

EVEN IF

TRUSTING GOD WHEN LIFE
DISAPPOINTS, OVERWHELMS, OR
JUST DOESN'T MAKE SENSE

MITCHEL LEE

SNEAK
PEEK



SAMPLE
ONLY

UNCORRECTED
PROOF

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MULTNOMAH

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To a generation of immigrants whose *even if* faith made mine possible, Edward and Susie chief among them.

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WELCOME TO THE VALLEY

My graduation from seminary was supposed to be epic, the culmination of so much preparation and expectation. After three years of trekking back and forth between my home in Maryland and my seminary in North Carolina every Monday and Friday (a four-and-a-half-hour commute I wouldn't wish on my enemies), I looked forward to finally moving into the next chapter of my pastoral journey. I had worked my tail off during this season, leading a student ministry in Maryland while keeping up with my theological studies, and now I was ready to be fully unleashed into the world.

The March before graduation, the senior pastor of my church invited me into his office to talk. We hadn't talked like this before, so I should have known that something was up.

"Are you excited about graduation?" he probed.

"Absolutely. It'll be nice to be more present with the students and families I've been leading."

"I see. Well, I hear that you're interested in exploring more studies after your degree. Is that true?"

“That would be nice eventually. We’ll have to see how it shapes up, though.”

Insert awkward silence. “Hmm . . . I heard from someone that you were looking to move on, so we hired a new youth pastor. He’ll start in June, so you’re free to move on after graduation.”

After the silence came an uppercut, a gut punch, devastation, and overall feelings of confusion and betrayal. *Why didn’t he ask me about this rumor? What did I do wrong? How could he just hire my replacement? What about the students and families? The summer mission trips? What am I supposed to do after graduation?*

Just like that, the church I had served during my three years in seminary—and even more than that, the church I had grown up in, the one that had been my spiritual family for more than twenty years—had broken up with me.

And that wouldn’t be the only heartbreak of spring 2002. I had been dating a young lady during seminary. Though we both had the long-term desire to get married, things weren’t going well as time went on. On the weekend following my devastating conversation with my senior pastor, we reached a breaking point. Over lunch, she brought up the deep issues that were eroding our relationship. What ensued was a blame game that I had mastered. And because I am a pro when it comes to shifting responsibility and making the other person feel bad, the relationship was over before our entrées arrived.

I paid the check. We said our goodbyes, and I unknowingly walked into a wilderness that would last two years.

Rejected by my girlfriend and my home church, I limped to my seminary graduation, supported only by my immediate family and roommates. Imagine how difficult it was to sit through the commencement address with the customary triumphant charge “You can change the world!” transformed in the seminary setting into an ironic “*God* is sending you out to change the world!”

Sending me? I must have forgotten to pay my membership dues. While my fellow seminarians were taking on new pastorates or heading overseas to serve God, I was jobless, churchless, and alone. If God was sending our graduating class out, I felt stranded on the platform while the train was leaving the station.

The rest of the summer was a fog of blame and resentment. I bounced around various churches, worshipping in anonymity, taking the occasional speaking gig because I needed a paycheck. I was angry at God, disappointed that he would let my fledgling pastoral career disintegrate even before it really got started. This was not the plan.

Stunned by everything in my life crashing in such a sudden manner, I didn't have the strength or desire to connect meaningfully with God. While I didn't abandon my faith in him, I kept him at a safe distance, going through the motions of what I thought I was supposed to do.

In need of a paycheck—and despite being in a place of desperation and serious emotional unhealth—I accepted a pastoral position. Ignoring the pride and self-righteousness that had contributed to my exit from my home church, I chose to blame my surroundings instead of looking into my heart. Little did I know that the valley could actually get deeper. My term at the next church lasted exactly one year, ending with another curt termination. I was devastated.

Upon my firing, I found myself managing my mom's deli, serving breakfast and lunch Monday to Friday. I didn't want anything to do with pastoral ministry. Mind you, I hadn't given up on God or my relationship with him . . . I had given up on my calling to be a pastor. It was too hard, and there was too much pain involved. I would figure out other ways to serve God. At least, that's what I told myself.

Deep down, though, I believed my pride had disqualified me. I had hurt too many people. I had made too many mistakes, and

I could not expect any sort of blessing from the Lord. I had blown my chance. I lived for a year in the deep valley, trying to faithfully serve customers, helping my immigrant parents grow the family business.

