

GROWTH CATALYSTS for An Abiding Faith

Have you ever thought about the ingredients that help create a lasting faith?

One thing we can all agree on is that the Christian life is a mystery. There are aspects to it that are upside-down or inside-out.

There are aspects that are counter-intuitive such as “love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you, don’t return insult for insult but give a blessing instead.”

There is no exact one size fits all approach, but there are some common ingredients that contribute to a vibrant faith.

EX: cooking or baking illustrate the importance of the right ingredients. Our family continues to get a good laugh thinking about the banana bread I tried to make year ago. I seemed to have used the wrong, or some old, ingredients. What came out would have been okay for Frisbee golf, but not for human consumption.

So, **what are the ingredients for a healthy spiritual life?**

The obvious KEY ingredient is the Grace of God, but often that grace is mediated through secondary means.

Andy Stanley

In listening to the faith stories of over 1000 people Five ingredients kept coming up. Those with a vibrant lasting faith saw all of these factors play out in the different seasons of their lives.

The premise of this message is that there are five things God uses to grow our faith. I would say that these factors apply to our initial experience of saving faith in Christ as well as to our ongoing walk with Christ. As we head into the summer it is important to keep these in mind, but even more important to maintain them in PRACTICE.

One way to do that is to review them in your own story. Take some time today or this week to fill in how you’ve seen these operative in your own life.

If you are doing a Supper for Six / Date for Eight group, then let 1-2 people share their faith journey story each week, and as do, you can use these five items as some helpful guidelines.

There may be some gaps along the way in different seasons of your life. That’s ok. Our Christian life isn’t about perfection, but direction.

It is about the perfection of Jesus, our refuge and savior.

Last week we saw in James 5 that it is possible to wander astray from the truth. This week we’ll consider how to wander back into the truth. Like going astray, returning to the truth is often a slow process, which is catalyzed by 5 growth factors.

I mentioned these 5 growth factors last week as we finished up James, but today I want to revisit them and unpack them. So, what are they? The order is not really important, but all five are needed to maintain spiritual health from a biblical perspective.

- **Providential Relationships**
- **Practical Teaching**
- **Private Disciplines**
- **Personal Ministry**
- **Pivotal Circumstances**

I like to start with **PROVIDENTIAL RELATIONSHIPS** because most people come to faith and then grow in faith in the context of key relationships.

How many of you were influenced in the pre-conversion days of your faith journey by a relationship with someone who was a Christian? - a parent, sibling, friend, VBS teacher, SS teacher, coach, etc
VERY FEW people come to faith cold turkey out of the blue, i.e. You have no Christian in your sphere of contact, never been to church, but one day...poof, you find a Bible, start reading, and come to faith in Christ.

Even the person who owned the Bible was a providential relationship.

In scripture we are called to be such a catalyst for those who don't yet know Christ.

Matt 28:18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

EX: you might say that we are called to be catalytic converters for Jesus (God uses us to be a catalyst for someone's conversion.)

Jesus told his first disciples, "follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men."

We see numerous stories of those who've encountered Christ who go and get a friend, family, or groups of others.

Looking back, are there people you feel God providentially brought into your life at crucial times?

If you are married, then you are the primary Providential relationship. Are you investing in each other for spiritual growth? Men, take your cues from Jesus in loving your wife. Women, take your cues from the church as she honors and submits to Christ.

If you have kids, has anyone seen God providentially bring someone into one of your children's lives?

THANK THEM

This ingredient runs through all the seasons of our Christian life - from spiritual birth through the process of spiritual growth.

Sometimes key individuals will stick out; Other times it may be the relationship with a community or group as a whole.

Britton, Dan; Page, Jimmy. WisdomWalks: 40 Life Principles for a Significant & Meaningful Journey . They suggest several Key relationships:

Do you have friend in your life who would come after you if your life goes off the rails? This friend or two has permission to ask the hard questions. He or she will help keep you from wandering and drifting, and you do the same for him/her.

Do you have a Mentor who has walked the path longer and can help guide and direct you? This person helps you navigate life circumstances by speaking biblical truth into your life.

Do you have someone for whom you are a Mentor? This is an opportunity to pour out what you've learned to someone else.

Isolation is the silent enemy. If we distance ourselves from relationships, we will crash and burn.

Sometime today or this week, I suggest that you make a list of the providential people that God has used and pray thanking God for those relationships. You might even call, text, or email them to express your thanks because they may never know the impact they've had.

PRACTICAL TEACHING

Typically, following the influence of a providential relationship, we may seek out or find our way into a church or ministry that provides practical Biblical teaching.

Rom 10:17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

2 Tim 3:14 You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, 15 and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

The old Presbyterian church in which I was raised did not have that. After coming to faith in college I got involved with a campus ministry that provide practical teaching in a large group and through small groups.

