

REAL FAITH Part 2

SUBSTANTIAL ASSURANCE

Doubt, the Pathway to Faith

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Job 30:20 "I cry to you, O God, but you don't answer.

I stand before you, but you don't even look.

²¹ *You have become cruel toward me.*

You use your power to persecute me.

²² *You throw me into the whirlwind*

and destroy me in the storm.

²³ *And I know you are sending me to my death—
the destination of all who live.*

Job 9:16 And even if I summoned him and he responded,

I'm not sure he would listen to me.

¹⁷ *For he attacks me with a storm
and repeatedly wounds me without cause.*

¹⁸ *He will not let me catch my breath,
but fills me instead with bitter sorrows.*

Have you ever struggled with doubts or troubling questions about Christ, the Christian faith, or the church? Do you sometimes feel that tough questions are not welcome or acceptable among believers?

Even though he had traveled with Jesus and learned from His teaching for at least three years, Thomas needed time, evidence, and personal convincing before he would accept the resurrection (John 20:25–26). But Jesus responded to his doubt by inviting him to check it all out. He presented Himself for Thomas' inspection (John 15:26–27) and did not chide him for wanting to be certain.

Jesus knows that loyalties too easily developed often lack staying power. By contrast, many tenacious people who probe the corners of their doubts and fears finally reach the truth—and faith in the truth is what Christ desires. He even promised that the Holy Spirit would come to help those who seek the truth (John 16:12–16).

Faith Can Increase

It is just such struggles to believe that reveal both our need and our desire to grow as Christians.

Luke 17:3 "If another believer sins, rebuke that person; then if there is repentance, forgive. ⁴ Even if that person wrongs you seven times a day and each time turns again and asks forgiveness, you must forgive."

⁵ *The apostles said to the Lord, "Show us how to increase our faith."*

⁶ *The Lord answered, "If you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'May you be uprooted and thrown into the sea,' and it would obey you!"*

⁷ *"When a servant comes in from plowing or taking care of sheep, does his master say, 'Come in and eat with me'? ⁸ No, he says, 'Prepare my meal, put on your apron, and serve me while I eat. Then*

you can eat later.’⁹ And does the master thank the servant for doing what he was told to do? Of course not.¹⁰ In the same way, when you obey me you should say, ‘We are unworthy servants who have simply done our duty.’ ”

Faced with the requirement to forgive freely and frequently, the disciples asked for more faith.

Jesus’ answer is: “Use the faith you have; even a little is a starting point. And do what is expected of you; you need no extraordinary opportunity to develop faith.”

I have found many people praying and waiting for an extraordinary moment to apply their faith, not realizing that faith is built in the *ordinary* course of life’s challenges and requirements. To ignore the latter is to undermine the former. Faith must grow — not bigger but deeper.

Paul’s letters to the churches encouraged and acknowledged their growth in faith:

2 Corinthians 10:15 **We hope that *your faith will grow* so that the boundaries of our work among you will be extended.**

Colossians 2:7 **Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then *your faith will grow* strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.**

2 Thessalonians 1:3 **We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because *your faith is growing* more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.**

Faith, which begins as a seed, is designed and intended to grow. Trusting God should be more common for you today than it was a year ago (though, perhaps, no easier). The seed becomes a sprout, then a stalk, then a leafy tree, then flowers, and finally bears fruit and reproduces itself. Such is the pathway of faith.

At each “growth point” or season of transformation along that path, fresh doubts *will* arise. This is normal. These are the “next things” that must be discovered for faith to increase and enter the new season of growth and productivity. (I’ll say more about this shortly.)

Unbelief Can Only Grow More Resolute

Hebrews 11:6 **And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.**

We must recognize that unbelief is the opposite of faith. It is the unwillingness or refusal to believe. This is the position of the atheist who foolishly says, “There is no God.” Unbelief does not grow toward faith in any way. The only way unbelief may grow is more resolute, more fixed in defiance.

Unbelief cannot turn into faith by any natural pathway. Only a miracle of divine intervention and conversion can change an unbelieving heart — it is an act of God. Yet, we often lump all people outside the Church into the category of “Unbelievers”; this is a huge error.

The vast majority of people are neither inflexible nor defiant about matters of faith; they simply don’t know yet what to believe or who to trust. “Non-believers” is a more acceptable term, indicating their lack of choice to trust Christ to this point. Some of these, who are actively investigating the claims of the Gospel, we call “Seekers.” Generically, I prefer the term “Pre-Christians,” for it is inclusive and it acknowledges God’s own passionate activity in seeking to save those who are otherwise lost.

While people frequently entangle unbelief and doubt in careless speech, as though they are interchangeable, they are actually unrelated. They are not of the same substance at all; they are not of the same tribe.

Doubt is Another Tribe

In 1887, Henry Drummond preached a sermon in Northfield, Massachusetts, entitled “Dealing With Doubt.” Here is one of his observations:

“Christ never failed to distinguish between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is *can’t* believe; unbelief is *won’t* believe. Doubt is honest; unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light; unbelief is content with darkness. Loving darkness rather than light—that is what Christ attacked and attacked unsparingly. But for the intellectual questioning of Thomas, and Philip, and Nicodemus, and the many others who came to Him to have their great problems solved, He was respectful and generous and tolerant.”

Philosophical tradition suggests that doubt has to do with the problem of knowing the truth of human knowledge. Augustine pointed out that skeptics cannot doubt that they doubt, and thus doubt presupposes the truth already.

