

Strongholds

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[0 : 0 0] Well, again, let me say good morning to you. You know, something that I have realized about myself and as I've talked to people over the years I realize is a pretty common thing is that I think most of us like to think of ourselves generally as open-minded people.

You know, most people like to think of themselves as open-minded, as pretty neutral, as pretty much in control of what we think, what we believe, what premises we accept, and generally unbiased.

We think of people who are biased as being other people, people who maybe lack the self-awareness that we possess. And yet what we find as we look at the research is that research consistently shows that's not in fact true, that we as human beings are not nearly as open-minded as we like to think.

We're not nearly as unbiased. As we like to think. Turns out there are all kinds of constraints and all kinds of limitations on our thinking that mean we, generally speaking, are much more likely to remain entrenched in our views and to be very resistant to contrary arguments.

And so it's really hard to change people's minds on things, one way or another. And this is partly because of something that the Bible refers to as strongholds.

[1 : 3 1] If you, certain Christians, if you grew up in the church, you grew up in churches where you heard all about strongholds all the time. Other people, you may have been in the church your whole life and you have no idea, you've never come across this word before and you don't know what we're talking about.

So what I want to do this morning is spend some time looking at strongholds. We're in a series in 2 Corinthians and this is the only place in the New Testament where this word is used.

Paul uses it in chapter 10. Now there's a number of themes going on in chapter 10. We're not going to have time to get to all of them. The theme that we're going to focus in on is the theme of strongholds, the problem of strongholds and then the answer to strongholds, how we respond to and deal with strongholds.

And as we proceed, my hope is that you'll come to see more clearly why I think this is so relevant for people like us. Let's pray and then we're going to open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the ascension which reminds us that you're seated on the throne and we thank you for the fulfillment of your promise to send the Holy Spirit.

And all of that means that your word isn't just ink and paper. It means that our hope is not resting on human insight and wisdom. Lord, that we are here because we know that through your word, we have an opportunity to encounter the living word, to see you face to face, to be embraced by you, to be known by you, to be changed by you.

[3 : 1 1] And that's why we're here, Lord. Pray that in the power of the Spirit, you would meet us where we are, be the king that we need, do your work in us, Lord, for our good, but ultimately for your glory.

We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So first of all, the problem of strongholds. In the ancient world, a stronghold referred to a heavily fortified structure.

A stronghold was very hard to access and thus it was very easy to defend. In some cities, some ancient cities, more prosperous cities, you might have the outer wall and then you would also have a stronghold that was built somewhere within the wall.

The idea being that if an enemy breached the outer wall, you would retreat into the stronghold and there you would make your final stand because strongholds are, by definition, very hard to tear down because they are very well defended.

So that's the image that we need to have in mind as we read Paul's words in verses 4 and 5 of 2 Corinthians 10. He's using the word stronghold as a metaphor to describe something else, something internal in our hearts and minds.

[4 : 30] He's referring to basically core beliefs, core attitudes, core values that take up residence in us.

We may not even be aware that they are in us, but they shape how we think. They shape how we feel. They shape what we are likely to accept as truth and what we are likely to reject as false. They ultimately shape how we live. So they're extremely important. And what we see in Corinth is an example of what we might think of as a cultural stronghold.

When he's talking about a stronghold, he's talking about, he's diagnosing the issue in the Corinthian church that has caused massive tension between the members of that church and Paul.

It's the reason why so much of this letter is devoted to Paul trying to repair the relationship that he has as the founding pastor of the Corinthian church because many of them have rejected him and rejected his ministry.

[5 : 37] And he says the reason is because of these strongholds that have taken up residence in your hearts and minds. So the Corinthian culture centered around power and strength and honor.

The Greco-Roman world held those things to be in very high esteem, power and strength and honor. And what has happened in the Corinthian church is those values have infiltrated the church. They've infiltrated the hearts and minds of these believers. They've become deeply internalized such that they are now unexamined assumptions about the way life works.

