

Power

by David C. Grabbe
Forerunner, August 2005

When we hear the word *power*, many pictures and ideas may come to mind. We often associate power with authority or rulership, and we use phrases such as "the powers that be" and "power corrupts." This meaning of the word *power* invokes images of political influence, of commanding figures or elite individuals who operate by their own rules and impose their will on others. In this regard, *power* and *control* are closely linked.

We frequently have the chance to witness the "power of nature." We know that "nature" is not really a power by itself, but that the natural world, created by God, has the potential to release or display tremendous energy. Every year, North and Central America experience a hurricane season, officially from June 1 to November 30, which often provides a spectacular display of power.

In the last decade or so, hurricanes Andrew, Charley, Frances, Hugo, and Ivan perfectly exemplified the meaning of the word *power*, and it is a testament to God's watchfulness that more lives were not lost. Considerable loss of life and destruction of property can result from the power that God built into the earth's atmosphere.

Sebastian Junger, author of *The Perfect Storm*, gives us an idea of the power within a hurricane:

A mature hurricane is by far the most powerful event on earth; the combined nuclear arsenals of the United States and the former Soviet Union don't contain enough energy to keep a hurricane going for one day. A typical hurricane encompasses a million cubic miles of atmosphere and could provide all the electric power needed by the United States for three or four years. During the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935, winds surpassed 200 miles an hour and people caught outside were sandblasted to death. Rescue workers found nothing but their shoes and belt buckles. So much rain can fall during a hurricane—up to five inches an hour—that the soil liquefies. Hillsides slump into valleys and birds drown in flight, unable to shield their upward-facing nostrils. . . . In 1938, a hurricane put downtown Providence, Rhode Island, under ten feet of ocean. The waves generated by that storm were so huge that they literally shook the earth; seismographs in Alaska picked up their impact five thousand miles away. (p. 102)

Dynamic Power

Of course, power does not have to be quite so dramatic or destructive. We have another saying, "If it is in his power, he will do this or that." In this sense, the word *power* means "ability," "capability," "the capacity to accomplish." It can also mean "talent," "skill," or "aptitude." We might tell a person, "The power to do something is in your hands," meaning he has what is necessary to accomplish or to produce that "something." People can be powerful because they make things happen. A person may be physically weak yet still be powerful due to his ability to achieve goals, control situations, and manipulate events in spite of opposition.

We talk of athletes as being powerful, not necessarily because they have the brute strength of a heavyweight boxer, but because they also have *precision* and *finesse*. Michael Jordan was not the

physically *strongest* NBA basketball player, but he is perhaps the most *powerful* player in the history of the game because of his *skill* and *effectiveness*—his demonstrated capacity to play well.

In the New Testament, the Greek word translated "power" is *dunamis*, the source of the English words *dynamic* and *dynamite*, both of which are easily associated with "power." In addition, *dunamis* can also be translated "mighty works" and "wonderful works." The implication is not just the capacity for activity or accomplishment, but actual actions and achievements of such magnitude that they inspire a sense of wonder in others. Similarly, *dunamis* is also translated "miracles" a few times. These powerful accomplishments, typically beyond normal human capability, refer both to things that Jesus Christ did (Mark 5:30; Acts 10:38), as well as works performed by God through others, such as the apostles (Mark 9:39; Acts 6:8; 19:11; II Corinthians 12:12).

Dunamis does not have an inherent moral quality; it is neutral. On the one hand, the angel told Zacharias that John the Baptist would come "in the spirit and power[*dunamis*] of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), meaning the prophet's *effectiveness* and *ability*, which we would consider to be positive. On the other hand, the Samaritans all wrongly said that Simon Magus—Simon the Sorcerer—was "the great power [*dunamis*] of God" (Acts 8:9-10). Similarly, in Revelation 13:2, the end-time Beast receives *dunamis* from Satan, and the ten kings give their *dunamis* to the Beast (Revelation 17:13).

