

On the bank of the Jordan River, the Baptizer—John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth—cried out, “Behold! Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of this world!”

John 1:29

Later, from one of the jail cells of Herod, John sent a message to Jesus: ***“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”***

Matthew 11:2

This Christmas season we hear, and we sing, “Glory to the newborn King,” but maybe we wonder: am I missing something here, “Should we be expecting something else?”

Can we be honest with each other and agree that there have been days or times when we have struggled with our doubts?

John had a lot of time to think while he sat there in the prison. The conditions were despicable, even for someone who was accustomed to living out in the wilderness, wearing a camel skin, and eating bugs.

As he sat there for about a year and a half, knowing that he’d probably never leave alive, it seems that John wondered if Jesus was the person who was going to fulfill all the prophecies of the Old Testament. Was He the Messiah? Jesus was not the one whom John had pictured.

Have we asked the same question?

Formerly, as a pastor, and still today sometimes I interact with people who I know are struggling with doubt. They might be dealing with a significant or persistent health issue, or maybe there is trouble at home or at work. Relief doesn’t seem to be coming anytime soon. Have you ever asked someone, “How are you? Really. How are you?” They look at you and pause. You can see the answer right behind their eyes, but no words come out. They aren’t ready to talk yet. They don’t want to give voice to their discouragement or to express their doubt publicly.

Have you ever wondered about Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:19, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

Jesus heard about John's struggle. He 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. Blessed are they who do not fall away on account of me" (Matthew 11:4–6). Echoes of Isaiah 35:5-6 and Isaiah 61:1 can be heard in these words.

I wonder, were these words helpful for John? We don't know. We don't get that answer from Scripture. We don't hear a profession or reaffirmation of faith from John. What is striking is Jesus' affirmation of John, even though John may have had his doubts. Read the rest of the passage (Matthew 11:7-19).

This morning I'd like to start with a question. Has anyone here ever struggled with doubt after becoming a Christian? I'm not talking about doubting your salvation. However there are some that have struggled with doubt as it relates to their salvation. What I really want to focus on today is dealing with the doubts that plague our minds from time to time.

Everybody has doubts. We all tend to second guess ourselves and say, "Did I do the right thing? Did I make the right decision? Should I take it back to the store?" We all struggle with these kinds of questions in our lives.

Interesting thing about doubt is it's an unfamiliar topic to most people, even though there are whole books of the Bible that deal with the issue of doubt in various ways — Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Habakkuk. Many of the psalms touch on the theme of doubt and feeling abandoned by God.

James 1:6-7 New International Version (NIV)

6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Definitions:

Definition of *doubt* (transitive verb)

1: to call into question the truth of : to be uncertain or in doubt about

to consider unlikely

a lack of confidence : DISTRUST has doubts about his abilities

b: an inclination not to believe or accept

2a: uncertainty of belief or opinion that often interferes with decision-making

b: a deliberate suspension of judgment

3: a state of affairs giving rise to uncertainty, hesitation, or suspense.

What effects can doubt have on our Christian experience?

- A Loss of Joy.
- A life filled with doubt is a life filled with turmoil and fear.
- That isn't the life that God intended for the believer to live.
- Jesus tells us that the life He brings is abundant and full.
- John explains the purpose of writing this first epistle was: That we may know that we are saved. And that our joy may be full.

“The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns. Faith also means reaching deeply within, for the sense one was born with, the sense, for example, to go for a walk.”

— Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*

Contrast doubt with the Biblical definition of faith?

"Now **faith** is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" Hebrews 11: 1. **Faith** is the connecting power into the spiritual realm, which links us with God and makes Him become a tangible reality to the sense perceptions of a person. **Faith** is the basic ingredient to begin a relationship with God.

Faith as a fruit of the Spirit operating in our lives, draws us into close relationship and trust in Him. Faith works by love, and our relationship and spiritual walk, gives us confidence to exercise the impartation of the faith which we receive. The operation of faith is dependent upon our relationship with God. John 15: 4-5 abide in me, and I in you.as the branches cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine no more can ye except ye abide in me.

