

## Freedom What's Next?

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January 17, 2021

I remember back in high school learning from Greek Mythology about a battle between the Achaeans and the city of Troy. Troy was a well-fortified city, nothing and no one could get in. After several failed attempts to invade the city, the Achaeans came up with a final, and desperate plan. They built a giant wooden horse and presented it as a gift. Seeing this as a symbol of surrender and peace, the people of Troy accepted the gift and brought it into the fortified walls of their city. But the giant horse was actually hollow and filled with Achaean soldiers. One night fell, and the city was celebrating their apparent victory, the soldiers came out of the horse, opened the gates from within, and the entire Achaean army marched in to defeat Troy.

Today, the phrase “Trojan horse” has come to symbolize anything that *looks* desirable on the outside, but actually causes *damage* from within, usually by deceptive means.

In Hebrews 12:1-2 we read: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

We’ve been asking the question “what’s next?” in our walk with God. Regardless of where you are in your faith, or what stage of life you’re in, God’s inviting you to know him more and follow Jesus. And these verses in Hebrews tell us to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. To examine our lives and see if we’ve let any Trojan horses into the gates of our heart, slowing our ability to run the race marked out for us.

So, for many of us, “what’s next” is to finally be free from strongholds – *the behaviors or thought patterns that reside in our heart and are destroying our lives from within.*

Now I need to mention a few things before we get started:

First: This topic could easily be a series in itself. We’re going to explore this biblically, with some practical steps along the way, but please understand there’s way more to say on this subject than one message allows.

Second: We need to be clear about what we’re NOT talking about. We’re not talking about how to deal with the daily *temptations* we might face, we’re talking about being free from repeated thoughts and behaviors that we just can’t seem to get rid of.

Think of it this way: *Temptations* are like arrows shot over the walls, trying to *gain access* to the fortress of our hearts. *Strongholds* are *already inside the gates*. They are behaviors and thought patterns that have taken up residence in lives, keeping us from following God and potentially causing damage in our lives.

Third: I recognize this is a heavy topic. Every single person - here Franklin Road, at Shelby Street, and online - has been wounded, to some extent, by someone else’s stronghold. *And we’ve*

*very likely wounded others with ours.* I also believe that, for many, your marriage / or future marriage, success at your job / or future job, your relationships, and most importantly, your walk with God and eternity, may hang in the balance of finally being free from one or multiple strongholds in your life.

So what that in mind, let's pause and ask God to guide our time together.

The Apostle Paul is wrapping up a letter to encourage and strengthen a church when he writes this in Ephesians 6:10-12: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

On June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1944, General Patton addressed troops of the Third Army. The very next day, these brave soldiers stormed the beaches of Normandy in a defining battle of WWII, leading to the defeat of Nazi - Germany. Now, General Patton's speech was direct and inspirational, but reading it, I realized that not once did he ever say something like; "this is war," or "hey, don't forget we're at war." These troops *knew* why they were in England, and they *knew* what was at stake. They didn't need reminding there was a war going on.

Friends, if you and I want to be truly free from behaviors or thought patterns causing damage to our walk with God and to those we love, we need to *remember we're at war.*

Pastor and author Pedro Okoro wrote: "Spiritual warfare is very real. There is a ferocious battle raging in the realm of the spirit between the forces of God and the forces of evil. Warfare happens every day, all the time. Whether you believe it or not, you are in a battlefield. You are at war."

Scripture is filled with images and warnings of a spiritual battle that's happening *right now*. Just because we didn't know about it, or forget about it, doesn't mean it's not happening. And Paul is reminding the Ephesian church there's a spiritual war being fought. But Paul goes a step further, trying to help them *recognize the real enemy.*

About 8 years ago, the first book of the Hunger Games series came out. I've since read all the books and watched all the movies. And there's a pivotal scene in the second book where the main character, Katniss Everdeen, is ready to fire an arrow at another combatant in the games when he says to her, "*Katniss, remember who the real enemy is.*" This changed where she aimed her arrow, and the ultimately helped her defeat the real enemy.

Listen, the real enemy we face, in spite of what we're told by the media, is NOT a political party, or our government as a whole, or another nation, or a social agenda, or people of different race or gender than you. In Ephesians 6:11, Paul says to "be strong in the Lord, and put on the full armor of God...so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes."

In 1 Peter 5:8 we're told to "be alert and of sober mind." Why? Because: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour."

If your marriage is struggling, your spouse is not the enemy, the devil is! He's the one working to separate what God has brought together. If you're at odds with a relative, co-worker, or friend, they're not the real enemy. The devil is working to sow seeds of division and hate to isolate us.

A study by the Barna Research Group revealed that 40% of *Christians* don't believe Satan is a real being, but is merely a *symbol* of evil.

But 19<sup>th</sup> century French Poet, Charles Baudelaire, wrote: "Never forget that the devil's cleverest ploy is to persuade you that he doesn't exist."

