



Beyond Doubt

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Jude's advice— "be merciful to those who doubt"—is great advice. "Be merciful to those who doubt" (Jude 22). There are few things more painful and confusing in the life of a Christ-follower than the experience of doubt. To feel a loss of trust and confidence in knowing God and knowing about God is one of life's ultimate losses. To feel unsure of what you believe is to be like a ship in a storm without an anchor. The great theologian Martin Luther felt that he had no greater enemy than doubt. He called it "this monster of uncertainty," a "gospel of despair."

So, that's my perspective this morning: to "be merciful to those who doubt." I want to be an encouragement—and help you see doubt as an opportunity, an opportunity to really grow deep and wide and high in the faith.

I actually love Thomas—he's one of my favorite disciples. Thomas was a thinker. He asked a lot of questions. In John 14, when Jesus talked about his impending death, of his return to his Father's house, about the way to the place where he was going, it was Thomas who admitted, "Lord, *we don't know* where you are going, so how can we know the way?" To Thomas was given Jesus' famous answer, "I am the way and the truth and the life." If Thomas doesn't ask, we don't have that reply, one of the foundational statements on which the church's faith is grounded: Jesus is the only way, the only truth, the only life—and all because Thomas was brave enough to ask a question! That's my point: great

questions, hard questions, will yield great answers, great thoughts! We'll be the better for it!

Thomas wasn't a pretender. If he didn't know something, if he didn't get it the first time, he spoke up. If he wasn't sure, he asked. That's actually a great quality to have. There are way too many pretenders in this world, even in the church.

So, let's back up. Doubt comes to us for a variety of reasons and has many causes.

One cause: When bad things happen, to us or to other people, such as when a little child gets leukemia, a teenager is killed in a car accident, or a young mother dies unexpectedly. We read of people starving in Africa, see some losing their homes to fire or flood or wind. It's what we call the *Problem of Evil*. The question is put: if God is Love, how can He allow these things to happen when he's powerful enough to stop it or do something else? I know, I've been there: when the daughter of good friends died from a rare form of cancer at age 17, the same year that things were coming apart in the church I was serving, after which I took another church that wasn't a good fit. "What are You doing to me? It feels like You're not on my side!" It took me ten years to work it through. But, I did! There is an answer to the question of human suffering! For me, it came by way of a year-long study of the book of Job.

Another source of doubt: you pray and pray and you pray for a certain thing and you never get it, or you get the very opposite! That's hard!

Doubt in God, for some, arises when Christians behave badly. People question the character of the Father because of the lack of character of some of His children.

Doubt occurs when students take a course in school and the lies told by the teacher or professor seem to make more sense than the truth they were raised in. Or, when someone you really respected when you were young, who taught you so much about God, then denies the faith and walks away from the church. You're left to wonder: "Well, are they right?"

Doubts come by our own disobedience to the principles found in God's Word. How so? We rationalize it, excuse it away. It's easier to blame God than oneself; easier to take the parts of the Bible one doesn't like, ignore them, twist them to fit with one's chosen lifestyle—and slowly, more and more—drift further and further from God, and fill ourselves with more questions than answers. But, as someone once told me: "If you feel God isn't close by, well guess who moved?"

Sometimes, doubts are simply the result of our human frailty, human weakness, human limitations. Simply put, God cannot be fully known. We know Him only in part. Think of God the Creator, in charge of the whole universe, of every detail. I mean, on a scale of one inch equals one

mile, the nearest star to the earth after the sun would be the distance from Washington, D.C. to Pittsburgh—and there are millions of stars way beyond that. And God is still creating and He rules and runs it all. I cannot fathom a God that great!! His very immensity, being all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful, everywhere-present, gives me pause sometimes.

Think of God as infinite. We all have a birthday. We all had a moment of conception, a beginning. God? No beginning? He always was? And always will be? A math professor, lecturing on the concept of infinity, took a piece of chalk, drew a line on the blackboard, continued drawing along each wall, coming back to the where the line started, and said, “There is infinity.” I can’t comprehend that!! Not being able to understand some things might become a source of doubt.

