

What Does It Mean to Have Faith?

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Daniel: Thriving in a Hostile World

Daniel 3

We are going to continue in our study of the book of Daniel. We are going to look at one of the most famous stories in the Old Testament. It is the story of Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and how they were thrown into a fiery furnace by an evil king named Nebuchadnezzar. This story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is a favorite one for children in church Sunday Schools. And those of you who grew up in church and went to Sunday School probably know the story. But there are quite a number of folks here who did not grow up in church and so this wonderful story may be unknown to you. It is a story about faith.

Now many people do not understand what the Bible is talking about when it calls us to have faith. I have talked with people about Christianity and they have responded with the statement, "Well, I wish I had your faith" as if faith were some super human achievement. Something that only a very few people have. Sometimes misunderstandings regarding faith can lead to really tragic results.

I have a dear friend who, when she was a teenager, found out that her mother was diagnosed with cancer. And her mother and grandmother had fallen under the influence of what has become known as "the faith teaching." What the faith teaching taught was that you could never acknowledge that you were sick and might die. So whenever she visited her mother in the hospital no one was allowed to talk with her mom about death or what would happen when and if her mother was no longer around. Any talk about death or sickness was seen as an absence of faith.

She said she remembers her grandmother and her mother adamantly saying that mother would be healed and that she was just going through all of the treatments so that God would have more glory in the end when he healed her. He would prove all the doctors wrong.

Well, in her mom's case the doctors weren't wrong and mom got sicker and sicker and eventually died. And my friend told me that that event really scarred her because she never had an opportunity to adequately say "goodbye" to her mother. She was never able to express to her mom her fears of Mom not being there for her. She was never able to tell her mom how much she really loved her and how desperately she didn't want her to die. Every bit of doubt, every bit of sadness and disappointment about what was going on had to be buried under this blanket of what these folks believed was faith.

For this dying mom and her mother faith meant believing God for a certain outcome and never permitting yourself to doubt whether that outcome would occur or not. People are really confused about the meaning of faith. I would say in America right now and in most churches the most popular understanding of faith is that faith is something that we give to God so that he in return gives us

what we want. Faith is like the coin that we put in the gumball machine. So, if you only have a nickel's worth of faith, then about all you can expect to receive from God is a gumball. That is why it is important to have a lot of faith because if you want to ask God for something really, really big, then you better have a bunch of nickels in your pocket or even silver dollars of faith.

I would say in America, and in most churches, the most popular understanding of faith is this bargain kind of faith. It's really a childhood idea. Faith is kind of a bargain I strike with God. If I have enough faith then God, on his side, is obligated to give me what I am asking for.

Now, the problem that arises with a bargain kind of faith, and any kind of bargain mindset that we have regarding our relationship with God, is what happens when the candy or gumball doesn't come out of the machine? Here I am, I am asking God for something—for healing, for a romantic relationship, for a new job, for a certain grade in a class, for the salvation of a loved one. I am asking God for something and I am really trying to believe that God is going to give it to me. But I don't get it. I don't get the job. I don't get healed. My loved one isn't well. I am still single when I wanted to get married.

There are only two conclusions that can be drawn, if your understanding of faith is that God is striking a bargain with you. Give me enough faith and I will give you what you want. Just two conclusions that can be drawn. The first one is you didn't have enough faith. You thought you had enough nickels of faith in your pocket to buy this thing from God, but you didn't. Conclusion #1 that can be drawn is that you have failed. If only you could have believed harder. That is one of the things that our friend struggled with for years regarding her mother and her mother's death. She asked herself over and over again, "Was it me, God? Did the fact that I doubted somehow hold back your healing? If only I had believed harder. If only I had prayed more. If only I had fasted then maybe my mother would be alive." Lots of people leave the church with a conviction inside, "Well, I just am not cut out for this faith thing. There is something defective about me. I guess I can't believe enough. I want to, but I can't."

