

A Tale of Two Strongholds

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[0:00] Please turn with me in your Bibles this afternoon to Proverbs chapter 18. This afternoon I want to tell you a tale of two strongholds.

! Only one of them is a true refuge and stronghold.

The other is strong only in the imaginations of those who take refuge in it. And one who took refuge in the imaginary stronghold was Karthik Rajaram.

He was a 45-year-old financial manager who lived in an upscale area of Southern California. He was a millionaire. He had three sons, a wife.

One of his sons was a student at the University of California at Los Angeles, UCLA. And as the U.S. economy slipped into recession, he lost his job and he lost his money that was in the stock market.

[1:15] And at the end of September 2008, while the economy was collapsing, this man's life was collapsing as well. And so with a gun, he ended not only his own life, but that of his wife, his three sons, and his mother-in-law.

This man had taken refuge in the stronghold of riches. And when that stronghold was gone, he had nothing left. Because it wasn't actually strong at all.

The collapse of our nation's economy led directly to a collapse of faith for many people who put their trust in money, the stock market, or fat retirement accounts. They left treasure on earth, not in heaven.

They build their lives, hopes, dreams, and futures on a foundation of sand. And when that foundation crumbles, so do their lives, hopes, dreams, and futures.

And sadly, Rajaram's story in Porter Ranch, California, played out in other places around the country as well. People believing it was better to end their own lives and sometimes the lives of their families, rather than go on living without their money.

[2:28] It doesn't have to be that way. How can you avoid such a fate? Well, there's a stronghold that's not imaginary.

One that's not temporary. Where you can find shelter even in the midst of recession, unemployment, and any other tragedy that could touch your life. Tragedies that cause many people to give up hope and end their lives don't have to.

Look with me at Proverbs 18. Verses 10 and 11. The name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous run to it and are safe.

The wealth of the rich is their fortified city. They imagine it an unscalable wall. These two Proverbs are intentionally placed together. Here's a lesson when you read the Proverbs.

A lot of times, Proverbs are just individual with no connection between them at all. But don't always read the Proverbs that way. They look for connections. Sometimes there's two of them paired together like we have here.

[3:33] And let me read you my own translation that draws out some of the linguistic connections that you might not see in the NIV. A tower of strength is the name of the Lord.

The righteous runs into it and are safely set on high. The wealth of the rich is their city of strength. A wall of safe height in their imagination.

And so there are these two strongholds set before us this afternoon. We want to think about both of them. First, the true stronghold, which is the name of the Lord. And then this imaginary stronghold, which are the riches of the wealthy.

And then, pause for a moment to see which are you trusting in. So we begin with the true stronghold. In spite of the sad story we begin with, there is a true place of refuge where you can find help in time of need.

What is it? Who takes refuge in it? And what's the outcome when someone takes refuge? We begin with what is it? The wise man, Solomon, compares it to a tower of strength.

[4:36] Towers were common symbols of strength. They were built into the walls of cities, oftentimes placed at the corners of walls. They were embattlements from which sharpshooters with bow and arrow could pick off the advancing attackers.

You could drop objects from the tower onto the heads of those who were attacking you. They were a place where people sought refuge. Occasionally, you would find a strong tower in the middle of a city as a last refuge, should the walls of that city be breached.

And if the walls were breached, then everyone would run to the tower in the center of the city. A vivid picture of this over in the book of Judges. Turn there with me for a moment. Keep your finger there in Proverbs, but turn to Judges 9.

Judges 9 to get a vivid picture of what Solomon is talking about here. When he says, the name of the Lord is a strong tower.

And when he talks about running to it, or running into it, and finding safety. Judges 9 will begin in verse 50. Abimelech, a wicked man, is on a rampage, a killing rampage, going from town to town, killing everyone in his path.

[5:45] And we read in verse 50, Next Abimelech went to Thebes and besieged it and captured it. Inside the city, however, was a strong tower. That's our word. There's a tower of strength inside the city.