With no aspirations and not believing that I deserved anything different, I stumbled upon the Puritan writer Richard Sibbes. His little book *The Bruised Reed* is a meditation on Isaiah 42:3: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.” My heart dared to wrestle with the thought of God’s compassion for those who are bruised, discouraged, and disappointed—people whose flames are just barely burning. Did God really have compassion for someone like me? Could it be true that he wasn’t done with me?

But what about the valley of disappointment I was in? My circumstances didn’t proclaim that my life was blessed by or even in favor with God. It sure felt like he had snapped this reed and put out the faint flicker of my calling.

Provisionally, God led me to a Sunday school story from my childhood. As I read Daniel 3, I was struck by the confidence of three young men with the names of a biblical tongue twister. Facing their own execution, they stood against the most powerful ruler in the world and declared their intention to remain true to their God: “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. *But even if* he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (verses 17–18, NIV, emphasis added).

Even if . . . The words seared into my consciousness, inviting me to get up and continue walking with God *even if* I felt alone, *even if* I was disqualified, *even if* I might be forgotten. As I studied the passage, I realized that this declaration wasn’t unique to these three men. The *even if* declaration resonated through the

lives of countless biblical witnesses. I couldn't unsee it—with each biblical account, God was forming me. With trembling heart and grace-shaped resolve, I declared, “*Even if* I never pastor a church or preach again, I will worship you, God. You've done enough. You're worthy. My life belongs to you.”

I don't know when I actually ascended out of the valley. I don't even know whether I ascended or whether the valley floor was somehow raised. I do know that my faith and walk with God have never been the same. This declaration continues to define my life and ministry. As I have experienced many valleys since, I have been learning fresh ways to say *even if*—to declare my commitment to worship a God who may not act in the ways I desire but always acts in ways that are good.

This is a book about how to worship God in the valley. This is a book for the strugglers, the ones who are trying to make sense of lives that haven't gone the way they hoped. This is a call to the hopeful realists, those who are holding on to faith, if even by the barest of threads.

It's not about escaping the valley. Believe me, I wish I could give you an instruction manual to avoid the valley. I wish I could give you a magical incantation that would make faith come alive, explain every disappointment, and connect all the dots for you. All I have for you is what God has taught me in the many valleys I've lived in, as well as those I've walked through with other people.

Whatever brought you here—be it desperation or just reluctant curiosity—we have a common experience: the damp, shadowy, chilling depths of the valley, that place of forgottenness and isolation. For some it can last for a season, but for others it can be the defining theme of their lives. Sometimes we can be in a valley for so long that it becomes the norm, making anything else seem like a celestial peak.

You might find yourself in a valley right now. You want to call

it quits. You're wondering how much more you can endure or how much more you have left to give. The loss of a job, the test results that came back positive, the accident you never anticipated, the ministry that crashed, the loss of a child, the betrayal of a friend, the disappointment of dreams unfulfilled, a pandemic—all these can leave us gasping for air, feeling as though we're surrounded with no hope of rescue. Valley life.

Some people are absolutely undone in the valley. They get punched in the gut and never get back up. Jaded and bitter, they resent not only their own circumstances but also the perceived happiness of all those on the cliffs above them. They respond by protecting themselves with layers of defensive coping strategies. They stop taking risks. They vow to order their lives so as to control every detail. No one and nothing will ever hurt them again.

Still, where many throw in the towel, others find renewed life. Author David Brooks described them as “second-mountain people.”¹ They are the ones who are thrust into the valley and experience a second birth. The suffering of the valley leads to wisdom, which then leads to service. The wilderness breaks them in an important, maturing way. They find a new level of resolve, a deep reservoir of strength that they didn't know existed. They transcend their egos. Faith becomes a lifeline. Their relationships with God plumb new depths of intimacy. Disappointment and its resulting frustration and confusion become the fertilizer (and we all know where fertilizer comes from) for a deep faith that worships God no matter what. The wilderness becomes the birthplace of devotion.

Jesus told his disciples, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). I believe that can be true for life in the valley. God can give you abundant life there when you make your own *even if* declaration. Whatever or whoever pushed you into the valley, that is not the end of your story. The bold, faith-filled, and defiant resolution of three young men in Daniel 3

can free you to hope and trust God, no matter the circumstances. In other words, disappointments and setbacks don't have to define us. They might explain us—our personalities, our quiriness, and our reflexive instincts—but they don't have to define us.

