

How to Stand Strong When Your World Comes Crashing Down

At 4:30 p.m. on May 11, 2012, time seemed to stop. That's when I got a phone call informing me that my oldest daughter, Hannah, had been in an airplane crash and was badly burned. She and four young men, two of whom were her close friends, were in an eight-seater twin-engine Cessna en route to one of our Acquire the Fire conferences when their plane went down in Kansas. Three of the young men died at the scene, while the fourth, 27-year-old former marine Austin Anderson, eventually died after heroically pulling Hannah from the flames.

My world began spiraling out of control.

My wife, Katie, and I were thrilled that our daughter had survived, but we were also vexed beyond comprehension. How could four people have ended up beyond the bounds of the faith in which we were so confident? After all, they were young, and they loved God. They were at the top of their game and had graduated from college. They wanted to make a difference with their lives. They wanted to change the world.

The next week I attended four funerals of the four men—Austin, Stephen Luth, Garrett Coble and Luke Sheets—four days in a row. I did it at the insistence of Hannah and the invitation of the parents. Trying to explain the unexplainable to the parents and other mourners, I found myself reaching for words that seemed shallow. I made statements such as, “We don't understand why these things happen, but let's focus on what we do know: We do know that Jesus loves us. We do know that these men loved Jesus and are with Him right now. We do know that one day, He will comfort every heart and dry every tear, and we will be with Him forever.”

Though I knew these were the facts, they seemed of little help

to those suffering such intense grief. I was happy that my daughter was alive, but I was also angry at the circumstances—and I told God. Whether He allowed what happened, caused it or chose it as part of His strategic plan, I did not like it. As grateful as I was for my daughter's survival, I knew that other parents were dealing with unbearable grief. "I just don't understand," I told God.

What do we do as Christians when circumstances careen out of control, and we no longer understand what is going on? As followers of Christ, how do we react when the confidence we have in our faith is shaken? What happens when our theology and what we believe about God is called into question in a moment's time? How do we develop the backbone of steel needed to take us through these times?

The underpinnings of faith lead us in one of two major directions: to give up or to be resilient. *Resilience* is the term we use when people bounce back from horrible experiences. Resilience is the grace to remain strong after going through something that almost breaks you.

So how do we find that resilience? How can we prepare to be resilient before life's unexpected setbacks hit us in the face? As we'll see, the answer begins and ends with faith.

A Two-Sided Coin

Faith has two sides. The faith that Jesus woos us to is much deeper than the easy belief system that says, "I believe in Jesus" but doesn't truly follow Him. It's more than believing in mystical formulas that satisfy our every whim and smooth over every rough patch. The faith Jesus invites us to live is a journey that includes rough patches and difficult choices.

The latter is the faith recorded in Daniel 3, where we find the famous story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Though they lived in pagan Babylon, a nation that worshiped multiple gods, these Hebrew children loved the living God and refused

to compromise their faith in Him. Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar had built a golden statue of himself and ordered everyone to bow down and pay homage when certain music played. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to honor an idol to any god or man, no matter the consequences.

And the consequences were great. The Hebrew children were brought before Nebuchadnezzar, who offered them one last chance to bow down when the music played. He warned that if they didn't, he would heat a furnace seven times hotter than usual and have them thrown into it. Despite the king's threat, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stood firm. Their response, recorded in Daniel 3:16-18, should cause even the faintest of heart to rise up with courage: "King 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 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" (emphases mine).

Faith is like a coin with two sides. In verse 17 we see one side of faith. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had confidence and were absolutely determined. They knew God was *able* and *willing* to deliver them. So often when Christians pray, they waver between opposing beliefs. They say things like: "Well, I know that God *can* heal me, but I'm not sure He wants to." "God is able to put my marriage back together, but I'm not sure He wants to." "I know God can reach my kids, but I'm not sure He wants to."

