

Five Things God Uses  
*Divine Crossroads*  
September 30, 2018

**PRE-SERVICE VIDEO**

**Congregational Songs – Great God Who Saves / One Thing**

**Reflection – Hannah**

**Congregational Song – Climb / T&G**

**Video – Behind the Scenes**

**Feature – Pompeii / Offering**

Well, isn't that a happy way to begin a message?

The walls have fallen down.  
It's dark and it's gray.  
We're surrounded by rubble.  
And we close our eyes to try and remember what it used to be like before.

Before the accident  
Before the disappointment  
Before the rejection  
Before the injustice  
Before the abuse  
Before the diagnosis  
Before the challenge or difficulty came upon us without warning.

And how are we going to be an optimist about *this*? How can anything good come from *this*?<sup>1</sup>

Some of us walked in today with that very thought. Some of us have had it in the past and, for some of us, that day is still to come: a *circumstance* that will prove to be *pivotal* in our lives; a divine crossroads, so to speak, that will determine what happens to us and to our faith.

**A Quick Review**

And, if you've been here during the past month or so, you know that's what we've been talking about:

- How we grow in our faith
- How we develop and become mature
- How we become more of the person God intends for us to be, the best possible version of ourselves ...

... which, if you're a Christian, means becoming more like Jesus in ...

- how you think

- how you act
- and you impact the world around you

And in this series we've talked about four things that God uses in our lives to bring about that kind of transformation.

**The first is *practical teaching* ...**

... when someone takes biblical truth and clearly explains how it applies in everyday life.

And this one is so critical – it's the foundation – because it shapes our thinking, which then shapes our action, which then shapes our impact.

**The second catalyst we learned about is *private spiritual disciplines* ...**

... the things you regularly do behind the scenes and alone with God *now* (like prayer and fasting and giving) so that your faith is stronger *later*.

The third thing that God so often uses to grow us is ...

***Personal ministry* ...**

... which is serving God and people in ways that bring honor to Jesus, build up His church, and help others to know Him better.

Personal ministry is so important because this is where you get a sense being in the game with God; being part of his mission of redeeming the world. Very few things will grow your faith like that.

**Then last week we looked at *providential relationships* ...**

... where God brings a specific individual (or individuals) into our life to help us grow into the person He wants us to be. They're able *teach* us things that we wouldn't *learn* on our own or *show* us things we couldn't *see* on our own.

And if you were to talk to any follower of Jesus today who has a strong faith and is becoming more of the person they were meant to be, it's very likely they would talk about these four experiences.

Now, they might not use those exact terms but these things would show up in their story ...

... which is why I want you to know about them. I want you to be aware of the typical pattern of God's activity in the life of a follower of Jesus so that you'll be able to embrace these things when they happen and take advantage the opportunities when they come up.

So many times I've seen people become Christians and then they stall out. They think "well, I believe in Jesus – I trusted Him as my savior – but my life isn't really changing. I'm not really changing. What should I do?"

Well, here ya go.

- Put yourself in a position where you get practical teaching.
- Develop the habit of private spiritual disciplines.
- Find a way to be personally involved in ministry of some kind.
- And put yourself in places where providential relationships can happen.

And one other thing – you have to go beyond “just dabbling” in those things. It doesn’t work that way. You’ve got to *do them* consistently. You’ve got to be committed to them. They have to become cornerstones of your life.

And if you talk to anyone who has a strong faith and has experienced transformation, they will tell you that, too.

And they will also tell you about the fifth and final catalyst which we’re talking about today:

### ***Pivotal circumstances.***

## **A Definition**

Now, what is a pivotal circumstance, spiritually speaking?

**A pivotal circumstance is an unexpected event or situation that forces us to turn *to* God or *away from* God.**

It’s a divine crossroads where we either go forward or we stop and go in another direction.

And every person who is Christian has had at least one pivotal circumstance in their life. That would be whatever happened that first drew them to a place where they understood ...

- That they were a sinner
- That they needed a savior – they couldn’t do enough good things to atone or make up for their sin
- But they didn’t have to because Jesus of Nazareth did that for them when he died on a Roman cross and rose again on the third day after.

