
Be Still.

THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION 50

SPIRITUAL POWER



*“We live in a world possessed.
And we know it.”*

JOHAN HUIZINGA

**“Test the spirits,
to see whether they are of God”
1 John 4:1**

Power can destroy or create. Power profoundly impacts our interpersonal relationships, our social relationships, and our relationship with God. Nothing touches us more profoundly for good or for ill than power.

The power that destroys demands ascendancy, total control. It destroys relationship and trust; it destroys dialogue; it destroys integrity. And this is true whether we look through the macrocosm of human history or the microcosm of our own personal histories.

What does the power that destroys look like? Think of Adam and Eve in the garden—given every pleasure, every delight, everything necessary for a good life. Yet they wanted to be more, to have more, to know more than is right.; they grasped and grabbed in a head-long rush to be like God, to know good and evil. *The sin in the garden was the sin of power.* Not content to be creatures, they wanted to be gods. That spirit festers within us, doesn't it? For us, it is never enough to enjoy good work. No, we must obtain supremacy; we must possess, we must hoard; we must conquer. Philosophy professor Arthur Roberts speaks of the little idols we make of ourselves in print and on television. 'Hallelujah to us!' we shout. But the sounds hurt our ears, and the sights burn our eyes, and the ashes fill our mouths, and the whole thing stinks to high heaven. And God, watching, weeps.

For Adam and Eve, it meant a rupture in their relationship with God. The experience of communion and dialogue with God was broken. They hid from him. We, too, hide from God, and our headstrong determination to do it our way makes God's voice hard to hear.

Power destroys relationships. How tragic to see the relationship between David and Saul destroyed because of Saul's lust for power. Even lifelong friends can become mortal enemies the moment the vice-presidency of the company is at stake. Nothing cuts us off from each other like power. Even ordinary human conversation is destroyed by it. Paul Tournier writes, 'Power is the greatest obstacle in the way of dialogue. We pay dearly for our power.' And we see this tragic drama written everywhere, between husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee. Power's ability to destroy relationships is written across the face of humanity.

Think of the disciples arguing bitterly over who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God, which must have been intense because it is mentioned in all four Gospels. Amazing, isn't it, grown-up people deeply exercised over who is at the top of the heap! Of course, whenever we are deciding who is the greatest, we are also deciding who is the least—and to be the least means to be helpless, completely without authority, without power. So Jesus sat a child in the middle of the group to teach them about greatness. What was he doing? He was pointing at the ability of children to work and play without the need for supremacy. They are simply content to make mud pies while the rest of the world goes on in its mad rush for 'greatness'. You see, in the kingdom of God, greatness is an issue that is beside the point. It is a virtue for the disciple of Christ to ignore the question.

Also think of Simon Magus in Acts 8:9-25, who thought he could merchandise the power of the Holy Spirit. His sin was trying to use

the power of God for his own ends. This is the sign of all false religion, but it is exactly this mentality that has come over so much of Christianity in our day. Power can be an extremely destructive thing in any context, but religious power can destroy in a way that no other power can. When we are convinced that what we are doing is identical with the kingdom of God, anyone who opposes us *must* be wrong. When we are convinced that we always use our power to good ends, we believe we can never do wrong. And those who are accountable to no one are especially susceptible to the corrupting influence of power. In the sixth century, Saint Benedict established the 'rule of stability' to draw into encouraging and disciplined fellowships the many wandering prophets and monks who had no one to hold them accountable for what they said or did. Most media preachers and itinerant evangelists today suffer from exactly the same lack of accountability.

What we must see is the wrongness of those who think they are always right. Jesus Christ alone is always right. The rest of us must recognise our own foibles and frailties and seek to learn from the correction of others. If we do not, power can take us down the path of the demonic.

PRIDE AND POWER

There is an intimate and volatile connection between pride and power, and power is insidious when it is coupled with pride. An unholy trinity of pride, arrogance and power contributed to Samson's downfall. Among the most dangerous people in our media-soaked culture are leaders who believe their own press releases. Malcolm Muggeridge suggests that if Jesus were going through the wilderness temptation today, Satan would add a fourth temptation, namely, to appear on television.

All of this makes pride one of the monumental problems of our day. Isn't it instructive that in a day when so many people struggle with self-esteem we also have an abundance of people with over-inflated egos? Pride makes us think we are right, and power gives us the ability to cram our vision of rightness down everyone else's throat. The marriage of pride and power carries us to the brink of the demonic.

THE PRINCIPALITIES AND THE POWERS

The demonic is exactly where destructive power reaches its apex. The Bible speaks of very real cosmic spiritual powers that manifest themselves in the very real structures of our very real world. These powers account for the destructive bent of power that we see all around us. Indeed, it is only as we begin to understand what the Bible calls 'the principalities and powers' that we can truly confront the power issue in our own lives. Our warfare, says Paul, is

'against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual armies of wickedness in the heavenly places' (Eph. 6:12). Indeed, the Bible speaks of the powers as gods that seek to enslave and destroy (Gal. 4:8-10). The powers are incarnational. They are the energising forces behind human beings and social structures. When Paul tells us that the powers 'crucified the Lord of glory,' he is emphasising that the crucifixion of Christ was far more than the work just of human personalities (1 Cor 2:8). When Paul says that our warfare is not against flesh and blood, he does not mean that flesh and blood are unimportant. He means that the real focus of our struggle should be against the inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates and regulates the person or institution.

Organisations and whole nations are often defined and controlled by a prevailing ideology, mood or spirit that gives unity and direction. We are accustomed in the west to viewing institutions as sterile, neutral structures that have nothing to do with the spiritual life. But when we think of the collective hatred of gathered Ku Klux Klan

To live rightly with reference to money, sex and power is to live sacramentally. To misuse and abuse these is to desecrate the holy things of God.

members reaching a critical flashpoint of prejudice and ruthlessness, or the Third Reich idea of *volk*—race—leading to the crematories of Dachau and Auschwitz, it becomes easy to believe in demonic powers.

What does this mean to us on a practical level? Well, when we look at our own insane drive to make it to the top, we must confront the powers of pride and prestige that grip our hearts. When a school board decision does a disservice to children, we must confront the powers of vested interest that stand behind it. We must seek out the 'spirit' that energises the unjust law or organisation and seek to defeat *it* in the power of Christ.

DISCERNING THE POWERS

Amazingly, it is the church's awesome responsibility to discern these spiritual powers. Among the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to the people of God is to recognise the spirits for what they are and to understand their hostility to the way of Christ (1 Cor. 12:8-10). This is not as easy as we may think. We can see the Third Reich's demonic perversion with hindsight but during Hitler's rise to power, his 25-point platform included a belief in 'positive Christianity'.

Fraught as it is with pitfalls, this ministry of discernment is given to you and to me. We are to discern what is truly happening today, understand where it could lead us, and give a value judgment upon it.

NAMING THE POWERS

'Test the spirits,' says John. But how do the powers manifest themselves today?

Mammon is one of the powers. Our wealth is not neutral, sterile or inanimate. It is alive with spiritual power and seeks to possess us. Sex is one of the powers. In our day it is not just a need, like cheerful surroundings or friendly conversation. For untold millions it is an all-consuming passion. We cannot hear the old cliché, "Keep her barefoot and pregnant" without recognising the language of power, or look at the crimes of incest and rape without seeing crimes of power. Sex is power, real power. There is nothing neutral or passive about it. It is alive with spiritual energy seeking to make a bid for supremacy over the hearts of men and women.

Religious legalism is one of the powers. Paul declares, 'If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch"... according to human precepts and doctrines?' Col.2:20-22. Behind these traditions and regulations are spiritual powers that have made obedience to them the highest good. The tragedy is that the thing designed to lead us to God does exactly the opposite, and becomes a rival god holding us captive and demanding our total allegiance. Religious legalism is one of the heaviest burdens human beings ever have to bear (Matt. 23:4).

Technology is one of the powers. When the god efficiency has won over spontaneity, we have become things and we sense deep inside that our personhood has been violated. For the Christian, other questions must counterbalance the question of efficiency: Will human beings be crushed in the process? We must seek to discern the spirituality of technology and respond to it.

Narcissism is one of the powers dominating our age. Pleasure seeking and self-satisfaction are at the top of the priority list. The very idea of sacrifice for the good of others seems ludicrous. We who follow Christ know that the good life is found not in selfishness but in selflessness, that to lose ourselves is to find ourselves (Luke 9:24-25).