The Hebrew boys had no such doubts. They said, "God is able, and He will deliver us." They spoke with their shoulders back, their chins held high, knowing God was on their side. This is the kind of confidence we ought to have. This side of faith says, "God can and will deliver me." When we go to God in prayer for a financial need, a healing need, a relational issue, or on behalf of the nations, we ought to pray and ask

without doubting. "Since we know he hears us when we make our requests, we also know that he will give us what we ask for" (1 John 5:15, NLT).

I Believe, But Only if ...

This side of faith rests on the character of God. We know who He is. We know what His Word says. We know that He wants to heal, save and deliver. The challenge with this side of faith is that we often add a whisper to it, a thought we'd probably never say out loud: "God can and will answer my prayer. *And as long as He does*, I will continue following Him."

Though we may never say this, it shows up in the way we act. We pray for something, fully expecting it to happen. But if somehow the prayer isn't answered in the way we wanted it to be or when we wanted it to be, we become victims of feel-good faith. Our resilience caves in. The life is sucked out of us.

What we thought was strength and confidence was actually a conditional faith. Whether consciously or not, we tell God, "I will follow You, but only if certain conditions are met *"Only if my prayers are answered."* *"Only if I feel good."* *"Only if I don't face too many challenges."*

Jesus encountered many people with this attitude. One said, "I will follow you, Lord, but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family" (Luke 9:61). "Another disciple said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father'" (Matt. 8:21).

These sound like reasonable requests. Why wouldn't Jesus let a person say goodbye to loved ones or bury his father? In the first example, Jesus said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). In the second, He said, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead" (Matt. 8:22).

Jesus wasn't being coldhearted. He was trying to communicate

that those who are spiritually dead should take care of carnal things, and those who choose to be alive spiritually should simply follow Him. That is what it means to put your hand to the plow and not turn back. In other words, Jesus said, “If you are wrestling with this, if you’re finding ‘good reasons’ for having second thoughts, you aren’t ready to come. If you think there is any good reason to not give up everything and follow Me with all of your heart, *then you don’t understand who has invited you to follow.*”

Too often we put conditions on our following Christ. When God meets our conditions, we promise to stick with Him; when He doesn’t answer when and how we want Him to, our passion wanes.

It’s this conditional following of Christ that is the real issue. If following Him is based on our conditions, what will we do when we face a real crisis? What happens when our prayer isn’t answered right away? What if we started with a different premise? What if the premise of our faith was that *God is the rightful owner of the universe and the rightful owner of our lives?*

With that kind of foundation in place, we could pray with confidence knowing that He is a good God who wants to heal or deliver or answer our prayers. We would be satisfied to know that when and how He answers our prayers is up to Him and not us. We would stand up—whatever the challenge. This leads us to the other side of the coin.

I Will Follow *Even if* ...

The three Hebrew youths from Daniel chapter 3 made a key statement during their trial. They said our God “will deliver us from the king’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” (v. 18). What happened here amazes me. They walked through the fire with “even if” faith—even *if* everything came apart at the seams,

even if they ended up in the fiery furnace and even if they didn't understand, they would not bow down.

Some might say the young men doubted God, because in one breath they said God would deliver them and in the next they said, "Even if God does not deliver us ..." I disagree. Their words didn't reveal doubt. *Their faith allowed for the mystery of God.* They knew no human could understand everything about God, yet they were confident that God could deliver them, and no matter what He chose to do, their faith in Him would not waver. They must have thought, "If for some reason we end up dying in the furnace and going to heaven, it won't be such a bad deal."

This *even if* faith is courageous. It has been the legacy of Christ followers from the beginning. *Even if* faith allows us to admit that we don't know—and don't have to know—everything. We would like every circumstance to come with an explanation, but those are conditions. *Even if* faith takes all the conditions off. It says, "I'm going to follow Him no matter what. *Even if* that the person I'm praying for doesn't get healed, or doesn't get healed instantly, I will follow Him. *Even if* something tragic happens that messes with my theology, I will follow Him."

That's what happened when Hannah crashed in the plane and four young men went to heaven. It flew in the face of my theology. Life hit me and my family squarely between the eyes. The evidence of our fallen world came crashing in around us. We were not the first followers of Christ to have such an experience, and we won't be the last. In those excruciating days, we needed the attitude that said, "*Even if* we don't understand what has happened, we will still follow You."

