

# God's power and real life

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The world is not the way God wants it to be. Things happen that God never intended to happen. People get cancer and malaria. There are people who don't have enough to eat, people starving to death, actually. There are wars, murders, assaults, crime. People are stuck in dead-end jobs. People get addicted to almost anything you can think of. These things are not what God created the world to be like. This isn't just my opinion. You can read it for yourself at



the very beginning of the Bible. God created the heavens and the earth, and God created men and women, and God created it good. There was no hunger in the Garden of Eden, no war, no sickness. But things have gone bad since then. Not everything has gone bad, of course. There are still wonderful things in the world. But the question is, is God's power doing anything to make the world become like God wants it to be?

In the world of the Bible, the answer is yes. God's power is always doing things in the Bible to make the world better. God's power was especially present in Jesus. Take today's Bible reading. It starts out with Jesus going from his hometown of Nazareth to the nearby town of Capernaum. He starts teaching in the

synagogue every Sabbath. And people are amazed because Jesus speaks with "authority." This part of the Bible was written in Greek, and the Greek word translated as "authority" is *exousia*, in Greek and it means in "power", "ability", and "legal right," which is pretty much exactly what the English word "authority" means.

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come.**

Luke 4:18-19

**After leaving the synagogue that day, Jesus went to Simon's home, where he found Simon's mother-in-law very sick with a high fever. "Please heal her," everyone begged. Standing at her bedside, he rebuked the fever, and it left her. And she got up at once and prepared a meal for them. As the sun went down that evening, people throughout the village brought sick family members to Jesus. No matter what their diseases were, the touch of his hand healed every one.**

Luke 4:38-40

So

what does it mean to say that Jesus taught with authority? What was so amazing about that? What it means is not that Jesus sermons sounded good, but that he the power, ability and legal right to *do* what he *said*. Do you remember what Jesus said he was going to do? We read that last week in Luke 4:18-19. Jesus said that he was going to relieve people's poverty, heal people's sicknesses, and overcome people's oppression. Real-world stuff. And then Jesus had the power, the ability, and the right to actually do it. Take the part about healing blind people. In

today's reading he heals people, not of blindness but of other diseases. In verses 38 & 39 of today's reading, he heals his friend's mother of a high fever. Then in verse 40, everyone in the town who is sick comes to him, and he heals all these diseases, not matter what they were. God's power and ability, in Jesus, made people's lives more like what God intended them to be by healing them from disease.

OK that's healing, Jesus also said he came to set people free from oppression, and in verses 33-36 he does some of that. A man is there, possessed by a demon. To us, demons are a complicated subject. What are they actually, really? Do they have independent existence? Where do they come from, where do they go. Can you be *possessed* by a demon or merely *oppressed* by a demon? It's a more complicated subject than I can get into here but whatever was this man, Jesus has the legal right to order the demon out. And it acknowledges his authority, and leaves. God's power, in Jesus, made this man's life more like what God intended by freeing him from demonic oppression.

**Once when he was in the synagogue, a man possessed by a demon—an evil spirit—began shouting at Jesus, "Go away! Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One sent from God!" Jesus cut him short. "Be quiet! Come out of the man," he ordered. At that, the demon threw the man to the floor as the crowd watched; then it came out of him without hurting him further. Amazed, the people exclaimed, "What authority and power this man's words possess! Even evil spirits obey him, and they flee at his command!"**

Luke 4:33-36

Ok that's healing and overcoming oppression, how about relieving poverty? Jesus doesn't do any of that in today's episodes. But he does that in other places, like when he feeds 5000 hungry people (Luke 9:17), or when he gets the fraudulent tax collector give everyone four times the amount of money back that he cheated them out of. (Luke 19:1-10). In the world of the Bible, God's power is always at work to make things more like God intended.

The question is is God's power at work in the real world, today, to make things more like what God intended? (Or put another way, does the Bible take place in the real world?) And the answer is yes. God's power is at work in the real world all around you to make the world a more like God intended.

Now I know that there are lots of reasons you could think that God's power is not at work in the real world. Some people even believe that God's power *can't* do anything in the real world because it would violate the laws of nature. To a certain degree, I agree with that. I mean I think that since God created the laws of nature, God probably doesn't violate them very often, if ever. If God needs to violate his own laws to accomplish God's purposes, maybe God could have created better laws. Wouldn't it be even more miraculous if God's power is at work in the world without violating God's laws of nature. And here's an example: every time there's a birth (or conception), God is miraculously creating a new human being, but no laws of nature are being violated. Every time someone makes a sacrifice for the sake of another person it's a kind of miracle, although no laws of nature are being violated. In fact, it seems to me that bad things are more likely to be a violation of nature than good things are. Cancer is a violation of nature, it's when the natural systems of self-regulation are violated. Cancer doesn't violate the laws of physics of course, but it does violate the proper nature of the human body. If God cures cancer, that would be a restoration of the natural order, not a violation of it.