And what that has done is it has distorted the way that these Christians live out their faith. They came to see everything in the Christian life through the lens of these cultural values of power and strength and honor.

What does that look like? Well, for one thing we know from the context they were obsessed with spiritual gifts. But not spiritual gifts like serving or giving or comforting.

[6 : 45] Gifts like speaking in tongues. Making grandiose prophecies. Healing people in dramatic miraculous ways. They were obsessed with gifts that could allow them to make grandiose displays of spiritual power.

And there was a culture in the church of spiritual one-upsmanship where people tried to outdo one another with grandiose, impressive displays of spiritual power. They preferred religious leaders who were highly charismatic, good-looking, highly impressive public speakers.

At one point we see in the chapter that they criticized Paul because physically he's unimpressive. You know, we imagine him as being kind of like short and kind of dumpy and kind of, you know, just kind of somebody that you wouldn't even notice in a crowd.

And they say that his speech is of no account. Oh, you write big words, but when you get up in front of us in person, you're boring. Nobody cares what you have to say. You're a bad public speaker. We've already talked about that place in Acts where during a sermon a guy falls asleep and falls out of a window and dies as a result of Paul's bad preaching. So he's not a very good, impressive leader.

[7 : 58] And so when they look at Paul, and they look at Paul's meekness and Paul's humility and Paul's poverty and Paul's suffering, they fail to recognize those as marks of genuine, Christ-like, countercultural ministry.

And instead, they say this man is pathetic. This man is a joke. There is no way the Lord can be with a guy like this. And so Paul says this is a symptom.

The way you perceive me and my ministry is a symptom of strongholds that have taken up residence in you. They've infiltrated your hearts and minds. We also see cultural and political strongholds continuing to influence the church today.

This is why many churches in the modern West have deeply revised Christianity to essentially remove anything that might sound offensive.

It's why churches have aligned themselves with the most popular public opinions. It's because of this. This is why other churches have become so intensely nationalistic.

[9 : 13] This is why nearly every church in our country is deeply divided along political lines. You know, there's a major resort happening right now where people are shifting and trying to find churches that are filled with people who think like they think when it comes to politics.

People are wondering, we're all wondering, where are my people? Who are my people? Where are the people who think like I think? These are all symptoms of cultural and political strongholds that have taken up residence in the church, that have infiltrated the church, that have infiltrated hearts and minds, because what we have is we have people who are viewing their theology and their faith through the lens of their politics.

You've heard me say it before, but it's interesting that, you know, that I can't remember who first said this, but all the time you hear about people changing their church because of their politics. I have yet to hear of anybody changing their politics because of their church.

These are strongholds. Now, these are cultural and political strongholds. Make no mistake, that's just one kind of stronghold. There are other kinds of strongholds as well. Let me just give you a few examples for the sake of time.

There's such a thing as a relational stronghold. A relational stronghold. Let me give you a couple of examples of that. Loving and honoring your parents is a very good thing. We all need to love and honor our parents.

[10:38] There are some parents and children here. I highly encourage you and pray that children, we would be able to honor our parents. However, there are some people in their 20s, 30s, 40s, who simply cannot bear the possibility of disappointing their parents, of disagreeing with their parents, of making decisions that their parents don't agree with.

And so, with all due respect, we do have some marriages that are experiencing extreme distress because one member of the couple would rather act in ways that please parents than do what's best for their spouse and their kids.

And so, that can cause, in some marriages, a lot of tension, a lot of unrest, a lot of resentment. Another example of a relational stronghold, romantic relationships, deep friendships, can be really good things.

In fact, that's what we were created for. But for some of us, we can allow a relationship with another person to... We can allow ourselves to become so deeply enmeshed, so deeply connected to that other person that they start to become everything to us.

They start to become the only thing for us. So, we come to a place where we begin to become deeply emotionally dependent on this other person for our emotional well-being.

[12:05] We lose a sense of where the boundaries are. We feel overly responsible for them, and we put too much burden on them to be responsible for us, and the boundaries disappear until we don't really know who we are apart from that other person.

