

Personal Strongholds

A Personal Reflection

In my second year of high school (10th grade), I made a new friend and his name was Marty. Marty was short in stature (about 5 feet 2 inches) and weighed a little over a hundred pounds. I, on the other hand, stood 6 feet tall and weighed two hundred seventy-five pounds. Marty was on the wrestling team and was one of the best wrestlers on our team and in the state of Michigan. One day he and I got into a big argument and the argument began to escalate into a shoving match. I knew that I was much larger and stronger because of my size advantage. I told him to back off and not put his hands on me. Marty would not. Instead he used some of his wrestling moves on me and before I knew it this little guy, who I more than doubled in weight, had me on the ground with him on top of me making his point in a rather undiplomatic way. My problem was that I was in a fight I did not even know existed. Marty on the other hand was ready, willing and able to make his point known to me.

I had not taken Marty very seriously. But he was ready to battle to make his point. This is exactly what many followers of Jesus Christ fall prey to when it comes to strongholds in their lives. They either are not aware they exist, or if they do, they do not take them seriously enough to know they need to be dealt with. Strongholds must be dealt with in the life of a follower of Jesus Christ.

If you recall, strongholds are thoughts and habits that predetermine our conduct. They can keep us from being who God created us to be; because of that it is important to know how to identify and destroy any strongholds in your life.

The first step is to realize that conflict is taking place around us continually, a spiritual conflict. Invisible to our physical eyes is the spirit world, which is divided into two categories: the forces of good and the forces of evil. These are in constant combat with one another and diametrically opposed to one another. The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 6:12 (ESV), *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.* The apostle goes on to explain that we are to put on the whole armor of God. Do you see the implication of this truth? We are all in a constant battle and we should be ready for it. If you are not ready, then you will be like I was in high school with this little guy on top of you imposing his will on you. Don't let that happen!

Preparing for Battle

How do you get and stay ready for a spiritual battle? We know already we are to put on the whole armor of God. That is part of the answer to our question. Because our war is a spiritual war; then the armor of our warfare must be spiritual. Through our spiritual weapons we will pull down the strongholds of the enemy in our lives. This is how the apostle Paul explains it in 2 Corinthians 10: 4-5 (ESV), *For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.*

I recall being asked one day by a young man I was mentoring, how often do I put on the Armor of God? My answer was a simple one. The enemy is in constant rebellion against the kingdom of God, of which we are part. Therefore, we should be ready to battle—for our minds, for our brothers and sisters in Christ, for our nation, for our loved ones, for those who have yet to come to know the Lord and for those who are currently on our prayer list—all of the time. In other words, the battle never stops until we see our Jesus face to face. This is truth is found once again in Ephesians 6:14-18 (ESV), *Stand*

therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness,¹⁵ and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one;¹⁷ and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.

The first word in verse 14: “Stand” in the original language is very descriptive. It means that we are to take an offensive military stance. It is like we are bringing the attack to our enemy and lunging at him with the Sword of the Spirit. When you look at the armor of God there is only one offensive weapon we have, the Sword of the Spirit or the Word of God. Praying God’s Word, literally using His Word in our prayers can be the most potent weapon we possess in our spiritual arsenal and by it we can pull down the strongholds of the enemy. If not praying His Word, then praying in agreement with the Word of God. Does Satan have a stronghold over your husband, your wife or your children? Are you focusing on ministering in an area that has yet to have the Word of God in their language and the government itself is in rebellion against the principles of the One True God? Are you carrying a burden in your life or in your ministry that you know without God working a miracle you are without hope? It is time to use a form of prayer that can be considered real work. It is called intercessory prayer.

Intercessory Prayer

This is the type of prayer that can be laborious. Paul, in his closing remarks to the church of Colossae makes mention of one of his fellow laborers, Epaphras, Colossians 4: 12 (ESV), *Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.*

This is the real work, the real battle that goes on. We are the creation of God, living in our fleshly bodies, dealing with our weakness, dying to the flesh and focusing on the spiritual aspects of our daily lives. When you enter that realm, you rush into the thick of the battle. It becomes work because you’re engaged against the forces of darkness and hell. They are in rebellion against God.