In order to experience the *even if* life, there's work to do. It won't be easy. You may have to retrace paths that you would rather forget. God may ask you to revisit painful places, remember difficult people, or even walk along the rocky shores that shipwrecked your expectations and dreams. At some point, you'll wonder whether it's worth it. The fear and heartache can be too much. I'm praying for your willingness and courage to remember who God is, to praise him in *all* circumstances, and to believe that he has not forgotten you. *Even if*.

We'll unpack this declaration in several phases. First we'll look at what it actually is. We'll examine the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3 and see how unthinkable their *even if* declaration actually is. Then we'll break down the declaration into its two basic parts.

With the basic components of the *even if* declaration before us, we'll uncover the *counter ifs* that threaten to undo our devotion. The unpredictability of life has a way of subtly convincing us that we have to fend for ourselves. We develop defense mechanisms that can accommodate faith while slowly distorting it. We write counterfeit declarations that keep us stuck, unable to move forward in our walks with God. Part of the work in declaring your own *even if* will be to recognize the *counter ifs* that we've adopted and to begin surrendering them to God.

Finally, we'll think about how to live the *even if* life . . . what it means for our daily habits and attitudes, as well as some *even if* steps we can take today. The end goal of it all is to live courageously with conviction and faith in the power and goodness of a God who promises to be with us no matter where life takes us. And his promise, my friend, can make all the difference.

PART 1

SOMEWHERE BEYOND THE SEA

In May 1940, the German war machine advanced through France, taking city after city. With each successive German victory, weary and defeated Allied forces made up of British, French, and Belgian soldiers retreated like a trail of ants toward the town of Dunkirk on the northwest coast of France. Over three hundred thousand troops eventually assembled along the twenty-seven-mile stretch from Dunkirk to the northern town of Ostend, awaiting evacuation or capture. The British citizenry watched helplessly from across the English Channel, and as the troops amassed, their morale deflated.

British military leaders spent sleepless nights trying to find a way to rescue their stranded soldiers. Operation Dynamo, as it was called, was a bold and desperate operation dependent on weather, military tactics, and raw luck. Expectations were low. Winston Churchill believed that rescuing just fifteen thousand troops would be an act of divine intervention.

In a series of now-famous radio messages, King George VI overcame his stuttering to summon his people's resolve and endurance. Legend has it that, in response to one of King George's messages, the stranded British army sent a three-word message across the

English Channel: “And if not”¹—a reference to the story of the three young men who defied the king of Babylon. The intent of the message was that *even if* they were not rescued, they would not bow to Germany.

The three-word message reinvigorated the people. Citizens stepped up to try to shuttle as many soldiers as they could take, in as many trips as necessary. From commercial fishing ships to recreational yachts, everyone who could carry even a few soldiers braved waters infested by U-boats and sea mines. Such was the urgency that some ships embarked without sea charts or maps. The entire country rallied together.

“The miracle of Dunkirk” was exactly that.² All told, over 338,000 troops were evacuated in ten days. Operation Dynamo stands out as one of the most incredible operations in military history. All catalyzed by a simple message: *even if*.*

Words have power. They can give life or death. You can remember the words spoken to you at just the right time, words that made the difference between continuing and giving up. Sometimes just a few words can alter the trajectory of a nation. (Think, “I have a dream . . .”)³

A simple declaration saved hundreds of thousands of lives and ultimately a continent. The same words that ignited the resilience of a nation can revive your soul: *even if*.

In order to unleash the power of this concept, we have to understand it. In this first part, we’ll take a closer look at the biblical story. Later we’ll break down the *even if* declaration into its two parts: trusting the goodness of God and resolving to worship him.

° The exact words of the message were “And if not . . .” The NIV renders the phrase “Even if”—this was the translation I was reading at the time I described earlier.

Out of the Fire . . . or into It?

At an early age, I was told, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” It was the opening line of a greater invitation to surrender my life to Jesus and invite him into my heart. If I did, the promise went on, “God will forgive you and lead you in ways you could never imagine.” While I certainly have no regrets about saying yes to that invitation years ago, I have come to realize that I made some serious assumptions about what God was inviting me into—and you know what happens when we assume.

