

On-Track: Life-changing Experiences

As a pastor, I see people walk through hard times, and come out the other side with rock solid, unshakable faith. In fact, you don't hear a faith journey story without hearing about a hard experience **they didn't ask for**. But they tell about how God did something that God could not have done any other way. How the Lord did something amazing through a life-changing experience where God felt far away.

Now when they call God "Father;" it's not some name or title, it's personal, and it is personal because they experienced God's faithfulness during the hard time they went through. Now the situation may have been good or bad.

But more often than not, it's in the big, bad circumstances; that phone call, the report from the doctor, that problem with a child; that moment you don't know what to do... when God moves in an unimaginable way because of that tough situation.

C.S. Lewis says it best in his book "The problem with pain."

*"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."*

If your new to Christianity or returning to Christianity, or even skeptical, your response to this may be thinking that we are making excuses for God because He backed Himself into a corner. You know – God is supposed to be a good, loving God, and bad things happen, but these poor Christians have to help God out, because how can you explain these bad things that happen to good people if God is supposed to be all powerful and all loving!

So Christians have to leverage these situations and explain these things away. They have to reconcile the reality of the world with this **ancient faith** that seem undeniable. The amazing thing is:

There is an undeniable relationship between the bad unexpected circumstances and our faith.

It's not an accidental relationship, it is an intentional relationship that God has worked since the beginning of time. And from this relationship we learn:

The same circumstance that can turn us away from God, if we allow, God will use it to make our faith stronger!

James, the brother of Jesus, who was in the middle of the death and resurrection of Jesus, wrote this about the relationship between circumstances and our faith:

*"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your (of your what?) **faith** (There is a connection between your trials of life and your faith, and the testing of your faith produces something. It...) produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work (This means that **God is up to something** in those life-changing experiences of your life. Let perseverance finish it's work...) so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." James 1:2-4*

James says, we will experience overwhelming circumstances and it's not accidental that something happens to their faith in God! This is one of the 5 things God uses to grow our faith. Those negative, unexplainable life changing experiences:

This is the way God works and He has worked that way from the very beginning!

I think the best illustration of this, comes from the Gospels, a story you likely know. But before you jump into the story, slow your mind down and experience this story with the characters. **This isn't a message for the faint of heart; and in it, you may discover something very disturbing.** In fact, it may create a new category in your theology... and it may create more questions than answers.

In this scripture, Jesus isn't manipulating a life changing experience to his benefit, Jesus is actually creating a negative experience - in order to grow someone's faith **and your faith.** Turn to **John 11:1-27**

John is the only record of the story of Lazarus. Now Mary, Martha and Lazarus are all close friends of Jesus. Look at verses 2 and 4... He has eaten at their home, they supported him financially. After their brother became sick, the sisters sent word to Jesus [who was 2-4 days away]; but listen to what they said, "Lord, the one you **love** is sick." **Jesus loved this family!**

This is powerful, they didn't say "Lazarus is sick", they said "The one you love is sick." They knew Jesus would know who they were talking about, they didn't need a name. Their relationship was so close, they only had to say "The one you love."

Jesus healed many, many people. People he only met once, and he healed people he never met, like in our second sermon about the Centurion's servant.

But here is a new biblical principle for you to consider:

Look in verse 4, When Jesus heard about Lazarus, he said "This sickness will not end in death (he knew the outcome of this event); NO, it is for God's glory! Here is the point... illness, sickness, and disease... **can be for God's glory!**

To that, I would say... I like the glory where you hit the home run that wins the last game of the World Series and when the reporters stick their mics in your face and ask "How did you do it, and you say 'I give God the glory.' Or you win an award at work or in an organization, you say thank you, and say, "*I give all the glory to God, I didn't have the ability to do it myself.*"

I like that glory! Something really good happens and I say, "It was God!"

Jesus says, "That's good, but there is another way, and it is more effective!"

It's the way... when something really **bad** happens to you. **And God says, "I'm going to use that for my glory – so My Son make be glorified through it!"** Tuck that Biblical Principle away for the next time life takes a bad turn!

Remember, this isn't a family Jesus just met. He knew their names, He knew where they lived, they supported Him... there is a special relationship with this family!

Look at verse 6, Jesus heard Lazarus was sick... what did He do? He stayed where he was 2 more days! Jesus did what you would **NOT** expect Him to do - nothing! Ever feel that way in life! You prayed – God help me, God help me, God help me! God I promise to do this... God I promise to do that... **and nothing!**

Verse 7, after 2 days Jesus said "Let's go..." **2 days** after Mary and Martha watch their brother suffer, **2 days** one sister watches their brother die while the other watches the road for Jesus to come. I can see them asking anyone coming from that direction... have you seen the Rabbi Jesus and His disciples?

For **2 days**... nothing and they see their brother slowly die. After 2 days, Jesus said, "Let's go back to Judea." Now Judea was not a good place for Jesus, they tried to stone Him there before. I have a hunch that the disciples remembered the time Jesus healed the servant of the Centurion from a long distance... **let's do that now!**

Then in Verse 15, there's one verse that's important to note: Jesus knew, in some mysterious way, Lazarus was dead. So He said, **"...for your sake, I'm glad I was not there, so that you may believe."**

To that I would ask, what about Lazarus' sake? What about Mary and Martha's sake? Think this through... Jesus is looking at His disciples and saying, "I'm glad that I wasn't there, I'm glad Lazarus died, I'm glad Mary and Martha struggled and saw their brother die, I'm glad they are disappointed in me, I'm glad for all the mystery surrounding this whole thing.

