

# KINGDOM POWER

SERIES: KINGDOM WORK



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Genesis 1 & 3,  
Philippians 2  
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*Genesis 1 & 3, Philippians 2*

A few weeks ago, we did an experiment at PBC to determine how many of us were dog lovers and how many were cat lovers. It turned out that you demonstrated a little known skill of the PBC community: our ability to make animal sounds.

I thought we'd do another little exercise this morning that has to do with animal noises. We're going to see which animal noise we can do the best. There are three contenders: pig, horse, and elephant. I'll be the only judge.

Let's begin with the pig. Let's hear your best pig noise.

Okay, now for the horse. Let's hear your neighs and whinnies.

Last one: the elephant. Let's hear your best elephant sound.

Nicely done. I'm going to need some time to think about the results. For now, I have a question for you: why did you play along with my game? We're a room full of reasonably mature adults. Some of us have a good deal of education. And yet here you are making animal noises. Why did you comply with my request?

Some of you might have wanted to show off your animal noises. But many of you probably did what I asked simply because I asked you to do it. Now you may now have done this if I ran into you on the street. You may not have done this if I met you on the patio and asked you to make animal sounds. But there is something about me being up here, beginning a sermon—the role of a pastor in the pulpit.

This morning we're going to be talking about power. We're in the middle of a series that we've called Kingdom Work. We're thinking about vocation: all the different ways you might spend the majority of your time. That includes your professional work, schooling, stay-at-home parenting, looking for work, retirement, volunteering, or anything else.

We're trying to understand and live out what God intends for us in our vocation. How does worshipping Jesus on a Sunday morning relate to every other day of the week? We're hoping to discover that God works through your actual vocation. Not just in "Christian" kinds of ways, but in all things.

You may not think of yourself this way, but you are powerful people. And I'm not just talking to the startup founders, VP's, or high-level doctors and lawyers. I'm talking to all of us. You have power because of your money, your jobs, your education, your relationships, your experience, your presence, and just by being in Palo Alto on a Sunday morning in 2017. Each of us has power in different arenas.

A significant part of living out our vocation involves figuring out how to use the power that we have. How does God view our power? Should we exercise it by asking people to make animal noises? What does using our power look like in the Kingdom of God? How does our power become Kingdom Power?

Now, I know that some of you are a little uncomfortable. We don't usually like to think about power. We have this notion that power is evil. We think that power automatically turns people into monsters. We recycle the famous quote by Lord Acton, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

But who says that Lord Acton is right? After all, our God is absolutely powerful. We believe that he has not been corrupted by that power. This morning we'll see that God gives us an incredible measure of power. Has that doomed us to corruption?

Every day on our planet, around 350,000 individuals are put into the hands of someone who has nearly absolute power over them. Those individuals are completely at the mercy of a very powerful person, who can nourish or destroy. They can choose to use their absolute power for good or to be corrupted by it.

And an incredibly high percentage of those women are not corrupted by that power. Virtually all of them choose to nourish and protect the infant born to them, who would die in a few days without their benevolent use of power.

So if it's true that we have power and power isn't necessarily evil, how do we use our power well?

This is what we want to understand this morning. To do that, we're going to begin by thinking about the power that God has given us. Then we'll look at the promises of false power and see how power can tend to corrupt. We'll think about Jesus as a model of power. Finally, we'll close with some practical considerations for ourselves.

## The Power We Have

Last week Dan Westman walked us through parts of Genesis 1 to understand how our vocations were intended to be fulfilling. This morning we're going to look at some of the same passages, but we'll be focusing on the particular idea of power.

What we notice is that the opening chapter of the Bible begins with an awesome display of the unparalleled power that characterizes the God of Israel. In fact, many commentators have pointed out that much of the language of Genesis 1 is meant to compare the God of Israel to the gods of the nations around Israel. Over and over, the point is clear: the God of Israel is more powerful than anyone or anything anywhere. No one can compare.

Then we see this powerful God do something a bit surprising.

### Genesis 1:26-28:

**Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."**

Most of the creation stories from the nations around Israel describe the gods creating people for their own purposes. Humans are the subservient slaves of those gods. People exist only to meet their needs. Those gods used famine and drought and disease to keep the human population under control to prevent an uprising. They were careful not to give too much power away.

But not the God of Israel. He installed his creation as his image, his representative, his authorized agent on earth. And he gives them dominion. His dominion. He tells them to rule. This incredibly powerful God gives power to his creation.

God made a beautiful creation. And he put mankind in charge of it. That is power.

How did giving his creation power work out for God? Of course, we know that it didn't turn out well. In fact, God's creation did rise up. They did rebel against him. They rejected him and declared their independence.

Andy Crouch, the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, has written a book called *Strong and Weak* which offers a helpful model for understanding the kind of power that the God of the Bible both wields and distributes.