As a noun, “doubt” today often describes the attitude of questioning or disbelief. In Daniel 5:16 (KJV), however, Belshazzar appeals to Daniel as one who could solve problems: “*I have heard of thee, that thou canst make interpretations, and **dissolve doubts**.*” The literal meaning of the Aramaic word is “to loosen joints or knots.” This Aramaic expression is applied to the knotty problems of the mind: things that perplex us.

In the New Testament, one Greek word for being in doubt (*aporia*) expresses “stuck or at a loss, without a way out or forward,” whereas another word (*diakrisis*) suggests a “dual crisis,” leading either to the overthrow of faith or its careful exposition (unpacking); it is a “moment of choice” — to divide or to be divided.

In his book, Spiritual Depression, Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes: “Doubts are not incompatible with faith. Some people seem to think that once you become a Christian you should never be assailed by doubts. But that is not so, Peter still had faith (as he panicked in the storm in Matthew 14)... His faith was not gone, but because it was weak, doubt mastered him and overwhelmed him and he was shaken... Doubts will attack us, but that does not mean that we are to allow them to master us.”

Doubt, then, is the condition of inquiring, seeking to know, but as yet unconvinced. And who is the Convincer? Is it not the Holy Spirit? We are responsible for bearing witness to the truth about Jesus, but only God’s Spirit can persuade or convince a person that it is so and is trustworthy. We tell them our story and His; He alone can make it theirs, too.

God Sponsors Faith’s Tests

Some imagine that testing circumstances signify a weak or faltering faith: “If I really believed God, I wouldn’t be in this situation.” Often, the very opposite is true: it is because of your faith that you have come to this crisis.

Faith must be tested in order to be established. This is the *normal* course of events for a believer. Faith’s tests accomplish several things that would not be possible otherwise.

1) Testing demonstrates the genuineness of one’s faith. This, in turn, produces assurance and courage for the future.

¹ Peter 1:7 These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.

2) Testing one's faith develops endurance — the power to stay. This staying power leads to increased fruitfulness.

James 1:3 For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

3) Only by faith's testing can one gain true devotion and overcome spiritual instability.

James 1:5 If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. ⁶ But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

4) Faith's rewards are only released for those who have held on through testing.

James 1:12 God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Doubt Turns to Faith

Hebrews 11:1 Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.

As I emphasized last week, faith is not confidence or assurance; faith is what produces the feelings of confidence and assurance. Faith itself is not a feeling at all, but the readiness to trust and the act of leaning or depending on God and His Word.

If I have won the last five games of tennis, and I am not weakened or injured, I may easily think, "I am confident I will win the sixth game, too." Confidence and assurance are usually based on past experience, but faith is rooted in things to come, things not yet seen. It is quite another thing to trust that I will succeed in something that I have never attempted before, something that moves me beyond my comfort zone.

One cannot arrive at that borderline between the familiar and the untried without encountering doubt. Doubt is the presentation of that "dual crisis" of opportunity and threat that demands that I choose. Will I retreat to the security of familiar ground, or advance to the discovery of new territory?

Therefore, doubt is the stepping stone to faith. Thoughts of doubt do not signal your failure to believe, but your need and opportunity to believe. Someone has said, "Believe your beliefs and doubt your doubts." Paul Schoch has repeatedly advised us, "Do not doubt in the darkness what God has shown you in the light."

Feelings of uncertainty go hand-in-hand with acts of faith. Though many choose to wait until they have reason to feel more certain before moving forward, insecurity can only turn to confident assur-

ance *after* you have acted in faith. So, you must learn to move ahead *even while* doubt lingers and agitates your mind. Here's how:

Don't let doubts stop you. Also, don't ignore them. Considering your doubtful thoughts is not sin; it is exploration. You cannot move past doubt *until* you have considered it, until you have explored its claim, until you have faced its threat. But don't do this alone.

Bring your doubts to God. Tell Him, as clearly and specifically as you can, what you are feeling and thinking. He will not be surprised and He will not be upset. Confess any sin of unbelief associated with your doubt and claim His forgiveness.

Ask Him for wisdom to clarify the situation and to give you direction. Then, ask for courage to move forward obediently, trusting Him to go with you and help you along the way.

Don't permit your doubts, which are normal, to sideline you. They may have been stumbling stones in the past, but you can turn them into stepping stones in the future. Start with the littlest, nagging ones, and take baby steps forward in faith. The result will be your faith's increase, and a greater readiness for the next round of challenges.

Remember, this process will repeat indefinitely, as long as you pursue a life of faith in Christ, but as it does, you will mature and your fruit will increase.

Faith Becomes Character

Max Lucado tells that when a potter bakes a pot, he checks its solidity by pulling it out of the oven and thumping it. If it "sings," it's ready. If it "thuds," it's placed back in the oven. The character of a person is also checked by thumping. Have you been thumped lately?

Late-night phone calls. Grouchy teacher. Grumpy moms. Burnt meals. Flat tires. "You've-got-to-be-kidding" deadlines. Those are thumps. Thumps are those irritating inconveniences that trigger the worst in us. They catch us off guard. Flat-footed. They aren't big enough to be crises, but if you get enough of them, watch out! Traffic jams. Long lines. Empty mailboxes. Dirty clothes on the floor... Thump. Thump. Thump.

How do you respond? Do you sing? Or do you thud? Jesus said that out of the fullness of the heart a man speaks (Luke 6:45). There's nothing like a good thump to reveal what's in your heart. The true character of a person is seen not in momentary heroics, but in the thump-packed humdrum of day-to-day living.

May your hearts become filled with real faith!