I wonder – I won't ask you to raise your hands – but, I wonder how many of you feel that way about yourselves? That you just don't have enough nickels of faith to put in the slot that God is demanding in order to get something really big from him, something really great. Oh, you could ask for something that is going to happen anyway, but something that would take a miracle, forget it. You just don't have enough faith.

Well, that is one conclusion that can be drawn when you don't get your gumball from the machine. There is something wrong with you.

But the other conclusion that is often drawn by people is that there is something wrong with God. I have watched person after person become bitter because they had this bargain notion of what faith was. Their attitude was, "I played by the rules. I did what I was supposed to do. I did pray and I did light a candle and I did go to church. And several others prayed with me. We jumped through all the hoops that God tells us to jump through, but God still didn't give me what I was asking for. God didn't keep his end of the bargain." I have watched person after person who didn't receive the outcome they wanted

become bitter at God. Forget it. It does no good to pray and ask God for a job, or a pregnancy, or a healing. And so they seal their hearts off from God. And they might still go through the motions of staying in church, but they resolve to never put themselves out again.

Today I want to talk about what the Bible teaches about faith – not a childish bargain type of faith, but an adult-sized faith. What does it mean to have faith?

Daniel 3

“King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

Then the herald loudly proclaimed, ‘This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.’

Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.”

Now, again, just to give you a little bit of background, Nebuchadnezzar, who was the ruler of the ancient middle eastern world – we have lots of information about Nebuchadnezzar not only from the Bible, but from various ancient historians as well as inscriptions that have been found and hundreds of contracts that were signed in his name. You may have heard of the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was Nebuchadnezzar who designed the Gardens as a series of terraces supported by arches as a gift to his wife.

It was this Nebuchadnezzar, world ruler, military hero, city planner, that invaded the Holy Land of Judah and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple and took captive back to Babylon, which today is in modern Iraq, thousands of Jews, including Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Now it says in verse 1 that “King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.” This was quite a common practice in the ancient world for kings to erect enormous images of themselves. This image is quite large, probably the ninety feet included an enormous base, but this statue is by no means the largest in the ancient world. And this business of image making of oneself has continued to be a practice of leaders to this very day. If you were to go North

Korea you would see enormous images everywhere of the former North Korean leader and of his son. And certainly in China, especially during the era of Mao Zedong, or Russia in the Communist era or Albania under its former Communist leader. You would see enormous images of the national leader. So this kind of idolatry is not just a feature of the ancient world, but has become more prominent in modern political life.

These statues aren't needed as much now because we have other ways to beam the image of a ruler into our homes via the airwaves and TVerse. But leaders continue to be very image conscious and are constantly thinking of ways to put their image in front of you.

Let's talk for a moment about Nebuchadnezzar's faith. For those of you who were here last week, you might recall that Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that greatly troubled him. In the dream he saw a gigantic statue and then he saw an enormous rock come and shatter the statue. And perhaps this was a recurring dream, but the dream of the statue being shattered so troubled Nebuchadnezzar that he desperately sought out an interpretation.

Last week we found that Daniel was given not only the interpretation, but the exact content of the dream. The interpretation of this dream of a giant statue being hit by a rock was very simple. The statue stood for four successive kingdoms that would rise and fall. Beginning with the Babylonian kingdom there would follow in succession the Persian kingdom, the Greek kingdom and the Roman kingdom – all of them to be ultimately destroyed by a rock, which was the kingdom of God. The kingdoms of this world were to be overthrown in Nebuchadnezzar's dream by the kingdom of God. Like that line from the book of Revelation 11:15 that is a song in Handel's Messiah at Christmas time, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. He will reign forever and ever."

Daniel tells him that. Daniel is a messenger sent by God to Nebuchadnezzar to break through the defenses and protective layer that Nebuchadnezzar had around himself that shielded him from God. God was giving Nebuchadnezzar an opportunity for him to get to know God.

