

# WHAT DO YOU SAY TO A FRIEND WHO STRUGGLES WITH DOUBT?

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*Matthew 14:22* Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. <sup>23</sup> After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.

<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. <sup>25</sup> About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. <sup>26</sup> When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

<sup>27</sup> But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage. I am here!"

<sup>28</sup> Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

<sup>29</sup> "Yes, come," Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

<sup>31</sup> Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. "You have so little faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?"

<sup>32</sup> When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped. <sup>33</sup> Then the disciples worshiped him. "You really are the Son of God!" they exclaimed.

The question we'll consider today is: What do you say to a friend who struggles with doubt?

Emotionally, serious doubts can be excruciating. From doubting that other people will treat you fairly because of a bruising experience to doubting your own capabilities because of a recent failure, doubts can keep you awake at night, rob you of your appetite, distract you from your responsibilities, interfere with relationships, or lock you in a dark dungeon of despair.

Spiritually, the toll may be even higher, for "without faith it is impossible to please God." (Hebrews 11:6)

However, it is important to note at the outset that everyone has experienced doubt. Some, by nature, tend always to see the glass "half-full," but everyone has been there, if only briefly.

Even if your self-image is strong and usually able to lift you over fleeting doubts, the accumulation of such experiences can begin to weigh more than the sum of the parts. Like the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, suddenly and without warning, a minor incident can flare into a major breakdown.

My focus today will be the spiritual side of dealing with doubt — whether doubt about God or about yourself or others — because this is the primary issue. If you are prepared spiritually to deal with doubt your emotions will do well, but if you only deal with it psychologically you will mask the symptoms, treating it only superficially.

We are warned in the Bible about doubts, and they have a variety of sources.

## Divided Loyalties

*James 1:5* If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. <sup>6</sup> But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

The New Living Translation renders it this way:

*James 1:6* A person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind.

Some doubts arise from divided loyalties. They are not about unbelief but indecision. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you, then make a choice. You cannot please everyone. You cannot follow everyone. You must decide. So, pray for God's guidance, then trust and obey.

## A Murky Conscience

Other times, it is the choices we make that stimulate doubt.

*Romans 14:22* Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. <sup>23</sup> But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

The New Living Translation renders it like this:

*Romans 14:23* If you have doubts about whether or not you should eat something, you are sinning if you go ahead and do it. For you are not following your convictions. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning.

Some doubts arise from a violated conscience. Live what you believe. Of course, it is possible to school your conscience to permit what God denies. So, let the Holy Spirit teach you through the Bible. God's Word will train you to value and reason like God does (which is often contrary to human nature).

With the voice of Scripture in your mind and heart, go with your conscience and you will find peace instead of doubt.

## Naturally, It's a Struggle

The opposite of faith is indifference, not doubt. When you no longer care, then you're in real trouble. But the struggle to believe is normal and common to everyone.

Doubt is faith struggling to be free, like a butterfly struggling to escape from its chrysalis (cocoon). It takes effort over time, but it is the very difficulty which prepares the butterfly for flight.

Similarly, our struggle to understand God's purpose and ways and timing, while it may be unpleasant, is the very thing that makes our faith (once activated) strong and enduring. Only then can we "fly."

*Isaiah 40:31* But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.

## Doubting Thomas

On some church calendars, today (the Sunday after Easter) is known as Low Sunday. That's probably because it's the end of the Lenten calendar, but it applies to a common anticlimactic feeling that follows the Holy Week celebrations.

In fact, it could apply to what follows any major climax of effort, attention, and emotional output.

It certainly was so for Thomas on the Sunday following the resurrection of Jesus. After Jesus' death, Thomas apparently hid himself away in mourning; he wasn't present when the disciples first got the news that Jesus was alive.

But a week later he found his way back to his band of friends.

*John 20:24* They told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

*But he replied, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side."*

For this he has become known as Thomas the Doubter. Now, let it be known that there is a big difference between doubt and disbelief, and Thomas was no disbeliever.

