

Who has been the most important spiritual influence in your life? I can name several, but one of my favorites was my New Testament professor in college, Rodney Reeves. Dr. Reeves is a brilliant, kind man who always had a way of rephrasing even the dumbest question as something important.

I remember one class in particular, we were studying a wide range of scholarly opinions on some passage about Jesus. We read a statement by a scholar who was much more liberal than any of us in the class, and we all laughed at how silly his position was. No intelligent person could *possibly* think what he thought! Hilarious!

Dr. Reeves got very stern. I'll never forget what he said next to us. "Many of those so-called liberal scholars know their Bibles better than you do. They know them in Greek."

The class got very quiet. And my brain sort of exploded. It was the first time I really remember understanding that people who disagree with me have something to teach me. That comment changed not only where I chose to go to grad school, but the fundamental character of my faith. I started seeking out voices who didn't agree with me, listening more and talking less. And my faith blew up.

Of course it wasn't just that statement Dr. Reeves made. It was the larger context of my relationship with him. It was his consistent kind, loving character that provided fertile soil for his words of correction to grow.

I know for a fact I wouldn't be who I am today without him in my life. And if you were to listen to the whole story of my faith, you'd meet countless other people who have been that for me. People who shaped my faith, who challenged me, loved me, cheered me on or supported me to grow into the person I am today.

I want to talk about those people today. Because we all have them. In fact, God places them in our lives to help us grow. So how do we spot them? And how do we lean into those relationships?

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.

Last week, we introduced the concept of Big Faith. We imagined 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?

We've all met people who have that kind of Big Faith, people we'd call idealistic or out of touch if they weren't so compelling.

Big Faith has five components. 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. Last week, we 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.

Today, we're going to talk about the next thing God uses to grow our faith: Providential Relationships. Ask someone with Big Faith about their faith journey and you'll hear something like, "Then I met this guy/girl. They started asking me about my life and my faith." or like me, "I had this professor in college who..." or "It turned out my roommate was a Christian who..." or "When my mom remarried, my stepdad insisted we go to church together" or "My coworker started a Bible study" or "Our neighbors invited us to a C-group".

We all have that person in our lives - we all have *several* of those persons in our lives. And when you look back, when you consider where you were then and where you are now, it feels a lot like God put those persons in your life so that your faith could grow, so you could learn to trust God better.

Now the opposite is also true. If I asked you to think of a person who *hurt* your relationship with God, you could think of those people too. A relationship that knocked your faith off your feet. A pastor or spiritual mentor who failed you. A toxic person who set you back financially or emotionally or really hurt your marriage or your kids. Relationships have real potential to undermine our faith. A lot of times, our biggest regrets in life can be traced back to relationships.

A text you wish you'd never responded to, an invitation you wish you'd turned down, a date you wish you'd never gone on, a job you wish you'd never taken. You can trace almost every regret back to a *relationship*.

That's because relationships are really powerful. So it shouldn't surprise us that God uses relationships to shape us, to grow our faith. Part of what it means to be created in God's image is that we're created *to be in relationships*.

That might strike some of us as strange. You're used to thinking of faith primarily as a private thing. Or as a Sunday morning thing. The idea that *other people* are really important to our faith is one of those ideas that, when we say it out loud, when we look back at our faith journey, seems pretty obvious. But

we don't *think* about faith that way. We don't act like relationships with other people are vital to our faith.

But if we recognize that *people* are a vital aspect of our growing faith, we can begin to leverage our relationships to grow our faith. And that's important because we're surrounded by people every day who probably couldn't care less about our faith. And, generally speaking, when we're tempted, it's not to do good.

How often do you find yourself saying, "You know, I almost made that snarky comment, but then I sort of caved and said something kind instead."? Or, "I really didn't want to do the right thing, but I'm just so weak I did the right thing anyway."? I don't know about you but that's not how temptation works for me. I'm not tempted toward good. I'm tempted toward bad.

Consider your life like this: if, when we look back, we all discover there are people God brought into our lives to grow our faith, then it's pretty much guaranteed that there are people in your life right now that are those people too. People that, 10 years from now, you'll look back and say, "Oh wow, God brought them into my life for a reason." What if we could identify those relationships and *lean into them*?

How many times have we *missed* those people God brought into our lives because we weren't paying attention? We were too busy or too stubborn or too insecure or whatever, so we kept saying no to their invitation to lunch or ignoring their offers of friendship and so we missed what God wanted to do in our faith? Isn't it also possible, if we're not paying attention, we're missing those relationships *right now*?

