

A person in a dark jacket stands with their back to the camera in a dark, textured environment. A bright light source is visible in the background, creating a strong silhouette effect. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and dramatic.

IF I BELIEVE,
WHY DO I DOUBT?

RAY PRITCHARD

IF I BELIEVE, WHY DO I DOUBT?

Let's talk about doubt.

It seems strange to say it that way because we rarely talk about doubt in church. You don't hear many sermons about doubt. It is 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, such as Job, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Habakkuk. Many of the Psalms touch on the theme of doubt and feeling abandoned by God.

We need this message because doubt is a hidden issue inside the church.
We need this message because sometimes it's not easy to believe.
We need this message because we all doubt sooner or later.
We need this message because you may feel disqualified by your doubts.

I received an email from a soldier serving in Afghanistan who had been there since the beginning of the war. Over the years he saw a lot of combat, and it took a toll on his faith. Here is part of what he wrote to me:

"I've been in the service since the start of the war, and it is getting emotionally taxing, being at risk so much with a family back home. To be honest, there are days when I doubt the existence of God even though I have grown up in the church. . . . I have struggled to find lasting peace . . . I had it for a few weeks, but I can see it slipping some."

During my pastorate in Oak Park, IL, the young singles group invited me once a year to an "Ask Pastor Ray" night. That was always fun because the group was lively, and they peppered me with unpredictable questions. The last time we met, 50-60 of us sat in a big circle in the church dining room. I told them I would be glad to answer questions on the Bible, the Christian life, theological issues, or they could ask about my personal life. No topic was off-limits. Near the end of the evening, a young lady raised her hand and asked, "Pastor Ray, when I listen to you speak, you always sound so certain about everything. Do you ever doubt?" My answer was short and simple. Yes, I do have doubts. *I don't know how a person can be a Christian and not have doubts from time to time.* Faith requires doubt in order to be faith. If you ever come to a place where all your doubts are gone and all your questions are answered, take a deep breath and relax because you've arrived in heaven.

THREE KINDS OF DOUBT

Doubt itself is not always sinful or wrong. Often it can be the catalyst to new spiritual growth. As I have pondered the matter, I have concluded our doubts tend to fall into three categories: *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? Is Jesus really the only way to heaven?

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 husband? Why did my friend betray me? Where was God when my uncle was abusing me? These are the questions we meet at the intersection of biblical faith and the pain of living in a fallen world. In my experience, these are the toughest doubts of all. Unfortunately, sometimes we tend to sweep them under the rug and to put down those in the church who struggle with these issues. When we refuse to deal with circumstantial doubts, they soon become spiritual doubts, and those spiritual doubts eventually become intellectual doubts. Then people start leaving the church altogether.

THREE CRUCIAL STATEMENTS

Lee Strobel frames the issue this way:

1) Many people think doubt is the opposite of faith, but it isn't. Unbelief 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. Very nearly the opposite of that statement is true. Struggling with God is a sure sign that we truly have faith. If we never struggle, our faith will never grow.

Many Christians struggle with doubt and then feel guilty. It is to those believers that my words are directed. In order to get a biblical perspective, let's focus on one godly man who doubted and how Jesus dealt with his doubt.

A QUESTION FOR JESUS

Do you recall the occasion when Herod threw John the Baptist in jail because John dared to rebuke him for his gross sexual sin? It helps to remember that John went to prison not for doing wrong, but for doing right. He was a mighty preacher of the truth whom God used to prepare the nation for the coming of Christ. Yet here he is, in Herod's prison, in a dungeon, in the wilderness east of the Dead Sea. He didn't know when or if he would be released.

Days passed, then weeks, then months. Prison time is hard time. The days are long, the nights even longer. No doubt confused and frustrated by his incarceration, John sent messengers to Jesus with a very pertinent question: **"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"** (Matthew 11:2-3). That's a powerful question if you think about it. Having read a few of the commentaries on this passage, I am struck by how many of them feel uneasy with John's doubt. They seem to want to explain it away. On one level, I can understand their discomfort. After all, we know John had made one of the earliest public confessions of Jesus when he cried out, **"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"** (John 1:29). Then he said, **"I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God"** (v. 34). Make no mistake. John knew who Jesus was. How could a man who was so certain about Jesus now harbor such doubt? The text does not provide an exact answer to that question, but I think I know part of the answer.

