

# The Thomas Factor:

## Using Your Doubts to Draw Closer to God

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### Introduction: Defining Religious Doubt

Our newspaper headlines tell the story. We are winning the battle against many dreaded diseases, but new ones are taking their places. Instead of physical calamities like tuberculosis, polio, typhoid fever, and malaria, we have made a switch. Now we have traded for emotional sicknesses like anxiety disorders and various kinds of clinical depression. The latter may even be far worse than the former. Perhaps more common, especially on less severe scales, many think that the emotional sicknesses affect life far more, are more difficult to deal with, and are far more painful than their physical counterparts.

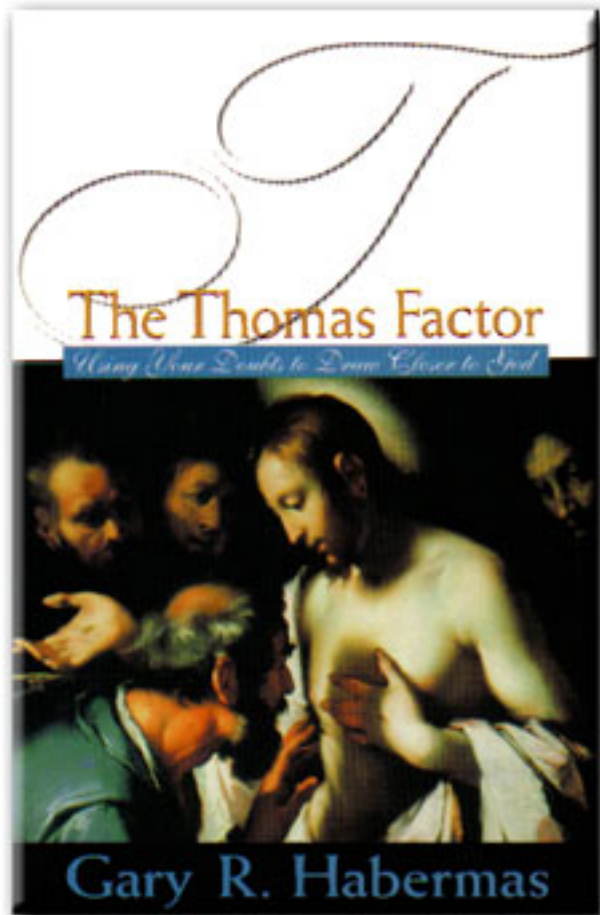
Some have called the last few decades the "Age of Anxiety." It seems that few descriptions provide a better idea of what this generation is about. We are worriers. We are concerned about every conceivable sort of situation. Yes, almost gone are the days when Russia pushing the button is our chief distress. Gone, too, is the apprehension that I or some loved one might be drafted to fight in some foreign jungle.

But new problems have taken their places. Will I get AIDS? Can my children even be raised today without contacting many opportunities for drugs and pre-marital sex? What if they make the wrong decision, especially given contemporary forms of peer pressure? Will some crazed individual walk into our local school or restaurant and open fire? We have heard that so-called Generation X is the first generation to conclude that their world will be worse than that of their parents. What does that mean?

In some ways our questions have grown more philosophical, too. Are traditional values passé? Is anything always right or wrong, or does it depend on the situation? Is it even possible to find Truth today (with a capital "T")? Can something be true for me and not for you?

Given our penchant to worry, is it any surprise that our fretting has moved over into the religious realm, too? Why should this be any different from the rest of our life? On the one hand, believers would like to think that, when it comes to their faith, they are rock-solid. Nothing should ever affect me there. But on the other hand, maybe I've never been particularly successful conquering worry wherever it rears its unwanted head. So why should my beliefs be any different? Thus, for many Christians today, few things seem to be more common than questions about one's faith.

Reflecting a bit further on the topic, it might occur to us that, in some ways, religious doubt is not all that



different from non-religious doubt. Both of these are concerned with topics that are very dear to us. After all, why would we waste time thinking about something that doesn't really matter one way or the other? And both can also involve similar thinking patterns. "What if I get AIDS?" or "What if I get fired?" are not that much different from "What if I'm really not saved?" Of course, a difference lies in the fact that religious questions concern God, Who should be our chief concern (Matt. 22:37-38). But is this always the way it is in life? While convicting, it is just not the case that believers are always most concerned about the things of God.

Somehow it's comforting to learn that other Christians almost always experience doubts about their own beliefs, too. The experts tell us that being worried by both religious and non-religious questions is simply a normal part of human life and development. In particular, religious questions of one sort or another have occurred to virtually everyone at some time.

