

### **Pivotal Circumstances**

#### **Five Things God Uses to Grow Our Faith**

We've come to the last of our messages in this series about **growing bigger faith**. Each year, during Lent, all of our small groups join in the same study, as we've been doing for the past six weeks. Little did we know when we started this Lenten study just how appropriate it would be for us during this time of trial due to the virus threatening and disrupting our lives.

We've been watching and listening to Pastor **Andy Stanley** as he shares his reflections on ***Five Things That God Uses to Grow Your Faith***. In your small groups I hope your discussions and prayers have been transforming. My Sunday messages have taken Andy Stanley's themes and added my own reflections. My prayer is that through this study and our Sunday messages, our trust in God has grown deeper. The first Sunday in Lent, by way of introduction, I spoke of Big Faith. The second Sunday it was about Practical Teaching. The third Sunday it was on Providential Relationships. The fourth Sunday it was on Private Disciplines. Last week's message was Personal Ministry, and today, the final message is about Pivotal Circumstances.

### **Pivotal Circumstances**

**Pivotal Circumstances:** those big, bad circumstances in life that are integral to coming to know God. Many times it's only when we come to the end of our own power, or we're overwhelmed by tragedy and misfortune, that we turn to God. Sometimes it's to seek help and comfort and sometimes it's in anger – like, “God how could you let this happen?” There's no avoiding it: **our faith in God is impacted by bad things that happen to us.** Yet God can use even the bad circumstances by redeeming them for His purposes and our good.

Well known Christian writer C.S. Lewis wrote in his book *The Problem of Pain*: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Sometimes those circumstances are dramatic events, like natural disasters, or serious illness or injury, or a spreading virus that forces us to stay home and the loss of a job and income that may result. These times try our faith in God, and we wonder if He really is in control or even cares. Other times bad circumstances may be long and drawn out, like caring for a family member with a long-term illness or coping with one who has a substance abuse problem. In the midst of such times we may cry out, “How long, O God?” Maybe we call to mind the first verse of ***Psalm 22, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?***

***Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?*** These are the very same words that Jesus spoke as He hung on the cross.

### **Pain Comes to All**

Some ask how can you believe in a God who allows bad things to happen? The same pain that grows your faith can also destroy your faith. But let us disabuse ourselves of the notion that God cannot be good just because there is pain and tragedy in the world; or that God does not care about us because He allows such things to strike us. **Pain** isn't new, **tragedy** isn't proof of anything about God. They **are not an exception to the rule.** Understanding and accepting this truth is key to realizing God's redemption of our condition. Pain and tragedy are a part of this world, a part of life, a part of our story. How did you react when you found yourself in dark circumstances? Did your confidence in God grow or diminish? I can think of several times in my life when my faith in God would have grown bigger if I'd turned to Him, rather than let anger simmer in my heart.

**Pain and tragedy are actually the rule for life.** Not because of God but **because of sin.** God's intentions for us were from the beginning a life of wholeness and health. But sin – disobedience to God's plan – entered the world and so death and all its attendant pains and tragedies became the norm for this world. Jesus knows that death, pain, and tragedy is unavoidable in this life, yet He knows too, that it is not God's intention or the final word.

### **Jesus Is Life**

The entire 11th chapter of the Gospel of John revolves around the death of Jesus' friend, Lazarus, and then Jesus using this tragic event to reveal who He really is: The Lord of life. Read the story carefully and you'll probably have some troubling questions. Did He purposely delay His response to Mary and Martha to come to their brother's aid? Why did He allow Lazarus to die? Isn't it cruel to make everyone mourn and weep when He could have just gone there to save Lazarus? Couldn't He just heal Lazarus from afar?

Certainly **Jesus knew He would use this circumstance to glorify God.** He said, ***This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it,*** John 11:4. It says that after Mary and Martha sent word to Him to come, He stayed two more days in the place where He was. It is a trial of faith for Mary and Martha that Jesus delayed His return to them to attend to their sick brother.

When Jesus then decided to go His disciples said, ***Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?*** John 11:8. What the disciples meant was that if they're trying to kill Jesus, they are also trying to kill us, your disciples. It is a trial of their faith in Christ that they go with Him

back into Judea, so quickly after His life has been threatened. [Thomas is resigned that Jesus is just so bull-headed that he'll risk it all and so they might as well resign themselves to dying with Him. Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, *"Let us go, that we may die with him,"* John 11:16.]

[Jesus responds with this cryptic comment about someone walking in the daytime versus walking at night and stumbling because the light is not in him. What did He mean? His words about light point to Himself – that even though they may follow Him into the valley of the shadow of death, they need not fear evil for He, the light of the world.]

