

C H A P T E R  
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# Power and the Reactor Factor

As president of his company, one of the best things Henry did was, well, act presidential. He knew that as soon as he returned to the office from a business trip, his employees would all jump to attention. He knew that whenever he summoned employees to his office, they would drop whatever they were doing and come running. And Henry knew that whenever he and his staff members were at odds over an issue, they would yield to his position. "Submit to those in authority," he knew the Bible stated, and people at his company had learned well the art of submitting.

What he didn't know was how anxiously his employees would count down the days until his next business trip. They dreaded seeing his car pull into the company parking lot, knowing that "Mr. Bivens" would, within minutes, turn their calm, peaceful environment into chaos as he barked one order after another. "It's like a dark cloud settles over our building when he arrives," one woman commented, and others readily agreed. Whenever Henry departed, it seemed that the "dark cloud" would leave with him.

Eventually, his domineering style began to take its toll. One employee would resign and then, as if the floodgates had been opened, several others would follow. But when his COO and his CFO turned in their resignations within a week of one another, Henry finally realized that there was a problem. These were key people who had always "watched his back," resolving difficult issues without complaining about

## 2 Behind *the* **BOTTOM LINE**

the fact that he didn't care to deal with these issues and graciously handling his "emergencies," which should have been problems anticipated well in advance.

It was only then that the company's board of directors stepped in, prompted by the sudden turn of events to take an in-depth look at the company's health. When they hired a consultant to conduct a 360-degree review, the findings were startling. The impression of "all for one and one for all" that they had initially been given about the company's working environment became an impression of "all for one." They knew that for the future of the corporation, some drastic measures would be required.



Driving across western Arkansas on Interstate 40, motorists can't help but notice a mammoth concrete smokestack rising from the landscape. What appears to be smoke, however, is actually vapor. And it's coming not from a smokestack but from a cooling tower for one of the two reactors at Arkansas Nuclear One (ANO).

Like the one hundred-plus other nuclear reactors around the country, the units at Arkansas Nuclear One in Russellville, Arkansas, were designed and constructed with safety in mind. The reactors are operated by highly qualified technicians who are trained, tested, and retrained in certified programs. And they are constantly monitored by on-site inspectors from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. As a result, these two reactors produce nearly 28 percent of the electricity consumed in Arkansas, in a manner that is both clean and safe—for the people who live in the surrounding area *and* for the environment.

The smooth operation of ANO stands in stark contrast with the disaster that occurred in April 1986 at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine (part of the former Soviet Union). That horrific event—by far the most severe accident ever to occur at a commercial nuclear power facility—is believed to have resulted from a severely flawed reactor design and serious mistakes made by plant operators. The accident destroyed the reactor, killed thirty-one people (one person immediately and the rest within three months), and contaminated large areas of Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia, according to information on the Nuclear Energy Institute's Web site.

These are two different power plants, with two vastly different scenarios. At ANO, power effectively harnessed provides much-needed

electricity for thousands of homes and businesses. At Chernobyl, power dangerously out of control put into motion a series of unstoppable events that allowed a significant amount of radioactive material to escape into the environment, forever altering the landscape and the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

What these two sites had in common was the use of nuclear energy to produce electricity. Where they differed was in their handling of that energy, which made all the difference in how each would be fulfilling its mission. The Chernobyl plant failed miserably, and it was destroyed in the process, whereas the ANO plant has been a good steward of the power entrusted to it, and it remains productive and safe.

Most people never step inside a nuclear power plant, much less go near any kind of radioactive material. But whether we realize it or not, most of us have been given a certain amount of power. And we are all responsible for the way we handle that power, whether it places us over a hundred thousand employees at an international corporation or puts us in charge of two small children in our home.

Not everyone deals with power the same way, of course. The philosopher Aristotle believed that every virtue consists of the mean that lies between two extremes: excess and deficiency. For example, the virtue of generosity lies between waste (excess) and stinginess (deficiency). Likewise, power under control lies between the two extremes of power abuse (excess) and power neglect (deficiency).

It's not difficult to think of power abusers; Adolf Hitler, Jim Jones, and Slobodan Milosevic readily come to mind. And we all know people who are guilty of power neglect. There's the highly skilled graphic artist who panders his time away loading boxes at the warehouse because he won't take the initiative to get a job where he can use his gifts. Or there's the executive in the family business who was promoted because he's related to the owner but who has no desire to acquire the competencies he needs to be a capable leader. And then there is the husband who is so wrapped up in his work that he frequently fails to come home for dinner, read to his children, or spend time with his wife.