This book is for Christians who doubt. It is addressed to those who are uneasy about their faith in any of several ways. But more specifically, we are chiefly interested in questions that take an emotional form. What happens when our faith somehow gets messed up with our anxieties? What do I do when worries about life shift to my most personal and cherished beliefs? Why must faith seem so difficult? Doesn't God care that I am really hurting? But I have always heard that true Christians don't have these thoughts, so am I not really saved, then? At the final Judgment, will Jesus say that He never knew me? I don't seem to remember many of the saints in the Bible fighting these sorts of battles.

Our primary purpose is to address this emotional side of faith, as a symptom of the larger problem of worry. How do we overcome emotional hurdles to our belief? How do I keep believing what I know is true? Why can't I just rest in my faith and enjoy the Christian life? Or conversely, when I'm worried, why can't the solution be an easy one? Why can't I just take two aspirins and go to bed? Why must it all be so complicated?

#### A Personal Quest

I am not a psychologist. This is not a psychology text. I have come to these issues from an intensely personal perspective. I questioned my own faith for ten straight years, then off and on for perhaps another five years. It got to the point where these matters were the predominant thoughts in my mind. They were the last thing I contemplated when I crawled, exhausted, into bed. They were the first items to greet me when I rose in the morning: "Where did I leave off the night before?" I hated (This may still not be a strong enough term!) my doubts with every fiber of my being. I wondered if I would ever overcome them, or if it was even possible to do so.

These questions pushed me on a personal quest. The area of apologetics (defending the faith) quickly became my favorite topic of study. I told myself repeatedly that a good dose of evidences would solve all of my doubts. What I found out, many years and thousands of books later, was that having a firm foundation was always helpful as a base. However, while it could certainly address certain sorts of questions, it was impotent against other forms of doubt. That was a shock. But that lesson came chiefly from listening to others and reflecting on what I had learned.

Another important personal discovery came during the time when I pastored a couple of churches. I realized that some kinds of uncertainty were also the most common questions I heard in pastoral counseling. I finished my doctorate and began teaching college and the lesson continued. Probably because they discovered a "fellow doubter," as one student proclaimed, I started to attract others who were similarly plagued. More and more people called, and they surprisingly included both unbelievers as well as believers. It seemed that this was a subject that affected most people at some time.

Early in the process, I began to take notes. I kept a card file on each person, including their specific type of question, how it originated, and what approach seemed most to help. Each time, I sought to uncover and record a specific lesson. Surprisingly, the numbers mounted to over one hundred hurting persons. At several points, I was shocked. Doubt was becoming much more multi-faceted than I had ever imagined. And the same solution that helped one person was very frequently not what the next person needed. I had to be versatile!

I was intrigued by these differences. I tried to think through each aspect very carefully. Why were there different starting points? Why did doubt seem so emotionally-based on some occasions but not others? Why did some doubters barely seem to care that they were bothered? Some questions appeared to be rather simple, while others were compounded by multiple factors. The differences could not all be explained on the basis of the various personalities involved.

Theory very quickly became melded to practice. It had to be or I would soon have nothing to say to those who sought advice. It was one thing to lecture on the subject. It was another to go through it oneself. But it was different again to be asked by a hurting individual to help them quiet the pain. All these various aspects needed to be combined. Something needed to make sense of the loose ends. Where was a theory that was large enough that, like an umbrella, it could shield those who sat under it?

This book is a popular attempt to share what I found over these years of personal experience, study, lecturing, and sharing. It is written to Christians who are either suffering from doubt or who want to assist others who are hurting. It is not a technical text. It is written in a popular style with the hope that the lack of

specialized jargon and references to dozens of other books will help those who struggle. For those who are interested, an earlier, different volume, contained in the bibliography, provides more of the theory involved.

Achieving our goal will involve accomplishing two major purposes. Initially, we will survey the subject in the first five chapters. Few topics involve so much confusion and so many mistaken beliefs. Frequently the truth is precisely the opposite of what we have been taught. Pain often results from trying to reconcile contradictory advice. That's one reason why an overview is so important. Like a medical problem, unless the dilemma is correctly identified, it may never be properly treated.

There are also different species of doubt. We will zero in on the three major types, concentrating on emotional doubt, in particular. It is probably the most common, as well as the most painful, variety. It demands a remedy. In the second half of the book, our central theme is to address the more obvious side-effects of emotional doubt and attempt to provide some hints for its successful treatment. Achieving a workable solution is important in order to deal with the contorted thinking, as well as the amount of pain, that are sometimes involved.

While emotional doubt can still produce many positive consequences, it frequently also causes situations that demand attention. We want to profile its nature, as well as provide some hints for dealing with this common modern phenomenon.

Along the way, I will use many illustrations and stories about people who have dealt with religious uncertainty. In no case is a specific person being discussed, to avoid any identification. Rather, I have changed names, significant circumstances, and other details, or used composites that reproduce typical questions that I have heard in twenty years of listening and lecturing on this topic. Still, I have concentrated on the essence of the situation so the reader can benefit from it.

