

“Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You.” —Jeremiah 32:17 (NASB)

In 1977, at the age of 14, the son of a conservative Jewish rabbi by the name of Harold Kushner died of an incurable genetic disease. The painful loss sent Harold Kushner on a quest to answer the question, “Where was God when He was needed most?” Although Kushner’s training in the Hebrew Scriptures asserted the omnipotence of God in all circumstances, Kushner began to question the accuracy of such teaching. To Kushner, either God was all-loving but limited in power, or He was all-powerful but limited in love. There could be no other reasonable option but the former: God is all-loving, but has limits to the exercise of His power.

In 1981 Kushner went on to chronicle his reasoning in a book entitled, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The book became a *New York Times* best seller for months and has since sold over four million copies. Readers have resonated with Kushner’s message. When asked in an NPR interview about why he wrote the work, Kushner stated that if his son’s death was in any way “part of God’s plan,” then “I don’t want to have to deal with a God like that.” After wrestling through what is called *theodicy* (the justification of God in a world full of evil and its consequences), Kushner stated, “The theological conclusion I came to is that God could have been all-powerful at the beginning, but he chose to designate two areas of life off-limits to his power. He would not arbitrarily interfere with laws of nature. And secondly, God would not take away our freedom to choose between good and evil” (NPR Interview, March 12, 2010).

Kushner’s rethinking of God according to his own logic may have provided him with some temporary solace in his own circumstances, but it certainly does not answer more fundamental questions. In fact, even the title of his book—*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*—betrays the bias inherent in his conclusion about God. As the Old and New Testaments testify, “There is none righteous, not even one . . . there is none who does good, there is not even one” (Rom 3:10b–12; Ps 14:1–3). Kushner’s “god” is not just one whose power must be downgraded; his holiness must be as well. Ultimately, mankind is innocent and there really is no explanation for “bad things”—nor are there ultimate good purposes that can come out of them. Kushner shows what a god made in man’s image looks like: gentle and friendly, affirming and kind, but not in control. Such a god is none other than the product of man’s reason when operating in rejection of God’s self-revelation.

What then does God Himself teach about His power? First, we must begin with a definition.

I. Definition of “Divine Omnipotence”

The term “omnipotence” comes from two Latin terms: *omni* (meaning “all”) + *potentia* (meaning “power”). Combined, the terms describe that which is “all-powerful.”

A. What omnipotence means.

The omnipotence of God refers to His ability to accomplish anything He pleases without diminishing His power.

In other words, to say that God is *omnipotent* is to say that God is never hindered in the exercise of His power. Whatever God desires to do, He does. And because His power is infinite, He never gets tired in its exercise, nor is His power ever depleted or exhausted when He uses it, and He never has to recharge or replenish it when it is expended. Furthermore, there is no personal being (such as Satan), impersonal law (such as the principle of “freewill”), or force (such as evil) that challenges or frustrates God’s activity or causes Him in any way to retreat, rethink, or redouble His efforts.

OMNIPOTENCE:
omni (“all”) + *potentia* (“power”)
= “all-powerful”

The 17th-century theologian James Ussher (1581–1656) provides a helpful summary of this particular perfection of God:

- 1) God is able to perform whatever He desires, that is, whatever is not contrary to His will.
- 2) God can do all things without exertion, with ease.
- 3) God can do all things either with the use of means, or apart from means.
- 4) There is nothing and no one that can resist Him.
- 5) All other creatures that have power exercise it dependently upon Him.

“God’s omnipotence describes His ability to do anything consistent with His nature.”
—John MacArthur & Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 177

B. What God’s omnipotence does not mean.

As the example of Harold Kushner illustrates, there are some who are zealously opposed to the doctrine of God’s omnipotence, or who avidly seek to redefine it in some way.

