

Strongholds in the Scriptures

Understanding Spiritual Strongholds

The word stronghold occurs about 50 times in Old Testament and once in the New Testament. In the OT it refers to physical fortresses, or to God as our stronghold or fortress. God intends to be our stronghold, but we are tempted to look to other strongholds as substitutes.

Today's popular term "spiritual stronghold" comes from this one NT passage:

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 NASB

"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 NIV). 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."

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 also gives other terms to describe spiritual strongholds:

- Speculations (*logismos* is also translated "arguments" NIV, "reasonings" AMP, "imagination" KJV, or "warped philosophies" MSG)
- Lofty Things (*hupsma* is also translated "pretensions" NIV, "high things" KJV, and "barriers" MSG)
- Thoughts (*noema* is also translated "opinions" ESV and schemes in 2 Corinthians 2:11 "We are not ignorant of his schemes")

I'd summarize the meaning of "strongholds" in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 as fleshly ways of thinking or living that become barriers to the Holy Spirit and thus refuges where the enemy can work in or among us.

Since the specific term "strongholds" is mentioned only once in the NT, we look for other passages that address speculations, lofty things and thoughts or opinions that become barriers to the Holy Spirit. It seems that such things are also warned against in several other NT passages that use these parallel terms for strongholds:

- Philosophies (Colossians 2:8 "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy...". (*philosophia* is also translated "big words" MSG, "intellectualism" AMP. It is a composite word from *philos* or affection and *sophia* or worldly wisdom.)
- Empty Deceptions Colossians 2:8 "See to it that no one takes you captive through... empty deception". (*kenos apate* is also translated "deceptive philosophy" NIV, "intellectual double-talk" MSG, "intellectualism" AMP, "vain deceit" KJV, "high sounding nonsense" NLT)
- Empty Words Ephesians 5:6-7 "Let no one deceive you with empty words". (*kenos logos* is also translated "religious smooth talk" MSG, and "groundless arguments" AMP)
- Elementary Principles Colossians 2:23 "You have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world... matters which have... the appearance of wisdom..." (*stoicheo* is also translated "basic principles" NIV, NKJV, "pretentious and infantile religion" MSG, "the world's elemental notions" AMP, "rudiments of the world" KJV, and "elemental spirits" ESV)
- Worldly and empty chatter 1 Timothy 6:20 "Guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called knowledge". (*bebelous kenophonias* is also translated "idle babblings" NKJV, "godless chatter" NIV, and "foolish discussions" NLT)

Other major passages that may address spiritual strongholds without using the term “stronghold” are Galatians 5:17-26; Ephesians 6:10-17 and Matthew 18:18-20 (with 1 John 3:8).

Galatians 5 seems relevant because the specific strongholds Paul was addressing in the context of 2 Corinthians were relational conflicts. Half the works of the flesh listed in Galatians 5 are relational conflicts.

It’s interesting how many of the Navigator “strongholds” that we’ve identified are either explicitly or implicitly present among Paul’s list of the deeds of the flesh. Here is a list of strongholds that we’ve repeatedly addressed in prayer in our ministry: pride, fear, control, criticism, independence, resistance, sexual immorality, unbelief, and quenching the Spirit. Look for them among the deeds of the flesh here:

Galatians 5:16-26

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

Ephesians 6 exhorts us to “stand firm against the schemes [*methodea*, methods] of the devil and instead to put on (or replace them with) the armor of God. It seems like the schemes of the devil are the flip side of spiritual strongholds. That is, one of his schemes seems to be to erect spiritual strongholds. His schemes are to be addressed by putting on the armor of God.

Ephesians 6:10-18

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the Gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.

Our assignment to bind and loose is crucial to binding and loosing or undoing spiritual strongholds. When 1 John 3:18 says that the Son of God appeared to “destroy” the works of the devil, the Greek word translated destroy is *luo*, which primarily means to loose or undo. Here are the ways that *luo* is translated in the NASB NT, in order of frequency: untie (13), release (8), break (7), destroy (5), loose (4), annul (1), putting an end to (1), remove (1), take off (1), unbind (1). You can see that the primary meaning of *luo* is to untie, release, or loose. So, Jesus came to untie, release or loose the works of the devil, but He intends

to do it through us. It therefore seems like we need to learn to untie, release or loose “strongholds”.

Matthew 18:18-20

“Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose [luo] on earth shall have been loosed [luo] in heaven. “Again I say to you, that if two of you agree [symphoneo, harmonize] on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. “For where two or three have gathered together [sunago, have been led together] in My name, I am there in their midst.”

1 John 3:8

The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy [luo, loose, release, untie, undo] the works of the devil.