Here is the truth about our personal spiritual reality and the reality of Satan, Colossians 2: 13-15 (ESV), *And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*

Do you see it in that passage? Satan has no authority over those of us who are followers of Jesus. Though the world rightfully belongs to Jesus Christ now, Satan seeks to maintain control and power over it by force. Much like when God had rejected King Saul from reigning over Israel and had the prophet Samuel anoint David in his stead, Saul, by force, tried to hold onto that which was no longer his, and sought to drive David from the kingdom.

This is the beauty of God’s plan. He too has a method of winning the world, but it is not by force like Satan’s plan. Jesus seeks to draw men unto Himself and into His kingdom through love. Thus, the warfare continues in the world for control of individual lives. Satan applies tremendous force and pressure appealing to the flesh and its desires. Jesus, wooing and drawing through gentle love, seeks to persuade people to submit their lives to Him.

When you begin to focus on tearing down strongholds, you have now entered the thick of the battle. You're going against powers that have been rooted deep in the psyche of the individual and the enemy is unwilling to yield. As you wage battle you will begin to witness the grip of power Satan has on the lives you are praying for. Through prayer you can advance with a battering ram and demolish strongholds the enemy has on those individual lives, freeing them from the power that holds them captive.

This is when being a prayer warrior becomes real work. You begin to understand what Paul meant when he said that Epaphras was *"struggling on your behalf"* in prayer. That is why it is so important that in your prayer you become very specific in your request. Vague prayers, general prayers like "God, save the world," won't even dent the enemy's kingdom. However, when you bring an individual before the Lord, laying claim to that person for Jesus Christ, you begin to be very specific and Satan must yield. Why? Because the prayers of a righteous man avail much (James 5:16).

That is why it is so important to use the name of Jesus in our prayers. He is the One who conquered sin and death. He is the One who has all authority. Therefore, when we pray, we always close in the name of the One who has authority over all, Jesus Christ.

Another important truth that we all need to understand: Satan is persistent. Even after you begin to see a bit of victory, you must continue to hold the ground you have gained. Just as soon as you have gained in some area, he will counterattack to regain it. That is why I used the terms vigilant and persistent earlier. The ground we take by prayer must be held by prayer.

Satan knows that prayer spells his defeat. He'll fight you more to keep you from prayer than any other thing you do. Sometimes, he even encourages you to other specific activities because he knows how fruitless they are.

I have been amazed over the years that all morning I have not received one phone call; yet, the moment I begin to pray, my phone rings. I have learned to have a note pad with me when I pray because invariably once I begin to pray my mind starts to wander and I think of things I need to do later in the day. I simply jot those thoughts down and get back to prayer.

Remember this: Once you begin to pray it is only a matter of time for Satan to be defeated. You know that is true and so does he. Now picture you fighting with an individual and all of a sudden, he pulls a knife out. The entire focus of the fight now shifts because it goes to who controls that knife. For those of us who are prayer warriors, we have the knife in our hand and it is prayer. You know that is true and so does Satan. His goal is to take it out of your hand; to free you from praying because he knows prayer is the deciding factor in whether you have victory or not. Be persistent and vigilant: don't stop praying. Let's begin now to focus on tearing down strongholds.

Tearing Down Strongholds

Let's begin with a passage from the prophet Jeremiah 1: 10 (ESV), *See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.*" Once we become followers of Jesus Christ there is never a need to be saved again. His sacrifice covers our sin forever. Although salvation is a one-time event, the process of becoming like Jesus (called sanctification) is a lifelong experience. I was born again on September 9, 1971. That was almost forty-eight years ago, and I still need to ask forgiveness of my sins multiple times throughout the day. I am so tired of my sins. I despise them. I hate repeatedly asking forgiveness, but apparently not enough to stop sinning.