Thus, *dunamis*, this capacity for achieving, accomplishing, and controlling things, is morally neutral. It can be used for God's glory or in Satan's service. However, it is mostly used in a positive light, describing God's authority, ability, or outworking by means of the Holy Spirit (for example, Matthew 6:13; 24:30; Romans 1:20; 9:17; I Corinthians 6:14; Ephesians 3:7; Hebrews 1:3; II Peter 1:3; etc).

In Acts 1:8, just before Christ ascends to heaven, He gives His disciples their final marching orders: "But you shall receive power [*dunamis*] when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. . . ." Jesus links the Holy Spirit with power—*dunamis* (see Luke 24:49). Similarly, Paul tells Timothy that Christians have not been given "a spirit of fear, but of power [*dunamis*] . . ." (II Timothy 1:7). When combined, these verses show that the Holy Spirit gives a person *the effectiveness for God's will and God's work to be done* through him.

Even when Christ performed miracles, the Father actually did the work (John 14:10). Jesus was His chosen vessel through whom the works were accomplished to do the Father's will. It is clear *dunamis* is more than just a capacity or ability; it is an *actively used* capacity or ability. It is not static. Once this power is set in motion, it continues to move, work, and accomplish.

Also in Acts 1:8, Christ tells the disciples that, with the Holy Spirit, they would receive the ability to be effective witnesses for Him. But more than receiving just the *capacity* for effective witnessing, the Holy Spirit—the power of God—would actively begin working in their lives, essentially without the disciples governing it! Christ said, "You *shall* receive power . . . and you *shall* be witnesses to Me."

God gives power to all mankind in the form of the spirit in man. The mind, the intellect, is the basis of man's power. To His regenerated children, though, He gives an extra, *realized capacity* to perform His will, just as He gives *dunamis* to the angelic host to carry out its responsibilities (II Thessalonians 1:7). He equips us with whatever we need to accomplish what He is working out.

If something needs to be done for God's design to be realized, we can be sure that God has delegated the power—the capacity, aptitude, authority, and active effectiveness—for it to be done. Sometimes this means working only through a person's natural ability. At other times, it means bestowing

additional power for miracles to be performed. For instance, the power God gives to each of us to understand the Bible is on the level of the miraculous. No amount of natural aptitude or scholarship can bestow that ability. God provides the ability to understand.

A Little Strength

With this in mind, the oft-read letter to the Philadelphia church (Revelation 3:7-8) takes on a different meaning—and adds tremendous encouragement: "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, ' . . . I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength [*dunamis*].'"

Jesus Christ tells the Philadelphians that they have only a little strength! They have a little power. They have a small, effective capability for wonderful works and mighty deeds, a limited ability to get things done. If they are dynamic, it is only on a small scale. This has some implications about the letter to Philadelphia that we may not have considered before.

There are at least four applications or audiences to the Letters to the Seven Churches: They are written to 1) seven literal, first-century churches in Asia Minor; 2) seven end-time churches; 3) seven historical church eras; and/or 4) individuals Christians. In each letter, Christ gives the admonition, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the *churches*" (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3: 6, 13, 22). The seven letters can represent attitudes or conditions as well as organizational units and periods. Looking through the lens of the fourth application gives the letter to Philadelphia meaning regardless of the era or corporate organization one may be part of.

Christ's statement that the Philadelphian has only a little strength is not necessarily a criticism. The overall tenor of the letter is extremely positive. However, He is giving a statement of fact: Philadelphians have only a small effective capability for miraculous work, a little physical or spiritual aptitude, a small measure of effectiveness. *Dunamis* is not entirely lacking, but it is present in only a small amount.

The Philadelphian, by this accounting, will probably not be the one healing people when his shadow passes by, or the one moving mountains. Nor will he be prophesying of future events or speaking in unfamiliar languages. He may not have great speaking ability or a dynamic personality. This is not to say that power and effectiveness are entirely lacking, just that the Philadelphian will probably not have the same dramatic outworking we observe in other biblical figures.

