

## FAITH TO FACE THE FURNACE

Gladys Aylward was a missionary to China more than fifty years ago. She was forced to flee the city she was living in when the Japanese invaded during World War II. In 1958, the story was made into the Hollywood film called *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*. She could not leave the orphans she cared for behind and so with only one assistant, she led more than a hundred of them over the mountains toward Freedom. During this terrible trip she grappled with despair as never before. After passing a sleepless night, she faced the morning with no hope of reaching safety. A 13-year-old girl in the group reminded her of their much-loved story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. "But I am not Moses," Gladys cried in desperation. "Of course you aren't" the girl said, "but Jehovah is still God!" When Gladys and the orphans made it through, they proved once again that no matter how inadequate we feel, God is still God, and we can trust in him.

Dan 3:15 Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" 16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." 19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual 20 and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. 21 So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. 22 The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, 23 and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. 24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, O king." 25 He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods." 26 Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, 27 and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

Most of the time in life obscurity is safer than standing out in a crowd. For example, in the TV show *Survivor*, the people who usually make it to the end are the ones who do not stand out and make waves. However, they are also not the ones who usually win the game. Going against the flow is always the more difficult path to take. When you go against the flow you stick out and in battle anything that sticks out is a target. However, sticking out is what has called us to.

We are continuing today in our series "Great Expectations". One of the things that God expects from us is that we will make a difference with the life that we are given. We are called to stand out.

Romans 12: 2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will.

When I was in university I had a shirt I would wear that said “Go Against the Flow”. It was a reminder to me that I was called to be different. As Christians we are under tremendous pressure to conform to the standards of the world. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had a decision to make. They could bow down and blend in like everyone else or they could stand up for what they believed in and face the consequences.

That is a choice each one of us has to make daily. To go with the flow and be unnoticed or to stand up for what we believe in and become a target for persecution. Going against the flow and having to face the furnace takes faith. I want to talk today about having courageous faith.

This passage shows us that faith has 4 aspects:

1. Faith is Rooted in God’s WORD (vs. 16) - we do not need to defend ourselves before you

These 3 men did not have to justify themselves or apologize for their actions. They were willing to stand up to the king and face the consequences because they knew that what they were standing for was absolute truth. They did not need to debate the matter by listening to a celebrity interview or enter into a dialogue on the question of whether bowing down to idols was right or wrong. They knew that there was only one God and that bowing down before anything but God was sin. They knew this because it is written in the Bible. Our faith is based upon God’s word.

Over the years I have had many people who wanted to debate my faith with me. You will often hear people say something like this “Well that is just your opinion.” How do I know that what I believe in is true. The answer is simple: I know it is true because the Bible says it and I know that the Bible is true. We do not need to apologize for our faith if it is based upon God’s word.

One of the first songs we learn as children is also the bedrock of our faith: Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Because the Bible says it I believe it. Our faith is rooted in truth. Jesus understood this. When he was tempted by the devil He did not try to debate theology with him. He simply said what was written in God’s word.

Matt 4:1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." 4 Jesus answered, "It is written: `Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

This means it is important to understand what the Bible says. In their book, *We Let Our Son Die*, Larry and Lucy Parker recount their tragic story of misguided faith. They had thought that if they just had enough faith, God would heal their diabetic son. Eventually, their son got ill and needed insulin. Believing that God would heal him, they withheld the insulin and, predictably, he lapsed into a diabetic coma. The Parkers, who were warned by some about the impropriety of not having enough faith, believed that God would still heal him. Unfortunately, the son died. Even after he died the Parkers, undaunted in their “faith,” conducted a resurrection service rather than a funeral service. In fact, for more than a year following his death, they refused to abandon their firmly held faith that their son, like Jesus, would physically rise from the dead. Eventually, both Larry and Lucy were tried and convicted of manslaughter and child abuse.

This tragic story happened because of a flawed concept of faith. They felt that their son’s healing depended on the sincerity of their faith. The extent to which we believe in something is not the issue.

There are a lot of people who very sincerely believe things that are completely wrong. Faith is only as good as the faithfulness of what you hold on to.

It is not our trust that keeps us, but the God in whom we trust who keeps us -- Oswald Chambers

2. Faith is Realizing life has WOUNDS (vs. 17a) - if we are thrown into the blazing furnace

These three men clearly understood what disobeying the king meant. They were not living in some sort of fantasy world where life is always pleasant and nothing bad ever happens. They knew the king had the power to throw them into the furnace and that he would if they disobeyed him.

One of the reasons people often turn their backs on God is because they have mistakenly believed that being a Christian means that you will never have any problems in life. They see God as a magical genie willing to instantly grant any and every prayer that is prayed. This is just not true. Life is full of trials. In fact, Jesus himself promised us that we would face many problems.

John 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble . But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Paul understood that hardship was a normal part of the Christian life.

2 Tim 3:12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted

He also understood that hardships can turn people away from the faith and that part of faith is realizing this truth and seeking encouragement and strength in the face of trials.

