

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 13 October 2024. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Pulling Down Strongholds Till Jesus Comes

On 5 November 1858, a young Scottish missionary couple named **John and Mary Paton** disembarked from a ship at Port Resolution, on the island of **Tanna**, near Australia. They had travelled thousands of miles to take the Gospel to the cannibals of these islands. Little did John know the heartaches and spiritual battles that lay ahead. Three months after their arrival, Mary gave birth to a boy, whom they named Peter; but nineteen days after his birth, Mary died of a tropical fever. Shortly afterward, Peter died, as well, and was laid to rest by his mother. However, John did not turn back from God's call. He stayed in Tanna, and continued to work with another missionary couple named the Mathiesons.

Now, time would fail me to tell you of the countless dangers that Paton faced in his forty years of ministry. On many occasions, bands of cannibals came charging at him with spears, knives, and clubs; but when Paton prayed to God for protection, his would-be murderers suddenly stopped, as if in confusion, and walked away. On one occasion, a hostile tribe burned down their church building; and they were just about to burn down the mission house in which Mathiesons, and some of the young Tannese Christians, were gathered. Paton himself was outside the house, where he found himself surrounded by about eight men with clubs and spears, who were shouting, "Kill him, kill him!" However, Paton calmly said to them, "Dare to strike me, and my Jehovah God will punish you—for burning His church; for hatred to His worship and His people; and for all your bad conduct. For doing only good, you want to kill us. But our God is here to protect us, and He will do just that."¹ Almost as soon as Paton had uttered these words, a huge roaring sound came from the south; and a fierce storm blew in at a shocking, abnormal speed. Torrents of rain began to pound down; and their enemies cried out in terror, "This is Jehovah's rain! Their Jehovah God is fighting for them and helping them. Run! Run!"² Not only did their enemies run away; but God caused the wind to blow the flames *away* from the mission house. Also, the rain was so profuse, that no one could have set fire to the house that night, even if they had tried!³

Well, John returned to Scotland in 1864, and remarried to godly lady named Maggie; and in 1865, he and Maggie arrived in the New Hebrides Islands, and began a new work on the island of **Aniwa**. This time, not only did John experience *protection* from Satan's angels: but he saw the *Satan's* strongholds torn down! By the end of Paton's life, literally every person on this island was a professing Christian! How did this come about? It all started with a quest for water! You see, the people of Aniwa were not aware that there was such a thing as underground springs of water. They gathered their water from cisterns; but the cisterns provided barely enough water for them to live. Furthermore, the witchdoctors bullied everyone into paying them to do their sorcery, to make it rain. Thus, when Paton told them that he could find rainwater *underground*, they thought he was crazy. He prayed fervently that God would show him where to dig; and when he felt that God had led him to the right spot, he began to dig. Very soon, though,

Paton realised that this was a spiritual contest that he could *not* afford to lose! Day after day, the scoffing and ridicule of the people increased, as he dug deeper and deeper. But finally, at 38 feet underground, he struck water! The people were stunned at the power of Paton's God; and the next Sunday, the chief stood up in their church service and declared that *he* wanted to learn the ways of Jehovah, and that he was ordering all idols on Aniwa to be destroyed. Over the next three years, Paton taught them the message of salvation; and finally, people began to believe, and be baptized. People who had once drunk human blood now drank of the cup of the Lord's Supper! God led Paton to water; and as the result, the people found the *living* Water! (By the way, they never did find a fresh water spring at any other spot on the island!)⁴

Folks, Christ has commissioned us to take the Gospel to the uttermost part of the earth; to baptize new believers in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; and to teach them to observe all things whatsoever He has commanded us. This is a stupendous task; and it requires that we, like John Paton, be prepared to do spiritual warfare—both as individuals, and as a church. That is what we will be talking about in this message which I have entitled ***Pulling Down Strongholds Till Jesus Comes***.

Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-6.

Read Acts 26:8-20.

I. Pulling down strongholds in the world

In **Matthew 28:18-20**, Jesus commanded His disciples, ***“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”*** This is the commission that our Master has given us until He returns; and it is an enormous task.

Furthermore, we are up against a powerful, unseen enemy. Satan isn't called the “god of this world” for nothing! Satan and his minions have blinded people's minds, so that the Gospel of Christ will not shine into their hearts. That is why God commissions us to ***“open”*** people's ***“eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God.”*** *We, in ourselves*, can't save anyone; but we can point them to the *Saviour*, so that *He* can open their eyes, and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God.

