

Strongholds: What They Are and How to Pull Them Down

From [That None Should Perish](#) ch. 4 by Ed Silvano

PRINCIPLE: Spiritual strongholds are Satan's secret weapon. It is through the surreptitious use of strongholds that Satan controls the behavior of the Church. They must be identified and destroyed.

The witness stand is an important part of the judicial process. When someone is called to testify in a case, the court clerk swears him in. With a hand on the Bible, the witness promises "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God." He is then led through his testimony by the lawyer for the party that called him as a witness. This is the easy part. The hard part comes when the lawyer for the other party cross-examines him. It is hard because the objective of the cross-examination is two-fold: to find inconsistencies in the witness's testimony, and to discredit the witness. The latter is usually done by attacking his character. If either one of these objectives is accomplished during the cross-examination, his testimony then becomes useless.

Picture for a moment a key witness in a case involving the possibility of capital punishment; if the defendant is found guilty, he may be sent to the electric chair. This particular witness is testifying for the defense, and his testimony is crucial to save the accused. As he approaches the witness stand, a sense of immediacy grabs everyone in the courtroom. Everything hangs on the balance of what he is about to say. This is where the defendant makes or breaks it.

The witness gives an excellent testimony. He says the right words and brings the right facts to bear on his story, ably lead by the defense counsel. But now the district attorney begins the cross-examination.

In a booming voice he declares, "Mr. Witness, I will not try to punch holes in your story. However, I believe that you are a liar, and I will prove it." Then he goes on to ask three simple questions: "Are you rich? Do you have clothes on? Is your eyesight normal?" To these questions, the witness answers with an emphatic yes. With a slight smile of satisfaction, the district attorney now moves in for the kill. He asks the witness the color of the tie worn by the defendant, who sits a few feet from the witness stand. No answer comes forth. The witness is totally blind, in spite of what he just said. Next the district attorney provides the court with Exhibit A, consisting of pictures that show the witness panhandling. This is accompanied by an affidavit signed by the director of the local rescue mission stating that the witness is currently living off the mission's charity. Finally, the DA asks the witness to stand up, and, to everybody's amazement, he is stark naked. His credibility has been destroyed. It doesn't matter if what he testified is true; no one will believe it.

Is it possible for someone to be blind and not know it? To be miserably poor and believe otherwise? To think in all honesty that he is dressed and to walk around naked? Yes, it is entirely possible. It happens every day. Where? In our churches. In fact, the problem is so serious that the Lord Jesus Himself sent a letter to a particular church, confronting it with

this severe form of spiritual schizophrenia. Recorded in Revelation 3:14-22, the letter says: “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me. He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

The situation was so serious that Jesus told them, “You think you have gathered in My name, but I have been left out” (see Rev. 3:20). Can you imagine Jesus shut out of His own Church?

In Revelation 12:11, we are told that our victory over Satan consists of three elements: the blood of Jesus, our testimony and our willingness to die. One element is constant, the remaining two being variable. The blood of the lamb is the constant because it represents a perfect sacrifice. However, our testimony and our willingness to die for Jesus, if necessary, are vulnerable to change. This is where Satan—the accuser, the spiritual district attorney—aims his attack.

Satan’s Arsenal

To be able to understand how a person, or a church, can behave as the one just discussed, we need to take inventory of Satan’s arsenal to find out what his weapons are and how he uses them against the saints.

Satan has three main weapons. The most obvious is sin. Satan is known as the tempter (see Matt. 4:3), and this is because of the expertise with which he uses this particular weapon. Sin is an active weapon. Like a guided missile, it seeks you. When it hits you, you know it immediately, because the wages of sin is death (see Rom. 6:23).

The second weapon is a passive one. Like a trap, it is surreptitiously set up for you to fall into. It is called “accusations.” Satan is described in the Bible as the accuser of the brethren (see Job 1:6-12; Zech. 3:1; Rev. 12:10). This is what he does, day and night, before the throne of God. If he has the courage to do that before God (who knows all the facts inside out), imagine what is he capable of doing to you and me, mere mortals. Even though we are forgiven, he reminds us of every sin we have committed, and then, for effect, he adds every other sin we could have committed. We are called by God by name, but Satan shouts at us that we have been forsaken, that we are not good enough for the ministry. Even though we are protected by the One who has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Heb. 13:5, NIV), he uses the problems and challenges we face every day as a

ramrod to blind us to the solidity of that promise. “God has left you,” he screams in our ear. “You are too bad.”