For me, that pivotal circumstance took place at Calvary Baptist Church in Bowie, MD. I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and guy in the band – not Richie Loomis (who I told you about last week) – a guy in the band invited me to play trumpet on a song the choir at his church was doing the following Sunday. My family didn’t go to church at that time, so I said yes.

When I went to the rehearsal on Wednesday night ...

- It just so happened that my mom dropped me off too early which meant that ...
- It just so happened that I was there at the end of a revival service which meant that ...
- I just so happened to hear the preacher explain who Jesus was and what he had done for us.

And when he said “if you want to receive Jesus as your savior, come down front on this next song and I’ll help you do that” as soon as the music started, I went down front.

And I prayed “I’m only in 9<sup>th</sup> grade but *I know already* that I’m a sinner. Jesus, I believe you died to atone for my sins and I accept you as my savior. Come into my life and help me follow you.”

It was an amazing moment and an amazing experience. And if you’ve not had that experience, I hope and pray you will someday. And if you want help in that, come talk to me after this service and I will do that for you.

Anyway, that Sunday evening I was baptized. A few weeks later my sisters starting coming to church and they accepted Christ and were baptized. And then my dad and my mom started coming and they got baptized, too.

And because of that Wednesday night, the trajectory of my life and the life of my sisters and my parents was changed for all of eternity. Talk about a pivotal circumstance! I had no clue any of that was going to happen!

Of course, what *made* it a pivotal circumstance is that I had a choice to make. I could either turn to God or *away from* God. I didn’t have to respond positively. I could’ve come up with a bunch of excuses as to why I shouldn’t accept Jesus as my savior that evening. I could’ve turned away.

And if I had done that, *maybe* God would’ve given me another opportunity, but maybe not. My life and my family’s life and maybe even your life could’ve gone in a completely different direction at that point.

So, that’s a pivotal circumstance.

And, again, if you’re a believer in Jesus, you’ve had at least one that’s similar to that. Somehow, something you weren’t planning on happened which brought you to the point where you had to choose to embrace Jesus as your savior and to go forward with Him.

And *throughout your life* as a Christian and follower of Jesus, God will continue to use those kinds of unexpected events and situations – pivotal circumstances/divine crossroads – where you have to choose to turn *towards* Him or *away from* Him.

And you’ll either grow in your faith or you’ll take a step back.

## **Trials & Tests**

Now, there are lots of other events and situations that function as pivotal circumstances. And many of them are positive:

- When people have kids, often they’ll think, “I really want them to know something about God” so they start going to church and something happens to *them* in the process – *they* start growing in *their* faith.
- Sometimes people will go on a mission trip and that opens their eyes to how the rest of the world lives. They realize how blessed they are and they begin to change the way they look at money and possessions and they want to get in the game, getting into personal ministry.

- Sometimes it's a move to a different town with a different environment and a different set of people and the chance to have a fresh start.

In all of those situations, God gets our attention in a new way and the Holy Spirit says “this is a great time for you to take a step towards Me. This is a great opportunity for you to engage in the kinds of activities and relationships that will transform your life.”

And many Christ-followers can tell you a story of how they said “yes” in those kinds of positive pivotal circumstances and how their life changed – how they grew, how their faith grew – as a result.

That said ... most Christians who have grown in their faith would also tell you stories of pivotal circumstances that were *not* so positive; unexpected situations and events where it felt like ...

The walls had fallen down.  
 And it was dark and it was gray.  
 And surrounded by rubble,  
 They would close their eyes to try and remember what it used to be like before ...

The accident  
 The disappointment  
 The rejection  
 The injustice  
 The abuse  
 The diagnosis

And in those unexpected and negative circumstances, faith suddenly becomes very *personal*. *God* becomes very personal.

You go from praying before dinner to falling on your knees before God, begging God for hope, for answers. Your relationship with Christ goes beyond Sunday morning and becomes personal.<sup>ii</sup>

And you have to decide: *am I going to move towards Him? Or am I going to move away from Him?*

Again, a lot of times, it's not the good things that God uses to take us to a new place but a hard thing or a tragic thing.

The great Christian author and philosopher C.S. Lewis ...

