



176: What to Do When You Can't Find God

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 176.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information, and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step. Today I'll actually share three next right steps, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Before we get started, a word from this episode's sponsor, Talkspace. As we close out April, many of us are preparing to celebrate mental health awareness month through advocacy, volunteer work, and special events in May. But mental health isn't just a priority for one, singular month. Talkspace is making it easier to prioritize mental health all year long with its digital therapy platform you can access 24/7 on your mobile device.

Talkspace therapists give you the support you need to feel your best, whether you want to text, send a video or voice message. And they have thousands of licensed therapists trained in over 40 specialties, including anxiety, depression, relationships, and more. And I love that they've made it easy to sign up and start therapy on the same day.

Talkspace is a fraction of the cost of in-person therapy. Instead of waiting for an appointment, you can send unlimited messages to your therapist, and they'll engage with you daily, five days a week. And Talkspace uses the latest end-to-end bank-grade encryption technology to store client information securely, and comply with HIPAA regulations.

As a listener of The Next Great Thing, you can get \$100 off your first month with Talkspace. To match with a licensed therapist today, go to talkspace.com or download the app. Make sure to use the code `nextrightthing`, all one word, to get \$100 off your first month. That's `nextrightthing` at talkspace.com. That's talkspace.com, and use the code `nextrightthing`. Now, onto today's episode. Listen in.

Several years ago, I read a book by AJ Swoboda called *The Dusty Ones*. In it, he shares a story about a friend of his from high school, whose name was Stu. Stu met Jesus through his friendship with AJ, and they quickly became zealous and excited together. They read their Bible, they prayed in front of their lockers, and Stu felt close to God in those days.

Well, Stu and AJ lost touch after graduation, as often happens. And about 10 years later they reconnected. And that was when AIG learned that Stu no longer called himself a Christian. Because once he went off to college, he stopped feeling the presence of God.

Now I'm not here to debate the reality of Stu's relationship with God, or the validity of his conversion, or even the role of feelings as they mix with our faith. But what I do want to talk about is this experience that many friends of Jesus either have gone through, are going through, or will go through. And that is the experience of the loss of the felt presence of God.

The truth is, we won't always feel God's presence. I know some believers who say they've never really felt God's presence. I don't want that to be true, but it is true. The good news is, this is nothing new. For generations and generations, Christians have wandered through the wilderness, have walked through the valley of the shadow, have navigated life in the midst of difficulty, loss, and seemingly impossible circumstances.

If you are walking through your own wilderness right now, you are not alone, even if you feel alone. St. John Of The Cross called his experience of not feeling God's presence, a dark night of the soul. Martin Luther called it the scandal of God's hiddenness, and Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *Learning To Walk In The Dark*, she says, "No one chooses the dark night, the dark night descends."

If you are currently experiencing a loss of the felt presence of God, you might be tempted to do one of three things, which can be applied to many different circumstances in life when we face something uncertain. And that is to either fight it, run from it, or feel frozen in time. The fight response is maybe to try to figure this out, to manipulate or bargain your way into outcomes, into changing the circumstance, or into forcing there to be meaning in it. If this is your tendency, you might find yourself feeling restless or frustrated that no matter what you do, you just can't fix this.

Or maybe you're experiencing the flight response. You might feel some shame, or like there's something wrong with you. Maybe you feel like this is your fault. You could be tempted to just want to run away.

Or maybe you're experiencing the freeze response. You're just tempted to quit. To stay immobile, to just give right up. Of course, we're tempted to try harder, to blame ourselves or to give up. Most of us have not learned how to make peace with uncertainty. We've not learned how to walk through a time of darkness without trying to control it. It's scary, it's unsettling, and it's unfamiliar.

Back to AJ Swoboda's book, *The Dusty Ones*. He points out that time when Mary and Joseph literally lost Jesus in Jerusalem. It's found in the gospel of Luke, when Jesus was about 14 and Joseph and Mary took him to the temple. Well, after spending some time there, the family heads home away from the big city and back to their familiar small town of Nazareth. But somewhere along the way, they literally lose Jesus.

They can't find him. Jesus is absent. If you study the three actions that Mary and Joseph took when they lost Jesus, it could inform at least a little bit what we can do when we experience the absence of his presence in our own lives.

Now, listen, this is not a perfect correlation. This is a story about parents losing track of their child. And

even if the child was Jesus, it's not the same as the spiritual experience of losing the sense of the felt presence of God. But still, I think there is something to learn here, and I'll briefly share the three things that they did when they lost track of Jesus, with a hat tip to AJ for pulling these points out.

First, they looked for Jesus among the people who knew what he looks like. They looked for him among the relatives. This is why community is important for us. When we feel disconnected from Jesus, maybe we can be encouraged and reminded by those who know him too. If you don't feel Jesus, you don't feel God, you can't seem to find God, who can you point to, who knows what God looks like?