In order for us to begin the journey of freedom from thoughts and behaviors we've let camp in our heart, that keep us from growing in our walk with God, and maybe are causing damage in our lives, and in the lives of those we love, we've got to *remember we're in a spiritual war*, we've got to *recognize the real enemy*. And we've got to *recognize the nature of the battle*.

Ask the average person what they struggle with most, and, if they're honest, they'll tell you they wrestle with things of like anger, envy, drinking too much, eating too much, pornography, laziness, control issues, materialism and other external behaviors. But Paul told us that "...our struggle is not against flesh and blood...the battle's not in the visible realm, but in the unseen places of the heart."

That's what Jesus was saying in Matthew 12:35: "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him."

In Mark 7, Jesus said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come"...then Jesus listed things that could easily be considered strongholds in a person's life: "sexual immorality, theft, adultery, greed, envy," and concludes by saying, "all these evils come from inside and defile a person." (Mark 7:20-23)

*The real battle is in the interior world of our lives!*

A friend of mine told me that as she was sitting with God in her quiet time recently, she realized that all the outward behaviors she struggles with come from inner place of fear, insecurity, or pride inside her heart and mind. Everything she wrestles with on the *outside* is from one or more of those core issues *inside* her heart. I tend to agree with that.

This is why trying to manage or modify our behavior doesn't work. It will eventually fail every single time. Because while we try to change the outward behaviors, our interior issues remain and will eventually surface again when we're stressed or our guard is down.

Do you realize that God desires, and is able to, remove the fear, insecurity, and pride that drive our unwanted behaviors, and replace them with his love, grace, provision and purpose?

But until we recognize the nature of the battle, that we've got to let God do a healing work *inside*, we'll be stuck in an unending cycle of managing our outward behavior without ever making real progress towards the full and whole life that Jesus came to give.

We live in a city, known worldwide for a race that runs round and round. But that's not God's plan for our lives. God is calling us to more! And I think, deep down, we want more than a life that runs round and round.

Which leads to an all-important question, and it's a question Jesus asked a man in John 5. Look at this text with me:

“Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool...here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, ‘Do you want to get well?’” (John 5:1-6)

Now, what kind of question is that? This guy's been paralyzed for 38 years, who wouldn't want to get well from that condition, right? Yet Jesus still asked him the question.

Now imagine that Jesus is here in this room, sitting across from you. And here you are, with whatever behaviors or thought patterns you just can't seem to shake, those strongholds that have taken up residence in your life, and Jesus asks you that same question: “Do you want to get well?” What's your answer? What's your *real* answer? Not what you think you're supposed to say because he's Jesus and you're in church. *Do you really want to get well?*

One of my favorite quotes is from a book I read years ago called *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. In it, the author (Peter Scazzero) says that a person is ready to change “when the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of changing.”

So, are you tired of being in a never-ending cycle of trying to manage thoughts and behaviors without lasting success? Are you're ready to allow God to set you free from the inside out? *Do you want to get well?*

About 20 years ago, there were thought patterns and behaviors in my life that I would consider strongholds. I wrestled on and off again with pornography, I was defensive, short tempered, impatient, and controlling...among other things. I could manage these behaviors or thoughts for a while and then in a moment of stress or weakness I'd be right back to those actions and attitudes that were destroying my walk with God, hurting those I cared about, and inhibiting the race that God had marked out for me.

I went to a Christian counselor, sat in her office, told her what was going on, and I'll never forget the first thing she asked me. “Tom, do you want to *act* better or do you want to *be* better?”

Do you see the difference? Simply wanting to “act better” would've meant learning more tools to try and manage my behavior. *Being* better was about letting God do a healing work in my heart, which would, in time, naturally transform how I lived. I said I wanted to be better, and we began

the slow work of allowing God to heal the fear, insecurity, and pride in my life. It was challenging at times, but it was also unbelievably life-giving in my journey towards freedom.

So...do you want to get well?

Honestly, some of us are not there yet. You may not be ready to let go of strongholds in your life. You may not think you have anything resembling a stronghold, or believe what you're doing isn't really hurting anyone. Maybe you're thinking, "Listen, I just wanted to come to church, or watch a church service, I don't need someone telling me how to live my life."

If that's you, my prayer is this: if you ever reach a point when you're ready for God to do a work in your heart, I pray you'll remember His open-armed invitation and his ability to set you free.

But if you do want to get well, then God, through his word, gives us some initial steps we can take. And the first is to *identify and confess our strongholds*.

Proverbs 28:13 says, "Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy."

So what's hindering your ability to run the race God has for you as a child in his kingdom? What's been easily entangling your mind and heart lately? Let me ask it this way: *Is there anything in your life that's more important to you than your relationship with God? Is there anything in your life you fear losing more than your relationship God?*

Huh! Asking that way opens to the possibility of strongholds we haven't even thought of.