I'm glad because I have something in story that is so big and so important for you to learn, I am willing to let the one I love die and the ones I love to have their heart broken! That is how important this lesson is!

Now here is the important part – Jesus says “**So that...**” Here is the reason and purpose! Do you want to know why I was not there and why I waited 2 days and waited until it seems like there was no hope???? **SO YOU MAY BELIEVE!**

There is belief... and there is pain and suffering... and Jesus knows that belief is more important than healing or miracles! Jesus, are you saying that you would let someone you love suffer and die; just so we could have bigger faith?

Is belief that important to you Jesus?

Jesus says – YES! Hard to believe, but growing in faith is that important to God!

- **Belief is more important than pain and heart ache.**

This is a very dramatic moment in the life of Jesus! It goes against what we want to believe about God. Basically:

- **Jesus set up this event to build big faith in believers.**

Jesus is saying, “Guys, I set this whole thing up, it is **THAT** important for you to believe and have big, bold, audacious confidence in me.”

NOW the disciples aren't getting what Jesus is teaching them about faith! But they realized they're not winning the argument. **In Verse 16**, at the end of the discussion, Thomas gave his best Eeyore impersonation – remember Eeyore the gloomy negative donkey from Winnie the Pooh, he said, “Well, we might as well die with him.”

Now go down to Verse 21, Martha heard Jesus was coming down the road, she runs out to meet him and falls at His feet; **and says what each of us have said to God at some point!**

Even if you are not a religious person, in some way or another you have said something like this to God...

Lazarus' sister Martha (Not Mary) told Jesus something we have all said to God:

If you would have been here, this would not have happened!

If you were here my brother would not have died,

Martha implicitly said, “Jesus, this is your fault!”

If you would have been here, this would not have happened!

But this event was much bigger than a healing.

Verse 21: But Martha went on, “*But I know, I believe, I trust... that even now God will give you what you ask!*” This is so cool... Martha is standing in front of Jesus and said “I know, without a doubt, that God will give you whatever you ask! That is why I called you in the first place when my brother became sick!

When Jesus told Martha that she would see Lazarus again, Martha reached into her theology and said what I have heard so many Christians say, “*I know he will raise again in the resurrection at the last day.*” I know, that's what we say at every funeral. That's what they say, we will see him in heaven! And Abraham and Isaac will be going around and giving autographs and all the famous Old Testament people will be there for a big autograph party.

Verse 24, Martha could have said, “Jesus, I know he will raise again in the resurrection... but you could have kept this from happening now!” But this next part is very important: in verse 25 Jesus said, “**I am the resurrection and the life**”

“It is about who Jesus is! He is the resurrection and the life.”

Jesus said, “Martha, you are right, God will give me whatever I pray for - but it is bigger than that. You’re right, I am a teacher sent by God – it’s bigger than that. You’re right, I am a miracle worker and could have healed your brother earlier – but it is bigger than that. It is so big and so important to everything I am about, it is so important to people who will live hundreds and thousands of years from now.

Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life! And that is what this is all about... Jesus was saying, Martha, Mary, everyone, whoever, anyone who believes **in**.

This is more than - believe that - It is more than believing about

This is about believing **in**! This is about trust. Jesus says “Anyone who trusts me or put’s their trust in me, will live, even if they die. And anyone who believes in me, whoever trusts in me, will live, even if they die. And whoever lives by trusting or believing in me will never die!

And then Jesus asked Martha... do you believe this?

This whole thing is about - Mary, Martha, everyone, I want you to believe **more** in me. This is about your faith in me... and what I will do to grow that confidence.

To say “I believe” or “I trust” in God is the greatest way to honor God

Do you believe Martha? Verse 27, “Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” And Jesus, I believe that even though you let me brother die, even though you didn’t answer my prayer. Jesus, I don’t have anything to base my belief on, but I believe. **WOW**

Then Jesus asked to be taken to the grave and he stood at the grave.

And we find the shortest verse in the Bible, “He Wept.”

Jesus who performs miracles and is the resurrection and the life.

Jesus who knew what he was about to do, but did not rush in and do a miracle, he paused to feel what Mary and Martha were feeling.

Jesus feels your pain in that heart-breaking life experience or when you feel that Jesus didn’t come through for you. **This is Jesus saying, I understand how that feels, and I mourn with you. I know!**

And even though the Lazarus was dead 4 days, he had the stone moved and **in verse 42**, Jesus prayed, thanking God the Father. He recognized this for the people... **that they be believe! Then he said “Lazarus, come out!”**

And Lazarus came out alive. If there was ever a doubt that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, this record from the Bible answered it.

Here’s how the scripture ends, **verse 45**, “*Therefore, many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.*” They placed their faith and trust in Jesus. Jesus did not simply leverage a painful situation, He created one in order to show the connection between life-changing experiences and the growth and development of our faith, our confidence in God!

God is so honored by our faith and trust in Him:

- **This scripture shows, God will do anything to grow our faith**

There’s a connection we can never really understand, unless we hear the stories of how God grew big, out of the box confidence in people. **The difference between a person who moves in and trusts in God, and a person who moves away from God in life changing situations - are the people who they surround themselves with.**

Prayer: