

New Series

Skepticism: Where Faith Engages Doubt

²²Be merciful to those who doubt; Jude 22; *NIV*

We are told that the emerging generation questions everything. This is a skeptical generation. Some are very concerned about this. Personally, I would encourage the young as well as the mature to be skeptical with regard to many prevailing opinions. However, I would also urge all of us to bring our doubts and skepticisms before God. God can handle our doubts! At the very least, it seems to me, we should give God a hearing . . . a read . . . a listen. If we are to doubt God and his promises, shouldn't we know what we are doubting? I'm not sure that is unique to this particular emerging generation. . . .

Sooner or later, our doubts should be addressed and if possible resolved. Nothing paralyzes a church like doubt. Hebrews 12:1-2 suggests that the sin that so easily entangles the Christian runner is the sin of unbelief - doubt is the doorway to all kinds of other sins.

January 17, 2010
Text: John 20:27

The Word on Doubt

²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." John 20:27; *NIV*

Today, we want to consider what God has said regarding doubt and skepticism. What's *The Word on Doubt?*

Alistair McGrath has written a very helpful little book on the topic - *Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Life*. In the study, he identifies four Biblical snapshots of doubt. Taken together they present a good picture of what God thinks about our doubts.

The first word we encounter occurs only twice in the NT. It is a word that pictures the action or inaction of . . .

Hesitation - to hold back, waver between two opinions, uncertainty as to which way to take - literally "to stand in two ways".

³¹Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you *doubt*?"

Matthew 14:31; *NIV*

May be you recognize the quote. Peter along with the other disciples have just witnessed Jesus walking on water in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Peter boldly spoke up. If the person out there on the water is you, Jesus, then call me to walk out to you! He started, and then he hesitated!

Now my first thought is to defend poor Peter. He didn't hold back. He got out of the boat! The others set petrified. And yet, Jesus confronts Peter, after saving him, "Why did you hold back, waver, hesitate . . . doubt ME!

Such is the journey of faith. A little faith gets us out of the boat. But our Lord will not allow us to continue in our relationship with him with a stagnant, small faith. He will help us grow. He wants us to trust him without reservation and without all the answers.

¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some *doubted*. Matthew 28:17; *NIV*

This text recalls the day Jesus appeared to the Eleven disciples on a mountain in Galilee after his resurrection! Their response was one of worship. But some held back.

They hesitated. *The Message* captures the meaning rather well,

16-17Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally. Matthew 28:16-17; *The Message*

The disciples were hesitant to put their total trust in Jesus. Hesitation betrays a lack of trust. "Our reluctance to accept the gospel wholeheartedly, with the enthusiasm of little children, reflects a basic lack of trust in God and his promises." - McGrath, 50.

In the first church where we served in Ohio there was a man who was more than just skeptical. He was jealous of the role the church played in his wife's life. He never attended. Even, on one occasion came and removed her from our service. Rather embarrassing for all concerned, especially considering she was one of our pianists!

He delivered heating oil for the church and the parsonage so I got to know him. He was a hardworking man. In many respects, a solid provider, honest, and trustworthy. He just didn't like church.

Over the years we became friends. Gradually his icy attitude began to melt. Finally, he explained why he had such a bad attitude toward church. Frankly, he had good reason not to trust church, of any kind.

One afternoon he called. He had decided to "get out of the boat" and start following Jesus. He wanted to turn to the Lord for salvation. He wanted to be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of his sin. He had set a date to do so.

While I was encouraged by the change in his heart, I was concerned about his date setting. I urged him to follow through as soon as possible. He assured me he would do so, but he had his reasons. The days turned into weeks . . . the weeks months . . . and he had not followed through.

Now they say that the strength of the small church is that everyone knows everyone. And the weakness of the small church is that everyone knows everyone! Well in our little village, not only did the church family know your business, much of the town did as well.

My friend heard that we were preparing to leave for vacation to a destination that was one of his favorite spots. He called me a few days before we were to leave. He was very helpful. Wanted us to have a great time. He made several helpful suggestions of what to see and do. I thanked him. When I return, will talk . . .

About four or five days into our trip I received a call. My friend and died suddenly of a massive heart attack. Such sadness filled their family and our church. To the best of my knowledge, he never followed through. For whatever reason, he "held back, hesitated, he doubted." It is not my place to declare his eternal destiny. But I could offer know assurance to his family and friends.

Sometimes the proverb proves true . . . " he who hesitates is lost."

Another snapshot of doubt in the Bible is that of . . .

Indecision - It is the same word that we considered last week in Jude 22 where we were told to have mercy on those in the grip of doubt - to disputing, arguing with - greater and greater antagonism. Indecision results from a lack of conviction. We find ourselves divided, unsure of what to do. It pictures an internal struggle with regard to God and his promises.

