

The Pressure to Bow Down

Turn your mind back to Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2. He sees a statue of a man representing empires and kingdoms. And in that dream, which part was Nebuchadnezzar? The head of gold. But now, what does he do? He builds a statue of a man and it's *all* gold. Not just the head, but the entire statue, all thirty metres high of it. So this statue represents his rule, his power, and the message he's trying to send is that he's not just a head of gold – he's a whole statue of gold, that his rule and his kingdom will never end.

You see, did you notice the phrase that keeps getting repeated here? Nine times the words 'set up' are used – and the king set up this statue, and the king set up this statue...(v1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 12, 14, 18). Now, why that repetition? Because back in chapter 2 Daniel uses the same words for God: "he [God] removes kings and sets up kings" (2:21). Only God sets up kings. But here is Nebuchadnezzar saying – no, my future is in my own hands, I can set myself up. And that's the spirit of Babylon, ancient and modern, isn't it? After all, remember how Babylon was founded on the plain of Shinar: Genesis 11:4, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves." And here is Nebuchadnezzar setting up another tower – a towering statue, 9 stories high, because he also wants to make a name for himself. Not Trump Tower, but Nebuchadnezzar Tower, covered in gold, shaped like a man.

But then look what he does: v4-5, 'And the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound... you are to fall down and worship the golden image that king Nebuchadnezzar has set up."' So he wants everyone to bow down before this image of his rule. David Foster Wallace, the American writer, once said, 'worship power, and you will feel weak and afraid and need ever more power to keep that fear at bay.' And here is Nebuchadnezzar, a man who worships power, who has power, but not enough. Now he needs to control people's hearts and minds – what they worship - as well.

But just think what he is doing in ordering this worship. He has taken his rule, the power of the state, something temporary, something relative, and made it an absolute: you have to worship this.

And we see the same thing happening today, don't we. Nationalism is on the ascendancy, and we make an idol out of our nation, or its national character, or identity. And we think, 'this is what will rescue us, and unite us: put the nation first.' But it's not just nationalists. Liberal societies do the same thing – it's just what they set up as the ultimate is different. And we take something of relative value and decide that this is a non-negotiable, this cannot be spoken against, and everyone must bow down to this: and at the moment, in the West, it's personal freedom, and the power to decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. And you can't speak against my right to choose. It's even made it way into Disney movies,

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as Elsa sings in Frozen: 'It's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through, no right, no wrong, no rules for me, I'm free!' As one writer puts it, 'Today, it is said, the only moral absolute should be freedom and the only sin should be intolerance or bigotry.'¹

But then look at Nebuchadnezzar's 'invitation' list, verse 2: 'Then Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counsellors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces.' So these are the most educated people of the day. They're the leaders, the politicians, the civil servants, the academics. They're the great and the good, and they're all bowing before this statue. And today, when the great and the good and the stars lead the way in bowing before that which is not God, how are you supposed to say otherwise? When a culture's or a societies leaders bow down – how are you supposed to resist, not just peer pressure, but leader, or celebrity, pressure?

But interestingly, it wasn't just political and administrative officials was it? The justices and magistrates are also on the list. So even the Judiciary is ordered to bend the knee to Nebuchadnezzar's rule. And when political power exceeds the authority of the law, or tries to, or when the judiciary also bows before that which is relative, danger is not far away.

Well, sure, you might say, I can see the modern parallels, but isn't the idea of a king building a golden statue as a symbol of his rule the stuff of fairy tales? Well, think of North Korea and the ruling Kim family and their statues. Or think of Saparmurat Niyazov, the strongman of Turkmenistan, who built a massive golden statue of himself, that would rotate to follow the sun. So far from fairy tale stuff, Nebuchadnezzar's statue is uncannily real.

And yet, you don't have to be a despot for this to be true, do you? You see, none of us, I suspect, have a burning desire to rule an empire, but isn't there a part of all of us that wants to be the one on the pedestal? Or have our achievements burnished and put on public display? Or to be acknowledged and have others say how wonderful we are – or how humble we are? And so, what you discover is that there's a part of Nebuchadnezzar in all of us, that wants the glow of other's adulation or respect.

