



Regaining Control

Psalm 8 & Hebrews 2:1-18

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Do you ever feel like your losing control? I do. Do you ever come up for air and say, “my life simply isn’t sustainable. I’ve got to make a few adjustments and try to put things back in order”? Perhaps you’re thinking:

- Life is too hectic. I’m totally stressed out. I’m constantly overwhelmed and unprepared. I’ve got to get caught up (on email, taxes, finances, oil change, home repair, continuing education, exercise, etc.)
- My relationships aren’t right. I’m not doing enough. (I forgot my mom’s birthday, I’m neglecting my spouse, my kids) or I’m at my wits’ end (We’re not communicating, the only thing that works is nagging, I’m jealous, I’m afraid, I’m lonely, etc.)
- I feel trapped. (I’m feeling anxious about everything. I’m eating too much. I’m drinking too much. I can’t keep giving in to sexual temptation. I think I may have an addiction problem.) And then in addition to feeling constantly defeated in this area, I’m worried that people at church are going to find out what I’m really like.
- I’m not doing enough for God. (I didn’t give up booze for Lent. I don’t tithe. I don’t give to the poor. My devotional life is pathetic. I don’t go to Bible study like I should.)

Do you ever lay there, with the covers pulled over your head, or maybe get up and pour yourself another triple-paxil rum chocolate nicotine espresso, and think about what can be done, what changes can be made, in order to regain control?

Welcome to the Church of the Resurrection, the “Control Issues” support group on the Hill.

Lent started on Wednesday, and for many people, Lent is the season for regaining control. It offers a Christian version of the New Year’s resolution. E.g. Feel like your weight has gotten a little out of control? Well, why not take control of your obesity by giving up sweets for Lent? Not only is it good for you, but it sounds like it will put you on God’s good side, too. What could be wrong with that?

If this is your approach to Lent, then I want to suggest that it is inadequate. If you’re thinking that you can simply make a few adjustments in order to regain control, then you have seriously underestimated the severity of the problem. Christians believe that this is a common malady affecting all mankind, in every time and place, and only God can solve the problem. The how and why of this is found in today’s New Testament lesson in Hebrews 2, one of the most wonderful & surprising passages in all the Bible.

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The Epistle to the Hebrews (“Hebrews”), which we will be studying throughout Lent, was written to explain Christian beliefs to people coming from a Jewish background. The basic message of the letter is that Judaism is incomplete, and self-consciously so. Every aspect of Hebrew religion, from worship in the temple to conquest of the promised land, anticipates fulfillment and consummation through divine intervention. In other words, the Old Testament (OT) is a story looking for an ending, and the New Testament offers the fitting and appropriate ending. And this problem of regaining control is the first major topic that is discussed in the letter.

Because Hebrews is written to people with a Jewish background, the author frequently quotes from the OT. Take a look at Hebrews 1 and you will see already 7 quotations from the OT. But as you move through the letter, you will find that there are four OT texts that are particularly in view, four that serve as foundations for the whole book, and all four of them are Psalms. There is good reason for this, because the Psalms were written to help people worship God, and that is the chief aim of Hebrews as well. And so throughout the epistle you find major arguments based on the Psalms.

The first of these is Psalm 8, which is quoted in Hebrews 2:6-8. This is where we are going to find out not only why we have such a deep need for control, but also how to regain it. Let’s take a look, beginning in **Heb 2:5** and moving verse by verse through the passage.

In 2:5, the author reminds his readers that God did not appoint angels to control the world. This is a reminder, because it is one of the foundational truths of Jewish religion, starting with the creation story itself. In **Genesis 1:26-28**, before sin entered the world, God gave humanity a mandate to do two things: multiplication & dominion. Breed, and take control. Sounds pretty scary, or maybe like bad science-fiction, but it wasn’t. In his goodness, God gave this commission to the first humans, in order that his goodness might grow and increase throughout all creation.

How could this be? How could an already good creation be made better by God putting humans in charge of it? God gives his rationale right in the middle of the mandate so that we won’t mistake his purposes, in Gen 1:27. Human beings are created in the image of God, and as such are his image bearers wherever they go.