But I'm getting sidetracked. The simplest way to look it is to ask, *can* God's power affect the real world. And the answer is, of course it can. If God's power can create the universe, God's power can do anything God wants in the universe. If you don't believe in that, then you don't believe in God. I can respect not believing in God. If you don't believe in God, you are very welcome here, that's important for you to know. But if you do believe in God, I think it's only logical to believe that God's power *could* make things happen in real life.

And the fact is, lots of people *are* experiencing God's power at work in the real world every day. If you want to believe that God's power is not at work in the real world, you have to ignore the experience of lots of real people.

I want this to be as personal as possible, so I'm only going to speak from my personal knowledge. My grandfather smoked two packs of cigarettes a day for forty years. One night, he had the terrible sense of a presence in his room, and a feeling this presence was trying to kill him. At last morning arrived, and he went to the bathroom and took a shower. As he was shaving he realized he hadn't had a cigarette yet, although usually he had three or four before getting out of the bathroom in the morning. Then he felt another presence, but he realized it was God, and he felt God say to him, "Glen, you don't ever need to smoke again." He never again felt even the desire to smoke, and he quit instantly and painlessly. What's more all four of his children — including my mother — ended up quitting too, mostly because they were all too stubborn to let the old man do something they couldn't do. Each of them had to quit the hard way, with much pain and agony. But strangely this little miracle led to all five of them quitting smoking.

I've had a bigger miracle in my life, although it's still small by world standards. This miracle is that I've always had exactly enough money. When I was about 14 a man in my church gave a talk about tithing. Tithing is the practice of giving 10% of your money to God's work in the world, including church and other organizations. This man said that by mistake they had put the wrong amount of money on a pledge card for the church's annual fund raising campaign. The amount they put on by mistake turned out to be 10% of their income, and they were worried sick about how much money that was. How were they going to live without that money, that 10%? At first they decided to just ask for their pledge card back, and erase the mistake and put in a much smaller amount, like they intended to do in the first place. But they sensed that God was leading them to stick with the mistaken pledge. So they did. At first it was hard, but by the end of the year they felt more financially secure than they ever had in their life. I don't remember whether they miraculously got more money from somewhere that year, or whether they miraculously learned to live on less.

That talk had a deep effect on me, and I immediately decided that I would always pledge 10%, which was about \$2 a week when I was 16. That \$100 pledge looked like a lot of money, and every month when Kim and I write our donation checks, it still seems like a lot of money. But thirty years later, it's amazing that I've always had just enough

money. My classmates from Harvard Business School mostly make more money than I do, some of them a lot more, and most of them are far more financially insecure than Kim and I are. I've had years when I don't have any idea how we're going to get through without losing our shirts. But we always do.

I know that people in Charles River Church have experienced God's power making a difference in their lives. Is there anyone here who has experienced God's power in real life? [Stories from the floor]

I'm amazed by the stories people tell me about God's at work in their lives. Some astounding things have happened to people. Most people won't tell you about them because they're afraid you'll think they're crazy. But sometimes they will tell a pastor, so I get to hear some amazing stories. If you want to believe that God's Power *doesn't* make anything happen in real life, you have to ignore a lot of what's happening to people all around you.

If you think about it, the real problem people have with God's power at work in the real world, is not that it never happens, but only that it doesn't always happen. There are times you want a miracle, you ask God for a miracle, and you don't get a miracle. It's OK to ask for God's power. In Matthew 21:21-22 Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and don't doubt...you can even say to this mountain, 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen. You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it." But I don't see any mountains flying by on their way to the Atlantic. Why doesn't God's power always do what you want it to?

**I tell you the truth, if you have faith and don't doubt...you can even say to this mountain, 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen. You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it.**

Matthew 21:21-22

Well, sometimes God's power doesn't do what you want because it would not be good for you. A lot of the things people ask for are intended to prevent them from having to change, like winning the lottery so you can keep living beyond your means. But God probably wants you to change! Sometimes God's power doesn't do what you want because it would not be good for someone else. If Duke prays to beat North Carolina, and North Carolina prays to beat Duke, you can see that someone's going to be disappointed. Sometimes God's power doesn't do what you want because, for whatever reason, God allows people to do bad things. There is not a single Jew that God wanted to be murdered by Nazis. But 6 million times it happened that a Nazi killed a Jew anyway.

