

# Born to Win

## Power Versus Freedom

by Ronald L. Dart

If power corrupts (and we know it does) and if absolute power corrupts absolutely, how is it that God has not been corrupted? You know, this is one of the oldest and most popular challenges that unbelievers like to throw out at Christians, “Well, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. God, if he’s that powerful, would be corrupted.” Actually, it’s a perfectly legitimate question. And the answer to the question opens the door to understanding and resolving a wide range of issues relative to God and the Bible. It was Lord Acton who coined that statement about power, and I’m finally beginning to understand *why* the statement is true. Perhaps I’m understanding, too, why the founders of this country were *so dedicated* to the balance of powers—to the prevention of the centralization of power. There is now, and long has been, a struggle between power and freedom. I think it’s fair to say that there is *enmity* between power and freedom—that freedom is a threat to power and power is a threat to freedom, and it has *always* been so.

Why, then, does God not become corrupted by power himself? The answer is relatively simple, but for some reason people don’t see it. God has a goal in mind that *requires* freedom for all concerned for the goal to be reached. Surely we can all understand how having an overriding objective tends to diminish every other consideration. So what is that objective?

Before I answer that question, I want to talk a little bit about the issue of freedom. It has been very much on my mind of late because I fear a considerable loss of freedom is in the works for mankind if present trends continue. To explain this, at the risk of boring you, I have to go back to the beginning. There are *loads* of unanswerable questions that arise from the early chapters of Genesis, and they serve as a distraction from what may be the most important bit of information found there. I suspect you know the story, well enough. In the words of James Weldon Johnson:

And God stepped out on space,  
And he looked around and said:  
I’m lonely—  
I’ll make me a world.

*James Weldon Johnson - The Creation*

And so he set out to create. He made the sun, the moon, the stars. He created plant, insect, and animal life. And he planted a garden eastward in a place called Eden, which must have been *stunning* to the eyes. And then he made *a man* [Genesis 1–2]. Now, you have to be blind not to see that *man was the object of the whole exercise*. God didn’t just do it for the fun of it; he did it with a point in mind. Now, why that was so—why man is the object of it—is a story all in itself. And then God concluded, “Well, it’s not good for man to be alone.” So he put the man to sleep, took one of his ribs, and fashioned a woman. To this pair, he gave the Garden of Eden with instructions to dress it and keep it [Genesis 2:18–25].

So far, so good. But he had done something else that people seem to have a hard time getting their mind around. He planted two trees in this garden: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He told his man and his woman that they could eat of *any* tree in the garden except one—the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Now, here is the central question: If he didn't want them to eat that tree, *why was it there?* You may want to write that question down and give it some thought. Ask your Sunday school teacher about that one. If God didn't want Adam and Eve to eat of the tree he told him not to eat, why was it there? Here's the answer: If you aren't free to disobey, you aren't free. And God wanted a man who *was free*. Man's freedom was an imperative of what God was doing with man, so man had to have a choice—a choice between life and the knowledge of good and evil, the *experience* of good and evil. If you ever need an example of what they call "free moral agency", this will serve well enough.

One of the most interesting aspects of the story is that God, having told Adam and Eve, "Don't eat of that tree", left them *completely alone* in the garden...well, except for a snake. You know the story—the argument that the serpent makes against the command of God [Genesis 3:1–5]. You know, "Did God tell you couldn't eat of that tree?" It almost seems surprised that the tree is there. And the woman says, "Oh, yeah. He told us not to eat of *that* tree because we'll die if we do." The serpent says, "Oh, *you will not die* if you do that tree." You know, it's a well-known old, old story.

What's *interesting* is: God is not present to argue with the snake. He doesn't strike the snake with lightning. He doesn't take its life away from it. He has already told Adam and Eve, "You can have *every tree* in the garden, just don't eat *this one*." Well, they ate of the tree, their eyes were open, and they knew that they were naked and they proceeded to cover up. That's a surprise—they *knew* that they were naked? Actually, I think they came to see their nakedness as significant, whereas before they had not.

