

# ***BREAKING FREE FROM STRONGHOLDS***

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Most of my kids were afraid of dogs as toddlers. Erikka was especially terrified by big barkers, and she would run to me for cover. But when she was on Daddy's shoulders, she said in happy tone, "Hi, Doggy." She had found safety. Moms and dads are often safe places for children; so is God. David found security in Him and wrote, "I love thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield...my stronghold. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies" (Psalm 18:1,2). David needed somewhere to run, and he experienced God to be a reliable place, so he praised Him for it and called God his stronghold.

## ***THE WAY TO BONDAGE***

Unfortunately, we don't always go to our Father when we are fearful or in need. We find other hiding places. At first, they seem to be safe places. But eventually, what we thought was a refuge becomes a stronghold that imprisons us rather than freeing us, and this is the way St. Paul uses the term "stronghold" (2 Corinthians 10:4).

David went on to write, "In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help" (6). He was being challenged by "the cords of death" and he was afraid. He could have said, "In my distress I attacked," or "In my distress I panicked," but he wrote, "In my distress I called upon the Lord." He chose the right response and received a favorable solution to his fear: "He delivered me from my strong enemy..." (17). What if David had chosen a stronghold other than God? He might have been captured or killed. He found God to be the perfect fortress. He wrote elsewhere, "The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1b). David went from danger to deliverance, from entangled cords to a broad place.

And David knew why God protected him: "He delivered me, because he delighted in me" (v.18). David didn't succumb to the lies of the enemy, like "God won't protect you," or "God isn't watching out for you." He embraced the truth, and the truth set him free. Clinging to lies robs us of freedom. They bring us into strongholds that look like safe places but are really prisons.

Life is full of barking dogs that intimidate us. We were created to rule, but when we dropped the scepter through sin, Satan picked it up and now comes against us. He was called by St. Paul "the prince of the power of the air." Jesus called him "the ruler of this world." I cannot survive on my own against him and his army; I need outside help. The place where I turn determines whether I will find freedom or bondage, victory or defeat. For one woman, she turned in the wrong direction.

Trapped in the stronghold of using food for consolation, Anna (not her real name) looked in the mirror at her bulging body and loathed herself, though she was a mature Christian with a good marriage and a leadership position in her Lutheran church. The loathing was so painful that she compared herself to everyone she saw, looking for bodies that were more out of shape than hers. She engaged in a frantic search for clothes that disguised her size, but hardly anything did. The reflection in the mirror worked constantly to convince her that she was of less value than thin people, and Satan used every trick to limit her capacity to serve the Lord with confidence and joy. "They'll remember when you were thin and gossip about how you've let

yourself go.” “You can’t wear the latest styles—they make you look like a whale.” The cost of focusing on her image usually sent her back to the refrigerator to coat the pain with another root beer float or piece of pizza. My wife and I had no idea that our friend Anna was in such a prison.

### **A STRONGHOLD IS...**

**.something I run to instead of God.** It is what I turn to when weak or in pain. I need a safe place in times of discomfort. As a child, I may not know how to run to God. A stronghold is a God-substitute, something I trust in for help. “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the Lord” (Isaiah 31:1). Anna learned to run to food. Others may run to religion or sleep or alcohol.

**.a lie I continue to believe.** Because I am vulnerable, I don’t realize that I am embracing a lie. It worked once, so I continue to try it. A lie is Satan’s domain. He is, according to Jesus, “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). When I accept a lie, I am dropping the belt of truth and I leave myself open to attack. The devil uses the lie to bring accusation, intimidation, and deception.

**.something I don’t like talking about.** It shames and embarrasses me, so I hide. A stronghold makes me feel like a wimp, because I seem powerless to break free from it. So I am afraid to talk about it with others, since it exposes me, makes me feel small, and condemns me, like it did for Anna.