Are you able to at least position yourself in a way to where you can watch, listen, and see if you can recognize any semblance of a melody that's familiar. A face, or action, or word. What do you hear? What do you see? Be aware of the people who know what Jesus looks like, and make it so that you are somehow in proximity to those people.

A second thing they did is, they went back to where they saw him last. Mary and Joseph went back to Jerusalem, to the place where they last saw him. If we feel we've lost sight of Jesus and we're no longer experiencing his presence, it could be helpful to return to the practice and place where we experienced him before. Was there a rhythm that was meaningful to you, that you've let go? A song that held meaning or joy, a story, a community, a friendship?

Now, unfortunately, I realize that oftentimes the thing that triggers a loss of the felt presence of Jesus is when a place, a practice, or a people who once represented him to you lets you down. In that case it can be difficult, especially at first, to separate that place, or those practices, or those people from the person of God. For a time, you might feel you have to distance yourself from where you saw him last, so that you can recalibrate to a new reality.

In the midst of a dark night, sometimes the trouble is the last place we saw God no longer yields the experience we once had. Here is where it's vital to refuse to embrace the shame. Yes, pay attention to the ways in which you connected with God before. But also be open to the new thing God might be doing. You might not see it yet, but that doesn't mean God's not there. Roots grow deep and slow in the dark, before any growth ever emerges from the soil.

Finally, don't lose hope. Mary and Joseph continued to look for Jesus for three days. That's a day, a sunset, a long night, a sunrise, a day, a sunset, a long night, another sunrise, another day, another sunset, another long night with a sunrise. Now for a dark night of the soul, that's pretty short. But for parents who can't find their kid, that's an eternity.

Still, they persisted. They didn't give up or lose hope. They kept on going, and we can too. What may feel like a loss of faith may actually be a deepening of your faith. It feels different, but new growth always does. When I first learned I was pregnant with the twins, I was thrilled. And then almost in the same minute, I was immediately terrified. Suddenly, I didn't recognize my changing body. And over the following weeks and months, I had just continual strange sensations.

There was a lack of certainty, and there was certainly a lack of control. No one really told me about this part. Or if they did I didn't hear it, or I didn't understand. There's just no way to really know until you're in it. It felt uncomfortable, and foreign, and even though we were really happy, it honestly was really scary

too. But growth was happening in the dark. And I was still me, even though I didn't feel like me.

There's more to say, there always is. But in closing, I'll repeat a thoughtful insight I once heard from John Mark Comer, about how to know if you're in a dark night of the soul.

He said, "Pay attention to your desire. If your desire for the world has gone up, and your desire for God has gone down, that is probably not a dark night. But if your desire, deep in your heart, if you ache for God's felt presence, but you just don't feel it, then the odds are that you are in a dark night of the soul.

"If you're feeling anxious, or angry, or afraid because you're not feeling the presence of God, there's nothing wrong with you. God is still here. You are still held. You're always loved, you're surely seen, and you're not alone. If you don't know what to do, maybe your next right thing is to wait.

"To listen, to allow the deepening to happen in you. Consider if your ideas about God need to fall away so that the true God can emerge. Dare to believe that this is not necessarily a sign that you've done something wrong. It may be a sign that you're right where you need to be, that your faith is actually growing, and that God is doing a new thing that you just can't see yet. Don't be afraid."

Thanks for listening to episode 176 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope the simple practice of looking for Jesus when you don't feel Jesus can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions, the deeper truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

As always, you can find me on Instagram at [emilypfreeman](#), and online at [emilypfreeman.com](#). And if you do follow me on Instagram, you may already know that a few weeks ago, I was in Wichita at Friends University for the second residency for the students who are getting their masters in Christian spiritual formation and leadership. If you've been curious about the role of spiritual formation in our lives, and have even considered more training or experience in how to walk into the lives of other people with the presence of Jesus, perhaps you would be interested in this degree program too.

It's one of my favorite things that I do right now, is teaching at these masters residencies. But of course, I'm just one of many who shepherd and lead students through this two-year program where we discover what it means to be apprentices of Jesus in his strong and unshakable kingdom. If you're interested in learning more about the program, applications are still open for the fall of 2021. And I'll include a link in the show notes, or you can go ahead and visit [friends.edu/CSFL](#).

In closing, here's a final word from Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *Learning To Walk In The Dark*. She writes, "No one chooses the dark night, the dark night descends. When it does, the reality that troubles the soul most is the apparent absence of God. If God is light, then God has gone. There's no soft glowing space of safety in this dark night. There is no comforting sound coming out of it, reassuring the soul that all will be well.

"Even if comforting friends come around to see how you are doing, they are about as much help as the friends who visited Job on his ash heap. There is an impenetrability to this darkness that isolates the soul

inside it. For good or ill, no one can do your work for you while you are in this dark place. It has your name all over it. And the only way out is through.”

I hope these words have been a comfort to you as you may be navigating your own dark night. And I hope you continue to hear something I’ve repeated often in this episode, and that is you’re not alone. Thanks for listening, and I’ll see you next time.