He suggests that biblical power is a combination of two things. Authority is the capacity to take meaningful action. The capability to do something that affects the world. Many of us only think of power in this dimension. But Crouch says that biblical power combines authority with something we might not expect: vulnerability.<sup>1</sup>

Vulnerability is the capacity for meaningful loss. It means you might lose something. You might get hurt. You open yourself up to risk.

Crouch points out that when God exercises power, he does it in a way that combines authority with vulnerability. He exercises his ability to do something meaningful in a way that opens himself up to significant loss. For God, that means that he created creatures that were capable of rebelling against him. Think about this for a moment. Of all the things that God does in the Bible, this is the one that surprises me the most.

What is the first word that most kids learn? "No." These little creatures who can barely walk around on two legs would not last more than a day by themselves in the world. They are completely dependent in every way on

the people who care for them. And yet, they choose to say “no” to those caretakers who exercise absolute power over them. It’s inexplicable.

I created creatures that were capable of rebelling against me. Or at least, I did my part in creating them. But I didn’t have a choice. If I had absolute power and wanted to make other creatures, I’m not so sure I’d give them the freedom to rebel against me.

This is what it means to say that when God acts in power, he combines authority with vulnerability. He created creatures, gave them power, and allowed them to rebel against him.

This is the kind of power that God exercises in the world. And this is the kind of power that he endowed in his creation. God created us as his image. He gives us power and wants us to use it in the same way that he did: by combining authority with vulnerability. Biblical power combines authority with vulnerability.

Think about the people who we call “heroes.” Isn’t this the kind of power they exercise? I did a quick news search for recent heroes. A federal officer in Hawaii repeatedly dove underwater with a knife to cut loose a man involved in a helicopter crash. A woman in Connecticut saved a young boy by jumping in front of a moving car to push him away. A soccer fan in London took on terrorist attackers wielding knives to stop their violence.

Our heroes always display this kind of power. They do something meaningful while putting themselves at risk. They combine authority with vulnerability.

Human beings are one of the most vulnerable species in existence. At least, they are born that way. We have one of the longest periods of dependence on our parents of any animal species. And that was true even before 24-year-olds started moving back in with mom and dad.

We are born vulnerable.

But as we grow up, we gradually increase our authority. We’re able to do more and more. We become more independent. We can provide for ourselves. We can defend ourselves.

We learn how to use authority. Think about kids with their pets (or siblings). Older kids with younger kids at school. Teenagers with money. Young adults with freedom. Professionals with responsibility over others.

We are constantly toying with authority—testing our limits, finding new ways to act in the world, establishing our dominion.

As part of that process, though, we encounter something over and over. We don’t know what it is at first, but we like it. It calls to us. It seems to make us happy. It fills us with a sense of security and accomplishment. Every day, in big and small ways, we encounter the promise of false power.

## The Promise of False Power

As the biblical story progresses, we see Adam and Eve face this very promise. In Genesis 3, Eve meets a serpent who challenges the consequences of the command that God had given.

### Genesis 3:4-5:

**But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”**

Listen to what this serpent promises Eve. “You will not die.” “You will be like God.” Crouch points out in his book that this is the siren call of false power.

“You will not die.” Death is the ultimate vulnerability. It is the one guaranteed loss that we all face. Nothing anyone has ever done has found a way to escape it. But here is the promise of a way out. This is complete invulnerability. “You will not die.” No vulnerability at all.

“You will be like God.” Combine invincibility with ultimate power. You can be like God. You can have his power. Nothing will stand in your way. No one will be able to go against you. You will have the authority to do whatever you want whenever you want.

The ultimate authority with zero vulnerability. This is the kind of power that calls to us. This is the promise of false power. From that first decision of Eve to eat the fruit that would allegedly give her this kind of power, the Old Testament tells story after story about people searching for this kind of power.

Heroes do something meaningful while putting themselves at risk. But we don’t want to be heroes. We want to be superheroes. They have more authority than normal people—special skills and abilities or technologies. And they have less vulnerability—for the most part, they can’t be hurt.

My family and I recently saw the movie *Wonder Woman*. I remember watching the original wonder woman as a child and being fascinated by those bracelets. How could she swing her arm fast enough to block the bullets? And what happened to the force of the bullets? How did the bracelets actually work?

This is what we want. We want to be superheroes. We want to be invincible. This is the promise of false power: authority without vulnerability.

This promise is what the Bible refers to as idolatry. Idols promise to give you what you want without asking for anything in return. They make you powerful and protect you from harm. Think about some of the idols we are fond of.

Alcohol makes you feel smarter, funnier, and happier and makes you worry less about the consequences of your actions. Increased authority with decreased vulnerability.

Money gives you more ability to do things that you want to do. And it protects you from other people controlling you.

