

THE MAN
WHO WRESTLED
WITH GOD

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New Wine Press

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DEDICATION

To Dr R.T. and Mrs Louise Kendall
Our beloved friends and
predecessors at Westminster Chapel
whose prophetic preaching, teaching, insight and counsel
were formative and life-changing for both of us,
leaving an indelible and lasting mark upon our lives.

Thank you.

(HEBREWS 6:10)

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INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of my first term of training for pastoral ministry at the London Theological Seminary back in 1978, my wife Ruth and I decided to get out of London one Friday evening and took off in an aged and unreliable Triumph Herald car that had been given to us as gift by a friend who no longer wanted it. The car was old and somewhat decrepit, though it still ran, but worse still it was without a heater or hot-air blower. On that bitterly cold December night with the snow beginning to fall, the result was that we were shivering and trying to stay warm, whilst vainly trying to de-mist our freezing windscreen. Our field of view and sense of wellbeing were both diminishing by the minute. We were headed out of London and making for a Christian conference centre called Hildenborough Hall, somewhere out in the beautiful wooded hills of Kent, some 40 to 50 miles away, where that very night a Christian folk group that we had personally known for years were giving a concert. It was supposed to be a real end-of-term treat!

The journey was hard because we were new to London and unfamiliar with its complex roads and routes out of town. The early evening commuter traffic leaving the city was very heavy, and in the darkness we rapidly became lost. Time passed slowly in long queues of cars and drivers skidding in the slush and snow, so that even as we cleared London we knew that

the journey would be fraught with difficulties, if we ever made it at all. Completely lost within an hour or so, I pulled over to ask for directions at the drive of a large, brightly lit, but unknown house. As I tentatively made my way on foot up the slope, slipping on the ice and snow of the fresh wintry-white driveway, I was suddenly startled by the appearance of the terrifying shape of a huge, black vicious-looking dog leaping out of the shadows and obviously intent on attacking me, tearing me to pieces and eating my bloodied remains to help ward off the bitter cold and aid its very survival that winter!

Its teeth bared, it snarled and slavered in my face, with misty hot breath clouding me in the darkness and causing me to freeze on the spot with fright. I decided right then to begin the attempt to back out of this dangerous situation and, hopefully, avoid serious injury. Not knowing what to do best to pacify my murderous attacker, I started to whistle nervously. I think the tune was the one that fits with the words, “Whenever I feel afraid, I whistle a happy tune, and no one seems to know, I’m afraid!” It seemed to work. You’ll be glad to know that I made it back to the car, minus travel directions but still alive, and with no serious injury except to my wounded pride. We eventually made it to Hildenborough Hall, but not until an hour after the concert had finished and only just in time to catch our musician friends and say goodbye, before they headed back home to Lancashire. It was a memorable night.

I have never forgotten the shock and surprise that bounding man-eater of a dog gave me that evening. My wife and I often recall the incident and laugh uproariously about it, as we did in the car that night when she first mocked me mercilessly, especially over my fake courage and feeble whistling in the dark. None of us like to be taken by surprise, frightened, and made to feel totally helpless and unable to do anything much about it – but this is especially true if the attacker is God!

This is what happened to Jacob on one fear-filled, terrible night that he would never be able to forget. The brilliant Christian writer Frederick Buechner in his book of sermons called *The Magnificent Defeat* comments on the way the Bible often springs stories on us that we don't expect to find in the Bible at all, stories that at first glance do not appear to be edifying or uplifting, or may appear just plain boring. He goes on to explain this with an unusual observation:

“The story of Jacob at the river Jabbok, for instance. This stranger leaping out of the darkness of the night to do battle for God knows what reason. Jacob crying out to know his name but getting no answer. Jacob crippled, defeated, but clinging like a drowning man and shouting out the words, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’ Then the stranger trying to break away before the sun rises. A ghost, a demon? The faith of Israel goes back some five thousand years to the time of Abraham, but there are elements of this story which were already old before Abraham was born, almost as old as man himself. It is an ancient, jagged-edge story, dangerous and crude as a stone knife. If it means anything, what does it mean? And let us not assume that it means anything very neat or very edifying. Maybe there is more terror in it or glory in it than edification. But at any rate the place where you have to start is Jacob: Jacob the son of Isaac, the beloved of Rachel and Leah, the despair of Esau, his brother. Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Who and what was he?”¹

