

## New Testament Model

### *Growing in Prayer Through Spiritual Warfare*

As a young believer I heard the term “spiritual warfare” and I was filled with fear. How do you do battle with an entity you cannot see or touch? I remember as a child hearing the stories about how the serpent deceived Adam and Eve: *and they walked with God in the garden!* Who was I to think I could take on such a deceiver?

I shared my fear with my mentor, and he pointed me to a verse: 1 John 4:18 (ESV), *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.*

When we begin to realize the totality of what Jesus won by His intentionally shed body and blood as He defeated death once and for all, we then begin to realize that positionally we are seated in the spirit realm with Our Savior. The victory that we seek to gain in our spiritual war has already been won! I realize that some of you may be thinking my last statement might be a bit dubious. Let’s look at God’s Word beginning in the book of Ephesians.

Ephesians 1:3-4 (ESV), *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.*

Don’t miss the truth in these two verses! Paul is writing to followers of Jesus Christ. Do you qualify as a follower? I hope so. If you do, then positionally in the eyes of God He has blessed you with **everything** you will ever need spiritually as you make your way through this life on earth, realizing our real home is in heaven. Did God know you would be engaged in spiritual warfare? Of course, He knows everything! Do you see what His Word says? You had all you need the moment you became a follower of Jesus. You might be wondering, “How did He do that?”

The apostle Paul answers that question in the next four verses, Ephesians 1: 5-8 (ESV), *In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight.*

In verse 7 the word “redemption” in the original language literally means that we were liberated by a ransom. This term was commonly used at the time Ephesians was written to refer to paying a ransom for a slave in order to secure his freedom. We were slaves to sin and Jesus paid for us and has set us free!

I have shared this truth with hundreds of believers through the years and invariably I hear something like this: “Pastor Mark, that’s great, but I certainly do not feel like I have every heavenly blessing. Most of the time it is more like simply trying to make it through the day without feeling like a complete loser in my spiritual life.”

Do you remember in the last lesson we spoke on Hebrews 12: 1 (ESV)? *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us ...* Many followers of Christ believe that once they accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, they have their ticket to heaven and there really isn't much left to do. Wrong! Look at the passage above; it implies we have work to do. No, we are not working for our salvation. Let me explain: Our salvation experience is a one-time event. However, the process of becoming more like Jesus (the term is sanctification) is something that starts the moment you are saved and continues until we arrive at home in heaven. Here is the key: Positionally (that means when we accept Christ we are as Paul writes in Ephesians 1:5), *In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.* Notice it says "the purpose of His will"; we have nothing to do with it. He gives us the faith and mercy and grace at the expense of His Son – He redeemed us like a person pays for a slave in order to free him. So positionally, we are seated with Him in heaven. But! We are still in this body of flesh that wars against His Holy Spirit. That is why we feel so defeated at times.

So, what do we do? We wage war against our flesh. That is what Hebrews 12:1 is describing. Our flesh is at war with the Holy Spirit because of the sin of Adam and Eve. It will remain that way until Jesus comes to claim His prize: His Bride, we His church. He holds the deed to this world right now: We are sort of like on a lay-away plan that is waiting to be redeemed!

### ***Strongholds Are Thoughts and Habits that Predetermine Our Conduct***

How do we fight? The Bible tells us how: 2 Corinthians 10:4-5 (ESV), *For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ ...* In looking at this verse we will talk about the weapons we have in a moment; first, let's discuss strongholds. We know they are not good because it says they need to be destroyed. They can keep us from being who God created us to be. They can be a weight: an activity that may not be sinful, but not edifying either. They can be a sin because they are a habit that is in opposition to the will of God.

When I encounter believers that love the Lord but are struggling in their sanctification process, I have found that usually although they are reborn positionally in the spirit realm, they are, however, struggling because their thought patterns have not changed.

Consider what Paul writes in Romans 12: 1-2 (ESV), *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.* Our relationship with Christ is an individual one; that means we as followers need to take ownership of our thoughts, our habits, our fears and most of all how we love through forgiveness. Love is the key. We all desire to receive love and give love to others. We have a choice: whether or not we show unconditional love, through the Spirit of God, letting His love naturally, supernaturally flow through us. This kind of love will produce spiritual fruit. Because we are all descendants of Adam, we are also capable of showing conditional love in the flesh. This is showing love for the purposes of receiving something in return. ***How we love can be a stronghold in our life and we may not ever realize it.*** This is called *eros* love. This kind of love is a love whose desire is to possess, acquire and control power over our own destiny.