- 1) **Some contend that if God is omnipotent, He must be able to do everything *imaginable*, even that which is *absurd, contradictory, immoral, and self-defeating*.** God must be able to make a rock bigger than He can lift, a square that is at the same time a triangle, and a statement that is both true and false at the same time. This challenge is often presented by philosophers who misunderstand the notion of biblical omnipotence. Certain passages of Scripture are even cited—out of context—to suggest such an idea:

- Genesis 18:14; Numbers 11:23; Job 42:2; Jeremiah 32:17, 27; Zechariah 8:6; Matthew 19:26; Luke 1:37; 18:37

But God’s omnipotence does not obligate God to do everything imaginable, nor to do that which is contrary to His essence. Indeed, God exercises infinite power in absolute freedom, but always in perfect harmony with His character and will. **His power is always consistent with all His perfections.** The response of Augustine (354–430 AD) is most fitting: “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.”

- 2) **Others contend that God’s power must be *limited by causes outside of Himself and beyond His control*.** For instance, an ancient Christian heresy known as *Manichaeism* (of which Augustine was a part until his conversion) taught that God was engaged in an epic battle between good and evil, with the outcome not entirely clear. Some *Charismatics* today believe that God’s power is limited by the forces of darkness, and that God needs human or angelic intervention to help win the battle. *Arminians* believe that God’s power was limited by His creation of human beings with “free will,” and that God either submitted Himself to such limitation or that it was imposed by Him by the abstract universal law of “free will” (that is, an infinitely powerful being cannot coexist with any other being that has personal freedom; there must be a compromise by one or the other). And of course, there are those like Kushner who believe that the only satisfactory way to explain the presence of evil in the world, while still affirming that God is all-loving, is to insist that His power is limited.

All such attempts to limit or redefine the omnipotence of God spring from man’s rejection of God’s own word. We cannot begin with what *appears* right to us in human experience or rationality. We must begin with what God has stated about His own power, and submit our reason and experience to that testimony.

“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.”
—Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:407

II. Biblical Testimony to God's Omnipotence

A. The general biblical witness to God's infinite power.

- Old Testament: Genesis 18:12-14; Deuteronomy 10:17; 2 Chronicles 20:6; Nehemiah 9:32; Job 23:13; 42:2; Psalm 21:13; 24:7-8; 29:10-11; 62:11; 71:18; 89:6, 13; 93:4; 115:3; 135:6; 145:11-12; 147:5-6; Proverbs 21:1; Isaiah 1:24; 9:6; 14:27; 40:26; 43:13; 46:9-10; Jeremiah 10:7, 10; 32:17-22; 32:27; Daniel 4:35; Nahum 1:3; Zechariah 8:6; etc.
- New Testament: Matthew 19:26; 26:64; Luke 1:37; Romans 1:20; Ephesians 1:18-23; 3:20-21; Philippians 3:20-21; Revelation 1:8; etc. GOD

B. The witness to God's infinite power from His names and titles.

God's Names and Titles of Power	
"Lord" (<i>Adonai, Kurios</i>)	Genesis 15:2, 8; Exodus 5:22; 15:17; 2 Samuel 7:28; Psalm 110:1; Matthew 7:21; 11:25; 22:43-45; Acts 4:24; Romans 5:1; 10:9; Revelation 6:10
"LORD God" (<i>Yahweh Elohim</i>) "Lord GOD" (<i>Adonai Yahweh</i>)	Genesis 2:4, 5, 7; 1 Kings 16:13; 1 Chronicles 22:6; Psalm 71:5; 73:28; Isaiah 40:10; Revelation 1:8; 22:5
"God Almighty" (<i>El Shaddai</i>) "Almighty" (<i>Shaddai</i>)	Genesis 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; Exodus 6:3; Numbers 24:4, 16; Ruth 1:20; Job 40:2; Ezekiel 10:5; 2 Corinthians 6:18; Revelation 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6, 15; 21:22
"LORD of Hosts" (<i>Yahweh Sabaoth</i>)	1 Samuel 1:11; 1 Kings 18:15; Psalm 46:11; Isaiah 1:24; 6:3; 51:15; Jeremiah 28:2; James 5:4
"Mighty One of Jacob" "Mighty One of Israel"	Genesis 49:24; Joshua 22:22; Psalm 132:2; Isaiah 1:24; 49:26; Luke 1:49
"Mighty God" (<i>El Gibbor</i>)	Isaiah 9:6
"the great King," "the King"	Matthew 5:35; 1 Timothy 1:17
"the only Sovereign"	1 Timothy 6:15
"God of gods and Lord of lords"	Deuteronomy 10:17
"mighty in strength," "the strong one," "strong and mighty"	Job 9:4, 19; Psalm 24:8
"the great, the mighty, and the awesome God"	Deuteronomy 7:21; 10:17; Jeremiah 32:18
"King of kings and Lord of lords"	1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14; 19:16

