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All Scripture quotations are NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

2 Corinthians 10:1-5
Take Captive Every Thought

A stronghold is a fortress. A place that has been fortified so that it cannot be easily moved and so that it can be easily defended. A hold that is strong. "Stronghold" is a word that belongs to the language of battle.

Psalms 144 records these words of David: Praise be to the LORD my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle. He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge.

David was a warrior, and this is language suited to war.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote: Though we live in this world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.

Paul was a warrior too, and this is language suited to war.

There are many kinds of enemies, and the most dangerous enemies are not the human ones. There are different kinds of strongholds, too.

David celebrates that God is his stronghold. In God, David is secure. In God, David is shielded from enemies--human and otherwise--who would try to break him down or destroy him or entangle him or enslave him. In God, David has a refuge.

A fortress is a refuge if it belongs to a powerful ally and if those who defend the walls are friends. In this type of fortress, we are safe. We can rest and recuperate from our wounds. We can grow stronger and more courageous. We can confidently stand with our powerful ally.

If, however, the fortress belongs to our enemy and the walls are defended by enemy forces, then it is not a refuge. It is a prison. In this type of fortress, we are not safe. We cannot rest. We cannot heal. We grow weaker and more afraid. We are entrapped--perhaps even enslaved--by our powerful enemy.

Paul is writing about this kind of stronghold.

In 1967, Joni Erickson was 17 years old. She was about to head off to college in western Maryland. She had a life filled with hope and

possibility before her. One day she went swimming with her sister in the Chesapeake Bay. She dove head first from a floating dock into what she thought was deep water. It wasn't. Her head slammed into the bottom. Her neck snapped. By God's miracle, she did not drown. She has never walked since then. She has no use of her hands. She is a quadriplegic.

As she lay in her hospital bed, despair overwhelmed her. She plotted suicide, but she was physically unable to act on her plans. As far as she was concerned, her life was over. One tragic accident, and Joni went from an energetic young woman excited and ready to face the world to a prisoner, broken down, entangled, enslaved, on the brink of destruction.

Have you ever been in that place? Have you ever known someone who has been in that place? In a situation that is so overwhelming and out of control that despair is the very definition of reality and it seems like there is no way out?

Maybe the trap you are familiar with is not despair but rage. Have you ever been so overwhelmed with hurt, so consumed by resentment and bitterness, that anger is the very definition of reality and it seems like there is no way out?

Or maybe you know about some other kind of trap. Have you ever known anyone who was so overwhelmed with stubborn insistence to get what they wanted and do what they wanted (and the rest of the world be damned!), that no reality mattered but the reality of their own desires and it seemed like there was no way out?

Maybe you know another kind of trap. There are lots of possible strongholds.

Joni was in a stronghold that belonged to some powerful enemies. Her circumstances were not her enemies. Her circumstances were certainly monumental challenges, but they were not her enemies. Her enemies were despair...hopelessness...self-pity...and fear. She was trapped, and, if something didn't change, she would eventually be destroyed.

There are many kinds of enemies, and the most dangerous ones are not the human ones.

Joni was in a war that she did not choose. She was in a battle that she could not avoid. She was imprisoned by enemies that were far more powerful than she. She was trapped in a stronghold.

If she could have, Joni would have taken her own life, because it seemed like the only avenue of escape. Finally, one night, Joni prayed in desperation, “God, if I can’t die, please show me how to live.” He did.

In the decades since then Joni has become a best-selling author and artist. She has hosted a regular radio program. She is a sought-after speaker. She makes a difference worldwide through an international ministry called “Joni and Friends.” Her married name is Joni Erickson Tada.

What changed? Point A—in despair, suicidal, no hope, no purpose, no joy, physically alive but spiritually dying. Point B—frustrated occasionally, yes. Facing daily challenges, yes. Hope, yes! Purpose, yes! Joy, yes! Physically and spiritually alive!

What changed? In a sense, nothing changed. Joni was still paralyzed from the neck down. She was still unable to walk, to dress herself, to feed herself, sometimes still unable to breathe well without mechanical assistance.

What changed? Well, in a sense, everything changed...everything about her thoughts, everything about the way her mind and her heart processed her situation, everything about what she believed, everything about the intensity and the depth and the day-to-day reality of her relationship with God.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that we do not wage war as the world does. We fight with a different sort of weapons—weapons that have divine power to demolish strongholds, weapons that have divine power to demolish arguments, weapons that have divine power to demolish every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, weapons that equip us to take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ.

That’s what changed. Joni got a hold of some of those weapons.

In her own words, Joni says that before that time Christianity was “a religion” for her. She kept Jesus “in the hip pocket of her Levis jeans.” When she prayed it was like “pulling the knob on a vending machine.” Since that time she has been given what she calls a “deep, personal relationship” with Jesus Christ.

