

# “THE ILLUSION OF BEING IN CONTROL”

Proverbs 21.1

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In Genesis 1.27, we read of the creation of humanity in God’s own image and likeness. But the next verse is sometimes overlooked in our thinking. In Genesis 1.28, we are told,

“And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

Turning to Psalm 8, I read verses 3-9:

- 3 When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;
- 4 What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?
- 5 For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.
- 6 Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all *things* under his feet:
- 7 All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field;
- 8 The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, *and whatsoever* passeth through the paths of the seas.
- 9 O LORD our Lord, how excellent *is* thy name in all the earth!

To be sure, this Messianic 8<sup>th</sup> Psalm is ultimately fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. In a sense, this psalm also speaks of the dominion God gave to humanity over the works of His hands. But sin entered in, and the human race was plunged into the dark abyss of spiritual death and depravity, with its distortions and perversions of what had been legitimate and God-honoring impulses and desires.

Whereas humanity had been created by God to submit to Him and to serve Him, while subduing God’s creation here on earth, and while exercising dominion over all of His creatures, sin certainly changed humanity. But sin also changed God’s creation. Romans 8.22 shows us that “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain” as a result of Adam’s fall into sin. Thus, the task of subduing and exercising dominion suddenly became far more difficult. In ways that we cannot entirely understand, in the main because of our sinfulness, but perhaps also partly the result of the unruliness of creation because of the curse, humanity’s desire to subdue and exercise dominion is sometimes distorted and perverted into an urge to assert control in ways God never intended.

Decades ago, I was standing outside the Church auditorium before a Sunday evening service, talking to two of our women. How the subject turned to this issue of being controlling, I do not recall. However, one of them mentioned how controlling the nurses at their hospital were. I was surprised until the other nodded her agreement. Then they were off to the races with illustrations and examples of female nurses exerting inappropriate control over other people, mainly over their own pathetic husbands. No one is asserting that all nurses are control freaks. And there are different professions and marital situations that require caution to prevent the inappropriate exertion of control over other people.

The late Vince Lombardi, the Hall of Fame Green Bay Packers football head coach, was just such a man. To be sure, he was a genius, and those who succeeded under his tutelage speak very highly of him. But what about those casualties whose lives were wrecked by his authoritarian approach to coaching?

The late college basketball coach Bobby Knight is another example. He shrieked and screamed at the top of his voice to players, assistant coaches, referees, and anyone else who got in his way and denied him what he wanted and felt he just had to have. Why did he go off like that whenever he thought he was not controlling the situation he was in to the degree he wanted?

Is such behavior required to be a genius football or basketball coach? Why did John Wooden, the greatest of all college basketball coaches, *never* act like that? Why did Red Auerbach, the greatest of all professional basketball coaches, *never* act like that? We have no evidence that the great NFL coach, Paul Brown, or Tom Landry of the Dallas Cowboys ever acted that way. Micro managers? Yes. Tyrants? No.

This message is not about fits of temper, but about a passion to control things you have no right to control. What a challenge this issue is to me, as a pastor. One of my former pastors followed the example of yet another pastor in seeking to exercise a degree of control over Church members' lives that the Bible never authorizes. So, the issue of being controlling rather than leading, managing, or instructing is real. While some people seem to try to control others, others obsessively seek to control every detail of the environment they live in.

Some years back, a member related to me what he once observed. A fellow walked into the auditorium impeccably dressed. His posture, movements, and even the way he sat in his chair were precise. Then he took his pristine new cell phone and carefully placed it on the seat next to him, just so. To our member, the entire picture was a display of a young man's attempt to control everything in his environment. Perfect groom. Perfect car. Perfect clothes. Perfect hair. Perfect shoes. He sought to control everything in his life so he could create what he considered an ideal life.

But no one can control everything. Those with experience in life recognize that there is very little in life that anyone can control. Related to this issue of control is my observation that some people resist the claims of Christ and His directive to come to Him because they see conversion in a false light. They see conversion as a matter of control, but the opposite of what the Bible reveals to be true.

Nowhere in the Bible is there any hint that a lost sinner retains control over any aspect of his life. Quite the contrary, the life of every sinner is a life without control. The life of a sinner, if it be called life, is actually an existence that is entirely out of control, concerning matters God deems to be important. Thus, no actual control is surrendered when a sinner is converted to Jesus Christ. How can anyone who has no control possibly lose control or forfeit control?

This is because, in one sense, the sinner is dead in trespasses and sins.<sup>1</sup> What control do the dead have? In another sense, the sinner is completely enslaved to sins and passions, unable to exercise anything but the most superficial control over his thinking, over his impulses, and over his decisions.<sup>2</sup> Even when the sinner thinks he exerts control over those aspects of life, he is blind to the reality of having no control over anyone else's life, or over anything that "accidentally" happens to him. With respect to this matter of control, the sinner is simply delusional.

Please turn with me to Colossians 1.13, where the Apostle Paul described conversion using some striking imagery. He wrote,

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2.1

<sup>2</sup> Romans 6.17, 20, 22

“Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated *us* into the kingdom of his dear Son.”

