

Power, Real & Imagined

By: Keith Keyser

The despots of the world cling to the notion that they possess power, and this legitimizes the enacting of their every whim. The ancient Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar harbored such illusions regarding his personal significance and authority. He was the poster child for Lord Acton's well-known dictum: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." The eighteenth century British statesman William Pitt the elder uttered a similar sentiment, saying: "Unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it."ⁱ This knowledge of humanity's proneness to abuse power led the founders of the United States to develop a government where authority is divided among its separate branches.ⁱⁱ Unfortunately, these liberal sentiments were written more than 2,200 years *after* this Mesopotamian monarch held sway over the near east. Accordingly, Nebuchadnezzar was the unquestioned head of Babylon with no checks and balances to curtail his exercise of power; or so he thought...

Bright Lights, Big City

Following their deportation from their homeland, four well-born Hebrews found themselves serving the Babylonian kingdom. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah – soon to be renamed Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego – were placed in the most prestigious university of the land in preparation for their work in the civil service of the regime. After graduating with top honors, they were placed in jobs where they distinguished themselves by hard work and faithfulness (Dan. 1:20.) Their rapid promotions to more important work came due to the Lord intervening in Nebuchadnezzar's life through a prophetic dream. The king and his most erudite advisors were at a loss to interpret the mysterious nocturnal revelation. In frustration, he vainly attempted to coerce an answer from his wise men by ordering their immediate executions. Daniel and his friends were able to petition the Lord for the solution to the dream, and thus their lives (and those of their colleagues) were spared. Furthermore, they achieved high status in the government on account of Daniel's successful interpretation – a feat for which, he gave all of the glory to God (Dan. 2:47-49.)

Nebuchadnezzar's dream should have humbled him to acknowledge that the Most High God is over all and that Babylon and all subsequent empires would eventually give place to the establishment of the earthly reign of the Messiah. Instead, he seemed to be enamored with his position as "the head of gold" (Dan. 2:38.) He set about building a monument to his own greatness, and in characteristic ancient kingly fashion, he wanted total allegiance from his officials – even to the point of worshiping the golden image that he erected. When the royal philharmonic struck up the music that was undoubtedly composed especially for this notable occasion, all of the government employees were to render obeisance to the image. Imagine the

scene: what an amazing display of unity when all of the officials great and small prostrated themselves in testimony to the king's self-perceived ultimate greatness! Regrettably, the effect was weakened by the fact that when the multitude bowed down, three men conspicuously stood.ⁱⁱⁱ

Royal Hubris Meets Divine Reality

News of this affront to the royal dignity soon came to Nebuchadnezzar's ears, filling him with rage at the temerity of these ungrateful Jews. Who did they think they were? All of the powerful and important people physically professed their loyalty to him as supreme, what made Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego think that they were exempt from the royal decree. Perhaps they had misunderstood. With remarkable restraint (for an Oriental despot, that is), he offered them a second chance: if they would put their faces in the dirt when the encore was performed, then the king would show clemency. The seriousness of rejecting his mercy is shown in his final words to them: "But if you do not worship, you shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. **And who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?**" [Dan. 3:15, emphasis mine.] His final question was clearly rhetorical, but soon he would receive an unexpected answer to that incredulous inquiry.

Remarkably, the three men turned the king down flat. More astonishing was their brave explanation of why they could not bow to him or any other man as supreme: "If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up" (Dan. 3:17-18.) Their supreme allegiance was to the living God, not to some idol or mere man. If the Lord so desired, His power could easily deliver them. If it was not his will to rescue them, however, they still would not prostrate themselves to the golden image. Loyalty to God trumps all other considerations – even earthly life itself. If they died in that furnace, they would join the multitude of martyrs who bear witness to the reality of the true Lord by the giving of their lives. Many testified in this way before them, and many have given their lives for God's glory since then. The chain of martyrs continues today in numerous places around the world and extends into the future Tribulation, when martyrdom will be the norm for those who are loyal to the Lord Jesus Christ in the face of unprecedented persecution and tyranny.^{iv}

They Wouldn't Bow, Bend, or Burn

Accordingly, the three faithful men were violently thrown into the deadly, white-hot furnace. Contrary to Nebuchadnezzar's expectations – and every law of physics regarding fire and heat – the men freely roamed the furnace unscathed. What is more, a fourth man joined them in their affliction, except He did not look like the others. By the king's own astonished admission: "...the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" (Dan. 3:25.) After this display of awesome Divine power, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego emerged from the testing without a hair

singed or the odor of smoke upon their persons.^v Such a magnificent display of power caused the awe-struck monarch to declare that they were “servants of the Most High God” (v. 26.) This dramatic occurrence elicited a remarkable confession from the lips of this eastern potentate:

Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, who sent His Angel and delivered His servants who trusted in Him, and they have frustrated the king’s word, and yielded their bodies, that they should not serve nor worship any god except their own God! Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation, or language which speaks anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made an ash heap; because there is no other God who can deliver like this (v. 28-29.)

Once again their faithfulness to the Lord resulted in their promotion, further authenticating the principle “...those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed” (1 Sam. 2:30; Dan. 3:30.)

