

When Coping With a Crisis, Follow This Example

I was halfway into my five-year service as assistant district superintendent for our denomination when I began to sink into depression. “Why am I in the ministry?” became the theme question of my spiritual downturn. I was in a substantial midlife crisis, wondering if the second half of my life should continue on the same track as the first half.

If my preaching had been constrained by my experience in those days, I would not have been able to minister effectively. In seminary, I remember considering the question, “Should you preach only what you have experienced?” The answer is “No.” You preach the Scripture regardless of your experience, and you judge your own experience by the Scripture. I put that principle to a serious test during those difficult years.

When experiencing a faith crisis, John Wesley told Moravian minister Peter Bohler that he couldn’t preach on faith if he didn’t have it. Rather than buy into Wesley’s struggle, Bohler admonished Wesley to preach faith until he had it and then preach faith because he had it.

After finishing my law degree, I had two lucrative offers. One of my friends was a practitioner in estate law. He told me, “I make \$250,000 a year, and I only work three days a week.” Another of my parishioners was a trial lawyer on product liability cases. He said, “I’ve heard you preach enough to know you’d be great in a courtroom. I’ll pay your way to send you to a summer school for trial lawyers so you can get the knack of what we’re doing, and you can come to work with my firm. The kind of money you’d make would be terrific.”

I found myself wondering, *What am I doing in the ministry? I’m depressed, and I’ve got family issues.* Although I’d always

pooh-poohed the idea of a midlife crisis, here I was experiencing one. What helped me survive was journaling through the Psalms and following the example of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

If you examine Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, you'll find that Jesus took some very significant steps to handle the sorrow in His life.

How did Jesus cope in crisis?

First, He admitted, "My soul is deeply sorrowful unto death" (Mark 14:34a). That's another way of saying, "I'm depressed."

Second, He sought the company of others. He didn't plan to handle it by himself. He pulled Peter, James and John aside, and even though they weren't much support, He still wanted them with Him.

I wonder if He thought even for a moment, *I'm the Son of God. I have tough things to face. I can't let these guys in on my need. They're going to desert me anyway. I can't spill my inner feelings to them. I can't trust them.* Instead, Jesus was vulnerable. He modeled what He taught in the first beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). The "I need help" kind of person receives the kingdom.

Third, Jesus prayed in the midst of His sorrow. He prayed to the Father who loved Him and who had sent Him on the mission to save us. His prayer reflected a deep trust in the Father, and our prayers—even in our darkest moments—should also emulate that trust.

The night when Jesus was in the garden and He said, "My soul is very sorrowful" (Matt. 26:38b), He could have simply cut and run. "A 10-minute walk up to the top, and I'm over the hill, into wilderness, and nobody will find me." But He didn't flee. He rose to His responsibility.

I kept asking myself during those days of depression, *George, what would you do today if you weren't depressed?* And I would get up and do that task whether I felt like it or not. Physical activity also helped me come out of depression. I started walking 20 miles a week. And there were other spiritual and emotional steps toward recovery. Listening to inspiring Christian music was another great help.

I also chose to get some outside help. My wife, Jewel, and I decided to seek assistance together. She went along to encourage me, and in time, I saw two different counselors. It was a powerful experience.

Don't go it alone—especially in a crisis. You may be tempted to withdraw so others won't know you're hurting, but there's healing available when you let the right people in on your struggles. It can also be a ministry to others to let them know you're only human. The message of a life lived for God will show through no matter what inner trials you face. {eoa}

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