[Scripture Slide 1] I want to give you two verses today that underscore why this matters so much. First, turn with me to the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is a collection of wisdom sayings. We hear that and think, "Oh they're like ancient bumper stickers, like people used to carve these on rocks and hang them from the backs of their donkeys and camels or whatever."

Maybe they did that. But when we talk about wisdom, it goes beyond just clever sayings. Wisdom is what ancient Israel called the way God created us to live. Wisdom is the creative energy of God flowing through a person. When they said, "That person is wise," what they meant was, "there's a person who figured out how God created them to live." So to call the book of Proverbs a collection of wisdom sayings is to say, "This book is a collection of descriptions of what it looks like when we're living as we were created to live."

One of these wisdom gems is about relationships (actually a lot of them are, but here's one for us today):

Walk with the wise and become wise; associate with fools and get in trouble. -- Proverbs 13:20

Pretty straight forward. Spend your time with people who are living the way God created them to, and you'll start to figure out how to live like that too. Spend your time with fools - with people who *don't* pay God any mind, and you're headed for trouble.

You're nodding your head along to this verse because you're thinking about those times you associated with fools and got in trouble. Hopefully you're also thinking about some of those wise people God put in your life, and how they helped you become more wise, too.

[Scripture Slide 2] Flip over to 1 Corinthians with me. This is close to the end of the letter, where Paul is beginning to wrap up. This whole letter has been managing chaos in a very messy church. People were fighting with each other, judging, even suing each other. As Paul has tried to inject some order into all this chaos, he ends with a powerful reminder:

Don't be fooled by those who say such things, for "bad company corrupts good character. -- 1 Corinthians 15:33

Bad company corrupts good character. Again, it's like a big sign. WATCH OUT! Be careful who's getting the lion's share of your time and energy. Spend your time with people who are going to help you become more wise. Spend your time with people who are helping you grow in your faith.

Here at Catalyst, we have several spaces where you can build those relationships, but the biggest one is C-Groups. We intentionally don't call C-Groups bible study because we want to make it clear that the goal of C-Groups isn't learning more information (like we said last week, the goal of faith isn't getting smarter). C-Groups are all about relationships. That's why, whether we're serving, celebrating or sharing our lives, we're learning more about each other. We're setting the table for relationships to deepen.

As we look toward the future here at Catalyst, one of the big questions we're asking is how we can create *more* spaces for relationships to grow. What does this look like for our teens at Synthesis? How can they form strong relationships with each other and with our Synthesis leaders, who are mentors for them? And in the Lab, for our kids, how can they grow in their friendships with each other?

Put yourself in places where relationships can happen. Because relationships matter. A lot. They're one thing God uses to blow up our faith.

Now let's flip it around. Because some of us in here have been thinking about that person God has put in their lives. But others of us have had this sort of growing horror as you realize that *you're the person God is putting in someone else's life*. Your parent or your coworker or your neighbor or your friend - when you're around them, you have this sense that you should say something to them. Maybe it's to offer prayer, or initiate a conversation about spiritual matters. But that's weird, a little awkward for a lot of us.

But here's the thing: that awkward place? It's where we really grow. Awkward moments are places of incredible spiritual possibility. What if we could trust that in those moments, God is inviting us to step up and be that spiritual influence in someone else's life?

Many of you already know our new Youth Director Brenda Spencer. She runs Studio 360, a hair salon just across Highway 66 here in Rowlett. She came to Catalyst because of some Catalyst folks who were customers. Every time they came in for a haircut, they kept inviting her. Eventually, she gave in - probably just to get them to shut up.

But she fell in love with Catalyst. Her faith blew up. She found herself in a C-group, and then serving. A couple of years ago, she joined our Leadership Team. And when our previous youth pastor announced he was moving away, she felt God prompting her to step into the position.

That sounds unbelievable, doesn't it? But it's all because someone was willing to make things a little awkward when God prompted.

Friends, we were created for relationships. Relationships have a huge impact on us. What would happen in your faith if you lean into the relationships you have with the wise people in your life? What might happen if you listen in those moments when God is pushing you to speak up and *be* that wise person in someone else's life?

Just how big will your faith get?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us to the table together, to share in God's relational life... together.

1. When in the last week did I lean into wise relationships?
2. When in the last week did I listen to God's prompting in my relationships?
3. When in the next week will I have the opportunity to follow God's prompting?
4. How can I lean into wise relationships this week?