You know, God gives us ample opportunities to surrender to him – lots of opportunities to connect with the real God. Nebuchadnezzar had an opportunity through a troubling dream where he was shaken to the foundation, and God was clearly letting Nebuchadnezzar know that there was a God over him, that a real God existed.

And God does the same thing today. He steps around our carefully built little defense against God. He opens doors up. We hear a message from the Bible. We might have a dream. We may have an amazing answer to prayer or our life is suddenly and unusually spared. We should have died in an accident. We are injured in a car crash, are nearly killed in a war, almost died of an illness – but we didn't. God comes to us and breaks our doors down.

And of course, we need to respond to this drawing near of God. I have often wondered for those who don't respond to the breaking in of God into our lives, for the Nebuchadnezzars of the world who have the troubling dreams and have an encounter with God, for those who have the accidents that they survive and they

don't respond, I often wonder if on the day of Judgment, God will not replay for us all of the opportunities we had to respond to him.

"Well, God, how can you hold me responsible," we say. "How can you ask me to exercise faith in you. I really never had a chance. Give me one more chance," we want to say on the Day of Judgment. "One more chance to believe and give our lives to you."

And I often imagine if the scene on the Day of Judgment won't be God saying, "One more chance? Let's see now, let's just take the week of November 28, 1999. Let's see, you had a troubling dream on Sunday night, November 28, that kind of bothered you in the morning. But you brushed it aside. And as you were running through the radio stations on Monday, November 29, you heard a preacher say that you could turn to Christ right then in your car, but you didn't. On Tuesday, November 30, a friend talked to you about Christ, but you didn't listen. On Wed. Dec. 1, you saw your wife's Bible sitting out or your child's. But you pushed it aside and picked up a newspaper. On Dec. 2 you had some feelings of guilt regarding some shady business you were involved in, but you pushed them aside. Dec. 3 you had an invitation to church."

Here is it Dec. 4, how many more chances do you need, Nebuchadnezzars of the world? If 4700 chances to respond to God didn't make an impression on you, and you brushed them all aside, what makes you think you will respond to the 4701st chance?

And what we see in Nebuchadnezzar's life is a superficial response to God drawing near. After Daniel interpreted the dream for Nebuchadnezzar, it says in 2:46, "Then king Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. The king said to Daniel, 'Surely, your God is the God of Gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of this mystery, for you were able to reveal this mystery.'"

Yes, I have had an encounter with God and I acknowledge that. But the question is has it changed me? And has your encounter with God in the past changed you? For you can't call anything faith and you can't even say you have faith unless your encounter with God changed you. Jesus talked about superficial faith in his story of the seed that was sown by a sower.

He says, "A farmer went out to sow his seed ... and some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root."

I think what Jesus was talking about by that description of a seed in shallow soil is the superficial conversion. The person who has some encounter with God that touches their emotions and maybe at some point they cry and say, "I realize there is a God and I want God in my life." But the change doesn't get down real deep inside of them. And so others end up scratching their head and say, "I don't know what happened when they raised their hands or when they went forward or when they prayed that prayer."

Let me tell you what faith is not. Faith is not an encounter you had along the way with God. Lots of people have encounters. Nebuchadnezzar had an

encounter. Faith is not God breaking the door down and saying, "Hey, I am real, pay attention to me." Lots of people have those experiences.

Faith is not you crying in a meeting, having your emotions touched, getting real excited for a little while.

Faith is a commitment to surrender and become a follower of Jesus Christ for the rest of your life. It is a commitment to stop following your own way. To give yourself and your will over. Faith is something that touches the will, not just the emotions. Where, when push comes to shove, you say, "I will continue to follow Christ."

In Nebuchadnezzar's case, his so-called faith was not superficial, but it was man-centered. Nebuchadnezzar sets up this image of himself and it says in verse 7, "As soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that king Nebuchadnezzar had set up."