**.a secret,** and sometimes I don’t even know the secret. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves...” (1 John 1:8). A stronghold may fool others, but it eventually fools me. It puts me in a place of self-deception. Satan’s number one weapon is deception (notice the battlefield—the mind). I make excuses for myself without realizing it. I blame others to keep the light from shining in my face and revealing the truth. I am in denial about my situation because I am ashamed.

**.part of my identity.** “I am the overweight person.” “I am a worry-wart.” “I am angry with life because of what my father did.” “I am the divorced person who is not loved.” “I am afraid and I always will be.” A stronghold defines me, locking me into my past and blocking me from a hopeful future.

**.a prison that is difficult to get out of.** At first I run to the stronghold because it seems like a safe place to hide from pain. Eventually it becomes a prison that keeps me bound up, so that I cannot escape even if I want to. I am addicted to my stronghold. It started out as a friend, but it has become an enemy. Sin is both choice and bondage, a decision I make as well as a prison from which I cannot escape. Once the pattern is established, it is difficult to act in another way.

**.a terrible place to hide.** It robs me of peace, joy, and freedom. It makes me a slave, when I am called to freedom in Christ. It puts me in the darkness, when I am called to be a child of the light. It takes things that could be a blessing and turns them into a curse, like food or a friend or even church.

**.a habit pattern of thinking that affects behavior.** The way I think is the way I will live. “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7). To break a stronghold, one must change the way of thinking, or as St. Paul wrote, “...take every thought captive to obey Christ.”

## **EXAMPLES OF STRONGHOLDS** (and the destructive lies that sometimes accompany them)

Perfectionism (I'll be okay if I do everything right. Then I will have earned my points).

Anger (People make me upset. I have a right to get mad. I wouldn't pop off if people were different).

Self-pity (No one understands me; no one appreciates me. I'm all by myself).

Lust (I need a high right now, a moment of harmless pleasure).

Work (I am valuable because I am a hard worker; people need to appreciate me).

Religion (I am a devout person. I have value to God because I go to church and serve others).

Sickness (Now people will care about me; now they will feel sorry for me. See John 5:1-15).

Withdrawal (I'll be okay if I can just disappear, if no one sees me).

Food (I'll be happy if I can just eat something. Food will comfort me).

Rejection (People always reject me. They don't think I am worth anything, so I'll reject them).

Bitterness (He ruined my life, and I'll never recover. If only he had not been so mean).

Depression (She robbed me of hope. I have nothing to live for).

Emotional detachment (They can't hurt me. I'll be okay. Just leave me alone).

Lying (It's all their fault. I've always done the best I could).

Co-dependency (He does have his problems, but he needs me).

Fantasy (I dream of the perfect body, the perfect home, so I can live with my imperfect one).

Worry (I'll think about it so that I can't sleep).

Materialism (I am of value because of what I own).

The lies start as single thoughts, but they can eventually become destructive behavior. The lies are used to prop up a fragile self-image rather than repent and turn to the truth in Christ. It's all right to keep an immaculate house, but if I use it to bolster my ego, I am believing a lie. If I wear five rings on my fingers to prove I have worth, I am really saying that I have been devalued. Wearing the rings may keep me from facing up with the truth and coming into real freedom.

## **LIES I'VE HEARD SATAN TELL**

Because Satan is the father of lies, he has an idea of which ones I will tend to believe. Some of them have enough truth in them to make a believer out of me. He wants me to accept his lies, because he hates Christ with an unholy passion and doesn't want me to find freedom in Christ and bring Him glory. This mental warfare is more about Christ than about me.

"You should not be teaching Sunday School. You're not a good Christian."

"You're not beautiful." "You're dumb." "You're ugly."

"God is angry with you for what you did as a child."

"Most people have three times the talent you have."

"God has abandoned you."

"The only thing to do now is to run."

"You're far better at that than he/she is. Only problem is—people don't know it."

"You aren't appreciated much. You are being neglected."

"God isn't hearing your prayers. And He doesn't speak to you like He speaks to others."