That would be a relational stronghold. There's also such a thing as emotional strongholds. Just one example of this, a common one, is the example of anger.

You know, we all get angry sometimes. The Bible even says there's a category for getting angry and yet not sinning in our anger. So, anger is a part of being human.

The Psalms are filled with people who are angry and expressing that anger in honest ways. But for some of us, anger can start to become a stronghold.

You know, bitterness and resentment can seep in and take up residence in us. They sort of come to define us. So, we tend to complain all the time.

[13:08] We tend to criticize other people all the time. There's always a fresh source of outrage. Until we almost don't know who we are apart from our anger.

Right? So, that's an emotional stronghold. One final example, such a thing as personal strongholds. Right? These are beliefs about ourself, beliefs about the world that we internalize.

Often, we do this at a very young age. A lot of what happens in pastoral work when you are with people and you start to get down below the surfaces, you realize that the truths of the gospel are butting up against these deeply held beliefs that people have about themselves and the world that were internalized at a very young age.

Some of us had experiences growing up that led us to believe that we are ultimately unworthy. That we are ultimately not good enough. Or that we're tainted.

Or that we're ultimately unlovable. If they really knew the truth about me, they would run. Some of us came to believe that our needs don't matter and that the way we contribute value is to be the strong, even-keeled person who doesn't have needs.

[14:21] And as long as we are that, we are valuable. Some of us came to believe that we can't really trust anyone. That if you trust somebody, that ultimately they're going to let you down. And so, I need to look out for number one.

I can't really trust anyone to come through. Now, imagine these core beliefs and the way they would play out in friendships. The way they would play out in dating relationships. The ways they would play out in marriages.

The way they play out in multiple spheres of our lives. Right? So, these are some examples of strongholds. Cultural, political, relational, emotional. There are many others, right?

We didn't talk about addictions, for instance. There are lots of examples that we could give. But it's crucial that we understand what Paul is really saying here. Here's what Paul is really saying. The reason that we are not nearly as neutral and open-minded as we like to believe we are is because over time, certain attitudes and assumptions have infiltrated our hearts and minds.

So, this isn't a stronghold that we have built to defend ourselves. This is somebody has invaded us. These things have invaded us and they have built a stronghold inside us.

[15:33] They have become like these well-defended structures of belief inside us. Meaning, they are heavily fortified. They are nearly impossible to get rid of.

In other words, to sum all of this up, Paul is saying, you need to understand your heart is occupied territory. Your heart is occupied territory.

You've been taken captive. And the biggest problem with strongholds is this. They ultimately end up controlling us. Because our strongholds shape how we see the world.

They shape how we see ourselves. They shape how we see God. They determine our priorities. They determine, as I said earlier, what we are likely to see as true.

What we are likely to see as false. They become our plausibility structures. They determine how we live our lives. They determine how we feel in response to our life experiences.

[16:33] So, in essence, we end up serving them. They're the ones calling the shots. We live our lives in service to false beliefs and attitudes.

And this is the thing that Paul is trying to get through to these Corinthians and to us. So, this is the problem of strongholds. Now, how do we deal with strongholds? What's the answer? Well, philosophy, and you all know that I love philosophy and spend a lot of time reading philosophy. Philosophy can be very helpful for understanding and naming our cultural and our political strongholds. But it cannot tear them down. Psychology can help us understand our personal and emotional strongholds.

You know, I have a background as a therapist. And I see a lot of value in the world of psychology to help us understand our personal and emotional strongholds. But it cannot tear them down.

It cannot tear them down. Because ultimately, you cannot think your way out of a stronghold. You cannot think your way out of a stronghold. You cannot argue somebody else out of a stronghold.

[17:40] If you have a deep, and some of you do. Some of you do. Some of us do. If you have a deep stronghold belief that you are ultimately unlovable. It doesn't matter how many times people tell you that they love you.