Whenever the focus of attention is on people and who they are and what they have done and achieved, whenever the focus of attention is on a man or a woman, we are not talking about faith. So much of American church life has nothing to do with biblical faith because we make a great deal out of each other, rather than making a great deal out of God.

Listen to me, there is nothing wrong with thanking someone whose ministry you appreciate. There is nothing wrong with saying an encouraging word to me after I do a message or a counselor after they have given you helpful counsel. Or sending an encouraging note to someone thanking them for their prayers or a gift they have given you. There is nothing wrong with encouragement. But when we go beyond encouragement and thanks and we begin to make too much of any particular person, then we are no longer in the realm of biblical faith. For the truth is that the more we make of people, the less we make of God.

And you know, not only should we not be given to effusive praise of a man or woman or any group of men or women, but we should never receive too much praise to ourselves. The person who takes to themselves too much honor, without deflecting attention onto God, shows that they don't know anything about biblical faith, because biblical faith is all about receiving praise from God and not from other people.

Do you know over and over Jesus draws a distinction between the person who receives lots of praise from other people and the person who receives praise from God? He says in John 5:44, for example, "How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?" Your faith is false, he says, when you are continuing drawing to yourself other people's attention and praise and you are not deflecting it off onto God.

Thank you for that encouragement. Thank you for that honor. Thank you that you think so much of me, but anything that is going on that is really good has been a gift from God.

Nebuchadnezzar didn't understand that lesson. So he drew all the attention to himself.

Let me ask you a personal question. Do you regularly have in your mind as a goal to receive praise in the end, from God? Do you say to yourself often, "What I really want, what I am really after, is praise from God in the end." Then you have real faith. If you don't often say that to yourself, then you will be a person who is unable to do things secretly. You will be unable to secretly give without writing your name on it. Or secretly pray or secretly fast. And your faith may need some help.

Let's move on and look at the three friends of Daniel.

"At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'O king, live forever. You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego—who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.'

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, 'Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? 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?'

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 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. 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.'"

Now Daniel 3:17 and 18 - especially verse 18 ought to be underlined in every one of your bibles - where the three friends of Daniel say, and here is the wonderful statement of faith, "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. 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 that you have set up."

Here are three heroes of faith and they say, "Even if we aren't delivered, even if we aren't rescued from the furnace, we are still not going to bow down to the idol."

Do you understand that faith is not trust in a certain outcome? Most people believe that to have faith means that you strongly believe that a certain outcome will take place and that is what God is asking of you. To believe in a certain outcome.

There is a pastor named Jim Conway who was pastoring People's Bible Church in Urbana, Illinois. He was a wonderful pastor. His daughter, Becky, was

stricken with cancer. The doctors said that they would have to amputate one leg to save her life. So the family began to pray and they were asking God to heal Becky's leg. They knew that God was able to heal and they prayed that God would heal as a testimony of his love. They sincerely desired that God would get all the glory so they were certain that God would heal their daughter, Becky.

So strongly did Jim believe that God would honor the family's request that on the day of the scheduled surgery he asked the doctors to test Becky's leg again before amputating. The surgeon agreed and the family went into a waiting room eagerly anticipating the results that they knew would bring glory to God and great joy to themselves.

Well, pastor Jim wrote a magazine article some years later in which he recounted what happened then. He said, "A crowd of friends from the church had come to wait with us. So many came, in fact, that they made us leave the waiting room. When the surgeon came out, I knew what he was going to say and I couldn't face it. I couldn't face all those people so I ran. I ran to the hospital basement where no one would find me. I cried. I yelled. I pounded my fist against the wall. I felt like God, who I served, had abandoned me at the hour of my deepest need. Was he busy answering prayers that somebody would find a parking space, so he couldn't take care of my daughter, Becky?"

