

Dealing With Doubt or Discouragement? Lock Your Exits!

Last week was tough. One of my best friends, Doug, died unexpectedly, and the tragedy shook me to the core. Doug's death also shook my friend Jeff, a pastor who looked up to Doug as a mentor. Before and after the funeral, Jeff and I cried together. We shared our memories of Doug and processed our feelings as honestly as possible.

At one point Jeff admitted that the loss made him want to run away and hide. He was halfway joking when he said: "I'd like to just move to the beach and forget everything." I knew he wasn't serious. Jeff is a faithful pastor of a thriving church, and he would never abandon his ministry. Yet it was good for him to share his pain. It's okay to be real about our weaknesses.

Then I gave him the same advice I've given others who feel tempted to run when trials come. "Nope. You can't run and you can't hide," I told Jeff. "You have to lock all your exits."

I was preaching to myself when I shared those words. All of us are tempted to run when we face fear, despair or overwhelming challenges. Timothy probably wanted to flee the scary city of Ephesus when Paul challenged him to swallow his fears.

Even David, who was known for his bravery, imagined running from God's will during weak moments. He wrote: "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?" (Ps. 139:7). People run from God for different reasons:

Some people aren't willing to obey God's leading. Jonah was an anointed prophet, but he didn't want to carry heaven's message to foreigners. He bought a one-way fare to Tarshish (what is

now Spain!) and sailed in the opposite direction of where God wanted him to go. If Jonah had locked all his exits and set his GPS coordinates for Nineveh, his journey would have been a lot smoother.

Some people let doubt paralyze them. The children of Israel left Pharaoh's slavery and crossed through the Red Sea on dry land, but they never learned to trust God. They marched toward the Promised Land, yet they longed for the comforts of Egypt during the entire trek. What should have been a quick trip turned into 40 years in the desert because of the people's lack of faith. When we doubt, we get stuck in perpetual limbo—always circling but never going anywhere. The Hebrews should have locked their exits and marched confidently toward Canaan.

Some people are in love with the world. Demas is one of the saddest characters in the New Testament. This man traveled with the apostle Paul, but he later went AWOL. Paul wrote: "For Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica" (2 Tim. 4:10). We don't know what specifically lured Demas away—it could have been an addiction, a wrong relationship or plain old selfishness. Whatever it was, it caused him to turn his back on God. Demas should have locked all his exits and stayed faithful to Jesus.

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What about you? Have you locked your exits? We can't be looking around for escape routes every time we face a challenge. We will certainly experience turbulence in life. There will be freak-out moments, physical hardships, emotional anguish, spiritual warfare and—as I experienced last week—the death of loved ones. But we can't be wimps. We have to toughen up.

When I was a child we used to sing a famous hymn by Simon Marak. The chorus says:

I have decided to follow Jesus /

I have decided to follow Jesus /

I have decided to follow Jesus /

No turning back, no turning back.

I learned recently that this song was inspired by a Christian brother in India who refused to renounce his faith, even after a tribal chief shot the man's wife and children with arrows. This brave hero didn't look for an escape strategy when he faced death. He refused to cave in. And his bold conviction in the face of martyrdom actually brought his persecutor to faith in Christ.

I encourage you to close every exit and embrace the will of God, no matter what you are facing or how scary your situation is. Say this prayer—"Not my will, Lord, but Yours be done"—and renounce all fears, doubts, stubbornness and selfishness as you raise your hands in total surrender. Place no conditions on your obedience, and don't look for loopholes or exceptions. Go where He says to go. Do what He says to do. Follow Jesus with a fully yielded heart.

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