Satan uses accusations to generate anxiety strong enough so we will come out from under the mighty hand of God (see 1 Pet. 5:6). This is why Peter admonishes us, “Casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7). Satan’s objective is to paralyze us, very much like an animal that has fallen into a trap (see 2 Tim. 2:26; 1 Pet. 5:8,9). Likewise, we know when this weapon has been used against us successfully, because we lose our freedom of movement in Christ. Creeping anxiety takes over. Fear replaces faith, and despair overtakes hope (see 2 Tim. 1:7).

The Church in general is very much aware of these two weapons. Adequate Bible teaching helps to deal with their effect on us and how to defend against them. The fact that the consequences suffered by the victims are visible—death and spiritual paralysis—acts as a motivator for people to seek help. However, Satan’s third weapon is the most dangerous. This particular weapon is virtually unknown to the average Christian. It is neither active nor passive, but dormant. Like an underwater mine, it can be planted and left undetected, waiting for the ideal moment to be activated. Because it is dormant, it is easy for the devil to conceal it from us. We usually find out about it when we survey the destruction it has wreaked on us. This devastating weapon is called “spiritual strongholds” (see 2 Cor. 10:4,5). It allows Satan to control Christians and make them do things that bring great damage to themselves and to others. He uses it to impeach our testimony, much like the DA in the opening story. It exposes a severe inconsistency between who we say we are and what we believe. Spiritual strongholds represent a state-of-the-art manifestation of deceit. This is consistent with Satan’s treacherous character because he is also called the deceiver (see John 8:44; Rev. 12:9).

Strongholds—The Secret Storage Area

The classic passage dealing with spiritual strongholds is 2 Corinthians 10:3-5:
For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses [or strongholds]. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

Like the average Christian today, I had no idea what strongholds were all about until recently. I never heard a teaching on it when I was being trained for the ministry in my home church. Nor did any of my professors in Bible school or seminary ever discuss the subject. However, when I began to identify some strongholds and to assess their devastating effect on the Church, I understood why. The efficiency of strongholds depends on their concealment. Like the underwater mine, once discovered, it can be disarmed, and it loses its effectiveness.

Like spies sent on a mission to find a new weapon whose existence and whereabouts have been kept absolutely secret, we are at a definite disadvantage. We are searching for something, but we don’t know what it looks like. It is similar to the story I heard of somebody who went around opening and shutting his hands in an obvious attempt to catch something that remained elusive. When someone asked what he was doing, he said,

“I am trying to catch a chiripitiflautico.” His questioner was perplexed. He had never heard of a chiripitiflautico before. So he asked, “What does it look like?” To this the prospective catcher replied, “I don’t know. I haven’t caught one yet!”

Let us determine first where strongholds are located. If we can discover that, then it will be easier to define what a stronghold is. I know this approach works because I was forced to use it in finding a “misplaced” car. Ruth and I had flown to Los Angeles to visit Peter and Doris Wagner. Our good friends David and Kristen Wendorff waited for us at the airport and lent us their car for the drive to Pasadena, where the Wagners live.

The Wendorffs were leaving town for the day and would meet us the next day. I did not pay much attention to the car. I just drove it, and when we got to Fuller Seminary, I parked it on the street. However, I made the mistake of not reading the posted sign, which prohibited cars from being parked there from 4:00 to 6:00 P.M. When we came out of our meeting with the Wagners, the car was nowhere to be found. It had been towed away by the Pasadena Police Department. Determining what had happened was the easy part. Recovering the car proved to be the real challenge.

Peter told me, “I’ll go with you to the police station. My son-in-law works there. What kind of car was it?” Then and there I realized the immensity of my problem. Except for the color of the car, black, I knew nothing about it. I had no idea what make, model or year the car was, much less the license number. Not even Peter’s connections at the police department could help me. The desk sergeant said to me, “How do you expect us to find a car that you, the driver, have no idea what it looks like?” Obviously, he had a point.

Then a thought occurred to me. If we could locate the lot where the car was impounded, we could then find out the specifics about the car and then file a proper report. I sweet-talked somebody into telling me where the car was (the sweet-talk was necessary because by then we had begun to look very suspicious). Peter drove me in his car. What followed was comical. Here was “Mr. Church Growth”—Peter Wagner—and his disciple looking like second-rate burglars casing a car lot! But it worked. I recognized the car among the dozens that were there. We explained our plight to the attendant, and he allowed us to get inside and copy down all of the information, which eventually allowed us to file a report, leading to the recovery of the vehicle.