The Illusion of Political And Military Power

Nebuchadnezzar was far from the last ruler to imagine that his power was greater than the God of Israel. Daniel chapter 5 tells the sad tale of one of his successor’s downfall for his disrespectful handling of the vessels of the Jerusalem Temple. The famous hand-writing on the wall appeared to tell wicked Belshazzar that his time was up – he had “...been weighed in the balances and found wanting” (Dan. 5:27.) In keeping with the Lord’s prophecy, that night his capital fell to the Medo-Persian forces and he was promptly executed. Hubris among autocrats did not cease with the demise of Babylon, however. Events in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ demonstrate that He suffered the same sort of mistreatment at the hands of supposedly powerful human beings.

A Scene From The Greatest Miscarriage of Justice In Human History

After being subjected to “show-trial” style hearings before Annas, Caiaphas, and the partial gathering of the Sanhedrin, Christ was led away to the fifth Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. The Romans prided themselves on the *Lex Romana* (Latin for “Roman law”), and affirmed that its enforcement was the basis of the *Pax Romana* (Latin for “Roman peace.”) Of course, the subjugated people under their rule might contend that things were peaceful as long as they bowed to the supreme authority of this occupying power. Nevertheless, the Romans prided themselves on law and justice. Their jurisprudence forms the historic foundation of most legal systems in the modern western world.

Pilate had used military force to quell other disturbances (e.g. Lk. 13:1; cf. Josephus’ *The Antiquities of the Jews* 18.2.60.) If Jesus was a threat to the state or the peace of Judea he was prepared to punish him in the severest manner. The problem was that this Galilean did not behave like a terrorist or revolutionary; nor did He exhibit open lunacy. Jesus just stood before

the judgment seat silently, permitting His enemies to heap opprobrium upon His person unchallenged. Not a single syllable was uttered by the accused in His own defense. If he had been an observant Jew the scene might have called a Scripture to the governor's mind: "...as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth" (Isa. 53:7.)

Innocent, Never To Be Proven Guilty

Despite the vehement condemnations of the chief priests and their allies, there was no obvious evidence of the prisoner's guilt. He did not need to speak, His innocence of the charges leveled against Him was apparent. Most unusual of all, Jesus did not beg for mercy from the powerful Roman official who seemingly held His fate in his hands. The contrasting views of Pilate's position between the judge and the accused is demonstrated in the following exchange: The Jews answered him {i.e. Pilate}, 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.' When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, 'You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?' Jesus answered him, 'You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin' (Jn. 19:7-11.) At issue was Pilate's authority (translated "power" in the KJV & NKJV.) The governor thought it incredible that Jesus did not beg for mercy – or at least, plead His innocence – from this exalted jurist. To paraphrase his exasperated expostulation: "I have authority to release or crucify you! You had better start talking to me." The Lord's reply revealed the true nature of things: it was the meek One who actually held the power, for He is the incarnate Son of God.

Like Nebuchadnezzar before him – and all human rulers for that matter – Pilate's power was limited by the will and power of the sovereign God who ordains the powers that be. As the Babylonian emperor recounted centuries earlier after the Lord humbled him: "...I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, And His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven. And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Dan. 4:34-35.) As the early believers exultantly prayed: "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done" (Acts 4:27-28.)

The Wrath of Man Carrying Out God's Purposes

For all of their vaunted pretensions of authority, the leaders of the earth are subject to the Most High God and only succeed in carrying out His purposes. What a comfort to believers who suffer under tyrannical regimes in "closed" countries. Nothing can happen to them apart from the permission of the Almighty Lord of heaven and earth. As He demonstrated in the case of the three Jews who would not bow, He stands with His people as they go through the fire (Isa. 43:2.)

Not only does He control and limit the suffering, He identifies with and strengthens His saints in their trials. Thankfully, the church has a Savior who affirms that “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18.)

ⁱ “Letter to Mandell Creighton (April [3? or 5?], 1887”:
http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_Dalberg-Acton,_1st_Baron_Acton, See also:
<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/288200.html> Both accessed on 1/26/10.

ⁱⁱ The principle was well-articulated by the chief architect of the U.S. Constitution, James Madison, who wrote: “The accumulation of all powers legislative, executive and judiciary in the same hands, whether of one, a few or many and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, **may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.**” [Emphasis mine.]

James Madison, “The Particular Structure of the New Government and the Distribution of Power among its Different Parts from The New York Packet, Friday, February 1, 1788,” in *The Federalist Papers*, by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, & John Jay, p. 269. Originally published 1788, republished 2008 by Forgotten Books, www.forgottenbooks.org (no other documentation available.) Electronic edition accessed on 1/26/10 at:
http://books.google.com/books?id=AKNY_hPTsz8C&printsec=frontcover&dq=federalist+papers&ei=ti1fS7vbA5XKMrOv9JAD&cd=1#v=onepage&q=the%20very%20definition%20of%20tyranny.&f=false

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel is absent throughout the passage. It is impossible to say where he was, but had he been there, his actions before and after this event make it clear that he also would have refused to bow, e.g. Dan. 2 & Dan. 6.

^{iv} Given the modern usage of the term “martyr” by religious extremists who take the lives of others, it is worth noting that the word literally means “witness” in ancient (Koine) Greek, and indicated one who gave his life as a witness to the reality of the Lord Jesus and His gospel, e.g. Rev. 2:13; for the future Tribulation martyrs see Rev. 6:9-11.

^v That this is evidence of the supernatural is well-known to anyone who ever sat by a camp fire – or even emerged from a modern restaurant that contains a smoking section!