The best way to understand this might be in terms of the specific job that Adam and Eve are given in Gen 2. They are placed in God’s garden, and called to be his gardeners. They are made stewards of all that is in that space, with the responsibility to tend it and keep it flourishing. And we can assume that because they are God’s image bearers, they are called to use their creativity to further improve the space as they tend it, to add to its beauty. They are also called to multiply, and as they bear children, we can assume that they are to push out the boundaries of the garden, making it larger and larger, expanding the beauty, order, and overall health of the place.

Note that in this there is no plundering or depletion of resources. They are stewards. Yet also in a very real sense they have been given control over something, over a small portion of God’s creation, with responsibility to rule it well as God’s ambassadors or vice-regents.

Now all of this was established before the Fall. Do you see that before sin came into the world, we were made to be in control? It was set deep within our DNA as human beings. Consequently, there is nothing wrong if you feel this desire today. God made us in his image, and for this reason we are inclined towards control. Thus, our need for control is not a byproduct of sin. Rather, it is the way God made us, and central to human dignity. God made us for multiplication and dominion of his image throughout creation.

Long ago, King David was so moved by this truth that he wrote a worship song about it, which the author of Hebrews now quotes in **2:6-8**.

In this excerpt, David marvels that God has given such enormous dignity to mankind. We are small and insignificant in contrast to the expanse and beauty of the cosmos, the work of God's fingers. What's more, who are we in comparison to the glory and majesty of God himself. Yet in God's ordering of creation, he made mankind almost equivalent in glory with the angels. In fact, **Ps 8:6ff**, he has given mankind dominion over creation, which is a privilege not given even to the angels. And so David praised the Lord for the dignity he gave us when God made us his stewards over creation.

But there's a big problem, which the author of Hebrews points out in **2:8b**. The problem is that we do not have dominion as God intended. We are literally out of control, which is contrary to the way God made us. All because of our fall into sin.

Take the time to reread the story in Gen. 3 and you will see that the first sin in the Garden occurred when Eve took and ate something outside her sphere of responsibility. She seized control of something over which God had not made her a steward. Then, following immediately on the heels of this first sin, Adam gave responsibility for his own actions to his wife. He relinquished control of something over which God had made him a steward (namely his own moral decision-making). We have been dealing with both of these problems ever since. The problem, then, is not with control *per se*, but rather with our desire for control apart from God. Whenever we give in to this desire, we either 1) seize control of things over which God has not made us stewards, or 2) relinquish control of those things over which God has made us stewards. Either way, it is a problem of control being disconnected from the Creator. It's an authority problem that interferes with our ability to exercise godly dominion.

If you understand these two things, you will make a fine pastoral counselor. Most of our daily struggles come from either neglecting or abdicating some area that is rightly our responsibility, or attempting to control something that is not our responsibility. Think about how this plays out in your own life.

So, as we read in 2:8b, we still do not see everything subject to mankind as it should be. That doesn't keep us from trying, though, because it is such a fundamental inclination that we have as human beings. Not only do we find this to be indicative of our personal struggles, but also of mankind as a whole. Consider these examples:

- We have harnessed control over the atom. We can use this power for good, as a clean energy alternative to fossil fuels. Instead, we use it for evil, as a weapon of mass destruction.

- We have harnessed control of the airwaves. We can use this power for good, to broadcast beauty and truth throughout creation. Instead, we use it for evil, to foster perversion of every kind (e.g. Internet porn), hopelessness, ethnic violence (“Tutsi cockroaches”), and so on.
- We have harnessed control of medicine. We can use this power for good, to eradicate infectious diseases and repair birth defects around the world. Instead, we deny it to those most in need, and use it to kill those who cannot defend themselves.

In other words, every time we extend our dominion, we end up using it for our own destruction. Our control is disconnected from the Creator. And so, we face the same problems on the macro level as we do in our own personal lives. We are out of control. Every effort we make to address the problem only makes it worse. What can be done? Who can deliver us?

