

“Strongholds”

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It's tucked away in the pages of the Old Testament. You'll find it in the middle of Joshua, the book that describes how Israel took possession of the “promised land.” And while you probably know how that book begins. Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, right? What about the rest of the book? What about the battles Joshua didn't fit? What about the battles he didn't even fight?

Well in the 13th chapter of Joshua, there's an interesting reference to those battles. And this is what it says, “Now Joshua was advanced in years and the Lord said to him, ‘You are old. But there still remains much land to be possessed ... so divide the land now among the tribes of Israel for an inheritance.’” And that's exactly what Joshua does. In the next four chapters he divides the land. He gives part of it by title to each of the tribes of Israel.

Now I have a title for the land I own. And the title I have for my land is a pretty long document. It's got a lot of details in it. I've never actually read the whole thing. I don't suspect many people do.

And maybe it's because we don't like to read title documents that most of us don't know much about this part of the book of Joshua. But tucked away in four chapters in Joshua, in the middle of a lot of details about city names and place names, there's one sentence that is hugely important when it comes to understanding David's first major decision as king of Israel.

For you see, in 2 Samuel 5, David's just become King, the first King of Israel to come from the tribe of Judah. And in the title documents in the middle of the book of Joshua, the tribe of Judah is given title to quite a bit of real estate. Places with names like Kinah and Libnah and Dumah and Tappuah; the list goes on and on until over 100 cities are named. Judah is given title to all of them.

But at the end of the whole city list, if your eye doesn't skip past it, you'll read about another city, the city of Jerusalem. It's given by God to Judah too, and then you'll read these words. “But the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the

people of Judah could not drive out; so the Jebusites dwell in Jerusalem, among the people of Judah to this day.”

And what that comment tells us is this. After being given title to over 100 cities and after taking possession of all of them, there was still one city the tribe of Judah didn't own: the city of Jerusalem. It belonged to them. But they didn't own it. And the reason they didn't was pretty simple. Jerusalem was inhabited by squatters. And Judah couldn't move the squatters out. “So the Jebusites dwell with the people of Jerusalem to this day.”

No one knows exactly when that comment in the book of Joshua was added or by whom. But probably it was written within a generation or two of the events it describes. And while that may not seem that long, remember. A generation is a lifetime. And a lifetime is a long time to own title to a piece of property that you can't really build on.

But it gets worse. You see by the time David is crowned king, his family, the tribe of Judah, has held title to Jerusalem for more than 400 years! But they've never been able to dwell there, because they've never been able to drive the squatters out of the city.

Now I have to pause here and tell you something. I like to discover facts like that. They help me understand the Bible. But there's one thing I like even more. And that's finding out how the Bible connects with my life and yours. And as someone who really likes to find those connections, I have to take off my hat this morning to Max Lucado because he connected this part of the Bible to my life a few years ago when he wrote a book about the life and legacy of David.

The book was called "Facing Your Giants." And in the book as he looked at the story in 2 Samuel that we read this morning, Max asked a few simple questions. Listen.

“Where's your weakness?," he wrote. "What's the habit you can't break, the attitude you can't change. Where do the squatters have a stronghold you've never really controlled?"

And that's the right word for it, isn't it? A stronghold, a fortress, a citadel. It's as if something alien to God's purpose stakes a claim on part of you and builds a wall

around it. And the squatters say, 'Not a chance. You're not getting control over this.' Not your explosive temper. Or your fragile self-image? Or maybe it's your addictive behavior?"

Those are the questions, Max asks. And they're just questions, aren't they? But they're questions that make a connection for us, a connection between two stories from the Old Testament that at first seem pretty obscure and situations in our lives that aren't obscure at all. They're very real, even for us as Christians.

You see I know, and I hope you do too. I know God in Christ has redeemed me. He's given me title to every part of a "new" life, a "new" land. I know it. But I also know there are still parts of that "new" life that I don't experience yet, not completely, not consistently. How about you?

What's the weakness you've never overcome? What's the habit you've never been able to move out of your life? What's the negative thought that you can never push all the way out of your mind? Whatever it is, for you it's a "stronghold," a place that's been redeemed, but hasn't really experienced redemption yet. By God's grace you hold title to it. But you haven't been able to take possession of it.

