

What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do

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Some of the most beautiful words of Jesus were spoken hours before His death. In the Gospel of John, the author set the scene by writing, "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1).

The death of Jesus for the apostles and the world was for love. Jesus did not want to endure the cross. He did not want to leave the apostles. Yet, His death was necessary for love's sake. In preparation for His death, Jesus tried to reassure the apostles. As is common when a loved one dies, we are often left confused.

Jesus knew what the apostles would experience in the aftermath of His death. With this weighing on His heart, Jesus said, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going." (John 14:1-4).

This text is heartwarming; however, these words are much more than emotional sentiment. These words are instructional. Jesus gave the apostles things to do when they would not know what to do. None of what Jesus said made sense at the moment. The apostles responded to Jesus' instructions with confusion. In time, though, they would come to understand and appreciate these sayings.

There are times in life when bad things happen to us. We have storms. We have crises. There are situations for which we struggle to find solutions or understand why. There are times when we do not know what to do. In those times, we would be wise to listen to the reorienting words of Jesus.

1. Do not let your hearts be troubled. This might seem harsh at first glance. When we experience loss our hearts are troubled. Grief is the troubling of the heart. Is Jesus teaching us to suppress our emotions? Absolutely not! Shortly after this conversation, Jesus would fervently plead with His Father to "let this cup pass from me." Jesus' heart was troubled as He faced the cross. Therefore, Jesus was not telling the apostles to suppress their emotions.

Jesus was telling them not to be overcome by their emotions. Grief is consuming. If grief is not dealt with properly, it can become paralyzing. Unchecked grief can lead to depression. Depression is debilitating. Jesus did not want the apostles to be paralyzed by grief or overcome by depression. They had work to do. They needed to use their grief to carry the legacy of Jesus to the world.

The legacy of Jesus is the Gospel. Jesus died so that we might live. The only hope of the world is through faith in Jesus. We should be troubled that our sins made Jesus' death necessary. However, Jesus wants us to receive forgiveness and renewal. He offers us the joy of salvation. This gives us stability when life becomes unsettled by loss.

2. Believe in God. Hard times test our faith. We turn to God and seek answers to our confusion. We want to know why. If we cannot find the answer we want, we may turn away from God. While they would not immediately understand, Jesus wanted to apostles to believe in God. A fundamental belief in the existence of God would be their anchor during the storm.

When bad things happen to us, we are prone to doubt the purposes of God. A troubled heart can lead us to reject God. For example, there is research that has been done among atheists ("When Atheists Are Angry at God," Joe Carter, 2011). Many atheists have some sort of trauma in their background that becomes a catalyst for their rejection of God. Ironically, many atheists are angry at a God they say isn't real.

Rejecting God in response to trauma is a strong temptation. Yet, if all we can do in the dark times is believe in God, that faith will be enough to help, settle, and save us. Peter wrote to stabilize the faith of Christians who were enduring persecution. The closing lines of his letter said, "After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Pet. 5:10).

3. Believe in Me. Jesus knew His death would cause the apostles to question everything they knew about Him. The resurrection of Jesus would be needed to restore the apostles' faith in Him. Jesus, though, did not want the apostles to give up on Him. He knew that their only hope of eternal life was through Him. In responding to Thomas, Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

The death of Jesus was unexpected by the apostles. The Messiah was not supposed to be executed. In the past, men had come along claiming to be Israel's Messiah only to be executed by the Romans. Jesus appeared to be another failed revolutionary. Jesus knew the crisis of faith His death would cause for the apostles.

We are in a different position from the apostles. They did not understand why Jesus had to die. We do. He died to save us from our sins. God raised Jesus from the dead to show us what He can do for us in death (Rom. 8:11). Yet, there is an important condition for our salvation. We must believe in Jesus. There is much we may not understand in life. However, God is going to make everything right one day through His Son and our Savior, Jesus.

Conclusion

These words of Jesus are often read in times of loss. They are comforting and encouraging. They give us steps to take in times of grief. They teach us how to engage with our grief and live in hope. Jesus shows us what to do when we don't know what to do.