In this book I want to take up Buechner's challenge along with his thought-provoking observations and questions. I wish to explore some of the mysteries of the cryptic story of “The Man who Wrestled with God”, and find in it not only some of the terror, but also some of the glory as well as its

surprises. Perhaps, in some way that I cannot predict, but which I have personally experienced to a degree myself, you too will come to experience the reality of God's ability to forgive the mistakes of our guilty past, heal the wounds of our heart that may still lie bleeding in the present, and turn your fears and tears into laughter once again, so that you will be better prepared for the future the Lord has planned for you.

Greg Haslam
Westminster Chapel, London
March 2009

Notes

1. Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, HarperCollins, 1985, p. 11.

THE MAN WHO WRESTLED WITH GOD

GENESIS 32:22–32

“That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maid-servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’

But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’

The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’

‘Jacob,’ he answered.

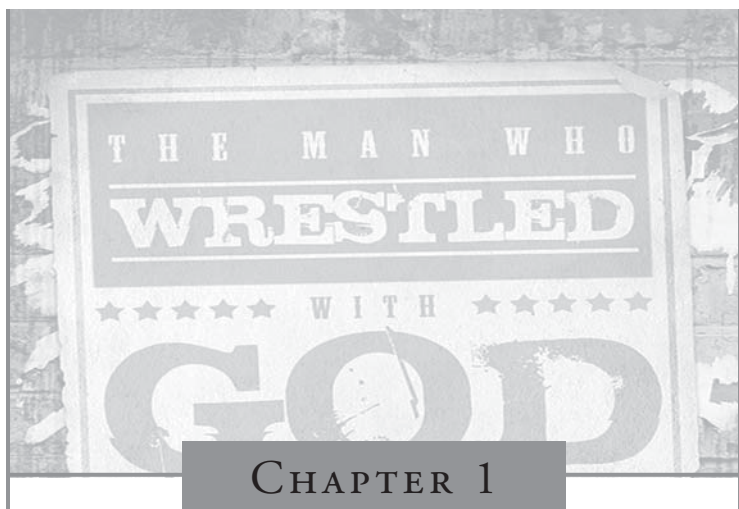
Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.’

Jacob said, ‘Please tell me your name.’

But he replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’ Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.’

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon."



PULLING DOWN STRONGHOLDS

The story we aim to explore at length is one of the most puzzling and mysterious narratives in Scripture. It may be few column inches long in most Bibles, but it is also many fathoms deep. In this sense it is like the human heart itself. We are often a mystery to ourselves and the dealings of God with each one of us are similarly puzzling and often open-ended in terms of any kind of full explanation from Him. God rarely ties up the loose ends and justifies His ways to us, at least not in my experience, and I'm learning to live with paradoxes and unanswered questions as my trust in God deepens by the year.

One thing we can say for sure about this cryptic wrestling match that Jacob engaged in at the brook Jabbok, is that it was primarily about a violent inner-transformation within the soul of this mixed up but significant man. But then, isn't

this what needs to happen to all of us at some time or other? The issue centres upon something the Bible calls “strongholds”, the results of our reactions to situations and people that cause us to adopt certain warped and unhelpful systems of thinking, beliefs and reactions to painful circumstances. We form defence mechanisms and strategies to protect ourselves from discomfort and interference, even from God. We could list such ugly reactions as manipulation, rejection, lusts, fears, immoral behaviour, stubbornness and anger.

