

If I Believe, Why Do I Doubt?

What Do These People Have In Common...?

- the business leader who wants to have a faith that matters in a very secular corporate world...
- the parent who wants some real answers as while holding her child who is on the verge of death...
- the college student who is assaulted by politically correct atheism in virtually every aspect of college life
- the woman who is picking up the pieces of her life after divorce and wonders if God could possibly be real

They are **walking the path of doubt**. They are not the only ones.

“Doubt, it seems to me, is the central condition of a human being in the twentieth century”

Salmon Rushdie

We **live in a culture infected** to the core with doubt and skepticism. We say, “Prove it. Then I will believe it.” This infection touches everything we do: it pervades our workplaces, it is the dominant ethic of the news media, and it colors every political campaign where every accomplishment is quickly tarnished and every character is relentlessly assaulted. To many people in America, **doubt** and its partners, **skepticism and cynicism**, are the highest of the intellectual virtues. But **doubt has a cost**.

Is Doubt Bad?

he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. Jas 1:6-8 (NIV)

We know what it is like to **ride that sea**. Because of the pervasive influence of doubt and skepticism in western culture, we find it **hard to believe in God**. Faith is privatized, marginalized, and held back from the public arena. We find it **hard to believe in people**. The infection of doubt

touches almost every personal relationship we have. Under the influence of this infection, relationship commitments are cautiously made and easily broken. Core values like trust, love, surrender and risk - that secure and enhance our friendships - are held back in fear rather than generously given. **Doubt has a cost.**

- Many people think true believers *never doubt*, but actually, the greatest believers have known sharp seasons of doubt.

You remember **John the Baptist**: This is the guy who **baptized Jesus** and he saw the heavens open up and heard the voice of God say, *“This is My Son in whom I’m well pleased.”* This is the guy who pointed at Jesus Christ and said, *“I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”* He had incredible faith. And he has a mountain of courage. He takes on Herod for his immorality. And what happens? He gets **thrown into jail**. Long sleepless night turn into weeks. He thinks about it all again and again. Was I right? Did I hear God right? And he gets **infected with the virus of doubt**. So He sends some messengers to Jesus...

“Are you really the one we are waiting for, or shall we keep on looking?” Mt 11:3 (LB)

What would you expect Jesus to do? Send him packing as a backslider? Toss him off the team for his doubts? Jesus does just the opposite. He sends his disciples back to John with a message, *“Go and tell him what you see and hear...”* Not a word of criticism for John as he struggles with his doubt. But instead, Jesus turns and tells the crowd something else...

Jesus: *“I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist...”*

Mt 11:11

Jesus does not shut the door on his followers when they get infected by doubt. If you bring your doubts to him, he will do just the opposite; he will help you through.

- Many people think doubt is *weakness*, but it can lead to the *strongest* faith. Doubts can produce some **positive side effects** if we take steps toward resolving them. It’s **like an immunization**. You get an immunization to help your body fight off future disease. When you are immunized, they **give you a little bit of that disease**. Your body reacts to that little bit of disease and builds up **antibodies** so if you’re ever exposed to the full disease your

body will be able to fight it off. Your body is actually stronger from the experience of having had a bit of that disease injected in the first place. The same thing can happen with your faith. When you're **infected with doubt**, **if** you work through it, you can **emerge stronger** than ever in your faith.

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you...” Matt 7:7

- Many people think doubt is **unbelief**, but it isn't; there is a difference between settled unbelief and **honest** questions.

What is **unbelief**? Unbelief is a settled refusal to believe. You don't want to be bothered with the evidence; you're sure, you're clear. There is no God. But that's not what doubt is. **Doubt** is to be indecisive over an issue. It's to be caught between certainty and uncertainty. You can have a strong faith and still have some doubts about tough questions. Remember that.

How to Grow From Doubt to Faith

1) **Think About The Roots of Your Doubt**

Doubt can come. It is important to think carefully about your doubt. Where does it come from? It can come from several sources:

- **Emotional Scarring**

I've known people with sharp doubts who also had deep emotional wounds. The wounds were so deep they didn't want to deal with them. So they kept **a shield of doubt** around them. They couldn't believe in God because they knew that if they came to Jesus, he would want them to forgive someone for something terrible. And they wouldn't do that. So they hid their wounds behind a façade of doubt.

For instance, you may have suffered abuse from a parent when you were a child. Or a dad may have walked out on your family or your parents may have gone through a divorce. Or maybe a spouse left you. And when you go through that kind of **abandonment** very often that kind of experience can lead to chronic doubts in your life toward God. You are afraid to trust because of your fears and memories.

Did you know that if you go through history and look at the lives of the most famous atheists who've ever lived – Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Bertrand Russell, Madelyn Murray O'Hare, Nietzsche, Camus – every

single one of them either had a father who died when they were young or who abandoned them when they were young or they had a horrible relationship with their dad. Every single one. Doubt can spring from emotional scarring.

● **Genuine Intellectual Concerns**

Oftentimes doubt is **honest questions looking for truth**. You can't believe an ancient book like the Bible is really true. Or you can't believe Jesus really died and rose from the dead. Or you can't believe that God can do miracles.