It doesn't matter how many times someone like me tells you God loves you. It's not going to penetrate. It's going to bounce off. Because there's a stronghold there that is heavily fortified.

It's almost impossible to penetrate something like that. Because strongholds are very well defended. Now, what if you try to confront somebody else's stronghold? What if you say something like, Hey, you know I love you.

You know I care about you. I've been thinking a lot about the last few conversations we've had. And I actually really think that you might have a political stronghold. And I think that that's something that you need to take seriously. Here's the thing.

If you're not dealing with a stronghold, that conversation might go well. That person might say, You know, I think that you're right. I should probably spend less time on Twitter.

[18:42] I should probably take more walks. I should probably get a more balanced perspective on my life. But if you are dealing with a stronghold, chances are direct confrontation is only going to make it worse.

In other words, people are much more likely to just further entrench themselves, build the walls higher, and push you away. That's kind of one of the ways you know you're dealing with a stronghold.

You know, one of the books that I love that I encourage people to read is the book Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands. And I love the analogy they use of the lawyers. That when you get too close to somebody's sin, when you get too close to a stronghold in their life, you don't encounter

them.

They send the lawyers out. And so the lawyers, their job in the conversation is to discredit the witness, is to attack. Right?

The best defense is a good offense. And so anytime you realize, I'm not having a conversation with this person's actual heart, I'm dealing with their lawyers, you're probably dealing with a stronghold.

[19 : 48] So strongholds are so deeply rooted that they take on a kind of spiritual power. And so they require a spiritual solution. This is what Paul says in verses 3 and 4.

For though we walk in the flesh, we're not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not flesh, but have divine power to destroy strongholds.

So he says, we're not waging war according to the flesh, meaning we're not going to rely on our persuasive arguments. We're not going to rely on our charisma. We're not going to rely on impressive public speaking or any of the other things that you think matter in ministry.

None of that's actually going to work to change your mind. That's what he's saying. Paul's weapons are spiritual weapons. And he's talking about the power of Christ and the proclamation of the gospel.

And the work of the Holy Spirit. That's what he's talking about. And he's essentially saying, you can't talk your way out of this. You can't talk somebody else out of this. It requires God invading that person's life.

[20 : 53] A work of the Holy Spirit to set this person free. And you know, the gospel ultimately says this. It says that your heart was made by God. And it was made for God.

And ultimately, it belongs to him. But the gospel also says that ultimately, we all serve someone or something other than God because our hearts are occupied territory.

So when God looks at your heart and he sees an invading force that has taken up residence in your heart, which is the metaphor, and has built a stronghold on territory that belongs to him, there's only one response that a true king would have to that kind of situation.

Conquest. He aims to take it back. He aims to reclaim what he made and what is rightfully his. And so that's how Jesus responds.

And what the gospel tells us is the only way to be free is to serve our rightful king. Because it says, don't give in to the lie that we are somehow neutral.

[22 : 10] Right? You're going to serve someone you're going to serve something. And so what the gospel says is the only way to be free is to serve the God for whom and by whom we were made to serve.

In that we discover who we are. In that we discover why we're here. And so Paul's metaphor, just to pull all this together, is this. Your heart is occupied territory.

Jesus is your rightful king. And he has come to set you free. To proclaim what is, or to reclaim what is rightfully his. And so we say, well how does he do that?

How does that work? The key verse for understanding how this happens is verse 5. Paul says, we destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God.

And so what he's saying here, he's telling us what strongholds really are. All strongholds are ultimately lofty opinions raised against the knowledge of God.

[23 : 09] And that's the key term there, lofty opinions. If you look that word up in the Greek, the word translated as lofty opinions implies someone who has a posture of arrogance, of presumption, of self-aggrandizement, ultimately of pride.

Right? So here's what Paul is saying. Ultimately, all strongholds are powered by pride. Pride. Pride is the gas in the tank. Right?

Pride is what turns the electricity on. Pride is what activates all of the perimeter defenses. Pride is the thing that makes the walls thick and high.