Much changes when we first come to faith in Christ, of course, and many problems are relatively simple to deal with. But a great number of them are not. Entangled roots of bad habits, wrong-headed thinking and stubborn resistance to God remain guarded and unexposed so that their presence and influence may continue for years. This was certainly the case with Jacob and it’s probably true of us also. These are areas of our lives not yet under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. So change, when it finally comes, has to occur deep within the core of our being. There comes a time when we stop running, cease hiding and allow the Lord Himself to perform divine surgery upon us to cut out enemy activities from our lives.

The Apostle Paul addresses this issue in a passage written to his beloved Corinthian church, a community that brought him a curious mixture of both the highest delight and the deepest distress. It is a passage which should help us to understand something of God’s ways in exposing and demolishing such high-walled pockets of resistance to God in our souls.

“By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you – I, Paul, who am ‘timid’ when face to face with you, but ‘bold’ when away! I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. 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. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.”

(2 CORINTHIANS 10:1–6)

In this striking and lengthy letter to one of the most challenging and troubled churches Paul ever planted, the apostle is dealing with a stubborn and recalcitrant minority in the church at Corinth who had an influence way beyond their numbers. They would not accept either him or his ministry any longer. They preferred the phony and flamboyant tomfoolery of false apostles, along with their trickery, financial exploitation and lies. This poses a question for us: why is it that some people can at one time . . .

- See something of the truth spoken to us by a choice servant of God
- See it embodied in the life and lifestyle of that servant himself
- See the anointing of God’s Holy Spirit on him to preach and teach that truth relevantly into our lives
- See it continue to bear fruit in the lives of other people around him

. . . and yet, still continue to refuse to yield honour, belief and obedient action in response to God as a result of the truth spoken to them?

You can’t say that such people aren’t really Christians at all. Nor blame the style of delivery, clothing, fashion, voice, or mannerisms of the preacher. *So what is it then?*

This question may seem anomalous to ask of a man who

lived around 1600 years before the apostle Paul, and certainly one who lived over three millennia before our lifetimes, as we are going to do throughout this book as we consider a crucial episode in the life of the patriarch Jacob, the Son of Laughter, one of the twin boys born to Isaac and Rebekah. But strange as it may seem, this kind of resistance and arguing with God seems to be a permanent part of the human condition. We are congenitally discomforted by and at odds with God on occasions when we are challenged by His truth spoken into our lives, even if we have believed in Him for some considerable time.

There are parts of us, inner hidden areas of our personalities we might say, that are stubborn and resistant to change and to God, and that won't yield to either the ministry we hear or to the ministries who bring it, let alone to the Christ who sent them. These hidden recesses of our personality are at odds with God's Word, sometimes God's servants, and even with God Himself. And this can continue for years, only to be defended and rationalized by the person themselves whenever this condition is uncomfortably exposed or challenged by the Holy Spirit.

Here at Corinth, Paul, in his absence from the Corinthians personally, was accused of being "all talk" and a man full of bluff and bravado in his letters – strutting his stuff, throwing his weight around, coming on strong – but acting like a total wimp when he was actually with his readers face to face (v. 1). Anyone can be brave when there is no threat or danger immediately present, they said, but let someone call their bluff to their face and stand up to them and they readily back off. "*That's Paul,*" they said! And the question is, how could they have been so wrong?

It's partly because Paul didn't throw his weight around! True servants of God in ministry generally aren't bully-boys, con-artists or spiritual gangsters who threaten people and become intimidating, bawling people out in order to get their

own way. Paul protests that he was meek and just, reasonable and fair among them. And here “meek” doesn’t mean “weak”, it means “strength under constraint and strong control” like Moses and like Jesus, whom the Bible calls the meekest men who ever lived.