C. The witness to God's infinite power from His works.

God's Expressions of Power	
Creating and sustaining the universe	Genesis 1:1-3; 2 Kings 19:15; Psalms 19:1; 33:6-9; 65:6-8; 68:33-35; Isaiah 40:26; Jeremiah 10:11-12; 27:5; 32:17; 51:15-16; Romans 1:20; Colossians 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:3; 11:3; Revelation 4:11
His orchestration of a universal flood	Psalm 29:10
Delivering Israel from Egypt and giving them the Promised Land	Exodus 15:1-18; Deuteronomy 4:34-38; 5:15; 7:8; 26:8; 2 Kings 17:36; Psalm 106:8-12; Jeremiah 32:20-22; Daniel 9:15

Resurrecting the dead	John 10:18; Acts 2:24; Romans 1:4; 4:17; 1 Corinthians 6:14; 15:43; 2 Corinthians 13:4; Ephesians 1:18-21; Philippians 3:10-11
Saving sinners	Matthew 9:6; 19:25-26; John 1:12-13; 17:1-2; Romans 1:16-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Protecting His people	Genesis 49:24; 2 Samuel 22:32-51; Nehemiah 1:10; Psalm 59:16; 91:1-4; Isaiah 40:29; Daniel 6:27; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Acts 4:23-31
Judging the wicked	Exodus 15:6; Ezra 8:22; Psalm 90:11; Isaiah 13:6; Luke 12:5; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 19

III. What God's Omnipotence Demands from Us

- A. **God's power warns the sinner of his fate.** Sinner, you will *not* prevail. As God stated to the rebel Saul on the road to Damascus, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14). He will have victory.
- Isaiah 1:24; Jeremiah 10:7, 10; Luke 12:5; Romans 1:18-20; 2 Peter 3:3-7
- B. **God's power makes the gospel believable.** The gospel is a promise from God to save the sinner (John 3:16). The issue is, can God bring this promise of salvation to pass? Yes—because He is *omnipotent*!
- Luke 18:24-26; Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:18, 24
- C. **God's power compels us to reverent worship.** As the biblical writers so often demonstrate, the fact that we do not worship a God of limitations, but a God of infinite power, is a truth that moves us to adoration!
- Psalm 21:13; 96:7; 145:10-12; 150:1-2; Ephesians 3:20-21; Revelation 4:11; 5:12; 7:12; 19:1
- D. **God's power comforts us in our weakness.** He has never lost control. The omnipotence of God allows us to answer the question, "Whom shall I fear?," with a resounding, "No one!" He never fails in taking that which is intended for evil to transform it into our good.
- Genesis 50:20; Psalm 27:1; 46:1-3; Isaiah 40:28-31; 59:1; Romans 8:28; 1 Corinthians 10:13; 2 Corinthians 12:9-11; Ephesians 6:10; Philippians 1:6; 4:13; 1 Peter 1:5; Jude 24-25.
- E. **God's power energizes our feeble ministry.** To be used by the Lord for His glory does not require elite education or noble birth. All it requires is humility, dependency, and His gracious enablement.
- John 15:5; 2 Corinthians 4:7; Colossians 1:28-29

For Further Study

Memorize: Jeremiah 32:17; 1 Corinthians 1:18 **Sing:** "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (*Hymns of Grace* #53)

Pray: Adore God for His power demonstrated in His creation, providence, and in your salvation. Confess how you have sought to assert your own will against His, or how you have doubted His ability. Pray that His power would be greatly manifested in your humility and weakness. Ask Him to energize you for greater ministry usefulness.

Discuss:

- In your own words, define God's "omnipotence."
- Explain why prayerlessness can indicate a lack of belief in God's power.
- Meditate on 2 Corinthians 12:9-11. How is God's power manifested in the believer's "weakness"?
- How would you address the believer who thinks that a pattern of sin in his life can never be broken?

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: January 28 (Saturday): "God's Design for Men and Women" (conference)