

Tough Questions/Real Answers: NO DOUBT?

John 20:19-31

Can real Christians doubt?

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With all the challenges to our emotional and spiritual equilibrium nowadays, it is not surprising that doubt has become its own kind of pandemic. According to research earlier this year by the George Barna organization, over half of teens and adults in the U.S. general population report that in the past few years they've experienced doubts about their religious beliefs at least sometimes (12% frequently, 16% occasionally, 24% sometimes). Similarly, exactly half of those who are Christian or who have some Christian background say they have gone through a "prolonged" period of doubt.¹

Doubt seems to be part of the human condition. Doubt is lurking behind all the tough questions we have been dealing with the past few weeks—the goodness of God, the reality of evil, coping with suffering, salvation only in Jesus. Is doubting incompatible with being a person of faith, like sin, or can real Christians doubt? Let's think about that tough question this morning, and see if we can find a real answer.

Actually, doubt is a big part of the Biblical story. Abraham is known as the father of faith, yet he doubted when God told him he would bear a son at the age of 99—imagine that!

Read through the Psalms. About a third of them are laments, crying out to God in times of trouble and many times in doubt: "*Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*"² Doubt is everywhere.

The apostle Peter often had great faith, but he also had his moments of doubt. When Jesus walked on the water, Peter stepped out of the boat and by faith stood on the stormy sea. But then his faith gave way, and he began to sink. Jesus saved him from drowning, but he said to Peter, "*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*"³

The first person to doubt the Virgin Birth of Jesus was Joseph, who didn't believe Mary at first when she brought the news that she would bear God's Son. The first people to doubt the resurrection were the disciples, huddled in fear, who heard the report of the women who had seen the empty tomb, yet they dismissed what the women were saying. Luke says, "*these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.*"⁴

The poster child for doubt in the Bible is the disciple Thomas. On Easter Sunday afternoon, as all the disciples were huddled in fear, the risen Christ appeared among them, to give them peace and to breathe into them the Holy Spirit. Thomas had stepped out for a few minutes, and when he returned, they all told him what had happened. What was his response? “*Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.*”⁵ He doubted.

Virtually every major figure in Christian history has gone through periods of doubting his or her faith and call. There is even a name for it—“the dark night of the soul.” Mother Teresa of Calcutta, one of the most prominent and saintly Christians of our own age, had times when she felt abandoned by God. The Archbishop of Calcutta remembered a letter he received while Mother Teresa was searching for a place to start her work with the destitute in the slums. She wrote, “I wandered the streets the whole day. My feet are aching, and I have not been able to find a home. And I also get the Tempter telling me, ‘Leave all this, go back to the convent from which you came.’”⁶ Of course, she didn’t go back. She ministered to the destitute and dying of Calcutta for half a century and eventually won the Nobel Peace Prize. But in *Come Be My Light*, a book of letters that was published after her death, Mother Teresa confessed that for almost the entire time she was a missionary in Calcutta, she didn’t feel the presence of Christ and doubted the existence of God. She wrote to her confessor, “as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear; the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak ... I want you to pray for me.”⁷ Doubt is a real thing.

But we try not to doubt, don’t we? We don’t want to be “doubting Thomases.” We’re afraid that if we let ourselves question too much, we might fall away from God and lose our faith. Lee Strobel, author of *The Case for Faith*, says, “For many Christians, merely having doubts of any kind can be scary. They wonder whether their questions disqualify them being a follower of Christ. They feel insecure because they’re not sure whether it’s permissible to express uncertainty about God, Jesus, or the Bible. So they keep their questions to themselves—and inside, unanswered, they grow and fester and loom until they eventually succeed in choking out their faith.”⁸

I think a better answer to the tough question of doubt is to find a positive way to deal with it. We can try to ignore or squelch our doubts, but that will only make them seem bigger than they are. I say admit your doubts, even embrace your doubts, and try to figure out a way to turn your doubts into a positive force for faith.

Doubts can help you make your faith your own. If you never doubt—if all you do is blindly accept what you have been told all your life—then you have not owned your faith. You are just relying on the faith of others. Before you can really claim your faith as your own, you have to dismantle it, take it apart, examine it, and put it back together in a way that makes sense to you.

It’s like playing with blocks when you were a kid. First you knock it down, then you build it back up—into something better and higher and stronger. Then it’s yours. Nobody built it for you and handed it to you and said, “Here, believe this.” You put every block in place yourself, and it’s solid.

Doubt can be a learning process. When you doubt something, that makes you want to figure it out. Figuring it out takes study and thought and prayer, and in the process, you learn more than you ever knew before. Doubt is the spur that goads us to seek until we find, to knock until the door is opened, and to ask until the answer is given.

In 2001, missionary Gracia Burnham and her husband Martin endured a year of captivity by Muslim terrorists in the Philippines. Finally, after a year, government troops moved in to rescue the hostages. In the effort, Martin was killed by a stray bullet. Gracia wrote, “Sometimes I wonder, *Why did Martin die when everyone was praying he wouldn't? Why does Scripture lead you to believe that if you pray a certain way, you'll get what you pray for?* People all over the world were praying that we'd both get out alive, but we didn't.” Her questions made her realize it isn't always easy to comprehend God's nature, but she could finally affirm this: “What I do know is that God is God—and I'm not. The world's in a mess because of sin, not God. Some awful things may happen to me, but God does what is right. And he makes good out of bad situations.”⁹ Gracia learned through her process of grief and doubt.