Joni is still paralyzed from the neck down. According to the definitions of this world, she is extremely disabled. The limitations of her physical body do nothing, however, to limit the reality that she is free—and eminently able—in Christ.

It's not that Joni never struggles with frustration or temptations to get down or give up, but by the grace of God she is not trapped there. She knows the abundant life that Jesus desires to give to his followers. Joni is well-aware of her limitations and her weaknesses, but they are no barrier to her living the abundant, fruitful life of a spirit-filled believer.

There are many church people walking around today with fully functioning limbs, who are nevertheless far more disabled than Joni Erickson Tada. For some, Christianity is a religion—a set of right doctrines and right actions—and Jesus remains a distant acquaintance. Some look okay from the outside, but invisible chains keep them trapped, unable to taste freedom and live joyfully.

For a Christ-follower, disability has little to do with the functioning of legs and hands and eyes and ears. For a Christ-follower, disability is more about strongholds.

For a Christ-follower, a stronghold is anything that steals, derails, or destroys the abundant, fruitful life of living in the midst of a deep, day-to-day, relationship with Jesus.

Paul explains strongholds this way: A stronghold is any “argument and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God.”

A stronghold is something invisible in our minds and our spirits that pretends to be bigger or more powerful than God. A stronghold is a pattern of thinking that steals our focus on God and the hope that he gives. A stronghold is a habit of attitude that derails our walk with Christ. A stronghold is a false understanding that destroys our joy and our freedom and leaves us feeling overpowered, controlled, mastered, trapped.

There is an almost endless list of possible strongholds. The enemy is always ready to exploit any and every vulnerability within the human mind.

Here's a partial list: idolatry—that is, giving our worship to anything besides God, treating anything in the world or in ourselves as having ultimate worth; unbelief—either not believing in God or not believing God is willing and able to do what needs to be done; pride; fear; deception; insecurity brought on by feeling unloved or unlovable; insecurity of feeling rejected or fearing rejection; all sorts of addictive behaviors; lingering and unwarranted guilt; lingering and false shame; chronic despair; persistent unforgiveness that breeds bitterness and resentment; sexual entrapments; an envious spirit; a critical spirit; issues with authority; refusal to accept responsibility. The list goes on. Not just passing negative emotions that

are part of the ups and downs of life, but guilt when you're stuck there, shame when you're stuck there, despair when you're stuck there, fear when you're stuck there, unforgiveness when you're stuck there...

A stronghold is a pattern of thinking that steals our focus on God and the hope that he gives, a habit of attitude that derails our walk with Christ, a false understanding that destroys our joy and our freedom and leaves us feeling overpowered, controlled, mastered, trapped.

Strongholds are thoughts that have been captivated by the lies of this world. Strongholds are demolished as we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ.

Strongholds distort how we think, and that in turn distorts how we live. Strongholds are broken as we learn to live according to the truth of who God is and who we are when we are immersed in relationship with Jesus.

Pride is one very common human attribute that can act like a form of cement that makes the strongholds that hold us captive even stronger and makes it even harder for us to escape. There are others, but pride is an important one.

Pride is not the opposite of low self-esteem. Those who are trapped in the stronghold of pride may have a boastful view of themselves or they may have a miserable view of themselves. Pride is about self-absorption.

Beth Moore wrote the following thoughts about pride. [*Praying God's Word*, 2000.]

My name is Pride. I am a cheater.

I cheat you of your God-given destiny...because you demand your own way.

I cheat you of contentment...because you 'deserve better than this.'

I cheat you of knowledge...because you already know it all.

I cheat you of holiness...because you refuse to admit when you're wrong.

I cheat you of vision...because you'd rather look in the mirror than out a window.

I cheat you of genuine friendship...because nobody's going to know the real you.

I cheat you of love...because real romance demands sacrifice.

I cheat you of greatness in heaven...because you refuse to wash another's feet on earth.

I cheat you of God's glory...because I convince you to seek your own.

My name is Pride. I am a cheater. You like me because you think I'm always looking out for you. Untrue. I'm looking to make a fool of you.

God has so much for you, I admit, but don't worry...if you stick with me, you'll never know.

Pride makes strongholds stronger. Pride goads us to use the weapons of this world, so that we beat against the walls of our prisons with our fists and get nowhere.

But we do not fight with the weapons of this world. We fight with weapons that have divine power to demolish strongholds. We fight with weapons that demolish arguments. We fight with weapons that expose pretensions that set themselves up against the knowledge of God. Among those weapons are humility, trust, and surrender.

God, if I cannot die, show me how to live.

We take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ. The walls of our enemies' fortresses weaken and collapse. And we find freedom.

Amen.