Let us apply the same approach to help us find where strongholds are located. Once we find that out, we will then gather the data that will enable us to describe them.

If I say “coffee, bacon and eggs,” what do you think? Breakfast, right? If I say, “Speculations, knowledge and thoughts,” what are you bound to say sooner or later? The mind, because that is where those three things take place. We use our mind to speculate. Knowledge is stored there and thoughts are generated by it. We found the lot! I believe it is safe to say that strongholds, as described in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, are located in the mind.

What do they look like? Again, based on the passage at hand, I have developed the following definition: A spiritual stronghold is a mind-set impregnated with hopelessness that causes us to accept as unchangeable, situations that we know are contrary to the will of God.

The presence of a spiritual stronghold must be suspected when a Christian finds himself powerless to change a situation that he clearly knows goes against the will of God. For instance, the Bible teaches us in precise terms that we are to forgive our enemies.¹ We have no problem ascertaining what the will of God is on the subject. Forgiving our enemies is a must for us! However, time and again we are in a bind, unable to forgive a particular person. We find ourselves totally incapable of doing something that God requires of us.

Another example involves our spouses. The Bible tells us that he who finds a wife or a husband “finds a good thing” (Prov. 18:22); it is so good, in fact, that we are told to cease being two individuals and, by cleaving to each other, to become one flesh (see Matt. 19:4-6). The Bible states that a spouse is a gift from God. However, some people have so much trouble with their spouses that they wonder, If this is the best God can do, I wonder what the devil has in mind?

This is a typical stronghold. The will of God is clearly spelled out, but reality tells us a different story. In fact, it blatantly contradicts the stated will of God, and we find ourselves powerless to change reality as we perceive it. This, in turn, leads to hopelessness.

As you can imagine, these conflicting perceptions are extremely difficult to live with. So how do we cope with them? By allowing a “lofty thing” to go up in our minds. A partition is raised to separate our minds into two compartments. On one side is the knowledge of God; on the other side is human speculation. A speculation is a conclusion based on an assumption that cannot be proven. The partition—what Paul calls a “lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God” in 2 Corinthians 10:5—is meant to block the knowledge of God in the presence of which it is impossible to successfully speculate. It is as frustrating as trying to focus the left eye on one object and the right eye on another.

The Visible Expression of a Stronghold

This fragmentation results in us developing what James describes as a “double mind.” According to James, the consequence of a double mind is instability “in all his ways” (Jas. 1:8). This instability is what prevents us from dealing satisfactorily with those things we know run contrary to God’s will. When we are convicted about it, we bail out by using rationalizations and speculations to avoid acting on it. We say something like, “I know what the Bible says, but there is a definite difference of opinion among scholars about what this passage really means. After all, we are removed by almost 2,000 years from the original writers.” Or we engage a merry-go-round of counselors, hoping to have our rationalizations validated by one of them. And so we go on and on, speculating.

For instance, when we go to church and hear the Word of God, we honestly believe it. We even say a loud “amen” to it. If we are preaching, we pound the pulpit as we declare what the will of God is regarding a specific issue. Our explanation is supported by Bible references. We state it in an unmistakably authoritative mode because we are quoting the Word of God. However, later on, as we walk to our cars in the church parking lot, we are also walking out of compartment A in our minds and going into compartment B. Insurmountable problems are ready to challenge us again. As we survey them, we immediately begin to speculate how to deal with them, using our own resources, quickly forgetting what we have just heard. How can we honestly believe one thing one moment and something different the next? Because we have a double mind (see Jas. 1:8).

Can you imagine the devastating effect of this on pastors and leaders? How can they believe God for a miracle for their cities if they find themselves unable to enjoy their marriages or forgive someone who has hurt them or to believe God for a breakthrough in their local congregation. Every time the Holy Spirit reminds them of the vision that caused them to become ministers, the devil activates the stronghold and a deafening loudspeaker blasts out: “Don’t you dare believe it! Look at the pool of misery you are in.” This is why it is futile to attempt to reach a city for Christ without first identifying and destroying the strongholds in the minds of the leaders (see Jas. 1:6-8).

The difference between a stronghold as presented in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 and a satanic scheme (see 2 Cor. 2:11) is that, in the case of the former, the person knows what the will of God is but finds it impossible to do it. This, in turn, produces an atmosphere of hopelessness where faith is disabled. Whereas, a scheme is a surreptitious operation of the devil that allows him to harm the unsuspecting believer without being detected. I believe that Satan uses sin, anxiety and strongholds to produce his deadly schemes, but he uses strongholds openly primarily to create the kind of instability described by James (see Jas. 1:6-8; 3:13—4:4) that eventually prevent the Church from effectively using the divinely powerful weapons (see 2 Cor. 10:4). When Christians know what the will of God is and do otherwise because of a stronghold, Satan is able to blackmail them. Like the DA of our opening illustration, Satan impeaches the character of the witness because he cannot challenge the blood of Jesus that is being testified about.

