

Welcome

This is the final Sunday of our Fall Series called 5 Things God Uses to Grow Your Faith. Throughout this series, we've explored what faith is, and the 5 things God uses to give us that Big Faith.

We began by insisting that faith isn't about following rules or checking boxes. Rather, faith is about relationships, about trust. 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: us breaking trust with God and God working tirelessly to restore that trust.

We suggested that God uses five faith catalysts to grow our faith. If you talk to people who have Big Faith, ask them to tell you the story of their faith, these five things come up over and over. We first looked at practical teaching. We saw that when Scripture comes alive for us, when we begin to obey God, to actually *do* the things God calls us to do, our faith grows.

Then, we looked at providential relationships. We saw that God places people in our lives to help us grow. We asked how we can leverage those relationships to be sure we're paying attention when God brings them into our lives.

Third, we explored private disciplines. We saw that, just like in other areas of our lives like fitness and hobbies, when we dedicate time to making space for God, our faith grows. Josh challenged us to give the first part of our time, energy and money to God, as an act of faith, so God could stretch our faith.

Last week, we saw that when we step outside our comfort zones, God grows our faith through personal service.

Today, we're exploring the last of our 5 faith catalysts, Pivotal Circumstances.

This is the one we have the least control over - those times when life happens to us. Talk to someone with big faith, hear their story, and before too long, you'll hear about a big change...

They met someone who went to this church...

Or they went on a mission trip.

Or they had a kid and suddenly those big questions seemed a lot more important.

Sometimes, really good things happen, and they can melt our cynical little hearts.

But let's be honest. When we're talking about Pivotal Circumstances that grow our faith, they're not usually good. They're usually hard... really hard.

A move took you away from everything you called home.

You lose a job.

Or someone close to you dies.

Or a really important relationship comes to an end.

Or they betrayed you deeply.

And even as they're telling the story, they say, "I wouldn't choose to go through that. I wouldn't want to go through it again. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. But it was right in the midst of that, I found God. God became real to me in a way I had never experienced before. And looking back, I realize God did something right there, in the middle of it, that I don't think God could've done any other way - that I don't know I would have *seen* any other way.

So now I look back at that and see that it was right then I realized God is real, and God is personal and God loves me.

And I couldn't have learned that any other way.

Today, we're going to explore these pivotal circumstances and ask how we can learn to see God at work. Because it doesn't come naturally to us. But God is not only at work, God is with us in those painful places. And if we'll be open, God will grow our faith!

Message

In this last Sunday of our series on those things God uses to grow our faith, we're exploring the one we have the least control over: Pivotal Circumstances. Those big, often painful moments that don't automatically make us trust God. In fact, often, it's those big moments that make us question God. And yet those people who have big faith say again and again that it's those pivotal circumstances that made them trust God more.

What's their secret?

C. S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Problem of Pain* that's all about exploring those painful times in life. In theological circles, they call this the problem of Theodicy. It's essentially: if God is good and all-powerful, why is there suffering? Why do bad things happen? Why is there illness and death and natural disasters and unfaithfulness and abuse and betrayal and corruption and prejudice and oppression and...

Why is there any of it?

And Lewis does this brilliant thing (it's actually the same thing the Biblical writers do): he stops asking "Why?" and he starts asking, "So What?"

Because when we're hurting, knowing WHY doesn't help very much. As I review the most painful times in my life, I've know the WHY of pretty much all of them. And it hasn't helped much.

So instead of asking WHY, Lewis says, "What's this for?" Is it going anywhere? Is there any purpose? And in reflecting on that, Lewis says this:

God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. -- C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

Pain is God's megaphone. We hear God more clearly in our pain than in anything else. James, Jesus' brother, says much the same thing in a sermon we have preserved in the New Testament. He says:

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. -- James 1:2-4

Consider *any* troubles an opportunity for great joy?! Can you imagine that? If every pain, every bit of suffering, you saw as an opportunity for *joy*, for celebrating?

But why does James say that? He says that it's a testing of our faith - our trust in God. And when we hit hard times, it's like flexing our faith muscle. Pain grows our faith, which will lead us to be completed.

That's a bold claim. A bold promise.

Could you imagine if it was true? How would that change your experience of hard times?

Now I want to be very clear on a point here before we go on. It will sound to many of us like I'm suggesting God *causes* evil to befall us just to teach us a lesson. That's not true. Scripture tells us God is not the author of evil.

Rather, what we're seeing today is a God who loves us enough to enter into our painful spaces - even the ones we make for ourselves - and invite us to trust.

