

Lesson 3

God's Omnipotence

Basic Idea: God can do anything in harmony with His nature

A highly simplistic definition of "power" would be that it is the ability to produce effects, or to accomplish what one wills. The Scriptures clearly affirm not only that God has such an ability, but that He has it without limitations. Hence, we speak of God as being omnipotent, infinite in power. (*Sam Storms*)

READING #1

We can do very little. God can do whatever He wills. We, beyond very narrow limits, must use means to accomplish our ends. With God means are unnecessary. He wills, and it is done. He said, "Let there be light; and there was light." He, by an act of His will, created the heavens and the earth. At the volition of Christ, the winds ceased, and there was a great calm. By His will He healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, and raised the dead. This simple idea of the omnipotence of God, that He can do without effort, and by a volition, whatever He wills, is the highest conceivable idea of power, and is that which is clearly presented in the Scriptures.

The Lord God omnipotent reigns, and does his pleasure among the armies of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth, is the tribute of adoration which the Scriptures everywhere render unto God, and the truth which they everywhere present as the ground of confidence to his people.

(adapted from Hodge, Systematic Theology, vol 1, 407)

Biblical Support for the Omnipotence of God

(adapted from Sam Storms; Nov 6, 2006 Series: Attributes of God; Enjoying God Ministries; www.enjoyinggodministries.com).

His "power is vast" (Job 9:4). He is "the Lord strong and mighty" (Psalms 24:8), "great and awesome" (Deuteronomy 7:21), "the Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel" (Isaiah 1:24). "Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. You show love to thousands but bring the punishment for the father's sins into the laps of their children after them. O great and powerful God, whose name is the Lord Almighty, great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds" (Jeremiah 32:17-19a). God is said to have created all things by the breath of his mouth, and to uphold the universe by a word. Creation is a testimony to "his great power and mighty strength" (Isaiah 40:26). He is Lord, Owner, Ruler, and King of all creation, whom none can resist or overpower (Matthew 11:25; Revelation 1:8; Psalms 29:10; Jeremiah 10:7,10).

Basic Doctrine - God

(L3) - God's Omnipotence

(Grace Fellowship - revised 2/13/14))

He is "the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:18; Revelation 4:8; 11:17), "the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Timothy 6:15). Nothing is too difficult for him; all things are within his power (Genesis 18:14; Zechariah 8:6; Jeremiah 32:27).

When Mary asked Gabriel how she, a virgin, could conceive a child without the involvement of a man, his response was: "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*" After comparing the difficulty of a rich man getting into heaven with a camel passing through the eye of a needle, Jesus said: "*With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*"

"*But our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases*" (Psalms 115:3).

"*Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps*" (Psalms 135:6).

"*For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for his stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?*" (Isaiah 14:27).

"*Declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'*" (Isaiah 46:10).

"*Then Job replied to the Lord: 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted'*" (Job 42:1-2).

"*And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off his hand or say to him, 'What hast Thou done?'*" (Daniel 4:35).

See also 2 Chronicles 20:6; Job 23:13; Proverbs 21:30; Isaiah 43:13.

A) Power Without Limit

We must remember that divine power is *optional* in its usage. Although God is infinitely powerful, it is not necessary that He always and in every way exercise His power. As William G. T. Shedd explains,

"God need not have created anything. And after creation, He may annihilate. Only when He has bound himself by promise, as in the instance of faith in Christ, does his action cease to be optional".

(William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, I:359)

It is also important to note that God accomplishes his will in one of two ways:

1. **He accomplishes much by appointed means**, i.e., by the uniform and ordered operation of what are called *second causes*. This would include God's activity in sustaining creation in which He makes use of existing things. God utilizes what we erroneously call "laws of nature" to carry out his purpose (e.g., sustaining human life by means of food and water, providing warmth for our atmosphere via the heat of the sun, etc.).
2. **God also accomplishes much by divine fiat**, i.e., directly and immediately without the use of means or secondary causes. Creation, for example, as well as certain miracles (such as the resurrection) are expressions of this kind of divine power. They are actions which are the operation of the first cause (God) alone.

It is also the case that the *actual* exercise of God's power does not represent its limits. God *can* do all He wants, but does not *need to do all He can*. That is to say, God's infinite power is seen in the works of creation, but is not exhausted by them. God could have created more than He has, if He wanted to. What God *has* done, therefore, is no measure of what He *could* have done or can do.