Militarism is one of the powers. The divine purpose of military power is to restrain chaos. Military strategists now plot to promote chaos—not how to make the world more stable, but how to make it less stable. The final end of this demonic perversion is the ultimate exercise of power in destroying the world. We must call militarism away from its evil bent.

Absolute skepticism is one of the powers. It

is so pervasive in university life today that it must be considered a spiritual power hostile to an honest search for truth. Not-being-sure has become the final dogma that must never be violated. We must call the university back from its arrogance to its humble mission of truth-seeking. When answers are found they should be embraced, not denied.

DEFEATING THE POWERS

We must never fool ourselves. The powers against which we wage the Lamb's war are very strong. Satan prowls about like a 'roaring lion' seeking those whom he may devour (1 Pet. 5:8). The principalities and powers do not just have power—they *exist* as power; power is how they manifest themselves. To dominate, to control, to devour, to imprison, is their very essence. But how do we defeat the powers without and within?

First, we must recognise that Christ has already defeated them. In his death and resurrection, God 'disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him' (Col. 2:15). On the cross, Christ could have summoned ten thousand angels, but instead he renounced the mechanisms of power in order to defeat the powers of the abyss.

Second, we defeat the powers by cultivating the gift of discernment. Until we have eyes to see the spiritual powers that energise a family, a corporate structure, or a government agency we do not fully understand it. You may wonder how such a discerning spirit is obtained. It comes first by asking for it. 'You do not have, because you do not ask,' said James (James 4:2). We ask—and listen: listen to God, listen to those around us, listen to what is occurring in our world. And we invite God to teach us what it all means. We also gather in groups of faithful believers to share insights and to listen together, for no single individual can know all of God's will. We do all this with a good deal of humour and humility. Humour, because we must never take ourselves too seriously; humility, because we must take God's word through others with utmost seriousness.

Third, we defeat them by forthrightly facing the powers within. Right at the outset, we all need to see and to address the ones that nip at our own heels. Otherwise we will utilise the tactics of the very powers we oppose and, in the end, become just as evil. We must look at our own greed and lust for power and see them for what they are. We must look at ourselves spiritually and discern ourselves spiritually. The glory is that we do not do this alone. The blessed Holy Spirit comes alongside of us and comforts and encourages as he convicts and reproves. He leads us into the inner solitude of the heart where he can teach us. Sometimes this will take the form of private retreat for prayer and reflection. More often it will be an inner retreat of the heart in the midst of life's many activities and demands. In this interior silence we

hear the Kol Yahweh, the voice of the Lord, and turn from our violence, our fear, our greed, our hate. Hearing, we turn to Christ's love and compassion and peace. We rejoice over every conquest of the Lamb, and as he conquers and wins our hearts, every victory feast has a place setting for our enemies.

Fourth, we defeat the powers by an inner renunciation of all things. In a posture of total renunciation, we have nothing to lose; the powers have no control over us. Suppose the powers take our possessions—no matter, they are only on loan from God. Protecting them is more his business than ours. Suppose they seek to destroy our influence by defaming our reputation—no matter, it is not ours to protect, and we could not do it even if we wanted to. Suppose the powers throw at us the fear of death—no matter, we belong to One who can lead us through death's dark pathway into greater life. So, you see, we simply have nothing to lose. We are positionless and possessionless, and this total vulnerability is our greatest triumph.

Fifth, we defeat the powers by rejecting the weapons of power of this world. We stop trying to control others. We refuse to dominate, intimidate or manipulate. The only way we can battle the principalities and powers is in the life and power of the Holy

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Spirit, who wants to be an active agent in our lives in the most practical and socially concrete way. Most revolutions have struggled to throw out one corrupt and self-serving government only to have another corrupt and self-serving government take its place. They failed to understand that the real battle has more to do with the powers of greed, vested interest and egomania than actual persons or government structures.