FACING UP TO OUR STRONGHOLDS

No, the real problem here was in the hearts of Paul’s opponents, not in Paul. There was a powerful “stronghold” present in their minds. It was a stronghold of prejudice, rebellion, quick and ill-considered talk, false judgements, carnal ambition for self-promotion and self-display, and a hasty readiness to distort the facts and resist the truth spoken by this great apostle. They misjudged Paul’s methods as inadequate and doubted the reality of his power. “He is really quite frail,” they said, “a bit of a damp squib in fact; a kind of Wizard of Oz – all smoke, noise and mirrors, but just a little weak man behind the curtains if you care to look.” Paul knew he had a tough problem to deal with here and that, ultimately, only the power of the Holy Spirit could finally deal with it in the lives of those Corinthian believers. This is what we can legitimately call a “stronghold”, and usually it requires someone stronger than ourselves to pull it down. It requires the force of the Spirit of God.

Paul knew that no amount of charm, human cleverness, eloquent argument, sound logic, or the weight of his own powerful personality could deal with this ugly resistance. Only God could crack it and then demolish it, so that it ceased to be a problem any more. And this is important for all of us. The truth is, *we all have strongholds*.

In verse 4, the Greek word *ochyromaton* (“strongholds”) is derived from *ochyros* (meaning “halt bar” or “road block”) – our familiar concept of a man-made barrier, which came to be used to refer to a manned guard-post on an international

border or city environs. It ultimately came to signify some kind of “fortress” with strong outer and inner defensive walls. Think of biblical Jericho where, “no one went in and no one went out”. The gates were barred. Think of the former Berlin Wall and its so-called “Checkpoint Charlie”. Other modern examples include the tall walled barrier between the Falls Road and the Shanklin Road in Belfast, Ulster, designed to separate Protestant Unionists from Roman Catholic Republicans because of the once highly volatile relationship between them. Then reflect on the fact that this wall of brick with its steel gates was originally vivid *physical* evidence of a high *spiritual* stronghold in the minds of those same Roman Catholics and Protestants who lived on either side of it, before it was physically erected as a form of visible stronghold before their very eyes. Then realize that we all have the spiritual equivalent of strongholds or something like them in each of our own minds and souls – until God deals with them.

Our heads are poked with mental road-blocks and high towers, something that New Testament scholar Professor F.F. Bruce sees as the effect of “. . . human wisdom or sophistry which limits the gospel by the measure of its own standards . . . The fortresses and high towers which vaunt themselves against the divine revelation may reflect a spiritual interpretation of the tower of Babel, described by Philo as ‘strongholds (Greek *ochyroma*, as here) built through persuasive but lying speech designed to divert and deflect the mind from honouring God’”¹ Paul knew that spiritual transformation in these heavily defended areas of our souls would be difficult to bring about. And he prayed for this to happen in the lives of his new converts.

SPIRIT, SOUL AND BODY

“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept

blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."

Here, in 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24, the apostle Paul prays for comparatively new converts still in need, by asking God to do something special in their inner life. They had experienced some degree of sanctification, cleansing and detoxification from the worst elements of their former lives (“*You turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God*”, 1:9), but their spiritual renewal wasn’t complete as yet. It isn’t for any of us. He voices his perspective concerning the three-fold aspect of our newly redeemed humanity, covering our inner and outer selves, referring to this as “. . . your whole spirit, soul and body . . .”. *Outside* we see the body with its parts and members. *Inside* is what ultimately animates and directs the body, namely, our soul. This is spoken of in terms of “spirit” and “soul”.

One common question that arises here is, “Are we ‘tri-partite’ beings or ‘bi-partite’ beings then?” It depends on how we define these terms and relate the parts. The *body* is physical, a means of expression for the spirit and the soul. The *soul* is spiritual and invisible. It’s what relates to the brain and the environment, since it includes the mind, emotions and will, picking up and reading the signals of our natural senses – sight, sound, touch, smell, hearing. It processes these using our brains through thought-processes, imagination, feelings, choices and decision-making in the use of the will. It uses the brain to direct the body via the central nervous system. So, there really is “a ghost in the machine”! When we die our soul departs from the body and the brain ceases to function, ending with the death of the body.

