

Power and the Image of God

BORN TO RULE

We need to recognise that when we are exercising power in life we are doing something that rightly comes very naturally to us. A significant part of what it means to be made in the image of God is that we are to rule in the creation, after the manner that God rules over us all:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth [Hebrew: and over all the earth], and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’ (Gen. 1:26).

In taking authority and ruling, we are simply exercising our God-given dominion ‘over all the earth’. The promise to Abraham with his descendents was ‘that he would inherit the world’ (Rom. 4:13). In Daniel’s vision, when ‘one like a son of man’ appears—the true human being—to him, along with ‘the holy ones of the Most High’, is given ‘dominion and glory and kingship . . . an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away’ (Dan. 7:14). Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom’ (Luke 12:32), that is, the kingship,

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authority, or rule. Paul the apostle told the Corinthians: ‘we are to judge angels’ (1 Cor. 6:3). Of those who have been ‘ransomed for God’ by the blood of the Lamb, it is said: ‘they will reign on earth’ (Rev. 5:9, 10). Ruling is in our make-up—we have been created for it.

Little wonder, then, that we so often want to take charge of a situation, and exercise control. We need to be mindful, however, of the original conditions under which that dominion was bestowed. Made in God’s relational image,¹ we were to rule:

- in relationship with God
- in the blessing of God
- for the purpose of God.

Here is how the original mandate was given:

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ (Gen. 1:27–28).

The mandate, then, was to take this image and glory² of God—this intimate relationship we have with God—together with the blessing He has given us to be able to carry it through, and to fill the earth with it, and bring the whole of creation under its dominion, until ‘all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD’ (Num. 14:21), or ‘the earth will

¹ According to Gen. 5:1–3, to be in the ‘likeness’ and ‘image’ of someone is equivalent to being related to that one as son to father. Thus Luke 3:38 speaks of Adam as ‘son of God’.

² See 1 Cor. 11:7.

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be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea' (Hab. 2:14). This is the true exercise of human dominion.

YOU WILL BE AS GOD

Into this noble exercise of human dominion, 'that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' (Rev. 12:9), introduced a subtle but fatal shift. A mighty angelic being created by God, he had fallen into scornful pride well characterised by this 'taunt against the king of Babylon' (Isa. 14:3):³

You said in your heart,
 'I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
 I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
 in the far north;
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
 I will make myself like the Most High' (Isa. 14:13–14, RSV).

The temptation that the serpent brought to the woman and the man was 'you will be like God' (Gen. 3:5). For those already 'in the likeness of God' (Gen. 5:1), this meant to put themselves in the position of God. To eat of 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' (sometimes translated 'the tree of the knowledge of everything'⁴), forbidden by God, was to seek to exercise the knowledge and power that is God's

³ This passage, in which the king of Babylon is addressed as 'Day Star' or 'Lucifer' ('bearer of light')—a name also used for Satan (compare 2 Cor. 11:14, 'angel of light')—has been taken as descriptive of the dynamic operating in Satan's delusion and fall.

⁴ *Good News Bible*, Genesis 2:17, footnote.

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alone: to decide for themselves what is right and wrong, apart from and over against God. It meant to take the plan and purpose of God and usurp it to themselves for what they perceived to be their own advantage. They would fill the earth not with the glory of God but with the 'glory' of themselves. Instead of the holy city that comes 'down out of heaven from God' (Rev. 21:2), 'whose architect and builder is God' (Heb. 11:10), they would build their own city up from the earth, 'with its top in the heavens', to 'make a name' for themselves (Gen. 11:4). But it would end up being the foul and alluring harlot-city 'Babylon', that turns in on its own with hateful and devouring desolation (see Rev. 17–18).

So much for submitting ourselves, in our supposed grasp at 'freedom', to the tyranny of the 'murderer' and 'liar' and 'thief' who came 'only to steal and kill and destroy' (John 8:44; 10:10).

STRIKING A BLOW AT GOD

One of the ten commandments is:

You shall not murder (Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17).

Why should we not murder? Is it because dying is a bad thing and so all killing is wrong? All of us end up dying one way or another. Is it because a society that allows murder is a dangerous place and we might get killed? True as it is, that would be a fairly self-serving reason for prohibiting murder.

God's reason for prohibiting murder goes deeper than that, and links it with humanity being in the image of God:

For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning . . . each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.

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Whoever sheds the blood of a human,
by a human shall that person's blood be shed;⁵
for in his own image
God made humankind (Gen. 9:5–6).

To murder a human being is to strike a blow against one who is in the image of God, and so to strike a blow at God Himself.

When someone murders another person, this striking a blow against God actually takes the form of seeking to dethrone God and act in His place. Whose responsibility is it to give life and to take it away? Not ours, but God's:

See now that I, even I, am he;
there is no god besides me.
I kill and I make alive;
I wound and I heal;
and no one can deliver from my hand (Deut. 32:39).⁶

For us to take into our own hands whether another person lives or dies is for us to usurp the prerogative of God. It is to make ourselves to be as God to that person, when we are not God and never can be. This is the ultimate wrongful exercise of power in a relationship.⁷

⁵ Does this contradict the command not to shed a person's blood? Each society must make up its own mind as to whether or not, and how much, it uses capital punishment. In the Bible a distinction is made between the shedding of innocent blood, with malice aforethought, and death by accident, or by the command of God (see Num. 35:16–28; Deut. 19:4–7; 20:10–18; 21:1–9; 27:25; 13:6–11). God still retains the prerogative as to who should live and who should die, and God often exercises this prerogative with mercy and forbearance (as in Deut. 22:22, compared with 2 Sam. 12:7–14; John 8:1–11).