Verse 24 tells us that Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus made his first appearance to them. I’m thinking he was probably off alone in a quiet place grieving. Struggling. Asking lots of questions. Thinking. When he comes back and he’s told, “Jesus is alive!” he can’t believe it. But, who would? You see, people rising from the dead is incomprehensible—it just doesn’t happen! I have done over 100 funerals and memorial services in 34 years of ministry, I have never seen anybody sit up and step out of a casket! I never had anyone for whom I did a graveside service show up at my house and say “Hello!” Jesus had just shown up to

the others and said, “Look, here are my nail-pierced hands and feet, here’s where the sword pierced my side. It’s me! I’m alive!” They saw—and believed. Thomas wasn’t there! He says, “I won’t believe it until I see it!” Can you blame him? The others got to see!

Then, a week later, Jesus appears again. And the first thing he does is to “be merciful to those who doubt.” Thomas had questions. Jesus had answers. He, as he had for the others before, shows Thomas his pierced hands, feet, and side. He says, “Stop doubting and believe.”

STOP DOUBTING AND BELIEVE. HOW CAN WE GET TO THAT POINT?

C.S. Lewis warned about two equal and opposite errors when we have doubts. The one error is to be too *soft* on doubt, to think, “Well, truth doesn’t matter that much, it doesn’t really matter how I live. So, I don’t have some answers to my questions, ah, no big deal, I’ll just live with it, it’ll go away.” I read an article once written by someone who had left the faith. He wrote, “I felt that I was honestly reaching out for God, but that I wasn’t getting any response. I eventually gave up. I don’t know about the existence of heaven or hell, and I don’t know whether Jesus was God. There are many things which I simply don’t know about. Instead of trying to force myself to believe in those things, I prefer to just live with the fact that I don’t know. I sometimes worry that that’s a cowardly solution.” Well, let me be blunt: it is cowardly! We’re talking about God here—

God! Things eternal, things divine! This is about life and death, eternal life in one place or another, one grand, one awful! *And, you won't try?* You're going to settle, just quit? Just to have some peace? C'mon, this is too important. OK! Have your doubts! But, please, never quit looking for answers. I mean, if we fall asleep while we're watching our favorite team win a championship, that's sad. But we can watch the highlights later. But, fall asleep on God and the things of God—we just can't! We can't let go that easily.

The other error is to be too *hard* on doubt—that you feel, somehow, that it's blasphemous to have questions about God, struggles in believing in God, to feel overly guilty about it, that, “I can't admit it to anyone in my church or they'll think badly of me.” Listen! Doubts are normal! We're weak, sinful, limited in our intellect: we cannot possibly comprehend God or understand God's ways fully! And, again, we may give up the search for answers just to find some inner peace. This same fellow I quoted earlier wrote, “I eventually (after giving up!) started to *feel* better, and the anxiety started to go away. I *feel* happy with my life. I *feel* more comfortable with my life now. I also eventually got used to the idea of not attending church and started to *feel* that it was better for me in some ways anyway since I wasn't *feeling* like a true believer.”

Catch the common words: *feel, feeling*. Five times in three sentences. In his doubts, he was both too easy on himself and too hard. To find peace—he quit!

My advice: *relax!* We all need to learn to relax about having doubts and big questions—but not *too* much! Just like Goldilocks and the Three Bears’ beds: Not too hard, not too soft, but just right. Doubt is an opportunity to grow. I remember a line from one of Pastor Pete’s sermons when I first started attending here, when I was still in the throes of my many theological questions. He said, “I’d rather wrestle with God than without him.” “Yup,” I thought, “me, too.” That helped me! Someone once said, “I believe in doubt!” That’s clever! So do I; I believe in doubt!

Here, the words of Jude are very helpful to those dealing with doubts/questions: Verses 20-21 read: “But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.” The main verb is “keep.” This verb is supported by three participles that tell us what actions to take in order to complete the main action. So, these verses could read like this: “Keep yourselves in the love of God, by continually building yourselves up, by praying unceasingly in the Holy Spirit, by constantly looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That’s followed by the line, that’s the context for: “Be merciful to those who doubt” (Jude 22). That’s how we help someone dealing with doubt! That’s how we help ourselves. And that would include extending mercy to ourselves. “Mercy” by acting and thinking and reacting rightly:

First, “Keep yourselves in God’s love by continually building yourselves up...” (Jude 21). We do that by reading, studying, digging and digging and digging into our Bibles and great books, especially when we have *big* questions.