What then of the *spirit*? The spirit is the dimension of our inner soul that relates to God and to the spiritual realm of angels and demons. Before regeneration it was

dead to God, but vulnerable to the activity of demonic powers. Paul vividly describes our slavery to the world, the flesh and the devil when we were in this unregenerate condition:

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

(EPHESIANS 2:1–3)

But God’s powerful work of regeneration within us by His Spirit has radically begun the process of renewal and re-creation of our fallen humanity. One implication of this is that both soul and spirit need to be kept “blameless” or “sanctified”, that is, weaned off our former rebellious attitudes, sinful habits, wrong desires and so on, and re-orientated to surrender to and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. We can sum up the likely concepts Paul had in mind when he listed the three areas that need attention in this way.

The Spirit – is our renewed nature, the essence of what we are as men and women made in the image of God. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit who has full access to our renewed human spirit. Its inclination is now towards holiness. It loves the things it once hated and hates things it once loved (for example Jesus, the Bible, the Church, prayer and faith)!

The Soul – is our basic human personality. It is in a process of constant and progressive change. And the good news is that personalities can change! You can become more and more “the real you” as God works upon you through His Word and

by His Spirit. The work of God in the soul progressively alters three things until they line up with what God wants:

- How we think – the MIND
- How we feel – the EMOTIONS
- How we choose to act – the WILL

The result will be that we come to think as Christ wants us to think, we begin to feel as Christ wants us to feel, and we choose to want what Christ wants us to want. It's obvious that such change affects the whole of our redeemed humanity in all its parts.

The Body – is the visible extension and manifestation of the soul and spirit. It is the “incarnation” of both. It is the last part of us to be redeemed fully. God may enable us to experience many physical healings of our bodies from various sicknesses from time to time, but our bodies will still age, become increasingly infirm, suffer debilitating illnesses and finally die. They're still subject to sickness, disorder, weakness, ageing, decay, disease and death. And only the final resurrection will see our bodies fully fixed-up and visibly perfect and young in appearance again (which will probably be recognizable as you and looking around 33 years old – the same age as Jesus' resurrected body when He came back from the grave).

Because of sin, your spirit was once numbed and deadened towards God. And your soul was decisively orientated away from God. It was at enmity with Him, on the run from Him and constantly suppressing the truth God makes plain to all men and women (see Romans 1:18ff.). But when you were born again by the agency of God the Holy Spirit, you actually suddenly escaped SIN as a power in your life (2 Peter 1:4), and your new spirit was more like God's own nature, but not completely so as yet. Your spirit no longer wants to practise sin. It is offended by it. It cannot habitually indulge in it (1 John 3:9). It really *hates* sin in all its forms.

OUR WORST ENEMY – SIN

Yet, paradoxically, believers do sin. Those times occur when their spirit, soul and body cease to be informed, directed and controlled by the Holy Spirit. Satanic lies, temptation, old mental and physical habits, wrong-headed thinking and our often weak will, all temporarily take over and cause us to stumble. Paul writes of the, “*law of sin at work in my members*” (Romans 7:23) – it still wants to control us and call all the shots in our lives. It can use either the body or the soul to trigger such impulses. There is a law or principle of sin at work here within each of our bodies. Some of these unclean desires and impulses are dealt with quickly, but when they are indulged, they lay us open to some degree of enemy occupation or even demonization. Evil spirits, being disembodied themselves and limited in what they can do, love to hijack human bodies and set up a base of operations in our personalities whenever we lay ourselves open to this through disobedience to God. Some of them may still remain there unidentified and unmasked from our previous unconverted lives. They weren’t all dealt with at conversion to faith in Christ, though some of them most probably were.

So Paul here calls such inner, hidden pockets of resistance “strongholds” in 2 Corinthians 10:4. A visit to an English, Welsh or Scottish castle will usually illustrate this. There are high towers, crenellated walls and often a watery moat or ditch designed to deter all but the most stubborn invaders. These are the strong outer defences and they were very hard to breach. But many also had a “keep” or inner fortress within, a “stronghold” designed for a last-ditch stand on the part of the defenders of the castle in the event of a successful enemy breach of the outer defences. Here, the walls of the keep are higher and thicker, the doors and windows fewer, the defenders more desperate to hold on, and therefore the task of taking the keep very much more difficult for the attackers!

