

The Day I Didn't Blame God

Karen Jensen loved traveling with her husband as they ministered full-time and planted churches throughout the country. But when he suddenly died in his sleep in 1997, she was faced with pastoring a congregation in Boise, Idaho, and an uncertain future. Instead of blaming God and giving up, she's found new meaning to God's faithfulness—and a new life in ministry.

The last time I saw my husband, Brent, alive on this earth was when he went to bed early on New Year's Day 1997.

He went to bed before me that night because things had been pretty crazy in our lives the past 24 hours. It started the night before, when we had rung in the new year with our church family. We had celebrated with games, prayer and lots of good food. Some of our congregation members hung around until 2 a.m., and since we were the pastors of the church, we were the last to leave, finally locking the doors and dragging ourselves home in the wee hours of the morning.

The next morning, we were startled awake very early with an emergency phone call from a church member. Running on about three hours of sleep, Brent climbed out of bed and went to help them.

That day I managed to sneak in a nap, but Brent didn't. After he got back home, he and our sons, ages 12 and 13, watched every college football bowl game and even went to a nearby park to play their own game with some neighborhood kids.

By 9:30 p.m., Brent was understandably exhausted. With a smile, he leaned over and gave me a kiss.

"I love you," he said over the noise of the TV show I was watching.

"I love you too," I said, glancing up from my cross-stitch project and smiling at him as he walked toward the hallway.

When I went to bed about an hour later, I found that Brent had stopped breathing. I called 911, and paramedics rushed to our house, but they couldn't revive him. Later at the hospital, he was pronounced dead.

I Had Questions

As you can imagine, my life changed drastically after that night. In an instant, I became a single mom of two teenage sons, and I also became senior pastor of our church, which I pastored alone for the next four and a half years.

Those were two things I never expected to be!

We humans can have all sorts of reactions when shocking, heart-wrenching things happen in our lives. We can retreat and hold all the pain inside. We can get angry and blame God. We can say, "Well, God is sovereign. You should never question Him."

Somehow I knew blaming God wasn't the answer. And I'm not one of those people who thinks we should never question Him. I think it's perfectly OK to ask God all our tough questions—because, first of all, He is our heavenly Father. He loves us and always wants the best for us. Who better to ask? Second, He's heard all the questions before—you can't scare Him. Besides, He already knows we're asking the questions in our heads. We might as well just be honest with Him! So I say, let's ask God all the questions we have. Write them down and date them.

I did that, not many days after Brent's death. With tears I wrote:

Why, God? Why? How did my big, strong, healthy 37-year-old husband, who hadn't been sick at all, go to bed one night and

suddenly end up in heaven?

Why didn't You tell me? I was right in the next room watching television, for crying out loud! Why didn't You notify me so I could help him?

How could You let this happen?

And perhaps the most daunting question of all: I used to be a wife—now what am I?

“Can You Trust Me?”

In the days and weeks that followed, I asked God those questions quite a few times. And every time I asked, I heard His patient answer in my heart: “Can you trust Me?”

Now, I might not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but I knew it wasn't a good time to stop trusting Him—not when I needed Him more than ever. Running away from Him didn't seem as smart as running *toward* Him. So my answer was, “Yes, Lord.”

Proverbs 3:5 became one of my life verses during that time, and it always reassures me, even today: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.” Every day I learned more of what it means to trust Him with *all* my heart, even if I didn't understand certain things. I knew that without Him I'd never be able to pastor a church, raise teenage boys or get over losing my husband, so I chose to trust and not to blame.

Over time, I got some of my answers. Not all, but some. Others I'm still waiting on, and I've discovered that some of my questions have simply faded away over time.

One thing I learned for sure was that I wasn't the only one who had gone through a traumatic life event. If you study the lives of successful people—in the Bible, in ministry, in sports, in Hollywood or in the business world—you'll find that many of them have had bad things happen to them, and they all

had questions.

But despite their traumas or disappointments, they left the past behind them, survived the pain and moved on. When they were knocked down, they got up. They chose to get better, not bitter. They persevered through heartache until they came out the other side, stronger.

Unfortunately, we all know other people who've had something bad happen to them and have stopped right there. The bad thing defines them, and they make a camp in the land of hurt and questions, never able to move past it. My heart hurts for those people. I truly believe that one huge key to success in life is the ability to leave hurtful things behind.

