

The Totalitarian Impulse

History is filled with examples of tyrants who ruled their subjects with an iron fist. Their grip may be strong, but there is another power they cannot overcome.

“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?’ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. . . . 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. 3:15-18).



The Cambridge Dictionary defines *totalitarianism* as “a government that has almost complete control over the lives of its citizens and does not permit political opposition.” The root word, *total*, captures the key element: Those in positions of power exercise complete control over those under their dominion. Dissent is forbidden, often on penalty of death.

Totalitarianism has cast a long, dark shadow across the pages of human history. King Nebuchadnezzar’s defiant boast, “who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?”, has been repeated countless times by egomaniacs who demanded absolute loyalty from their subjects. The Pharaoh of the Exodus, Jezebel, the Jacobins of the French Revolution, Hitler (Germany), Stalin (Soviet Union), Mao Zedong (China), Pol Pot (Cambodia)—

the list could go on and on. These were not merely strong rulers, but ruthless and self-indulgent tyrants who crushed their opponents with brutal efficiency, using torture and execution to “persuade” their subjects into submission, often by the millions.

Totalitarianism is not limited to individual rulers. Think of the mob at the trial of Jesus. Their demand to “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” overrode the judgment of a politician who knew better. Even democracies can become totalitarian, when sinister forces learn how to manipulate the passions of the populace.

That’s not all. Religions can develop an authoritarian mindset, too. Islam has gained its worldwide following largely as the result of its “convert or die” message. Medieval Christianity used the Inquisition to exterminate those it saw as heretics.

Historically, the individual liberties enjoyed today by Western democracies are a rarity. We have been lulled into thinking these liberties are permanent, but that is unlikely. The usual pattern is one of the masses being controlled by a powerful few, usually to selfish ends. The totalitarian impulse runs deep in human societies, and we will likely see it again, even in our own nation.

What should be the response of God’s people to those who rule in such a fashion? The apostles counseled Christians to “honor the king” and pay taxes—even to oppressive regimes (1 Pet. 2:17; Rom. 13:1-7). So, insurrection and rebellion are not options for us. The only thing worse than tyranny is anarchy.

But surrendering our faith is not an option either. Allegiance to God has always been viewed by totalitarians as a threat to their power, so believers are often their targets. King Nebuchadnezzar was not the first, nor the last, dictator who sought to crush the faith of God’s people. When rulers demand loyalty to themselves over God, we have only one choice: in the defiant words of the three young Jews, “we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship.” Even if it costs us our lives, we must not yield.

Today, Nebuchadnezzar barely rates a footnote in the history books. Eventually, every totalitarian ruler will come to the same ignoble end. God will see to that. In the meantime, our task is to stand strong in the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, and refuse to capitulate to the despot who demands our surrender. We serve a greater God and will bow to no other.

— David King