"You should probably tell Martha about that problem with Jane."

"You're overweight and everyone knows it."

"If you just tried a little harder, you would be more worthy of God's grace."

“You don’t fit in anywhere. Why try?”

“You make people uncomfortable.”

“You’re demon-possessed. You’re going crazy. You’re getting more nervous. Just look at your hands.”

“You’re going to lose your job. Just watch.”

“Your spouse is having an affair.”

“There’s no harm in it. It won’t hurt you—at least not one time.” “Everybody’s doing it.”

“You’ll never have a good devotional time with God. You’ve tried before. It doesn’t work for you.”

“You are a failure and you’ll probably die that way.”

“People notice that there’s something wrong with you. You’re just not like other people.”

“Church members sometimes talk about you—and it’s not complimentary.”

“God speaks to people. He just doesn’t speak to you.”

“You’ll never get victory over that sin.”

“God is usually disappointed with your performance.”

“You’re too old. Let the young people do it.”

“You’re the only one who can do this the right way.” “If you don’t do this, no one will.”

## **WHY A STRONGHOLD IMPRISONS ME**

.I get locked into a way of thinking and find it hard to break the mental cycle. (“I’ve always been afraid of heights”...“of getting up in front of people”...“of praying aloud.”)

.I often learn the habit early in life. I may have been thinking this way or doing this for many years. It seems so much a part of who I am that I feel helpless to change.

.I can trust God for many things, but I find it difficult to trust Him in the area of my stronghold. I have little faith because I have experienced defeat so often.

.Demons sometimes attach themselves to strongholds, making me a prisoner to the enemy.

.Wounds from the past often accompany strongholds, which heighten the pain and the shame.

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## **FALSE ATTEMPTS TO BREAK FREE FROM A STRONGHOLD**

.**Resolutions.** “I should stop doing this.” They usually have little power to break a stronghold.

.**Extra effort**, but often in an area where I don’t need deliverance. In my deception, I sometimes cover up a stronghold by concentrating elsewhere.

.**Prayer**, which often has little effect on a stronghold, but people may pray over their stronghold for a lifetime. They hope for change but they don’t expect it. That is why deliverance prayer from someone else is often needed to break the power of a stronghold.

.**Religion.** I do something out of duty to earn points and convince God to bless me. I have sometimes felt under a curse and do good things to dig myself out of my hole.

.**Criticism.** I concentrate on the faults of others to deflect attention from myself. I can’t stand being in the light, so I judge others to look better. Like Anna, I have a low self-image, and I bolster it up by unkind thoughts and words.

.**Self-punishment.** I get down on myself for being so stupid, for giving in to my addiction. I condemn myself, lash out at myself, call myself names (Dummy, Ugly, Unworthy, Evil...).

.**Denial.** As a friend once said, “Denial is not a river in Egypt.” A stronghold brings so much shame that it sets me on a course of defensiveness, deception, denial, and darkness. The Pharisees were religious people who knew much of the Scriptures in their heads, but they were

oblivious to their own bondage. They announced to Jesus, “We have never been in bondage to anyone.”

### ***THE WAY TO FREEDOM***

1. **I identify the stronghold.** If I have lived with deception for years, this may be difficult. One way to identify a stronghold is to complete the sentence: I’ll be okay if I \_\_\_\_\_ (run and hide...pity myself for my predicament...lash out in anger...get some food to comfort me... criticize everyone else...take another drink...go to church...try a little harder...blame myself for everything...give up...keep worrying relentlessly...do it perfectly).

2. **I confess my attachment to the stronghold.** I confess that I have run to this stronghold instead of to God. I have trusted something other than God for security, safety, pleasure, or hope. I acknowledge that I have believed Satan more than God, a lie more than the truth. I have rejected Jesus, who is the truth, by embracing a lie. “Dear Father, forgive me for making excuses for my sinful behavior. I realize that what I have done has hurt you, others, and myself. I confess my pride, my fear of being hurt by people, my overly sensitive emotions, my propensity for defending myself rather than the truth.”

