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Doubt And The Believer

We live in a world where uncertainty is the norm. Thinking too deeply about what could go wrong will quickly lead to becoming overwhelmed with fear and anxiety. Our minds try to eliminate or dismiss the reality of uncertainty's existence in order to reduce the unsettledness of living without guarantees. And true, through technological advances, some uncertainties have been reduced. For example, we are reasonably able to predict the weather. We know these weather predictions can often be wrong, yet we check our weather apps compulsively and still make plans based on an uncertain forecast. In other words, we take risks every day, many of which we hardly even consider (i.e., riding in a car). Thankfully, we are typically able to engage life and the inevitable risk inherent with life based on the *probability* of danger rather than *possibility* of danger. Trying to eliminate all risk in life will only leave us full of fear and paralyzed to do anything. One tactic Satan uses over-and-over to discourage the believer is to get us focused on running from something, like doubt, rather than running toward a desired goal, such as increased faith.

Satan loves to use our natural desire for certainty to tie the believer in knots. For the believer who is experiencing strong faith, Satan might use their strong faith to stir frustration with fellow believers. For the believer who is experiencing doubt, Satan comes and magnifies the doubt. Enough magnification can make the tiniest object appear unsurmountable. Satan attacks to shift the believer from seeking to grow their relationship with God to a place of shame and fear.

In the Gospel according to *Matthew (17:20)*, we learn that someone with faith as small as a mustard seed could move a mountain. Jesus is telling us that faith, even in small amounts, is powerful enough to accomplish the impossible. Consider how Thomas deals with his doubts in *John 20:24-28* and the outcome of his honest expression of doubt. We don't know for sure if Thomas was more skeptical than the other disciples but in this specific situation, Thomas wanted to see for himself, just as the other disciples had already experienced, before believing. Thomas' doubt does not preclude him from relationship with God through Christ. Instead, Jesus ministers into his doubt and Thomas ends his interaction with Jesus exclaiming "*My Lord and my God*" (*Matthew 20:28*).

Faith is believing or trusting in the evidence that points to something that is not immediately tangible. Thomas was shown tangible evidence that Jesus had in fact risen from the grave, but he still had to have faith that Jesus was Lord. Once something moves from possible to certain it no longer requires faith to believe. *Hebrews 11* begins by defining faith and pointing to the example of Creation as evidence of the existence and power of God. Faith in anything is fueled by the tangible evidence we see as well as our life experiences. Faith in God works in the same way. In addition, Romans declares that, "*faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.*" (*Romans 10:17*) Ephesians tells us "*for by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.*" (*Ephesians 2:8*)

We believe God first because He has given us grace to believe Him. This faith is sustained by both a stepping forward in the midst of doubts and a God who sustains us. He graciously gives us evidence and experience that testifies of Himself. Yet, intellectual and emotional challenges to faith in God often surface over the course of life. These questions or doubts often arise through challenges of life. Take for example, *James 1:2-3* where we are told to count it all joy when our faith is tried. James assumes difficulties will lead to a testing of our faith in God. It seems plausible, even likely, doubt would then be part of that difficulty.

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In *Mark 4* Jesus seems frustrated with the disciples' doubt. The disciples have been with Jesus for some time, hearing Him give the Sermon on the Mount, watching Him heal the sick, and perform many other miracles. Jesus is exhausted as evidenced by Him sleeping through a fierce storm. Jesus is awakened by fearful men who do not fully realize who He is and He seems frustrated. If the story ended there, we would wonder what this meant for the disciples, and it would be fearful indeed. But the story does not end there. The rest of the story is good news. Jesus continues to patiently minister into the disciples' doubt and fear. This experience recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke demonstrates the reality that Jesus is God in the flesh. While we can learn from and take comfort in the disciples struggling with doubt, this is not the main point. The central point of this account is the awesomeness of Jesus both in being God in the flesh and in His merciful pursuit of Man. We should not read this account in awe of the disciples, but rather we should read this account and revere Jesus. The disciples did not find the answer to their doubt within themselves-the answer was without them in the person of Jesus. Our doubt is insurmountable when we look within ourselves for a solution, but pales in comparison with looking to Jesus.

Nowhere in Scripture is faith defined as the absence of doubt. Rather Scripture paints a picture of faith as being a turning toward God amidst doubts and struggles. In these times it is important to focus on keeping the object of our faith, Jesus, constant while the strength of our faith ebbs. What we place our faith in is key even if it is very weak faith. So, what does it mean when we read in *James 1:6* to ask of God in "faith, nothing wavering?" Or what does it mean when we read Jesus reprimanding the disciples for their doubt in *Mark 4:37-40*? What do these passages mean and how should they affect the way we think about doubt? In the case of *James 1:6* it is important not to forget verses 2-3 where James assumes challenges will be difficult. This may seem obvious but for many Christians they feel bad for feeling bad. Satan is good at bringing shame when the believer struggles with fear and doubt. Yet the scriptures assume those who desire to walk in faith will struggle. The Christian walk is grounded in the Hope of the Gospel yet we continue to live in a world and in bodies that groan for a time when all things are made new. We want to walk through doubts and fears to a place that is more fully grounded on Christ, and this journey is often challenging and slow.

Whether you find yourself in a season of strong faith with little doubt or a season of weak faith and many doubts, focus on Jesus. Let the strength of your faith rest on the wonder of Jesus Christ. Bring the strength of your doubts face-to-face with the person and character of Jesus. As you contemplate Jesus and the Kingdom He ushered in, let His goodness and message of hope ground you. Satan is very effective at stirring doubts, yet he has no antidote for the person and character of Jesus. While doubts are often scary, they need not be feared. As you experience doubts, reach out to other fellow believers, pray, and dive into the scriptures. Remember, certainties in life are elusive, and yet certainty is not necessary to live by faith. Seek to grow closer to Jesus and more faithfully live out His teachings in time of strong faith as well as deep struggle.

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If you find yourself struggling with doubt, below are a few helps to consider:

- Talk with a trusted friend or mentor figure about the doubt you are experiencing.
- Ask a believer to share a story of answered prayer with you.
- Recall your own answered prayers.
- Pray for:
 - o Faith
 - o Endurance through the experience of doubt.
 - o Ability to see God through daily experiences.

- Read the Scriptures:
 - o *Isaiah 40-45*
 - o *2 Corinthians 4-5*
 - o *Hebrews 10-11*

- Review the lives of those who have wrestled with doubt:
 - o John the Baptist (*Matthew 11:2-13*)
 - o Disciple Thomas (*John 20:24-28*)
 - o Father of a sick child (*Mark 9:24*)
 - o Abraham (*Genesis 12-22*)
 - o Gideon (*Judges 6*)
 - o Elijah (*1 Kings 17-19*)

- For more information, see www.accounseling.org/doubt.