First Cor. 13:12 says: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (KJV). In other words, we understand many things, but they're not completely clear.

We know a lot about the Lord, but we don't know everything. We would like to demystify the God whom we follow, but we cannot. He is the God of the universe, the Creator of all that is good; He made the heavens and the earth and rescued us by sending His Son. We might like to know everything that is in His heart and mind, but we simply don't.

Only if faith is the opposite of even if faith. Even if faith says, "Even if there are circumstances I don't enjoy, I am going to follow. Even if someone I deeply admire lets me down, I'm going to follow. Even if a pastor or leader does something horrible, I'm going to follow God. Even if the person who led me to the Lord turns away from Christ, I'll follow Him. Even if the loved one I'm praying for doesn't get healed, God's already been so good to me, I'm still going to follow. Even if I never receive another answer to prayer for the rest of my life, I will follow the God who has already answered so many of my prayers. I'm still on the receiving end of this relationship, and I'm still going to follow Him."

Faith That Doesn't Bow

I remember visiting with Oral Roberts at his home in California before he went to be with Jesus. As we discussed this topic of faith, I was initially shocked when he held up his right hand and said: "Ron, I've prayed for millions of people with this hand. In those prayer lines, in those tents, literally millions of people I laid hands on. Many of them were healed, but there were *many more* who weren't healed. We would see dramatic healings—people whose legs didn't work at all, and they stood up and walked. But there were many more who didn't seem to have any manifestation of healing at all."

Oral continued: "Ron, I don't know why. I still had the same feeling of faith, the tingling in my hand, the same confidence as I prayed over these people. I don't understand why. But it didn't mean I would stop praying for the sick, because I know

that God wants to heal the sick. So I just kept laying my hands on others.”

As I listened to him I thought, “*This is the kind of confidence we must have in our God.*”

Like Oral Roberts, we know what His will is, so we pray accordingly, but we don’t let the results affect us. We don’t let them determine whether we keep going, because if we did, we would be putting conditions on our God. *Even if* faith is the faith Jesus intended for us from the very beginning. It is the only kind of faith that bears up under our struggles. It is strong because it chooses to put confidence in the character of God even when we don’t understand our circumstances. It says, “I know He is good even when I don’t feel good.”

Struggles *will* come. Everyone knows somebody who has died prematurely. Too many people have been in horrible accidents that have left them maimed for life. When things like this happen, we ask the almost inevitable question: “Why?”

Through all the months of Hannah’s recovery—the operations and physical therapy and adjusting to her new world—that is the question that persisted: *Why?* Why would God allow such a seemingly senseless tragedy? Why would He allow these four young men, who were passionate about serving Him, to die? Why would He allow my daughter to endure such pain physically, emotionally and mentally? Why do bad things happen to good people?

When Katie and I found ourselves in the middle of a tragedy, we could not answer the *why* question. We knew we had to focus on what we knew instead of what we did not or could not know. We knew that Jesus loved us. We knew that He came and gave His life for us. We knew that He rose again. We knew He would come back for us, and we knew we would be with Him forever and ever.

Instead of focusing on the questions we could not answer, instead of focusing on explaining the unexplainable, we focused on the goodness of God. All the rest we left in His hands. We decided we were OK with not having all the answers. And somehow, focusing on what we did know assuaged the lingering pain of what we didn't know.

A lot of people will try to offer explanations about why bad things happen to godly people, and they often have good intentions and good theology. I understand wanting desperately to find the good in terrible situations. But I know that there are a lot of people who experience tragedy and may never understand why. Still, they stand strong in their faith. So must we.

Jesus has invited us to follow Him with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength. He asks us to trust Him even when we don't understand. He urges us to have so much confidence in Him that even when life seems to spin out of control—even if we end up in a furnace seven times hotter than anything ever experienced—we will not bow down. We will not stop following the only One who is worthy of all we have and all we are. By His grace, we choose *even if* faith.

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Watch Ron Luce share more about how his faith was tested following his daughter's plane crash at