

Who Influences You?

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An important character in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (1955) was Denethor II, the last of the Ruling Stewards of Gondor. The last years of his life illustrated the importance of faith and how it can be wrecked by misleading influences, which in his case led to tragic decisions and actions that caused him to miss out on the blessings of salvation and victory.

Denethor was a proud man, subtle, and very perceptive of other men's thoughts. This was due in part to his secret use of a *palantír*, or "seeing stone," which was a perfectly smooth, opaque sphere used to view over great distances and gather intelligence. Great mental strength of will was needed to use a *palantír* because one's intended thoughts and visions could be revealed to a user at the other end.

The Dark Lord Sauron had managed to acquire a *palantír* through the conquest of a fortress of Gondor years before. In his pride, Denethor convinced himself that he possessed the strength of will to use the *palantír* to probe the mind of



and form a

defense for Minas Tirith, the capital of Gondor. But Sauron was able to use his palantír to influence the mind of Denethor. He saw in him a deeply rooted fear of Gondor's destruction and the end of the rule of the stewards, so he showed him visions of his apparently invincible military forces.

Denethor provisioned Minas Tirith for a long siege and sent away to safer parts of Gondor the elderly and the women and children. He also lit the beacons of Gondor and sent riders to alert Théoden, king of Rohan, that the aid of his army was sorely needed to save the city. Some time later, the vast forces of Sauron arrived at Minas Tirith, bringing catapults for hurling large boulders at the city, siege towers, and an enormous battering ram to break down the main gate.

Denethor looked from the wall at the highest level of the city's citadel. The visions he saw in the palantír were confirmed in his mind as he saw the great spread of Sauron's forces on the plain before the city. He could see that the main gate was destroyed, and Sauron's forces were streaming into the lower levels of the city.

In bitter despair, Denethor thought that Rohan had deserted Gondor and Théoden had betrayed him. He lost faith in his friend Théoden because he had not seen his arrival, and so he believed his doom was inevitable. Denethor erected a funeral pyre, threw a torch on the wood, laid himself on the table, and perished in the flames, clasping in his hands the

palantír.

If Denethor had not doubted the integrity and faithfulness of his friend Théoden and that of Rohan and waited a few moments longer, he would have heard the horn blasts of his arrival with his army. Théoden broke the siege and helped to deliver Minas Tirith from the hordes of Sauron. Denethor perished needlessly in anguish, clinging to the very tool used by Sauron to transmit partial information, concealing the whole truth. The news that deliverance was nigh was hidden from him, influencing him into falsely believing that Gondor stood alone facing certain destruction and making the tragic decision to take his life.

When the children of Israel reached the border of the Promised Land from the wilderness of Paran, God commanded Moses to send a man from each of the twelve tribes to spy out the land of Canaan. As he sent them out, Moses instructed the men to observe the layout and vitality of the land, the strength of its inhabitants, the kind of cities in which they lived, and to bring back samples of the fruit of the land (Numbers 13).

The spies returned to the wilderness of Paran at the end of forty days, bringing back a cut branch with a cluster of grapes, along with pomegranates and figs. They affirmed that the land did indeed flow with milk and honey, but ten of them gave a negative report, saying that the inhabitants of the land were strong, lived in large, fortified cities, and were too mighty for them to overcome.

Caleb of the tribe of Judah and Joshua of the tribe of Ephraim encouraged the people to trust in the Lord because He was with them and would strengthen them to take possession of the land. The protection of the Canaanites was removed, so they urged them not to doubt God and rebel against Him. But the people, influenced by the negative report of the majority of the spies, did not listen to Caleb and Joshua. They wept and railed against Moses and Aaron for bringing them to a place

where they believed they would be killed and plundered, and they called for their stoning and for another leader to return to Egypt. In their anger, they failed to remember God's protection and provision for them from their deliverance from slavery in Egypt through their journey in the wilderness.

If the people of Israel had not doubted the integrity and faithfulness of God, they would have enjoyed the blessings of the Promised Land. Listening to the ten influencers who promoted fear of destruction and unbelief in God brought them forty years of wandering in the wilderness until they died, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua. The next generation of the people of Israel would enjoy what their parents missed, the blessings of God in the land He had given to His people (Numbers 14).

About 1,500 years later, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews referred to this incident to warn about the dangers of unbelief:

“‘TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME.’ For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? **So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief. Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it.** For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.” (Hebrews 3:15-4:2)

We live in challenging times that can be very perplexing and discouraging. Many of us may be facing a serious crisis that makes us feel like we are trapped in a besieged city. We may be tempted to look into our own palantíri, our smartphones and

other mobile devices, to seek understanding and guidance. But a plethora of influencers at the other end deluge our screens with “authoritative” voices and “expert” information coming at us from all directions, saying many different things to manipulate our perceptions, beliefs, and actions. This confusion coming from Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), and other social media platforms can too often cause people to be misdirected into false perceptions, wrong actions, and severe consequences.

Do not be like Denethor in *The Lord of the Rings*, who allowed himself to be influenced by selected news from his information device that led him astray into a shipwrecked faith, hopelessness, and suicide on the cusp of deliverance and victory. Follow not the example of the children of Israel, who saw God’s outstretched arm and mighty hand deliver them from bondage in Egypt and provide food and water for them in the wilderness, yet on the negative report of ten influencers did not believe in the Lord and missed entering the Promised Land.

Instead, be like the widow of Zarephath, who, on the verge of death by starvation for her and her son, did not heed the influencers regarding her inevitable end but trusted in the word of God through the prophet Elijah that sustenance would be provided. Because she had faith in the God of Israel, she and her son found rest. The flour and oil were not exhausted until the Lord sent rain to the earth and ended the severe famine in the land (1 Kings 17:1-16).

The many conflicting voices that we hear in the world and on our devices clamoring for our attention and seeking to influence us can cause us to miss out on the hope, peace, deliverance, and rest found only in Jesus Christ. God’s word tells us that “we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.” (Ephesians 4:14)

In place of our palantíri and the influencers behind them, read the Bible, God's word, and let Him be the Influencer in whom you trust. Jesus will never mislead, desert, betray, or fail to save you and provide what you need (John 10:11-18; Philippians 4:19; Hebrews 13:5). He invites anyone who is weary and weighed down by the troubles and stresses of this world to come to Him and find rest (Matthew 11:25-30). Believe in Jesus and His word today!

Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience. (Hebrews 4:11)

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