**... once described it like this:**

“We can ignore pleasure but pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience but shouts to us in our pain; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>iii</sup>

What an interesting way to put it: *God shouts to us in our pain.*

... which is not exactly what we want Him to do, is it? What we want God to do is to *fix* it ... or, better, *prevent* it from happening in the first place!

But God doesn't seem to do that very often, which means that we are left to live in a broken world where bad things happen; a world where *death* is part of the story.

Of course, that's not the way God intended it to be. That's not the kind of world God created.

Instead, the Bible says that it was through the sin of Adam (which has since been repeated by all of humanity – every single one of us) ... it was through his (and our) disobedience to God, through his (and our) decision to walk away from God ... it was through the sin of Adam that death entered into the world and our world became something God never intended.

If you want to know “why bad things happen to good people” that's your answer ... though it doesn't really help when you're in the middle of dealing with ...

- The accident
- The disappointment
- The rejection
- The injustice
- The abuse
- The diagnosis

What does help – or what *can* help – is the knowledge that ever since the moment when the curse of sin entered, God has been working out a plan to redeem everything; working out a way to restore the goodness of His creation and to bring us back to Him.

And, in that plan, God has sovereignly and brilliantly chosen to use *everything* to accomplish that goal – even the curse of sin and death that is present in this world ... which is why even the *negative* unexpected situations and events can become a catalyst for our growth.

And this mindset, this particular outlook on trials and tribulations, has been present since the very first days of Christianity.

Not long after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman authorities tried to shut down the growing movement of men and women who were coming to believe in Him and follow Him ... which meant that it became more and more difficult to be a Christian.

In fact, at one point, a great persecution arose; so much so that many of the first believers had to leave and move away from Jerusalem – which was a *bad* thing. They had to scatter all across the Roman Empire, which meant that the message of Jesus went all over the Roman Empire *with them* – which was a *good* thing.

Anyway, at one point, James – who was not only the leader of the church in Jerusalem but also the brother of Jesus – wrote a letter to them. They didn't have email in those days, so it was copied by hand and then carried to various locations and read to the collectives of believers (otherwise known as “the church.”)

And here's what James said – at the very beginning of the letter ...

### ... the very first thing ...

*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 (NIV)*

Notice that James doesn't say "if you face trials." He says "when you face trials" because, if you're a human being you will face trials and tribulations. It's inevitable.

- If you're married, you're going to have trials and tribulations in your marriage.
- If you have kids, you're going to have trials and tribulations in being a parent.
- If you have a job, you're going to have trials and tribulations with the boss or the other employees.
- If you have an old dog that has forgotten that he's supposed to poop outside (which is going on in our home right now), you're going to have trials and tribulations in being a dog owner

And James says instead of complaining "why me, why this, why now" in all of those situations (and many more) we should look at those challenges with an attitude of *pure joy*.

That sounds like crazy talk, doesn't it?

But James isn't crazy because he's not saying ...

- "Do your best to be happy about the situation that is causing you such stress.
- "Be happy that you accidentally stepped in dog poop in your bare feet (like I did).
- "Rejoice in how the curse of sin and death are screwing up your life."

James isn't talking about happiness at all.

Instead, he's saying ...

- "You can be joyful – you can be an *optimist* – because you have a God who can accomplish something good through bad situations which *test your faith in Him*.
- You can rejoice – you can be an *optimist* – because you just encountered a pivotal circumstance in your life which God has allowed and maybe even caused ... *so that ... you may be mature and complete not lacking anything*" ...

... which, again, is the goal. If you're a Christian – if you're a believer in Jesus – God's goal is to grow you into the best

possible version of yourself which is to be like Jesus in how you think, act and impact.

And that's why James says "when you're in this situation, don't look for the easy way out. Stay the course. Keep going. God wants to do something in you. Let *perseverance* finish its work."

## **The Seed Principle**

Now, at this point, I could probably stop and say, "OK, whatever situation in your life right now is testing your faith, I encourage you to persevere. You are at a divine crossroads, facing a pivotal circumstance and I want to encourage you to turn to God instead of away from God."

And then I could pray for you and we would be done.