To which all the men and women, all the people of the city fled. They locked themselves in and climbed up on the tower roof. Abimelech went to the tower and stormed it, but as he approached the entrance to the tower to set it on fire, a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull.

We'll stop our reading there. It goes on, and he doesn't want to be killed by a woman, so he has his armor bearer take his sword and run him through, so it can't be said that he was killed of a woman. But you see the refuge that this strong tower provided when their city was breached.

You can go back to Proverbs now. Just a picture of this strong tower. Solomon may have heard this imagery from his father as well. Psalm 61 and verse 3, a psalm of David.

For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe. Same words. The tower of strength. David pictured God this way, and so does Solomon.

[6:53] The tower of strength, then, is a symbol for the name of the Lord. The name of the Lord is a strong tower. And the name of the Lord is to be taken for the Lord Himself.

Just as to praise the name of the Lord is to praise the Lord. Psalm 113 and verse 1, praise the Lord. Praise, O servants of the Lord. Praise the name of the Lord. Those things are parallel.

Praising the Lord and praising His name. So also to take refuge. And the name of the Lord is to take refuge in the Lord Himself. You can look for refuge in all sorts of places.

But only in the Lord, the God of Israel and our God, is there true refuge. So that's what it is. It's a strong tower. It's the Lord Himself. But who takes refuge in it?

Well, what does the Proverbs say here? The name of the Lord is a strong tower. For the righteous run to it and are saved. These are the people of God. People who love God and therefore live for and obey Him.

[7:50] They will take refuge in Him. They've trusted in the Son of God, Jesus, and have His righteousness on their account. And they're seeking to live a life of righteousness. They find shelter in Him.

And let me speak a word for a moment to those that are not righteous today. To those that aren't trusting in Christ. The tower is open to you as well. Through Christ.

You come and you put your hope and trust in the Savior, Jesus, who is our Lord today. And you can forsake all the places where you've sought refuge. You might have places that you think are safe. People that you find safety in. Your own wisdom. Your own strength. Maybe it's money. I hope in a moment you'll see the futility of trusting in those things. You can put all of those things aside and come to the tower of true refuge.

Through the work of Christ. Begging Him for mercy and forgiveness. And you'll find it. And then, as one who has the righteousness of Christ, you too have access to this tower of protection and refuge.

[8:55] And this righteous one runs. He doesn't walk. He runs. He makes haste. To it or to him. Either to the tower or to the Lord. We could translate it either way. He runs to him.

Well, how do you do that? How do you run to the tower of refuge? If a tornado is coming, we run to sort of the opposite of a tower of refuge.

We run to our basement of refuge, right? And you know what it is. To run to your basement in the middle of a severe storm. A tornado warning. But when a spiritual tornado comes, how do you run to the tower of refuge that is the name of the Lord?

Matthew Henry gave some helpful suggestions. You run by faith. It's what we heard of this morning. How do you keep from fear? You trust in the Lord. You have faith. You cling to that which you cannot see to Jesus.

Even though what you can see seems so big. And so impossible. And so insurmountable. Your eyes see that, but you look not at that. But with the eyes of faith, you look to Jesus whom you can't see.

[9:55] And even though you have not seen Him, you love Him. And even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him. And are filled with not fear and terror when you're looking in faith at Jesus, but with inexpressible and glorious joy.

1 Peter 1. And so we memorize those promises that we heard of this morning. We recite them when things are going well and when they're not going so well.

So that we develop a conscious dependence upon God all of the time. Not just when things are going bad. By faith we run to this tower. We run to the tower by prayer. Begging Him for help and deliverance.

And peace. Peace. In Psalm 61, David compares God to a tower of strength. But just before that, he's praying. And that's part of his prayer. Hear my cry, O God.

Listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you. I call as my heart grows faint. Does your heart ever grow faint when you face trouble? What should you do?

[10:52] You run to the tower of strength. How do you do it? You pray. Hear my prayer. As my heart grows faint, lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For you have been my refuge.

