

[Persecuted Church story]

I don't know about you, but when I hear stories like Pi's, my heart quells a little. Or a lot. I can't help but imagine myself in a similar situation, and I wonder if I would respond the same way. Do I have the kind of faith in God that would lead me to such bold faithfulness?

I'm afraid it's not. I'm afraid that my faith is more ordinary than that. Because I have a pretty comfortable life. Sure I have problems - I'm too busy, I worry about money, I'm still figuring out what a great marriage looks like - the kinds of problems we all have.

But let's be real: I'm never in a place where my life is on the line. Like ever. I'm never ridiculed. I've never had to flee my home. And I'm *certainly* not called upon to suffer for my faith. My faith, frankly, is one of the easier parts of my life. I actually look to my faith to shore up those other areas of my life.

Then I hear stories like Pi's, and I marvel. I marvel at how strong his faith is, how small my faith seems in comparison.

That's why for the next 6 weeks, we're doing a series called BOLD. We'll be exploring various aspects of our journey with Jesus and ask what it looks like to have a BOLD faith. We'll see what it looks like through stories both from the Bible and from fellow believers around the world today who suffer for their faith, whose choice to follow Jesus costs them much more than it costs us here.

We'll be inspired by their stories to a faith more bold than we might have hoped. Through the examples of our brothers and sisters, we'll discover a new depth and power to our own faith, and we'll respond to power with prayer for the suffering church around the world.

On November 10, churches all over the world will be joining together to pray for those brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering for their faith. So for the next six weeks, leading up to Nov 10, we will prepare our hearts and souls by hearing these stories, remembering them in prayer and responding in our own lives with a faith that's more BOLD.

So expect God to challenge you over the next 6 weeks. Expect God to call you forward.

Today, I want to explore BOLD faith with you. Faith is a tricky thing for us. We tend to treat faith as a results-oriented process. When we're at our best, we'll trust pretty naturally. That goes for people, and for God. We'll give 'em a chance.

And if everything goes well, if our faith is rewarded, so to speak, then we continue to have faith. But if we're let down, if things don't work out the way we'd hoped or expected, we put up walls. We back off from faith. In the quiet places in our souls, we question God's goodness, wonder if faith in God is actually a wise life-choice.

We have a saying: Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

We mean: If you take advantage of my good faith, that's on you. But if you wound me, and I keep trusting you, even after you've proven yourself unfaithful, then that's on me. It's not wise to be faithful in the face of faithlessness.

At its core, this is Results-Oriented Faith. It means our faith is justified by the outcome. The Ends justify the Means. IF I step out in faith and God shows up, then my faith is justified. But if God leaves me hanging, doesn't deliver what I expect, then faith isn't justified. It's foolish.

This sort of faith is defined by its outcome. We can't tell whether faith is good or not, wise or not, until after it's all said and done. [timeline]

But this isn't the sort of Faith we find in the Scriptures. It's not the sort of faith we find in stories like Pi Chui's.

If you have a Bible, turn to Hebrews 11. If you grabbed one of our bibles off the rack on the way in, it's on page XXXX. If you don't own a bible, we'd love for you to keep that one, consider it a gift from us.

Most scholars think this book we call Hebrews was actually a sermon written in the first few decades after Jesus' resurrection. It was preached to a group of new Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. They were losing jobs, friends and credibility because they'd left their old ways of life to follow Jesus.

And now some of them, under the pressure of that persecution, were slipping back into old habits, back into their old lives. So this sermon is all about encouraging them to stay strong, to be bold in their faith. And here in chapter 11, the preacher specifically addresses faith:

Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see. -- Hebrews 11:1

I love this definition of faith. It's one of my favorite passages in all of scripture: Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen. By definition, we can't hope for things we already have. We only hope for what's ahead, in the future. Do you see how different this is from the Results-Oriented Faith? [definitely a timeline] Whereas our typical definition of faith waits for the results to judge, the Scriptures challenge us to a faith in God that says, I'm so confident that I'm going to live as though God's promises are true *before I see the results*.

Biblical faith is grounded in God's character, not the outcome of our situation.

And as you read through this whole chapter, the preacher tells story after story from the Scriptures of persons who acted on faith, who chose to follow God when the outcome was uncertain. Some teachers call this chapter the "Hall of Faith" because there are so many famous stories in here. I want to focus in on one with you.

Stick a finger in Hebrews 11 and turn back to Daniel 3 with me. Again, if you have one of our Bibles, it's on page XXXX. A little context: the book of Daniel is written about the period after 586 BC, when the Babylonian Empire destroyed the kingdom of Judah, sacked Jerusalem and

destroyed God's Temple. Babylon took the Jewish elite back with them to Babylon, effectively crippling Jewish culture.

The book of Daniel is the story of a few of those Jewish exiles living in Babylon. We learn how God was at work in their lives, in the midst of enemy territory, even after their world seemed to have fallen apart. This particular story in Daniel 3 focuses not on Daniel, but on three of his friends. Let's read together, from verse 1:

King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold statue ninety feet tall and nine feet wide and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. Then he sent messages to the high officers, officials, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to come to the dedication of the statue he had set up.

Pretty normal behavior for Nebuchadnezzar. He was pretty impressed with himself.

So all these officials came and stood before the statue King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Then a herald shouted out, "People of all races and nations and languages, listen to the king's command! When you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other musical instruments, bow to the ground to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's gold statue. Anyone who refuses to obey will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

So at the sound of the musical instruments, all the people, whatever their race or nation or language, bowed to the ground and worshiped the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Of course they did.

