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Difficult decisions: Circumstances that affect our path

by Angela Denker

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."


(Isaiah 40:28-31)

It's a strange thing, but in my vocational life, I've found that some of the best opportunities I've found have come to me after at least one disappointment. It all started in 2003, when my dream college rejected me. That should have prepared me for the job hunt:

- December 2006: A promised job fell through.

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- January 2007: I made it to the final interview but it didn't work out.
 - February 2007: I got a job – in my field! – that paid twice as much as the one that fell through.

Then, after discerning that I was called to the ministry, I started over again.

- January 2011: I interviewed for several pastoral internships in my area but none of them worked out.
- February 2011: I started an internship at a vibrant congregation in Las Vegas – post that has informed my ministry ever since.
- March 2013: My first-call assignment was in rural Minnesota, but there was no work for my husband there. It didn't work out.
- May 2013: I accepted a call to a small congregation in Chicago, where my husband could work. It worked out beautifully!
- December 2014: Another congregation in Chicago invited me to interview but it didn't work out.
- March 2015: A big and busy congregation in California called me to serve as a member of its pastoral staff. What an experience!
- June 2017: Following what I thought was a call from God, I took a part-time call so that I could be at home with our two small children.
- July – December 2017: I interviewed for full-time pastoral positions with several congregations, but none were a good fit.
- December 2017: I thought I'd found the perfect fit with a wonderful congregation, but it fell through at the very last minute.
- December 2017: The day before that happened, I received an offer for a book contract.
- January 2017: I officially went "on leave from call" and committed myself to the writing life.
- February 2017: My dream congregation offered me my dream position: part-time teaching pastor. At last!

You'd think that with this years-long list of disappointments followed by satisfactions, I'd have learned to be confident in God's plan for my vocation. And I'd love to say that's true, but I don't have it down perfectly yet.

I still have those moments of doubt and uncertainty and confusion and even despair. I too often range from one external rejection to another external affirmation, letting my internal spirit be affected by my outward accomplishments. And that's not the vocation that God intends for any of us.

Clearly, the Spirit's path for us (or at least for me) isn't a smooth, straight-ahead line. It's much more like trying to cross a big trampoline. Sinking low only to rebound high into the air – the lower the dip, the higher the leap — saved and raised up by our God who defeated death and can certainly defeat human disappointment and fear.

Through all the ups and downs, dips and leaps, I've learned a few things.

1. Build up your self-worth. Particularly if you tend toward perfectionism or achievement, you have likely received plenty of external affirmation – awards, honors, praise, scholarships. This is not a bad thing, but it can deplete our internal capacity for self-love and affirmation. True worth and Godly love are rooted not in accomplishments or awards but rather in the pure acceptance that is poured out on all of us from the dawn of creation. The writer of 1 John writes: “We love because [God] first loved us.” God loves us not because of our accomplishments but because of our very being. God calls us to love ourselves in the same way, rooted in self-love as we ride the rollercoaster of life’s highs and lows.

2. Don’t make concessions or try to fit yourself into someone else’s box. Wait upon the LORD, and often a poor fit will be replaced with one that celebrates your God-given gifts. At the beginning of this reflection, I quote the beautiful words of the Prophet Isaiah: “those who wait upon the LORD will renew their strength.” When I look at my above list of disappointments, many of them share a similar characteristic: they weren’t the right fit for me. Instead, I often wanted them because of prestige: such as attending that dream college or being the pastor of a very large church, even if it wasn’t a good fit.

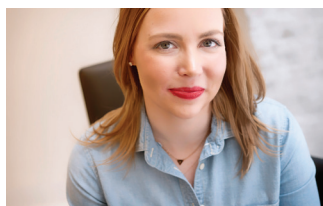
3. Don’t rush. One of the best pieces of advice I ever received was “don’t take a call too soon.” This advice works outside the church, too. Don’t take a job too soon if it’s not the right one. The waiting, as Tom Petty sang, is often the hardest part. But it is in the waiting when God renews your strength, lifting you on wings like an eagle, and teaching you to fly.

Closing prayer:

Lord, as we wait upon you to renew our souls in times of uncertainty and unpredictability in our life’s paths, surround us with your love and your peace, which passes all understanding. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. When have you experienced rejection in your life and how have you coped with it?
2. When did Jesus experience rejection?
3. Where can you find comfort and support during difficult circumstances?



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What the Bible says about rejection

by *Becca Ehrlich*

There was a job that I wanted, and I even had a sense that God was calling me to it. Needless to say, I was thrilled when I got an interview.

Colleagues and friends affirmed me, saying that my gifts and skills matched the job. I prayed about it, asking for God's guidance. I researched the job, studying the field and talking to people who did the same kind of work. I went into the interview feeling prepared.

The interview went well. I even thought I detected a hint that the job was mine – all I had to do was wait for the phone call.

Finally, the phone rang — the call I'd been waiting for!

I did not get the job.

