

Finding Your Way in the Dark: A Brief Guide to Navigating Faith Crises

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“I’m just not sure I believe any more.” “I had faith once upon a time, but now I just don’t experience anything.” “If that’s what it means to be a Christian, I don’t think I can call myself one.” “I can’t seem to find my way in religion. In fact, I have real doubts about how any of us can.” As a professor of philosophy and religion, I have heard comments like these many times. Faith crises happen. Not everybody seems to have them, but many people do have some kind of a crisis of faith at some point in their lives. They are disorienting and unpleasant, but they are not impossible to navigate. It’s a lot like learning to find your way around in the dark.

Ever been somewhere that you have never been before, in the dark? Really dark? What did it feel like? Confusion? Fear? Empty? You reach out and nothing is there. You take a step and wonder where you might fall. It is so easy in times like this to panic, but the first rule of navigating the dark is, “keep calm and don’t panic.” Sometimes a faith crisis feels like the edge of a black hole: we don’t even want to get close to the edge and so we avoid it, we deny it, we label it something else, like anger at the church. But when we are honest, we admit – “I don’t know where I am and I don’t know how to find my way.”

Once we calm down and admit that we are having some kind of faith crisis, we can start feeling our way around us a bit. You kneel down, reach your hands around you and notice what you feel. That’s the way it is in the dark. And that’s the way it is in a faith crisis as well. Only the “reaching” and the “feeling” are more interior. Ask yourself: what does this situation feel like?

- Is it a question or set of questions that you can’t seem to answer?
- Is it like a hurt or wound that still pains whenever it is touched?
- Is it a sense that you don’t belong any more with a group of people?
- Is it that you have a different experience (or perhaps a lack of experience) than what you once had?
- Is it that you are no longer comfortable with certain ethics or practices that you have thought were central to the faith?
- Perhaps you are not sure whether you can ground your life in the basic story of the Christian scriptures or in the person of Jesus Christ. What does this doubt feel like?
- Or perhaps it is some blend of these.

Naming what we feel around us helps us take the first step forward. We know what kinds of obstacles we have to navigate. And we realize that we are not alone in this. Many others have faced the same kinds of crises. Some have serious questions while still finding meaning in the basic story or in the family of faith. Others can’t seem to find a way to associate with church even though they still believe in Jesus and everything. The possibilities are many. Can you describe the elements of your own faith crisis? Give it a try.

It is one thing to walk across a slippery floor in the dark. It is another to avoid falling in a big hole, or to dodge sharp objects. Each challenge requires a unique strategy. And so it is with our faith crises. Wounds require healing. Awkward relationships require reconciliation or re-position. We discover new practices to replace those that don’t seem to “work.” Needless to say I cannot cover, in this brief guide, all the possible strategies for navigating a faith crisis. But perhaps you know someone safe you can talk to?

Two kinds of obstacles, however, are common in many faith crises—basic doubt and asking questions. Thus I will address these two in the remaining space.

Basic doubt -

The first thing you must realize is that doubt is normal. Inquiry leads to exploration leads to discovery leads to practice. That is the way we are built. We may think that religion is about “finding the answer” such that doubt is somehow wrong. Yet in a much deeper sense we must realize that God (whatever God is) is vastly bigger than any of our ideas or images. Thus wonder, awe, and even questioning are indicators at times not of leaving God, but rather of our own drawing deeper into the Truth. As we grow our vision of God grows and since God is infinite this growth is never ending. In this sense our Christian faith is not only an answer but also a question into which we enter deeper and deeper as we mature. Doubt may feel at times like “leaving faith.” It may be a path to growing faith.

Second, doubt is influenced by different factors. We forget what God has done for us and begin to question. We don't really understand what Christianity teaches about God. We can't figure out how to relate to the Bible or to other religions. We have a hard time making a commitment. But with what I am calling “basic doubt” one must gather all the factors together as they influence the single decision to identify with the Christian faith or not. In the end, when you go to bed tonight, will you pray to Jesus Christ? Why or why not?

Third, you can take steps to resolve the factors involved in basic doubt. You can review your past relationship with God: the good and the bad. And, like the Psalms, you can review this good and bad *to* God. You can clarify just what Christianity *does* teach about God or how to relate to the Bible, discarding superficial pronouncements and welcoming the Truth. You may need to explore a range of resources, but exploration this is part of resolving doubt. You can also talk to people about what you are learning and asking. Again, you are not the only person to struggle with faith. You may not be able to take these kinds of steps right now, but what might you do in the days and weeks to come?

Finally, since a faith commitment is so basic (like marriage), you must ultimately weigh the various factors in light of the reasonableness of keeping or rejecting faith as a whole. When do you have enough reason to keep or to leave faith?

Asking questions -

As you can see, basic doubt and questions just go together. So now it is time to consider your questioning.

First of all, consider the *when* of your questioning. Is this the right time for you to probe these questions? Examine what you do and don't know. What kind of things will you need to know and how certain will you need to be and order to feel satisfied about your questioning? Consider your capabilities and resources. What kinds of questions are you capable of addressing right now? Ask your friends, is this the right time for these questions? How can you make that time?

Next, consider the *who(s)* of your questioning. Are you primarily questioning others or yourself? What kinds of questions are you pointing at those “whos”? What does it feel like to question the who(s) of your questioning?

Why are you questioning? Why not ignore this question? Why is this a particular question for you right here and now? Why does this question even come up in culture today (if it does)?

Finally, consider the *how deep* issue. Is this a minor question about some topic that does not promise to shake anything up, or is this really a life-changing issue. What habits, world-views, emotional concerns, relationships and so on are at stake in this?

A straightforward consideration of our own questioning process can help us determine the resources (intellectual, time, relationships, emotions, and so on) required to navigate a faith crisis. I have seen too many people enter into questioning without having considered the investment, only to realize later that they were not able to see the process through and so make a life-decision based on shallow evaluation.

Finding your way in the dark. It is not easy. It can be done. For some it is a sign of growth.