Folks, if we are to carry out the Great Commission, we *must* see the lost the way that God sees them. Jesus said that He came to ***“preach deliverance to the captives.”*** Christian, is *this* how you see the lost—as “captives”? You should; and you *must*! The sobering reality is that most people are under *Satan's* control. Satan has built “strongholds” of deception in their minds; and they are chained there, in a spiritual prison. Their sins are like ***“cords,”*** which bind them. The anger, strife, and contentions in their hearts are like ***“bars of a castle,”*** shielding them

from forgiveness of sins, and reconciliation with God. Their pride, love of possessions, and trust in their bank accounts, are like the walls of a fortress, which reinforce their false sense of security, and their belief that they don't need the Lord. Leading a lost person to Christ is a bit like breaking down the gate of a castle, fighting through a host of enemy soldiers, breaking into a dungeon, and then offering the prisoner freedom, if he will have it! (But even then, the prisoner may *not* want freedom; and you can't force him to leave his cell!) In light of this, perhaps you're thinking, "Pastor, this job sounds impossible." Should this be what you're thinking, you're right! It *is* impossible (for *us*, that is). In our *own* power, this *is* an impossible task; but "***with God all things are possible.***" Brethren, God has given us the spiritual weapons that we need in order to pull down the satanic strongholds in people's minds.

Read Ephesians 6:10-18.

Everything we need to be victorious in our Christian life is available to us in Christ. God has given us the **girdle of truth**, which binds up the "loins" of our minds, so that we will not stumble over Satan's lies and distractions. He has given us the **breastplate** of Christ's righteousness, which protects us from the "missiles" of temptation. He has given us the **shield of faith**, which quenches the fiery darts of Satan's lies. He has also given us the **helmet of salvation**, which represents the absolute *assurance*, in our own minds, that we are saved. (If you are absolutely confident of your *own* salvation, because you are trusting in God's promises, then you will be in a position to lead *other* people to Christ.) All these things are *defensive* pieces of armour, which protect us from Satan's attacks. However, *defending ourselves* from *Satan's* attacks is only half the battle. God has also given us *weapons* with which to *push against* the enemy, and invade *his* territory, and pull down *his* strongholds! Let's look again at **verses 15-18. (Read Ephesians 6:15-18.)**

In these verses, Paul names two weapons. First, there is the "***sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.***" God's Word is a sharp, two-edged sword, which pierces into the hearts of men, and convicts them of their sin, so that they can be saved. That is why we must *read this Book* every day, so that we will be enabled to pierce into people's hearts with God's Word. There is also the weapon of **prayer**. Paul does not compare prayer to any actual physical piece of armour: he simply names it as "***praying.***" Prayer is the invisible resource that enables us to go to the throne of grace, and ask God for the *spiritual power* that we need for the battle. As we *pray* for the lost, God responds to our prayers, and opens people's hearts, so that they might understand the Gospel. There are also the "***shoes***" of the "***preparation of the gospel of peace.***" This means that we are ready, at a moment's notice, to use our spiritual weapons, and share the Gospel with others. We are ready because our hearts are filled with God's Word.

You see, the Christian life isn't just about *not sinning*. God doesn't want us simply to *stand still* on the battlefield. He doesn't want us simply to hide behind our shields, and try not to get hit by Satan's darts. No, God wants us to *march forward*, and *attack* Satan's army. He wants us to do some harm to *Satan's* kingdom! He wants us to pull down *his* strongholds! And how are we to do this? Are we to go out to battle as "lone rangers," fighting all on our own, without any human support? No! God has commissioned *His church* to pull down Satan's strongholds. Jesus said, "***Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.***" That word "***ye***" is plural, because Jesus addressed this command to His *church*. Each and every local church is like a military unit in God's army. In the first century, Roman soldiers stood side-by-side, and linked their shields together to form a "wall," as well as a "ceiling" of shields above their heads; and as they linked their shields together, they marched *forward*, as a unit, against the enemy. Well, so it is with a church. A church is a body of saved and baptized believers who are committed to carrying out the Great Commission; and *as a body*, we must go, and give, and pray, and fast, and sacrifice, and send out missionaries to distant places!

