dreams. God knows *everything* about you.

That's not a reason to fear. That's a reason to rest, being aware that the God who knows you better than you know yourself is also completely head-over-heels in love with you. And even when you feel like no one in the entire world "gets" you or cares about who you really are, you can always sink comfortably into the truth that God knows you.

THOUGHT #4

YOU ARE LOVED

Think of the person or thing that you love more than anything else in the entire world. Now think about how much you love that person or thing, what that love feels like, and what it causes you to do. Now multiply all of that—the quantity of love, the feelings, the actions that flow from it—by a million. Or a billion. You're getting somewhere in the ballpark of how much God loves you.

Yes, God loves everyone. But that doesn't take anything away from how much God loves *you*. Just like a parent can uniquely and fully love multiple children, God knows you and uniquely loves you.

Still, it might seem a little weird to be so deeply loved by someone you've never even physically seen. There are things we love *in concept* more than in reality. You might "love" penguins, but you've only seen them once, in a zoo, on the other side of a thick plate of glass. So your "love" for penguins is more about loving *the idea*

of penguins than it is a love for any particular penguin. (It would be a bit odd, wouldn't it, to have a deep love for one particular penguin?)

But God's love for you isn't broad and conceptual like that. God doesn't just love the idea of you. God loves *you*.

And get this: There is *nothing* you can do to make God love you less. And there is *nothing* you can do to make God love you more! God's love for you isn't in response to your goodness or badness. God's perfect love (remember: a billion times stronger than your most intense love!) is laser-focused on the you that he made and knows.

When you really understand this and believe this, it becomes a part of who you are (your "identity"). When you think about the big question "Who am I?", a central and true part of your response can be, "I am loved."

THOUGHT #5

"AM I INFLUENCED OR FREE TO CHOOSE WHO I BECOME?"

Some people think they're trapped by their surroundings and parents and even the city or town they live in. They think they have zero choice in who they become, because all of these external people and places have locked them into a place of no choices.

They're wrong.

Others think just the opposite: They believe that no one has any influence on them. Not their parents, not their friends, not the part of the country they grow up in or their teachers or anyone or anything else in all of creation. They see themselves as 100 percent independent.

They're also wrong.

As you think about who you are and who you're becoming, be aware of this: There are absolutely people and situations that influence you. But those influences should never be seen as chains that remove your freedom of choice.

Think of it this way: You get a little puppy and work hard to train it. It's a certain breed known for its potential to be a great dog or a vicious dog, so you're careful to give it the attention it needs and the encouragement it thrives on, all while providing boundaries and protection. Your puppy grows up into a big dog. And as you ride your bike around your neighborhood, your dog loves to run with you. Sometimes people ooh and ahh and say things about what a beautiful doggie you have; other times, they look terrified, as if your dog is about to bite their faces off.

You have clearly had a big influence on your dog's behavior and personality (and so have its breed and other influences in your home and neighborhood). But could your dog still make the choice to do something horrible? Absolutely! It's a big, powerful dog.



Now, we hope you're not offended that we just compared you to a dog! Instead, focus on the fact that we've just said you're big and powerful. Your parents, your siblings, your community, your life experiences (good and bad) all have a role in shaping who you are. But you still have a choice in who you become.

THOUGHT #6

“GIFTS ARE GOOD, RIGHT?”

Maybe it's obvious to you that you have certain “gifts”—abilities and talents that are a natural part of who you are (even though you might need to practice them to get really good). Or maybe you don't feel like you have any gifts at all (but that's only because you haven't discovered yours yet). We've certainly met lots of junior highers in both of those places. We seen teenagers whose musical, athletic, artistic, or math abilities are *really* obvious by the time they're junior highers. And we've seen lots of other teenagers whose gifts don't become as obvious until they're a little older.

A big part of your teenage years is the discovery of your gifts.

But there's more to it than discovering your gifts! Think of your gifts as a tool—and tools can be used for good purposes *and* bad purposes. A hammer can be the perfect tool for putting a nail into a piece of wood—or a hammer can do serious damage when used in ways it wasn't intended.

Here are a couple of examples of what we mean:

Tessa has a great gift of humor. She's just super funny and can totally make people laugh. Her gift can be used to bring great joy—or it can be used to make fun of people and really hurt them.

Jake seems to be naturally gifted at computer programming, and has worked at developing his gift enough that he's written some of his own programs. Jake can use his gift in a way that helps people—or he can use his gift to write a computer virus that damages and destroys.

As you start to discover your gifts, think about the good you can do with them. And be aware of how, when used selfishly or without wisdom, they can be tools that bring suffering.

THOUGHT #7

“WHAT IF THERE’S STUFF ABOUT MYSELF THAT I DON’T LIKE?”

All of us are a combo platter of good and bad, strengths and weaknesses. As you travel the pathway of discovering who you are, you'll surely find some stuff about yourself that doesn't exactly excite you.

Maybe you struggle with a school subject that you really wish wasn't so tough. Or maybe it will become obvious to you that you don't have ability in the sport

or instrument that you once dreamed of playing for a professional career. Or maybe you'll discover a part of your personality that bugs you and you wish you could magically change.