Why is this *dunamis* lacking? From the rest of the letter to Philadelphia, it does not appear that the lack of *dunamis* is because of a great failing or negligence in duties to God. On the contrary, the letter is a commendation because of *faithfulness*. Perhaps part of the reason, seen in one of Jesus' parables, is that not much natural ability is there for God to enhance. Perhaps also, mighty deeds are lacking because there is no *need* for such works to be done. Remember, if God has ordained that something be done, *He* will give the power for it to be accomplished. If He has not given that power, it is because it is His will that a thing not be accomplished.

The Parable of the Talents adds to the picture:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own *ability*; and immediately he went on a journey. (Matthew 25:14-15)

The word *ability* in verse 15 is also *dunamis*. These verses affirm that 1) talents are given by God, and 2) apparently the bestowing of talents depends somewhat on the effective capability the person already possesses. Along the same lines, it is interesting to note that Christ Himself was limited in the works—*dunamis*—He could perform because of the unbelief in some areas (Matthew 13:58; Mark 6:5-6)!

The two faithful servants double what is given to them. The amounts are not as important as the growth. Both give Christ a 100% increase on what He bestowed on them. The unfaithful servant produces nothing at all.

In this example, we can see the Philadelphian as the servant who receives only two talents rather than five. He does not have the same natural ability. However, even though he may have fewer responsibilities, or the scope of what he controls is much smaller, he is *just as faithful* as the servant who receives more. The Philadelphian may have only a little ability, but with that ability he is able to *keep God's word and not deny His name* (Revelation 3:8). His power enables him to keep God's command to persevere (verse 10).

"An Open Door"

We commonly interpret the "open door" in the letter to Philadelphia to be a reference to preaching the gospel. This seems plausible, as Paul uses the imagery of an open door in three places to signify the opportunity to preach (I Corinthians 16:9; II Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3). However, an "open door to preach the gospel" does not fit the context of the seven messages. Does *every* Philadelphian have an open door to preach the gospel? All of the letters involve moral, spiritual, and attitudinal strengths and weaknesses. They emphasize *overcoming* rather than accomplishing one specific, external task.

In Revelation 3:8, the phrase "open door" is being used, not so much as an *opportunity*, but as a *reward*. *Young's Literal Translation* shows this emphasis: "I have known thy works; lo, I have set before thee a door—opened, and no one is able to shut it, *because* thou hast a little power, and didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name" (emphasis ours). Christ sets before the Philadelphian an "open door" *because* he has only a little capacity for mighty works, and yet he still keeps God's Word and does not deny God's name by the way he lives his life. He still is able to overcome.

The door Christ opens to the Philadelphian, the door no man can shut, may well be the door to the Kingdom itself! In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the door is open to some of the virgins and closed to others (Matthew 25:10-12). In the description of New Jerusalem, the gate is open only to those whose names are written in the Book of Life (Revelation 21:27; 22:14). Christ opens the door to the Kingdom because of the Philadelphian's faithfulness, just as He promises to keep him from the hour of trial because of his perseverance (Revelation 3:10).

God may have given him only two talents, but He knows that if he is faithful with a small amount of power, in the Kingdom he will faithfully administer all of the responsibility and effectiveness that God bestows upon him. Individually, we may only have a little "power," but if we are faithful with what we have been given, God is pleased, knowing we will also be faithful with great power. As Christ says in Luke 16:10, ". . . faithful also in much. . . ."

We have been given a measure of *dunamis*. If we have God's Spirit, we have *ability*, *talent*, *effectiveness*, and *strength* in some measure, in some area. It does not matter how much is given, or in what area our strength resides, but that we remain faithful in what God has given to us and that we make use of the power we have to further God's purpose.

Having only a little *dunamis* should not be a deterrent from achievement, even if it is only on a small scale. God is interested in what we do with what we have been given. Martin Luther King, Jr., put it this way:

If a man is called to be a street-sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will pause to say, "Here lived a great street-sweeper, who did his job well."