Maybe I was reading between the lines. I assumed that the fruit of surrendering to God’s wonderful plan was a life with less pain and no confusion. I reasoned that since I trusted him, I could not be disappointed or feel uncertain. After all, God would always be with me. It was a simple formula: my trust + his plan = smooth sailing.

I do the trusting, he does the planning, and we’re all good.

It’s okay if you’re shaking your head, thinking, *How naive*. Life has a way of exposing our naivete. For me, all it took was getting picked on, seasons of intense loneliness, watching my parents’

crazy fights, and experiencing financial hardships to realize that God's plan didn't equal smooth sailing at all.

As my relationship with God deepened, I came to realize that a trouble-free life is never part of the promise. In fact, the Scriptures guarantee the opposite.

We will have hardships—physical pain, sorrow, disappointment, and sometimes just general confusion. You have had your own tough experiences. Perhaps you are in one right now. Life has not gone the way you wanted. You are disillusioned. Hurt. Maybe just plain stuck while everyone else seems to be moving forward just fine. You might be none of those things, but living in a world shaped by COVID has caused you to question the things that, until now, you thought were certain.

While the season you've come through or are in right now might have been a surprise to you, it wasn't a surprise to Jesus. In his last lengthy talk with his disciples, just before he was betrayed and crucified, Jesus made a promise: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Did you see the two parts to it? He guaranteed the trouble just as he guaranteed *his presence*.

The disciples were going to face all kinds of opposition from the world, and so are we. They would be afflicted, and so will we. He called them to be strengthened in their resolve—that is what "take heart" means—because he has overcome the world. The one who has overcome the world would be with them. Jesus called for trust in the midst of trouble.

If you're like me, you love to believe in the certainty of his presence but not necessarily the certainty of trouble. Can't we just have his presence without the problems? I think, *I could learn to trust without the trouble. I'm a really quick learner. Just give me the good stuff, and I'll trust you! I promise.*

My unwillingness to accept the promise of trouble makes me

wonder, *Have I really outgrown my childhood assumptions about what it means to trust in God?* I hate to admit that the formula still shapes my outlook in subtle ways. Life's difficulties expose them. And with every twist and turn, every time I feel shocked when life knocks me upside the head yet again, I have the opportunity to revisit what my faith means for living in this broken world.

I suppose being shocked is better than the tragic alternative—growing bitter and cynical to the point where we're suspicious if life goes smoothly. I have met people like that. The curmudgeon who refuses to receive any help from anyone. The friend who thinks that his failures are everyone's fault but his own. The boss who feels that everyone is out for her job, whose insecurity will never let her apologize. The embittered family member who feels as though the world owes him something.

Pessimism and distrust have a way of sucking the life out of every moment. Like people wearing those high-tech noise-canceling headphones, some hear only one soundtrack to life. They are always looking for the angle or expecting the other shoe to drop. Gratitude goes extinct because they suspect there is always a catch—some sort of karmic retribution that will make sure they end up paying for whatever moment of peace or joy might have come their way.

Cynics didn't get that way overnight. They faced trouble and disappointment enough times to harden their hearts. At one time, they were hopeful. After they got knocked to the mat too many times, their best defense was to forsake the expectation that life would get any better. They just stopped hoping. They simply stopped trying. They chose bitterness because it was at least more predictable than dashed expectations.

IS THAT ALL THERE IS?

Are these your only options? Continually getting floored by the frustrations of life or growing cynical and expecting nothing but disappointment? I believe that God offers you more—a third option, to trust him even when life is hard. The relationship he invites you to does not require nice weather to flourish. In fact, that is why God can deepen your faith even when the storms of life upend your dreams, plans, and expectations. No matter what life has thrown at you, it is possible not only to endure but even to move forward, trusting God for whatever comes next.

Have you ever seen glimpses of this kind of faith in other people? In a cancer patient who seems to draw on a reservoir of strength that you wish could be bottled and shared. Perhaps in a senior who has lived through incredibly hard times yet exudes the gentleness and sweetness of a child. I have been warmed by the resilience and never-give-up determination of colleagues who have devoted many years to fighting for the forgotten and overlooked. People like that are our heroes. We want to be like them.

And I believe we can. There are no shortcuts, though. The kind of faith I am describing forms as we cling to Jesus's presence in hardships. And to cling to Jesus in trouble means *it will take trouble*. Another way to say it is that difficulties can therefore be redemptive. And “lucky” for you and me, we don't have to manufacture the trouble. Life will bring it.

