

Perfect in Power

Psalm 33:1-9; 2 Corinthians 12; Matthew 26

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You've all, I'm sure, heard the conundrum, presented by skeptics, to the claim that God is omnipotent-- all powerful. It comes in the form of a question: Can God make a rock so big that he cannot move it? The dilemma, then, is that, if you say yes, then there is clearly something God cannot do (move the rock that he's made), and if you say no, there is also something God cannot do (make such a rock).

This is really a silly objection. And to just be blunt-- the answer is no. No – God cannot make a rock so big that he cannot move it. But in saying that, we are not denying or undermining God's omnipotence. Why? Well, for one thing, the Christian claim about God's power is NOT: God can do anything. There are numerous things God can't do. He can't lie (Titus 1:2), he can't die (Ex. 3:14), he can't be ignorant, he can't change, or suffer in his essence. He can't not fulfill his covenant (Heb. 6). He can't create another God with all the properties he has. We could go on. In short, God can't not be God.

And a crucial part of who he is, as God, is One with sovereign control over all he makes. Which is why the hypothetical "rock so big God can't move it," cannot exist. It's no limitation on God, that he can't not be God. That he cannot be in a situation where the created order successfully thwarts or resists him. It's an assertion that his infinite perfection is inviolable, and cannot be compromised, even by God himself. But to understand this better, we need to understand God's power better, and that is our task this morning. We will make two points: Omnipotence Defined, and Omnipotence Displayed. Repeat.

I. Omnipotence Defined

First, then, omnipotence defined. What – more precisely -- are we saying when we say God is omnipotent? Back to the Shorter Catechism, Question 4:

What is God? God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, POWER, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Thus, God is infinite (eternal, unchangeable) in his power. What good would it be for God to be present everywhere-- without power to act? Or for him to know all

things-- without power? So, Omnipresence and omniscience and omnipotence all belong together, and imply each other. Or better, everything that can be said about God, can be said of his power. Here I will remind you of the sermon on God's unity, entitled the Lord is One, where we looked at the doctrine of divine simplicity. We said there that all the attributes imply all the other attributes. Even more strongly, if you recall, we said, God doesn't – properly speaking – have attributes, he is his attributes, and in him, all the attributes are one, they are identical.

So let's state this with respect to power --- and this might sound strange to your ears, but God IS his power. God doesn't have power, he is power. Hilary of Poitiers, a 4th c. father, said: God, being power, is not made up of things that are weak. In fact, the divine being is spoken of as power in the NT. Jesus said to the High Priest, in Mt. 26: I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power (shorthand for God, capitalized in your Bible) and coming on the clouds of heaven." There is no distinction between God's power and his essence. He is eternally, unchangeably, infinitely, powerful.

Now, let's be more precise. This power that God *is and has*, really refers to his perfection over creation. Going back to our original question about the big rock: God can do all that is possible, all that is consistent with his character, should he choose to do so. He cannot be mastered or overcome by creation. Were he to create a rock so big he couldn't move it, he would be impotent, not omnipotent. Omnipotence then, is a corollary of God's sovereignty, of his governing all his creatures and all their actions.

He can bring forth any effect – outside of himself -- that he pleases, his will is unthwartable, no successful resistance can be mounted against him by creaturely realities. As the angel said of the Virgin Birth, to a bewildered Mary: For nothing will be impossible for God. Nothing is impossible – defined properly – for God. Or, put the other way around, by Jesus, speaking of the salvation of the rich: with God all things are possible. Listen to the prophet Jeremiah:

Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.

And nothing is *too* hard for God because nothing is hard for God. He does all that he does, with effortless ease and delight. As one Reformed theologian put it:

It is as easy for God to create the world, as it is for him to move a feather. To uphold all things as it is to speak a word.

God does NOT expend energy when he creates, governs, or acts, or speaks. This inexhaustible power follows from God's being an infinite spirit, his being free from bodily limitations. It's precisely our embodied existence, now burdened by sin, which is the reason we grow tired, that we need rest, we have to take breaks,

and our love and our service are profoundly limited. Our power fades. But the eternally, self-existent God, lives his replete, full, unmeasured and unmeasurable life, without ever experiencing a loss or a decline of any kind. There is no exertion in God.

This omnipotence is expressed most frequently in Scripture by speaking of God as the Almighty. God reveals himself as the Almighty to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. And the Psalmist tells us, that he who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, abides in the shadow of the Almighty. And the Lord God identifies himself at the opening of John's vision in the Book of Revelation as:

The One who is the Alpha and the Omega, the One who is and was and is to come, the Almighty.

And as one Puritan said: One Almighty is greater all mighties. That's omnipotence defined.

Let's look now at this omnipotence displayed. We see it first and foremost in the act of creating. And in the resultant beauty, vastness and order of the creation. This is why the creeds start with: I believe in God the Father ALMIGHTY, *maker* of Heaven and Earth. With a mere Word – and God doesn't have a mouth, he doesn't literally speak and make noises --- so when we say with a mere Word, *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, God creates, we mean something like by merely thinking and willing God creates the world. The creation itself, Jeremiah 10 says, is an act of elegant power (and wisdom):

*It is he who made the earth by his power,
who established the world by his wisdom,
and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.*

And this "Word" is effortlessly effective. Here's Psalm 33:

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.

