



## 5: God's in the Circumstances | Pastor Brad Williams | January 24, 2010

### A. Fellowship Time (10-15 minutes)

1. Chitchat. Perhaps offer coffee, tea, or a cold drink with some snacks.
2. Pray (or invite someone to pray) to open the discussion.

### B. Review Time (Read the summary below to the group: 5-10 minutes)

#### How is it possible that our faith grows in some of the worst of times?

We've all had experiences when we've wondered how anything good could come from our bad circumstances. But the circumstances of life can greatly shape the depth and scope of our faith. C.S. Lewis explained it this way, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Some of us may be more skeptical and think, "How could God allow bad things to happen to good people?" The reality remains that there is an undeniable relationship between big bad unexpected circumstances, and our faith. James acknowledged this relationship and encouraged others to "*Consider it pure joy... whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything*" (James 1:2-4). James was saying it's not accidental that we will face overwhelming circumstances. And it's not accidental that in the middle of those circumstances something begins to happen to our faith in God. As we will look at John 11 and the story of Lazarus, we will see how God leverages even the worst of times to build our trust in Him.

#### Principle: Every circumstance we face is an opportunity for God to grow our faith.

The very circumstances that have the power to turn us away from God, He uses, He leverages, to do something in us to make our faith stronger. This is the way that God works, and it is the way He has worked since the very beginning. The best illustration of this comes from a story from the life of Jesus. [Read **John 11:1-44** together now.] Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were close friends of Jesus. Jesus had healed strangers, people he saw only once, and even people he never met, just by speaking a word. So when Lazarus became sick, Jesus' friends called for him. **John 11:4** tells us that "*When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory."*" Jesus was basically saying that illness and disease can be for God's glory. We don't like having to suffer to bring God glory. We like the kind of glory where something really good happens and we get to say, "It's not me, it was God." But there is another way God gets the glory and it is generally a more effective program. It's the program where something really bad is introduced into our lives and experience. God allows it and leverages it for His glory.

In **John 11:6** it says that "*when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was for two more days.*" He did exactly what we would not expect him to do. Everything about it is wrong, frustrating, and a bit infuriating. Sometimes we've felt that in our lives. We ask God to help or heal but instead, He does nothing. Finally, two days later, in **John 11:7** (Jesus) said to his disciples, "*Let us go back to Judea.*" Jesus was willing for one whom he loved to die and for people whom he loved to have broken hearts in order to teach an important lesson to the disciples because in God's economy, belief is more important than relieving pain and suffering. Martha shared her disappointment as she explained that she'd seen Jesus heal strangers, people that weren't even in His presence, people who were undeserving, and even the servant of an enemy. In **verse 25**, "*Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'*" This whole set of circumstances was about Mary, Martha and the whole world believing more about Him, it was about faith and confidence in Jesus.

Then Jesus asked to be taken to the grave. He stood there with all the mourners, and **John 11:35-36** it says "*Jesus wept.*" Then the Jews said, "*See how he loved him!*" Jesus who performs miracles, who is the resurrection and the life, and who knows what He's about to do, paused to feel what Mary and Martha had been feeling, and to feel what we have felt when we say, "I'm trying to believe, and I'm trying to trust, but you're not doing anything." Then Jesus did the strangest thing. He asked them

to remove the stone from in front of Lazarus' tomb. It says in **verse 43** that "*Jesus called out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'*" And the Bible says that Lazarus came out of the tomb. If there was ever any doubt in their minds, or our minds, that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, all the loopholes on that argument, in that moment, were closed. The story ends in **John 11:45** where it says, "*therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.*" Jesus didn't simply leverage a painful situation. He created one in order to show the connection between pivotal circumstances and the growth and development of our faith.

**Big Idea: My circumstances do not change who Jesus is, Jesus changes me through my circumstances.**

We often think that the purpose of Jesus coming was to eliminate our pain, but instead he came to see us through it. Tragedy and pain are part of the story. People get sick, jobs get lost, and loved ones die. It's a part of the human experience and there's nothing wrong with being disappointed. Philip Yancey put it this way, "**There's only one thing worse than disappointment with God, it's disappointment without God.**" When we feel like God is doing something to us, we're liable to lose faith. But when we begin to understand that God is doing something in us, so that he can do something through us, then we'll be one of those individuals who emerges on the other side. We will be able to say, "I still believe that He is the resurrection and the life, and whoever believes in Him, will not die." When we're in the middle of one of these circumstances, we can pray, and ask God to help us recognize Him in the situation. If we are able to see God in our circumstances then we will know that there is hope and it will help us to not give up. If we see God in the midst of our circumstances then we have an opportunity to emerge on the other side with bigger faith. Jesus made it clear. Our suffering and bumps in the road are not the exceptions. They're part of the story just as our heavenly father leveraged the greatest crime of history, the crucifixion of his son, as reference point for faith, as a reference point for salvation, in the same way, if we'll let Him, He will leverage our deepest pain and our darkest disappointments in the same way.

**C. Life Group Questions** (select, revise, and add as desired: 20-40 minutes)

1. Can you think (and share, if comfortable) of hardships or hard times that you've experienced that you can reflect back and understand why God allowed them? At the time, did the experiences feel like a blessing? What helped you gain perspective on those difficulties?
2. With the understanding that God uses difficult circumstances to grow our faith, what current situations in your life is God using to shape your faith? Can you share anything that you are learning?
3. Paul reminds us to always thank God (see Ephesians 5:20), and specifically tells us, in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Notice that this says "in" not "for" all circumstances. What does that distinction mean to you?
4. It's easy to thank God for the wonderful blessings in our lives, or the rays of hope in the midst of disaster (like rescuers finding people alive 10 days after the Haiti earthquake). But what about something that just seems full of pain, like the sudden loss of a loved one? How can we remain thankful in such painful circumstances? What are some ways God grows our faith in painful times?
5. In our success and progress-oriented society, it can be easy to let our external circumstances push us away from God. What negative, or positive (we can be fooled into thinking our good fortune is sufficient), circumstances in your life have you let come between you and God? What do you think prevented you from seeing God in your circumstances?

**D. Personal Application** (1-3 Minutes).

- Take an inventory of your current circumstances; look for ways that God is being glorified.
- Try to respond to every situation you encounter this week with thanks to God...minor inconveniences, new problems, old problems...and trust God to help you through any difficulty.

**E. Prayer Time** (As a whole group or subgroups of 3-4:10-15 Minutes)

- Thank God for His wisdom...even when we may not see it.
- Ask God to help you see Him in all circumstances, to respond to difficult circumstances with an open heart and thankfulness, and to put your trust in Jesus, "the author and perfecter of our faith."
- Bring other praises or request to God that came up during the discussion.