



For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3-5 TNIV)

A stronghold was a castle—though more like Oldbury Castle above Cherhill than the Tower of London. Oldbury does not look like much today but before explosives and modern machines it was a good place from which you could defend yourself and control the surrounding area. A stronghold is a place in our mind where we have built up defences so that we feel safe. It includes patterns of avoidance and self-justification as well as other things that stop us being true to ourselves and what God has made us to be.

Take the person who wants to make friends but just can't reach out to other people because they feel they are not worth knowing. It's not likely that they will be helped by reading a book about it. The problem is a stronghold. Or take the person whose fear of being wrong stops them from trying—at exams, at work, in love. Look at the chart at the end if you need more examples.

A stronghold is a negative behaviour pattern based on wrong thinking. It certainly includes extreme behaviour like addiction but it also includes "can't do" behaviour, the kind which finds a whole pile of reasons for leaving things just as they are.

ISN'T EVERYBODY BOUND BY SOMETHING?

"It sounds as though you're talking about weaknesses. After all none of us is perfect and God does use broken people doesn't he?" Yes he does use broken people but that is hardly the point. You can care for your family while have a broken leg in a cast. You may make a good job of it and hear people say, "Didn't she do well!". But you could do better with two good legs. There would be more things you could do and it would be far less effort. Freedom affects our usefulness, even if it doesn't affect our acceptability.

That's the point about strongholds. They might not stop us from doing what God wants entirely. We can still serve and bless people and function. But we do so at less than peak efficiency. We carry dead weight and because we are battling with ourselves as well as circumstances and the enemy we are more tired, more hassled and less effective than God intended.

CAN STRONGHOLDS BE DEALT WITH?

I had recently come through an episode in my life where I was prayed for to deal with some recurring behavioural problems. At the time I was seriously aware that trusting God was a major effort. It took all my resources to stay above water. As soon as circumstances looked bad, so did I.

On a visit to the USA, I got alongside a man called Dave Cunningham who was able to pray for me. He told me how a similar thing had happened for him. After prayer he had come to see the underlying problem was no longer a stronghold. It was a sort of green lizard which he could, with God's help grab and throw off instead of letting it pull him into bondage again.

When I walked out of his office I felt nothing, though I believed that something was happening. But as I fiddled with the seat belts in my hired car, I prayed that God would confirm to me that something had really happened. He did, within a day or two I found that my mind set was changing. By the time I got on the plane there was a definite tendency to expect good things and it resulted in some changes. I feel that I can risk more things going wrong. I don't waste so much time regretting mistakes. That isn't the end of it of course. When I find the old thing rearing up again I find myself dealing with it as a temptation or a bad taste in my mouth. I reach for the mouthwash. You can fool yourself into thinking that it's all just a new technique like positive thinking. I know that for me it's more than that. Being positive is much easier—less of a continual struggle.

THE PROBLEM WITH STRONGHOLDS

It was listening to Brian Houston, founder of Hillsong, that gave me a new way of explaining how these things happened and how they re-established themselves once somebody had been prayed for. Because that is part of the problem. Most of us have been prayed for once. The problem is that after a flying start at a new freedom the old bondages creep back and we again get stuck in the mud. Like many things we hear, revelation comes as old truth said in a new way which catches you straight between the eyes. He took (2 Cor 10:3-4)

FOUR STAGES IN BUILDING A STRONGHOLD.

1.Thoughts—That's where it all starts. What goes on inside my head is too important to be left to chance. I have a right to catch it and control it. Quite often the problems start when our minds are roaming free. Some of my worst times used to be while mowing the lawn. My mind used to run free and

I started to find negative, critical, fearful thoughts flying in like a flock of starlings. When we let our heads get out of control, ideas, experiences of rejection or insult or real damage become something we think about and react to—*déjà vu*, all over again.

2. Pretensions—The text calls this next stage a pretension—a claim or assertion. This is the point where the trouble really starts. A thought stakes a claim to being truth! It becomes part of the way I make decisions and affects my reactions.

3. Logical Arguments—The Greek word is actually logismos. When uncontrolled thoughts take root it doesn't take long before everything seems so obvious. We find explanations and facts to support the pretensions. Once a stray thought is supported by facts—even if the *facts* are complete garbage—we are stuck. At this point our minds are made up and new information is not welcome. It becomes difficult to process insights which could set us free. It just doesn't fit with what we think we know about ourselves: that we are unworthy, incapable, fit for nothing or that other people are not to be trusted.