Pride is what fires the arrows at anyone who gets too close. It's all powered by pride. All strongholds are powered by an attitude that says, I know best what is true.

I know better than you what is true. I know better than God what is true. I know best what is true.

That's what drives strongholds. And you say, well, what about negative strongholds?

[24 : 13] What about if you have horrible beliefs about yourself? Here's the thing that most people don't realize. If I have a deeply held belief that I internalized as a five-year-old that ultimately I am unlovable, and I am not willing to hear otherwise, ultimately, with all due respect, underneath that there is pride.

In other words, there is the belief that this belief that I have is more true than anything you have to say to me or anything God has to say to me. And that has to be rooted out. So what's the answer to strongholds that we're sort of closing in on?

Well, the only way to take the power out of our strongholds is for us to be humbled. We need to be humbled. We need multiple experiences that humble us.

We have to be brought, sometimes kicking and screaming, to the realization that our attitudes, our assumptions, our judgments can be faulty and unreliable.

And so when Paul talks about divine warfare, he's talking about Jesus humbling us. He says, I'm coming, and I'm coming as a part of the army of Christ.

[25 : 32] And Christ is really the one coming, and Christ's aim is to humble you because He loves you. So what he's saying is when we have experiences in our life that are humbling, when you have experiences that show us our weakness, or when we have experiences that call our judgment into question, it very well may be that Jesus is at work in you in that moment to humble you, to set you free from stronghold beliefs, to loose your hold on unassailable, unexamined truths that you have a vice grip on.

To put all of this another way, the more lofty our opinions are, the more power our strongholds have.

And so the only way to be free from them is for our own opinions to come down and for God's opinions to be raised up above everything else. Right?

My take on things needs to come down. God's take on things needs to be exalted. That's the only way to do it.

So let me just apply this in one way just to give a more concrete example of what we're talking about here. Let's take this thing that we've come back to a few times. I think this is an issue for some of us in this community.

[26 : 56] A stronghold belief that I am ultimately unlovable. Right? How do you deal with that?

Well, the world would say if you were to go to somebody down the road and ask or ask your friend or many therapists, if you were to ask them how do I deal with this belief that I have that ultimately I'm unlovable?

I can't accept love from my boyfriend or my girlfriend or my spouse. They say I love you and I just don't believe them. I can never believe it. I go to church and it drives me crazy because I just don't connect to that. How do I deal with that?

Well, many people would say well you just need to work on loving yourself more and here's how you do it. You need to understand that you're worth love. You need to understand that you're valuable. And so what you need to do is work on your self-esteem.

So write some words of affirmation out. Put them on your bathroom mirror. Repeat them to yourself. Give yourself hugs. Right? Treat yourself well. You need to do these things and work on loving yourself and then you'll feel more lovable.

But ultimately that kind of thing doesn't really work. And I say that as somebody who's actually tried that. I've tried that. I mean I'm not going to hug myself up here in front of you but I've tried this stuff over the course of my life.

[28 : 08] And it doesn't work because there's always this voice in the back of your head that knows that you're doing it to try to manipulate yourself into loving yourself more. You always feel yourself gaming yourself.

Right? It feels like a technique. It feels like a strategy to look at a word of affirmation for yourself on your mirror and to say it to yourself. And you know what you find yourself wanting is you want somebody else to say it to you but whose opinion matters so much that it actually convinces you.

That's what you really want. And when you hear your own voice saying it somehow it lacks credibility. It lacks authority. And so we look and we say well what's another way to get at this?

And I would think that the answer comes from a man named Bernard of Clairvaux. 12th century Benedictine Abbott. And here's what he says about love and loving ourselves.

He says you know we all start out with lofty opinions of ourselves. We have a very high view of ourselves. And he says you know so he says we love ourselves for our own sake.

[29 : 15] That's how everybody starts. He says but then something happens. Some calamity some crisis and that humbles you. And in that moment of being humbled you reach out to God in crisis.