Quite often followers of Jesus Christ can have this kind of love instilled within our character early in life through judgments, betrayals or broken promises that take place. When these hurts occur, we recall the pain they bring with them and we naturally begin to look out for ourselves in a selfish way subconsciously. I learned this truth personally as I experienced great betrayal as an eight-year-old child. It was at that young age that I was abused physically and sexually for the next five years of my life.

When I met Jesus and experienced His unconditional love for me when I was nineteen, He immediately began to restore that which the locusts had eaten in my life (Joel 2:25). It took sixteen years before I could honestly remove the hatred and bitterness for my step-mother and the stronghold was broken in my life. Up until that point in my walk with the Lord I tried to be a loving person; but the Lord showed me that the stronghold of bitterness within me simply did not permit me to share unconditional love with those around me. Consider the following verses:

- Hosea 10:4 (NLT), *They spout empty words and make covenants they don't intend to keep. So injustice springs up among them like poisonous weeds in a farmer's field.*
- 1 Peter 3:7 (NLT), *In the same way, you husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat your wife with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God's gift of new life. Treat her as you should so your prayers will not be hindered.*
- Proverbs 18:8 (NLT), *Rumors are dainty morsels that sink deep into one's heart.*
- Proverbs 18:21 (NLT), *The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences.*

As we pray for one another and live in the body of Christ we need to ensure that our minds (how we think and how we love) have been transformed and unaffected by any strongholds that could have been instilled in us from any transgressions inflicted upon us by others.

### ***Strongholds Can Come From Error, False Doctrine or Tradition***

***Strongholds can also be introduced into our lives through error, false doctrine or the traditions of men.***

Look at what the apostle Mark writes to us: Mark 7: 7-8 (NLT), *Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.'<sup>8</sup> For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition.*

We can see this in many churches today that focus on attendance as being their driving force for success in their ministry. The focus becomes how many are in church and seeking to make converts rather than making true disciples of Jesus Christ whose desire is to obey all the commands of Our Savior. Jesus told us in Matthew 28: 19-20 (NLT), *Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup> Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.* If we are not careful, we can fall into a trap of believing as long as we are doing something in the church we must be growing in our love for Jesus. Doing things for Jesus is not the same as being with Him, which is what He desires most. Remember the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10? Mary's focus was on Jesus and being with Him and Jesus referred to that act as being better than serving God. Simply having large churches with lots of activity does not build disciples. Now, look at your life. Are you focused on spending time with God – loving Him, adoring Him – or are you busy, “doing God's work?” That can be a stronghold that as the apostle Mark says in Chapter 7 above is as a farce.

Why is spending time loving God so important? Is He so insecure He needs to hear our praises all the time? Of course not! It is because as we love and adore Him, we are constantly reminded of His unconditional love for us. Look at what the apostle John writes: 1 John 3: 1-3 (NLT), *See how very much*

*our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are! But the people who belong to this world don't recognize that we are God's children because they don't know him. <sup>2</sup>Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is. <sup>3</sup>And all who have this eager expectation will keep themselves pure, just as he is pure.*

This passage describes the sanctification process; in verse 1 we hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and we see how much Father God loves us. It also tells us that those who belong to this world do not understand God because they don't know Him. In verse 2 it tells us that we who are His children believe in Him, but we do not fully comprehend all the blessings He has prepared for us. However, the passage concludes by telling us that as we learn more and believe more, we will be changed more to become more like Him. This describes the process of sanctification: We first understand that we belong to Jesus. We then begin to believe and apply His teachings. As we obey His Word we then are changed to be more like Jesus.

How does this truth apply to spiritual warfare? Do you remember we discussed earlier how we fight this battle? The Bible tells us how: 2 Corinthians 10: 4-5 (ESV), *For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. <sup>5</sup>We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ ...*

You can really sum up this passage in 1 John 3 by saying that ***unconditional love is the greatest motivator for change in our lives.*** Jesus put it this way in John 14:15 (NLT), *If you love me, obey my commandments.* Do not read any further. Stop reading and reflect with the Spirit of God right now and ask the Lord, "What is my motivation for wanting to be a prayer warrior?" There really should only be one reason: our love for the Lord and His people. As we seek to love as Jesus does, He will break any stronghold in our life that could possibly be perverting His unconditional love flowing through us. This happens because His Word is true: We do not fight with weapons of the flesh but the weapons we do fight with have divine power (that is not our power, but His) to destroy strongholds. Stop and reflect before you read any more.