SPIRITUAL STRONGHOLDS IN OUR SOULS AND SPIRITS

This is Paul's explanation of why even Christian people who love God and have already experienced some measure of moral and spiritual change may still battle with willful disobedience and stubborn resistance to God's word and the work of the Holy Spirit in His desire to sanctify them. Strongholds come in many forms:

- They are "soulish" habits of sensuality like lust, greed, envy, carnal ambition, low self-worth, greed or avarice.
- They are stubborn attitudes of mind, emotions and will, like rebellion, prejudice, erroneous ideas, fears, angry temper-tantrums, pride, stubborn offensive habits and uncontrollable selfish lusts.

Strongholds refuse to be directed or controlled by the newborn human spirit that truly loves God and they affect the proper functioning of the spirit and the soul so that they sometimes malfunction and warp us. As a kind of fortress in our lives they are vulnerable to alien ideas, enemy propaganda and lies, seductive temptations and plausible arguments that seem reasonable at the time, but were actually diabolical lies designed to pamper the flesh and foul up the soul and spirit. Even further demonic infiltration can be the unhappy result. Demons feel and know they have a "border pass" and permission for entry when they see such things as rebellion, refusal to forgive or self-centredness in our lives. Romans 6:6–7 which says, *"we know that our old self was crucified with Christ . . ."* should always be true of us, but Romans 7:16–23 (*"I have the desire to do good but I cannot carry it out"*) is all too often the reality!

The true believer has frequently already been substantially freed from some of these demonic and fleshly strongholds,

but not always liberated from all of them. Some may still remain firm, stubborn and defiant against God. This reality is like the experience we read in those stories of Japanese soldiers during the war in the Pacific in the latter months of World War II, men who remained hidden in jungles on occupied Pacific islands for many years after the western allies' war with Japan was declared over, even for decades in some cases! No one had told them that hostilities had ceased and they could finally leave their post and go home. So they were still holding out against all-comers. Similarly, there are, as it were, still stubborn stains and "lumps in the soul" that have so far refused to budge and have not yielded to the detergent cleansing and demolishing dynamite of God's liberating Gospel in our lives as He seeks to free and transform us. Some examples:

- *We have all come across "rebellious" Christians.* In their worst forms they can behave in patterns that could legitimately be labelled as a form of witchcraft – a soulish intimidation, manipulation and control of others which the Bible calls a "work of the flesh" and that Paul warns believers against (Galatians 5:19–21). King Saul's chronic rebellion and disobedience to God was called "witchcraft" by the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 15:23).
- *An unforgiving and bitter spirit* that leads God to hand a person "over to the torturers" and send them to a kind of prison of their own making according to Jesus (Matthew 18:29–35). I've known many believers who simply refuse to forgive. For as long as this continues, they will not themselves be forgiven. Depression, suspicions, fears, bodily physical deterioration, arthritis, ulcers, colitis and nightmares may all result.
- *Unresolved anger and resentment* that becomes a landing strip or "beach head" for the Devil so that an unholy "spirit of anger" comes in and takes ground (Ephesians

4:26–27). We wrongly handle anger by either “bottling up” in bitterness and resentment or “blowing up” in violent speech or actions and becoming a grudge or a grouch!

- *A jealous and selfishly ambitious pursuit of self-promotion* that manifests truly demonic desires (James 3:14–15). We may sing to the Lord “It’s all about You”, but the tune in our hearts is “It’s all about *Me* . . . I alone am God and You’ll surrender to My ways”!
- *A habitual, harmful self-indulgence or guilty-habit that becomes a lust*, for example, unclean sexual desires freely indulged (heterosexual or homosexual), by habitual sexual sin that leads to bondage, to a spirit of lust and pornography, sometimes termed a “sex addict” because as a form of idolatry the person cannot and will not get free (Ephesians 4:17–20).
- *A “religious spirit” or unclean form of soulish spirituality* that carries on religious services and worship without the Spirit and indeed resists the Spirit of God. It becomes ritualistic, legalistic and dehumanizing. The Bible calls it “a form of religion that denies the power of it” and it may clearly be the work of a demonic “religious spirit” (2 Timothy 2:24–26; 3:5).