Then God came into the garden and called out for them, "Where are you?" [Genesis 3:9]. Now, at this point, there are a lot of furrowed brows that show up because they are thinking, "What do you mean, 'Where are you?'. Isn't this God, who knows everything? Was he *pretending* he didn't know where they were?" No, I don't think so. This is God, who knows everything *he wants to know* and he doesn't choose to know everything. What he did was to leave instructions, then leave these two beautiful naked creatures together, entirely alone. He did not hide in the bushes and watch. This was an essential element of granting to man *complete freedom*. God was not about to stand around and *nag them*.

Now, why did God do it this way? Why didn't he make creatures that could only do the right thing? Well, we did, actually. We call them cows or sheep or what have you. What God wanted was *sons* to share eternity with *sons* who chose God freely and not because they had no other choice. So, *freedom* was at the top of God's agenda *right from the very start*. Why does power not corrupt God? Because he is absolutely committed to man's freedom, and cannot get what he is after without man *having* freedom. This simple idea has some far-reaching consequences.

Now I would like to bring Jesus into the picture, and consider the *impact* he had on the power structure of the time. Frankly, I have always found it a little hard to understand the opposition to Jesus. You know, when you think about this man, the teachings that he had—they were healthy, they were strengthening of the people, they freed the people, they liberated them, they he healed the sick. He's an *astounding* man, a *gentle* man, and yet he faced *incredible* opposition.

Let me draw you a picture. Here's Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and there was a man there who had a withered arm. (I think one of the reasons this parable always transfixes is me is because I remember seeing a man just like that when I was a kid. Withered arm, just like a stick that was pulled to his side and he couldn't stick it out, at all. It was just there.) The leaders were watching Jesus to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath day. And I have an idea: Most people, when they read that, they think, "What!? I mean, what are you talking about, 'healing on the Sabbath day'? Why would you *not* heal on the Sabbath day?" Well, by Jewish law, something like that was *sort-of* "work" and you shouldn't do "work" on the Sabbath day. I don't know what they thought about a person

nursing a sick person on the Sabbath day, about spooning food into his mouth, about maybe massaging his back a little bit where he's hurting. I don't know what they thought about that. But *here* is a man who can say, "Be healed!", or "Rise up and walk!", and people who have been lame all their lives or blind all their lives *can walk or see*.

Well, Jesus knew all the arguments about Sabbath observance—he kept the Sabbath himself. The leaders there that day, intending to put Jesus on the spot, asked him point-blank, "Rabbi...":

**Matthew 12**

KJ2000

<sup>10</sup> [...] Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days? that they might accuse him.

<sup>11</sup> And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?

That's easy. I mean, you've got one sheep (you're a pretty poor guy if it's the only sheep you've got) and the thing falls into a pit. All you've got to do is reach down there and grab a handful of fur and lift the little thing out. Wouldn't you do that? Assumedly he wouldn't have brought this question up this way if the answer would not have been, "Yeah, we would do that." But, of course, a sheep represents *money* to a man. Then Jesus said:

**Matthew 12**

KJ2000

<sup>12</sup> How much then is a man better than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days.

He's answered the question: Yeah, it's lawful to heal on the Sabbath day.

**Matthew 12**

KJ2000

<sup>13</sup> Then he said to the man, Stretch forth your hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like the other.

You know, this is *really something*—to actually see it with your own eyes, to see this poor guy standing there, to see his arm withered up like a stick, no flesh on his fingers all up like a claw, unable to stretch his hand out, and Jesus says, "Stretch out your hand." This is work? This is breaking the Sabbath? The man stretched his hand out and it was restored exactly like his other hand.

**Matthew 12**

KJ2000

<sup>14</sup> Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.

No, among *normal* people this would be considered an *insane* response to what Jesus had done. Time after time, Jesus healed the sick (often on the Sabbath)—released burdens, freed people captive to disease—and time after time the *fear* of him and the *hatred* of him grew. But not among the common people. They had no problem with Jesus. They followed him all over the landscape. They hung on his every word. What was the difference between, say, the Pharisees and the common folk? In a word, the difference was *power*. Somehow, the story of their deliberations and a bald statement of their motives leaked out of their councils. There's no surprise in this. You can't do anything without somebody talking to somebody. It will always leak out.