What actually takes place when a sinner comes to Christ is not any surrendering of freedom to the control of Another. Instead, it is a transference from the hobnail boots of Satan’s authoritarian and sin’s dictatorial oppression of the sinner to the liberty of Christ’s reign over the lives of those set free from bondage to sin. That is why Paul wrote to believers in Galatians 5.1,

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.”

However, few people pay much attention to truth in the abstract, so I thought I would spend some time this evening relating the life experiences of a few mighty and controlling men. As we review their lives, we reflect on the fact that no one alive at the time, or in our day, would deny the certainty that if anyone had control, or could be controlling, it would be these men.

Imagine, if you would, the shakers and movers of their day. We are about to review the experiences of the most powerful men who have ever lived, men who *totally* dominated everyone around them, men who epitomized the idea of controlling and dominating every aspect of their environment.

Imagine what we will see in their lives.

### **First, ABRAM’S PHARAOH**

When you get home tonight, you might want to read Genesis 12.10 20. In that passage, you will find a fascinating story in which there are three individuals, Abram, Sarai, and Egypt’s pharaoh, who lived almost 4,000 years ago.<sup>3</sup>

Abram and Sarai went to Egypt during a time of famine and were observed by the mighty ruler, Pharaoh, who took notice of Abram’s wealth and prestige. When Pharaoh saw Sarai’s beauty and desired her, he, used to getting whatever he wanted, took her into his house, not knowing she was Abram’s wife. God intervened with a plague.

This man, who controlled everyone and everything around him, who had access to anything he wanted, who had anyone he wanted, found that there was something he could not control ... God.

### **Next, ABRAHAM’S ABIMELECH**

Abimelech, like the word pharaoh among the Egyptians, refers to the king of the Philistines. Genesis chapter 20 records this example of a controlling man, about a quarter century after Abram and Sarai’s experience with Egypt’s Pharaoh.<sup>4</sup>

Abimelech took Sarah, formerly named Sarai, much like Pharaoh had taken her. The woman must have been stunningly beautiful to be so attractive at such an advanced age. That, or the benefits of being seriously covered by modest attire, has been wholly lost on so many women of our day.

What could Abimelech not have if he had wanted it? What woman in his kingdom could he not take if he desired her? What aspect of his life could he seemingly not control? Everything was set until God spoke to him

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Reese, *The Reese Chronological Bible*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1977), page 55.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., page 64.

in a dream, telling him that if he wanted to continue living, he must immediately restore that woman to her husband, Genesis 20.3 7.

Abimelech seemed to be a man in control. What could he not control? He had the power of life and death over every Philistine. Yet, he could not control God.

### **Next, JOSEPH'S PHARAOH**

You remember the story of Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob. Favored by his father, he was sold by his jealous brothers into slavery, which became slavery in the household of Potiphar, after which he was confined to prison, before becoming second only to Pharaoh. The contrast of their lives is a wonder to behold. Joseph was a man who had control over absolutely nothing. Bound by his brothers, bound by the slave merchants, a slave to Potiphar, and imprisoned by Potiphar. Then, though with a very high rank, he was enslaved to Pharaoh.

Where was Joseph's freedom? Where were Joseph's choices? What were his options? Contrast him with Pharaoh, who may have been the most powerful man in the world at that time, the absolute ruler over what was already one of the oldest and most well-established empires in history.

So mighty was Pharaoh that it is doubtful that he had lifted anything in his lifetime, ever performed a menial task of any kind, or ever had anything happen to him that he had not previously considered and approved. Yet God sent dreams to Pharaoh's sleep, dreams only Joseph could interpret. Then God sent seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of drought. Why did God do all that? He did that to establish Joseph in Pharaoh's household, to strengthen the hand of Egypt's priestly class in preparation for the Exodus four centuries later, and to bring Jacob and his family into Egypt, where that family would grow into a nation.

Through all of that, who was controlling what? I am sure Pharaoh thought he was in control. It may even be that he looked as if he were in control. Indeed, Joseph was never in control. Who was in control the whole time? Only and always God.

### **Fourth, MOSES' PHARAOH**

Advance four hundred years to the book of Exodus. Egypt was now ruled by a Pharaoh who headed up a different dynasty, one that had enslaved the Jews and badly mistreated them. This Pharaoh seemed far more arrogant and confident than Joseph's Pharaoh. Yet when Moses returned from the Midian desert after forty years of training to be a shepherd under God's tutelage, whose control is put on display when the plagues were visited upon the Egyptians?

When the water was turned into blood, who was in control? When the frogs came, who was in control? The night the death angel came and took the lives of all Egypt's firstborn, who was in control? When the waters of the Red Sea were parted to allow the Israelites to pass over, and then when the waters came back together to destroy the army of Pharaoh, who was in control? Throughout his life, Pharaoh had been raised to exert control, and perhaps even believed he had achieved it. He certainly tried to control God's chosen people. But the plagues showed who was really in control.

Egypt's king was not in control. Egypt's priests were not in control. Egypt's gods were certainly not in control, since every plague the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sent was a direct attack against Egypt's false gods. Only the true God was in control. Only my God is in control.