The life-transforming truth is that we are left not at the mercy of our situations but rather at the mercy of a loving God who leads us and does have wonderful plans for us. Seeing him in the midst of the trouble will take some shifting of our perspectives, some personal reflection, and a lot of courage.

We will need to remind ourselves over and over who God is and what he has done for us. And when we do, we will develop a

reflex-like disposition for our faith that informs how we respond to life's situations—good or bad.

The kind of faith I am describing expresses itself in . . .

- resolve to trust God in ways that we never thought possible
- endurance amid difficulties that we didn't know we had strength for
- peace and hope that are so otherworldly they can bless and transform others

This kind of faith can flow from a simple but powerful declaration, one that catalyzed my own transformation and continues to this day. I was in the midst of a dark wilderness season, stuck and alone. Yet in the middle of my valley, God spoke two life-giving words that resurrected me. Two words from a children's Sunday school story.

FAITH THROUGH FLAMES

The first time I heard the story of Daniel, I wasn't really paying attention . . . until our Sunday school teacher bribed us with candy if we would only sit still long enough for her to get through the lesson. She used a black flannelgraph board and cutout pictures to tell us about Daniel and his three friends in Babylon. Back then, it was cutting-edge technology for children's ministry, an analog version of PowerPoint. She told us the story of three young men in Babylon who boldly stood firm in their faith against a powerful king. They were miraculously delivered from a fiery furnace because they trusted God. She then asked, "Who will stand up for Jesus like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?"

One by one, we stood and proclaimed our allegiance to God. "I will trust God no matter what kind of fire comes!" we all

shouted. Then we received our Jolly Rancher reward. Simple enough. The lasting image of this story became for me three flame-retardant young men miraculously standing alongside Jesus—a fireproof Savior for any situation. The story stuck.

The Scriptures are imaginative and simple enough to nurture the faith of a young child. But they also have a depth that grows to accommodate what David Brooks observed: “These stories kept coming back, but they changed, as if re-formed by the alchemy of time. They grew bigger and deeper, more fantastical and more astonishing.”¹

Over the years, through encountering my own fiery furnaces, that Sunday school story has grown bigger and deeper for me. As I look more closely, imagining the emotions and tensions embedded in the drama of Daniel 3, the response of the three young men is as surprising as the miraculous deliverance from the fire. Let me explain.

Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon, the most powerful man on the planet. He had conquered every rival power, including the small province of Judah.* Not even the previous superpower, Assyria, could conquer Jerusalem. But the Babylonians marched in, laid siege, took over the city, and forcibly removed the people of God from their land.

Nebuchadnezzar had the entire world at his fingertips, but he desired more acclaim. So he came up with a great idea: “Since I’m the greatest, why not have everyone acknowledge that I’m the greatest?” He built a huge statue, summoned all the officials of the empire, and, on the day of the statue’s dedication, played his Nebuchadnezzar-ian theme song so everyone could bow down to it. I imagine that it was quite a demonstration of absolute rule, a choreographed ritual of worship and nationalistic loyalty.

Everything was going according to plan. Nebuchadnezzar was

* Actually, unbeknownst to Nebuchadnezzar, God handed Judah over to him because of their continuing rebellion and unfaithfulness.

excited to see the reflection of his own worth in his prostrate subjects. Except . . . three high-ranking officials in his own province—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—refused to bow! To add insult to treachery, these were men whom he himself had appointed, men from a vanquished city called Jerusalem.

In a furious rage, the king summoned them to the site of the fiery furnace to explain themselves. How dare his own officials ignore his decree? Maybe there was some sort of misunderstanding. These Babylonian officials were, after all, not from around there. Perhaps something got lost in translation.

The king sought confirmation: “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?” (Daniel 3:14).

By not bowing down, these three officials refused to engage in Babylonian-sanctioned worship. It was not just a rejection of Babylonian culture or a display of personal preferences. It was an act of treason against the king.

Nebuchadnezzar threatened, “*If you are ready*, when the music plays, you will bow down and worship the image I have made. *And if not*, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a fiery furnace” (see verse 15).

Nebuchadnezzar finished his threat with a rhetorical question just to make sure these young officials understood the situation they were in: “And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” (verse 15). In other words, “If you refuse me, who can save you?” The most powerful man on the planet stated his case, asserted his authority, and surely expected contrition and fealty.