A strong tower against the foe. He remembers back to what God has done. And takes confidence that he will do it again. I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.

We seek Him in trouble. By prayer and by faith. And by regular devotion to and dependence upon God. When you're in time of trial, does your regular everyday devotion to God continue?

Do you continue to read His Word? Do you continue to pray? Or do you somehow lose faith when you lose all the things you've actually been trusting in?

Disaster, trouble tends to reveal to us where our faith really lies. When everything is yanked out from under you, do you still have a quiet, calm faith? Or do you learn that your faith was actually in everything that's just been taken away?

[11:56] Your home, your job, your money, your family? What are you trusting in? So I hope we don't make the mistake of only seeking refuge in God in times of trouble.

Things are going well now today. I've got my job. I've got my family. I've got my home. And I trust in those things. And then disaster comes. And then I pray. It shouldn't be that way.

Every day. Lord, I see that You've given me these abundant and good gifts. And I thank You for them. But I do not trust in them. I trust in the God who has given these things. So that when they're taken away, our faith doesn't collapse.

We should be fostering a conscious dependence daily upon our God. What are you teaching your children to trust in? By your example.

If I were to ask your children what you trust in, what would they say? What would they say gives mom and dad peace? The paycheck comes at the beginning of the month.

[13:00] Everything's okay. And at the end of the month, mom and dad are totally and completely stressed out. Because the money has run dry and they don't know what to do next. What do they see from you?

Do they see you in good times and in bad? Find you on your knees in prayer. In family worship. Expressing confidence that God is faithful and will provide. What are you saying to your children about where your trust lies?

By your example. Think about that and you'll see what you're trusting in. Where your stronghold is. The true stronghold is the name of the Lord. Well, what's the outcome? What happens for those who take refuge in this stronghold?

Well, it's real. It's true security. Those who run into the tower are set safely on high. This just says are safe here in the NIV. And that's good, but it's more vivid than that.

They're set safely on high. They're safely exalted out of the reach of trouble. It speaks of being so high that you're inaccessible. If you're going to childproof your house, you put things that are breakable inaccessibly high.

[14:07] You put them where your children cannot access them. Right? You set things out of their reach or you teach them even better not to touch. And we try to do both at our house.

We put a lock on the cabinet that has all the cleaners in it. So that should there be a moment of disobedience, it's not a deadly one. And we teach them with the cabinets with the pots and pans to leave it alone and not to touch.

Anyway, that's inaccessible. We're childproofing the house. And you put things inaccessibly out of reach of your children.

Okay? And that's what God does with those who take refuge in Him. He puts you out of reach of the one who's trying to destroy you. You know all the people in Judges 9, they ran into the tower and they went to the very top.

And they couldn't be reached by Abimelech there. And God does that with us. He takes us and He puts us out of reach of harm. Now, you may have no earthly reason for hope, but you're secure in your heavenly Father.

[15:17] You might even lose your life, and yet that only delivers you home to glory with God, truly set on high where nothing can ever touch you. So we must be storing up treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not and cannot break in and steal.

You see, you are in the fold of the great shepherd and no wolf can destroy you there. You're inaccessible. You're in the hands of the mighty God who made the universe, and nothing can snatch you out of those hands.

You are set safely on high in a secure high tower, the name of the Lord. There's a connection in the Scriptures between the name of the Lord and being safe.

It's here. We see it in Psalm 20 in verse 1. May the Lord answer you when you are in distress. May the name of the God of Jacob protect you, set you safely on high. May the Lord and elsewhere.

And really, the greatest fulfillment of this is in Christ. I've urged you who are not righteous, not currently trusting in Him, to come to Him. And not only then will you find refuge from the trouble of this life, it's in Jesus that you find refuge from the greatest trouble that you could ever face, from eternal trouble.

[16:32] Jesus Himself is a strong tower. And it's in Him that you find refuge, covered in His blood. The blood of Christ our Lord.