In 2000 I wrote a short "gospel book" for Moody Publishers called *An Anchor for the Soul*. It's a simple presentation of the gospel in "Wal-Mart English" for people who don't go to church and don't know much about the Bible. In the last sixteen years we have given away over 750,000 copies, most of them to prisoners through a partnership with Prison Fellowship and Good News Jail and Prison Ministries. As a result, we have received over 12,000 letters from prisoners. Until I started reading those letters, I knew very little about what it's like to be in prison. My heart has been deeply moved by the accounts of the hopelessness most of them feel. *No place on earth is more corrosive to faith than a prison cell*. No place on earth is darker and more hopeless than a prison cell. I received a letter from a prisoner who said, "Being in prison is like being dead. No one wants anything to do with you." One inmate called prison "Satan's playground."

It is no wonder that as he languished in prison, not knowing when, or if, he would be released, John began to wonder, and then he began to doubt. He at least knew enough to ask the right question. "Are you the one sent from heaven, or is there someone else who will be our Savior? Are you really the promised Messiah?" The answer our Lord gives is very instructive. He does

not rebuke John or put him down. He simply gives John the evidence he needs in order to regain his faith. Go back, he says, and tell John what you have seen. Then he lists six miracles:

The blind see.

The lame walk.

The lepers are cured.

The deaf hear.

The dead are raised.

The poor have the gospel preached to them.

Jesus essentially says, "Go back and tell John that in my name, the hurting people of the world are being totally transformed." This is what people outside the church want to know:

Where is the power that can break the chains of sin?

Where is the power that can save my marriage?

Where is the power that can bring my prodigal son back home?

The people of the world don't understand theology, and most of them don't know much about the Bible. They aren't interested in hearing more theories. But they will listen to anyone who can tell them where to find a fresh start and a new life.

"HE'S STILL MY MAN"

Notice what happens next:

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (vv. 7-11).

John the Baptist sent his disciples from the prison to find Jesus in Galilee and ask him the all-important question. After giving his answer, Jesus then shares with the crowd his high praise for John the Baptist. He is "more than a prophet," he is the forerunner who was foretold in the Old Testament. No one born of woman has been greater than John the Baptist. Note carefully when Jesus says this. According to verse 7, it happened "as John's disciples were leaving." That means they heard the high praise of

their master and no doubt relayed it to him back in the prison. But where was John at this point?

He's still in prison.

He's still wrestling with his doubts.

He's still living with uncertainty.

He's still unsure about Jesus.

He hasn't heard the answer yet. It's as if Jesus is saying, "John may doubt me, but I don't doubt him. He's still my man. He's still on my team. I still believe in him." *He affirmed his faith in John while John still had his doubts.* He knew that underneath those doubts there was genuine faith. Jesus is saying, "He's still my man, doubts and all." What an incredible affirmation.

DOUBTERS WELCOME!

Above the front door of every church in the world, we should erect a two-word sign: **Doubters Welcome!** That should be the church's message.

If you have doubts, come inside.

If you have questions, come inside.

If you are uncertain, come inside.

If you are a skeptic, come inside.

If you are searching for truth, come inside.

Deep doubt is often the prelude to an even deeper faith. I love the way Frederick Buechner expresses it: "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving" (from the book *Wishful Thinking*). The greatest doubters often become the strongest believers. And honest doubts — once resolved — often become the bedrock of an unshakeable faith. It has been said no truth is so strongly believed as that which you once doubted.

FOUR WAYS TO DEAL WITH DOUBT

Doubt will not disqualify you as a disciple, but it can be dangerous if you don't deal with it. It's what you do with your doubt that matters. Here are four principles to help you handle your doubt:

1: Admit Your Doubts and Ask For Help.

That's what the father did in Mark 9:24 when he cried out, "I believe. Help my unbelief." That's what John the Baptist did. And in a way, that's what Thomas did also. He plainly stated why he could not and would not believe until he saw the evidence for himself. *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 all your questions and all your doubts, cry out and ask for his help. And don't fight the battle alone. Go to a Christian friend, a pastor, an elder, a deacon, anyone with strong faith and godly insight. Ask them to walk with you as you face your doubts honestly.

2: 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 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.

Don't you think all these great heroes of the faith had their doubts? Of course they did. 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. If you do the same thing, your faith will continually grow stronger.

3: Doubt Your Doubts, Not Your Faith.

This simply means you should not cast away your faith because you are in the deep valley of darkness. All of us walk into that valley from time to time. Some of us spend a great deal of time there. When you find yourself in that valley where all is uncertain and you are sorely tempted to give in to your doubts, fears and worries, remember these two words: keep walking. *You may be in a valley of doubt today, but you don't have to stop and build a condo there.* 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.

#4: Keep Going Back to What You Know to Be True.