Power without Self-Contradiction

Can God do anything and everything? Certain people have argued that God has an absolute power that is free from, or even contradictory to, all reason and morality. Thus, they concluded that God can sin, lie, and die, among other things, that He is not only able to do all He wills, but He is able also to will everything, even the logically contradictory. Most theologians, however, have pointed to several texts of Scripture that indicate otherwise:

- "*Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged*"
(Hebrews 6:17-18).
- "*If we are faithless, He will remain faithful, for He cannot deny himself*"
(2 Timothy 2:13).
- "*When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone*" (James 1:13).

It is no more a limitation of **power** that it cannot perform the impossible, than it is of **reason's** inability to comprehend the absurd, or of **infinite goodness** being unable to do wrong.

The idea of God's power being "limited" is contrary to His nature. Instead of exalting, it degrades God, to suppose that He can be other than He is, or that He can act contrary to infinite wisdom and love.

Therefore, when it is said that God is omnipotent because He can do whatever He wills, it is to be remembered that **His will is determined by His nature**.

It is certainly no limitation to perfection to say that it cannot be imperfect.

(adapted from Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology I:409)

These would appear to be those things God "cannot" do:

- anything that is logically contradictory (God's *inability* to be illogical is prevented by his truth, righteousness, faithfulness, etc.)
- immoral actions (because of his moral excellency and consistency)
- actions appropriate to finite creatures
- actions denying his own nature as God
- the alteration of his eternal plan

Augustine concurs: "God is omnipotent, and yet He cannot die, He cannot lie, He cannot deny himself. How is He omnipotent then? He is omnipotent for the very reason that He cannot do these things. For if He could die, He would not be omnipotent."

To be able to do all that you want to do is to be omnipotent. But to be *unable* to do what you do *not* want to do is not weakness. This is because power is the ability to do what you want, not the ability to do what you don't want to do. Ronald Nash puts it yet another way:

"The power to sin is the power to fall short of perfection. Since this is the opposite of omnipotence, God's inability to sin is not inconsistent with His omnipotence; rather, it is entailed by His omnipotence".

(Ronald Nash, 47)

The Question: Can God create a stone too heavy for God to lift?

"If God can create the stone too heavy for God to lift, there is something God cannot do (namely, lift the stone). And if God cannot create the stone too heavy for him to lift, there is still something He cannot do (in this case, create the stone). Either God can or cannot create such a stone. Therefore, in either case,

there is something God cannot do; and in either case, we seem forced to conclude that God is not omnipotent".

(Ronald Nash, 47)

But for this objection to hold, it must propose a genuine "task" for God to do. But it does not. The request that "*the Being who can do anything, which includes creating and lifting all stones, create a stone too heavy to be lifted by the Being who can lift any created thing*" is incoherent. It proposes nothing. It is a pseudo-task. That is to say, *a stone too heavy to be lifted by him who can lift all stones* is contradictory. Likewise, for God to create something which is a nothing (namely, a stone too heavy to be lifted by him who can lift all stones), is contradictory. That God cannot create a stone which logically cannot be created is no more a threat to omnipotence than his alleged "inability" to create a round triangle.

B) Practical Implications of God's Power

1. It is a reason to praise

2. It is a warning to the rebellious

Divine omnipotence is an ominous warning to those who think they somehow can resist God's judgment.

3. It brings comfort to the saved

God's omnipotence is a comfort to us when we are persecuted and oppressed (Psalms 27:1). It is a comfort and encouragement to us when we are tempted (1 Corinthians 10:13). It is especially a comfort to us when we pray, for it reassures us that God is altogether able to do what we ask (see Ephesians 3:20-21).

What is God able to do? *(adapted from John Stott 139-40)*

Ephesians 3:20-21 Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, 21 to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

- a. He is able to *do* or to work, for He is neither idle nor inactive, nor dead.
- b. He is able to do what we *ask*, for He hears and answers prayer.
- c. He is able to do what we ask *or think*, for He reads our thoughts, and sometimes we imagine things for which we dare not and therefore do not ask.
- d. He is able to do *all* that we ask or think, for He knows it all and can perform it all.
- e. He is able to do *more . . . than* (*hyper*, 'beyond') all that we ask or think, for his expectations are higher than ours.
- f. He is able to do much more, or *more abundantly*, than all that we ask or think, for He does not give his grace by calculated measure.
- g. He is able to do very much more, *far more abundantly*, than all that we ask or think, for He is a God of superabundance