And then there are those who have found that sweet spot between the two extremes. There's the politician who realizes that power, at times, can be fleeting. There's the CEO who understands that with authority comes responsibility. There's the police officer, the cardiovascular surgeon, the high school principal, and the journalist who

#### 4 Behind *the* BOTTOM LINE

recognize that to be effective, they should neither abuse nor abdicate their power.

There are many manifestations of power in the Scriptures: the creative power God used to bring the universe into existence, the military power displayed by the armies of Israel as they conquered the Promised Land, the economic power of Solomon's kingdom, the supernatural power demonstrated by the miracles of Jesus—in His resurrection and in the coming of the Holy Spirit, and so on. The list of powerful people is just as compelling: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Daniel, Esther, Nebuchadnezzar, Pilate, Agrippa, and the Apostle Paul, to name just a sampling. Some of these people recognized that their authority came from God; others did not. Some abused their power, some used it effectively, some abdicated it—and some, over the course of their lives, did all three.

Moses, the great lawgiver, falls into the latter category. For the most part, however, he got it right. He discovered Aristotle's mean—the perfect balance in knowing when to exercise his power and when to keep it under wraps—and he handled it with grace, compassion, and wisdom.

#### A PORTRAIT *of* POWER

Acts 7:22 says that Moses was “educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.” A brief review of a few of his accomplishments verifies that description. After standing his ground during numerous confrontations with Pharaoh and coordinating the exodus of two million Israelites from Egypt, he led that same group of complainers around an inhospitable desert for forty years.

Think about it. Moses was responsible for some six hundred thousand men, their wives, their children, their personal belongings, and their livestock. That amounts to about two million people and who knows how many cows, sheep, and goats. He not only had to provide food and water for all these people and creatures in a hostile environment where there was neither, but he also was responsible for resolving all their disputes and maintaining peace in the camp. He had help with that, of course, but ultimately he was in charge.

We marvel when someone turns a failing company around in a year, wins a big military battle after several weeks, or achieves a great

victory in court after a three-month trial. But as significant as those accomplishments are, they pale in comparison with the work of Moses. He didn't just guide the Israelites for a few weeks, a few months, or a few years, he led them for *four decades*.

Moses was to the children of Israel what Warren Buffett has been to Berkshire Hathaway, what Jack Welch was to General Electric, and what Sam Walton was to Wal-Mart. There is a difference, however. Buffett has led Berkshire Hathaway for only slightly more than three decades, Walton was at the helm of his company for about the same length of time, and Welch led GE for just over twenty years.

Keeping the same leadership post for forty years is a tall order under any circumstances. But the people Moses led didn't even want to be there! They complained incessantly about how much better off they had been as slaves in Egypt. They grumbled about the food that God provided for them. And they even occasionally rebelled against Moses'—and God's—authority over them.

But despite all the pains his power brought him, Moses neither threw in the towel nor evolved into a tyrannical dictator. He persevered, strengthened by his relationship with the God he had come to know “face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10).

Moses wasn't perfect, of course. Scripture records at least two occasions when God got angry with him, and both times had to do with Moses' response to the power he had been given.

In the first case, he tried to abdicate it. When God called Moses to deliver His people from bondage in Egypt, Moses had been working as a shepherd for forty years. So when God gave Moses his assignment at the burning bush, it's no wonder that he had misgivings. He fired off one objection after another: “I'm not qualified.” “What if the people don't believe me?” “I've never been good at speaking in public.” “Send someone else to do it.” (See Exodus 4:1–13.)

That final comment was the last straw. However, although Exodus 4:14 states that the Lord's “anger burned against Moses,” in His compassion, He selected Aaron, Moses' older brother, to serve as Moses' spokesman. God didn't allow Moses to neglect the power he had been given, but He did give him a partner in leadership.

Moses also triggered God's anger by abusing his power. It was another occasion when the people were complaining because they had no water to drink. But rather than maintain his composure as he had done

## 6 Behind *the* BOTTOM LINE

many other times, Moses lost his temper. God had instructed him and Aaron to gather the people together, to speak to a rock in their presence, and then to allow them to drink the water that came from the rock.

Instead, Moses struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, but the outburst caused Moses and Aaron to forfeit the privilege of entering the Promised Land. “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites,” God told them, “you will not bring this community into the land I give them” (Numbers 20:12).