The Back Burner

Throughout this trying time in my life, I learned it's what we do *after* we ask our questions that determines what's going to happen next in our lives. So here's what I did. After I asked all my hard, scary, ugly questions, I pushed them to the back burner of my life and kept on "cooking" with God on the front burners.

It's like when you're cooking a stew. While you're cutting up the veggies and the meat, you have the pot on the front burner, adding all the ingredients. But once you've got everything in there, you push the pot to the back burner and let it simmer for a good long time. You don't focus on it or pay much attention to it—you just leave it back there while you go on cooking the rest of the meal on the front burners.

Once I'd asked all my questions, I prayed: *Father, these are my questions. Now I'm going to put them on the back burner of my life and not focus on them. I'm going to keep on "cooking" with You on the front burners. I'm going to keep moving forward and growing in You. I'm going to keep reading Your Word, believing You, loving You, seeking Your will and obeying what You tell me to do. I'm going to keep on trusting You.*

It's amazing how free I felt after doing that. Yes, I still felt the loss of my husband very deeply—I probably always will. But this simple act helped me keep my heart and mind on God's truths and His good plan for my life. It's how I kept from making a camp in the land of hurt and questions.

Too many times we let our questions stand between us and God. We get mad and blame Him, which is a bad idea because He is our help in those times! When we're in trouble or trauma, that's no time to get offended at God; that's when we need Him most. He's on our side.

I Clung to God's Word

When something traumatic happens to us, it's easy to think, "I'm not sure I know anything anymore." It was that way for me. I thought I knew what to expect from life. I thought I would always be a wife. Now I had no idea what my future looked like. In an instant, everything had irrevocably changed.

Maybe it's the same for you. Maybe something has shaken you to the very core. You might feel like you can't possibly move on when you don't know what to expect in the future. You might be asking, *What if this happens again? How can I be sure of anything?* It can be terrifying.

But here's what I learned: Even though we may have questions, we still know some things. There are truths that are still very sure: God is still on His throne and still Lord of your life. He will never change, and your foundation in Him is sure. His Word is still true. He will always love you. He still has a good plan for you (even if it's not the one you expected).

How can we move forward? What does it take to "cook on the front burners" of life?

For me, I cemented the things I knew to be true in my heart by

reading the Bible. In the weeks after Brent died, I vividly remember just *devouring* it.

Now, I had been a Bible reader for years. I was even a Bible teacher. But now I clung to God's Word like never before. For hours I would sit and feed on it, running my finger down the page like a 5-year-old learning to read.

Psalm 119:92 says, "Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction." That's how I felt! I had to have His Word in my heart and mind night and day. It's how I survived.

Even though losing my husband was the hardest time of my life, it was also a time of amazing comfort and revelation. I learned from practical, personal experience that God really *is* a very present help in times of trouble (Ps. 46:1). He became so real to me! And as a result, I fell more in love with Him than ever before.

I also found out the Bible is the foundation upon which I could build a new life. I was thrilled to discover it's where my sons and I could find a new vision for our family, just when we needed a new vision most. As I pressed into His Word during my time of desperate need, God showed up and lavished His comfort, love and strength on us.

I Kept Going Through ... And You Can Too

One of my favorite verses is Psalm 23:4: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me."

That verse lets me know that, first of all, there *is* a valley of shadow. Stuff is going to happen in this life—it just is. I wish we could wrap up in cotton and be insulated so that bad things can't hurt us. But we can't do that, and besides, that's no kind of life. A real life has challenges and risks. Without those, existence would be dull indeed.

The key word in Psalm 23:4 is *through*. Keep walking *through* the valley of the shadow. Don't set up camp there! The valley of the shadow is *not* a place we want to stay.

As my sons and I continued to trust God and hold fast to His Word, He helped us keep going until we came out the other side. Today, they are both married, and we are all serving God in ministry. He has been so faithful to us, and He will be to you too!

Karen Jensen and her husband, Brent, were *itinerant ministers and pioneered two churches. Upon his death in 1997, she became senior pastor of their church in Boise, Idaho. The author of Why God Why: What to Do When You Have Questions, Karen has been a writer and minister for 30 years and is an instructor at Rhema Bible Training College in Broken Arrow, Okla. For more information, visit .*

Watch as Karen Jensen explains how to get God's direction for your life at