Faith isn't blindly following a God who's willing to hurt us to get what he wants. Faith is learning to trust a God who is *always* with us, even in the darkest, scariest, most painful places.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to John 11. This is towards the end of Jesus' ministry - he's weeks away from being crucified at this point. And he gets word that a good friend of his named Lazarus is sick. Let's read what happens:

A man named Lazarus was sick. He lived in Bethany with his sisters, Mary and Martha. This is the Mary who later poured the expensive perfume on the Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair. Her brother, Lazarus, was sick. So the two sisters sent a message to Jesus telling him, "Lord, your dear friend is very sick."

Do you think being able to call Jesus a close personal friend came with perks? Mary, Martha and Lazarus certainly did. Lazarus got some sort of terminal disease, so they sent word - come quick! Your friend is dying!

Surely Jesus would come, right? After all, healing was his thing. And he stayed with Mary, Martha and Lazarus every time he visited Jerusalem. They were his home away from home, so to speak. So... Jesus is definitely going to heal him. Couldn't he even just heal him from a distance? He'd done that before, too! Let's read what happens:

But when Jesus heard about it he said, "Lazarus's sickness will not end in death. No, it happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this."

So although Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, he stayed where he was for the next two days. --
John 11:1-6

Instead of coming, Jesus says, "This won't end in death. This is about God's glory" - which, by the way, is a way of saying "this is about God's reputation."

Does God take care of God's friends? Is God trustworthy? These are *faith* questions. What's at stake for Jesus is *faith*.

So he stays where he is. And Lazarus dies.

Then Jesus sets out to visit his friends.

When Martha got word that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him. But Mary stayed in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again."

"Yes," Martha said, "he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day."

How would you feel if you were Martha right now? Furious? Confused? Devastated? All of the above?

And when she confronts Jesus, he gives her what sounds like that terrible funeral theology people always toss at grieving people so we don't have to face their pain. "He's going to rise again."

And Martha, bless her heart, has heard this all before. She has all the right theological answers. But those theological answers aren't helping her *pain* right now.

Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?"

"Yes, Lord," she told him. "I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God." -- John 11:20-27

Do you trust me, Martha? Do you believe that I'm your friend? Do you believe that I'm good? Do you believe I'm here with you and Lazarus and that I love him as much as I love you?

Do you believe?

And Martha does her best. She says, "Yes. I believe."

So Jesus goes to the tomb:

Then Jesus wept. The people who were standing nearby said, "See how much he loved him!" But some said, "This man healed a blind man. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?" -- John 11:35-37

This bit is the bit that really stings. Jesus weeps for his friend. Even though he knows death isn't final and isn't going to have the last word here, even though he knows what he's about to do, Jesus weeps with Mary and Martha and you and me and every victim ever.

And some say, "Really, bro? If you're that sad, why didn't you heal him? Surely if you can open the eyes of the blind, you could've saved your friend."

Cynical as they are, they have a point. Why didn't Jesus do something sooner? Maybe because he has a bigger agenda here...

Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me." Then Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man came out..

Many of the people who were with Mary believed in Jesus when they saw this happen. -- John 11:41-45

Lazarus is raised and *many believed*. Many trusted Jesus.

Friends, this is the heart of faith. When we encounter those pivotal circumstances, especially the ones that knock us off our feet, take the wind out of our sails, do we trust that God is with us *in the midst of*

that pain? Do we trust that God is with us, weeping with us? Do we trust that God is with us, working with us?

I have come to believe that pain is God's megaphone because when our lives fall apart, so much of the noise we usually surround ourselves with is stripped away and it's not so much that God is shouting louder as it is that God's the only one left when everything is stripped away. Because God never leaves us, never forsakes us.

That reality has changed, for me, how I experience those seasons of life.

It's not that, if I work hard enough or have the right kind of character or go to church enough or give enough money or whatever, God doesn't let bad things happen.

Hard times aren't a sign God isn't with me. Quite the opposite.

In bad times, I've learned to stop, to remember that God is right there, with me, inviting me to trust.

Could you believe that, friends? Could you believe that God is in the midst of your painful circumstances doing the impossible? Could you believe that God is weeping with you, experiencing the full weight of your pain with you? And could you believe that even so, God is at work, growing your faith, inviting you to trust, bringing about good for you?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus didn't skip the Cross. Jesus embraced the Cross to be with us.

1. What is a recent pivotal circumstance where I trusted God was at work?
2. When has a pivotal circumstance to hurt my faith in God?
3. How can I look for God's presence in a pivotal circumstance?

Assignment + Blessing

Review the 5 things God uses.

Best news: God is WITH us. God wants us to grow. We can have that impossible, unbelievable faith if we only respond to God.