The king’s straightforward threat is what makes the response of the young men so stunning. With equal parts defiance and matter-of-fact explanation, they declared that they didn’t even really need to answer the king in this matter. The answer to his question was so obvious, they didn’t even think it warranted an answer.

“*If this happens*, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the fiery furnace, and he can save us from your hand. *And if not*, you need to know we won’t serve your gods or worship this image” (see verses 17–18).

Nebuchadnezzar’s ultimatum was met with an equally resolute declaration: “*Even if* God does not deliver us, we won’t worship any other or bow down to you.” They weren’t oblivious to the threat before them. This wasn’t naive optimism or blind faith. With the heat of a fire drying out their eyes, they refused the king.

The two parts of their response to the king make up one of the most powerful declarations in the Bible. They declared . . .

1. their confidence in a good God who was able to deliver them
2. their resolve to worship him *even if* he didn’t

In other words, the God whom they served, the God of the Bible, is more powerful than the king they stood before. Their God could override the king’s decree and neutralize his threats. “My God is bigger than your god.” You probably expected as much from a Bible story. Faith against the odds.

But this is where it takes an unexpected twist. They went on to declare not only that God could save them but also that *even if* their all-powerful God chose not to demonstrate his power to save (seemingly giving Nebuchadnezzar the win), they would not give their loyalty to another. Their allegiance belonged to God regardless of how he chose to act or not act on their behalf. And consequently, no matter how much the king huffed and puffed, they would not give their loyalty to him.

Even if. These are the two words that can transform your expectations and strengthen your faith. The *even if* declaration can help you stand before a fire and trust God even when the outcome is not yet decided. It refuses to succumb to the current

pressure or disappointment, and in that sense, it is a surprising declaration in trouble. It expresses confidence and resolve when all the conditions seem to warrant doubt and compromise.

The *even if* declaration is all the more surprising when we consider how these *even if* declarers ended up in Babylon in the first place.

A LONG WAY FROM HOME

Though the warnings had come for a while now, no one took them seriously. Jeremiah's anti-nationalistic, doom-and-gloom prophecies were dismissed by counterprophets, and their logic seemed more compelling. No way would the city of God, the very place where God had made his dwelling, fall to an enemy. God would never forsake his people, despite their idolatrous tendencies and unfaithfulness.

Even as news began to flow from the north about a new threat—an army from the faraway land of Babylon—life (and unfaithfulness to God) went on. Then one day, a shadow began to grow on the horizon of the Judean wilderness. Dots became horses and chariots. Dust clouds rose as a war machine advanced toward their city.

False prophets stubbornly refuted what everyone was seeing: Jeremiah's message coming true. They reassured the people that God would always uphold the glory of his name by preserving his city. All this talk about God handing over his people for judgment and exile was just a scare tactic. Babylon would be turned back just as previous would-be invaders had been.

Then the city fell. The temple was looted. Jehoiachin the king, the son of Jehoiakim, captured. Per the usual Babylonian policy, all the promising youth, including Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, were trafficked to Babylon

to be acculturated and then assimilated into the Babylonian Empire. Their names were changed, and they were taught a new language, (re)educated, and given positions in government.

And all the while, the prophecies of the now-vindicated Jeremiah echoed: “Don’t count on returning to Jerusalem. Make your home in Babylon. It’s gonna be a while.”

Fast-forward to where Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel was up to some other defiance elsewhere) stood before their captor and declared their confidence in their God.

How could these men continue to trust in God’s power to deliver when he had not in the past? How could they declare their faith with such conviction when they were facing the very king who had brought about Jerusalem’s downfall? It would be understandable if they gave up on the God who had seemingly given up on them.

This is the challenge that everyone who trusts in God will face. Expectations go unmet. Promises go unkept. Blessings run dry. Prayers go unanswered. Our hearts get broken.

People respond to this challenge in various ways. Some defiantly recant their faith, emotionally unable to worship a God who would abandon them. The silence of God—both in word and in action—discourages them to the point of numbness. In the words of Fleming Rutledge, “Even God’s wrath would be preferable to God’s absence.”²² People suffering like that abandon God and look to other sources of strength: their own ability, others around them, or whatever would-be savior looks plausible.