Some years ago I was ready to go to bed on a Saturday night when I realized that my girls were still downstairs with a couple of guys. I went down to see how they were doing and remind them it was getting near the end of the evening. As I came into the room, one of them said, "Why don't you ask Dad that question?" Within minutes I found that these guys had spent the better part of the evening trying to talk my girls out of their faith. I told them I would love to talk to them sometime, and invited them back. Later, after the boys had left, there were a thousand questions. "They said the bible is just a bunch of things someone made up, Dad. They said God isn't real, and Jesus isn't really alive, and heaven and hell are just stuff people made up. We were so surprised, we didn't know what to say! They were asking us **tough questions!** What should we say?" They had caught the virus of doubt, and were asking honest questions that needed real answers.

● **Personal Rebellion**

Sometimes doubt flows from personal rebellion. Most of my doubt was like this during my 20's. I didn't want to give my life to God. I didn't want to give my life to anyone. So I used cynicism and doubt to keep Christians away from me. I could always ask better questions than they could answer. When I got into religious discussions, I asked probing, sharp edged questions. And it worked. It kept me in charge of my own life. But it **wasn't real doubt. It was just rebellion.**

What you have to do when you look hard at the roots of your doubt is to try and **solve the real problem.**

If it's a **rebellion problem**, long conversations over the evidence for the resurrection aren't going to help. I have to solve the rebellion problem first. Then I can find freedom from my doubts.

If it is a **heart problem**, I can't treat it like it is an intellectual issue. I have to get honest about my unwillingness to forgive or my fear of abandonment. Then I can find a way through my doubts.

If it is an **intellectual problem**, it won't do any good to treat it like it is a rebellion problem. I need honest and real answers to genuine questions, and I probably need some help to find them. Then I can find my way forward through my doubts.

You have to think carefully about the roots of your doubt. Then you have to ...

2) Ask God for His Help

People were always doing this. In our Gospel lesson today, a man had come to Jesus' disciples with a boy that was tormented by demons. This Dad was beside himself in fear for his son, and he was looking for help. So he asked Jesus to help him if he could. He wasn't sure Jesus could help. And Jesus took him up on it...

"What do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked. "Anything is possible if a person believes."

Once you hear the father's response to Jesus, you never forget it.

The father instantly replied, "I do believe, but help me not to doubt!"

Mk 9:23-24 (NLT)

It is a very honest request for help. He wasn't sure. He had sought help so many times before. And **his faith** was right there. But **so were his doubts** and his fears. But he **took them both to Jesus**. That's what you have to do! Proverbs says...

If you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.

Proverbs 2:3-5

Jeremiah says...

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:13

Again and again God invites doubters to seek him, and promises that when they do they will find him. If you are in a season of doubt, could you pray a prayer like this? (Read it with me)

A Seeker's Prayer: *“God, I don't know if you are real, but I want to know. I've got some tough questions that need honest answers. If you are real, would you help me find you and know you as you really are?”*

God will answer prayers like that.

3) **Build Up Your Faith**

Faith does not just come one day in your life and remain strong through all the seasons of life. You have to build it up. It is like your body. If you take care of it and exercise it, it will grow healthy and strong. If you trash it and eat junk food and smoke and drink and sit around in your recliner all the time, your body will get sick and out of shape and weak.

Faith grows by hearing and studying about the life of Jesus.

Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor...” Mt 11:4-5

Paul said it like this.

Faith comes from listening to this message of good news—the Good News about Christ. Ro 10:17 (NLT)

Your faith cannot stay healthy enough to fend off the virus of doubt – in a culture that is heavily infected with that virus – if you do not **read the bible** regularly. Listen to Hebrews...

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith... Heb 12:2 (NIV)

Jesus started your faith. He will perfect it if you keep your eyes on him.

4) **Act on the Faith That You Already Have**

Finally, inevitably, you have to act on your faith. That was the point of Jesus' response to his disciples when they asked him to...

“Increase our faith!”

He replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.

Lk 17:5-6 (NIV)

All you need is a little faith in a great Lord... and the willingness to act on it. Often it is the willingness to take a step of obedience, a step of faith – even while you may have unanswered questions – that will be the step to a life of faith and effectiveness. Lee Strobel tells just such a story of a 30 year old man who was *fighting for his faith. He was a believer in the Lord and had a friend named Chuck and his friend went to a very liberal seminary and he started raising questions about God and especially about the Bible. Chuck kept saying to him, “You can’t trust the Bible,” and started trying to undermine his faith. And his friend started to get a little shaky in his thinking. But he had another friend, a woman, who was a strong Bible scholar. She would whisper in his other ear, “It’s not true. Here’s the evidence. Here’s the facts. Here’s why you can trust the Bible.” He said, “I felt like I was on a rack, being pulled toward doubt one way and faith another way... I came... to a point of being very disturbed by the whole experience, very unsettled.”*

*At the height of the confusion and conflict he began to pray to God and said, “God, I need Your help in this! I don’t want to have a weak faith. I want a strong and powerful faith. I want You to use me...” He **hadn’t answered all his questions, but he felt he had real answers to the critical questions.** So he got down on his knees and said, “**Based on all the evidence for the trustworthiness of the Bible I... [decide to] accept the Bible as being the word of God and I’m going to base my life on it and I’m going to live the way it says I ought to live and I’m going to tell others about it.**” He said, “I got up off my knees and it was like God breathed fresh life into my faith. I felt like **a spiritual battle for my soul had been fought and had been won.**” That man was Billy Graham. And look what God has done through his faith.*

If you’re here today and you’re riddled with questions and uncertainties and doubts and you wonder, “Can I ever do anything positive and powerful in my life?” Think of Billy Graham and think about how your doubts may be the very road that God will use to give you a vibrant, resilient, powerful faith. Who knows what God can do for you?