Moses’ reaction to his punishment is telling. He was deeply grieved that he would not be able to enter the Promised Land. But rather than sulk or pitch a fit about the unfairness of it all, Moses resumed the march toward Canaan. The secret to his response—and, in turn, to his ability to maintain a godly approach to power—lies in a particular character trait that is not commonly associated with powerful people.

Numbers 12:3 (KJV) says that Moses was “very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.” The word *meek* often brings to mind the picture of a timid, feeble person who is afraid to stand up for himself. For Moses, however, nothing could be further from the truth.

Meekness does have an element of gentleness associated with it, but behind that gentleness is the strength of steel. Think of a once-wild horse that has been trained to submit to a bit and a bridle. “It is not a spineless gentleness, a sentimental fondness, a passive quietism,” writes William Barclay in *New Testament Words* (The Westminster Press, 1964). “It is a strength under control.”

### POSITIONAL *Versus* PERSONAL POWER

The meekness that Moses demonstrated was an integral part of his *personal* power, whereas his specific role as leader of Israel was an example of the *positional* power that God had given him. Generally speaking, it is into those two categories that power—particularly as evidenced in the business world—falls.

Positional power is the ability to act based on one’s station or platform in life. In the corporate world, a person’s positional power is measured by his title, the size and placement of his office, his salary, the number of stock options he has, the number of employees he has

under his control, and whether he drives his own car or has a limousine at his beck and call.

The very nature of these trappings reveals that positional power is external, and, as such, it can come and go. When the president's term is over, he gives up the privilege of traveling in Air Force One. When a corporate CEO retires, he relinquishes his right to the corner office. On the flip side, when a thirty-year-old doctor completes a cardiac surgery residency and joins the surgical team at a large hospital, she suddenly has a great deal of positional power that she never had as a medical student. When a twenty-six-year-old accountant earns an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School, his earning potential rises dramatically, simply because he now holds an advanced degree from a prestigious university. Inside, the doctor and the accountant are still the same people they've always been, but, outwardly, they wield much more influence than they did before.

Personal power, on the other hand, is based on moral authority. It represents a source of energy that flows from the inside out. From a theological perspective, a person with this type of power knows who he is. He knows what his skills are. He knows what he was created to do. He has an eternal sense of purpose and, as a result, his life is characterized by peace, contentment, and integrity.

Personal power is tied to reputation, which means that if a person loses his reputation, he also can lose his personal power. But in today's rapidly changing marketplace, the loss of positional power is far more common.

By defining power this way, we don't mean to reinforce the misconception that personal power is good and that positional power is bad. Going back to Aristotle's balance between two extremes, both types of power can be either abused or neglected, and both kinds can be used properly. The Bible tells of many people who failed to exercise their positional power correctly, but it also is full of examples of people who used both personal and positional power to accomplish great things.

Moses, for example, never would have been able to lead the Israelites for forty years without a good deal of personal and positional power. True, the people were often rebellious and ornery. But if they had not recognized that Moses' power was based on the ultimate moral authority and that his position was God-given, they would have

## 8 Behind *the* BOTTOM LINE

hightailed it back to Egypt before the first batch of manna ever appeared on the ground.

Moses certainly had neither personal power nor positional power when, as an infant, his mother placed him among the reeds of the Nile. When Pharaoh's daughter found him and adopted him as her own son, his positional power shot up exponentially. He was now a member of the king's court, and he had access to all the privileges that accompanied such a distinction.

Scripture says nothing to make us think that Moses didn't also have some degree of personal power in that setting. But we do know that when he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave, his own people rejected him—a clear indication that whatever personal power he had wasn't enough to impress the Israelites, at least not at that time in his life (Exodus 2:11–14).

The first forty years of Moses' life ended with his running away to Midian to escape prosecution for the murder of the Egyptian. The next forty years served as a time of character development for Israel's future leader. As a shepherd, the only positional power he exerted was over the sheep. And his personal power was limited to the influence he may have exerted as a husband and father.

The burning bush experience changed all that. Moses' life-changing encounter with God gave him all the personal and positional power he needed to accomplish a seemingly impossible task. Not that anyone else could tell the difference right away. Compared with Pharaoh, Moses appeared as powerful as an ant about to get crushed by an elephant. Pharaoh had a mighty army at his disposal. He had the best magicians that Egypt could offer at his service. And he had all the clout and glory that went along with being the king of the most powerful country on earth.