Education gives you access to better jobs and more opportunities. You can do more things and be safer from losing your job.

This is the promise of false power. Authority without vulnerability. False power promises authority without vulnerability.

I've traveled to India several times as part of a pastoral teaching team. It's a great experience and always an honor to offer what I can to leaders who are following Jesus in radical and sometimes life-threatening ways.

The first time I went there, I was amazed at how they treated me. They greeted us from the plane like royalty. They listened to my every word. Hours and hours of my preaching and they always asked for more. I thought to myself, "Finally I've found people who recognize the sheer brilliance of what I have to say!"

Eventually, I realized two things were going on. One was that God was at work. That was certainly the case. But there was also a human factor. The reality is that my status as a Westerner gave me an immediate authority in India. This had deep roots in factors like British Imperialism, institutional racism, world politics,

and socio-economics. I didn't do anything to create those things. But I was the recipient of the authority they gave me.

In India, I had more authority and less vulnerability. It was incredible.

And I realized how dangerous it was. I recognized the temptation to fan that flame. To accumulate more power and protect myself.

Andy Crouch describes the idols which offer authority without vulnerability in this way,

*They offer us, in a word, control—for the very essence of control is authority without vulnerability, the ability to act without the possibility of loss. Control is the dream of the risk- and loss-averse, the promise of every idol and the quest of every person who has tasted vulnerability and vowed never to be exposed in that way again.*<sup>2</sup>

What about you? Don't you want control? Don't you want to be a superhero? How do you use power to protect yourself?

Maybe you're tempted to accumulate wealth. Or hide behind your status. Maybe you avoid complicated relationships because you might get hurt. In your job, maybe there are subtle ways you try to please those above you with political power. Maybe you refuse to listen to people who think differently than you because you're afraid of rethinking your own opinions. Maybe you micro-manage everything you're in charge of because you're afraid to feel like things aren't in your control.

How do you use power to protect yourself?

The problem with the promise of false power is that it doesn't deliver what it promises. The promise of false power is nothing but a lie. In the end, whether it's drugs or alcohol or money or education or success, the idols of false power end up turning on us.

Psychologist Jeffrey Satoniver puts it this way, "Idols ask for more and more, while giving less and less, until eventually they demand everything and give nothing" (qtd. in Crouch 56).<sup>3</sup>

It's been reported that in 2015, Facebook paid \$4.3 million dollars for security services to protect its founder, Mark Zuckerberg<sup>4</sup>. Do you know how much more that is than I spend on personal protection?

One of the richest, most famous, and most successful men in the world. But think of how vulnerable he is.

False power never delivers. And yet we are constantly drawn to it. Instead of embracing vulnerability, we run from it. Instead of opening ourselves up to loss, we insulate ourselves from any kind of risk. How will we learn to use our power as our God uses his? How will we discover Kingdom power?

### **The Path of Christ**

This is where the Gospel of Jesus Christ comes in. If the Bible opens with a story of the Creator God exercising power by combining authority with vulnerability, then it climaxes with a new version of that story. In the person of Jesus Christ, in a hundred different ways, God combined his ultimate authority with the ultimate vulnerability.

God didn't just allow his creation to turn against him. Jesus allowed the ones to whom he gave life to take life away from him. Jesus made himself vulnerable, even to the point of death. He sacrificed himself for the ones who rebelled against him.

Listen to how the path of Christ is described by the apostle Paul.

#### **Philippians 2:6-8:**

**[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**

Jesus systematically laid down his authority. He took up vulnerability. He allowed the ultimate vulnerability of death. He succumbed to the most humiliating and degrading death known: crucifixion on a cross.

When we believe in Jesus, we follow him where he leads. The Gospel of Jesus Christ leads us along the path into vulnerability. We can follow Jesus into vulnerability.

Sometimes people have a false view of the vulnerability that Jesus faced. It can lead us in a bad direction. We can think that Jesus faced death, but he knew it would all work out in the end. That line of reasoning says that Jesus didn't really become vulnerable. He might have died, but he knew he was going to be resurrected. He didn't really risk anything because he was still in control.

That kind of reasoning is connected to several ancient heresies. If we take away the reality of Jesus' risk and suffering, we take away the entire message of the Gospel. Jesus' risk was real. His pain was real. He was truly vulnerable. He didn't just seem to be vulnerable. He was truly vulnerable.

The same is true for us. Being vulnerable, for us, means that we actually open ourselves up to loss. Remember our definition: "the capacity for meaningful loss." That means real loss. Vulnerability doesn't just mean you might get hurt. Vulnerability means there are times when you will get hurt.

You will lose status. You will lose respect. You will lose your sense that the world makes sense. You will lose confidence in yourself. You will lose your control over situations. You will face meaningful loss. That's what vulnerability means.