Some like-minded friends in college continued in the church where we were raised, but found a good alternative with Charles Stanley on TV. We'd go to the early service and SS and get home in time to catch the sermon on TV. We were fed and encourage by the teaching, and we worked on our Charles Stanley impersonations.

After college I moved to Atlanta and lived near FBC and attended there until Linda and I were married. We quickly found a new PCA church, Perimeter Church, which was growing and featured solid practical teaching. Perimeter rapidly became a much larger growing church that started multiplying congregations around Atlanta. People were converted, fed, and nurtured through the ministry of the Word.

One thing I learned through the key relationships and the practical teaching was that we can't live off of the spiritual lives of others. A vibrant faith needs the ingredient of...

PRIVATE DISCIPLINES

God leverages spiritual disciplines and generosity to grow our confidence in him.

We know many of them. Books have been written on them:

There are Word oriented disciplines – scripture reading, memorization, meditation, and listening to preaching.

There are 'internal disciplines' – Sabbath rest, fasting, prayer, private worship, Scripture, solitude

There are corporate disciplines – public worship, fellowship, service, generous giving

There are outward disciplines – evangelism, service to those outside the church

The spiritual disciplines are not ends in themselves that we check off. They are means by which we engage with and enjoy the power and presence of God in our lives so that we might be transformed.

1 Tim 4:6 In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following. 7 But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; 8 for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

We discipline ourselves for what we value.

If you are interested in a good return on investment for this present life and the life to come, then discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.

NO ONE DRIFTS into godliness, just as no one drifts into a 4 minute mile. Both require discipline, training, and intentionality.

Octavius Winslow: Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul:

<<There is no essential element in divine grace that can secure it from the deepest declension. We tend to deify the graces of the Spirit thinking of the faith and love in us as being omnipotent. Though they are divine in origin they have no self-sustaining power. They need constant communications of life and nourishment from Jesus. The very moment of their being left to their inherent strength is the very moment of their certain declension and decay.>>

Sow a thought, reap an action.

Sow an action, reap a habit.

Sow a habit, reap a character.

Sow a character, reap a destiny. RANDY ALCORN

1. Do you have a wide lens view of spiritual disciplines or do you only see a narrow picture? When it comes to discipline, where do you struggle most?
2. Do you have a plan for growing in godliness, which holds a promise for this life and the life to come?

These ingredients relate to each other...EX: a Providential relationship can be a BIG help in learning how to practice the private disciplines. Get a support team and be a part of someone's support team.

"All this discipline stuff just makes the Christian life drudgery and it stifles an authentic relationship with God." REALLY??

Men, does your commitment to love your wife and be faithful to her stifle your relationship with her? BE very CAREFUL how you respond to that question.

Every healthy relationship is held together partly by disciplined actions and routines. Perhaps the easiest way to understand the importance of discipline in a relationship is to consider a relationship without boundaries. All self-imposed boundaries are a form of discipline. Imagine a marriage in which neither partner practices self-control. The marriage would eventually deteriorate. Andy Stanley

PERSONAL MINISTRY

Romans 12:4 For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly:

Eph 4:11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

All Christians are 'charismatic' because the word means "grace gift". We've all received some combination of grace gifts for the service of the body and the kingdom. If we are to grow up in maturity, we'll need to find a place of personal ministry. Sometimes it's behind the scenes; sometimes it's up front.

Even though we have gifts, it is a step of faith to use them to serve others. If we don't serve in some way, we become like an old sponge – we sit, soak, and sour. Don't bypass the area of personal ministry in your spiritual journey.

"Aren't you glad somebody took a chance, ignored her fear, and stepped through the door of her own insecurity in order to serve you?"

-Who has chosen to serve you in spite of the fact that he/she was busy, ill-equipped, and unsure of how things would turn out?

PIVOTAL CIRCUMSTANCES -

James 1:2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Rom 8:28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

The key to pivotal circumstances isn't the circumstance, it's our response to God in the midst of it.

This takes us back to 9-20-20 in the 2nd sermon on James 1.

James wants us to know that Pivotal Circumstances HAVE A DIVINE PURPOSE

They arrive with a divine purpose. V 3

Trials are tests to produce perseverance and growth in endurance.

In *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis writes: "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."

Don't waste your Pivotal Circumstances, lest you hinder your own spiritual growth.

This is another reason why we need Providential relationships. Often, we need others to walk with us through the pivotal circumstances of our lives.

How are you cultivating these areas in your own life?

Providential Relationships

- Practical Teaching
- Private Disciplines
- Personal Ministry
- Pivotal Circumstances

Come to the TABLE – this is one of the habits of grace that strengthens our souls as we come in faith. It is a practical application of biblical teaching; it is private and public; it reminds us of the Providential relationship with have with Christ and the pivotal circumstances that brought forth our salvation.

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