What Does a Stronghold Look Like?

Here are five characteristics of a spiritual stronghold:

1. Strongholds are located in the mind.

I already dealt with this previously. However, as a corollary, let us be reminded of the Church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-20), whose members honestly believed themselves to be rich, wealthy and self-sufficient, only to be exposed as poor, wretched, miserable and blind. This is further illustrated by Paul in Romans 8:6,7: “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so.”

2. Strongholds are often made up of good thoughts.

This characteristic of a stronghold greatly contributes to its ability to go undetected. We seldom suspect our good thoughts. However, Satan uses this very cleverly. Our own good thoughts create a blockage for the excellent thoughts of God to come in. Such a case in point is Peter in Matthew 16:21-23. What was the strongest word Jesus ever used to rebuke a human being? It is the word “Satan,” when Jesus called Peter by that name (Matt. 16:23). Never before and never after did Jesus use that term again to refer to another human being. This is even more perplexing when we consider that Peter was one of Jesus’ key disciples. Actually, he was the leader of the group. Why would Jesus denounce Peter so harshly? Was he suggesting that Jesus should lie, steal money or commit fornication? Not at all. Peter had just given Jesus well-meaning, compassionate advice. When Jesus predicted

that He would suffer and die, Peter said, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You” (Matt. 16:22) To which Jesus replied, “Get behind Me, Satan!” Why did Jesus identify Peter with Satan? Because he was setting his mind on man’s interests rather than God’s (see Matt. 16:23).

In other words, Jesus was saying, “You are looking at this from man’s point of view rather than God’s.” By calling Peter “Satan,” Jesus identified man’s perspective with Satan’s. Being the Son of God, He was able to see through the wall of speculation present in Peter’s mind, and He called it as He saw it. This is why I say that strongholds are often made up of good thoughts. The enemy of the best is not the worst. This is very easy to spot and easy to prevent from happening. The enemy of best is good because good and best can be easily confused. Satan knows this, and he uses it to his advantage. This is why we are exhorted to take “every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5), not just the evil thoughts, but all of them—the good ones included. The Church of Laodicea was not cold (evil) but lukewarm (good), and this prevented it from realizing that it was not hot (excellent).

To understand this more fully, we must look deeper into the context of the Matthew 16 passage. One of the tragedies of modern-day Bible translations is man’s well-meaning additions to the original text by way of subtitles, paragraph headings and so on. I can live with chapter and verse divisions because they help locate a specific passage, but many chapter divisions are located in the wrong place. Many times, a new chapter or section begins with the words “likewise,” “therefore” or “moreover,” which clearly refer the reader to the preceding chapter or section. Matthew 16:23 is a classic example of the confusion created by man’s addition to the Word of God. “But He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.’” Most Bibles have a dividing subtitle between verse 23 and verse 24: “Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’” This subtitle divider leads the reader to believe that verse 23 was the end of Jesus’ explanation and that verse 24, with its reference to self-denial and picking up the cross, is a different subject—in essence, a call to discipleship.

However, Jesus begins in Matthew 16:24 with what amounts to a paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 10:5. Denial of self is what “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ” is all about. Taking up the cross implies dying to ourselves, and this spells death for our speculations as well. Following Jesus means leaving behind our own understanding and submitting to His guidance.

The most dangerous piece of equipment a Christian carries is the mind because of its ability to produce thoughts. I am not so concerned with the evil thoughts our minds produce. Those are more easily spotted and identified. It is the good thoughts that our minds are capable of that often lead to disaster.

Let’s take the case of church splits. When neutral parties analyze a church split, they never find a group of good people being opposed by a group of evil people. Usually, the arguments on both sides of the split are quite reasonable. In fact, they both sound good. And that is the problem! They are good rather than excellent. Only God can provide the

excellent thoughts. Church splits often take place because people, relying on their own understanding, choose not to deny themselves. Both parties provide “good reasons” for their point of view that blocks God’s best.

