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THE BATTLE FOR CONTROL: KINGDOMS AT WAR



*Surrender is not the surrender of
the external life, but of the will;
when that is done, all is done.
There are very few crises in life;
the great crisis is
the surrender of the will.*

*

OSWALD CHAMBERS¹

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- ❖ *Mindy*, a Christian college senior, can't believe she ended up in bed with her fiancé last night—again—after promising herself she wouldn't give in and praying about the matter with her accountability partner just last week. Mindy and Jeff are planning to get married after graduation and had hoped to serve as short-term missionaries before having children. But now . . . the whole idea seems hypocritical.
- ❖ Angie steps on the scales, sighs, and heads for the kitchen, where she opens the refrigerator. She starts to pick up a bag of carrots, then reaches instead for a piece of carrot cake that seems to be calling her name. Just then, the phone rings; her sister is

calling to offer a ride to their weekly Bible class tomorrow morning.

- ❖ Something inside Dan knows he really shouldn't be going out for "business lunches" with his attractive young assistant—especially since their recent conversations have been less about business and more about the problems in her marriage. Dan is nervous about being seen with Stacie by someone from the church where he is a respected elder. But some unseen force is drawing him to spend more time with her.
- ❖ Both Tamara and Rod would like for her to be able to quit her job so she can stay at home when their first child is born next month, but they just don't see how they can swing it financially. Their pastor recently preached a message from Matthew 6 about trusting God to provide for basic needs. But they are afraid to step out—and his parents have said she'd be crazy to quit her job.
- ❖ Reggie is still fuming as he flies down the freeway at eighty miles per hour. He knows he shouldn't have lost his temper with Carla—especially with their three-year-old son standing there watching the whole scene. But he can't believe she has overdrawn their checking account again. Why can't she exer-

cise some self-control when it comes to spending? Reggie gets scared when he thinks about what he might do someday when he is in one of his fits of rage. Recently his anger has started coming out with the students at the Christian school where he coaches football.

- * Corrie is troubled by the attitudes and language her children are picking up from other children in preschool and second grade. She wants her children to have a heart for God and really feels she should consider homeschooling them, but she can't handle the thought of being tied down with kids all day every day.

THE REAL WAR

These men and women are not alone in their struggles. Every day, in big or little ways, even as believers, you and I find ourselves engaged in a battle (Galatians 5:17).

The battle is real and dangerous. We are like a soldier in a foxhole, with bullets whizzing past his head, but our battle is actually part of a larger war that has been going on since the creation of the world.

In fact, one of the megathemes that emerges repeatedly in Scripture is that our battles here on

earth are merely a reflection of a cosmic war between the kingdom of God and all other kingdoms. That is true whether we are talking about kids squabbling on a playground, embattled parents and teens, estranged mates in a divorce court, warring desires within our own hearts, power struggles in the church, or nations at war.

This bigger war—the “real war”—begins in the opening pages of the Word of God and continues unabated, gaining in intensity, almost to the final page. It is, in essence, a battle for control.

In the first recorded act in time and space, God *exercised control*. He spoke with authority and power . . . bringing light, life, and order to the darkness and chaos of the universe. When He said, “Let there be light,” there was light. When He said, “Let the trees bring forth fruit,” the trees brought forth fruit. All creation, including—initially—the first man and woman, lived in glad, wholehearted surrender to the sovereign control and will of the Creator.

This surrender did not strip the creation of dignity or freedom; to the contrary, surrender was—and still is—the source and means of true freedom and fullness. The sovereign Creator God ruled over His creation with tender love, inviting His creatures to engage with Him in a divine dance-of-sorts, in which He led and they followed. They responded to His initiative with trust, love, and surrender. In turn,

their needs were abundantly met, they fulfilled their created purpose, and they existed in harmony with God and with each other.

Psalm 104 describes this original, ideal state. In that passage, we see a definite, unquestioned hierarchy in which God—the gracious Sovereign—acts, initiates, directs, sets boundaries, supervises, and lovingly rules over His creation. The creation looks to Him, waits for Him, bows before Him, surrenders to His control, and simply does as He directs.

The oceans stay within the boundaries He has established for them. The grass and the trees grow according to God's direction and provide nourishment for man and animals, also in surrender to God's will. The sun and moon keep their appointed seasons; the animals get up when God tells them to get up and they lie down when God directs them to do so.

What is the result? "The earth is satisfied" (v. 13); "they are filled with good" (v. 28). Did you catch that? To surrender to the Creator's control is not onerous or burdensome; it is, in fact, the place of blessing, fullness, and peace. There is no evidence in this passage of any stress, struggle, or strain. Why? Because the creation is not vying with the Creator for control.

