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Journey

COURAGE UNDER FIRE

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COURAGE UNDER FIRE

It was not yet noon and the day was already promising to be warm. The great Roman amphitheatre in Carthage rose in the shimmering heat, round and hollow in the centre, its tiered seating stretching towards the sky, the stone seats warm and inviting.

Through the gates of the arena a stream of eager spectators poured into the aisles, jostling, talking, trying to find seats with the best views of the sandy floor in the center. The sand shone white in the glare of the sun, shimmering and pristine, but soon it would be churned with blood and

sweat. This was the high point of the spectacle about to unfold; blood and gore and death.

The games that day were being held in honour of the Emperor's birthday and rumour had it that there was a special treat waiting for them at the end of the usual program. First there would be the traditional games. Well armed gladiators would storm the arena and fight each other to the bitter end. They would salute Caesar and acknowledge his supremacy and then senselessly sacrifice their lives for the amusement of the mob.

Then when all of that was done the Christians would be brought out. They too would be senselessly sacrificed not only for the pleasure of the mob but most importantly because they had refused to burn incense to the emperor. The Christians were to face an array of wild

animals who would tear them to pieces before the watching throng.

If there was one thing that Rome was known for it was the blood-thirsty and braying mob. In many respects Rome was the mob. The Emperor and every other leader below him knew that if they could find a way to keep the mob happy then Rome was theirs for the taking. And the mob was easily pleased.

The common people really only wanted two things; full bellies and good entertainment. The Emperor was more than happy to oblige with both. For their bellies he gave them good Roman bread and for their entertainment he gave them the games: a spectacle of blood and gore such as has never been witnessed since.

But it was not just the gory gladiatorial games that the mob relished. There was

more. At the end of the games came the executions. Mostly it was Christians who were thrown to the beasts while the mob watched on jeering and hooting as innocent men, women and children were torn to shreds.

At the military games in Carthage in 203 AD a group of Christians were slated to be executed. Their crime was their refusal to burn incense to the Emperor. In an Empire where the Emperor was regarded as a god and freedom of conscience was non-existent, such a crime was punishable by death.

And not just any type of death; the most brutal and humiliating death that the Roman mind could imagine. Among those who were executed at the celebratory games in Carthage to mark the Emperor Septimius Severus' birthday were two young women; Perpetua and

Felicity. Perpetua was 22 years old and newly married. She had a small nursing infant whom she had to give into the care of her parents after she was sentenced to death. Felicity was pregnant when she was arrested but gave birth shortly before she was sent to the arena.

On the morning of the games the prisoners were led to the amphitheatre and brought into the arena and forced to view the horrifying spectacle before them. The thousands of jeering spectators, calling for their death, the grim faced Emperor sitting in his box at the head of the amphitheatre looking down on them with contempt, and the iron gates to the cages that held the wild beasts, snapping and snarling, waiting to rush at them.

Faced with certain death, Perpetua, Felicity and the three men who were sentenced along with them, Revocatus,

Saturninus and Satorus began to sing Psalms. The Emperor gave the command and the helpless Christian martyrs were exposed to an array of hungry wild animals. It was a cruel and horrible death, painful and slow but the intriguing thing about these martyrs was their willingness to die for their faith even when it would have been a lot easier to throw a stick of incense into the fire and save their necks.

When the Christian church was first birthed, soon after the death of Christ, the disciples were familiar with persecution. Indeed, it was something they came to expect and accept as part of throwing in their lot with Jesus, but over the centuries it seemed that Christians attracted more and more contempt.

This was largely due to the fact that they were seen as a seditious element in Roman society. For the most part the Emperors

of Rome didn't really care what anyone believed in but they did care about the allegiance of their citizens and vassals. Loyalty to the emperor was paramount, and Christianity, which was seen as a new Jewish sect, called for loyalty to Jesus over loyalty to Caesar. In fact Jesus himself had famously told his followers *"Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."* (Matthew 22:21)

Jesus recognised there was a certain level of allegiance due to temporal rulers, but he also recognised the need for a dividing line between temporal and spiritual. While Caesar could command civil obedience, the authority of Caesar could not extend to matters of conscience. But this is exactly what the Caesars took exception to.

Religious liberty and freedom of conscience were alien concepts within the Roman empire. The emperor demanded the complete, unmitigated allegiance of all his citizens. Anything less than this was considered treason. For many Christians the idea of offering the emperor allegiance and homage that was due only to God was unthinkable. It was on this point of religious liberty that Rome refused to budge, and many Christians were martyred for their faith because of it.