But some of the astrologers went to the king and informed on the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "Long live the king! You issued a decree requiring all the people to bow down and worship the gold statue when they hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes, and other musical instruments. That decree also states that those who refuse to obey must be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—whom you have put in charge of the province of Babylon. They pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They refuse to serve your gods and do not worship the gold statue you have set up." Then Nebuchadnezzar flew into a rage and ordered that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought before him. -- Daniel 3:1-13

We'd met these three guys, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, when they were brought with Daniel from Jerusalem. So we're not surprised they wouldn't worship this idol. We're already acquainted with their BOLD faith. This is one of those points I wonder if I would be so courageous.

And I like to think I would be. After all, I can imagine I was hiding in my room or something. Just sort of conspicuously absent, like a congressperson at a contentious vote.

So maybe I could be bold enough to not show up. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are found out. Someone snitches, and they're brought before the king.

When they were brought in, Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you refuse to serve my gods or to worship the gold statue I have set up? I will give you one more chance to bow down and worship the statue I have made when you hear the sound of the musical instruments. But if you refuse, you will be thrown immediately into the blazing furnace. And then what god will be able to rescue you from my power?”

This is the part that's really scary. No more running, no hiding, no voting with my absence. Here I have to either stand up and be bold or kneel and be a coward. What would you do, if your life was on the line?

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.” -- Daniel 3:13-18

This is a bold statement: The God whom we serve is able to save us. He *will rescue us* from your power. Wow. That level of confidence in who God is is astounding. And if you know the rest of the story you know that God did, in fact, rescue them from the fire. God saved them.

This is faith: confidence in who God is. Confidence that God will preserve and rescue us. If you flip back to Hebrews 11, you see this in v33. The preacher says,

By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight. Women received their loved ones back again from death. -- Hebrews 11:33-35

Over and over and over in the Scriptures people who trusted in God had their faith vindicated. They put themselves out there and God showed up, big time. This is the sort of faith we should aspire to, the bold faith that stands tall even in the face of certain doom, confident that God will work miracles. That looks like that Results-Oriented Faith, doesn't it? Of course they serve God... God came through for them!!

This is where, in the quiet places in our souls, we cringe a little and say, But...

But what about when God *doesn't* show up? What about those times when we don't get a happy ending? When the chips fall and it goes very badly? Isn't faith foolish when we know that God doesn't always "show up"?

But remember what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said to the king: God *will rescue us* from your power. But *even if he doesn't*, we want to make it clear that *we will never serve your gods*. They were wholly confident God would save them. But they were equally confident that even should they die, even if God doesn't rescue them, God is still God and worshiping any other god isn't an option.

In other words, their faith in God wasn't based on results. It was based on God's character. God is God, and God is the only one worthy of our allegiance, our worship, our lives. Regardless of how our individual circumstances turn out.

Our faith shouldn't be based on outcome, on results, but on who God is. Either God is the god who brings life from death or God isn't.

This faith Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego showed wasn't blind. It was bold. Live or die, God is god. Live or die, I serve only one. Live or die.

The preacher in Hebrews acknowledge the same: not all these heroes of faith met happy ends. After listing all those amazing deeds, he goes on in v36:

But others were tortured, refusing to turn from God in order to be set free. They placed their hope in a better life after the resurrection. Some were jeered at, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in prisons. Some died by stoning, some were sawed in half, and others were killed with the sword. Some went about wearing skins of sheep and goats, destitute and oppressed and mistreated. They were too good for this world, wandering over deserts and mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground.

All these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. For God had something better in mind for us, so that they would not reach perfection without us. -- Hebrews 11:33-40

Here is the key: when we choose a BOLD faith, when we choose to follow God no matter the consequences, we will either experience good or bad. Over the course of a whole life, probably both. A life with God is often a mysterious mixture of both blessing and curse.

Faith is choosing to follow God no matter the outcome. Because we believe God is who God claims to be: the God who is faithful to us no matter what. The God who brings life even out of death.

This is why Jesus' resurrection is so important to us. Because Jesus, our ultimate example, the one we follow, the one our faith is forming us into, followed God and it cost him everything. Jesus' bold faithfulness to God cost him his life.

But God did not allow the powers of darkness to have the final word. God raised Jesus from the dead as a loud proclamation to all the powers of hell they cannot finally triumph. That even when they do their very worst, God will have life and they are powerless against him.

It's Jesus' resurrection that empowers our bold faith. Why can we risk everything for God? Because even if we lose it all, God brings life from death.

BOLD faith is found not in the good and beautiful times in our lives, but when we're up against the wall, when it looks dire and we can't imagine a happy ending. Faith isn't found in happy endings, but in trust and confidence that God is who he says he is.

Let us not be those who lose hope, who succumb to despair and display a weak, shallow faith. Instead, let's listen to the witness of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The witness of Pi Chui. Let them not make us feel small, but hopeful. That's why the preacher in Hebrews wrote chapter 11. After recounting story after story of BOLD faith, he turns to us who are listening and says,

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people;* then you won't become weary and give up. After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin. -- Hebrews 12:1-4

Jesus began our faith and will complete it. It's his bold faith that makes ours possible. And it's his resurrection that seals God's promise not to abandon us, whatever may come, whatever the cost to our faith.

[music begins]

What is God calling you to? What's that next right thing in your life, the thing that scares you a little (or a lot)? Where's the risk in your religion?

Could you imagine that God isn't going to abandon you to the worst case scenario? Could you say along with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, God will rescue me from your power. But even if he doesn't I will never worship anyone else?

Faith is risk and bold faith is even riskier. Your confidence is rooted not in outcomes, but in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

So what are you waiting for?

Song