### **Fifth, JUDAH'S MANASSEH**

More than a thousand years after the days of Moses, it is in Second Chronicles chapter 33 that we learn about a twelve-year-old boy who ascended to Judah's throne when his father, Hezekiah, died. Named Manasseh, he was the worst king Judah ever had, growing up to be a man guilty of killing his own children to worship a false idol, and leading his people into the basest of idolatries.

He thought he could do anything he wanted. Raised by parents who never said "No" and never held him accountable, the Bible shows us that when God spoke to Manasseh, he refused to listen.<sup>5</sup> How arrogant and how wicked King Manasseh must have been to resist the God of Israel as he did. God's response to Manasseh was astounding. He moved the Assyrian empire to wage war against Judah for the express purpose of taking Judah's king, Manasseh, captive while he was hiding in the thorns, and then taking him in chains to Babylon.<sup>6</sup>

It was in his captivity that Manasseh humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers and admitted to himself that the LORD, He is God.<sup>7</sup> If you had asked him, who do you think he would have said is really in control?

### **Sixth, DANIEL'S NEBUCHADNEZZAR**

The book of Daniel introduces us to the relationship between the Jewish prophet Daniel and Babylon's monarch, Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel chapter 4, we read of a prophecy given by means of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and Daniel's interpretation. Of course, the king was very proud and thought he could say anything he wanted to say, and do anything he wanted to do. He deluded himself into thinking he was in complete control of his life. But in connection with this prophecy of impending judgment from God, Daniel warned the king and urged him to repent.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, the king ignored Daniel's plea. One year later, while walking and talking to himself in his palace, Nebuchadnezzar uttered these words:

"Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?"<sup>9</sup>

Was he not a perfect illustration of someone who thinks he is in control of his life? Let me read the very next verse to you, Daniel 4.31:

"The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar."

Within one hour, God's judgment fell upon Nebuchadnezzar, and he not only completely lost his mind, but he lived outdoors like an animal and ate grass like the oxen.

Did God restore him? Yes. Listen to what the man who had been the most powerful ruler on earth said when God gave his mind back to him. Daniel 4.34-37:

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Chronicles 33.10

<sup>6</sup> 2 Chronicles 33.11

<sup>7</sup> 2 Chronicles 33.12-13

<sup>8</sup> Daniel 4.27

<sup>9</sup> Daniel 4.30

- <sup>34</sup> And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion *is* an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom *is* from generation to generation:
- <sup>35</sup> And all the inhabitants of the earth *are* reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and *among* the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?
- <sup>36</sup> At the same time my reason returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, mine honour and brightness returned unto me; and my counsellors and my lords sought unto me; and I was established in my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added unto me.
- <sup>37</sup> Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works *are* truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase.

Methinks you who are not converted might resist the Gospel because you perhaps erroneously perceive the Christian life to be a life of bondage, and your own sinful life to be a life of freedom, a life in which you imagine that you control the circumstances of your own life. I am here to tell you that is an illusion. You have as much control over your life as a goldfish has over which room I choose to place the aquarium in which it lives. Fishbowl.



You control nothing. You have no control over how smart you are, your potential for physical strength or weakness, whether or not you get cancer or Parkinson's Disease, whether you are shot in a drive by shooting, or if something falls off a flatbed truck in front of you on the freeway and crashes through your windshield and kills you. It is the illusion of control. The Jewish priests and the Roman soldiers thought they were in control when they brutalized and then crucified the Lord Jesus Christ. They imagined they were exercising their own free wills when they acted, and when they decided, and when they moved.

Yet Simon Peter uttered these words on the Day of Pentecost. Acts 2.22-24:

- <sup>22</sup> Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know:
- <sup>23</sup> Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain:
- <sup>24</sup> Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.

When the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, who believed they were in control? The Jewish religious leaders thought they were manipulating the Romans. The Romans were convinced they were crucifying Him.

And these things were all true. But at the same time, God was precisely fulfilling His plan, showing that only He is ultimately in control.

Do you want to continue thinking that you exert control in your life? You decide when to come to Church and when not to. You decide whether to come to Christ or not. It is very much a matter of control, to some of you. You do not want to give up control.

Just understand this, my friend. You are not in control of anything. It is all an illusion produced by sin. Here is the truth, Proverbs 21.1:

“The king’s heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, *as* the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.”

So, the next time you are pondering the claims of Jesus Christ, and you are mulling over this idea of giving up control of your life ... admit to yourself that you actually control nothing.

Faith is a gift God gives to sinners.<sup>10</sup>

Repentance is a gift God gives to sinners.<sup>11</sup>

Eternal life is a gift God gives to sinners.<sup>12</sup>

And your heart is too nasty for you to think you can be saved by giving your heart to God.<sup>13</sup>

When a sinner is saved, he is freed from his bondage to Satan and sin and becomes a servant of Jesus Christ. That is a servitude the Apostle Paul wisely boasted of.

Come to Christ, my friend.

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<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 2.8-9

<sup>11</sup> Acts 5.31; 11.18; 2 Timothy 2.25

<sup>12</sup> Romans 6.23

<sup>13</sup> Jeremiah 17.9