Altogether, in these foundational passages that address strongholds notice these exhortations regarding what to do with strongholds:

- Destroy them 2 Corinthians 10:4 (*kathariseo* is also translated “take down”, “pulls down”, “cast down” NKJV, “demolish” NIV, “smash” MSG, “refute” AMP)
- Take them captive 2 Corinthians 10:4 (*aichmalotizontes* is also translated “bring into captivity” NIV, NKJV, “lead every thought and purpose away captive” AMP, “bring into captivity” KJV, “capture rebellious thoughts” NLT)
- Crucify them, Galatians 5:24
- Stand firm against them & Resist them Ephesians 6:11, 13, 14
- Put on the armor of God, Ephesians 6:14ff
- Extinguish them, Ephesians 6:16
- Pray in the Spirit, Ephesians 6:18
- Bind them and loose them, Matthew 18:18-20

Roles of Leaders in Destroying Strongholds:

Paul & Corinthian Strongholds

It’s interesting that the one mention of strongholds in the New Testament is at the start of four chapters where Paul was exercising strong spiritual leadership in the face of resistance to his leadership. His leadership authority and influence were being challenged and criticized by those under his leadership care. It was in that context that Paul wrote, *“the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses (strongholds).”* (2 Corinthians 10:3)

He went on to say, *“You are looking at things as they are outwardly.”* (v7). That is how we often fail to recognize strongholds for what they are. We merely look at things outwardly through the lenses of our experience, history, psychology, organization management or culture. Those are all important, but as Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:12, *“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”* Satan loves it when we fail to recognize, and use, the authority we have over these hidden spiritual forces that are opposing our spiritual and organizational leadership.

If one looks at Paul's letters to the Corinthians through the lens of a leader tearing down strongholds, then these may be strongholds among the Corinthians that Paul was tearing down:

1. Personal loyalties and factions 1 Co 1:11, 3:1ff
2. Depending on cleverness 1 Co 1:17ff; 2:1ff; 2 Co 11:6
3. Worldly wisdom 1 Co 1:20; 2:6-7; 3:18ff; 2 Co 1:12
4. Pride 1 Co 4:8; 5:2
5. Depending on positional or religious power 1 Co 4:8; 5:2; 2 Co 11, 12 & 13
6. Sexual immorality 1 Co 5; 6; 7; 10:6ff; 11:27ff
7. Legalism 1 Co 8:1ff; 2 Co 3:7
8. Idolatry 1 Co 8:1ff; 10:7, 14, 2 Co 6:14ff
9. Unintentional demon fellowship 1 Co 10:20
10. Seeking status through demonstrating spiritual powers 1 Co 12, 13, 14
11. Unbelief 1 Co 15
12. Independence from, or resistance to, God-ordained authorities 2 Co 2; 3; 7; 10
13. Love of comfort vs suffering 2 Co 4; 5; 6
14. Greed and covetousness Vs generosity 2 Co 8-9
15. Love of class distinctions, reputation and their power 2 Co 11-13

Paul's approach to destroying such strongholds among the Corinthians involved a lot of teaching and confronting and personal story. But he also exhorted the Galatians and Ephesians to personally crucify fleshly strongholds, stand firm against them, resist them and extinguish them in their own lives, and to pray in the Spirit in behalf of others who may be affected by strongholds. Binding and loosing as Jesus taught us also seems to be a central prayer responsibility in addressing strongholds.

Israelite Leaders & Strongholds

If spiritual strongholds truly are fleshly ways of thinking or living that become barriers to the Holy Spirit and thus become refuges where the enemy can work in or among us, then it's interesting to look at how Old Testament Israelite leaders and prophets addressed the strongholds that they encountered.

It seems like idolatry was the biggest and most persistent stronghold among the Israelites. That is natural because idolatrous worship and dependence on false gods or idols (and the sexual immorality that accompanied such worship) was the prevailing stronghold of the cultures in which Israel was birthed.

The OT narratives then appear more relevant to what it may mean for Navigator leaders to tear down strongholds. Think of Moses' conflict with the idolatry of Egypt. Think of Achan, and later Rachel, hiding idols that became intolerable and dangerous footholds and strongholds of resistance to the righteous rule of Jehovah.

Think of the destruction that followed Solomon's seduction to worship foreign gods. Think of how even righteous Israelite kings that succeeded him often failed to remove the high places of idol worship. Apparently, they became blind to how those high place strongholds gave the enemy a place among them. What seemed culturally acceptable to them was regarded by God as spiritual adultery, so eventually he sent them in to 70 years of exile to immerse them in a disgusting and oppressive idolatrous culture.

That is the context for how God used Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, along with the exilic and post-exilic prophets to lead Israel into truly tearing down and destroying the stronghold that the enemy had maintained among them for generations. Bible scholars say that after the exile, Israel was mostly free from idolatry.

So, what did these leaders do to effectively tear down the last vestiges of the strongholds that still remained among them after 70 years of exile?

1. Daniel led prophetically in mostly *quiet behind the scenes worship, confession, lament and intercession*, which *mobilized angelic forces* to fight for their restoration. Occasionally he also risked everything to take a *public stand in renouncing* the stronghold.
2. Ezra was raised up to *publicly rebuild* a culture of worship. He and his people invested boldly and zealously in miraculously *restoring* temple worship (i.e. abiding). He *led them to reflect on the Scriptures* they had neglected, as a foundation for their repentance. He *led them into public and emphatic lament* over their sins. When there were relapses, he *led and strongly exhorted* them to renounce those relapses, at great personal cost.
3. Nehemiah later *led into renewed and deeper repentance* through personally demonstrating prolonged *weeping, mourning and fasting and prayer*. He then *led them to follow through to restore* tangible and enduring cultural structures to protect the culture that they had lost. After Ezra's initiatives, it seems like they had given up and lost heart. But Nehemiah led them to follow through by *resourcing, organizing and defending restoration* that was intended to ensure keeping the spiritual strongholds dismantled.

Notice that this process of tearing down Israel's strongholds took decades of intense and sacrificial leadership. That builds our hope, courage and determination as we look back over decades of God speaking to us about strongholds that He wants torn down.