⁶ Note the order here: the making alive comes *after* the killing. So God's action in bringing death is still with a view to His purpose of life.

⁷ Seen in a TV documentary on an oppressive regime in a south-east Asian country: a commanding officer taking some fellow officers out on nightly visits to villages, where he would randomly select a villager and shoot him in the head—for sport. His comment: 'This is better even than having women'. That tells us

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The most damning exposure of murder as intending to strike a death-blow against God comes out in the killing of Jesus, where we are told that ‘the rulers of this age’, in their culpable refusal to understand who Jesus was, ‘crucified the Lord of glory’ and, in preference for a murderer, ‘killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead’ (1 Cor. 2:8; Acts 3:15). Jesus nailed their attitude in one of his parables:

This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours (Mark 12:7).

ANGER AND MURDER

James traces acts of murder back to wrongful inner cravings bent on self-satisfaction, outside of a right relationship with God:

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures (James 4:1–3).

James goes on to say that in such a situation a person is ‘an enemy of God’ (James 4:4).

Jesus himself traced murder back to its root cause of anger and seeking to put another person down:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I

that his raping of women was for him an exercise of power over another person, and that purposeless murder was for him, perversely, the ultimate power kick.

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say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire (Matt. 5:21–22).

What is it that makes us angry? We get angry when things don't go the way we want them to, or are not the way we think they should be.⁸ Anger can take various forms: frustration is anger with the lid on it; depression has been described by one comedian as 'anger with the enthusiasm taken out of it'!

Who ever thought we were meant to get our own way? Who really is in charge of the world, and decides how things are going to be? God, who 'accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will' (Eph. 1:11). We have decided to accomplish all things according to our own counsel and will. This will never match up with the way things really are, and so we will be angry. The way I want things to go will also clash with the way you want things to go, so I will be angry with you, and you might get a little bit angry with me. And so we will take it out on each other. Even if we are restrained from murdering each other, we have still as good as wished each other dead. So Jesus virtually equates wrongful anger with murder, and says that they are both as bad as each other.

Is there such a thing as righteous anger? Are there not plenty of wrong things in this world that we should be angry about? I think we can have righteous anger—for about two seconds, before it degenerates into something else! We all have our own motives, and our motives are rarely pure. The only properly sustained righteous anger would be God's anger or wrath against our evil and sin. 'God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day' (Ps. 7:11)—at our

⁸ For a developed treatment of anger—human and divine—see Geoffrey Bingham, *Angry Heart or Tranquil Mind?* (NCPI, 1984).

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evil and sin. In our sinful condition, we may even get angry at God for daring to oppose His holy love to what we may be doing!⁹

THE END OF ANGER

One of the most fearful judgements of God is reserved for those whose anger is without end:

Thus says the LORD:
For three transgressions of Edom,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because he pursued his brother with the sword
and cast off all pity;
he maintained his anger perpetually,
and kept his wrath forever (Amos 1:11).

Why should God be so against those who keep wrath forever? God's wrath always serves the purposes of His love. Once it has done its job, it comes to an end.

The place where God's wrath comes finally to its end is at the cross. There we see God's wrath fully and finally expended on sin, and fully borne for us in and by God's Son (see Mark 14:27; 15:33–34; Rom. 8:3; Gal. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24). This is where God has 'cast all our sins into the depths of the sea' (Micah 7:19), and replaced them with God's favour and approval in His Son.

This is where our anger, and our desire to control people and things from which it arises, and the murderous intentions that result, also come to their end. When we see God taking our murderous anger into Himself, and bearing it out to

⁹ See further: 'Wrath—the Pressure of God's Holy Love', in Martin Bleby, *God's Holy Love: For Newcomers to Christian Faith* (NCPI, Second Edition 2001), pp. 46–51.

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extinction for us, our feeble objections are shamed to silence, our embittered consciences are purified and brought to peace, our misdirected hearts are realigned in His overwhelming love, and all our warped desires are consumed in His wholesome satisfaction of our deepest longings. This is where we discover that what we meant for harm, God intended for our good (as in Gen. 50:20), and that the one we crucified and killed by lawless hands was actually ‘delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God’ to wipe out our sins, in order that ‘times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord’ (Acts 2:23; 3:19, RSV). God is indeed sovereign over all things—even over our evil—and we are not. Truly God is the One ‘who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will’ (Eph. 1:11), and we can gladly allow our foolish little plans and posturings to be consigned to the scrap heap. Here we find that our anger, that ‘does not produce God’s righteousness’ (James 1:20), is turned by God to His praise (as in Ps. 76:10).

Here, in a right relationship with God, enabled by the great blessing of Christ, we can learn to exercise our God-given dominion, in keeping with God’s glorious purpose for His whole creation.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

- *What have we known of the desire to take charge of situations to effect good outcomes?*
- *What have we seen of this desire being distorted to preserve ourselves and do harm to others?*
- *What have we known of wanting to be God ourselves in our own lives and in the lives of other people?*
- *What have we experienced of our anger being laid to rest?*