This experience devastated Jim. But it drove him back to the scriptures and what he found was that faith does not insist on a certain outcome, even if what we want to happen would honor God. I know that many of us know this idea, this will really honor you, God, if it happened but somehow that desire gets overwhelmed by when you really want and need something to happen; it is so hard to not project your wishes up to the sky and then insist that God meet your demands and answer your prayers in the exact way that you prayed them.

Do you know the Bible has so many instances of faithful men and women who did not obtain the outcome they were seeking from God? Who lived not in verse 17 of Daniel 3, "God who we serve is able to save us from your hand and he will save us," but in verse 18, "Even if he does not." The apostle Paul had his head cut off in Rome on the third milestone of the Appian Way. The apostle James was martyred in prison. The apostle Peter was crucified upside down. The apostle John was exiled to a little remote island called Patmos. Many single people have prayed to be married and never found a mate. Many sick people have prayed and never been healed. Many times people have asked God to give them a certain job or a certain house or grade or to have a baby and they didn't get it.

Faith is not believing that a certain outcome will occur as a result of your prayers. Nor is faith trusting in your ability to believe. So often we are deluded into thinking that if we can get ourselves to believe a certain thing really strongly, if we can pump ourselves up emotionally, if we don't let any doubt enter at all, then we will really obtain what we want from God.

OK, I have to vigilantly guard my mind against any doubt that might creep in. The moment doubt creeps in, I will banish it. The moment I feel uncertain or emotionally insecure, I have to suppress all of those feelings and pump myself up

like the Little Engine Who Could. I will say to myself, "I think I can. I think I can. I think I can." Or even "I know God can. I know God can. I know God can."

Faith is not positive thinking. Faith is not a mind game you play with yourself. Faith is not the repetition over and over again, "I know God can." Such a faith is a misplaced faith. God doesn't ask you to believe in your ability to believe. God asks you to believe in Christ. Stop looking inward and start looking outward to Christ. Faith is not trust in a certain outcome. Faith is not trust in your ability to believe. Faith is not simply a leap in the dark.

When people say, "I wish I had your faith" what they often mean is "I wish I had your capacity, Pastor Rich, to unscrew my head and leap off a cliff in the dark without any reason, any basis for trust. I wish I could discount all of the evidence like you seem to be able to do and just believe in a God who is good and rules the world. But I can't. After all, I have a brain."

The Bible never asks you to leap in the dark off a cliff trusting that five feet below there is a ledge. The Bible never says in order to exercise faith you must discount all of the evidence and unscrew your head, blow out your brains. Biblical faith, true faith, is faith based on the evidence we have. It is a step we can take in confidence based on a track record of reliability.

Let me illustrate. My wife often gets up in the morning before me and she makes me coffee. Now each morning when I pour my cup of coffee, I trust that she hasn't poisoned it first. You say, "Well, what proof do you have that she hasn't poisoned it? How do you know that she hasn't picked this morning to poison you? How do you know that that sip of coffee that you are taking is not going to be your last?"

Well, I drink my coffee in faith, I say to you. But it is not just a leap in the dark. It is not just some blind faith, unscrew my head and put it on a hat rack somewhere. My confidence that I am not being poisoned by my wife is based on a track record of credibility. I have had 2000 cups of coffee from her. I know her character. I know her love. So I can take coffee from her hand in confidence.

Now this is what faith in God is like. Faith in God is my ability to receive life from the hand of God, to say with these three men, "Come what may, I can receive life from the hand of God because God has a track record of credibility." There is so much evidence of God's faithfulness, of his love to me and to you that you can take the next step on with God, come what may.