Interesting to note however. that if we could somehow discover some empirical proof that God did exist, and by empirical, I mean verifiable by observation or experience rather than theory or pure logic. Then there would be no need for faith

James 1:6-7 (NIV)

6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

“How do we read James 1:6-7, particularly as it concerns doubting? It appears James is saying that those who doubt God’s power are like waves and what not. Is this a specific theology of the time, or is it really saying TO ME that I should never doubt?”

I’m guessing I’m not the only person in the world with a question like this, especially having been taught that struggling with faith is a sign of weakness—in part because of James 1:6-7:

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Well that seems crystal clear: doubt = bad.

Different biblical authors have different perspectives. We can never read one author as cancelling out another—like James cancelling out the spiritual struggles of, say, Job, some Psalms, or Ecclesiastes.

As tempting as it might be to take James 1:6-7 as a clear command for all time and every situation, first it is more responsible to try and understand *why* James says what he says in this particular letter, and then see how it might apply to one's own situation.

James is speaking in the context of “trials” and the “testing of your faith” (James 1:2-3) in what was thought to be the end of the age. Like other New Testament authors, James likely thought of Jesus's resurrection as stage one of a two-stage process *that would come to completion soon*.

In that context of urgency, of “suffering, though the time is near,” a tone of warning and “pull yourself together, man!” is the expected rhetoric.

That context, however, is not one which you or I necessarily share. We have, rather, more in common in this sense with Old Testament authors for whom no end was in sight, which afforded [plenty of opportunity to struggle with their faith](#) (again, many of the Psalms, Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations).

So, James is valuable (of course) but not as the crowning once-for-all view a Christian should have when struggling with their faith. I don't believe James simply trumps Qoheleth, Job, or any of the psalmists.

Scripture is diverse and ***multivalent*** (many applications, interpretations, meanings, or values)

The Greek word here translated as “doubt” does not mean what it might appear to mean at first blush, especially filtered through our western rationalist society, namely “intellectual uncertainty”—intellectual struggling/questioning brought on by life experiences, bouts with depression, personal tragedies, etc.

The Greek word is *diakrinō* and connotes a “divided loyalty” (for example “being double-minded”), which is a particularly pressing concern in James's context.

James seems to be saying something like, “Stay firm, resolute in this time of great urgency. Trust in God. Do not get carried away by your circumstances. Nothing good will come of that.”

The question boils down to whether James 1:6-7 means it is always wrong to struggle with faith and whether our current struggles invokes God's anger or displeasure. I believe the answer is no.

I believe that a faith that never questions is not faith

That doesn't mean you celebrate doubt or force it to appear. But sooner or later, doubt happens, and when it does, there is plenty in the Bible to identify with.

Sooner or later every thoughtful Christian will experience the unsettling, cold, soul-gripping claw of doubt.

First, there are intellectual doubts. These are doubts most often raised by those outside the Christian faith. Is the Bible the Word of God? Is Jesus the Son of God? Did he really rise from the dead? How do I really know God exists? These are the doubts raised by Stephen Hawking, Neil DeGrasse Tyson and the controversies stirred by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and other contemporary apostles of atheism.

Second, there are spiritual doubts. These tend to be the doubts of those inside the church. Am I really a Christian? Have I truly believed? Why is it so hard to pray? Why do I still feel guilty? Why is it taking me so long to get better?

Third, there are circumstantial doubts. This is the largest category because it encompasses all the "whys" of life. Why did my child die? Why did my marriage break up? Why can't I find a spouse? Why did my friend betray me? Where was God when I was abused as a child? These are the questions we meet at the intersection of biblical faith and the pain of living in a fallen world. And these are toughest doubts of all, and we tend sometimes to sweep them under the rug and to put down those in the church who struggle with these issues. But when we refuse to deal with circumstantial doubts, they soon become spiritual doubts, and those spiritual doubts eventually become intellectual doubts. And then people start leaving the church altogether.