This was a hallmark of the Roman Empire: commanding the allegiance of its subjects on pain of death, depriving its citizens of the right to a free conscience, and making them pay for any resistance with their blood. Rome had no time for dissenters, nor did she have time for those who dared to say they worshipped a God who was greater than Caesar,

for Caesar himself had decreed that he was god.

But the struggle for religious liberty didn't begin with the Roman Empire. It is a long standing struggle that has been engaged in under every successive world empire since Babylon. It seems that the kingdoms of this world, unlike the kingdom of God, choose to command the allegiance of their subjects by force, under the threat of death. This use of excessive force in order to gain loyalty is a hallmark of the kingdom of Satan, a characteristic that is diametrically opposed to the kingdom of God.

God never uses force. In fact, the Bible tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8) and the use of force is contrary to the principles of love. Love is something that can never be commanded or coerced. Love can only be awakened in response to love, and this is precisely how God operates.

God seeks to secure our allegiance through a display of self-sacrificing love. This is exactly what he did when he sent Jesus to die for us on the cross. John 3:16 says *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* and 1 John 3:1 says *“behold what manner of love the father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God”*

It is by demonstrating his love for us that God seeks to woo us to himself and secure our allegiance. In fact, 1 John 4:19 describes our relationship with God clearly by saying *“We love Him because He first loved us”* and Jesus adds depth to that statement by saying *“if you love Me, keep my commandments”* (John 14:15)

We choose to obey God and give him our allegiance because we love him, and our

love for him is simply a response to his great love for us.

In this sense the kingdoms of this world, which use force to gain the allegiance of their subjects, are completely opposed to the kingdom of God, which seeks to win the allegiance of its citizens by love.

We should be thankful that we live in a world that gives us the opportunity to exercise our right to a free conscience. But this has not always been the case. For generations God's people have been tested on this point and for generations many of them have chosen to stand firm in their allegiance to God.

Over the centuries the world has seen four great super powers dominate the west. Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and then Rome have all dominated the world, controlling large swathes of territory

and bringing a variety of nationalities and cultures under their firm, sometimes tyrannical rule. Through each change a single common thread has wound through the fabric of each of these empires; they have all demanded absolute allegiance from each of their subjects to the exclusion of every other consideration.

Vassal states acknowledged their new overlords and agreed to pay homage to their gods rather than face death. The exception were those who counted themselves subjects of the God of heaven. Time and again when faced with the demand of absolute allegiance, God's people have chosen to render Him their first allegiance, often at great cost to themselves.

The book of Daniel repeatedly deals with the issue of worship and freedom of conscience. In Daniel chapter 3 we

are told the story of Nebuchadnezzar's great ambition to secure his power by demanding the homage of the empire. In Daniel chapter 2 Nebuchadnezzar has a cryptic dream which he cannot recall in the morning.

Through the providence of God, Daniel, a young Hebrew captive working at the Babylonian court, revealed the King's dream and also gave him the interpretation. Daniel told the king that he had dreamed of a massive metallic image, made up of various different metals. The image had a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet and toes which were partly of iron and partly of clay.

Each of the metals represented a kingdom. Babylon was the head of gold, but like every other kingdom represented by the image, it was destroyed by a great rock

which struck the image on its feet and reduced it to nothing more than chaff.

Daniel explained to Nebuchadnezzar that the rock represented the Kingdom of God which would ultimately supersede every other earthly kingdom and rule over the whole earth. At first Nebuchadnezzar was in awe of Daniel's God and His ability to foretell the future.

But Nebuchadnezzar struggled to reconcile himself to the fact that his kingdom would not last forever. Determined to secure his empire and possibly defy the plans of Daniel's God, Nebuchadnezzar commissioned a massive statue made of gold.

The image, which was a nod to the image of his dream, was entirely overlaid with gold. Nebuchadnezzar was making a bold statement. His kingdom, the golden

kingdom of Babylon, would last forever. And then, to secure the allegiance of his subjects, Nebuchadnezzar gathered together all the key leaders in his empire.

Daniel 3:2 says *“then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent to gather together the princes, the governors, and the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors and the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image which Nebuchadnezzar the king set up”*.

The dedication was to take place on the vast plain of Dura, where the massive image, which was about 90 feet tall and about 9 feet wide, had been set up. The dedication of the image was essentially a worship service with a musical concert followed by obeisance.

But, in order to ensure total compliance,

Nebuchadnezzar added an ominous caveat to his decree. Daniel 3:4-6 says *“Then an herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages, that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up, and whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace”*.