My father was a good man. He was born in 1910 and was a product of the Great Depression in our country back in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He was a hard worker and he loved to describe himself as a self-made man. He instilled in me a profound work ethic for which I am grateful. However, I remember him telling me over and over that I am his son and therefore no one can tell me what to do and I should trust no one. This was how I was raised. It was my culture. This culture created yet another stronghold in my life that is the next one we need to discuss.

### **A Stronghold Can Be Built Within Us through Our Ethnic or Cultural Upbringing**

Consider the following passage: Colossians 2: 6-8 (NLT), *And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. <sup>7</sup>Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness. <sup>8</sup>Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ.*

As a young follower of Jesus, I needed to throw off the empty philosophy of my father. It was a stronghold. There are no self-made men; not in the body of Christ. We serve a risen Savior; He is Our King! I realized that in Scripture Jesus says that He had laid out a path for my life before the foundations of the earth were made. It tells us in Jeremiah 1 that He knew us before He formed us. I repented of my

selfish thought processes and asked God to guide my steps for the rest of my days. He is faithful to do just that in each of our lives. How about you? Are there ethnic or cultural teachings that you have been following that do not line up with the Word of God? There could be lies that are ingrained in your how you look at life that have become strongholds. Ask the Holy Spirit now to illuminate those areas of your life that do not honor His desires for you.

### **Strongholds Can Often Be Built through Negative Thought Patterns and Ungodly Beliefs**

We find this to be true in the following passage of Scripture: Proverbs 23: 7-8 (NLT), *Don't eat with people who are stingy; don't desire their delicacies. <sup>7</sup>They are always thinking about how much it costs. "Eat and drink," they say, but they don't mean it. <sup>8</sup>You will throw up what little you've eaten, and your compliments will be wasted.*

Negative thought patterns: "What I have is mine." Really? It tells us in I Corinthians 6 that when we become followers of Jesus Christ it is because we were bought and paid for with a great price.

Many people worry about giving of their time, talent and treasure because all of what they have is limited. Yet in the kingdom of God it says that if you really want to live you must give your life away.

I have had people tell me that they do not share the good news of Jesus with people in their lives because, "they do not feel led to do so." How does this thought process line up with God's Word? Matthews 28:19 (NLT), *Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.* How can we say we don't feel led, when we have been commanded by God?

Now I realize that we all could improve on sharing the gospel, but my point here is that not following through on what we know to be true in God's Word is a negative thought pattern that should not dominate our actions in life. What are some of the negative thought patterns in your life? Do you really believe what you say is true? Do you really want to follow Jesus in every aspect of your life? Engaging in spiritual warfare with known sin in our life that has not been repented of is like trying to run a 40-yard dash while you hold your breath. It is not something you want to try to do. I share this from personal experience!

### ***In Summary***

First, when it comes to spiritual warfare, we must realize that as a follower of Jesus the battle has already been won for us on the cross of Calvary. We wage war with the His divine power that can destroy strongholds. What are strongholds? ***Strongholds are thoughts and habits that predetermine our conduct.*** They can keep us from being who God created us to be. They can be a weight: an activity that may not be sinful, but not edifying either. They can be a sin because they are a habit that is in opposition to the will of God.

How do we break free from these strongholds?

- We first must take ownership of our sin and seek true repentance. Look at what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 2:4 (NLT), *Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?*
- Second, become more sensitive to the voice of God. We are His sheep and we need to know Our Shepherd's voice. That takes conversation: time in prayer, speaking with Him and listening to Him. We also need to realize that we are not in this battle for holiness alone.

- Third, seek out a brother or sister in Christ (if you are married make sure it is not someone from the opposite sex), and begin to meet regularly holding each other accountable and praying for one another.
- Fourth, as you begin to break free from your stongholds realize that you are in a battle and there will be times when you may lose a battle: Remember, the war has already been won by Our Savior. Ask for forgiveness for your sin and begin to fight again! James 4:7 (NLT), *So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*
- Finally, remember God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6) and we need to believe that God's love will pour deep into areas of our lives. Romans 5:3-5 (NLT), *We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. <sup>4</sup>And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. <sup>5</sup>And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.*

In our next session we will discuss the life of an effective prayer warrior and how to continue to apply the truths of God's Word in our lives for the purpose of living a victorious life in Christ.