I remember, years ago, at a cottage in Michigan that my brother-in-law owned at the time, my wife said desperately one evening, “I can’t find my rings!” She had lost her engagement and wedding rings! We turned that cottage upside down, even got the kids involved; we never found them. Later, we had to leave to go home, without them. We went back the next year. Same thing. We looked everywhere—ransacked the place. No success. Again, we went home to Virginia without them. We went back the next year. So, already, two years that my wife was missing her rings. We got there, and I emptied my shaving kit into the bathroom and I heard what sounded like loose change in the side pocket. I opened it, and out popped the rings! We had them the whole time!! My point is that they were valuable to us personally and emotionally. We looked and we looked so very carefully; we turned everything upside down to find them. And ever mindful of these rings, I was tuned in to listen. I heard something rattling. There they were! After two years of looking!

I don’t care how big the question may be, how deep the doubt. I have absolute confidence in God and His Word and so many of the great thinkers who have written about great Biblical truths. You can find satisfactory answers to your

questions, and resolve your doubts, if—*if*—you’re willing to ransack the Scriptures and great books, and keep looking! When I hear someone say, “Oh, you know, I don’t believe in Jesus, I’m struggling with doubts....” I ask whether they’re trying really hard to find answers in the Bible and great books, and I get, “Well, no, not really... I never read the Bible anymore, that’s a lot of work, and it’s really hard.” I’m saying, “But, we’re talking about God here!”

For those of you with questions or doubts, let me recommend this book: *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel; it’s fantastic! Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen”—not seen Jesus face to face, not seen the nail-pierced hands and feet, the sword-pierced side of the resurrected Jesus— “and yet have believed.” That’s any of us who believe, right?! And, if we’re struggling to continue in that belief, books like this are a great help! We can’t *see* him; there is evidence of and for him! So, yes! By all means, have your questions! Acknowledge your doubts. But, at least, try to find answers! Again, we’re talking about God here! Jeremiah 29:13 says, “And you will seek me and find me, when you search for me with all your heart.”

Another thing to do is from the second line in Jude, “Keep yourselves in the love of God by praying unceasingly in the Holy Spirit.” Ask the Holy Spirit for help, for insights, guidance, for a good book, and great conversation with a wise friend or relative. James 1:5 tells us, “If any of you

lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given him.”

In Mark 9, a man comes to Jesus to ask for the healing of his son who is demon-possessed. Jesus says to the frightened father, “Everything is possible for him who believes,” to which the man says, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24) I don’t think that man would mind if you plagiarized his words in a prayer: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” Read the Psalms and how desperately so many of the writers prayed to God with pain-filled pleas for answers and wisdom and understanding. Read the book of Job, as I did in 2010/2011, how Job wrestled with God. And he got answers, as I did.

Jesus told us that the Spirit “will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26). Thomas asked questions; he got answers. His conclusion, “My Lord and my God!” is his return to full faith!

The third action step from Jude is to look constantly for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. Psalm 57:1 reads, “Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge.” Jesus was merciful to Thomas! Jesus helped his unbelief. He will help us in our doubts, with our questions.

Doubt is a hard thing to experience. But, if we will ransack the Scriptures, do it on our knees with prayer, even

clinging with your fingertips to Christ, we can come through it to the other side—stronger!

I once heard Joni Eareckson Tada speak at a conference. She was paralyzed from the neck down at the age of 16 in a diving accident. She spoke about suffering. She said that when she got to heaven, she wanted to take her wheelchair with her. She would walk up to Jesus and say, “Lord, do you see this wheelchair? Well, before you send it to hell, I want to tell you something about it...the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on you and the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered you to be.”

In our times of questions and doubt, that, too, can be our experience.

The weaker I was, the harder I leaned on you, and the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered you to be.