

May 7, 2017
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All Scripture quotations are NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5
Nothing to Prove, Nothing to Lose

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 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. In his letter to the believers in Corinth, Paul is writing about this kind of stronghold.

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.

There are many distractions in the world that draw our attention away from God and God's truth for a moment or even for many moments--bells and whistles that are as attractive as carnival lights and the smell of cotton candy. Something or someone in the world promises to satisfy all our hunger, or end all our loneliness, or grant us fame or fortune or success, or make the road ahead one of ease instead of struggle, and--before we even realize it--our steps have turned in that direction. Perhaps some of the most enticing distractions are the ones that don't even promise to make anything better, they just promise a fantasy that will keep us from thinking or feeling or facing what is real.

Momentary distractions--though they might be sinful--are not strongholds. We can notice and acknowledge, confess and repent, re-orient and re-focus on what is true and right and noble. But when our attention becomes trained on that which is deceptive or destructive or

dishonorable, so that, more and more, we cannot remember or we no longer care what is true or right or noble, we might be falling under the influence of a stronghold. When we cannot re-orient or re-focus--even when we want to, even when we try, even when we wish we had never heeded this distraction to begin with--then we are certainly imprisoned in a stronghold.

Missteps--though they might be sinful--are not strongholds. We can notice and acknowledge, confess and repent, re-orient and re-direct. But when our missteps start to carve ruts that lead toward that which is deceptive or destructive or dishonorable, so that, more and more, we cannot remember or we no longer care what is true or right or noble, we might be falling under the influence of a stronghold. When we cannot re-orient or re-direct--even when we want to, even when we try, even when we wish we had never headed this direction to begin with--then we are certainly imprisoned in a stronghold.

The world is full of aches and sorrows, too, that cannot be ignored and rightly require response. Great loss demands great grief. Confronted by injustice, anger erupts. Calamity threatens, and our chests tighten with fear. After a time of willful blindness, something happens to open our eyes to our own selfishness or rebelliousness or stubbornness, and we stumble under the sudden weight of guilt and regret.

Grief, anger, fear, and guilt are not necessarily strongholds. They can be appropriate responses to the pain of living in a broken world. But when grief or anger or fear or guilt escape the bounds of what is appropriate and responsive to a real and present hurt...when grief or anger or fear or guilt turn into lingering despair and smoldering resentment and paralyzing insecurity and bruising self-condemnation...then they are turning into strongholds.

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

There is an almost endless list of possible strongholds. 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; all sorts of obsessive behaviors (having to do with food, sex, substances, even social media); persistent unforgiveness; a controlling spirit; a gossipy spirit; unrecognized prejudices. The list goes on.

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 holds us in captivity to lies.

Last week I mentioned how 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. Fear is another one.

Following the pattern set by Beth Moore, who wrote about pride, I wrote this little ditty about fear:

My name is Fear. I am a cheater.

I cheat you of your God-given
destiny...because you prefer the miseries you know
to the possibilities you don't understand.

I cheat you of contentment...because you
constantly worry that what you have won't be
enough.

I cheat you of knowledge...because you
refuse to let go of your misconceptions.

I cheat you of holiness...because you are
afraid to admit when you're wrong or take the risk of
being changed.

I cheat you of vision...because you tremble at
the thought of moving beyond what you already
know.

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

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

I cheat you of greatness in heaven...because
you prefer the anonymity of mediocrity.

I cheat you of God's glory...because I
convince you to hide in the shadows.

My name is Fear. I am a cheater. You don't like me, but you think I keep you from danger. Untrue. I keep you in bondage.

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

Strongholds unsettle the peace that is ours in Christ. Strongholds erode the joy that is ours in Christ. Strongholds make a mockery of the gratitude that undergirds our life in Christ. Strongholds fracture the hope that is ours in Christ. Strongholds stand in the way of us walking courageously and righteously into the freedom that we have in Christ.

Sometimes believers feel as if they don't have peace and joy and gratitude and hope and freedom, then they must be failures...they must have screwed up somewhere. Sometimes believers look around the other folks in their congregations and somehow get the idea that everybody else has it all together...everybody else seems to know something about peace and joy and gratitude and hope and freedom. Sometimes believers start to think they are failing at the abundant life...and they are the only ones.

Because of this, many believers wear masks...presenting to the world a false exterior...pretending--to others and even to themselves--that they know peace and joy and gratitude and hope and freedom. Those masks can become strongholds...false understandings that hold us in captivity to lies.

The reality is that most believers struggle, some of the time, with some stronghold or another. The reality is that most believers, much of the time, fall short of the fullness of peace, joy, gratitude, hope, and freedom that is described in Scripture. For freedom Christ has set us free, but the world and the enemy and our own brokenness do not give up easily, and they work tirelessly to enslave us again. Paul (and others in the Bible) write about the weapons that work against strongholds because--short of Christ's return and the final victory of the kingdom--there will always be strongholds to battle. That's not failure. Through the battles, we grow.

Pride and fear make other strongholds stronger. Pride leads us to believe that we can be in control, and that not being in control represents failure. Fear leads us to believe that we need to be in control, and that not being in control leaves us exposed and vulnerable. Those are lies. The truth is that we cannot be in control. That's okay, because the Lord is our Shepherd. The truth is that we need not be in control. We're still okay, because our Shepherd gives us everything we need.

Pride and fear goad us to use the weapons of this world, so that we beat against the walls of our prisons with our fists and get nowhere. Strongholds, by definition, cannot be defeated by will power. We cannot tear down strongholds by our own strength.

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.

We do battle indirectly, not directly. From time to time, it may be helpful--with the aid of other mature, spirit-filled believers--to attack strongholds directly. But that cannot be our first way of doing battle. And it cannot be our main way of doing battle. We do battle indirectly, not directly. Walls made of lies are demolished, not by directly attacking the lies, but by indirectly building up the truth. We take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ.

I mentioned last week that three of our best weapons are humility, trust, and surrender. Humility, trust, and surrender are all about truth and building ourselves up to stand on the truth. We shall know the truth, and the truth shall set us free.

Humility does not mean that we think poorly of ourselves. Humility means that we think rightly of ourselves. Humility is based on knowing who God is: God is sovereign (he knows what he's doing) and God is loving (nothing can turn him away) and God is gracious (no sin is beyond his forgiveness) and God is faithful (he keeps his promises...always) and God is powerful (the victory is his). Humility involves knowing who we are: in Christ, we have a place in God's plan; in Christ, we are embraced in God's love; in Christ, we are forgiven and set free; in Christ, we inherit God's promises; in Christ, we will overcome the world.

Humility is what assures us that we have nothing to prove...that we need not pound against strongholds with our own fists...that we need not hide behinds masks of false perfection...that we can face weakness because, in our weakness, God's strength takes over. We have nothing to prove, because no one's opinion matters but God's...and he values us. Humility releases us from the illusion that we are (or should be) in control.

Trust does not mean that we have, in ourselves, all that we need. Trust means that we hold tight to the truth that God gives us everything we

need. Trust is based on knowing who God is and knowing that, in Christ, we belong to God.

Trust is what assures us that we have nothing to lose...that strongholds have no right to define us, because we are created in the image of God...that strongholds have no claim to own us, because we have been bought with a price...that strongholds have no power to destroy us, because Christ is our life and, in him, we have life. We have nothing to lose, because God has defeated even death...and he holds us in the palm of his hand. Trust releases us from the need to cling to control.

Humility and trust make it possible for us finally to surrender...not to the lies of this world that would enslave us...but to the King of creation who sets us free. When Christ is our only master...when Christ is master over every part of us...then every other claimant to the throne must flee.

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.