

I'd like to start this morning with a thought experiment. For some of you, it may take a lot of imagination, and for others, it may be a little easier. But whether you're a Christian or not, whether you believe in God or not, here's what I want you to imagine:

What would be different in your life if you were 100% certain that God existed and you had perfect faith in God? What if you were absolutely certain that God was with you all the time? What if you had no doubt ever that no matter what came at you, God is at work to bring you good and that one day you would look back and marvel at what God was up to now that you didn't see? What if you knew in your bones that the laws and principles God gave us were because God wants what's best for us?

How would your responses change to tragedies, job losses, sickness? How would it change your response to unexpected success? How would it change your relationships?

I want to call this total certainty, total trust in God "Big Faith". Every now and again, we meet people who have this kind of 'big faith'. When you do, they can almost seem delusional - they're in the midst of a major life crisis and they seem serene. They say something like, "I know it's hard, but God'll get us through." And you want to shake them and point out all the reasons the sort of faith they're demonstrating is foolish.

But on the other hand, they don't *seem* to be in denial. They just seem... confident. Like this trust they're giving voice to is genuine. Like they know something we don't, something we can't take away from them no matter how many facts and figures we throw at them because it's not blind faith... it's BIG faith.

Today is all about how we get Big Faith. The good news is that God wants us to have Big Faith, so it's not something we have to earn or work hard for or deserve. Today is about how we say Yes to God's invitation and begin walking the path to a Big Faith!

Message

Our Fall Series is called 5 Things God Uses to Grow Your Faith. So not to spoil anything, but throughout this series, we're going to talk about what faith is, and identify 5 things God uses to give us that Big Faith.

We're going to begin today by talking about FAITH - what is it? If we go clear back to the beginning of Scripture, we see that the whole story of the Bible is really a story of faith.

When God created the first humans, God placed them in a garden with two trees. And God told them: this one tree is off-limits. All other trees are fair game for food. Just don't eat this one.

The first Sin came about because of a lack of trust. The man and woman didn't believe God really had their best interests at heart. They thought God was holding out on them. So they disobeyed God's instruction.

Yes, disobedience played a role, but at the *heart* of the disobedience was a *faith* problem. We didn't *trust* God or God's intentions. So we broke trust with God and as a consequence, our *relationship* with God suffered.

From that point forward, the whole rest of the Bible is the story of God working to rebuild that broken relationship, teaching us to trust God again. Relationship comes before obedience - God didn't give Israel the Law until *after* God had freed them from slavery in Egypt. God demonstrated trustworthiness, then gave Israel the Torah, a trustworthy path to life and flourishing.

Jesus' life and ministry is all about building trust. Jesus offers us an invitation to re-engage with God, to trust that God's way leads to the life we were created to crave. Again and again, the NT writers insist that what happened on the Cross wasn't about obedience but *faith*. God invites us not to follow a whole bunch of rules, but to re-engage in a *relationship*.

And relationships are built on faith. The very strongest relationships you have are the ones where you have full trust in the other person. "Have you heard from your husband? No? Aren't you worried?" No. I trust him.

"Did you talk to your daughter yet? No? And you're not worried?" No. I trust her.

Obedience isn't worth much, because it can be forced. Ask anyone who lives in a dictatorship. God is not a dictator. God could force us to obey, but that's not what God wants. God created us for relationships, and relationships are all about *trust*.

So what God wants is faith. BIG faith.

[Scripture Slide] Turn over to Matthew 8 with me. We're going to an encounter Jesus has with a man who is... less than desirable. But it turns out, this guy has Big Faith. In fact, he *amazes* Jesus (it's the only time the Gospels ever tell us Jesus was amazed by anyone).

The man is a Roman centurion. The Romans occupied Israel during Jesus' lifetime, and the Jews *hated* the Romans. Romans were Gentiles, which meant they were unclean - Jews couldn't share meals with them or even go into their homes. So to have unclean Gentiles ruling over God's people *in God's land* was a constant thorn in the Jewish people's side.

This centurion was in charge of 100 men. Roman soldiers were able to do basically whatever they wanted - if they wanted to take your money, it wasn't considered robbery. If they wanted to rough you up a bit, sure, you probably had it coming. If they wanted you to 'take a walk' with them and you never came back, they could do that too.

So you can imagine how the Jews felt about Roman soldiers, and their leaders in particular. This centurion Jesus is about to meet wouldn't have been well-liked.

With that in mind, let's read beginning in verse 1:

When Jesus returned to Capernaum, a Roman officer came and pleaded with him, "Lord, my young servant lies in bed, paralyzed and in terrible pain."

Jesus said, "I will come and heal him."

This one is a doozy. Can you imagine what the disciples thought when this Centurion walked up and said, "Excuse me, Mr. Christ, a word please?"

Fear turned to disgust when he told Jesus about his servant. We know what they were thinking, "So what? Another Roman dead is another step in the right direction. Of course Jesus isn't going to heal *him*."

And then Jesus says, "I'll come to your house." Of course he did. You think a Gentile's house is going to scare him?

No... but it sure would have scandalized all his followers.

