

When my boys were in grade school, "Masters of the Universe" was their favorite show. "He Man" and the "Masters of the Universe" were the good guys who battled the evil forces of the cosmos led by "Skeletor." And the battle cry of "He Man" in Masters of the Universe was "I have the power!" When that was shouted, evil was always routed ... but only till the next episode!

My favorite was the "Lord of the Rings." Written in the shadow of World War 2, this complex and literary masterpiece was a powerful examination of the same battle between good and evil, with theology being intentionally brought into play. These stories are all similar to the story that has been part of every culture. The question of every generation is the same, who is the master of your world?

Scripture is full of stories with the same theme: David versus Goliath, Moses battling Pharaoh, Noah racing to escape a flood, or Lot fleeing the destruction of Sodom. But the ultimate battle for control of the universe was played out in Jesus' encounters with Satan, whether in a wilderness temptation or the horrific battle at Calvary.

Who has the power today? How do we struggle with what is beyond our control? Who *will* help when we feel powerless? Who is the "master" of our universe? What rules our living – demands our attention – preoccupies our thoughts and energy? How do we seek to exert our control over people or forces that get in our way? And why do so many of our efforts at power fail, and rather than being "master" we often feel complete loss of control?

St. Paul refers to the human condition as "*living in slavery* – being owned by another." Such language, with America's historical shame of slavery is tough to relate to. But Paul had a different context. Slaves and servants were part of every culture of his time. And whoever was owner had the power. So he used an illustration from his world, to discuss issues of every time and place.

Paul's point was to face reality. And the reality is that we all are slaves to the brokenness of this world. Too often Satan is master of our living. Difficult as that language is, it is reality of life. Despite our desires and demands, life will never be perfect because sin and a broken creation exert such power.

Jobs disappear. Illnesses reappear. Friends disappear when needed and darling babies turn into hormone possessed teenagers. Gardens become overgrown with weeds and loved ones die. COVID has changed our lifestyles and protest marches and violence cry out against the pain of having no control over what we would like to control.

We are all frustrated by the forces beyond our control, and would prefer that we could control the universe (*or at least the smaller regions where we live – like family, health, and job.*) We cry! We complain! We get frustrated! We demand freedom from where we feel like slaves only to find out that when we get our way, we have only traded on master for another.

And even when it seems as if we are getting our way, we know that lurking around the corner for all is the ultimate earthly master called death. Our entire being is tied up with power or the lack thereof. That is what we call sin, and Paul uses that image to help us understand our slavery to the brokenness of a world out of control. We are slaves to sin. It doesn't mean that we chose to live that way, but that on our own, we can't escape that reality.

No one would willingly seek to be enslaved! And no one is ever comfortable admitting that something else controls my life. Our country is more sensitive than most about any form of slavery, so to even use the word is anathema to a nation wrapped up in equality and freedom. And yet, selfishness, the idolatry of self, and the inescapable reality of death are reminders that we are more slave than free! There is no escape from sin!

Do you remember a story in Matthew's Gospel about disciples on a boat during a storm so terrible even professional fishermen feared for their lives. They were trapped in a raging storm they couldn't escape. They cried out, "Who will save us?" Jesus was asleep in the boat, so they shook him and demanded, "Don't you care that we are going to die?"

Well, you know what happened next! Jesus calmed the storm. And to show he does care that we are all going to die, he accepted our death and on Easter emptied our tomb. So, what does that mean for us as we daily demand to be master of every part of life, and daily are disappointed when we can't?

Paul confronts this dilemma with a simple question, who rules your life? In other words, "are you master or slave?" Paul says if we live according to our passion, (meaning natural instincts) then we continue as slaves to sin. Conversely, if God's Spirit controls our life then He becomes Master as we freely accept our role as His servants. Even our earthly freedom, we learn, has the price of ownership of someone or something else. Slavery is another word for the dependency called sin, and the resulting condition called death.

What a difficult concept to people who insist on freedom, yet who confront the inescapable master called *death*. But surrendering instead to God as Master brings a freedom to our servanthood as daily living can become an exercise in faith and the freedom under the shadow of God's loving grace. Accepting God as master is concept alien to human nature because each of us would rather be master of our world than servant to anyone else – even God!

Faith is the freedom to say, "I know who has created me, who protects me, and who gives me a purpose. " I rejoice in knowing who I am and that my God will do for me what I could never do for myself! I respond to the God who stoops to wash my feet, destroy my tomb, and forgive me for not being perfect. There is nothing but joy in living with such a servant Savior."

We love to think we have the power to set people free. We demand laws to show how wise and powerful we are. We assume medicine and science can conquer all the

forces of life and even death. We are convinced that we deserve what we want. And we fail to acknowledge our slavery to selfishness, anger, resentment, fear, prejudice, sickness and death.

That is why God began his victory as a helpless infant, completely dependent upon everyone else, like a slave. That is why Jesus began our emancipation by becoming a servant who washed feet and freely accepted the finality of a death He didn't deserve. Faith is surrender, and his faithful love allows us to escape the universe controlled by sin and death. Easter announces who the only Master of the Universe could ever be.

In the midst of a raging storm Jesus simply asked, "Where is your faith?" And then he did what they couldn't. Calming the storm was easy! It is our response, which is simply to acknowledge God as master, where we often fail.

How interesting that in our desire to become free people we only squirm more tightly into the death grip of this world – a trap from which there is no escape. Earthly freedom simply trades one master for another.

On the other hand, what peace to know that in choosing freely to accept God as master, that we find true freedom in servant love as we kneel before God and learn to wash the feet of those around us. The future isn't always clear. And storms can rage. But God is the only master who has ever truly freed the slaves.

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