Thanks be to God for the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our deliverer, as we read in Hebrews **2:9**. Why do we need Jesus? Because only Jesus can deliver us from our fundamental “control issues.” When we look around, we don’t see mankind exercising godly dominion over all creation. But we do see Jesus, who died, rose again, and ascended to the right hand of God the Father. Jesus is now exercising dominion in the right way, in conjunction with his Father, and as such our Father’s garden is flourishing once again.

There is a wonderful irony at the end of John’s Gospel when the resurrected Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. In 20:15, *Jesus says, “Why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Then thinking that he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary” and then she recognized him.* Isn’t it great that she confused Jesus with the gardener? And rightly so, because Jesus did what our first parents did not, and what we could not do on our own. He was the faithful image bearer that we were made to be, and in so doing paved the way for us to do so as well.

How did Jesus do it? Hebrews **2:10**. It wasn’t just by God’s fiat. Jesus wasn’t simply given this status in way that cost him nothing. Rather, “it had to be *established*; it had to be *achieved* by conflict and conquest. The pioneer of our salvation had to be *made perfect through suffering*, suffering occasioned by the endurance of temptation all the way to the cross, which was the ultimate and supreme test” (P. E. Hughes, *The True Image*, p 331). How did Jesus do it? Through enduring the same hardships that we do, yet choosing not to wrest control away from God. Then he died a death that he did not deserve, in our place, so that we might be put right again with God. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus became the doorway for us to regain control.

We see him at work in today’s Gospel lesson (Luke 8:26ff). Having just calmed a storm that was out of control, Jesus comes ashore and meets a man with the same problem. The townspeople had often tried to solve the problem by chaining him like an animal. But that wasn’t what he needed. He needed Jesus to deliver him from bondage, which is precisely what Jesus did. And next we see him sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. Through the healing touch of Jesus, he is no longer out of control.

This is what all of us need as well. We aren't going to be able to regain control by making some minor adjustments. Rather, we need the healing touch of Jesus. He will restore us at our proper place, at his feet, where we can exercise responsible stewardship under his loving care.

This doesn't mean that we won't be tempted. As I mentioned earlier, we continue to struggle with either neglecting or abdicating some area that is rightly our responsibility, or attempting to control something that is not our responsibility. But Jesus helps us in this regard as well. In Hebrews 2:14-18, we read that we no longer need give in to temptation. Because of Jesus' experience, he gets it. He knows what we are going through. No longer can the devil deceive us into thinking that there is nobody who understands what we're going through. Jesus gets it. Jesus knows. Jesus has been there. And he stands with us whenever we face temptation.

Bishop Thad is a great boss, because he has been a church planter for 25 years. Not only has he been there, but he loves the work so much that he is still doing it all these years later. He also loves me, and he prays for me all the time. I don't ever want things to change, because it's a perfect situation for me.

If this is true, then consider how much more Jesus is our perfect leader. Heb. 4:15 says that Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are. He really knows what we are going through.

Do you think Jesus ever felt out of control? What about those 40 days without food in the wilderness, when he was being tempted by Satan? What about when he was arrested and falsely accused, mocked and tortured. What about when they nailed him to a cross and he hung there in misery and shame, crying out to God? Do you think he can relate to our own feelings of helplessness?

Consider this: Do you really want to be the Emperor of the Universe, with absolutely no higher power than yourself? Or would you rather have what Jesus offers us: the perfect job in the perfect company with the perfect boss? He gives us meaningful responsibility, loving supervision, constant assistance, and genuine understanding. It would be pretty difficult to feel out of control in such a safe work environment. So not only does Jesus deliver us from a life that is out of control, but he then stands with us in solidarity as we serve alongside him in his Father's garden.

We find one more image of this solidarity with Jesus in Hebrews 2, and in my opinion we have saved the best for last. Hebrews **2:12**. Quoting Psalm 22, the "Good Friday" psalm. Jesus stands at the head of the congregation as our lead worshipper. Whenever we sing, we sing with him at the helm, leading our praises. Whenever life feels out of control, don't think that you can resolve it by simply making a few adjustments. Rather, turn to Jesus, the author of our salvation, perfected through suffering, who leads us in all things, even worship. If we follow him in praise, everything else will fall exactly into place.