Given those odds, Moses didn't stand a chance. But he had one thing that Pharaoh didn't have: a personal relationship with the all-powerful God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That relationship—and the power it held—was what sustained him as he warned Pharaoh about the plagues, as he led the Israelites across the Red Sea (Exodus 14), as he guided them to victory over the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8–16), as he received God's law on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20), as he dealt with the disobedience and constant complaints of the people, and as he led them in the wilderness for forty years.

## MOSES *on* POWER

As those final forty years drew to a close, perhaps Moses did some deep thinking about his life, his career, his beloved Israelites, and his relationship with the great “I Am.” As he stood at the top of Mount Nebo and gazed over the Promised Land, he likely felt the familiar pangs of sadness about the sin that ultimately kept him from entering the land with his people. If, at that moment, Moses had been asked to give a brief summary of his life learnings about power, he might have touched on the following themes:

### 1. POWER IS A SACRED TRUST.

It doesn't matter if we inherit our power, if we attain it gradually as we rise through the corporate ranks, or if we receive it by virtue of being elected to a specific post. Whatever the case, it doesn't really belong to us, and we have no guarantees that it will last. The only thing we know for sure is that, for as long as we have it, we are responsible for using it wisely.

When God gives us a certain amount of power, He expects us to be good stewards of it. Power is never an end in itself. Like money, it's a tool—to influence someone, to help a cause, to right a wrong, to create an opportunity. It's up to us to figure out why we have been blessed with our power and then to make sure we use it correctly.

### 2. OUR CHARACTER IS TESTED BY HOW WE USE OUR GOD-GIVEN POWER.

There's nothing like a big dose of power to find out what someone is really made of. If a person whose life is marked by self-control, honesty, and integrity receives a big promotion or is appointed to a top position, his whole approach to his newfound power will be quite different from that of someone who is devoid of character. But that doesn't mean that the first guy won't struggle with handling power correctly.

“Power is as dangerous as unstable dynamite, not only to those it is used on but [also] to those who exercise it,” writes Tom Marshall in *Understanding Leadership* (Sovereign Word Ltd., 1991). “Lord Acton, the British statesman, is remembered for his famous dictum, ‘All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ History is littered with the sad evidence that proves the correctness of his judgment, the

## 10 Behind *the* BOTTOM LINE

wreckage of good men and good women who began with the best of intentions but were corrupted and destroyed by the power they wielded.”

### 3. POSITIONAL POWER AND PERSONAL POWER MUST NEVER BE CONFUSED.

If a significant part of our authority stems from our position—as a CEO, a business owner, a college president, or an elected official, there’s always a danger that we might slip into the mode of assuming that people do what we say because of our own personal influence over them. Then, when that authority slips away—when a new guy takes office or we’re replaced by a new CEO, we lose our identity. That’s why it’s important to remember that positional power can come and go, but personal power often grows over time.

### 4. THE MORE POWER WE GIVE AWAY, THE MORE POWERFUL WE BECOME.

This story is a familiar one. Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, came to visit his family in the Israelite camp. The next day, Moses opened court and began mediating the people’s disputes, from morning until evening. When Jethro realized that this was Moses’ daily practice, he gave him some advice that has stood the test of time, particularly in organizational management circles. Jethro told Moses,

What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. . . . You must be the people’s representative before God and bring their disputes to Him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. . . . That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you (Exodus 18:17–22).

Moses took his father-in-law’s advice. He didn’t figure it out on his own, but once he was shown the value of empowering the people, he didn’t try to hoard all the power. For Moses, giving power away not

only was efficient and effective, but it also significantly expanded the depth of his leadership. That, in turn, helped him in the continual exercise of power that was required as he led the Israelites.

5. WHEN GOD GIVES US POWER, IT IS UP TO HIM TO KEEP US IN POWER.

Throughout the course of his leadership tenure, Moses had significant challenges to his power. But whether they came from members of his inner circle (Miriam and Aaron) or from rebels among the people (see Numbers 16), he never fought back. He left vindication up to God, and God never failed him.