Something similar occurs during the process that eventually leads to divorce. Well-meaning, compassionate advisers counsel divorce on the basis of some very good reasons. They say, “It is better for the children, because they won’t continue to be exposed to a bad example” or “It will give you a fresh start, and you certainly need one. You will definitely learn from this mistake, and next time you will do better.” These good thoughts cloud the reality that God hates divorce and that He has already provided us with divinely powerful weapons to deal with its cause. This, in turn, keeps us from using those weapons and we thus settle for a good solution rather than God’s best. Instead of denying ourselves, standing on God’s promises and fighting for our marriage, we choose divorce for “good reasons.” As good as they are, they are short of excellent.

In no way am I suggesting that divorce is an unforgivable sin, nor do I wish to add insult to injury to those trying to recover from its severe consequences. God is a God of love and mercy, and He is always able to restore. The point I am making is a narrower one. As long as we entertain only good options, we will never experience God’s best. In Matthew 5:3, Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Who are the poor in spirit? Those who do not rely on their own wisdom. Those who need to be led. Our self-sufficiency is the material of which the “lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God” is made (2 Cor. 10:5).

3. Strongholds often develop in the shadow of our strengths.

In military science, a stronghold is always built somewhere that is already strong. Rather than constructing a fort at the bottom of a floodplain, military engineers build it on top of a hill or at the entrance of a bay—both of which are already strong points. Likewise, Satan often targets our natural strengths in order to position his strongholds.

There is a very simple reason for this. We are constantly aware of our weaknesses and, therefore, we keep a close watch on them, thus making it more difficult for Satan to use the element of surprise. But not so with our strong points. Where we perceive ourselves as strong, we tend to relax on that particular point (see 1 Cor. 10:12,13). For instance, when it comes to my spiritual weaknesses, I pray about them every day. I do “spiritual Jazzercise” in the presence of the Lord every morning, pleading for help and mercy. The consequences of my past mistakes are too painfully in view for me not to do so. However, when it comes to my natural strengths, I am not so watchful. Overconfidence is always one step away, and this allows Satan to move into that area with great freedom.

Let me give you an example. Think of the worst thing that ever happened to you. Got it? Why was it so bad? Most likely because it was totally unexpected. Right? Why was it so unexpected? Because you never thought that it could happen to you like that. And why is this so? Because you knew you were strong in that particular area. In essence, something unexpected happened to you along the lines of your strength.

Basically, what happened is that a natural strength was pushed beyond its limits and, thus, turned into a weakness. This often happens in Christian circles such as seminaries. What is

the natural strength of a seminary? Teaching, right? However, by exaggerating that particular strength, a seminary may cause harm along the lines of that strength. For instance, the two least likely things to be found on seminary campuses are a strong prayer emphasis and an aggressive evangelism program. Why is this so? Is it because the faculty decided against it? No, usually it is because they taught too much of a good thing, such as the sovereignty and the omniscience of God. These two, when taken to an extreme, preempt the need for evangelism and for making our needs known to God.

The areas of our lives where we feel most confident are the areas in which we are most likely to develop overconfidence. Proverbs 3:5 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding." But confidence in self preempts the need to depend on God for guidance. We are not on the lookout for God's direction because we feel we can handle it. In essence, we have no early radar warning system to alert us to impending disaster.

I suggest that you take inventory of your perceived strengths. Watch them. Make a list of avenues available to the enemy through your flesh to undermine those strengths. You need to do this constantly! For instance, in the areas where I am weak, which are also the areas where I have failed before, I have the road memorized. I know the way in, and I also know the way out. Unfortunately, I have been there plenty of times. I can lecture on how Christians are enticed and lured away in those particular areas. The moment one of my regular temptations heads my way, I immediately recognize it.

However, in other aspects of my life, where I have historically been strong, I do not have the same frame of reference to recognize the work of the enemy. I have no early warning system. I'd better watch out. This is why so many times in the counseling room we hear heartbreaking stories of a man or a woman who has failed where they expected it the least. "I never thought I would go for something like that," we hear them lament, while they struggle not to drown in a sea of remorse. "I have always been strong in that area. What happened to me?" What happened is Satan crept in and hid in the shadow of their strength. The moment they blinked twice, he built a stronghold.

This is why Hebrews 4:12 presents the need to separate the soul from the spirit through the two-edged sword, which is the Word of God. The soul reflects our own thoughts; the spirit, God's. When these two are mixed we fail to discern the intentions of our heart. "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

4. Strongholds are often activated by painful trauma.

Time and again I have sat across from people in the counseling room who have told me something like this, "I will never forgive again. Never!" And then I later find out that the person has been gifted by God with the gift of mercy. Or someone will tell me, "I will never give money to the Church, ever!" and I will discover he has the gift of giving. Why would someone who is equipped by God with mercy choose not to forgive, which is the mainstay of that gift? And why would someone with the gift of giving become selfish and self-centered?