And there, not even the accusations of Satan himself, not the just wrath of God, can reach you. You remember, God gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

And salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which men may be saved, by which we must be saved. And so if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. You see? The name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous runs into it and are safe.

Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. The name of the Lord really and truly is a strong tower. Salvation itself in Christ. And so, the true stronghold.

[17:51] It's the name of the Lord. The righteous run to it and they are set safely on high. But then, there is an imaginary stronghold. Sadly, another place where people put their trust, even Christians, professing Christians, they say they trust in Christ, but they really have their strength or their trust here.

And that's an imaginary stronghold. Again, we'll see what it is, who trusts in it, and what's the outcome. What it is here, it's a strong city. In verse 10, it was a tower of strength. Here, it's a city of strength.

Same word for strength. Perhaps these disdain a mere tower in the center of the city. Their whole city is impregnable. It is fortified. They are secured as strong.

And what is that strong city? It's wealth. It's money. Proverbs 10, 15, the wealth of the rich is their fortified city. Money is the solution to everything.

And so, the more of it, the better. If you're sick, you buy the best medical care. If your car breaks, you buy a new one. If you lose your job, it's okay because you've got money. Money. Don't misunderstand.

[18:58] It's not wrong to have money. And to use it wisely. And to be able to do those things, it is wrong to put your trust in that money. Instead of the God who gives it. Who takes refuge in it?

Well, the rich. The wealth of the rich is their fortified city. That may be obvious. And comparatively speaking, we're pretty wealthy people. I'm not rich, but it's easy for me to trust in the money that I have in the home and all of these things.

So don't just think of rich, rich people when you read that. But even people without money, trust in it. They're insecure because they don't have it. And they show that that's where their trust is because they're insecure without it.

And they're fearful without it. So you don't have to be rich to trust in money. You can be poor as dirt and still clinging to your hope in riches. Still trusting it, though you don't have any.

And the outcome for such is sad. They imagine it. An unscalable wall. In their imagination, it is a high wall, but not in reality. And the word that's used here is the same as verse 10.

[20:06] In verse 10, those who run to the Lord are set safely on high. And here, the wealth of the rich is a safely high wall. It is a wall of safe height that can't be scaled.

It can't be taken down. It can't be broken through. It's so high they can't imagine an enemy getting over it. In a coastal town, it's a tidal wall so high that you couldn't imagine a wave big enough to come over it.

But it's the people of Jericho who trusted in their high and strong walls. Or the people of New Orleans who trusted in their levees found out there's no wall so high or so strong that God can't bring it down.

And so seeking security anywhere except in this God who's able to crumble your imaginary walls. Anywhere but Him seeking safety is foolishness.

In fact, it's not security at all. It's only in your imagination. Trumper Longman says, it's true that wealth can help us navigate some problems in this life. But it lets us down in the area of life's ultimate issues.

[21:11] Money might be able to get you out of a tight spot here or there, but it can't help you in real trouble. So plan wisely. Have financial goals. That's good. But trust in the Lord. And if you don't meet those financial goals, you're not fearful and worrying because you haven't met them because that's not where your trust is.

And if you do, you're not confident because of those things. You're confident in the Lord who allowed you to reach those goals because when it comes crashing down, if that's where your hope and trust is, it's a tragic outcome.

All the money in the world can't buy medical care for an incurable disease. All your money can't protect you from a crashing stock market, failing banks, or devalued currency.

And you certainly won't be able to buy your way out of eternal punishment. And so if you trust in money or any other imaginary stronghold for that matter, some people it's their family.

As long as they're surrounded with family, they're safe. They're comfortable. They're content.

Relationships, physical strength or human wisdom, even if I lose all my money, I still got my brains and I'll be able to figure something out.

[22:18] I've still got my strength and I'll be able to work and just fight my way through it. See, you're still trusting in something that's imaginary. Your strength can be gone in a moment. Your mind can be gone in a moment.

Your family, gone in a moment. These will all let you down. They will fail you. But the name of the Lord will not. And so where is your trust today?