Others tame their faith while continuing to go through the motions. Instead of explicit rejection, quiet resignation sets in. While not abandoning God altogether, they develop an arms-length distance from him. They might acknowledge him by dropping in on weekly worship gatherings or staying in relationship with other Christians, but they functionally act like their own god. They follow God as long as they don’t have to depend on him for anything

of real importance. They have come to believe that it just works better this way.

Yet Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego chose another way. They chose to trust in God not for the benefits they received but because of who he is and what he is able to do. Tim Keller observed the almost-paradoxical nature of their declaration.³ They had faith in God's ability to save but were willing to admit the possibility of not being delivered. At first glance, it might seem contradictory. How can you trust God and still be open to the possibility that he might not do what you want? But that's exactly the point—a robust faith believes God so deeply that even if he doesn't do what you think he should, you trust that he is working for your good. This is the kind of faith from which an *even if* declaration arises.

FAITH THAT'S BIGGER THAN ME

I'm not very handy. While I can follow directions and build IKEA furniture with the best of them, beyond that I am not a craftsman. It usually takes me several tries to hang a picture straight. Forget about anything involving electricity or plumbing. I have, however, built other kinds of things: ministries, teams, and organizations. I know that if you're going to build something well (whether it's a house or a church), a solid foundation is essential.

The same holds true for our faith. Jesus gave an entire parable about building our lives on a solid foundation (Luke 6:46–49). Someone who comes to Jesus, hears his words, and does them is like a person building a house on solid rock. When storms come, the house will stand. Pretty straightforward stuff.

I wonder, though, whether we subtly depart from this belief. Especially in our day of self-help, when pursuing our own happiness is the highest objective, building our faith on Jesus can be thought of as a subjective practice: just Jesus, self, and a cup of

coffee with the latest worship album. We can think we're building a foundation on Jesus, but this kind of faith has an inherent weakness. It will be only as strong as our own experiences of him.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego demonstrated a faith informed by more than just their personal stories. Their devotion flowed from a deeper spring than the surface streams of their circumstances. That is what gave them confidence to trust God in the face of the fire. Their faith was built on the work of God in ages past.

Maybe they recalled the way God had delivered their people from Egypt at the Exodus and provided for them in the wilderness. And he had delivered a previous generation from the mighty Assyrians. Time and time again, they had heard about God's miraculous deliverance and his faithful, covenant-keeping love.

All these remembrances formed a larger body of work demonstrating God's character and power, a body of work that encompassed much more than their lives. It was enough to warrant their confident devotion even if they hadn't personally experienced his deliverance.

This is where the *even if* declaration finds its foundation: in the objective, historical testimony of Scripture and saints of old. What Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego built on is available to you too. Your faith is much more than just private devotion, a set of personal values or experiences that holds true only for you. God has been at work throughout human history, providing for and leading men and women in profound and powerful ways. His fingerprints are everywhere, even in the darkest of times. Remembering this can make all the difference in whom we know God to be . . . especially when facing the fire.

Standing before the most powerful human being on the planet, eyes squinting from stinging sweat, faces seared by the raging heat of the furnace, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remained confident. God could save them from the fire because he had

saved past generations. Because he is all powerful, he was able to save them. And even if he chose not to, he was worthy of their worship.

Their confidence in God was extraordinary, but their circumstances were not any more exceptional than what we face today. In a world of increasing hostilities and political tensions, coronaviruses, cancer, family breakdowns, persecution, terrorist attacks, and armed conflicts, can we look out on the world we live in and have this same confidence in our God's ability to deliver? What's the larger body of work that your faith is built on? Is God worthy of your worship?

THE *EVEN IF* OUTCOME

Nebuchadnezzar reacted with fury over their brazen defiance. I can empathize. If my own children responded that way, it wouldn't end well. Daniel 3 says that "the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego" (verse 19). Whatever mercy or empathy the king had sought to extend now evaporated. He ordered the furnace heated up seven times hotter than usual. The furnace was so hot that even the guards whose duty it was to throw them in died in the act. As tempered as the three young men's collective response seems, the king's retaliation was disproportionately ablaze with fury. He wanted them to hurt, and he didn't care whom he hurt in the process.

The *even if* declaration didn't soften the circumstances; it intensified them. An *even if* declaration isn't some sort of magical charm that clears the path in front of us. It didn't work that way for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They declared their trust in God's power and goodness and their resolve to worship him alone, but that declaration didn't give them an out. Instead, it literally increased the heat. The choice to trust and worship their God became a confrontation. A would-be god versus the true and

living One. There's no middle ground or compromise possible here, no playing both sides. Bow or burn.