And finally God's power sometimes doesn't do what you want for reasons that I just don't know. Why doesn't God heal every child with leukemia? Why would God's power ever let a child die? I don't know. I don't know why Tara's husband died, and why her baby died before being born, as she told us about two weeks ago. It's really important for you to hear this from me now. It is not true God makes every death happen for a good reason. Some deaths are just a terrible tragedy that God cries over just like the people involved. It is not true that if you don't get healed from cancer or whatever, that it's just because you don't have enough faith. Please do not let my claim that God's power is at work in the world, make you think I said that someone is to blame when God doesn't do what they need in life. Please do not let your believe that God's power is at work in the world, let you be hard-hearted when people are poor, or sick, or oppressed. Please do not say "I'm sure God had a good reason for..." unless God has told you what that reason is. Otherwise, at least keep your platitude to yourself. And God help me if I don't live up to this myself, because a pastor ought to ask God every day to at least get this right.

I can't give you an answer to why God's power doesn't always do things that it's obvious would make the world more like God wants the world to be. I'm still wrestling with that, and you're going to have to wrestle too, if it's something you care about. I will make one observation. Whether you get or don't get what you want from God in this life, is not God's ultimate gift to you. God's ultimate gift to you is to invite you to continue in the world beyond this life into the world where everything is the way God wants it to be. This is true whether or not you get everything you want from God now. For instance, if God does not heal your leukemia, and you die as a child, that doesn't keep you from eternal life. And if God does heal your leukemia, and you live to be 100, you are still going to die. God doesn't keep anyone from dying, ultimately.

I don't mean that it doesn't matter what happens in this life. It matters a lot. I actually believe that this life is already a part of eternal life, just the first chapter, but what happens in the first chapter is really important. What happens in this life is so important that God himself came to share it with you and me. God doesn't always prevent poverty, and sickness and oppression. But when God doesn't prevent these things, God suffers with you. Jesus died on the cross so that God even experiences death along with you and me. God's power did not prevent God from experiencing death, in the form of Jesus. That's how seriously God takes what happens in real life. And God's power brought Jesus back to life just as God's power can bring you and me back to life.

So you have a choice about what to do with God's power. Two choices really. The first choice is whether to believe God's power really is at work in the real world. You can choose just to forget about God's power at all, and just try to do everything on your own, or you can choose to depend on God's power in the real world. If you do that, then you have a second choice. You can choose either to ask God's power to do what you want, or you can choose to find out what God's power is doing, and learn to want to do that. Do you see what I mean? You can ask God to change to do more of what you want. Or you can change to do more of what God wants. Which do you think will lead to more of God's power in your life?

For instance, money. You can ask God for more money. Maybe you should ask God for money. "Give us today our daily bread." But even more, you can try to find out what God wants money to be used for, and use whatever money you have to do more of that. I think God wants more money to be used to help people in poor places get clean drinking water and enough food to eat, so I maybe I should use more of my money to help do that. I think God wants money to be a true measurement of whether a business is accomplishing its mission or not. If a business is accomplishing its true mission God wants it to be profitable, and if it is not accomplishing its mission, God wants it to be unprofitable. Now I sit on the board of directors of a company. So I ought to be voting for us to invest our money in accomplishing what our company's true purpose is, which in our case is creating drugs to cure cancer. And I ought to be voting against manipulating our books to cover up mistakes, or trying to manipulate our stock price, or anything else that obscures our true mission. (I hope I am voting these ways, by God's grace.) I think that I will experience more of God's power in my life if I try to use my money for God's purposes than if I try to get God to give more money for my purposes.

This is true even of healing. Of course, if you are sick, or if someone you love is sick, you should ask God to heal them. But remember that the main sickness God is trying to heal is the sickness of the soul. If God heals your body now, your body will die later. If God heals your soul, your soul can stay healed forever. Over the course of a lifetime, if you keep asking God to heal your soul, I think it will be a success. Over the course of a lifetime, if you keep asking God to heal your body, I know it will be a failure. God has a larger purpose at work than keeping your body healthy forever.

In fact Jesus himself said that God has a larger purpose in mind, that it's not all about you. He only said that you can move mountains *if you have faith*. By faith, he doesn't mean "if you believe hard enough." That's wishful thinking, not faith. By faith Jesus means, if you are plugged into God's purposes. That's faith.

**I tell you the truth, if you have faith and don't doubt...you can even say to this mountain, 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen. You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it.**

Matthew 21:21-22

**Early the next morning Jesus went out to an isolated place. The crowds searched everywhere for him, and when they finally found him, they begged him not to leave them. But he replied, "I must preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God in other towns, too, because that is why I was sent." So he continued to travel around, preaching in synagogues throughout Judea.**

Luke 4:42-44

And look at what Jesus did after healing all those people in Capernaum. He moved on. He didn't stay around to be Capernaum's personal healing machine. He healed people because he had compassion on them. And he moved on because his compassion had an even larger purpose than healing people. He wanted to change the world, not just make people more comfortable in it. He did change the world, and he's changing it still.

Now it's up to you. Do you believe God's power is at work in the real world? If you're not sure, how could you find out? If God's power is at work in the world, have you ever experienced it yourself? What could you do this week to find out more about what God's power is doing in the world, and how to plug into it?