Here is what faith sounds like. Dear God, I want a certain outcome. I really do and I am not ashamed to go before you and tell you what I want. Just like my kids have no problem telling me what they want for Christmas, as your child, God, I am not going to play pretend with you and tell you that I don't want something that you know I desperately want." So you go to God and you say, "God, I want to feel better. I want to get married. I want to have this ministry expand. I want to see the salvation of my child or my parent or my spouse. God here is what I long for. And Lord, I am not going to play mind games with myself and try to pump up my ability to believe for a mate or a new job or for this bill to be paid or for this healing. I am not going to play games with myself, God. Instead I consider your track record, and your track record in the Bible and in my life tells me that you are good. Your track record tells me that you are very smart

and you really know what you are doing. Your track record tells me that you love me. So Lord, if your plan and your glory would be more advanced by me not getting this job or me continuing as a single person, or me not seeing what I want to see, then may it be so! I will not insist on running the universe. Faith means, for me, I will let you be God and I will trust that you know what is best and you have my best in mind." Faith is letting God be God.

Can you do that? Can you stop insisting that you always get your own way, or you are just not going to play the game? Can you stop insisting on running the universe? Can you let someone else call the shots, believing there is one in the universe who actually is smarter than you?

Let me tell you one other thing that faith means. Faith means that you live, if you are a follower of Christ, in loving defiance to the world. Verse 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."

How do you know you have faith? When you regularly see yourself performing little acts of defiance to the rest of the culture. Do you know what I mean by little acts of defiance? I don't mean the big acts that you go out and march against something holding banners and smashing windows and throwing tear gas at the police. Little acts of defiance. I don't mean you riot or call a lot of attention to yourself. Little acts of defiance are the hundreds of things that you do out of loyalty to Jesus Christ which makes other people look at you and say, "Are you nuts? You are going to do what?" Or "You aren't going to? Are you crazy?" Little acts where you take a stand.

We will not bow down to your idol, O king. What does that sound like in your life? Little acts of defiance. I am going home and I am going to cut the cable on my TV. Or our home is not going to have a TV. Are you nuts? No TV, how could you live?

Little acts of defiance as a single person, you choose not to date until you feel like you are ready to get married. What kind of single person wouldn't date? What are you to do with your life if you aren't involved with a series of men or women? Well, I could be friends with people. I could serve. I could be really useful and have a lot more time on my hands if I didn't spend all my time dating.

Little acts of defiance in our culture. Making a decision, if you have small children, to not have both parents work, even though it is going to work a hardship financially, that you decide to have one of the parents stay home. Or you deliberately choose to live in a smaller house than you can afford. Are you crazy? You could afford so much more than this. You could afford a much bigger mortgage. I know. But because of Jesus Christ, we want to not spend all of our money on our home, so we have more money to give.

The church is meant to be a community of defiance where we are teaching people in a thousand places to take a stand against the culture and say, "Sorry, O kings, but we won't bow down to your idols."

Now you teach your children to take a stand every time you watch a commercial. Teach your kids to poke fun at the marketers, to laugh at the commercials and say, "How stupid. All those people want to do is make me give my money. I am not going to be swept away by Pokeman." Teach your kids not

to be swept away with the latest Ninja Turtle or Star Wars. Sorry, O kings, we won't bow down to the hype for the latest garbage that America's marketing machines are pumping out.

Loving defiance. That is what faith is. I don't need to go along with the world's system to have a good life. I choose not to work another twenty hours of overtime. I choose not to take a promotion. If you want someone to say you are crazy, turn down a promotion that is offered to you at work. I am sorry, but I am already giving the company fifty hours a week and a promotion would mean that I would have to give the company sixty hours a week and be on the road. And I know that would keep me from my first priority which is seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And God says, all these things will be added to me. If I took that promotion it would mean that I would have to move away from a loving church, a healthy church, supportive friendships. No. We aren't going to do that.

Loving defiance, retired people. Or if you are thinking about retirement in the next five years. How about practicing loving defiance to the rest of the culture by choosing in your retirement to invest in people and serve people and care for people and love people? You watch the commercials for investments and I tell you they make me almost want to vomit. One of the commercials that is out now says that if you invest with such and such a company that the only thing you will need to do in your retirement is worry about whether the fish are biting when you go out on your boat. I see that commercial and I think to myself, "I can think of nothing more horrible than a person who has so much to offer to others wasting their last twenty years on earth fishing or golfing or puttering around their house or collecting more Hummels." How disgusting. We are so much more valuable than that. We have so much more to give than that.