And so, for all our culture's worship of personal freedom, and for all our post-modern psychology that says that if we are to be truly free then we just have to be true to ourselves, and be who we want to be, regardless of what anyone else says, the truth is we all want people to say, 'you're great, I'm proud of you, I approve of you.' But the danger of that is that it just makes us a slave to what the crowd thinks, or what society currently worships. True freedom will never come

¹ Keller 105

that way. We need a much better image to bow down to than ourselves or our freedom. And Christ is the image of the invisible God, and He lifts him up, and sets him up, not on a pedestal, but on a cross. Not on a plain outside Babylon, but on a hill outside Jerusalem. And it's there, as he gives his life for you, that he tells you how loved and valuable you are. It's there that you can discover your real worth, where the Son of God takes your place of shame, that you might find his place of honour. And true freedom comes from making him the one you worship.

But if you do, don't expect it to be easy.

Facing Attack

Look at v8: 'Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews.' Now, I think it would be true to say that there is a kind of self-importance that likes to take a stand, and make a show of it, isn't there? But these guys don't do that. It seems the king would never have known about this, unless these other men had told him. So, these young Jewish men don't make a big show of this, they don't go looking for confrontation. But that doesn't mean they're cowards.

And at the end of chapter 2 we saw them promoted. Now they're staring death in the face. It's a reminder, isn't it, that if you refuse to bow to this world's idols, you might not enjoying the favour of Babylon for long – so don't get used to it. In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, one of the characters says, 'Some by sin rise, and some by virtue fall.' And these men discover, there can be negative consequences to virtue. It's why the apostle Peter writes, 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you' (1 Peter 4:12). To suffer for Christ, or for truth, isn't strange, Peter says, it's normal.

And today, following Jesus might mean for you a loss of the things our culture values most highly: things like prominence, approval, and social standing.² And so there's this temptation to turn down the volume of our faith. Sure you don't want to be obnoxious like some lad in the park with his ghetto blaster, but that's not what these young men were like, was it. But neither did they turn down their faith, or their convictions, until they were inaudible. And yet, we face the constant pressure to compromise if we're to stay in the good graces of others don't we.³ Because if you don't, you run the risk of being criticised as unloving, or judgmental, or narrow minded. And so, in our so-called age of tolerance, it's not that people are no longer vilified or ostracized for their beliefs, it's who those people are who *are* vilified that has changed. And today it's those who refuse to bow down to the god of personal freedom.

² Vassar 105.

³ Vassar 107.

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Ok, but who are these men who bring this accusation? 'Chaldeans' Daniel calls them in v8. Now, does that ring any bells? Well, it's the name Daniel used for the Babylonian wise men in chapter 2 whose lives he, and these three friends, saved. So how's that for gratitude! But, if you were Shadrach, Meshach or Abednego, how would you feel about these guys who have just knifed you in the back? How easy do you find it to love, and pray for, and forgive those who speak badly of you, or attack you? It's hard isn't it? Especially if you've tried to do them good.

In the hymn, 'My Song is Love Unknown', the third verse goes, 'Sometimes they strew his way, and his strong praises sing, resounding all the day hosannas to their King. Then "Crucify!" is all their breath, and for his death they thirst and cry.'

And above everyone else, Christ knew what it was to have those who claimed to be friends, to whom he had done good, turn on him. And yet from the cross he prayed, 'Father forgive them.' And when you realise that you are numbered among those he is forgiving, that we are among the crowd who one moment call out 'Hosanna' and the next turn on him and cry 'crucify'; and yet he forgives us, then we can know a well of forgiveness and love for those who speak against us.

But just look at the men's accusation. Verse 12, 'These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.' Now, is that true? And the answer is, it's only partially true. Do they refuse to worship his gods and bow down to his idol? Yes. Does that mean they pay no attention to the king? No. They have faithfully served the king.