Now this happened very shortly after Jesus had deliberately delayed... You remember the story of

Lazarus who died, and Jesus who was late getting there? He was *deliberately* late. He wanted to be gone long enough for a full three days and three nights to pass, so everybody understood that Lazarus was *graveyard dead*. Okay. He came down there, walked up to the tomb, said:

**John 11**

KJ2000

<sup>43</sup> [...] Lazarus, come forth.

<sup>44</sup> And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a cloth. Jesus said unto them, Loose him, and let him go.

He raised a *dead man* back to life. Well, the story is told in John, the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter, verse 45.

**John 11**

KJ2000

<sup>45</sup> Then many of the Jews who came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him.

<sup>46</sup> But some of them went their ways to the Pharisees, and told them what things Jesus had done.

Oh, that's inevitable. Sooner or later, somebody is going to go—some snitch is going to go—and tell the power-brokers what you've done. Well, then the chief priests (notice, the *chief priests*) and the Pharisees gathered together—they got a council and they said:

**John 11**

KJ2000

<sup>47</sup> [...] What do we? for this man does many miracles.

<sup>48</sup> If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.

Now, I don't really quite know why they thought that would be that way. I can see the problem when they say, "If we leave him alone, everybody's going to believe on him." That is true. And, of course, that for them would have been a complete loss of power.

**John 11**

KJ2000

<sup>49</sup> And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, You know nothing at all,

<sup>50</sup> Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.

[...]

<sup>53</sup> Then from that day forth they took counsel together to put him to death.

Now, it is as clear as crystal what the problem was. They feared the loss of power, the loss of influence, the loss of privileged position. And you do understand, don't you, the relationship between fear and hatred? These things are almost Siamese twins, it seems. It is, I think, the fear of the loss of power that causes power to corrupt. That's one that's worth sitting back for a while and thinking over. Perhaps we can begin to understand why an all-powerful God is not corrupted by power. Perhaps it's because he has no *fear* of losing power or losing anything else, for that matter. You can't touch him, so why should he be afraid?

Now, considering Jesus and power a little bit further. On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus had a caution for his disciples. It's in John 15. He said:

**John 15**

AKJV

<sup>17</sup> These things I command you, that you love one another.

<sup>18</sup> If the world hate you, you know that it hated me before it hated you.

<sup>19</sup> If you were of the world, the world would love his own: but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

Now, you got to understand...I can't imagine any earthly reason why the world would have hated those guys—because they were preaching peace and they were healing sick people—except the issue of *power*.

**John 15**

AKJV

<sup>20</sup> Remember the word that I said to you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.

<sup>21</sup> But all these things will they do to you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me.

<sup>22</sup> If I had not come and spoken to them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin.

There's nothing they can do to cover it up; it has been stripped bare and they hate me for it.

**John 15**

AKJV

<sup>23</sup> He that hates me hates my Father also.

<sup>24</sup> If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: [*Maybe they wouldn't have been such sinners.*] but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father.

<sup>25</sup> But this comes to pass, that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, They hated me without a cause.

Now, I don't read in the Bible that the *man in the street* hated Jesus. They followed him. They listened to him. They rejoiced in his healings. They were fascinated by him and nearly everyone knew someone who had been healed or fed bread and fish by Jesus. But then, the man in the street was not *threatened* by Jesus. On the contrary, he was *liberated* by Jesus and *liberated* by Jesus' message, for *freedom* lay at the core of Jesus' message. It was the powerful who hated Jesus—people to whom he posed a threat. They even acknowledged what the threat was—the loss of power: *morally* over the people and *literally* to the Romans. It was that simple. Jesus did not mean to say they had *no reason* to hate him, only that he had never given them a cause. Make no mistake, if Jesus were on the scene today people in power would *fear and hate him*, and it really is as simple as that. Paul laid this out again and again in his letters.

For Paul, the issue was joined shortly after he returned from his first missionary journey. He had gone all the way through Asia Minor and had to make a *major* shift in policy. After the Jews in synagogue after synagogue rejected his message, Paul went on to convert Gentiles in large numbers. He came back to Antioch and told him the story, and they were all celebrating over the whole thing. It was *wonderful*

that God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. Now, this did not set well with what Luke calls “the believing Pharisees” [Acts 15:5]. Notice, this is the same philosophy that Jesus opposed throughout. But if you go back to the day of Pentecost, when they baptized 3,000 people in one day, you know a lot of those were Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes—the whole spectrum of Judaism was being baptized. But just because people are baptized doesn’t mean they’re converted all the way through.