These strongholds are not in themselves demons, they are actually human willfulness and rebellion, various forms of deliberately chosen and sinful behaviour on our part. But they do invite entry by demons, becoming well-defended demonic “strongholds” in people’s lives. In these respects then, some genuine believers appear to have become temporarily indistinguishable from the world. They offer the strongest resistance to God for long periods of their lives. They hold out against God for as long as possible! In the 1962 Oscar winning film directed by the actor John Wayne and entitled *The Alamo*, there is dramatic depiction of the 1836 battle when around 130 heavily

outnumbered Texans fought against more than 4500 Mexican soldiers of General Santa Anna in the former's defence of the mission station near the town of San Antonio, the ruins of which can now be seen in the State of Texas. We make heroes of "freedom fighters" like Davy Crocket, Jim Bowie and Major Travers. Their resistance and violent deaths became an icon of American bravery and the defence of liberty. But our resistance to God has nothing to commend it, for it is not a fight to defend freedom but a bid for self-centred autonomy and rebellion ending in some form of slavery, and there is nothing at all commendable or inspiring about it.

THE MAIN FEATURES OF SPIRITUAL STRONGHOLDS

Shortly, we are about to embark upon the story of a mysterious and striking episode that occurred in Jacob's life, and which proved to be a turning point in breaking the power of some major spiritual strongholds in his life. Since most of us also have such fortresses in our souls that we consider "off limits" even to God, then we can expect that, in His great mercy, God will not allow these inner keeps and self-imposed prison houses to remain indefinitely. It will take a major fight and an even greater spiritual defeat in our lives if God is going to win the victory and take new ground in our lives. We dare not underestimate what is at stake here, for some of the main characteristics of such strongholds indicate just how difficult they are to deal with. Here are some of those indicators:

1. They're **STUBBORN** – they haven't automatically disappeared at our conversion. Religious activities, evangelism, preaching, prayer meetings and so on, have so far failed to demolish them.
2. They're **IRRATIONAL** – they defy logic, reasoning,

common sense and moving appeals from people who love us. They're ultimately indefensible by arguments e.g. addictions like smoking, drugs, lying, boasting and various fears or phobias.

3. They're often UNCONTROLLABLE – they resist all of our New Year resolutions to change and “turn over a new leaf” by personal force of will.
4. They're WELL CAMOUFLAGED – posing as hereditary traits, personality disorders, little personal weaknesses and spoken of as “the way I was made” so that God ultimately gets the blame for them. They appear to be part of us – we were “born that way”.
5. They're DIFFICULT TO SCALE AND PULL DOWN – so ordinary measures and means of grace may not deal with them. A person can be kissed by Jesus hundreds of times under good sermons and great prayer meetings, but the “ugly frog” has not yet been turned into a handsome prince or princess!

PAUL EXPLAINS WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

The apostle Paul makes us aware in 2 Corinthians 10:5 that the inner fortresses have been made up with the stones and mortar of what he calls “arguments, pretensions, thoughts, and acts of disobedience”. He determines the appropriate and effective response to them all:

“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. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.”

(2 CORINTHIANS 10:5–6)

Wall No. 1: “Arguments” (Greek *logismos*)

These are the “reasonings” or “rationalizations” and “patterns of thought” we voice and replay in our heads, which are at odds or conflict with the truth of God and sometimes called “imagination”, since we habitually picture ourselves in this way and cannot even begin to see ourselves differently. We say, “Well, God’s still using me” or “My ministry is being blessed, God must approve of my life” or “I can’t change, it’s the way I’m wired.” Sometimes we even argue, “The Holy Spirit told me to do this” or “The Bible isn’t relevant on this issue anymore”, or “the culture has changed since then so God has changed His mind on that issue” forgetting that our culture will inevitably become outdated and the Word of God never will!