This (phone) might be a stronghold for some. There's this app that tells me how much I'm on this a day and it was shocking recently to realize what a dominant place this has in my life. Is this the first thing I pick up in the morning and the last thing I put down at night? Is *this* a trojan horse that looks good for what it gives me access to, but is getting in the way of more important things?

Your stronghold could be your phone, or video games, social media, or your appearance. Even "good things" like exercise, or projects, or our careers can become strongholds.

So, I want to challenge you: take 10 minutes this week, sit in a quiet place and ask God to help you *honestly* identify anything that might be a stronghold in your life. Anything that's more important to you than Him!

Then, confess your strongholds, first to God. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he (God) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Then confess them to other believers you do life with. James 5:16 says, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

Speaking to Christians Paul wrote this in Galatians 6:2, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

My father-in-law is a recovering alcoholic. He credits his 30 years of sobriety to two things: His walk with God, and his commitment to work with, and be held accountable by, others in AA. He still attends several meetings a week and every time he shares, he starts with the same public confession. “Hi, I’m Jim, and I’m alcoholic.”

Friends, there’s great power in confessing areas of weakness to God and to other trusted believers. And this is one of the reasons I love Rooted so much. Rooted is a 10-week experience to grow closer to God & others to launch you into an ongoing and intentional community called a life group.

Week 5 of Rooted is all about strongholds. And there’s a time, during week 5, when the men and women in each group split off by themselves, and, with great honesty and confidentiality, they confess their strongholds to one another and pray for one other.

It is, by far, one of the most meaningful, initially intimidating, but ultimately liberating experiences I’ve been a part of in ministry. It allows us to bring to the light what’s been hidden in the dark for far too long, to unload the weight of sin and shame and share the burden with others, to be honest with God and with others in a safe and caring environment.

The only danger with confession is to think immediately afterwards that the hard work is done. People after week 5 are so relieved to unload the weight of their strongholds that we remind them confession is the first step towards freedom, but the next step is to *gear up for the battle*.

And we’ve already been told in Hebrews 12:1 how to do this: we throw off the things that hinder us, and we put on the full armor God provides.

This could mean that you limit screen time on your device so you can spend time in scripture.

Or you ask a friend to help you throw out the alcohol, the pills, or the credit cards and take the money you save and start seeing a Christian counselor who’s able to help you get to the core issues dictating your thoughts and behavior.

Maybe gearing up for the battle is limiting adult content on your Netflix account or putting parental controls on your computer asking someone else to create the password so you can’t change it back, then focusing in on your marriage or purity in your singleness.

Maybe your life group needs to recommit to the regular, honest, and transparent accountability you learned about in Rooted, truly challenging each other towards godliness through reading and memorizing scripture and prayer.

Maybe you need to throw off the noise of the world (news/social media) so you can be still and be reminded that God is in control.

Our spiritual battle is not meant to be fought in isolation. We need God's help, and we need community around us so we can be encouraged *and* encourage others!

Which leads to the last step we have time for: we have to *fight like the battle has already been won*.

We just finished a series in Isaiah, and we read this in Isaiah 53:5: "But he (Jesus) was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."

Psalms 103:2-4: Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion.

Friends, God has already made a way for redemption and freedom. Healing *is* available: spiritually, relationally, emotionally, and mentally because of Jesus!

In Romans 8:1, 35-39 we read:

"So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. Who then will condemn us? No one – for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us. I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Guilt and shame are weapons the enemy uses to convince us there's no hope in redemption. We think: "*Why even fight, God can't still love me.*" These verses remind us that's just not true!

One more passage: "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." (2 Corinthians 10:3-4)

Friends, we need to fight with hope, because in Jesus the battle's already won!

In July of last year, authorities in Malaysia discovered 1800 tons, or 3.6 million pounds, of toxic waste, hidden in a port just feet from the major waterways to Singapore and the Pacific Ocean. Left unattended, the toxins would've leaked into the water system causing untold damage to the environment, people's health, and the world economy. Luckily it was discovered and removed in time.

Friends, God's inviting us to more! For our relationship with him, for our marriages or singleness, for our families, for the people we work with, for our community. And strongholds are like toxic waste in our hearts. If left buried inside, it will eventually seep out into every area, causing untold damage.

The good news is it's *not* too late, you're *not* too far gone, and you're *not* outside the realm of God's love and his desire and ability to set you free.

The question is, *do you want to get well?* Are you ready to move beyond managing behaviors to real freedom from strongholds that've taken residence in your heart?

If so, here are some different ways to respond:

Visit the porch for prayer, and to connect with someone to help point you in the right direction.

Visit our website: [www.thecreek.org/care](http://www.thecreek.org/care) – check out the “resources center” tab or the “care appointment” tab.

Sign up for Rooted: [www.thecreek.org/rooted](http://www.thecreek.org/rooted) – and get connected with a safe and caring environment to grow with God and others.