When we follow Jesus and turn our power into Kingdom power, we face real vulnerability. We face real loss.

But you know the rest of the story. Jesus faced the ultimate vulnerability, but he wasn't conquered by it. In fact, he overcame it. He rose again. He defeated death. He removed the vulnerability. And in doing that, Jesus opens up a whole new path for us.

He frees us from the danger of vulnerability. We no longer need to use our authority to protect ourselves because our God protects us. We don't have to fear death because we have eternal life. We can use our authority as we enter into vulnerability because we have the promise of redemption. Jesus offers us the real hope of what idols can never deliver.

### **The Path of Redeemed Power**

After describing the path of Christ in Philippians 2, the apostle Paul continues with an exhortation for us to follow that example.

#### **Philippians 2:12-13:**

**Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**

The apostle Paul asks us to get to work. Take this work of discipleship seriously with fear and trembling. But know that it is God who works in us. God gives us the will. He enables us to make those hard decisions. And he gives does the work. He is glorified by our actions because he is working through us.

So let's think about two very simple ways to apply this. How can we work out our salvation, in our fears, but be courageous enough to use our authority with vulnerability? There are many ways to live this out but consider as a starter, these two.

First, we need to recognize the lies of false power.

Every day, multiple times a day, you will face situations where you are given a choice to use your authority to protect yourself. Our world is full of voices who promise "you will not die" and "you will be like God." They whisper in our ears. They shout from billboards. Our friends will give us this kind of advice. Our families will urge us in this direction. Our hearts will long to follow.

We have to recognize those lies.

Brothers and sisters, don't listen to those voices. They are lies. They lead you down the path of despair. Success will not get you what you want. Money will not protect you from the real dangers of life. Your job cannot provide for your identity. Don't sell your soul for the temptation of false power.

I know it feels good. I know the desperate fear of being hurt. I know you've been hurt before. But you can't listen to the lies. You know the ones that you are tempted by. You know the voices that you allow in your life. Shut them up. They are deadly.

Not only am I pleading that you recognize the lies of false power, but I'm suggesting that you knowingly, of your own will, chose vulnerability.

Think particularly about how you can use your authority to make yourself vulnerable for the sake of others.

When I worked in software development, one of my colleagues worked in quality assurance. I'm not sure this is the case in every organization, but in ours, the QA team was given significantly less respect than other members of our team.

Our QA manager always had ideas for improvements to our process. And no one seemed to listen. He was often a difficult person to work with. And I often felt I had as much trouble as anyone being patient with him. But there were a few times when I went to bat for him. I supported his ideas and defended him in meetings.

I realized after the fact that it was a vulnerable thing to do. I think I lost respect among my team members. I think my status dropped a little. And I didn't do it because I was trying to combine my authority with vulnerability. I just thought his ideas had some merit. I was more naïve than noble.

But he mentioned those things to me later. And I realized, in hindsight, that he was one of the more vulnerable people on our team. By aligning myself with him, I made myself vulnerable. But in the end, it helped some of his ideas to be implemented.

Think about your vocation: your job or your family or your school or your neighborhood. One of the ways that we can choose vulnerability is to align ourselves with those who are more vulnerable than us. There is great risk in doing that. If you stand next to someone that others are shooting at, you might get hit with a bullet.

You might get hurt. You might lose something. But that's what it means to exercise Kingdom power. And when you do that, you'll be putting yourself into the hands of Jesus and allowing him to protect that. But more than that, you'll be joining with Jesus in his death, trusting him to bring you back to life.

## Conclusion

I began my sermon this morning with a demonstration of my power. I got a room full of Silicon Valley adults to oink like pigs, neigh like horses, and do whatever sound an elephant makes. That's power. That's real power.

Was I using my power well? Was I using it biblically? Did my authority combine with vulnerability to serve others? Would Jesus have used his power the same way?

We all have power in our vocations. Different kinds, different amounts, in different settings. As you follow Jesus, you are constantly faced with the question of how you will use your power. Will you use it well? Will you use it like Jesus?

Know that as you follow the path of Jesus by recognizing the lies and choosing vulnerability, you won't just be following Jesus. He will go there with you. Remember how he was tempted in the desert and chose truth over lies. Remember how he identified with the vulnerable and made himself vulnerable. You may be vulnerable, but you will not be alone.

Understand the power that you have. Understand how God intended power to work in this world. Recognize the lies of false power. Choose vulnerability.

Walk the path that Jesus walked and exercise Kingdom power.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Crouch, Andy. *Strong and Weak*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 99

<sup>3</sup> Crouch, Andy. Jeffrey. *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Reisinger, Don. "It Costs Millions of Dollars to Protect Mark Zuckerberg." *Fortune*, fortune.com/2016/04/28/protect-mark-zuckerberg/. Accessed July 2017.