And for some of you that would be good enough. You just need a little encouragement today to "lean not on your own understanding"; a little reminder that your life, as we sang earlier, is in the hands of a God who brings and redeems our suffering.

But some of you are a little more skeptical and that kind of conclusion might actually bother you because right now, you're thinking "I get what you're saying, Rick. I get what James is saying. But why should I believe either of you?"

"Why should I believe that God can redeem the negative and painful unexpected events and situations in my life? Why should I believe that they can somehow wind up having a positive effect on me? Because right now, I don't see it. All I see is walls that have fallen down and I'm surrounded by rubble."

One of Jesus' closest friends, the Apostle John, tells the story of an incredible incident that happened in Jesus' life that might be of help in answering that question. It's found in chapters 11 and 12 of his Gospel.

At this point, Jesus and his disciples are in the northern part of Israel when word comes that another of his friends, a guy by the name of Lazarus, is sick and at the point of death.

And, at this point, it's also well-established that Jesus has the ability to heal whoever He wants. And He doesn't even have to be present to do it. He can just speak the word and it happens.

So, the expectation is that, upon hearing this news, Jesus will go back down to Bethany (which is where Lazarus lives with his sisters Mary and Martha) to heal him.

But he doesn't. He stays put for two days.

**And then out of the blue He says to his disciples ...**

*"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."* John 11:11 (NIV)

And the disciples, as usual, don't understand what Jesus means. They think Lazarus is literally sleeping.

**So Jesus states it plainly.**

*“Lazarus is dead.” John 11:14 (NIV)*

And the disciples are thinking what you and I would be thinking: “What? How could you let your friend die? Why didn’t you just speak the word of healing? This doesn’t make any sense.”

And then Jesus adds something that, at first, makes even less sense.

**He says, “Lazarus is dead ...**

*“And for your sake I am glad I was not there ...”  
John 11:15 (NIV)*

Now, think about that for a minute. God in human flesh is saying He is glad He didn’t heal one of his best friends. He’s glad his friend died.

Can you imagine that? That’s just crazy.

In fact, if you’ve ever doubted the authenticity of what’s written about Jesus, the fact that this statement was recorded and preserved ought to convince you otherwise because this is too severe to be made up. It’s in total opposition to everything we want to believe about God.<sup>iv</sup>

The only reason for keeping it in the story is that Jesus really did say it; that what Jesus did in neglecting his friend and in allowing his friend’s sisters to suffer and grieve *was intentional*.

In essence, Jesus is saying “I set this whole thing up. I could’ve healed him but I’m glad I didn’t.”

Fortunately for them and for us he explains why.

**Jesus says, “Lazarus is dead” ...**

*“And for your sake I am glad I was not there ... so that you may believe.”  
John 11:14-15 (NIV)*

In other words, “all of the pain and drama you’re going to witness when we get to Bethany is about your faith. And all of the pain and drama that Lazarus’ family is going through right now is about their faith.”

And they’re thinking what you and I would think – “really? You mean, our trust in you is that important that you would let your friend die?”

“Yes,” Jesus would answer.

“Mary and Martha’s trust in you is so important you would let them go through this kind of grief?”

“Yes, it is.”

And that ought to say something to us about how important our faith is to God as well. Everything rises and falls on it.

Anyway ... so they head south. And when Jesus gets to Bethany, sure enough, Mary and Martha are overcome with grief at the loss of their brother.

“If you had gotten here sooner,” they say to Him, “he would still be alive.”

**But Martha adds:**

*“But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”*      *John 11:22 (NIV)*

In other words, “this is the worst outcome I could possibly imagine, but Jesus I still trust you. Even now, there’s hope.”

John tells us that they take Jesus to the tomb where Lazarus is buried. And then, finally, Jesus himself is overcome with emotion for his friend.

**John writes ...**

*Jesus wept.*      *John 11:35 (NIV)*

And the lesson in that is that even though He allowed it to happen, it’s still horrible and heartbreaking to Jesus. God hates death and pain and suffering as much as we do. He’s not detached from our trials and tribulations. He is in it with us, living through it with us.

And if you’ve heard this story before you know what happens next. They roll the stone away from the tomb and Jesus calls Lazarus back from the dead.