This basically happens because of abuse along the lines of God-given strengths. The ensuing trauma has built a pain reservoir deep enough to last a lifetime. That pain acts like a trigger. Anytime God provides an opportunity to exercise these gifts, the devil neutralizes it by activating that pain.

This could well be the case with Peter when Jesus appeared for the third time to him and the others after His resurrection (see John 21). Peter was always the first one to speak up, to ask questions, to volunteer information. However, this time, Peter did not say much. When Jesus questioned him about his love for Him, Peter answered Jesus in the affirmative but held back any comments regarding the shepherding of Jesus' sheep. The born leader was shying away from leadership. Why, if Peter was a born leader? On many occasions in the Gospels, Jesus had distinguished him as such. However, when Jesus told Peter he was going to betray Him, he argued back with a haughty display of self-assurance. He seemed to be saying, "I know I am strong and loyal. Therefore, I know I will never let you down." Unfortunately, he left out of the equation the third player: Satan. Satan knows when overconfidence is in place and how to take advantage of it (see 1 Cor. 10:12). Peter seemed to have been reluctant to exercise his God-given gift because of pain—pain caused by the traumatic events of the past.

5. Strongholds create a double mind that results in spiritual and emotional instability.

In the third chapter of his epistle, James warns us, "Teachers...shall incur a stricter judgment" (Jas. 3:1). In an era when we have elevated the office of teacher to the pinnacle of prestige in the Church, this warning is hard to understand. Unless, of course, we put it in the context of James's teaching on strongholds.

In chapter 1 of his epistle, James states that the double-minded man is unstable in all his ways (see Jas. 1:8). Such a person is capable of subscribing to two different—even opposing—views on account of the "two-diskette" capability of his mental computer. He then chooses to remain double-minded on account of selfish ambition (see Jas. 3:14). Selfish ambition refers to a personal agenda that is so dear to him that he is willing to sacrifice everything else, even God's agenda, to carry it out. He has made a decision not to surrender certain thoughts to the obedience of Christ.

When such a person is entrusted with teaching, the potential for the devil to infiltrate and influence the Church rises exponentially. He is like a radio receptor with two different bands, and a trusting, listening audience. One band picks up the wisdom from below (see Jas. 3:15), which is earthly, natural and demonic. The other one tunes in to the wisdom from above, which is from God. He is thus sending out mixed signals, and because of that, his audience is misled. This, in turn, results in him receiving a harsher judgment because he knew better.

As you can imagine, someone who one day expounds on God's wisdom, and the next day acts on wisdom that is earthly, natural and demonic, will certainly develop some problems leading to emotional and spiritual instability, in addition to harming those entrusted to his care.

Quarrels also become part of the picture, as warned by James in 4:1. Quite often, teachers with a personal agenda (which is a polite way of describing selfish ambition) start, promote and engage in strife among the brethren without realizing the magnitude of the evil they perpetrate. They may believe they are being persecuted. They see themselves as the victims rather than the victimizer. Can you imagine the devastating effect of such a person on a ministerial alliance that is striving to reach a city for Christ? Never is a person in the wrong more dangerous than when he honestly believes he is right, especially if the person is in a position of authority or influence.

What to Do with Strongholds

According to 2 Corinthians 10:5, strongholds must be destroyed. They are not to be remodeled. They are not to be repainted or covered with wallpaper. They are to be destroyed. Studying James 4:7-10, I see four steps to accomplish this:

1. "Submit...to God" (Jas. 4:7).

This entails a truth encounter. Jesus Christ is the truth, and this truth has been revealed to us through the living Word of God. Determine by the Word of God what is God's will. Choose to believe it, and confess it with your mouth in opposition to the circumstances that contradict the Word of God. "Not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39, NIV) should be your prayer. Bring down the partition that has allowed you to store two opposing views in your mind. Call truth "truth" in spite of your feelings, if necessary. Invite Jesus to come in. This is what Jesus Himself indicated to the Church of Laodicea, which was controlled by a stronghold so severe that it lost touch with reality (see Rev. 3:14-21). If it was good for them, it should be good for you also! I am not saying you should receive Him as your Savior anew. I am suggesting you invite Him into the compartment in your mind where your rationalizations and speculations reign.