3. **I renounce the lies.** A baptismal liturgy reads, “I renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways.” Another translation says, “I renounce all the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises.” I acknowledge that Satan has never made good on any promise of comfort, well-being, or safety. I refuse to accept the lies any longer. I repudiate them in the name of Jesus. Breaking free from a stronghold is an act of aggression, a declaration of war. I say boldly, “I renounce my dependency upon the stronghold of \_\_\_\_\_ in my life.” The battlefield is the mind, the place where the enemy has taken me captive with lies. St. Paul reminds us that “the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ...” (2 Corinthians 10:4,5). My thoughts had been taken captive to Satan. I break that old cycle in the authority of Jesus, refusing to give it credibility any longer. I declare lies to be just that: Alcohol (or any bondage) is not my salvation—God is. I am not rejected—I am accepted and cherished by the Lord of life. I destroy the arguments of the enemy and bring my thoughts captive to Christ. What I really need is Christ, not porn or a drink or an escape or control or pity. I renounce vows I have made to protect myself (“I will never speak about this again.” “I’ll never trust anyone again after being hurt.” “I will get even”).

4. **I forgive others.** Because wounding often accompanies strongholds, I forgive those who have rejected, hurt, abused, or manipulated me. Without forgiving, I cannot be free from a stronghold. According to Jesus, I will stay locked in torment until I release people for what they have done (Matthew 18:34). Forgiving them does not mean they have not hurt me or are not accountable for what they have done. It means that I will not demand repayment in my heart or continually hold them guilty before God. I will not take personal vengeance. I leave that to a merciful and just God. “In Jesus’ name I forgive those who have hurt me (name them). I ask Jesus to heal me of the wounds in my life.”

5. **I affirm the truth.** I cannot break free on my own. I need the Strong Man to bring me into freedom. I have believed lies. Now I choose to live by the truth of God’s Word. I daily read the Scriptures, so that my mind is washed in words of truth. I speak truth into my heart: “I am free in Jesus Christ. God is bringing me victory. He is making me an overcomer. God loves me and

accepts me in Jesus. He cherishes me and looking out for me. I have a rich future in Jesus Christ. I have hope that no one can take from me. Because God loves me, I love myself, and I freely love others.”

6. **I receive deliverance.** Christians can be oppressed by demons, especially when they habitually open themselves to attack by embracing lies, putting them in enemy territory. Deliverance is needed to break the cycle and set prisoners free. And so we pray (for ourselves or for others): “In the strong name of Jesus I command all spiritual powers that have been associated with this stronghold of \_\_\_\_\_ to leave. They no longer have any power over me. I lay rightful claim to my freedom in Jesus Christ. I choose to make Him my stronghold. I break any generational tie that has given me a propensity toward this stronghold. I release its hold on me by the power of the blood of Christ.”

Anna recognized that she was caught in a web that seriously threatened her ability to live in the truth of God’s love and acceptance. Prayer for deliverance was the way to free her of the distractions that kept her from maximum service to the Lord. In our prayers for her, Anna saw the legacy of anger and disapproval that seeped through generations of her family and continued to bind her to sources of comfort that bankrupted her self-image, peace, and ultimately, her relationship with a loving heavenly Father. Strongholds from previous generations needed to be broken to give her the freedom the Lord had always desired for her.

7. **I am filled with the Holy Spirit.** I ask to be filled with the Spirit. I learn a new way of living. I discover that the Christian life is not trying harder but trusting more. I rely on the power of the indwelling Spirit to obey God. I learn new ways of thinking, which affects how I act. I know God loves me and is giving me power to overcome the darkness that has been in my life. I find strength to obey. I choose to serve rather than to survive. I understand that freedom is a walk rather than a hop, a process rather than an event. I experience increasing liberty as I apply the truth of God’s Word to my life.