If we're in a position of leadership, it's not a matter of *whether* people will challenge our power, it's a matter of *when*. At that point, we are faced with the same three choices we face as we deal with any other aspect of power. We can overreact, we can unplug, or we can balance on that sweet spot in the middle and wait for God to act on our behalf. "It will require discipline to take the journey and to live with the mockery, the condescending comments, the inevitable second-guessing," Charles Swindoll writes in *Moses: A Man of Selfless Dedication* (Word Publishing, 1999). "You must have the kind of discipline it takes to say, 'Lord God, you are the one who set me on this course, and until you say otherwise, this is the direction I'm going to walk. My critics are getting louder and more in number and closer. Silence them. Or at least, stop my ears.'"

6. THE MORE POWER WE HAVE, THE MORE FAITH WE NEED.

The book of Deuteronomy closes with the following words: "Since then [Moses' death], no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel" (Deuteronomy 34:10–12).

What a fitting epitaph for one of the greatest leaders of all time. But it never would have been written had Moses not been a man of growing faith. He led the people one step at a time. He never knew how God was going to accomplish His promises; he simply believed that He would, in fact, accomplish them. Initially, Moses didn't really

## 12 Behind *the* BOTTOM LINE

want any power—or any of the frustrations and responsibilities that came with it. But as he watched God work, he began to trust Him more. And as he came to trust Him more, he learned to bring each struggle, each pain, each frustration, and each temptation associated with his power to God.

His relationship with God was his sole means for dealing with his power. With that relationship, he was as effective as the smoothly operating nuclear power plant in Russellville, Arkansas. Without it, he would have self-destructed like the reactor at Chernobyl, leaving the Israelites to suffer from the fallout caused by a leader who couldn't handle his power.

Therein lies the most important lesson of all: Seek God, not power. Doing the opposite only leads to disaster.

### EVALUATING POWER

Power is something we all have, to one degree or another. Some, because of their positions or personalities, seem to have more power at their disposal. But we all have some measure of power within our spheres of influence. The question is, how will that power be used? Now would be a good time for you to evaluate your own use, misuse, or abuse of power. The following three questions are designed to help you arrive at an honest self-appraisal and, if necessary, consider steps to enable you to more appropriately direct your power to the benefit of everyone involved.

1. IN WHAT WAYS MIGHT YOU CURRENTLY BE ABUSING THE POWER AVAILABLE TO YOU?

Consider your relationships with those you report to, your peers, and those who report to you. Do you influence others through mutual respect and concern, or have you learned ways to achieve your purposes, regardless of what others think? Discuss this with someone you can be honest with, and be willing to receive honest and insightful feedback.

2. CAN YOU THINK OF ANY TIMES THAT YOU HAVE NEGLECTED YOUR PERSONAL POWER?

Have you ever failed to pursue ways to fully maximize your gifts, talents, and skills? Perhaps you're failing to do this right now. Or

maybe you have become so wrapped up in your career that you have forgotten to give a high priority to other areas of your life in which your power is needed, such as your family, your church, or your community. Candidly appraising yourself in this area may be difficult; you may even say “ouch!” a time or two. But consider the alternative of ignoring this reality in your life.

3. WHAT STEPS SHOULD YOU TAKE TO FIND THE “SWEET SPOT BETWEEN THE TWO EXTREMES”—NOT ABUSING YOUR POWER, BUT ALSO NEGLECTING TO USE IT PRODUCTIVELY AND POSITIVELY?

It’s not enough to admit your tendency to misuse power in your work and personal environment. If you typically use it in inappropriate ways, it’s important to explore what changes you should make to align more consistently with the biblical perspective on power. Have a friend—or members of your small group—help you consider the problems and possible solutions.

#### PRAYING *About* POWER

Consider the following prayer as a guide to seeking God’s help so that you can honestly reconsider your approach to using power at work, in your home, or anywhere else.

*Lord, power can be a seductive tool, used in self-centered ways to manipulate others and accomplish one’s own purposes. In the workplace, the result can be equivalent to what happened at Chernobyl. Power can be ignored and neglected to avoid unwanted confrontation, and, in commerce, power is more often abused or misused than used in ways that are true to Your Word. I want my power to benefit others as well as myself. Enable me to sincerely review what kind of power wielder I am and help me be willing to make necessary changes.*

#### Recommended Resources on Power

*Descending into Greatness*, by Bill Hybels, Zondervan, 1994.  
*Empowerment Takes More Than a Minute*, by Ken Blanchard, Berrett-Koehler, 1998.  
*Moses: A Man of Selfless Dedication*, by Charles Swindoll, W Publishing Group, 1999.  
*A Tale of Three Kings*, by Gene Edwards, Tyndale House, 1992.