A well-educated lady attended one of our seminars where she was exposed to this teaching. Her son had been away from the Lord and was doing drugs. She had tried to reason with him but to no avail. She disciplined him, but it made no impact on his attitude and behavior. After much pain and many tears, she gave up. Even though she knew that her son was a gift from God to her and her husband, she was unable to reconcile this with the fact that now her son was walking with the devil. She "reasoned" herself out of pain by telling herself, "He is old enough to drive a car and old enough to buy alcohol. Now it is his problem, not mine."

At the seminar, she made a decision to reenter the battleground. She chose God's Word and God's promises over Satan's lies. She took a decisive stand in the heavenlies, interceding for her son and claiming him for God. As soon as she began doing this, the old pain, uncertainty and perplexity came back like a flood. However, she stood her ground by faith in the Word of God. A few weeks later, her son began to respond to the gospel. Today, he is in full-time Christian service.

2. "Resist the devil" (Jas. 4:7).

The most effective way to resist the devil is by dying to the old self. When you take your position in Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:20), you place yourself completely outside of

Satan's reach. Being in Christ also takes care of your speculations. In Christ, everything is certain and proven. Renew your mind by memorizing Scripture. Nothing stops the devil like a statement prefaced by "It is written" (Matt. 4:4,7,10). If you meet the conditions set forth in the Scriptures—"Resist the devil"—God has promised that "he [the devil] will flee from you" (Jas. 4:7).

A distressed mother came forward for prayer at one of our seminars. She told the old, familiar story of a rebellious daughter who had turned her back on her family, the Church and the Lord. She was involved in all kinds of sin. She requested that we have intercessory prayer for her daughter. Less than a week later, the woman called to report that her daughter had come back to the Lord. However, it was through an unexpected avenue. As the mother began to submit to God, she was instantly convicted of sin in her own life. The Lord showed her that she had provided an entrance for the devil through her pent-up anger. She fully repented before God. She submitted to God and began to resist the devil in the area of her life where she had yielded to Satan, while aggressively claiming her daughter "in the heavenlies." Two days later, her daughter, who had not been home for months, called to ask permission to come for a visit.

When the daughter came, the mother asked forgiveness for her poor Christian example. This touched the daughter, who also repented. Today, both of them are walking with the Lord. As this mother died to her old self, Satan lost his grip on her, and, through her, the grip he had on her daughter. When she decided to resist the devil, Satan had no choice but to flee because he had no claim on her.

3. "Draw near to God" (Jas. 4:8).

The need to go back to God exists because we have drifted away from Him through our speculations. The sum of our speculations reflects the full measure of the distance we have walked away from God. Once Satan's hold on us has been broken, there is an immediate need to go back to God.

I remember the case of a woman afflicted with what is commonly called "multiple personality disorder." She had been treated by pastors, counselors and psychologists. There had been some improvement, but it never went past a certain point. As I counseled with her, I discerned a stronghold in her mind. Because of the painful trauma suffered as a child at the hands of her father, she was unable to take God at His word. Intellectually, she knew that God is love, but her own speculations voided the effectiveness of that truth. Every time she hit a certain point in her recovery, she stopped and turned around for fear of rejection on the part of God. We taught her to "cast all her anxiety on God because He cares." The stronghold was destroyed by faith in the Word of God, as she forced herself to cross the barrier of fear of rejection. Ever since she crossed that threshold, she has been on the road to steady recovery.

4. "And He will draw near to you" (Jas. 4:8).

The most common fear after realizing the depth and the gravity of our disobedience, is the fear of rejection by the One whom we have offended. That is why God promises that when we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us. Notice the contrast between the devil fleeing from us (see Jas. 4:7) and God drawing near to us (see Jas. 4:8). How reassuring! When the

woman I discussed previously reached out to God, not only was she able to pull down a major stronghold, she also opened up the way for God to draw near to her with blessings and unprecedented joy. No fear of rejection is possible in God's warm embrace.

The Final Blow

James 4:8 says, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded." Cleansing our hands refers to the outward manifestation of the stronghold, while purifying our hearts refers to the inward dimension. The first part, that which is visible, is easier to deal with. A person living in adultery will find it easier to break up the adulterous relationship than to rid himself of the immoral drive responsible for the sin. This is why this particular verse says "cleanse your hands,...and purify your hearts." The first phrase describes the symptom; the latter describes the root cause.