Sixth, we defeat the powers by using the weapons of Ephesians 6, which are more powerful than we can possibly imagine. We have sterilised them by teaching that they are all 'defensive' and forgotten that the Roman military was the most ruthless killing machine of its day. The equipment Paul describes was not solely for standing one's ground, but for advancing against the enemy. The 'Roman wedge' was an effective V-shaped formation that made full use of a specially designed, elongated shield with which a soldier covered two-thirds of his own body and one-third of his comrade to the left. This is a wonderful picture of the company of the committed, advancing against the powers together, conquering in Christ's name. The gates of hell cannot stand against such a unified and determined offensive. James Naylor writes, "He [Christ] puts spiritual weapons into their hearts and

hands to conquer his enemies, not as the prince of this world, with whips and prison, tortures and torments, to kill and destroy men's lives, but with the word of truth, returning love for hatred, wrestling with God against the enmity, with prayers and tears night and day, with fasting and mourning, in patience, in faithfulness, in truth, in love unfeigned, in longsuffering, and in all the fruits of the spirit, that if by any means he may overcome evil with good."

The powers are strong, but Christ is stronger and his victory is sure. We live in that life that overcomes the world, and we should expect to see the overthrow of the kingdom of darkness and the inauguration of the Lamb's rule of righteousness wherever we go.

CREATIVE POWER

"The only cure for the love of power is the power of love." —Sherri McAdam

There is a power that destroys. There is also a power that creates, which gives life and joy and peace. It is freedom and not bondage, life and not death, transformation and not coercion. The power that creates restores relationship and gives the gift of wholeness to all. It is spiritual power, the power that proceeds from God.

What does the power that creates look like? Think of Joseph combining spiritual discernment with political clout to avert a disastrous famine, then using his power for reconciliation with his brothers instead of revenge. Think of William Wilberforce, the Christian politician, who used his position to help abolish slavery in the British Empire. The use of power to restore relationships is also a part of our personal, everyday world. The mother who rights a wrong between children is using her authority to restore broken relationships. School principals, pastors, CEOs, can all use their power to restore life, healing, integrity and wholeness to their given domains. All of us in daily life encounter thousands of opportunities to enlist power in the service of reconciliation. Creative power sets people free. When Moses, backed up by the mighty acts of God, brought Pharaoh to his knees the result was the most dramatic release of captives ever known. When Martin Luther King Jr. stood firm against America's racism, millions were set free. When teachers unlock the joy of discovery in the minds of their students, they are using the power of their position to liberate. When an older brother uses his superior status to build the self-esteem of his siblings, he is using power to set them free. When the old destructive habit patterns of depression or fear are transformed by the power of God, the result is liberation.

Jeremiah reminds us that spiritual power sometimes looks like weakness. His tenacity to the truth of Yahweh in spite of persecution enabled the people of Judah to keep faith in God when Jerusalem fell and all the

words of the false prophets were revealed as spurious. Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew the power of God that looks like weakness to the world. He said, 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.' He died to self, he died to all his hopes and dreams, and he died at the hands of Hitler's SS Black Guards. But as the Scripture reminds us, a grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies bears much fruit (John 12:24). The fruit of Bonhoeffer's life and death is beyond calculation.

The power that creates produces unity. Think of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. The inclusion of Gentile Christians was an issue that could have easily split the Christian fellowship right down the middle. As they talked, as they listened, the power of God broke through in a Spirit-led unity of heart and mind, and the cultural captivity of the church was broken.

When John Woolman delivered his moving plea against slavery to the 1758 Quaker conference, the entire body, without dissent, agreed to remove slavery from its midst.

People came alive to God to each other through the life-giving ministry of Jesus. In the crucifixion, the power that creates reached its apex. Satan sought to use all the power at his disposal to destroy Christ, but God turned it into the ultimate act of creative power. You and I can now receive forgiveness and know the restoring of our relationship to God. Real forgiveness brings doxology—and doxology itself is power. As we live thankfully for God's great gift, others are drawn to know this joy of the Lord that overcomes all things.

THE MARKS OF SPIRITUAL POWER

The power that creates is in stark contrast to human power. Paul the apostle said he counted his pedigree, position and connections as 'dung' for his sights were set on a greater power, 'that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead' (Phil. 3:10-11). When we see people desperately scrambling for the dung—human power—we can be sure that they know little of the 'power of his resurrection.' Love is the first mark of spiritual power. In Christ, power is used to destroy the evil so that love can redeem the good. When the men at Lystra wanted to turn Paul and Barnabas into Greek gods, they tore their clothes in horror (Acts 14:15). Many of us might not find the idea of deity status so reprehensible. After all, we would use our power to such good ends! But the power used to enhance reputations is not motivated by love and so destroys the user.