Don't miss this picture. It is what the old gospel song describes as "perfect submission, perfect delight!"²

THE BATTLE BEGINS

Let's go back to the Genesis account. The first blip on this perfect screen came when one of God's created beings—already a rebel himself—approached the happy couple and challenged God's created order. Until that point, there had never been any question about who was in charge and who was taking direction. Now the suggestion was made that the man and woman could be in charge of their own lives, that they didn't have to take direction from anyone else. *You don't have to live a surrendered life; you can be in control*, the tempter implied.

So the man and the woman—created beings—tried to wrest control from the hands of their sovereign Creator. Control that didn't belong to them. They resisted the will of God and insisted on sharing His throne. The battle had begun.

From that point to this, man has been engaged with his Creator in a battle for control—dueling wills, we might call it.

Mercifully, we are dealing with a Creator who is not only sovereign, but also compassionate. God knew that if we tried to run our own lives, we would reap misery and conflict, and that our drive to be in control would render us hopelessly enslaved and would ultimately destroy us. He knew that the only hope for man was through surrender.

From that very first skirmish, God set into motion a plan devised in eternity past to restore man back to a place of surrender to His control. Possessing absolute power, He could have chosen to bludgeon His rebellious creatures into submission. However, because He desires a loving, personal relationship with men and women, created in His likeness, He has opted first to woo and win the hearts of His creatures. He wants their willing, volitional surrender.



GOD HAS OPTED
FIRST TO WOO
AND WIN THE
HEARTS OF HIS
CREATURES.

We know that one day “every knee [will] bow” and “every tongue . . . confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:10–11). Those who refuse His overtures of love and grace will do so under coercion. But those who love and trust Him will find ultimate, eternal joy in that glad-hearted surrender.

THE KING AND HIS KINGDOM

The very thought of God being bent on exercising control over His creation raises an obvious question. If you or I were to attempt to bring the whole planet under our control, we would rightly be labeled “control freaks.” So why is it acceptable for God to insist on “world domination”? Why is it considered selfish

and rebellious for us to want control, but absolutely appropriate for God to assert control? The answer is simple:

He's God—
and we're not.

In that profound, unalterable, eternal reality lies the key to understanding and dealing with this cosmic war, as well as handling our personal, daily struggles for control.



HE IS THE ONLY
ONE CAPABLE OF
RUNNING THE
UNIVERSE.

No one would consider it unreasonable for a mother to insist on being in control of her minivan while her four children are seat-belted in place. That's because she knows what she's doing. She knows how to drive and her children don't. She is the only one in the vehicle capable of keeping everyone safe. The fact that she doesn't share the driving with her preschoolers doesn't make her a control freak!

In the same way, God exercises His sovereign control over the universe because He is the only One capable of running the universe.

Inherent in His being is absolute sovereignty—the right to rule. He is the Creator—we are His creatures. He is eternal—we are finite. He is all-powerful

—we have no power of our own. He is autonomous, independent, and self-existent, needing no one and nothing—we are dependent on Him for our next breath (Acts 17:24–25).

The God revealed in the Scripture is King—not a king on a level with other kings, each with their own sphere of control—but *the* King over all kings. This King has a kingdom. That kingdom—the realm over which He has lawful jurisdiction—includes every molecule of the planet on which we live; it includes the farthest-flung reaches of our galaxy and of every galaxy; it includes those regions that are inhabited by the angelic hosts (both fallen and holy).

In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, twentieth-century Bible expositor G. Campbell Morgan suggests that the kingdom of God really means the *kingship of God*.

It means that God is King now, and always. The Kingdom of God is in existence. God has never been dethroned; and this is what Jesus preached. . . . He was proclaiming the Kingship of God, the rule of God, the fact that the Lord reigneth. . . .

What this age needs is the proclamation of the sovereignty of God, the Kingship of God, the Kingdom of God. . . . When a man yields himself up to that sovereignty, nobody can tyrannize over him.³

The concept of a Sovereign King who exercises absolute control over His subjects is one that our egalitarian, Western minds find difficult to embrace. We want to have a say in the matter—to vote for the leader of our choice. We don't want to bow before an all-powerful monarch. To the contrary, what we really want is to *be* the king—or at least to have a representative form of government.

But whether we buy into it or not, the sovereign rule of God and the lordship of Jesus Christ is a non-negotiable reality that is as determinative and binding as the law of gravity—and more so. It is an irrefutable truth with which every human being must come to terms, sooner or later. And, as Morgan suggests, those who resist His sovereign Lordship set themselves up to be tyrannized by other lords.