And everyone is amazed and everyone rejoices.

**But most importantly, John writes:**

*Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.*  
*John 11:45 (NIV)*

Their faith grew. The faith of the disciples grew. And the faith of Mary and Martha grew.

And that’s an incredible story because not only is it an example of how God sometimes doesn’t take away our pain and bad circumstances, but uses them to grow our faith. *It also points to an even greater truth about God and how God redeems pain and suffering ...*

... a truth which becomes clear in the very next chapter of John’s story about Jesus.

After Jesus does this miracle, people go crazy over him and Lazarus. People are coming from everywhere to see them which makes the religious leaders both jealous and nervous. They’re jealous because people are following Jesus instead of them and they’re nervous because the Romans don’t put up with insurgencies.

And the people are talking about revolting and making Jesus their king which they know would lead to a bloodbath.

So John tells us that not only are the leaders planning to kill Jesus ...

*The chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him. John 12:10-11 (NIV)*

They just want to put an end to it.

But in spite of all that, more and more people keep coming to see Jesus and Lazarus. At one point, John tells us that even non-Jewish people start coming to see them!

It's getting crazier by the day. The religious leaders are getting more amped up, the Romans are more amped up, and the people are amped up.

And Jesus realizes that his time has come.

**At that point, Jesus says something very cryptic.**

*"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*

*Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." John 12:23-24 (NIV)*

And you can imagine the puzzled looks on the faces of those non-Jewish people – Gentiles – who had come to see Jesus get even more glory by doing even more miracles, and instead encounter a man who talks in riddles about farming.<sup>v</sup>

And so, like a third-grade teacher, Jesus stops to explain how there might be glory where we can find only grief.

- A grain of wheat has to die, He says.
- Then it has to be buried in God's good earth.
- Else you don't get a harvest.

You don't get amber waves of grain without a certain amount of death and burial.

I don't know much about farming but as I prepared for this message, I read that two bushels of seed can produce forty to fifty bushels of yield; enough wheat for about 2,500 loaves of bread.

That's what happens when a seed goes into the ground and dies only to be reborn.

*And that's what Jesus is saying is going to happen to Him.*

Jesus' body, sown like a single seed into the earth, will send its roots down and its stalk up until it bursts from the ground with power to feed the hungry souls of the world.

And while Jesus is saying this is what *He* will do, He also says this is how it's going to work for his followers as well. God

isn't going to reap the whole harvest without dropping a lot of other grains into the earth, too!

**He continues:**

*“Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” John 12:25 (NIV)*

Translation: You and I – if we follow Jesus – are like a grain of wheat. We're like a seed.

But a grain of wheat doesn't “die” by falling into the ground. It dies by being stripped from the head.

- To get bread, you have to thresh some kernels.
- To get wine, you have to crush some grapes.
- To grow and change into the person God wants you to be in Christ, the old life has to be threshed and buried.

**Closing**

So, why should you and I believe that God can redeem the negative and painful unexpected events and situations in our lives? Because he did it in his own.

In Jesus, God paid the price, absorbed the evil, suffered the humiliation in order to save the world He loves. And then he overcame all of it by rising up from the grave.

He took the process of pain and suffering and death into Himself and said, “It's not how I wanted it but this is how the world works now, so I am going to subject myself to it and use it and transform it.”

In God's agriculture, dying and losing, suffering and pain, always lead to life. It was true for Jesus. It will be true for you and me.

So, whenever you face trials of many kinds approach them with joy, 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.

Let's pray.

**Video – “A Grain of Wheat”**

**Feature – I Am a Seed**

**CLOSING COMMENTS**

1. Next week – Andy Rhea
2. Blessing –

the lord bless you and keep you  
the lord make his face to shine upon you

the lord lift up his countenance upon you  
and give you peace in

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> From the song Pompeii by Bastille

<sup>ii</sup> Great line from Shawn Spradling's version of this message, <https://cpcc.church/messages/pivotal-circumstances/>

<sup>iii</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, pg 91

<sup>iv</sup> From Andy Stanley's version of this message.

<sup>v</sup> From Cornelius Plantinga's amazing sermon on this passage @<https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-2003/unless-grain-wheat-falls-sermon>