A heroine addict who has been in a detoxification program for 30 days will walk out with no physical addiction because his body has been deprived of drugs for a month. However, the first thing he is likely to do upon recovering his freedom is to inject himself. Why? Because even though his hands are cleansed, his heart has not yet been purified. He remains psychologically addicted. He continues to have a double mind, and a powerful battery of speculations is always on standby to prevent him from doing what God says he should. A stronghold has been totally destroyed only when a double-minded person becomes single-minded.

James has a straightforward prescription for this: "Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom" (Jas. 4:9). As you see the ugliness of your own sin, you will be drawn to His holiness. There is no better frame for God's grace than the gap between your sinfulness and God's holiness. Where? In the presence of the Lord. For how long? Until He exalts you. He will decide when you have been purified. You must wait and listen for His voice. In the meantime, "Do not speak against one another" (Jas. 4:11). This means that you should not justify yourself by blaming others. It's your heart, after all. You have no control over others, but you have full control over your response to their deeds.

The ultimate objective of this exercise is to eliminate double-mindedness. In Psalm 51, David says, "Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight, so that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, and blameless when Thou dost judge" (Ps. 51:4). What David is saying is: "God, You are in control. I am guilty, and You are righteous. There is only one opinion that counts, and that is Yours, oh Lord. I will not speculate but rather accept Your word."

When we sin, our tendency is to justify ourselves and to minimize the evil done. We plead guilty, but always with a request to say something on our behalf. As long as we do that, we perpetuate the existence of a double mind. We will not be free from sin until we are able to see sin the way God sees it. We must see it through His eyes.

This is why the command in James 4:9 is to be miserable, to mourn, to weep, to turn our laughter into mourning. The best way I have been able to implement this is by going into His presence, alone, and letting Him show me my sin as He sees it, and also through the

eyes of those people my sin has hurt, because the presence of the latter will cause me to be defensive and less than fully transparent. It has to be done in His presence with no witnesses! I must remain there until all my self-serving arguments collapse and I fully repent. Now I have only one mind: God's mind. Now my hands will remain clean because, by purifying my heart, I have eliminated the root cause: double-mindedness.

Personal Application

Perhaps God has convicted you of double-mindedness. Now you are able to see the stronghold in your life, and you want to tear it down. Let me encourage you not to give up. Persistence is the opposite of instability. I suggest that you determine what the will of God is and begin to hammer away at your wall of arguments. If your children are not walking with the Lord, confess God's promises regarding your children. If pastors in your city are divided, proclaim God's view on the matter. If your marriage is on the rocks, confess God's Word regarding marriage. Use God's words like a sledgehammer, and hit those situations repeatedly (see Matt: 4:4,7,10; Eph. 6:17). Never give up. Do it, day in and day out. Memorize pertinent Scripture and quote it out loud!

Ray Trembath, a pastor friend of mine in the San Francisco Bay area, told a story that illustrates this point. He told how a friend of his who was remodeling his home hired a contractor to demolish a cement wall. He watched as the contractor hit the wall with a sledgehammer. One blow, 2 blows, 3 blows, nothing happened. Then 10 and 15 blows, and still nothing happened. He continued—30, 35 blows, and still nothing. Finally, on the 36th blow, the wall developed a horizontal crack. On the next one, a spiderweb pattern of cracks appeared. On the 38th blow, the wall cracked all over. At that point, the contractor put the sledgehammer down and picked up a small hammer and a chisel, and, little by little, he brought down the wall.

This is also how a stronghold must be destroyed. That formidable stronghold you are looking at may seem to be made of solid granite. However, the Word of God is powerful (see Matt. 4:4,7,10; Eph. 6:17). The gospel is the power of God (see 1 Cor. 1:18). Choose God's Word over the circumstances. Confess the Word of God. Every time you do it, you are applying a sledgehammer blow to that granite wall. Keep doing it. Sooner or later, the first crack will appear. After that, it is only a matter of time before the whole thing crumbles.

"For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Cor. 10:4). Before we attempt to bring down Satan's stronghold over our city, we must destroy all the personal strongholds, or fortresses, he has placed in our own lives. Everything opposed to the will of God must come down. We must be set free, totally free, in Christ. Without that kind of freedom, our attacks on the forces of evil will never amount to anything more than a riot inside a POW camp. However, if the Son truly sets us free, we will soon be conducting an amphibious landing to secure God's perimeter in our city (see John 8:36). Prayer evangelism as described in 1 Timothy 2:1-8 requires "holy hands." Are you already destroying strongholds in the innermost part of your soul? Go for it!

Note

1. See Matthew 5:43-48; 6:12; Mark 11:25; Romans 12:14,17,19,20.