Many have this struggle coming to Christ. But even believers may find themselves engaged with doubt. The old self seems to live on. The debate rages between the old person and the new person. The former life was skeptical of God's promises while the new life wants to embrace them wholeheartedly. The result: indecision.

Lack of confidence in God can easily lead to a lack of commitment to God. God uses these struggles to deepen our faith. When faced with indecision, we must cry out, "Lord, I believe, help me with my unbelief." - Mark 9:24

Any coach will tell you that an indecisive player is a tentative player. And tentative players make more mistakes. They seldom succeed. Confident players succeed even when they make mistakes. They are bold and aggressive.

With regard to God's promises, we have every reason to be strong and decisive. Like Abraham . . .

²⁰Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, Romans 4:20; *NIV*

James used the same word with regard to our prayers. Prayer should be decisive with regard to our trust and surrender. While we may not always know if God will grant our specific request, we can once and for all resolve to trust him with our lives and situation.

⁶But 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. James 1:6; *TNIV*

5-8If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who "*worry their prayers*" are like wind-whipped waves. Don't think you're going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open. James 1:5-8; *The Message*

A third biblical snapshot of doubt is pictured by another word that only occurs twice, and both times in James.

Double-mindedness - double-spirited; it refers to a person trying to lead a double life.

⁸they are double-minded and unstable in all they do. James 1:8; *TNIV*

8[For being as he is] a man of two minds (hesitating, dubious, irresolute), [he is] unstable and unreliable and uncertain about everything [he thinks, feels, decides]. James 1:8; *Amp*

5-8If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a

second thought. People who "worry their prayers" are like wind-whipped waves. Don't think you're going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, *keeping all your options open*. James 1:5-8; *The Message*

⁸Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. James 4:8; *TNIV*

8 Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. James 4:8; *NLT*

This is what we experience by trying to stay loyal to our community of faith and family, while at the same time hanging out with another lifestyle - another group of friends. It may occur at work or at leisure. It's not that we are trying to love unbelievers into the family, but rather be accepted by unbelievers and enjoy their way of living.

This snapshot of doubt means that the inner conflict between faith and unbelief has not been fully resolved. It refers to a life that is keeping all the options open long after we should have closed them.

Jesus said that we are to be in the world, but not of the world. Doubt arises when we try to keep our feet in both camps. We are reluctant to make the break between the world and the good news of Jesus Christ.

But when Jesus is Lord, we are enabled to live in the world without giving in to its standards or anxieties.

Tiger Woods is a tragic reminder that living a double life never works in the long run even by world standards.

The final snapshot is by far the most common picture of doubt in the Bible.

Unbelieving - . . . it is the state of mind that disbelieves. It is the most common biblical picture of doubt.

²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." John 20:27; *NIV*

Do not disbelieve, but believe. John 20:27; *ESV*

Jesus is saying as a command, stop doubting now, once and for all, and keep on believing! Get this matter resolved for life!

Cf. The word occurs 23 times in the NT writings: Matthew 17:17; Mark 9:19; Luke 9:4 (disciples unable to cast out demon); Luke 12:46 (assign him a place with the unbelievers); Acts 26:8 (why should it be thought a thing unbelievable that God can raise the dead?); 1 Cor 7 (unbelieving spouse); 10:27 (go to dinner when unbelievers invite you); 14:24 (can become a believer); 2 Cor 4:4; 6:14-15; 1 Tim 5:8; Titus 1:15; Rev 21:8 this word becomes the primary description of those who are not in Christ. But here lies the good news, unbelievers can become believers!

How? Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ!!!

Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservation.

Additionally, there are two images which show the challenge of living by faith in a world of doubt.

Walking in the dark.

A life of faith in a sin-darkened world is Image of walking in the dark with the aid of light - His word is a light to our feet and a lamp to our path! {Illustration - Cheryl's gift to her siblings who have not been to visit her in Central Asia - head lamps!}

Now we see in a mirror dimly . . . 1 Cor 13:12 doubt can arise in part because of the frustration of not being able to understand everything!

It is then that we need to be reminded that we walk by faith and not by sight.

A second image of a faith-life is . . .

Boating in rough seas. Doubt is like living with seasickness.

We are never sure, never stable, never solid. But we are reminded that God is solid, and he is our anchor on a troubled sea! - Hebrews 6:18-19

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see - Heb 11:1

Don't be discouraged if you can't see clearly or completely. You can see what God has done for you in Jesus Christ. And besides, there are really no other better options.

"Everyone who believes anything significant or worthwhile about the meaning of life does so as a matter of faith." - Alister McGrath, *Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Life*

Stop doubting and believe . . .