



Room for Doubt: Doubt and the Bible

April 3, 2016

Doubt is part of the human condition. The word, “doubt,” doesn’t appear in the Old Testament but there are many examples of it. The first comes from the **Garden of Eden** when the serpent asked Eve: **“Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”** Job was a righteous man with enormous problems, including doubt. Yet he also had faith: “Even though he slay me, yet will I trust him.” He believed in God, yet simultaneously had faith. Nobody has ever come up with a knockout answer to suffering. Have you ever read the **Psalms**? They are full of both faith and doubt. Psalm 22: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd.”

The disciples aren’t specifically named, but after the resurrection it’s not just ONE who doubts, it’s “some.” **Matt 28:16-20** *Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

Only John’s Gospel provides information about the disciple Thomas. He has 3 specific Thomas stories:

John 11:16 *Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”* “Didymus” means “twin.” Evidently in that culture, when a set of twins was born they’d give one of them a name and then call the other “Twin.” “Sharon” and “Not Sharon.”

This quote from Thomas was in response to Jesus’ decision to go to Jerusalem. Thomas was NOT a coward, but he’d not be confused with Joel Osteen. He didn’t think the cup was half full – it was half-empty. He saw problems. He had a grim, gloomy outlook. He could tell you why things wouldn’t work. He would’ve been the last disciple out of the boat when Peter walked on the water. But let’s give Thomas credit: he was absolutely right about anticipating what would happen to Jesus in Jerusalem. And indeed, their lives were in peril, too. When

Jesus said “take up your cross and follow me” – Thomas got it. The cross was an instrument of death. To follow Jesus would mean death.

John 14:1-5 *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”*

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

He wouldn't pretend. When he didn't understand, he asked a tough question. He wanted clarity. He wouldn't act like he believed when he didn't. WE are better off because he was a deep thinker.

John 20:24-29

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"²⁷ Then 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."²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

We all deal with grief differently. Thomas, like the other disciples, was broken-hearted and grief-stricken. Even though he knew Jesus' trip to Jerusalem would result in His death, it didn't mean that he was emotionally prepared for it. When Jesus appeared to the disciples, Thomas wasn't there. We don't know where he was or what he was doing, but my take on it (purely my take) was that Thomas' way to deal with his grief was to withdraw from everyone else. He wanted to grieve alone. There's a time for that. It's not a bad thing. However, like anything, it can easily get out of balance. I know people who've gone solo - withdrawn into isolation. This was a problem in the early church, too. That's why Hebrews (10:25) insists: *Let's not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.* If loss is not processed, it's like driving a car on tires which aren't properly inflated. You'll destroy the tires, by deflation or over-inflation. Withdrawal brings isolation. Nobody says: "I think I'll grow up and be a recluse. I want to live all by myself and not have any interactions with people." A little withdrawal becomes a habit, then a character, then a destiny. Thomas was isolated – even from those who loved him.

Faith – Doubt – Unbelief

How do we respond to doubt?

1.) **“Ask, seek and knock.”** Jesus said to ask questions. Seek answers. Investigate. “Inquiring minds want to know.” This takes humility to admit that we don’t understand or have all the answers. The disciples asked Jesus a lot of questions. Having doubts is common and is not the problem – what’s wrong = being passive about them and allowing ourselves to be stuck year after year after year with the same doubts. Resolve them. Move on. Thomas did.

However, there will be no end to doubt. We’ll never get all of our questions answered. Some of our doubts are about the Bible. Many, if not most, of our doubts are about life: “Why did God let this happen?” We can answer some questions, but we can never answer them all.

A lot of us think that if only we could see the miraculous, THEN we’d believe. That’s not necessarily so. In C.S. Lewis’ book, Miracles. He tells about a friend of his who saw a ghost. Before she saw the ghost she was convinced there was no immortal soul. After she saw the ghost, she was still unconvinced.

2.) **Recognize our limitations. 1 Cor 13:12** *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

3.) **Be part of Christian community. Jude 22** *Be merciful to those who doubt*

Sometimes others have to help us believe. Thomas reminds me of Elijah, who after destroying the prophets of Baal, got a life-threatening message from Queen Jezebel. His faith collapsed and he fled the scene of victory full of fear. He was all alone and capitulated to depression. The greatest of the Old Testament prophets doubted God’s protection. **1 Kings 19:10** *Elijah replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”*

Why the parallel with Thomas? He was all alone. He was separated from his faith community.

I told last Sunday of reading in How Dante Can Save Your Life about Carlos Sanchez, who became a Catholic priest in his 50’s. He grew up Catholic in Guatemala. He went to Dartmouth College to study engineering. He told Rod Dreher, the author of How Dante Can Save Your Life: “Those brilliant minds made a lot of boys lose their faith. They made me lose mine. Everything became so uncertain.” Dreher was wrestling with his own doubts when he spoke to Carlos Sanchez. He said: **“By talking to him I could see all my intellectual doubts about Christianity amounted to nothing more than a problem of the will. I didn’t want to believe because then I would have to change my life.”**

Doubt doesn't preclude from belonging to the community. Having questions doesn't mean you have to go. God can handle your questions and so can the church. This is one of the ways our pastors can serve you. We love talking shop.

4.) Learn scripture. John 21:30-31 *Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written **that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.***

As A.A. likes to say: "You're only as sick as your secrets." Your doubts are not unique in the history of mankind. The chances are that ANY question you have about the faith has been asked innumerable times by others throughout Christendom.