

How to deal with doubt?

By

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Emotions and attitudes › Getting and maintaining a relationship with
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Experiencing doubt as a Christian might unsettle you greatly. You may wonder if you are allowed to doubt or even worry that God will condemn you for it. You might be apprehensive to share your struggles with fellow believers and as a result may feel increasingly alienated from them.

Doubt is part of human experience

We all experience uncertainties. In Scripture we come across people who doubt. In the book of Psalms in the Old Testament, Asaph shares his struggles and in the New Testament we have John the Baptist and Thomas, one of Jesus' own disciples, who all go through doubt. We will look at their experiences in more detail later.

However, one can also look at doubts from a positive perspective. So instead of allowing them to be debilitating in our lives, we may see them as warning signs that we need to pay extra attention to various uncertain matters in

our lives. For example, we may wonder whether we have prepared ourselves well enough for our next exam or a work project presentation. Doubt can thus become a motivating factor to put more effort into making sure we come up with the right strategies. So, doubt can be used positively.

Tim Keller puts it like this: “A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person’s faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection.”[1]

Doubters in Scripture

Asaph wrote a Psalm in which he describes his personal struggle: he could not figure out how God could be good in the face of the prosperity of evil people . He got deeply affected by the questions they hurled at him: “ How can

God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? ” (Psalm 73:11). They claimed God to be blind or ignorant and therefore felt secure enough to do as they pleased.

John the Baptist doubted Jesus’ identity as the Messiah and Savior of Israel. He had come to realize that Jesus’ Messiahship was not accepted by the majority of the Jewish people. Actually, John was imprisoned and so his perspective on what was happening was very limited. He wanted to get answers though, and questioned Jesus through his disciples: “ Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another? ” (Matthew 11:3).

Thomas doubted the resurrection as he had not been with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them. He asked for the same proof as the other disciples had experienced. He put it like this: “ Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe ” (John 20:25). Thomas was the kind of person who did not want to rely on other people’s experiences, he wanted to know for himself.

Understanding doubt better

Let us differentiate between some different types of doubt, defining them by their causes and motives. A combination of these could be at play in your life.

Causes

Doubt may arise as a result of intellectual questioning about certain fundamental faith issues like the existence of God and spiritual reality, or about specific tenets of the Christian faith like the resurrection of Christ. Perhaps people have asked you some tough questions about what you believe and you could not answer them. This set you off wondering yourself.

Doubt can appear due to emotional reasons, often resulting in a lack of trust in God. You may still believe God exists, but you question whether He is the kind of God who is personally involved in your life. Perhaps you are going through unsettling setbacks or the loss of loved ones that trigger feelings of God being distant or even absent. Doubt about whether He really exists at all may

surface in your mind or you may simply feel too numb and broken to be sure of anything.

Motives

You doubt because you earnestly desire to find answers and you are willing to put effort into finding some. Your overall motivation is to grow in understanding.

You experience doubt because you do not really believe your questions can be satisfactorily answered. This may be because of presupposed philosophical reasons: you may hold to the view that there are no ultimate answers to questions about the meaning of life or spirituality. Or you may think that only rationally and experimentally proven positions are worthy of belief. Perhaps your motive is that you are not ready to face the consequences if some of your questions did get answered. So, you actually choose to hold on to your doubts; it can even become a “cool” way of life to you. In fact, you want to keep God at arm’s length.

Doubts can therefore destroy your relationship with God or build it up. They can put an end to your relationship

with God if you leave them unattended and allow your struggles to distance your mind and heart from Him. Doubts can also deepen your connection with God if you consider them as stepping stones for a stronger faith seeking understanding.

Ways to go

When you experience doubt, there are a few things you could do:

First of all, seek God in prayer and express your feelings of doubts to Him and ask Him to help you. In the Psalms we find people freely expressing their questions to God. “ Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? ” (Psalm 10:1). Even Jesus cried out in despair at the cross: “ My God, why have You forsaken Me? ” (Matthew 27:46 quoting Psalm 22:1). So, in the midst of all your struggles, do keep your lines of communication with God open! He loves you as His child and will not reject you. He will come through to you, even though it may take a while. Believing that, is a matter of trust. You cannot demand anything from Him, but of

course you can ask Him for specific answers and also for a reassuring experience of His presence. Jesus came through to Thomas. He took Thomas' questions seriously and did not condemn or reject him, instead He invited him to look closely at the evidence of the marks in His body: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." (John 20:27).

Secondly, seek the company of fellow believers in whom you can confide. In spite of how you feel, just keep going to church or other fellowship meetings: these are places God can speak to you. In Psalm 73, Asaph testifies that when he went to the house of God, he received understanding and a broader perspective. Besides, make an effort to get in personal touch with knowledgeable people with whom you can discuss your questions and doubts. John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus Himself to question Him. That is how he got answers: "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 is the man who does not fall away on account of me. ” (Matthew 11:4-6). John then knew that Jesus was the promised Messiah of Israel, as Old Testament prophecies were being fulfilled by these prophetic acts of Messianic ministry.

Thirdly, inform yourself intellectually. Some great thinkers have struggled with doubts and have come up with great answers. There is so much great material you can find in books or online. There are interesting debates you can watch and see how different opinions interact. It should not bother you that God’s existence cannot be proved or disproved like a mathematical theorem. The good news is that there is a lot of supporting evidence that points to His existence, like the existence of order in the universe. Science cannot explain this order. It must presuppose it in order to explain anything. Besides this, there are many more matters that you cannot find rational explanations for and yet you act on them as if they are true, like moral imperatives. We all know that we ought to keep our promises, regardless of whether science or rationality can

prove this to be true. Science can only establish facts, but cannot tell us what our moral duties are.

These are just a few examples of mind provoking topics for further research that can help you if you are left with intellectual doubts. Do check out the resources given at the bottom of this article.

Conclusion

It could be that your doubts will be resolved as many of your questions get answered. It may also be that with time your uncertainties just lose their grip on you. You simply learn to live with unresolved questions in your life of faith and no longer feel debilitated by them. On the other hand, doubts may continue in your mind even in your search for answers. Let them motivate you to dig even deeper into your tough questions, and find people to interact with emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. And most important of all: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8).

[1] Keller, Timothy (2008-02-14). *The Reason for God* . Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition, location 192).

Some helpful resources

Tim Keller “ The reason for God “ Sermon series:
Overcoming objections

William Lane Craig / Reasonable faith Posts on doubt

N.T. Wright Interview: Broken signposts: How Christianity
makes sense of the world Podcast: Ask NT Wright
anything

“Unbelievable?” Premier Christian Radio Online
apologetics course: Confident Christianity: Evidence for
God and Answering Objections

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