You reach out to God for help. But at that point he says we only come to love God for our own sake. I was in a moment of crisis. I prayed. I felt better. And we start following God because we think that God can give us what we need.

So he says we start out in a relationship with God where we love God for our own sake. You know God provides for me. God gives me a sense of peace when I'm afraid. But then he says over the course of our lives living lives of faith we're going to continue to face more and more trials and hardships that are going to humble us even more.

And over the course of life if we're living faithfully we come to rely on God more and more and more. We come to reach out to God more and more and more and we're humbled more and more. He says over the course of time we come to love God not just for our sake but for his sake.

God has come through so many times. He's done so many things in my life. I've had so many experiences of being in prayer with him that I've come to realize that God is worth loving simply because of who he is regardless of what he does for me.

[30 : 35] And at this point Bernard describes a shift. He says at this point what's happening is my opinions my lofty opinions are being brought down low.

God's opinions God's take is being exalted in my life. I'm coming to love God for who he is. His opinion is mattering more. And here's the key. Finally the ultimate sort of the fourth stage of love according to his taxonomy is this.

We come to love ourselves for God's sake. And you say what does that mean? We develop a love for ourselves that is not self-focused.

We develop a love for ourselves that is not self-aggrandizing. We come to love ourselves because God's opinion of us has come to matter so much more than anyone else's opinion that it has come to define us.

So my love for myself at that point flows out of God's love for me because when God looks at me and says you are infinitely worthy you are infinitely valuable and I was willing to give everything for you I love myself because of that love because that has become the stronghold in me.

[31 : 51] and he says that's the sort of end of spiritual growth that's it. We get to the point where God's opinion is central and so this is how strongholds are ultimately destroyed.

God humbles us so much that we stop relying on our own opinion as authoritative and we come to rely on God's opinion as the thing that defines us. You know this is what Paul means by the phrase take every thought captive to obey Christ.

It means Jesus becomes our stronghold. Jesus becomes the lens through which we see and make sense of everything else in our lives and you know the Psalms are filled with this idea.

Psalm 9 the Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed a stronghold in times of trouble. Psalm 144 he is my steadfast love and my fortress my stronghold and my deliverer.

So here's what all of this means just to kind of bring this together. because Jesus made us and because Jesus loves us and because our hearts and minds are occupied territory he sometimes uses hardship to humble us in order to set us free from our strongholds because he wants to be our stronghold.

[33 : 10] So in times of suffering and many of us are in times of suffering right now as it says in the Psalms we are called to look to the Lord to be our stronghold.

It's very tempting to look to the narratives in the surrounding culture. It's very tempting to look to politics. It's very tempting to look to our formative childhood experiences.

It's very tempting to rely on our feelings and our emotional world. But the invitation here is to recognize where the true stronghold the true source of hope and peace can be found and that's Jesus Christ.

So the invitation is to look instead to God's word to God's will to God's love. And in our suffering if we're ever tempted to doubt Jesus' love if we're ever wondering how could he let this happen to me?

How could a loving God want to humble me through this experience? If we ever doubt his love we need only look to the cross. Because here's the divine weapon that can truly destroy strongholds.

[34 : 17] It's this gospel truth that Jesus loved us so much that he allowed us to use our weapons against him. That in order to set us free he allowed himself to be taken captive.

That in order to destroy our strongholds he allowed himself to be destroyed. That's the kind of king we can trust with our hearts.

That's the kind of king we need. Let's pray. Lord we thank you for your word and we thank you that we have more than spoken or written words to rely on.

We thank you that as we come before you in prayer and confession as we come around your table that Lord you offer us yourself this morning. That we have an opportunity to receive you into our bodies Lord.

And we pray that you would work through your spiritual your Holy Spirit and through our prayers and confessions and singing through the sacraments Lord to eradicate the strongholds in us and to become our stronghold.

[35 : 27] We pray this Lord for our good and for your glory. Amen.