Faith says no to all the life-robbing messages. All the messages which say that you are less than what God says you are. That all you are is just a collection of fluff that you must give in to. All the messages that say that you are just a consumer or that your life is just about the accumulation of more stuff. Or you are just what you look like, or what you eat or drink. Or that what you are really after in life is just to lay back.

We say no to those messages. Sorry, O king, but we won't bow down. And that is what faith always is. It is an act of loving defiance. It is the thing that makes other people say, "Are you crazy?" It is the statement, "Mom and Dad, I am going to be a missionary." You don't have to throw a tear gas canister or break a window or march with a sign to be defiant. In fact, the little acts of defiance are so much more subversive, so much more antagonistic to the world's system, than marching and shouting. That is what Daniel's friends were all about.

Then in 3:19-20 we read the following:

"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 and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace."

We see that faith doesn't mean we won't be put in the furnace. There is a marvelous verse that you might want to underline. Verse 25 where we read, "Look, I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

I have always believed that this was a preincarnate visit by God the Son, the one who promised that no matter what we would go through he would always be with us, even in the furnace.

Listen, you may have the opportunity to experience, like Daniel's three friends, a miraculous deliverance from whatever it is that is holding you down. God may intervene and you may, indeed, experience the exact outcome to your prayers that you have been seeking. You may be one of the couples who can't have a child and is miraculously touched and you have several kids. Your cancer may disappear. Your marriage may be totally restored. The addiction in your life may be broken forever without any relapse. You may find that perfect mate. You may have that miraculous intervention.

Corrie ten Boom was one of those people. Like the friends of Daniel who had a miraculous deliverance from God, Corrie ten Boom was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. One day she was called into the commandant's office, given some papers, and released. She didn't understand it. She went home. Several weeks later all the women in her age group were killed. Corrie ten Boom's release was a matter of a clerical error.

But let me tell you another story in closing as we finish up exploring what it means to have faith. I read a story of a coal miner who was a strong Christian believer and who was injured in a coal mine when he was in his twenties. He became an invalid and basically had to be cared for by a succession of parents, then brothers and sister, friends. He watched his friends marry and raise families and make money and have kids, boats and cars and then have grandchildren. He couldn't have any of those things. He was stuck in a wheelchair. One day, when this coal miner was quite old, a young man came to visit him and said to him, "I hear that you have faith in God. How can you have faith in the face of all the things that have happened to you? Don't you doubt God's love?"

The old man teared up and he said, "Sure, sometimes Satan comes calling on me in this fallen down house of mine. He sits right there on the bed right where you are sitting and he points out the window to men that I used to work with as they drive by in their new cars. Satan says, 'Do you still think Jesus loves you?' And then he makes me look around this miserable room and he points out the nice homes of my friends. He says, 'You still think Jesus loves you?' And then he points to a grandchild of a friend of mine, a man who has everything that I don't have, and Satan waits until I cry and then he whispers in my ear, 'You still think that Jesus loves you?'"

The young man said, "Well what do you say when Satan says all those things to you?"

The old invalid miner said, "I take Satan by the hand and I lead him in my mind to a hill far away, where there is a cross planted on that hill. And I point to that head with the thorns in it and I point to those feet and those hands that have

been pierced with nails. And I point to that side that was run through by a spear and I say, 'Yes, Jesus loves me.'"

Do you want to have faith? Then you fix your eyes on this cross because it is there that God the Son showed us how much God loves us. And it was there that God the Son did not demand, as a price for continuing to trust in God, that God end his suffering, that God change his destiny. It was there that the infinite wisdom of God was demonstrated. And it was there that Jesus showed us what faith was all about as he let God be God. Will you do the same?

Let's pray.