The Church fought this issue out. You’ll find the whole story beginning in the end of chapter 14 and Acts 15. They send decrees out to all the churches. Paul went out, delivered the decrees to Galatia. But when he had passed on, the same gang that had opposed him in Jerusalem followed him to Galatia. And Paul heard about it, got the whole story, and he wrote a letter back to the Galatians. And in this letter he makes a *clear* statement about a fundamental issue a faith. Galatians five, verse one:

### Galatians 5

AKJV

<sup>1</sup> Stand fast therefore in the liberty with which Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

Now, it’s easy to misunderstand this when you don’t know what the issue was. What had happened at Jerusalem was an attempt to impose, on Gentile converts, not merely the law of Scripture, but Jewish law including adult circumcision. Jewish law involved a *lot more* than Scripture; they had a list of “dos and don’ts” as long as your arm. Some seem to think that the yoke of bondage was the Ten Commandments, but I don’t know of *anyone* who thinks our liberty includes the freedom to steal. So where does this idea of a yoke of bondage come around? What Paul is talking about is the yoke of human administration of the law that has become the problem.

James, when he sat down to write a letter (really, kind of, out of the same situation) said:

### James 1

AKJV

<sup>23</sup> For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like to a man beholding his natural face in a glass:

<sup>24</sup> For he beholds himself, and goes his way, and straightway forgets what manner of man he was.

<sup>25</sup> But whoever looks into the perfect law of liberty, and continues therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

That’s really interesting. Listen to how the NIV puts it—New International Version:

### James 1

NIV

<sup>25</sup> But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

The law of God cannot *possibly* be a yoke of bondage because the law of God is what *gives freedom*. Let me read it again:

### James 1

NIV

<sup>25</sup> [...] whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom [...]

Now, lest we misunderstand what James is driving at, in chapter two of James he says this:

**James 1**

NIV

<sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

<sup>11</sup> For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” [...]

Where do you find those laws? The Ten Commandments, right?

**James 1**

NIV

<sup>11</sup> [...] If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

<sup>12</sup> Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom[....]

Do we understand this? He is talking about the Ten Commandments. Now let’s go back to Paul and Galatians where he says:

**Galatians 5**

AKJV

<sup>1</sup> Stand fast therefore in the liberty with which Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

Listen to how the NIV—the New International Version—puts it:

**Galatians 5**

NIV

<sup>1</sup> It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

*Freedom is the object.* It’s for *freedom* that Christ has made us free. So where do men go wrong? Well, they add rules on top of rules and they create a power structure in the Christian community. Here’s what you need to understand about the law of God: When you break the law, say, “Thou shalt not covet”, no one knows you broke the law—you may not even have acknowledged it yourself—but the breaking of the law carries consequences that require no one to administer them. This is true of *many* violations of biblical law. No one knows but you and God. You are free to break the law *and* you are free to suffer the consequences.

It’s really kind of simple, isn’t it. But when men start using the law as an instrument for *controlling human behavior*, corruption inevitably enters the picture. I think we are seeing an object lesson of this right now in the political structure right here in the good old USA. I hear people who are increasingly *afraid* of government control. And just as religious leaders oppressed early Christians, the civil government can do *exactly* the same thing. Here is something to remember: God *doesn’t do that*. He has no desire to *control* your behavior. God wants your behavior to be *voluntary*. After all, your obedience to the law is for *your* good, not his. And I really, honestly wonder how many people understand this. What Jesus was all about was freedom—freedom to make your own choices and freedom to live with the results. But he was also about setting us free in those areas where we have hurt ourselves and hurt others. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

## 2 Corinthians 3

NIV

<sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

And that's the way it has to be for a class of sons whom God intends to be *winners*.

*Christian Educational Ministries*

P.O. Box 560 ❖ Whitehouse, Texas 75791

Phone: 1-888-BIBLE-44 ❖ Fax: (903) 839-9311

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