This 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 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.**"

Some things you think.
Some things you hope.
Some things you feel.
Some things you know.

Faith is not a feeling. Sometimes we talk about “feeling God’s presence” during a worship service. I know what people mean when they talk like that. I’m all for having a consciousness of God’s presence in your life. But what will you do when the happy feeling goes away? If all you have is a “God of the good times,” you don’t have the God of the Bible. What will you do when the boss says, “We’re letting you go?” What will you do when your spouse walks out of your marriage? What will you do when the doctor says, “I’m sorry. There’s nothing else we can do.” What will you do when your children end up in jail? We need a faith big enough to encompass the worst moments of life.

GOING “ALL IN”

When I was younger, I thought I had everything figured out. Life has a way of knocking us down a few pegs. That certainly happened to me. I’m not as sure about some of the details as I was 30 years ago. *But what I know, I really know.* I have a handful of convictions that cannot be shaken. I would include in that short list these truths: God is good, Jesus is Lord, the Bible is true, this world is not my home, and even hard times are meant for my benefit. At the core of my faith is an unshakable belief in the sovereignty of God. He’s God and I’m not. He is sovereign over all the details of my life, and I can trust him completely even when those details seem to be spinning out of control.

Years ago I decided to go “all in” on Jesus. I’m “all in” that he is the Son of God, that he died on the cross for my sins, that he rose from the dead on the third day, that he is the Lord of the universe, that he is coming again, and that he will someday take me to heaven. Lewis Sperry Chafer said believing in Jesus means trusting him so much that if he can’t take you to heaven, you aren’t going to go there. I like that. If Jesus can’t take me to heaven, then I’ll never make it because I’m going “all in” on him. I don’t have a Plan B.

I ran across a statement that resonated with my own heart: “One who has never doubted has only half believed.” By that standard, I’m not ashamed to say I have fully believed because I have often doubted. But my doubts have only made my faith stronger in the end.

JUST AS I AM

In the 1830s a young woman named Charlotte Elliott was visiting some friends in the West End of London when she met a noted minister named Cesar Malan. Over supper he asked if she was a Christian. When she replied

she did not want to talk about the subject, the minister said, “I did not mean to offend you. But I want you to know Jesus can save you if you will turn to him.” When they met again several weeks later, Miss Elliott said she had been trying to come to Christ but did not know how to do it. “Just come to him as you are,” Mr. Malan said. Taking the advice to heart, she composed a poem that began this way.

*Just as I am, without one plea but that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bidd’st me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

The third verse contains Charlotte Elliott’s own testimony:

*Just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt.
Fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

And the last verse contains the gospel promise:

*Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

My doubting brothers and sisters, take heart.

Do not despair.

Don’t let your doubts take you away from Jesus.

Let your doubts lead you to Jesus.

Keep believing.

Come to him with your doubts, your skepticism, your unbelief, your hard questions, your uncertainties. *Don’t let your doubts keep you from Jesus.* Come to him just as you are—and bring your doubts with you.

Take your fears to Jesus.

Take your questions to Jesus.

Take your doubts to Jesus.

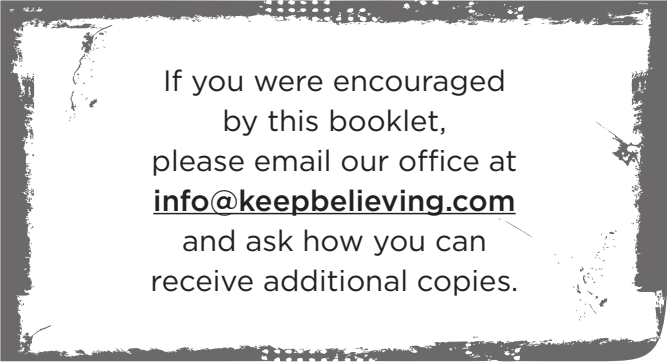
He never turns an honest doubter away.

Here is a very simple prayer that could help you believe all over again. I encourage you to say this prayer out loud and then write it down or print it out where you can see it every day.

Lord God, take your Word and seal it to my heart. I believe you are who you said you are, and I believe you will do what you said you will do. Fill me with your Holy Spirit so I might move from doubt to faith. Thank you for not turning away when I am weak, fearful, and confused. Help me to go all in on Jesus with nothing held back. Amen.

GOING DEEPER

1. When are you most likely to struggle with doubt?
2. If you could ask God any question, what would it be?
3. Read Romans 8:35-39 out loud each day for a week.
4. Name something you can do today to act on your faith, not your doubts.
5. Give this booklet to someone you know who is struggling with doubt.



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