Rejection. It's something we all experience at some point. Whether it's rejection by a teacher, a family member, a significant other, a friend, a college, or a possible employer, rejection happens. And when it does, it can range from a mild inconvenience to emotional and financial devastation.

Rejection is not new. You'd think that we'd be complete pros at it by now – but that's not so. Rejection can damage our self-worth and ruin our lives . . . if we let it.

An early experience of rejection can be found in the Bible in Genesis 4:1-16. It's the story of Cain and Abel.

The two brothers gave their offerings to God. Farmer Cain brought things he had grown, and shepherd Abel brought some of his flock. God "looked with favor" on Abel's offering, but God "did not look with favor" on Cain's offering. In other words, God rejected Cain's fruits and veggies.

Spoiler alert: Cain did not deal well with this rejection. He lured his brother Abel out into the field

and killed him. Then Cain lied to God about the murder, but God knows that Cain killed Abel because, well, God knows everything. God exiled Cain to be a wanderer, but not before putting a “mark” on Cain so that he won’t be killed by others while he wanders.

Besides being tragic, this Bible story teaches us helpful things about rejection:

Rejection brings up emotions. Cain has a strong emotional reaction to God’s rejecting his offering: “So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast” (s. 5). Anger and disappointment (and some envy) fuel Cain’s terrible actions later in the story.

My own emotions around rejection almost made me say no when I was asked to write this article. Rejection doesn’t feel good. People don’t like to be rejected. Just watch any reality TV show where suitors compete for a rose (and another date). When the contestants are sent home, they are almost always emotional. This mirrors our own experiences of rejection. We may not be rejected on national TV, but that doesn’t make it any less of a big deal or any less emotional. Being rejected hurts.

Rejection causes uncertainty. When Cain and Abel gave their offerings to God, they both knew the system. They give offerings to God, God accepts the offerings, all is well. But then God threw a curveball and rejected Cain’s offering. This threw Cain for a loop, and he found himself thrown into uncertainty and confusion.


We all like predictability and certainty. We like to know how things will turn out. When we are rejected, as Cain was, we are thrown into uncertainty and confusion. And because of the rejection, we can start to question everything we know, even things we were sure of before. Which brings us to . . .

Rejection causes us to question our identity. When God rejected Cain’s offering, Cain was not only angry and disappointed—he was unsure of who he was anymore. Cain gave the offering because he thought he was doing the right thing. He thought he was a good person. So now he’s not only emotional and uncertain—he’s not even sure who he is anymore.

When we encounter rejection, we question who we are. If we are rejected by a significant other, we question who we are without them, and what in us caused the rejection. If we are rejected by a potential employer, we question if we should even be doing that type of work. If we are rejected by a college or university, we question what we are meant to do, and what our path in life should be. Rejection hits us right in our existential core.

Left unresolved, rejection can lead to tragedy. Because Cain did not work through his emotions,





uncertainty, and identity crisis, he ended up killing his brother.

That's an extreme example, but when we don't work through our own emotions after a rejection, it can lead to tragedy in our own lives. We can lash out at loved ones or feel like we don't matter anymore. We can start making bad decisions that have long-lasting consequences for ourselves and others around us.

So, when we are rejected, what helps?

God's grace. Even after Cain killed his brother Abel and had to live with the consequences, God marked Cain so that he wouldn't be killed. God's grace is all the good that comes from God (salvation, love, mercy, peace, and so much more) through no work of our own, with no strings attached. Cain did not deserve to be saved by God—but that's God's grace.

Even in rejection, God is there. We have a God who knows what rejection feels like, who lived through the ultimate rejection. Rejected by friends, followers, and his people, Jesus was put to death on a cross. But God worked through that cross and brought resurrection to Jesus and to all who follow him.

Being a Jesus follower means dealing with rejection, as Jesus did. But it also means that Jesus and God's grace are with us amid that rejection. With God's help, we can work through our reactions to rejection. We can work through our emotions, the uncertainty, the identity crisis, and avoid tragedy—because our God knows what rejection is like and can help us through it.

Jesus turns the uncertain certain. Jesus reminds us that our identity is that of beloved children of God, not whatever we think the world thinks of us. Jesus helps us to use our emotions productively rather than hurting others. And Jesus helps us avoid tragedy in our response to rejection.

We will experience rejection, but Jesus is the "stone which the builders rejected" and he "has become the cornerstone" (Acts 4:11). With Jesus, the God of rejection and resurrection as our foundation, we too are resurrected after rejection. We have hope in Jesus Christ.

Closing prayer:

God, we thank you for sending your son Jesus to us to show that rejection is not the final word. Help us to be aware of Jesus' presence when we are rejected. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. Think of a time you experienced rejection. How did you react? How did God help you through that rejection?
2. Can you think of a real-world example of rejection leading to tragedy? How could the outcome have been different?
3. How will you deal with rejection in the future, knowing that Jesus himself experienced rejection and is with you when you are rejected?



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