So why Doubt?

Interestingly, if you were to look at the gospels, you would see that doubt is an often-recurring theme.

In John we have the story of a guy called Thomas, who developed the nickname doubting Thomas.

Luke seems to have a doubt theme running through it And Matthew begins his final few lines of his report with the words **“When they saw Jesus, they worshipped him, but some doubted.”**

Matthew said the spiritual equivalent to a dirty word, He said Doubt!!!

I say that because that’s often how doubt is treated, like four letter word

To many of us as Christians the word doubt is offensive because Christianity is all about faith.

And because it’s all about faith and so many people think talking about doubt is like playing with fire or a live grenade

Belief in Jesus hangs by a thin enough thread in this world without doubt too.

So, because it’s such a difficult subject to talk about our questions often go unasked,

As people of God we are often ashamed to say that we have doubts. All the questions then tend to get left unasked and therefore unanswered, the fear is that people may look at us and see that we have doubts.

Try for a moment to imagine what it would have been like to view the crucifixion with the eyes of one of Jesus’ closest friends, the disciples.

The scene

you’ve got eleven disciples scattered in and around Jerusalem, its early in the morning Saturday, in between all the tears and grief some have been able to sleep others not.

Their rabbi, friend, confidante Jesus had just been nailed to a cross the previous day hung out to die in the midday sun, tortured, beaten and crucified.

The friend the disciples left everything to follow was no more. Now all the eleven disciples had was doubt, Was he just a fraud?

were the miracles he performed all a part of a cheap side show act to woo the crowds?

And were the words he spoke of this new kingdom just a load of bunk?

These questions and more must have sprung from the disciple's doubt. For the disciples it was a hard journey to take from the doubt of Friday to

well, they didn't know what lay ahead

an uncertain future was the best they could hope for, especially if the authorities found them. If there was ever a time to doubt their faith then it was then, in the face of the crucifixion. If there was ever a time to doubt Jesus, then it was when Jesus wasn't there. If there was ever a time for the world to stand by and say there is no God, then it was at this time.

For the disciples' Journey in Faith, suddenly the path led through the darkness, desolation and a desert wasteland that is doubt, what they didn't realize was, as the old Southern Baptist preacher said: "it's Friday now but Sunday's Coming!"

You see this wasteland of doubt was also a place of passage for the disciples because they left this desert wasteland transformed, they had gone from a childish faith into an adult faith.

So, doubt is not always the enemy of faith.

But doubt is the enemy of weak, shallow, superficial faith. You see when faith is shallow it is purely based upon emotions.

Now, there is nothing wrong in having a faith that is based on your emotions.

We are called to love God and you need to use your emotions to do that,

But when the emotions run dry it runs into difficulties.

But that's not all, because emotions also lie. Think of how barren the cross felt.

Remember how the disciples looked at it with total despair. Yet never has God been so at work. Our emotions can and do lie to us.

So, if our faith stays purely in the emotional realm than before we know it, we can be in trouble

Doubt though can call our emotional faith to a different level,

FACE UP TO OUR DOUBTS: Face up to the fact that we have and doubts, when we stop ignoring them, we can treat them, address them and who knows they may even go.

But more importantly we need to see that doubt can be a sign of growth.

We would rather not have them.

But doubt can take your faith to the next level.

Because our doubts cause us to cry out to God for answers.

Now I'm not saying that Doubt is the same as belief

And doubt may not even lead to belief. To embrace our doubts is like playing with a live grenade, so we run the risk of not only losing our belief but our faith if the pin falls out.

But a faith that is not able to take a risk is not faith at all, a faith that will not face up to the difficult questions is likely to die a slow and painful death, suffocated by the questions that life brings. Oswald Chambers says it best: "Always make a practice to stir your own mind thoroughly to think through what you have easily believed. Your position is not really yours until you make it yours through suffering and study.