ONE WOMAN'S CONTROL CRISIS

“Lynda,” a forty-something mother of four, learned the hard way that to resist surrender to the perfect will of God is to become controlled by tyrants. I received a letter from Lynda in which she told her story. She has been married for twenty-five years to a man she calls “saintly.” However, she grew up in a home with an alcoholic father who was extremely controlling of her and her passive mother.

As she became an adult, she resolved that she

would never submit to another human. She recalls, “I had a huge problem when it came time to say our wedding vows—‘to love and obey.’ Love? Yes, absolutely! *Obey*? I don’t think so!”

In retrospect, Lynda can see how her drive to be in control created numerous problems from the outset of her marriage and led to choices that ultimately caused her life to careen out of control. She admits that she began to turn to other men

to make me feel in control again, and to show my husband that I—and no one else—was in charge of my life. Little did I realize that I was “out of control” in many ways—including sexually and with alcohol abuse. And I was not ever in charge of my life or body.

You see, while I refused to submit to my husband, I was submitting to other men—but not in loving relationships. I was not in control of my body or my life—other men were. “Meet me here, Lynda.” “OK.” “You drive today, Lynda.” “OK.” “You check us in at the motel.” “OK.” “Wear this, do that, call me. . . .” “OK, OK, OK.”

Lynda’s experience poignantly illustrates that as long as we refuse to surrender our will to the will of God, we are never truly free. Rather, we find ourselves dominated by ungodly appetites and forces.

When we throw off the restraints of our wise, loving God, we become slaves to terrible taskmasters that are intent on our destruction. That is exactly what happened to the Old Testament Israelites:

Because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity, therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the LORD sends against you. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you.

—Deuteronomy 28:47–48 NIV

You don't want to surrender to God's control? You won't bow to His will in relation to your marriage, your morals, your attitudes, your tongue, your eating habits, your spending habits, or the way you spend your time? Then count on it—the very points on which you refuse to surrender will become “enemies” that rule over you—lust, greed, possessions, food, sloth, immorality, anger, etc.

After more than twenty years of turmoil in every area of Lynda's life, the Lord brought matters to a head by causing her husband to discover her unfaithfulness. In an incredible display of the heart and ways of God, her husband not only extended mercy, but he tenderly and firmly exerted the wise, loving leadership that Lynda needed to get her life back in order.

Lynda hardly knew how to respond to such grace. But in that crisis of surrender, she says, “I repented. I knew I had to submit completely to God and to my husband—in that order!”

Though she had always feared what would happen if she were to relinquish control of her life, Lynda began to experience blessings she had never known in all the years she was trying to hold on to the reins.



WHAT IS THE
TURF IN WHICH
YOU ARE
IN A BATTLE
FOR CONTROL?

A huge weight was lifted off my shoulders. I didn't want to be in control any more. My journey has not always been easy, but it has been wonderful and life-changing. I had to “let go” of a lot of people in my life—but I have God and my family. I have a beautiful peace of mind and serenity. And I hold my head high every day, because I know I have been forgiven. I will *never* be the same person again—ever.

Lynda's whole perspective on this matter of control has changed. Today she tells others, “Even if you are stubborn and think you will not submit to anyone, you will always be submitting to someone or something—and that can be extremely dangerous. Even life-threatening.”

Surrendering her will to Christ's control in relation to her marriage brought about a dramatic change in Lynda's life. "Your kingdom come; Your will be done" replaced her former motto of "I am in charge of my own life."

What is the turf in which you are in a battle for control? Perhaps it is in relation to your marriage—you may be bent on changing your mate, refusing to accept him/her as God's choice for your life, or resisting your God-given responsibilities in that relationship.

Your battle for control may be in another relationship—perhaps with a parent, a child, an employer, a pastor, or a friend.

Or you may be resisting God's right to control your body—your eating, sleeping, exercise, or moral habits—or your tongue, your time, your future plans, or your finances.

Whether in our relationships, personal disciplines, daily decisions, or recurring habit patterns, our choice to resist or to voluntarily surrender to the control of the King has far-reaching implications.

When we play "king"—when we insist on establishing our own kingdom and asserting our right to rule—we set ourselves unavoidably at war with the Sovereign God of the universe—a battle, I might add, that we cannot possibly win. Invariably, we will end up being ruled by tyrants.

However, when we bow to His kingship—when we recognize His kingdom as being supreme, when we surrender to His wise and loving control—then we can live at peace with the King. And only then will we be free from all other tyrannies.

MAKING IT PERSONAL . . .

- * What is one example of a battle for control in your life?
- * What is one area of your life that has ended up ruling you as a “tyrant” because of your lack of surrender?

NOTES

1. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, September 13.
2. Fanny J. Crosby, “Blessed Assurance.”
3. G. Campbell Morgan, *The God Who Cares* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1987), 153, 172.