Read Luke 10:1-2.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus spoke of His "***church***" as though it were something already in existence. Why? Because it *was* already in existence! *The Lord Jesus Christ* was the Pastor of His own *ecclesia* ("assembly"); and everywhere He travelled, His flock followed Him. With this in mind, what do we the Pastor doing here? We see Him sending out seventy of His church members, *two by two*, to preach the Gospel throughout the cities of Israel. From this point onward, this is the pattern that Christ's churches consistently followed. For example, in **Acts 13**, the church of Antioch laid hands on Saul and Barnabas, prayed over them, commissioned them as their missionaries, and *sent them out* to preach the Gospel and establish churches in Asia Minor. They went out as a unit of *two*, as representatives of their church. Why *two*? First of all, because it is a biblical precept to establish every word by the mouth of two or three witnesses. Secondly, there is strength and encouragement in companionship. The Bible says, "***Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.***" This is why we go out door-knocking by *twos*, as much as possible. When I go by myself to knock on doors, it is easy to feel lonely and disheartened; but when I have a *partner*, I feel encouraged by the fellowship and support of my brother.

Brethren, the Great Commission is a *corporate* effort! Christ has given this commission to every church; and Christ promises that the gates of hell *will not* prevail against His church!

Read Matthew 16:13-19.

When Jesus spoke these words, He was at **Caesarea Philippi**, in the far north of Israel, by the border of Syria. Caesarea Philippi was also known by the name of **Paneas**, because in this city there were idolatrous shrines to Pan—the half-goat, half-man god. (There were shrines to other gods, as well.) This city was built at the base of an enormous rock crag; and at the base of this huge rock formation there was a natural grotto, with a deep spring of water in it. The pagans believed that this cave was the entrance to the underworld. They called it “the gates of *hades* (or ‘hell’)”; and they threw animal sacrifices into the water. Tragically, many parents even threw their own baby boys into this spring, in order to try to appease the god Pan.

Now, why would Jesus take His disciples to this horrible place? In order to illustrate something extremely important about Himself! After Peter had confessed that Jesus is “***the Christ, the Son of the living God,***” Jesus confirmed that what Peter had said was true, and that this truth had been revealed to him by the Father. But then, Jesus made a sharp contrast between Himself and Peter. You see, Jesus had given Simon his new name, *Petros*, which means “*little rock*”; and He gave him this name in order to remind him of the kind of strong, unflinching faith that He wanted him to have. However, as they looked up at the enormous rock crag that towered over the city, Jesus used *another* Greek word—the word *petra*. He said, “***Upon this rock (petra) I will build my church.***” Jesus was using the word *petra* (which means “large boulder, or mountain crag”) to refer to *Himself*. Contrary to what the Catholic Church teaches, Peter is *not* the Rock on which the church is built: *Jesus* is the Rock! Peter is a little rock; but Jesus is the *big* Rock—the mountain crag! Throughout the New Testament, we are told that Christ is the Stone, or Rock, upon which His church is built.

However, there is one more part to the illustration. Remember the “***gates of hell***”—that grotto where the horrible human sacrifices were made? Well, Jesus promised that “***the gates of hell***” will *not* prevail against His church. Now, think about that analogy! The word “***gates***” implies that a city is being attacked, and that its gates are under siege. And who is doing the attacking? Is Satan’s kingdom pressing against the gates of the *church*? No! Jesus said that it is the *church* that presses against the “***gates of hell***”! It is the *church* which should be pushing against the doors of Satan's spiritual “fortresses,” and breaking through them, and rescuing captives. Jesus prophesied that the gates of hell will not “***prevail***” against the church.

The obvious question, then, is this: Why are so many churches not only failing to attack the enemy, but are *succumbing* to the attack of the enemy? The answer is simple: they are not availing of the power that Christ promised to give us. As individuals, and as a church, we must avail of the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. And how do we avail of this power? Through faith in the **Word of God**; and through **prayer!**

Folks, our prayer times on Sundays and Wednesdays are vitally important. We don’t get together to pray because “it’s just what we do.” No, we get together to pray in order to push against the powers of darkness, and prevail against them! Satan is not happy with the fact that

this little church takes time to pray against him! He knows that he cannot prevail against a praying church. Do you want to make the devil mad? Then come to church at 6:00 this evening, and join your brothers and sisters in prayer, as we plead for God's power!