Where are you taking refuge? Is it in a real secure place, the name of the Lord, that nothing can shake, where you are set so safely that nothing can harm you? Or is it in something foolish like riches?

If it's in the Lord, you're secure when trouble comes. Listen to the words of Jesus. Matthew 7. The Sermon on the Mount. Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The rain came down. The streams rose. And the winds blew and beat against that house. Yet, it did not fall. Because it had its foundation on the rock.

[23 : 23] Your life built on the rock. The rock of Christ Jesus. Do you listen to Him and then put into practice what He says? That's another way to run into that tower of strength.

Listen and obey. Set firmly on a rock. When we build a house, we don't just start laying two by fours in plywood and the sand, do we?

Poor foundation. Concrete. Got to have a rock to build on. And for us, the rock is the name of the Lord. Trust in Him.

Love Him. Obey Him. Pray to Him. Cry out with the psalmist again. Hear my cry, O God. Listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth, I call to you.

Call as my heart grows faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. That's our strong tower. May this be our prayer and trust.

[24 : 18] You will be secure in Him. He's been our refuge. A strong tower in the past. He will be in the future. If your trust is in the Lord, you're safe today. Thank God for it.

What a wonderful place to be. But if your security is in wealth or any other imaginary thing, rather than the name of the Lord, you'll be devastated in time of trouble.

You too hear the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house. And it fell with a great crash. You build your house on the foundation of money, your own supposed strength and wisdom.

You're not listening to the Lord. You're not putting into practice what He says. And you're building on a foundation of sand. And do you know that you can set two houses right next to each other?

[25 : 23] One built on a foundation of rock and one built on the sand. And then the same storm comes. Same storm. Houses might even look pretty similar. But the one stands firm and the other falls flat.

Which will you be? Which will be your life when trouble comes? You see, we begin with a sad, tragic story with a tragic conclusion of one who built on an imaginary foundation.

His stronghold wasn't even there. He thought it was, but it wasn't. We begin with that story. The storm came and his house fell flat. Let's finish with another story today.

One that I've seen right here in this congregation. And one that is no doubt played out all over the country and around the world in the lives of God-fearing people who listen to the Word of the Lord and do it.

It's a story of men who lost their jobs and with them their means of support. And they would be the first to tell you that they have experienced times of doubt and worry, but they continue nonetheless to put their trust and their hope in God.

[26 : 34] Not in their employment. Not in their paycheck. Their trust had been in God all along. And they continue to worship and to pray and to seek God's face to provide for them and their family.

No need to end their life or that of their families. The church joins with them in praying for them. And the Lord hears the cries of His people and sees the needs of His children and provides for them.

Some now have jobs again. Others still do not. But God is providing for them and their trust continues to be in their Lord. Not in their paycheck.

And one such man told me that when he lost his job, he was fairly confident he could find another. Good resume, pretty marketable guy. But he said, I don't want my trust to be in those things.

I want my trust to be in the Lord. There's a man who's building his house on the rock of the name of the Lord. He's taking refuge in that place. You see, he trusted in the right stronghold.

[27 : 40] The real one. There's true strongholds. Wealth, riches, anything else you can think of are the name of the Lord.

Which are you taking refuge in today? In the name of the Lord, you'll be secure when trouble comes. Anything else. And you're without hope in this world.

And so come, take refuge through Christ in the name of our great God. Let's pray together. Father, we thank You for the truth of Your Word.

Lord, we pray that You would write it on our hearts and that You would give us grace not just to hear Your truth, but then to put it into practice.

Give us grace to trust in Your name and the work that You have done for us through Christ and the providential protection that You provide for us day in and day out.

[28 : 37] Forgive us for trusting in other things, material things, our own intellect, our own wisdom, our money, or our lack of money. Forgive us for these things and give us grace to build our house on the rock of Christ, trusting in Him.

Give us grace to run to You every day and in time of trouble that we might not be destroyed when the difficulty comes. We thank You today for Christ, for what He has done for us, and we pray in His name.

Amen.