So Jesus is going to go to the home of this centurion and heal his servant. But Jesus *still* hasn't been amazed yet. So let's watch what happens next:

But the officer said, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed. I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, 'Go,' and they go, or 'Come,' and they come. And if I say to my slaves, 'Do this,' they do it."

The Centurion says, "I'm not worthy to have you in my home." And this is where one of the disciples muttered, "No doubt!"

Of course *they* thought that way. They were Jews. But a *Roman* wouldn't think that about himself. He was the conquering people. His gods had given him victory over the Jewish god. If anyone was unworthy, it was *them*.

So what made him say that to Jesus?

It came down to what Jesus *did*. He said, "Look, I'm a soldier. I'm under authority, and I have authority. I tell that guy to go get me food, he does. I tell him to go guard a building all night and don't fall asleep, he will because he knows I could have him killed otherwise."

"And I've been watching you. I've seen you command nature and disease. I've seen you have authority over demons. That tells me that whoever your boss is, is more powerful even than Rome. So don't come to my home. I'm not worthy.

"Just say the word. Heal from right here. I know you can."

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed. Turning to those who were following him, he said, "I tell you the truth, I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel! -- Matthew 8:1-10

Can you feel what a slap in the face that would've been to all the Jews listening - even to his followers? All those guys who'd been following him around for weeks at this point?

But the Centurion showed Big Faith. And Jesus was amazed.

What amazes God? Not obedience... *trust*. Living as though you have full confidence God is with you. *That's* what amazes God.

Not obedience.

How often do we think that we should obey God in order to make sure God loves us or blesses us or gives us what we want? We obey to get.

But that's not what God wants. God wants us to obey, to follow, because we trust. Because we have a *relationship* with God.

So how do we develop a Big Faith?

Another church I really love has spent a lot of time asking this question. They spent a lot of time asking each other, asking themselves, and there were five things that kept coming up over and over.

5 elements of a deep, growing relationship with God. 5 ingredients to a big, deep trust in God. We might call them 5 Faith Catalysts.

The first is practical teaching. Ask anyone who's growing in their faith, and there'll be a moment (or a lot of moments) when Scripture became real to them. It quit being an old story or my parents' story or a set of boring rules or an oppressive old book and came to life. There was a moment when Scripture helped you see yourself better, and helped you see what your next right step was.

For some of us, that happens in here, when we receive teaching together. For others, it's in C-Group, in discussion with others on the same journey. And for others, it's in private study. Hopefully as we grow, it's in all three spaces.

Practical teaching is one faith catalyst: when the Story of God becomes our story, we trust God more deeply.

The next is providential relationships. In everyone's faith story, there comes a part where they say, "And then I met so-and-so." A guy, a girl, a couple, a boss, a mentor. Someone who was just *different*, who by the very way they lived helped you see something more, something beyond what you already knew. And when you look back, it feels like God put them in your life so that you could know God better, that through *their* love, you came to know God's love better. It was a providential relationship. And it blew up your faith.

Third are private disciplines. These are all those spiritual practices we talk about, like reading scripture, prayer and sabbath. These are a faith catalyst because these private disciplines make our faith our own. They open us up to God's Spirit, help us engage more deeply in that relationship with God. As we grow in our faith, there comes a moment prayer moved beyond "God is great God is good" or you gave for the first time and it helped you realize how much more you trusted money than God. Or you fasted and God *did* something in you. And boom, your faith blows up.

Fourth is personal ministry. This is serving. When people share about their faith, they often point to a moment where they were asked to step up. And they were pretty freaked out about it. Like, "Who, me? Are you sure you are talking to the right person?"

But they do it. They begin to serve and as they do, the Spirit comes alive in them like never before, because now they're giving of themselves the way God gives to us. And BOOM, their faith blows up.

The last one is pivotal circumstances. In the story of God inviting us to trust, they're nearly always big events, big changes that rock us. It could be a tragedy or it could be good. A lot of people who had no interest in God have a kid and suddenly they're asking all these new questions like "Who's going to teach this kid to be a responsible, functioning human?!" Kids are often a catalyst for a growing faith. But again, good or bad, there are always pivotal circumstances that impact our faith in big ways.

What's amazing about these 5 faith catalysts is that they're not a list you can go do. You can't force pivotal circumstances to happen. You can't force a providential relationship. Even private disciplines - which feel the most like a checklist - are really more about how the Spirit moves in us than what we do.

Friends, Big Faith isn't something we achieve by following a checklist. Big Faith is something God invites us into, a relationship we lean into. And as we learn to be on the lookout for these big faith catalysts, we'll find our faith in God growing and growing until everyone we meet is amazed by our Big Faith.

So that's what this series is going to be about: We're going to learn how to be on the lookout for God in our lives. Because faith is a relationship. Faith is built on trust. And when, like that centurion, you see Jesus at work in your life, following him becomes easy. Because you trust him.

Communion + Examine

[Communion Slide] The Cross demonstrates how trustworthy God is.

1. When in the last week did I trust God?
2. When in the last week did I struggle to trust God?
3. When in the next week might I struggle to trust God?
4. How can I be on the lookout for Big Faith catalysts this week?

Assignment

Write down your faith story this week. Highlight Big Faith catalysts.