But it's the fact that it is only partially true, or partially false, that makes it so difficult to defend. And if you seek to live a distinctively Christian life in a changing world, you will find yourself in situations where accusations are made against Christianity in general, or your beliefs in particular, that contain this mixture of truth and error. For example, between thinking that homosexual behaviour, or same sex marriage, is wrong and being a homophobe or a hater. Between taking a position against euthanasia, and not caring about end of life suffering. Between refusing to subscribe to a naturalistic, materialistic world-view, and being anti-science. And it is this mix of truth and error that makes discussion difficult, because it requires patience and the willingness of others to listen. And in the age of 140 characters those qualities are in short supply.

So, just as in ancient Babylon, we should not be surprised when a failure to bow results in trouble. And when it comes, you need to know where your security lies.

In Whose Hands?

Look how Nebuchadnezzar responds: v13, 'in furious rage' he demands to know whether this is fake news, and if it isn't, and they refuse to bow down, v15, "you

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shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" Now, did you notice what he doesn't say? He doesn't say "who is the god who will deliver you out of the hands of *my god*" – he says "who is the god who will deliver you *out of my hands!*" So who does he think he is? He thinks there is no power greater than he. He thinks he's god. And he's telling them: capitulate on your beliefs, or die.

Now, if that arrogance is breathtaking, what about their response? Verse 17, "If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

So, they don't presume that God will reward them for their faithfulness. Rather, they'll obey God because he's God, not because they'll have their best life now. They will face the consequences rather than compromise. And it doesn't matter how red Nebuchadnezzar's face gets, it doesn't matter how often, or how loudly the bagpipes play, this golden image that Nebuchadnezzar has set up is still not God.

Sometimes we need that kind of clarity, don't we? You see, it doesn't matter how often someone calls an arm a leg, it's still not a leg. And it doesn't matter how many times, or how loudly, people say it, but wrong is not right, and sin is not righteousness, and personal freedom can never be the absolute, whatever the powers of the state, or culture say.

Instead these young men bow to God's sovereign will. They know whose hands their lives are really in; and they know that God has the power to deliver them. But if he chooses not to, even if they do lose everything, they will still not compromise.

Now just think, how does their situation differs from the one they faced in chapter 2? Back then there was nothing they or Daniel could do to save themselves. They were well and truly in God's hands. If God didn't give them the interpretation to the dream, they were stuffed. But here, they could save themselves. They just had to bow down. And think how they could have done it. Think how you and I might have done it.

They could have rationalized it in their minds, couldn't they? 'Come on, this kind of thing goes with the job. It would be wrong not to bow down. We need to be culturally sensitive.' Or, 'look, there are our public lives and our private lives – and faith is a matter for our private lives. This is public stuff, so it's ok to bow down.' Or, 'Wouldn't it be less confrontational to bow? I mean, is being a member of the awkward squad such a good witness? Aren't we in danger of being seen as intolerant or inflexible?' Or, 'Hey, what does it matter if *outwardly* we bow down,

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when *inwardly* we know it doesn't mean anything. I mean, we all *know* this isn't God. And we can always ask for forgiveness afterwards.' Or, 'If we die, pagans will take our place, and that makes no sense; our influence for good will be gone. Think of how much more we can do if we bow down this time.' Or 'Think of our wives and children. It's not just about saving ourselves, this is about saving others.'

Yet they don't, do they? They are faced with the choice of what will be their non-negotiable. Will it be their lives, or will it be God? Will it be obeying the king, or obeying the truth? And for them, obedience to God had absolute value. Everything else: their reputations, their careers, their safety, even their lives, even loyalty to the state, has only relative value. It is God who claims their ultimate allegiance.

But Nebuchadnezzar and his cronies saw things very differently, didn't they? They think everyone has a price. And they were convinced that these men would choose life over obedience. They thought life or safety or career would be their absolute. And you and I will face conflict whenever what the state or culture thinks is an absolute clashes with what the Christian faith says is the absolute. And when we do, we need the same kind of courage and faith in God these guys had.