Brethren, Christ has all power in heaven and earth; and He has given this power to *us*. Look again at what Jesus said to Peter in **Matthew 16:19**. (**Read Matthew 16:19.**) What is Jesus saying, here? Is He saying that Peter is the "holy father," and that he decides who gets into Heaven, and who doesn't? Not on your life! You see, Jesus used these *very same words* when speaking of *all* the members of a local church!

Read Matthew 18:15-20.

In this passage, Jesus said that a "**church**" can be as small as two or three people. Jesus does *not* despise a small church such as ours. To the contrary, He assures us that "**Whatever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**" Folks, let those words sink in! This "**binding and loosing**" authority was given not only to Peter, but to *all* believers in *every* local church! This "keys of the kingdom" authority is the authority to "bind" or "loose" spiritual forces, *through prayer*. Satan *can* be bound, and his power *can* be restricted, through the prayers of God's people. Sinners *can* be "loosed" from Satan's grasp, and God's angels *can* be "loosed" to help and assist us, when we *pray collectively*. If the "**effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much,**" how much more do the prayers of a church body or *twenty or thirty* members avail?

Do you see why Satan fights so hard to keep us from praying together? Prayer is powerful; and Satan knows it. Why, then, do *we* not know it? Why is it like pulling teeth to get Christians to pray together? Because we are listening to the enemy. The enemy whispers, "The prayer meetings are too long! You don't have time to go to prayer meeting; you've got things to do at home. Someone else can pray. Besides, we've been praying for those lost people for years, and they're still not saved. It's pointless!"

Christian, have *you* ever had such thoughts? If so, I'm here to warn you that these thoughts are coming from the enemy! You see, lost people aren't the only ones with strongholds. *We who are saved* have strongholds of unbelief and lies in our *own* minds which must be cast down, if we want God to use us. And this brings me to our last point.

II. Pulling down strongholds in our own hearts

Every year, we emphasise a different aspect of the Great Commission. Last year, for example, we emphasised *giving* of our best to the Master. This year, however, we are emphasising **“pulling down strongholds,”** because we cannot even *carry out* the Great Commission if our minds and hearts are not clean before God. You may mechanically give your Faith Promise missions offering every week, like a lifeless machine; but if your *mind* and *heart* are not surrendered to God, you have no spiritual power. Christian, your *mind* is a battleground! The day you placed your faith in Christ, you were given the **“mind of Christ”** (the ability to think like Christ); yet, as long as you are still in this mortal body, you will continue to have your old fleshly nature to contend with. Your flesh is *constantly* waging war against the mind of Christ. This is why every single day, throughout the day, you must **“cast down”** ungodly thoughts as soon as they arise. If you are *not* surrendering your mind to Christ, then you will be in no spiritual position to win lost people to Christ, nor to sacrifice your time, talents, offerings, and prayers to the work of the Great Commission. *How* can you overcome your fleshly nature? Through the Word of God! Run every thought through the grid of Scripture, to determine whether it is godly; cast down thoughts that are *ungodly*; and then *fill* your mind with God’s Word.

Read 2 Timothy 2:15-22.

Christian, if you desire to be used of the Master, and equipped to carry out the Great Commission, then you *must* **“flee youthful lusts.”** (By the way, even us *older* folk need to **“flee youthful lusts”**!) And *where* do we lust? *In the mind.* The *mind* is where Satan lays down “building blocks” of lies and wrong thoughts; and if you do not swiftly cast them down, these “building blocks” soon turn into walls, and then into strongholds. By the way, you’ll notice that there are two specific kinds of thoughts that Paul says we must “cast down.” Let’s look at them again. **(Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 again.)**

In **verse 5**, Paul names the first kind of thought that we must cast down: **“imagination.”** Now, “imagination,” in and of itself, is not wrong. God created us with the ability to picture things in our “mind’s eye”: and we call this “imagination.” (We even use our imagination to picture things that we read about in Scripture.) However, our imagination can be quickly hi-jacked by evil, because we have an enemy within called “the flesh.” We also have an enemy *without*, named “the devil,” who knows how to invade our imagination. (Perhaps this is why the word **“imagination”** is never spoken of in a good way in Scripture!) Since our imaginations are so easily hi-jacked by evil, we must evaluate every thought in light of God’s Word, to see whether it is acceptable to God—and then **“cast down”** that which is *not* acceptable to God.