Five Ways to Move from Doubt to Faith

Doubt is not sinful, but it can be dangerous. However, doubt can be a spur to enormous spiritual growth. *It's what you do with your doubt that matters.* Here are five suggestions about how to handle your doubt.

A. Admit Your Doubts and Ask for Help.

That's what John the Baptist did. *God is not fragile.* He can handle your doubts, your fears, your worries, and all your unanswered questions. He's a big God. He runs the universe without any help. Your doubts won't upset him. Tell him your

doubts, cry out and ask for his help. And don't fight the battle alone. Go to a Christian friend, a pastor, someone you respect, anyone with a strong faith and godly insight. Ask them to walk with you as you face your doubts honestly.

B. Be Honest About Your Doubts

God already knows that we are doubters. Our calling is not to pretend we have no doubts, but to trust Jesus even with our doubts.

C. Act on Your Faith, Not Your Doubts.

That's what Noah did when he built the ark. That's what Abraham did when he left Ur of the Chaldees. That's what Abraham did when he offered Isaac. That's what Moses did when he marched through the Red Sea on dry ground. That's what David did when he faced Goliath. That's what Joshua did when he marched around Jericho. That's what Daniel did when he was thrown into the lion's den. That's what Nehemiah did when he built the wall. That's what Peter did when he stepped out of the boat.

All these great heroes of the faith had their doubts. They didn't know in advance how everything was going to come out. But they took a deep breath, decided to trust God, and they acted on their faith and not on their doubts. Do the same thing and your faith will continually grow stronger?

D. Doubt Your Doubts, Not Your Faith.

This simply means that you should not cast away your faith simply because you are deep in some valley of darkness. All of us walk into that valley from time to time. Some of us spend a great deal of time there. But when you find yourself in that valley where all is uncertain and you are highly tempted to give in to your doubts, fears and worries, remember these two words. Keep walking. Just keep walking. *Nothing is gained by camping out in the valley of darkness.* The only way out is to keep on walking. Every step forward is a way to "doubt your doubts." Soon enough the light will shine again.

E. Keep Going Back to What You Know to Be True.

This, for me, is the most important point. After considering the sufferings of this life, and the perils and tribulations of following Christ, Paul concludes Romans 8 triumphantly by declaring, "**For I am persuaded.**" And he declares that nothing in

all the universe can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. In 2 Timothy 1:12 he says, **“I know whom I have believed.”**

CONCLUSION

1) Many people think doubt is the opposite of faith, but it isn't. Unbelief and certainty are actually quite closely related. This is the opposite of faith. Unbelief refers to a willful refusal to believe, while doubt refers to inner uncertainty.

2) Many people think doubt is unforgivable, but it isn't. God doesn't condemn us when we question him. Both Job and David repeatedly questioned God, but they were not condemned. God is big enough to handle all our doubts and all our questions.

3) Many people think struggling with God means we lack faith, but that's not true. Struggling with God is a sure sign that we truly have faith. If we never struggle, our faith will never grow.

Doubt is not the absence of faith; it is a critical and necessary step on the path toward faith, however crooked that path may be.

“In 1975, the Jesuit philosopher, John Kavanaugh, went to work for three months at the ‘house of the dying’ in Calcutta with Mother Teresa. He was searching for an answer to some spiritual struggles. On his very first morning there, he met Mother Teresa. She asked him, ‘And what can I do for you?’ Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him. ‘What do you want me to pray for?’ she asked. He answered with the request that was the very reason he traveled thousands of miles to India: ‘Pray that I have clarity.’ Mother Teresa said firmly, ‘No. I will not do that.’ When he asked her why, she said, ‘Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.’ When Kavanaugh said, ‘You always seem to have clarity,’ Mother Teresa laughed and said, ‘I have never had clarity. What I have always had is trust. So, I will pray that you trust God.’”