And you can get both in the gospel. You see, here are three young men, standing in the desert, refusing to bow down, at risk of the furnace of the king's wrath. Six hundred years later, Jesus was standing in the wilderness, similarly tempted to bow down to what is not God, and being offered the world if he will only do it. And he too declines. And he too is thrown into the furnace - the furnace of God's wrath at the cross - and he goes there for all those times when our integrity fails, all those times when we do compromise, all those times when we do bow down before that which is not God. And when we know that he loves us so much to do that, that he would sacrifice all of us, then it stirs in our hearts a loyalty and a love for him that will help us to stand, when we are tempted to bend.

But look how Nebuchadnezzar responds. Verse 19, 'Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury', and he has them bound and thrown into the furnace. But who dies? Nebuchadnezzar's soldiers. Just a few minutes ago Nebuchadnezzar was saying that there was no god who could save from his hand. But it seems he can't protect his servants quite as well as God can protect his!

The Man in the Furnace

Verse 23, 'And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, fell bound into the fire.' And sometimes the situation can seem hopeless, can't it? And the outcome for these men seems certain. And in the face of the power of culture, and the direction of the state, in the 21st Century West, the cause of Christ can also seem hopeless.

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But that's the whole point of this story, isn't it? That God's power to save is demonstrated in the midst of the furnace, and not before. And God does not meet with them in the safety of the plain, but in the heat of the fire. It's where God always meets his people. As the Lord says through Isaiah: 'Fear not... when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned... For I am the Lord your God.' (Is 43:1-2) It's a reminder that whilst there is zero promise of ease or comfort, or deliverance *from* the furnace in the Christian life, there is wonderful promise of deliverance *in* the furnace.

And the truly remarkable thing about this whole episode is the appearance of this fourth man beside them: verse 24, "Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counsellors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?... But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.""

Now the Bible never tells us who this being is. Is it an angel, or a pre-incarnation appearance of Jesus? And, in many ways, it doesn't matter. Whoever it is, it is a manifestation of Immanuel – God with us. God in the furnace with his suffering people. The furnace of our sin, the furnace of our grief, the furnace of our trials. And whether it was Jesus or not, this fourth man points to him –not one like a son of the gods, but *the* Son of God. And in Christ, God the Son enters the furnace, and at the cross he becomes sin to rescue us from sin, he enters death to rescue us from death. He faces God's wrath to rescue us from that wrath. And as this fourth man leads them safely out of death, and back to life, so in his resurrection Christ leads us in triumphant procession from the grave of grief and sin and death.

And in response, Nebuchadnezzar has to acknowledge God, and promotes them. And so God takes something that others mean for evil, and turns it for their good.

But, the ending is not always so happy is it? I asked Su to marry me on a bridge in the University Gardens in Oxford. And just down the road is the Martyrs Memorial. The plaque of which reads: 'To the Glory of God, and in grateful commemoration of His servants, Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, Hugh Latimer, Prelates of the Church of England, who near this spot yielded their bodies to be burned, bearing witness to the sacred truths which they had affirmed and maintained against the errors of the Church of Rome, and rejoicing that to them it was given not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for His sake.'

And just around the corner from the memorial, in the road is a cross, marking the place where Ridley and Latimer and Cranmer were burned at the stake. But no being like a son of the gods rescued them from the flames. Rather, as the flames

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were rising around their bodies, Hugh Latimer called out to Nicholas Ridley: 'Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man, for we shall this day light such a candle in England as I trust by God's grace shall never be put out.'

You and I are unlikely to face anything so dramatic. But we all face times that test what our ultimate, what the absolute for us will be. Will it be financial gain, or personal freedom, or sexual pleasure; or career advancement, or the applause of the crowd. Or will it be God. To what will we bow? And we may face the long pressure to conform, and experience the weight of the state pressing down. And we may face attacks and the temptations to compromise. Don't. Look to Christ, to the image of the invisible God. Look to Jesus, lifted up for you, and find in him the courage to bow to him and him alone.