Jesus then tells disciples plainly: *Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe,* John 11:14-15. Glad? Really? What He planned to do was so big, and so important, that He is willing to let His friend die, Mary and Martha to experience grief, and allow skeptics to say, "See, we knew He couldn't do anything. He's not really who you think He is."

When He arrived in Bethany Martha expressed what most any of us would, *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* Lord, why don't you come and heal my mother, father, brother, sister, friend etc.? I know You can do it. *"Whatever you ask from God, God will give you."* Here's something to think about: If Christ had come immediately, and cured the sickness of Lazarus, He would have done no more than he did for many; if he had raised Him to life when newly dead, no more than He had done for some: but, deferring his relief so long, he had an opportunity of doing more for him than for any. We might take note, that *God has gracious intentions even in seeming delays to our requests.*

Jesus says to Martha, *"Your brother will rise again."* Like most of, Martha replies with a statement of faith about the last day, final judgement, or something like that. But *Jesus' purpose for Martha and Mary and His disciples is the same He has for us: to make God real.* To move us from a nominal faith in God, praying at dinner, just a private thing in our life – to an out loud, "God really did something in my life!" kind of faith, so that God is no longer an idea or image we might have picked up in Sunday School, but we come to know Him as the one, true, living, and personal God that He is.

Now, in this chapter of the Gospel of John you will find the shortest verse in the Bible. John 11:33 reads, *Jesus wept.* He shared the sorrow and pain that those mourning Lazarus carried. He understood how they felt just as He understands how you and I feel in the middle of our darkest times. Yet in this chapter we also have *words of Jesus that speak an eternal truth* that carries through our darkest circumstances, up to and including death: *I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.* He wants to reinforce our faith in Him, and He will use even the tragedies in our lives to bring home the lesson.

## **God Has A Purpose**

Would Jesus really allow all that happened to Lazarus and his sisters, so that His followers would grow in their faith in Him? Have you noticed that He doesn't spare any of us from the tragedies and pain we experience? In the context of His presence with us and in a community of believers we are able to carry through **dark times** and they **become pivotal circumstances through our trust in God**. If you've been through one or more of those times you'd likely say, "I wouldn't choose it, want to go through it again, or wish it on anyone. But somehow God got through to me in this trial and brought me closer to Himself. Author Phillip Yancy: "One thing worse than disappointment with God is disappointment without God."

In the Bible James reminds us: Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that ***the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything, James 1:2-4.***

Maybe this isn't the best of examples but let me share it with you. Jim, who sold us the van we our son, is a unique man. While spending most of a day with him at his auto shop we learned a bit about his life. He has a PhD. in mathematics yet realized he wasn't cut out to teach. He went into auto mechanics for high-end autos. He told us he was very successful and grew wealthy from his auto repair business. Then he was struck by cancer and wasn't able to work for a year. He recovered, but during that year he underwent a heart change. He shared with us that something told him he needed to change what he was doing ... that is, just making lots of money for himself. When he was able to work again, he had a new, single focus: to repair and recondition disability vans so they would be available for those in need. And that's what he's been doing. I wouldn't say Jim is a believer in Christ, but I believe God spoke to him in his illness and steered his life into a more useful purpose. So out of his tragedy, cancer, Jim's life was steered in a direction that benefits others and gives him joy. Maybe you have similar stories to tell ... tell them.

Bad things happen, all the time, and bad things happen to good people. In the thick of the darkness **we can choose whether we'll turn to God and get better or turn in on ourselves and get bitter**. Better or bitter? Which will you choose? Probably one of the most profound prayers one can utter in the midst of bad circumstances is this: **"God, what would you have me learn from this experience?"** It may be days, months, or even years, but God will use your tragedy to do something important. He is doing something in you so that you will come out the other end a bigger, better, more whole person. **Many become even better servants for God as a result of their dark experiences.**

This is Palm Sunday. We mark the beginning of Holy Week, the events of Jesus' life that led to the most pivotal event in human history: His death on the Cross. Though our Holy Week plans have been upended by this virus threat that

**keeps us from gathering in person, we still look to the future with hope because we know Easter is coming. His death paid the price for all the sin in the world and then He rose from death to show us that in Him there is no eternal death.**

**Friends, Easter is not cancelled because of this virus or any other tragedy that may strike. Easter will never be cancelled. The Lord truly is the resurrection and the life for all.**

### **Sermon Take Away**

**Probably one of the most profound prayer one can utter in the midst of bad circumstances is this: “God, what would you have me learn from this experience?”**

**In the thick of the darkness we can choose whether we’ll turn to God and get better or turn in on ourselves and get bitter. Which will you choose: better or bitter?**

***... the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything, James 1:2-4.***

**Pain and tragedy are actually the rule for life. Not because of God but because of sin.**