Much like the emperors of Rome, Nebuchadnezzar demanded worship and used the threat of death to coerce his subjects to comply. Quietly, without any resistance, the vast majority of Nebuchadnezzar’s officials and government leaders complied with his request. After all it seemed like worshipping the king’s image was a small

price to pay to save their necks.

But among the crowd of dignitaries crammed on the plain of Dura were three young men who refused to bow down. Three young men, who instead of falling to their knees before an idol, chose to stand tall, exposing themselves not only to scorn and ridicule but also the threat of death.

Seeing the quiet defiance of these three men, some of the king's loyal subjects approached the king and informed him of what was happening. *"They spoke and said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree that everyone who hears the sound of...all kinds of music, shall fall down and worship the gold image...there are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego; these men,*

O king, have not paid due regard to you. They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up.”
(Daniel 3:9-12)

Enraged by this act of disobedience Nebuchadnezzar summoned the three young men in question and demanded that they bow down to his image or face certain death.

It was an interesting situation. In Babylon, as in many of the other empires that came after it, the king was like a god and his word was law. Disobedience meant death. But the three Hebrews chose to obey God rather than the king.

The law of God commanded them “*You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth*” (Exodus 20:4). And they chose to

submit to the command of God regardless of the cost.

Incensed by their unwillingness to bow down and worship the image that he had set up, Nebuchadnezzar ordered that the furnace, designed to punish dissidents, should be heated seven times hotter than normal.

The flames were so hot they scorched the men who tossed Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego into the fire. The young men tumbled into the fire and the king fully expected them to be incinerated on impact, but a few moments later he stood up astonished by what he saw.

Pointing to the furnace Nebuchadnezzar cried out *“Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?...Look!”* he answered, *“I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they*

are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.” (Daniel 3:24-25)

Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from the faith and fidelity of the great martyrs of all ages is this; even in the midst of the fire they were never alone. The God they chose to honour, in turn honoured them with His presence and His protection.

In the case of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, they escaped the furnace unscathed and lived to see another day. Their faithfulness to God and their determination to follow their conscience regardless of the cost, created an opportunity for the Babylonian empire to see the power of the God they worshipped.

Strange as it might seem, God’s faithful people have always grappled with the issue of freedom of conscience. Not only

in Babylon but also in Medo-Persia this proved to be a point of contention.

During the time of Ahasuerus, one of the Persian Empire's most formidable monarchs, Mordecai, a Jew who worked for the King and worshipped the God of heaven was forced to choose between obedience to the law of God or the laws of man. Like the three Hebrew worthies before him, Mordecai chose to obey God and paid dearly for his choice. But he too experienced the faithful providence of God in the midst of his trials.

The story of Esther is one that is widely known. The young and beautiful Jewish girl was raised by her cousin Mordecai in the citadel of Sushan. Mordecai was a gatekeeper in the palace of the king and a faithful worshipper of the true God.

When the king divorced his queen, Vashti, and began a search for a new queen, Esther found herself at the palace among hundreds of the other girls who would be presented before the king. Finally, the king chose Esther to be his queen, but neither the king nor the officials of his court knew that Esther was Jewish.

Meanwhile Mordecai was faced with challenges of his own. One of the king's highest ranking officials, Haman, a prince and advisor to the king, demanded that all the king's subjects pay him homage by bowing down and worshipping him.

Mordecai refused to do this because it went against his conscience. As a Jew he was bound by the law of God and chose to bow to Him alone. Haman was enraged by Mordecai's refusal to bow down to him and went about plotting his demise.

He misrepresented the Jewish people to the king and convinced Ahasuerus to pass a decree that would essentially wipe out the entire Jewish race from the empire. Ahasuerus readily agreed to Haman's scheme and authorised mass genocide.

Still Mordecai refused to bow to Haman and Haman's agitation grew worse and worse, until finally Mordecai appealed to Queen Esther to speak to the king and intercede on behalf of her people.

Esther, though reluctant and fearful at first, agreed to go before the king. Touched by Esther's appeal on behalf of her people, the king intervened. Though the decree could not be reversed, the king agreed to add a caveat to the decree thus empowering the Jews throughout Persia to defend themselves.

The story of Mordecai, Haman and Esther is another example of how God's people are often faced with a choice between obedience to God or obedience to man. Over and over again God demonstrates that those who choose to put their trust in Him will not regret that choice.

What was it that gave each of these individuals the courage to face monarchs and bear witness for their faith, regardless of the consequences? Speaking about his own spiritual experience and what motivated him, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14 "*For the love of Christ compels us*".