I have found that it can be hard to mature in the things of the Lord when we have not dealt with our habitual hidden unconscious thoughts. In other words, we need to redeem our minds. For forty-eight years I have asked to be cleansed of my sins that I have committed, yet I still need to look at how I think about certain sinful actions or situations that I find myself that will lead to me sinning.

Consider these next two passages: Romans 12:2 (ESV), *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.* Ephesians 4:22-23 (ESV), *to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds.* Study these two passages carefully. We find in them the truth that although we have been positioned spiritually into the kingdom of God there is still additional change that needs to take place in our lives. It is apparent we are not to be conformed to this world; yet we are still living in this world. We know we are to find the will of God and to put away corrupt desires. But how is this done?

Romans 5:3-5 (ESV), *Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* Remember the plan of how Father God wants to woo men and women to Himself? He does not plan on forcing Himself on people but rather to love them to Himself. In Romans 5 we see it is God's love that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us! It is that love of God through His Spirit that will change us to become more and more like Him as we put to death our flesh. We put to death the strongholds of hurts, hang-ups and addictions that plague our lives and we let the life of Jesus Christ flow through us into the corruption of the world; as we do we get to be His witnesses to His working in and through us.

That is the first principle of really putting to death strongholds in our lives and letting our lives become what He created us to be. As succinctly as possible the first principle of tearing down strongholds is: **With God's help you can change.**

I have found through the decades that until I agree with God about how detestable sin is in my life, I will not change it. Until I became a child of God, I was simply one of His creation that was destined to join the father of lies in hell. However, John 8:32 (ESV), *You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.* I came to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and I was born again into the kingdom of God. However, my existence is that I am still in this flesh waiting to one day make it home to heaven. Until that time I must battle my flesh. Look at this passage from John 8:44 (ESV), *You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*

It is true that positionally I am destined for heaven as a follower of Jesus Christ. However, I still need to renew my mind daily. Unfortunately, because of my sinful past, my eternal soul is wrapped in this body of flesh that is still corrupted by the culture, my habits and my past experiences. I have come to realize that until I begin to stop blaming other people, until I begin to look at my life the way Jesus does, I will not change my behavior. Look at what Jesus said as recorded in Matthew 23:12 (ESV), *Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.* This leads us to the second principle of tearing down strongholds: **No matter how much blame you charge someone else with, it will not change you.**

Early in my life and even after I was saved, I blamed every bad thing that happened on my parents. My father was not present in my life for many reasons and my stepmother (my maternal mother died when I was four years old.) began abusing me physically and sexually early in my life. Not a good example of parenthood; but they did not make the choices I made in my twenties—I made those choices. We cannot blame someone else and expect our lives to be better because of blaming them.

There was a popular saying back in the 1970s: *If it feels good, do it.* Not true. The mantra I use today is this: *Father God, will you be pleased with this?* We need to be humble before the Lord in every aspect of our lives. This means we must agree with Him on all our behaviors and reactions to others in our daily lives. If we prayerfully do this, strongholds will fall. Here is the third principle: **When you change, everything around you changes. This is because all the sinful habit patterns are broken.** 2 Corinthians 3: 16-18 (ESV), *But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

Oh, what a great God we serve! Precious prayer warrior, please understand that this is not three easy steps to breaking strongholds. This takes time. This takes true effort in putting to death the flesh and it takes much time in prayer. We must come to God in humility and agree with His Word what He says about our lives. We must understand we cannot earn our freedom: It has been given to us to go from glory to glory. We have been positionally given our spiritual freedom. Through God's love and by His Spirit (Romans 5:5) we must let Him come alive in and through us in prayer, breaking the chains that bind us to the father of lies. The battle was won on the cross so now it is time to put on our armor that has been given to us and become the Christian that Satan fears the most—a Holy Spirit-filled prayer warrior!