Thomas is only mentioned three times (all in the Gospel of John), but these glimpses reveal a lot about him.

On the first occasion, east of the Jordan River, Jesus and His disciples were hunkered down, out of the spotlight of controversy, when a message came that Jesus' good friend, Lazarus, was dying. After a couple of days, Jesus decided to brave the dangers of opposition and visit His friends. No one was thrilled. Only Thomas spoke, saying, "Let's go, too—and die with Jesus." (John 11:16)

You may be inclined to think of Winnie the Pooh's friend Eeyore, who always spoke with a pessimistic monotone drawl: "We're all gonna die anyway, we might as well get it done." But Thomas was really saying, "If Jesus is going to walk to His death, I will go with Him, too." It was not Gloomy Thomas, but Loyal Thomas who spoke.

Then there was the gathering for the Last Supper, when Jesus revealed that He would be leaving His friends, but tried to encourage them with these words:

*John 14:1* "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. <sup>2</sup> There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup> When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. <sup>4</sup> And you know the way to where I am going."

To this Thomas responded, "No, we don't know, Lord. We have no idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (John 14:5)

You might be tempted to think, "Well, there's always one 'party pooper' in the crowd." But Thomas was not being disagreeable; he was simply expressing his genuine consternation about what he had heard and his need for more information. He was not Awkward Thomas, but Honest Thomas.

Finally, we meet him again on the Sunday after Easter. Always extreme in his remarks, ever over-the-top, he responded to the amazing news of the resurrection by saying, "I won't believe it unless I

see the nail wounds in his hands..." Sure, Thomas. "AND, put my fingers into them." Yeah, right, Thomas. "AND place my hand into the wound in his side." Okay, we get it... you WILL NOT believe.

Low Sunday? More like Bottom-of-the-Pit Sunday for Thomas!

Then, suddenly, Jesus appeared in the room, and turned straight to Thomas.

*John 20:27* "Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!"

Can you see Thomas' face? Jesus knew exactly what he had thought and spoken, even though He didn't appear to be present. Briefly doubting, but now inescapably convinced, Thomas could only say, "My Lord and my God!"

## **What to Say**

So, what do you say to a friend who struggles with doubt?

#1: Don't berate them! To tell them, "Stop doubting!" is like saying, "Stop worrying!" We may agree that it's a good idea, but we have no power to achieve it. Belittling or scolding seldom accomplishes anything positive. Doubt is best removed gradually by offsetting it with the weight of trustworthy truth.

Perhaps the best illustration I can offer is the old one about a train. Today, we might call it the Thomas Train.

The train has three cars: fact, faith, and feelings.

Fact is the engine, the power source. It is fact-based knowledge that pulls the train of Christianity forward. Christianity is not based on fables or myths, but verifiable historic facts.

Faith is the passenger car. Detach faith from fact and the train will slowly roll to a stop, going nowhere. Faith without fact is superstition (like astrology and black cats).

Some people think that Christianity is superstition. It is not. Our faith is based on things which, though we cannot see them, are true and real for all sorts of reasons, engaging both the mind and the heart.

Finally, comes the caboose (feelings). Put feelings first and you'll land in all sorts of trouble. Feelings rise and fall like the tide (but without the predictability). Feelings depend on various things: our health, whether or not we've eaten, what we've eaten, where we're going, who we have to meet, what came in the mail. Good feelings are great, especially the sense of the presence of Jesus, but faith cannot depend on feelings.

When the facts of God's Word guide our faith they will also produce good feelings, and things will go smoothly forward.

While you cannot "just stop doubting," you can bring your doubts to God (don't hide them), and you can strengthen the facts that build your faith.

*Romans 10:17* Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

Go to the Word. Let your faith follow divine facts, and then let feelings come along behind as they will.

We could all do a lot worse than to be a Thomas-disciple.

Don't wallow in doubt. Let God transform your doubts into living faith — tried, tested, and durable.