Start with this idea: Don't compare yourself to other people. When we compare one little area of our ability or personality to someone else, we usually miss the whole story of who we are *and* who that person is.

But beyond that, here's a good rule to live by: Focus on your strengths, and make sure your weaknesses don't create problems for you or others. If you focus on your weaknesses, it's unlikely that you'll experience much success. Discover your gifts, and build on them. Don't ignore your weaknesses; just give them enough attention that you keep them from inhibiting your gifts.

THOUGHT #8

YOU ARE INDEPENDENT YET INTERCONNECTED

"I'm an individual, and responsible for myself!" Yup, that's true (or it will be, once you're not so dependent on your parents for stuff like food and a place to live and a ride to the mall). "And I don't need anyone for anything!" Uh, nope. That's independence gone too far.

"I need my friends and family!" Yup, that's true. "And I'm completely incapable of doing anything, or even *being*

anything, without them!” Uh, nope. That’s dependence gone too far.

Becoming independent is what the teenage years are all about, in a nutshell. You’re no longer a kid, completely needing your parents for *everything*. Life might be tough if you had to go it alone right now, but you likely wouldn’t die. Gaining some independence can be fun, and it’s a part of growing up.

But this is one of those both/and things, rather than an either/or thing. We don’t move from dependent to independent. Healthy and happy people are both independent *and* interconnected. In other words, they can stand on their own two feet and make decisions for themselves—they take responsibility for themselves (including the consequences of their choices). But they realize the importance of community, family, friends, and a church who support them (and who they can support).

THOUGHT #9

LIES ABOUT WHO YOU ARE

Culture has already told a ton of lies about who you are, throughout your childhood. But as you move into and through your teen years, these lies will massively increase. Here are some of the lies to watch out for:

You are what you buy. The truth: You are so much more than a consumer, so much wiser than those selling to you think you are.

You are what you wear. The truth: Clothes can be a fun way of expressing yourself, but they don't have to dictate who you are (or aren't).

You need a boyfriend or girlfriend to be someone. The truth: Most teenagers don't have a boyfriend or girlfriend, even if they they'd lead you to believe otherwise.

Whoever has the most toys wins. The truth: All the gadgets and laptops and gaming systems in the world won't actually make you happy. Plus, stuff breaks.

(If you're a girl) *Flirting and dressing sexy is the image you want to project.* The truth: Flirting and dressing sexy can create all kinds of problems, including convincing yourself that you're nothing more than a sexy flirt.

(If you're a guy) *Being tough and silent is the image you want to project.* The truth: If you teach yourself to hide your emotions, you rob yourself of important and good stuff in life.

THOUGHT #10

“WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE A CLUE WHO I AM OR WHAT I'M GOOD AT?”

If we divided the thousands of junior highers we've known into two categories, we could create two groups, pretty easily, along these lines:

- Group 1: junior highers who know who they are and what they're good at
- Group 2: junior highers who don't yet know who they are or what they're good at

And Group 2 would be way larger than Group 1. So don't sweat it—at all!—if you're thinking, "I'm supposed to know who I am? I don't even understand the question!" Be patient. The junior high years are the *first time in life* when most people start thinking about these questions. And if you're not thinking about them yet, no biggie.

But if you want to start wrestling with this stuff, you're at the *perfect* age. Try stuff. Seriously, try a ton of things. Don't worry about being great at any one thing. Don't sweat it if you don't make the "travel team." Just experiment, and see what interests you. You often won't know what you like (and even who you are) until you try new things. And—this is the cool part—you'll often discover things about who you are and what you're good at *in the midst* of trying new things.

A Story From Junior High Marko:

A few months ago I started attending a new school for seventh grade. I didn't know anyone. And to make it worse, my family is moving to a house (which is why I started at this school), but we haven't moved yet. So I don't even live near anyone from my school.

Trying to fit in has been really hard, and honestly, I feel lonely every single day. I've made a few attempts to make some friends, but it hasn't really worked out very well, and so far I feel like I'm just picking up a label of being a weirdo.

Today, though, was a new low. I'd seen this super-popular kid named Peter wearing clothes that everyone obviously thought were cool: just jeans, with a thin white crew neck sweater under a plaid flannel shirt. But I could tell that how many buttons were buttoned and how many weren't, along with the particular way he rolled up the sleeves, was all part of the presentation.

This morning, as I stood in front of my closet trying to figure out what to wear, I thought, "Hey, I have those same clothing items that everyone thinks are so cool on Peter. I could wear that." So I wore it exactly the same way, making sure I had the right number of buttons closed and the sleeves rolled up just right.

But it backfired. All day long, kids pointed at me and laughed. Really, I have no idea what I did wrong. At lunch, I went into a bathroom stall, took the sweater off, and just wore the flannel shirt in a boring, normal way.

At school, I can't figure out if I'm supposed to try to stand out or disappear. It's like there's a code that I don't have access to. Luckily, my church friends (and I'm not changing churches with my family moving) don't care what I wear. I'm glad there's someplace where I can just be myself without all this other pressure.