Love motivated generations of faithful men and women to remain true to God. While men like Nebuchadnezzar, Haman and the emperors of Rome had to use force and coercion to command their subjects to do their bidding, God's people

have always chosen to be faithful to him because they loved him.

While the kingdom of Satan uses force in order to command the allegiance and worship of men, the kingdom of God uses love. Love that was revealed on the cross and love that draws us like a powerful magnet. Speaking of the great love of God, Paul wrote *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:35,38-39)

Just before Jesus comes again, when the earth is embroiled in conflict and turmoil,

the Bible tells us that God's people will once more be tested. Their faith and fidelity to God will be tried and they will be forced to choose once more between obeying the commandments of God or the commandments of man.

Revelation 14 paints a picture of three heavenly messengers who proclaim a final warning message to the whole earth. This message is to go to every nation, tribe, tongue and people and is a wake up call, designed to alert the inhabitants of the earth to the final cosmic struggle before them.

The heart of this message is worship. In Revelation 14:6-7 the apostle John writes *"Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people— saying with a loud voice, "Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour*

of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.”

The first angel of Revelation 14 calls all the inhabitants of the earth to fear or reverence God and to worship him as creator of the entire earth. Ultimately this is what makes God worthy of worship. We owe him our allegiance because He made us.

As the great German reformer Martin Luther indicated, our consciences must first be captive to the word of God; every other allegiance, every other consideration, comes second. It is for this right, the right to a free conscience, captive first and foremost to the Word of God, that so many of God's people were willing to sacrifice so much.

The third angel of Revelation 14 reveals just what is at stake though. While the first

angel calls us to worship God, the third angel's message tells us who we should not be worshipping. Revelation 14:9-10 says *"Then a third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand, he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God..."*

The final conflict on planet earth will centre around the issue of worship. Each of us must choose who we will offer our allegiance to: the Creator of heaven and earth, or the beast. Revelation 13 tells us that in the final conflict worship of the beast will be enforced on pain of death. Much like the three Hebrew worthies in Daniel, much like Mordecai in the book of Esther and much like the Christians during the rule of the Roman emperors, God's people will once more face a choice.

They must choose between worshipping God or worshipping Satan, worshipping the lamb or worshipping the beast. The stakes are as high as they have ever been; life or death. But while Satan only has power over our mortal bodies, God holds our eternal destiny in His capable and loving hands.

As with every other issue in life, worshipping God is not something that happens overnight. Choosing to be faithful to God at great personal cost is the result of little decisions, continuously made, to submit our hearts and lives to the word of God.

When faced with the temptations of Satan in the wilderness, Jesus said *“It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”*. It is by choosing to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of

God, every hour of every day, that we can prepare ourselves to meet the conflicts that lie ahead.

Jeremiah 12:5 summarises the situation beautifully when it says *“If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, in which you trusted, they wearied you, then how will you do in the floodplain of the Jordan?”*

It is by being faithful in the little trials and temptations we face every day that we build up our spiritual stamina to face the greater trials that lie ahead. May we choose to be faithful to Jesus even in the smallest areas of our lives, that we will choose to worship him wholeheartedly when we face greater challenges in the future.

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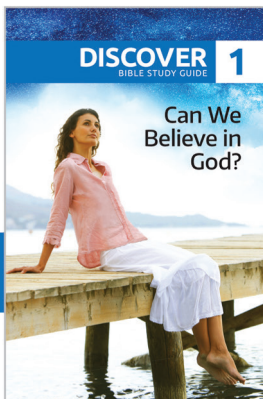
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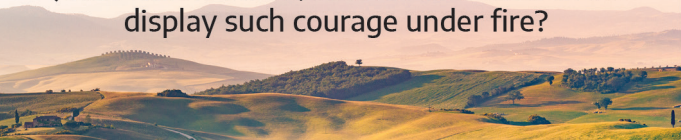
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Under the auspices of the Roman emperor and the roaring approval of the Roman mob thousands of innocent men, women and children were slaughtered in their great arenas. The blood that was most frequently shed was the blood of Christians. Why did these Christians choose death when they could have just as easily chosen to denounce their God, Jesus, and live to see another day? What was it about this Jesus that led men, women and children to display such courage under fire?



Pastor Gary Kent is Speaker for The Incredible Journey ministry. He has produced and presented numerous documentaries on subjects including the Bible, Bible prophecy, world events and natural health. His passion is to share the good news of Jesus' imminent return.

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