Use your doubts to help you own your faith and to help you learn more so you can understand better. But don't forget to **doubt your doubts**. Don't take your doubts so seriously that they destroy your faith. Doubt your doubts; they can be dangerous. Like water to a non-swimmer, up to a point it's OK, but if it gets too deep, you drown. Doubts can be spiritually destructive.

Carl Sagan, the famous scientist and astronomer, was a convinced agnostic. He could not believe that rational adults could cling to a faith based on the unverifiable testimony of observers who had been dead for 2,000 years. Once he challenged Joan Brown Campbell, an ordained pastor, “You're so smart; why do you believe in God?” To which she replied, “You're so smart; why don't you believe in God?”

Carl Sagan never came to believe in God. When he died in 1996, his wife reported that there was no deathbed conversion, no hope for an afterlife, and no hope that the two of them would ever be reunited. Someone asked her if Dr. Sagan ever *wanted* to believe. She replied fiercely, “Carl never wanted to believe. He wanted to *know*.”¹⁰

What Carl Sagan should have known was that we cannot know everything. We're not that smart! Doubt assumes that given enough time and information, we can know everything. It just isn't so. But where knowledge ends, faith begins. Where knowledge falls in despair, faith stands in triumph! We just have to doubt our doubts.

John Wesley, the founding father of Methodism, was on the point of despair after an unfortunate experience trying to be a missionary in the new colony of Georgia. When he returned to London in 1738, he was utterly convinced that he had lost his faith. And he was a priest in the Church of England! He asked his friend Peter Boehler if he should stop preaching altogether. Boehler told Wesley, “By no means....Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.”¹¹

Faith is not an emotion; faith is a decision. We decide we want to believe. Then we behave as if we believe, and our doubts can help move us down the road of faith, as long as we don't let them hijack the bus.

Doubts happen; we just have to deal with it. Here's how to do that. We deal with doubt by **deciding** we want to believe. We put away the excuses, the self-centered motivations, and the desire to be in control, and we just decide to be a believer.

Then we have to **stay** where faith is—to be in community with people who are also positive about their faith. If you want to grow oranges, you don't plant your orchard at the North Pole. If you want to be a disciple, you don't hang out with people who ridicule faith with their words or their lives. Stay where faith is.

Then **build** your faith with positive mental reinforcement. Fill your mind and heart with faith-building material—books, music, and conversation that stimulate faith and doesn't tear it down. This also means removing yourself from much of the immoral, violent, and exploitative media that permeate our culture today.

The fourth thing to do is continually **clarify** your faith. Keep your focus on Christ; investigate the evidence; question the answers; make judgments based on your research. Keep refining and clarifying and growing in your knowledge of spiritual things. St. Augustine characterized the Christian life as “faith seeking understanding.” Seek faith, understanding that you will never know everything, and you will never know for sure—without a doubt—until you stand before God. That's why it's called faith: as the Letter to the Hebrews says, “*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*”¹²

The final antidote for doubt is **the irrefutable personal experience** of the presence of God. You can learn, and decide, and then keep on learning, but there comes a point where you just have to experience faith to understand what we're talking about.

It's like riding a bicycle—you can read a book about riding a bicycle, you can watch the instructional video, you can watch other people ride, but you cannot know what riding a bicycle is like until you get on one and move forward.

The reality of faith and the cure for doubt is the experience of a changed heart—changed by the power of the Holy Spirit and the presence of Jesus Christ.

After his time of despair, John Wesley found faith in a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street. He felt his heart “strangely warmed,” and he felt for the first time in his life that he trusted in Christ alone for his salvation.

Thomas found faith a week after he doubted the resurrection, when Jesus showed up again in the midst of the disciples. Jesus invited Thomas to look at his nail-scarred hands and to touch his wounded side and see for himself. Thomas didn't even have to; he fell to his knees and cried out his confession of faith: “*My Lord and my God!*”¹³ All his doubt was gone.

Someone has written that God lets you love the question until you can live the answer. What Thomas and John Wesley and countless other people of faith have discovered over the centuries is that we can have an experience of faith that doesn't eradicate doubt but transforms it into a positive force for spiritual growth. So we keep loving the question until we can live the answer. We keep seeking and searching and inquiring and probing and learning and growing. We engage the process; we enter the conversation understanding that in the end, God is God, and we are not. In the end, there is some mystery involved. In the end, it takes faith. That is the real answer.

¹ Barna Highlight 3/20/2023.

² Psalm 10:1.

³ Matthew 14:31.

⁴ Luke 24:11.

⁵ John 20:25.

⁶ Kevin A. Miller, *PreachingToday.com*. Source: CNN.

⁷ <https://time.com/4126238/mother-teresas-crisis-of-faith/>.

⁸ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* ((Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 226.

⁹ Corrie Cutrer, “Soul Survivor,” *Today's Christian Woman* (July/Aug 2003), p. 50.

¹⁰ Jerry Adler, *Newsweek*, March 31, 1997, p. 64f.

¹¹ *PreachingToday.com*, “Zinzendorf and the Moravians,” *Christian History*.

¹² Hebrews 11:1.

¹³ John 20:28.