How did the story turn out? God did indeed save. Nebuchadnezzar saw a fourth person in the fire, one "like a son of the gods" (verse 25). This divine figure stood with the three men and protected them such that not even their clothes were singed nor did they smell of smoke. These would-be burnt offerings experienced what scholars call a theophany—a manifestation of God. In that way, the young men got more than deliverance. They got God's very presence.

The king accepted his place. He summarily declared, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God" (verse 28).

Nebuchadnezzar's blessing offers two important observations. First, the most powerful man on the planet acknowledged the saving power of someone greater. God had indeed delivered his servants, answering the earlier question the king posed: "Who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" (verse 15). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's confident declaration—"Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king" (verse 17)—was proved true.

Second, the king commended their devotion and commitment to the God who could deliver. The acknowledgment is an important one. Nebuchadnezzar saw that the young men's defiance wasn't just stubbornness or a nihilistic resignation to whatever fate might bring. Nor was it the expression of a naive, triumphalist faith that refused to accept the possibility of death. No, they were willing to die, to yield their own bodies rather than serve any other. In ironic fashion, the king was the one to explain the

true motivation behind their actions. Their refusal to bow down flowed from a greater devotion to a greater God.

Nebuchadnezzar then issued an empire-wide declaration. No one in the empire was to speak anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, because there is no other God who could rescue *in this way*. And what way is this?

God could have kept the young men from the fire in any number of miraculous ways. He could have caused the fire to go out. He could have changed Nebuchadnezzar's mind. If he could make wet wood catch fire in the case of Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), surely he could have prevented the fire from burning. But the three young men weren't spared from the furnace. God allowed them to be cast into it. Rather than changing the circumstances, God made his presence known in and through them. Remember Jesus's promise? Presence in trouble.

This is often how God works. In fact, in another part of Scripture, God sent the prophet Isaiah to foretell Israel's exile and how he would deliver them:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you. (43:2)

It doesn't say *if* you walk through the fire but *when*. And when you're in the fire, you won't be burned. You won't be consumed.

God sometimes allows us to go through the fire. When we are faced with difficulties or uncertainties—the fires of life—our instinctive response is to do what we can to change the circumstances. We ask God to put out the fire. Or at least turn down the heat. Change the king's mind. Shut the furnace door. Show that

you're God. How many times have I operated from the belief that what I needed most was a changed situation rather than more of God in the midst of the situation?

As an example of how easy it is to think this way, think about when you last talked through a problem with someone. Chances are that most of the advice you were given had to do with how to change your situation. Maybe the person suggested you cut off the relationship, removing yourself from the negativity. Perhaps he or she pointed out what you needed to do differently. Little of the advice we receive has to do with enduring.

God allows us to walk through the fire so that we might experience his presence, not just his power. By being with us in the trouble, he shows us that he cares for us, not as a genie who makes life trouble-free but as the God who loves us and calls us into relationship with him.

Even in the toughest circumstances, we have the opportunity to declare *even if*—holding in one hand our confidence in a God who can save and in the other our resolve that *even if* he does not, we will still worship him.

Even if is a declaration of both faith and uncertainty—a way to express our faith and hope in a God who cares about our lives in the tension of the unpredictable, difficult world we live in. And after all is said and done, while God might not always change our circumstances, his presence will change us in the fire.

No other God rescues in this way, and it isn't true just of a fiery furnace in Babylon. God rescued all of humanity, not just three young men. And look at how he did it: God came to us as Immanuel, which literally means "God with us." God left the glory of heaven, put on flesh, and lived among us. He experienced the pain and suffering of this world, and he died for the sins that messed everything up in the first place.

In this way, Jesus came and walked into the furnace not just with us but for us. He chose to be forsaken in the furnace of his

sufferings so that we might be forgiven. And after his resurrection, just before he ascended to the Father, he promised, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). That means, in every valley, in every fire, we can declare our *even if* with confidence in the God who delivers *even if* it’s in ways that we could not imagine.

That’s what faith in God gives us. The possibility and opportunity for transformation no matter where we are. Before we look at how to live out this faith in concrete steps, let’s consider in a little more detail the two parts of the *even if* declaration.