4. Strongholds—Almost inevitably, unless challenged, we gradually become fixed in a negative behaviour pattern which can take over some part of our lives.

CAN I CHANGE NEGATIVE THINKING PATTERNS?

There is a balance between looking at these issues as though they are easily explained problems which we can resolve and recognising that we need God's help. Jesus came to set free those who were in bondage. Once you are tied up it is tough to get free. It was no more possible that strongholds should be torn down than that sin should be forgiven without intervention by Jesus. Part of our problem is a failure to recognise that when we become Christians the renewing of our minds does not happen automatically. There can be a crisis where we suddenly find that the grace of God bursts in upon us. Without question these events ought to be more common. The gospels taught about deliverance in their opening pages. Mark opens with the issue on page one and Luke just a little later. But even when we have been set free we have to be alert and disciplined in order to stay that way.

WHAT STEPS CAN I TAKE?

LEVEL ONE: If I am a free agent in Christ I do not have to take on thoughts that drop in on me from outside. I don't think that I have ever had the thought come into my mind that I could if I wished turn stones to bread. It isn't a problem for me. My uncontrolled thoughts most often have to do with really embarrassing stuff like fear of failure and whether I have remembered to lock the door. But like any temptation they can be rejected by the disciplined mind. I do not have to become subject to passing thoughts.

LEVEL TWO: Preoccupations will need stronger handling. Just recently I read a book by Larry Tomczak in which he gives pages of true statements which are designed to counter negatives. They are basic, profound and true of every believer. I have a copy of them. You could get the book or start your own list of verses and statements from the Bible. My own development of the Tomczak list starts: "I believe that God is going to do good things. I am a child of Abraham. I am one who believes!" It's powerful stuff. You can call this activity by any number of names. Declaration is good. Confession is good too because it means agreeing with God. In my experience, this becomes the test of how far an uncontrolled thought has bedded in. I believe tht the word of God is powerful. If I declare it, I stay free. Where the prophetic word comes into your life there is additional ammunition. Uncontrolled thoughts challenge the prophetic word and vice versa.

LEVEL THREE: Once the overwhelming logic of negative thinking has established itself in your mind the likelihood is that you will need help -- that's part of what pastors are for. Certainly you will need help to unscramble where your logic is faulty.

LEVEL FOUR: My own feeling is that the difference between a logical argument and a stronghold is more a matter of time than anything else. If the stronghold is an ever-growing wall of negative lies and semi-facts, that seems fairly obvious. I have known times in my life where I have been able to do an effective demolition job myself. On those occasion I think the stronghold has been at an early stage but most often I have needed to ask for help. Apart from anything else when somebody prays for you there is the power of agreement and if prayer occurs in a pastoral context the opportunity to make yourself accountable. Where I have been able to see myself released the key has always been revelation. God has suddenly switched the light on, exposing the problem and there and then I have called out and he has answered. Generally speaking it's best to yell for help. The only reason for not doing so seems to be a desire to cover up the problem. And we all know what God thinks about that.

HOW STRONGHOLDS GET BUILT

	THOUGHT	PRETENSION	LOGICAL PATTERNS	STRONGHOLD
Shyness	If I go into this room I will have nobody to talk to	Nobody wants to talk to me	I am not likeable or interesting	I will avoid new situations
Can't do	I can't do this	Everything I do goes wrong	Things go wrong because I am no good	I am not going to try
Victimised	I am here because X did this to me.	X has messed up my life	My life is bad because of other people	Powerful people must be obeyed/avoided
Disappointed	X let me down	I can't cope with being let down	People always let me down	I will not trust other people
Outvoted	I was right; they were wrong	Nobody listens to me	They are insecure	My job is to challenge insecure people
Criticised	It was unfair to criticise me	I was doing my best	Other people do not understand me	I will withdraw from involvement
No future	I can't get a job	They don't want people like me	I don't have what it takes to survive	The situation is hopeless
Prayer	God has not answered my prayers	There is something wrong with me	My prayers do not get answered	God does not accept me