Next, spiritual power under the discipline of **humility** is teachable. Apollos was a powerful preacher, but he was also willing to learn from others. Peter made some serious

mistakes in his powerful ministry, but when confronted with his errors he had the humility to change. Believe me, this is no small matter. Many have been destroyed in their walk with God simply because their exercise of power was not controlled by humility. Power without humility is anything but a blessing. To really know the power of God is to be keenly aware that we have done nothing more than to receive a gift, which leads us to the other marks of spiritual power: **self-limitation**—those who live and move in God know that there is a time to withhold the hand of power just as there is a time to use it; **joy**—not the bubbly joy of the superficial, but the rich inner joy of spiritual power that is yet acquainted with sorrow and grief; **vulnerability**—the power from above lacks the human symbols of authority and is not filled with bravado. It is the power of the 'wounded healer' (2 Cor. 12:9-10). In prison, Alexander Solzhenitsyn discovered that when he tried to maintain a measure of power over his own life by acquiring food or clothing, he was at the mercy of his captors. But when he accepted and even embraced his own vulnerability, his gaolers had no power over him. In a sense, he had become the powerful, they the powerless; **submission**—as we learn to experience on a personal level the same kind of intimate cooperation with the Father that characterised the life of Christ, we will enter more deeply into the meaning of true power. There is a power that comes through spiritual gifts, and there is power that comes through spiritual positioning. The two work in unison. Submission gives us spiritual positioning. We are positioned under the leadership of Christ and other Christians. We find others in the fellowship who can further us in the things of God. We submit to Scripture to learn more perfectly the ways of God with human beings. We submit to the Holy Spirit to learn the meaning of obedience. We submit to the life of faith in order to understand the difference between human power and divine power. Submission is power because it places us in a position from which we can receive from others.

Freedom is the final mark of spiritual power. People were set free when Jesus and the apostles exercised power. There is more to this, however. Notice how Jesus worked with people. 'He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick,' prophesied Isaiah. Jesus never ran roughshod over the weak. He never used his power to exploit or control others. It would have been easy for him to do otherwise. The poor would have done anything for him. But he freed them to be themselves, fully and uniquely. **Our only business with people is to bring them the truth of God, and then simply love them regardless of what they do or don't do.**

Human power is power *over* someone. Divine power has no such need to control. God's power in our lives frees, not binds.

POWER IN THE MARKET PLACE

- In the individual, power is to be used to promote self-control, not self-indulgence. From self-control comes freedom, for we are becoming what we were created to be.
- In the home, power is to be used to nurture confidence, not subservience.
- In the marriage, power is to be used to enhance communication, not isolation. We make use of our intimate knowledge of each other not to hurt, but to open wide the channels of love and compassion.
- In the church, power is to be used to inspire faith, not conformity. We give people freedom in the Gospel to be themselves without cultural conformity.
- In the school, power is to be used to cultivate growth, not inferiority.
- On the job, power is to be used to facilitate competence, not feelings of inadequacy.

THE MINISTRY OF POWER

We all exercise power over others. We are all affected by the power others exercise over us. We can choose the destructive power that is used to dominate and manipulate, or we can choose the creative power that is used to lead and liberate. It is only through the grace of God that we are able to take something as dangerous as power and make it creative and life-giving.

All who follow Christ are called to the 'ministry of power.' Nothing is more clear than Jesus' consistent use of power to overthrow the kingdom of darkness and confirm his message that the kingdom of God has arrived.

If we expect to engage in this ministry, we must understand the hidden preparation through which God puts his ministers. We must go into the desert of the heart, with God's protection, to meet the Devil. Stripped of all our support systems and distractions we must look squarely into the face of the seductive powers of greed and prestige. We must crucify the old mechanisms of power—push, drive, climb, grasp, trample—and turn instead to the new life of power—love, joy, peace, patience, and all the fruit of the Spirit.

The issue for us is how to bring the lofty talk into our daily walk. In hiddenness we learn to see life spiritually—to see what is important and what is not. Often God completely reverses our priorities. Things we once considered beneath us become matters of genuine consequence. We begin to value simple acts of kindness and neighbourliness. Amid the obscurity of the small corners of life we find God—and it is this finding of God that is essential to the exercise of his life-giving, liberating power.

*Adapted from
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