1 Thess 3:2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted . And it turned out that way, as you well know

Part of faith is understanding that we all live in a fallen sinful world and that we have all inherited a fallen sinful nature. Someone asked me once why God didn't just eliminate all sin from the world. Certainly He has the power to do that. God cannot simply take all the evil people away and destroy them because the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

Our struggle with sin is in many ways similar to an alcoholic's struggle with drinking. It's never over. How often I find myself talking about sin in the past tense as if being a sinner is something I'm beyond -- a page turned in the book of my life. But sin is like alcoholism. Sinners are never cured; they simply decide to stop sinning ... and it's a daily decision. -- John Fischer

About the worst advice you could give anybody is 'be yourself.' -- Oscar Wilde

The only way to be "truly" consistent is as a non-Christian. If we are to be Christians at all, we will be inconsistent ones. We will be right some of the time and wrong some of the time. What Jesus asks of us is that we strive to take the "right some of the time" and make it an ever-increasing portion of the time -- James Sennett

Faith is rooted in God's word and realizing life has wounds;

3. Faith is Remembering God's WORKS (vs. 17b) - God is able to save us and He will rescue us

Part of faith is remembering that God is willing and able to save us. God is for us. He is on our side. He is working for our good. God's power and love are the foundation upon which we build our lives. His goodness and faithfulness and might are a part of who He is.

All I have seen teaches me to trust the Creator for all I have not seen -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

The more we depend on God, the more dependable we find he is -- Cliff Richards

Back in 1874 a man called James Eads built a steel bridge across the Mississippi River at St. Louis. At the time it was the longest arch bridge in the world and the first made out of steel. Many said it could not be built. They said it would never support its own weight, let alone the weight of a fully loaded train. So James Eads, the builder, ordered fourteen locomotives to stop on the bridge at once. When people saw that the bridge could handle even the heaviest of loads then people began trusting the bridge. They called it the eighth wonder of the world.

4. Faith is Resting in God's WILL (vs. 18) - but even if He does not ...

The 3 men say here that even if God did not help them and they died in the furnace that they would still not bow down. Part of faith is resting in God's will. It is recognizing that sometimes God's will for our life is not the same as our will. Sometimes bad things happen even though we cannot understand why. Faith is trusting in God even when everything around us seems to be falling apart.

Sweeping across Germany at the end of World War II, Allied forces searched farms and houses looking for snipers. At one abandoned house, almost a heap of rubble, searchers with flashlights found their way to the basement. There, on the crumbling wall, a victim of the Holocaust had scratched a Star of David. And beneath it, in rough lettering, the message: I believe in the sun - even when it does not shine; I believe in love - even when it is not shown; I believe in God - even when he does not speak

God could have delivered Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from this situation in three ways;

- a. Delivered FROM the fire – faith is built
- b. Delivered THROUGH the fire – faith is refined
- c. Delivered BY the fire into His arms – faith is perfected

While they did not know what God would do, they knew that God was in control and that God was greater than any king. Perhaps God would change the heart of king Nebuchadnezzar. Perhaps He would miraculously rescue them from the furnace. Perhaps he would not. Although they did not know exactly what God's plan for them was they KNEW that God was in control.

None of us know exactly the path that God has chosen us to walk. Certainly we know that we will face trials of many kinds. God may deliver us from some but have us face others. There is one thing that we DO know – that wherever we go and whatever may happen to us that God is with us and He is in control. It was not a “son of the gods” that walked with them in the furnace but the SON OF GOD - Jesus Christ. We know that whatever may happen to us that Jesus will never leave us and that nothing will ever separate us from Him.

The king threw the very worst he had at them. They were bound by his strongest men. The furnace was heated to 7 times its normal temperature – so hot that it killed those who threw them into it. They faced the very worst and yet not even a hair on their heads was touched. The devil can throw the very worst of hell at you and he still can not touch you. You can lose your job or your family. You could even lose your life, but Jesus still walks beside you and you will be with Him.

Luke 11:4 "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. 5 But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.

Never be afraid of what the world can do to you. Instead, be afraid of wasting the life God has given you. Be afraid of living a life that is meaningless.

Dead Poets Society is a great film. In his first lesson with his senior class, the rather eccentric but very inspiring English teacher John Keating, played by Robin Williams, takes the boys into the foyer outside the classroom where he asks one to read out a poem. "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, old time is still a-flying. And this same flower that smiles today tomorrow will be dying." "Carpe deum - Seize the day ", Keating says to them, "Every single one of us is just food for worms. You may be destined for great things, but you need to take the opportunity now." Then he leads his class up to the cabinet in the foyer, filled with old, black and white photos of students from many years ago. "What do all these boys, your illustrious predecessors, have in common?" asks Keating. "They're all fertilizing daffodils. They're all dead. They were boys with high expectations, high ideals, just like you. They felt they were invincible, thought that the world was their oyster, just like you. But did they manage to fulfill even a tiny bit of their potential? - Carpe deum. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary."

Let us be like a bird for a moment perched on a frail branch when he sings; though he feels it bend, yet he sings his song, knowing that he has wings. -- Victor Hugo

Faith for my deliverance is not faith in God. Faith means, whether I am visibly delivered or not, I will stick to my belief that God is love. There are some things only learned in a fiery furnace. -- Oswald Chambers

One of the early church fathers, John Chrysostom, lived in the late 4th and early 5th century. One day he was brought before the emperor and commanded to renounce Christ. The emperor threaten him saying if he would not renounce Christ he would be banished from the country forever—he would be separated from his father's land for the rest of his life. John responded, "You cannot. The whole world is my Father's land. You cannot banish me."

The emperor then said, "Then I will take away all of your property and treasures." John replied, "You cannot, for all my true treasures are in heaven."

The emperor then said, "I will send you to a place of absolute solitude where there is not one friend for you to talk to." John said, "You cannot, for I have a friend that is closer than a brother to me. He is my elder brother, Jesus Christ, who has promised to be with me always—to the very end of the age."

In anger the emperor then said, "I will then take your life." John said, "You cannot. For my life is forever hidden in Christ with God."