Our modern world glorifies imagination and fantasy, instead of reality. Psychologists even encourage troubled people to create a “safe place” in their minds (a little “fortress” of fantasy, so to speak) where they may go to escape their problems. Movies and video games draw people into a world of fantasy, as well. Why is our world so enamoured with fantasy?

Because the "prince of the power of the air" knows that imagination is a powerful tool that he can use to draw people into sin, and rebellion against God. The Bible says that the imaginations of men's hearts are evil continually; therefore, if we, as Christians, do not take every thought captive, and submit it to Christ, *our* imaginations will be evil, too. Every Christian who is living in rebellion against God is in this condition because he is living in some kind of fantasy world. Too many Christians allow their minds to dwell on thoughts of another time or place which they yearn for, instead of their present lot and responsibilities; on thoughts of adultery or fornication; on things of this world that they covet; on thoughts of self-pity, or even suicide; on thoughts of self-righteousness, pride, self-glory, and personal achievement; on selfish and envious thoughts; on thoughts of hatred, anger, bitterness, or revenge against someone; on gossip, and other people's affairs; and on a thousand other things that draw their hearts away from holiness. Brethren, God commands us to “cast down” *all* these thoughts! Let's see what Paul said about this in **Ephesians 4**.

Read Ephesians 4:17-32.

Christian, the moment a wrong thought springs into your head, *immediately* ask God to forgive you, and to help you to cast down that thought. Then, replace that wrong thought with the promises of Scripture, and put on the “garment” of the “*new man*.” Consciously replace the ungodly thought with thoughts of praise. Start praying and *thanking* God for something. Sing a hymn. Think on things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report. Start off your day by surrendering yourself to Christ, in prayer; and then be ready to submit *every* thought to Christ throughout the day, *at every point of impact*, as temptations arise.

Now, the second kind of thought that we must cast down is “*every thought that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God.*” (Read **2 Corinthians 10:5** again.) Christian, casting down thoughts that exalt themselves against the knowledge of God doesn't merely mean casting down *filthy* or *immoral* thoughts. *Any* thought that contradicts the *will of God* is a thought that must be cast down. This includes wrong thoughts about the Great Commission. You see, the enemy whispers all kinds of wrong thoughts about the Great Commission into our heads. He whispers, “We can't possibly reach *that* person, or *that* people group with the Gospel. Their hearts are too hard! It's too dangerous to try to take the Gospel to *that* neighbourhood. It's too dangerous to try to send missionaries to *that* foreign land. I'll never let *my* son or daughter go *there* as a missionary.” The enemy whispers, “Don't give more money to Faith Promise missions this year. You've given in the past; and that's more than enough. You've got your *own* things to look after.” The enemy whispers, “Don't surrender your life to be a missionary. Are you crazy? You'd never survive on the mission field! Just stay here, and live the comfortable life. Someone else can go.” The enemy also whispers, “Don't talk to that person

about Jesus. He might laugh at you.” Christian, if you find yourself thinking such thoughts, beware! You are entertaining a thought that exalts itself against the *“knowledge of God.”* Cast down that imagination, and bring *every* thought into obedience to Christ!

Conclusion: This message has been directed mostly toward the saved; however, I would be foolish to assume that everyone here is saved. If you are not sure that you are on your way to Heaven, I’m here to tell you that salvation is a free gift. Christ has already purchased your salvation for you, on the cross: and you need simply to *receive* this gift, by simple faith in Him! Stop trusting in the lie that you can get to Heaven by living a good life, or by being religious. This is a stronghold of deceit which Satan has erected in your mind. The Bible says, *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”* Stop trusting in your own goodness, and believe that what Jesus did on the cross is *all* you need. By faith, ask Jesus to wash your sin away, and come into your heart; and He *will* save you! **To those who are saved**, I would ask, “Do *you* have any strongholds that need to be pulled down?” Is there a stronghold in which you are seeking shelter from biblical reality? The reality is that every day, lost people are dying and slipping into hell! It’s not just the cannibals in places like Tanna, or Aniwa, that are perishing. Your neighbours and family are perishing. People you pass on the street, or in the shops, are perishing. *This* is reality; and it is also reality that God has commanded you to take the Gospel to them. Don’t let the enemy persuade you that you are not responsible to reach them, or that it’s not worth the sacrifice to reach them. Pull down every stronghold with God’s Word; and then join your brothers and sisters in this church, as we attack the *“gates of hell”*!

¹ Benjamin Unseth, *John Paton* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), p. 105,

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-145.