And the result is that Isaiah can point to the creation, to the stars, as a monument, a testimony to God's POWER:

*Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name;
by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing.*

And that text bleeds together creation and providence. Creation, and then loving care for the creation. And just as we see God's power in creation, that same Almighty power sustains the creation. The Son, through whom the Father

created the world, the radiance of the glory of God, and the exact imprint of his nature, He upholds the universe by the word of his power (powerful word). It's not merely the cosmos, it is the fact, the stunning fact, that it is maintained in being that testifies to Omnipotence. In him, Colossians 1 says, in Christ, all things hold together. The coherent, integrated unity of the uni-verse – the fact that it doesn't just dis-integrate or break up in pieces – is due to the POWER of Christ. In him ALL THINGS consist or hold together. Every galaxy, every star, every nation, every person, every atom, is kept in being by this power. Here's Katherine Rogers, a professor of Philosophy at the University of Delaware:

God's omnipotence entails, that everything that has any sort of being at all, besides God, is kept in existence from moment to moment by God's causal power... Since God's power is his knowledge, whatever IS is because it is being thought right now by God."

Should God stop thinking of us, for even an instant, we would cease to be. This providential power, mysteriously, does not compete with or negate our creaturely powers, or our creaturely acting. In Aquinas' language: It's because God moves us that we move. In Paul's language: in him (by his power) in him, we live and move and have our being.

Let's unpack this power in providence further. It pertains not only holding being and motion and all things in existence. It extends especially to God's care for you. Here's the lovely Psalm 121: *I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth* (there's creation). *He will not let your foot be moved* (there's providence); *he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep* (there is his Almighty power, his inexhaustible, undistracted alertness, to you, and your situation and needs).

Here's Isaiah on God, the fountain of all protecting power: Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth (there's the creation). He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. (there's God strong and mighty, free from bodily limitations)

And the result? He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might, he increases strength.

Omnipotence is a comforting doctrine. It is the source of our real, though limited, strength. The arms underneath us are not only everlasting, they are Almighty. Here, we could rehearse the whole history of Israel and the church. The One who is Almighty has power and authority to ACT --- and to act decisively in history.

He can do this through various means, various secondary causes (normal), but he is able to work without, or above, or against means. He overthrows Pharaoh

and the gods of Egypt, he humbles Nebuchadnezzar, he topples and raises up kings and empires. He is able to rescue. He is able to defeat all his and our enemies. As Israel sang at the song of the Sea: *Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.*

II. Omnipotence Displayed

This brings us to our final point. We've seen omnipotence displayed in creation and providence, but it is supremely, and surprisingly, and paradoxically, displayed in our redemption in Christ. The mighty arm of God is revealed to the nations as an infant, conceived in the womb of Mary. It was, we are told, the power of the Most High which overshadowed her in the virginal conception. In the fulness of time, omnipotence comes in the form of shocking weakness and vulnerability. And Mary sings of the baby in her womb that – through God made flesh, made weak – all the opposing powers shall be overthrown. This pregnancy, she says, is the revelation of the strength of his arm.

Here we have a scandal. A stumbling block to Jews – who did not conceive of power in this form – and foolishness to Greeks – who could not stomach an embodied God. This incarnation, and supremely, this incarnate One crucified, this is a weakness of God, which is stronger than men. He was crucified in weakness, Paul says, raised in glory. He bears our weakness, our sin, our shame, our impotence, in order to raise it up in glory. And in the resurrection, Paul says, God shows the immeasurable power of his great might. Christ moves from omnipotence covered in weakness and shame, to glorious radiant omnipotent power.

And we must experience God's power in the same way, in same sequence. There is no chest-thumping triumphalism for us about God's power. It is, in this age, found in the way of the cross. This is part of what the already not yet means. Unlike Jesus, we are not past the suffering and the cross and fully in glory. Cross and resurrection overlap mysteriously for us in this age.

When Paul pleaded about the thorn in his flesh, God said to him "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Weakness is not going away. It is the location of power. Cruciformity. Therefore, Paul says, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Power in the Christian life does not displace weakness, it manifests itself in and through weakness. If you don't want weakness in this age, you can't have power. As Paul puts it in Philippians: it is in conformity to Christ's death, that we taste the power of his resurrection. That power is even now, already, at work in us. By faith, through the Spirit of the risen Christ, we are seated with him in the heavenly places.

The gospel we have embrace, and which we proclaim, is the power of God unto salvation. Paul speaks of the immeasurable greatness of his power --- toward us who believe. Under the sign and shadow of the cross, already partaking of the power of the resurrection, we live in trust and confidence in the hands of the Omnipotent God. For, God has not given us a spirit, not of fear, but of power, and love, and self-control. Indeed, in the face of all opposition, not only underneath us and all around us are the everlasting arms, but greater is he who is in you, than he who is in the world. Omnipotence enfolds us in all of our frailty and weakness and manifests the splendor of God in our brokenness. Thus, we say with the apostle:

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the POWER at work within us,²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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