Is there a place like that in your life? Well if there is, then I've got good news for you this morning! Are you ready for it? Here it is. In God's kingdom, there is no time limit on your title! Once God gives you title to a new life, a new land, that title exists in perpetuity. It belongs to you forever.

By grace through faith, God's given you and me title to the redemption of our whole lives. Scripture says it clearly. "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation, the old has passed away and the new is coming into being." (2 Corinthians 5:17). Once you put your faith in Christ, God grants you and me a title to a new life. And the title says that someday every aspect of my life and yours will be possessed not by old habits, but by God's Spirit at work in us.

Don't believe me? Think what I'm saying sounds too good to be true? Well the proof's right in front of you! It's in the story we read this morning, the story of what happened in the life of the tribe of Judah when David became King of Israel. Listen again to Max Lucado.

“A stronghold,” he writes, “that’s what David faced. When he looked at Jerusalem he faced a stronghold that had held his family back from taking possession of the land God had promised them for over 400 years. When you and I think of the city of Jerusalem, we envision temples and prophets. We picture Jesus teaching, a New Testament church growing. We imagine a thriving hub of history, a great capital.

When David sees Jerusalem in 1000 BC, he sees something else. He sees a millennium-old, cheerless fortress, squatting defiantly on the spine of a ridge of hills. A rugged outcropping elevates her. Tall walls protect her. Jebusites dwell in her. And in David's Day everyone knows. The Philistines can attack the Amalekites. The Amalekites can attack the Moabites. But no one can attack the Jebusites. If you do, you can't possibly win. So everyone leaves them alone."

And from everything we know about the archaeology of Jerusalem, these words are accurate. Everyone left Jerusalem alone in this historical period, everyone that is except David. For fresh from his experience of seeing God's promise to make him King come true in his life, David decides to "push the envelope." He decides to see how far God's willing to go to support him as king. So he marches with his men to the one place in his whole kingdom that doesn't recognize his kingship: Jerusalem!

And when he gets there, what are the first words he hears? Well according to the Bible, here's what he hears. “You’ll never get in here!” the Jebusites tell him. And then they taunt him. "Even the blind and the lame can ward you off,” they say. It was the same taunt that David's family, the tribe of Judah had heard from the Jebusites for centuries! But this time, David doesn't listen.

And that’s a lessons we need to take away this morning. Take it away from this story and into our lives. Because when you’re trying to take over a place in your life where an old habit has a strong hold over you, don’t listen when "old tapes" start to play and try to taunt you, to make you give up before you get started.

Don’t listen when they tell you, you can’t. And you know what I mean, don’t you? You’ve heard those tapes play. So have I. “Why do you think you can change now? You've never been able to do this before? Why do think you can now? Give up! Accept it! This is just the way you are."

When you're trying to take control of a stronghold in your life, you hear messages like that, don't you? But God's word says you may hear them, but you don't need to listen to them. David didn't.

He listened instead to the whisper of the Spirit of God and we can too. And when you do "Your ears," Scripture says "will hear a word behind you saying 'This is the way, walk in it.'" (Isaiah 30:21) That's what happens to David. While all the men around him stare up at the walls of Jerusalem and listen to the "old tapes" the familiar taunts of the Jebusites, David tunes in to a different voice. He listens and hears God's Spirit speak.

And what happens? "On that day," the Bible says, David suddenly spoke up. He said, "Anyone who conquers the Jebusites will have to use the water shaft to reach them."

The water shaft; what an amazing idea! Where did it come from? For centuries the tribe of Judah had stood in front of the fortified city of Jerusalem. And for centuries they'd seen the same thing, the walls. They were impossible to conquer. But now David sees something else. He sees something no-one had seen before. In his mind's eye he sees the water tunnel that has to run under the city walls.

And the rest of the story is history. In fact, the details aren't even interesting enough for the Bible to mention. Because the turning point, the crucial turning point, it's found right here. When you're trying to conquer a stronghold in your life, don't listen to the "old tapes." Listen for a whisper from the Spirit of God.

Let's pray ...