Wall No. 2: “Pretensions” (Greek *hypsoma* – “high towers”)

These are the “fronts” and fake image that we erect and put on for public consumption, like the “flats” or “sets” on a Hollywood studio sound stage – they look like substantial buildings but there’s nothing behind them! The “image” we carefully cultivate for public consumption is a hypocritical façade. It may be “coolness”, “all togetherness”, “pride”, “stubborn defiance”, or sickly fake smiles that say “I’M OK, YOU’RE OK”. It may be emergency diversionary tactics like, “Never felt better bro!” or “Doing great!” so that people say, “He’s impregnable” or “She’s not reachable, no one can get through to her”. Paul says that both tactics ultimately set themselves up in resistance to God (v. 5). So no matter how cool, reasonable, justified or sophisticated this resistance appears to be – if it’s anti-God then it is folly and wickedness! This is a “battle for the mind” or a “war of the worldviews”. And the Gospel must win this battle if our nation and culture are not to go the way of all previous civilizations! And the first victories need to be won in the hearts of God’s own people.

So what’s the way of escape and change for us all (v. 4)? Paul speaks here of conducting a warfare not “according

to the flesh” (Greek *kata sarka* – i.e. human effort without the Spirit of God). He places no confidence in himself, or the power of mere human argument or eloquence or worldly wisdom, and methods like those devised by psychologists but not based upon God’s Word, including such things as behavioural therapy, hypnotism, drug treatments, reflective counselling and so on, that can only produce cosmetic or surface changes in people. Instead, we need spiritual siege engines to storm these fortresses and not worldly tactics that produce little by way of lasting change that pleases God. We must therefore rely supremely upon the supernatural power of God working directly on people’s lives to change them! This ultimately involves a number of elements that feature in the war that God fights in order to capture what the famous Puritan writer John Bunyan (1628–1688) called “Man-soul” in his famous work *The Holy War – The Losing and Taking Again of the Town of Man-soul* (1682), a classic work on the features of spiritual warfare for a man or woman’s very soul:

1. *Truth* – 1 John 1:8–9. Christ’s Word comes in prophetic power to us. It is the “sword of the Spirit” dividing soul and spirit, bone and marrow to penetrate hidden issues in our lives.
2. *Recognition* – Christ’s light of self-understanding, discovery, pain and genuine realization of wrongs done along with real regret for our part in them.
3. *Repentance* – a horror, then a complete change of mind and actions (not just sadness and remorse, let alone suicidal feelings). I am no longer the centre, God is
4. *Renunciation* – we cast off old sins and evil habits like lice-infested clothing and want no more to do with them, like the prodigal son in Jesus’ parable who left the pig-pen with no intention of ever returning to it.
5. *Deliverance* – Christ casts out and evicts any demonic squatters, no matter how long they’ve been present and

breaks the power of now cancelled sin, so we are liberated from dark powers that once ruled the roost and called the shots in our lives!

6. *New power*—The Holy Spirit then comes to fill the vacuum left and makes Jesus' and the Father's love and presence more real to us. This is what the Scottish theologian Thomas Chalmers once called "the expulsive power of a new affection" as nobler desires evict base lusts.

All of this, and more, will surface in the story of Jacob at the brook Jabbok when he wrestled with God. Its relevance for each one of us is that the time will come, perhaps more than once in our lives, when the Heavenly Fight Arranger will schedule a contest we personally have to enter and cannot avoid, the outcome of which has already been decided. There will come a time when we will climb into the ring and wrestle with God, and then make the surprising discovery that it's only when we at last lose the fight that we finally get to win.

Notes

1. F.F. Bruce, *The New Century Bible Commentary – I & II Corinthians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1971, p. 230.