#### Varieties of Doubt

Have you ever questioned the existence of God? That the Bible is really God's Word to us? What about difficult texts in Scripture, or the miracles that are recorded there? Do supernatural items like these seem difficult to believe for modern persons in the twenty-first century?

What about your own faith? Have you ever wondered if you were truly a Christian? Or questioned whether you said the right words when you trusted Christ as your Savior? How much repentance is enough? What if you're pretty sure that you did the right thing, but you just want to be more sure?

How strong is your motivation to follow God? How about the strength of your faith--do you question God easily? Does your belief fluctuate, seemingly dependent on what is happening in your life or how you are doing on a particular day? Or do you think it would take a lot for you to doubt the truth of Christianity? Do you ever feel like you don't want to follow Jesus any more?

Welcome to the subject of religious doubt! It comes in several forms and is far more common than most believers think. Later we will discuss three different species of uncertainty: factual, emotional, and volitional. I characterize them this way both because they seem to have three different root causes, as well as responding best to three sorts of solutions. But we will say more about all of this in chapter 4.

These three species of doubt can each be sub-divided into the most common categories of questions. To complicate things further, however, the same question does not always indicate the same root cause. Frequently it is the case that it is not what is being asked as much as it is why and how is it being asked. This is just another reason why the topic can be a maze of problems and proposed solutions.

One familiar category concerns whether certain aspects of Christianity are true. Another is the commonly expressed need of personal assurance of salvation: how do I know if I really am saved? Uncertainty also comes in the form of other common questions. Why do bad things happen to those who try their best to follow the Lord? Why aren't our prayers answered? It would seem that most believers have wrestled at some time with notions such as these.

Cindy was a young believer who had been taught that doubt was merely a synonym for unbelief. While struggling with her own assurance of salvation, she met Sarah, a Christian who openly asked questions about several aspects of Christianity. Cindy became confused one day when she heard Sarah comment: "There's really no difference, you know. One sort of question about God is the same as another." Startled, Cindy never asked Sarah what she meant. Were both of them doing the same thing? Privately, Cindy began to worry that perhaps neither of them was truly saved.

#### A Definition

In the New Testament there are at least a half dozen Greek words that describe the general condition that we have called doubt. They can also have other meanings, as well, such as puzzlement or wondering. When used in the sense that is relevant for us, key meanings include uncertainty or hesitation between two positions, but

there are differences. Interestingly, they are applied to believers and unbelievers alike.

For example, using the most common word for doubt (diakrino), James describes the man who asks God for faith but who wavers concerning whether he thinks God will grant the request. This individual is described as being unsettled (Js. 1:5-8). Using the same term, Jude instructs believers to have mercy on doubters (Jude 22), who, in the context, were apparently affected by false teachers (vs. 17-23). Matthew mentions that Jesus' followers doubted (distazo) Him on occasion (14:31; 28:17). In the former instance, Jesus identified Peter as having little faith, and asked him why he doubted. Unbelieving Jews are also described as doubting (psuchen airo) Jesus (Jn. 10:24).

Other terms with similar meanings are also used. Paul describes his own condition during times of persecution as being perplexed (aporeo), although he said he did not despair (II Cor. 4:8). Jesus uses still another word (meteorizo) when warning His listeners about anxious worry (Lk. 12:29).

Such words regularly indicate a state of vacillation or questioning, even of anxiety, despair, or unbelief. There is also much variety in the use of these terms, depending on the context. So doubt covers a fairly wide range of possible states of mind, with some diversity regarding the particular nuance. It can tend in the direction of unbelief. But it is commonly used of true believers who lack assurance. We will see a number of examples in the next chapter.

It is instructive that there are no hard lines of distinction here, either. Both believers and unbelievers doubted Jesus, for example. Both Jesus and James scolds those with weak faith. So we are not to take these states of mind lightly. Neither are we free to make comments implying that doubt is always a positive state or that it isn't potentially dangerous. We do need to deal with it.

But the other side needs to be noted, too. Not all states of doubt are created equal, largely because doubt doesn't always say the same thing. Even in Scripture, it is not always rebuked. Sometimes it even preceded victory.

For the purposes of this book, we will define doubt as the lack of certainty about the truthfulness of Christianity, one's own faith, or how it applies to real life situations. Except for occasional comments, especially in the next chapter, we will address ourselves only to believers.

In short, this book is addressed to Christians who question. The way we will use it, the term doubt is not necessarily the opposite of faith. Literally dozens of verses in Scripture tell us that true believers can and do suffer from this condition. It even ravaged their lives. And doubt can affect one's faith, at least eventually. But for others, it was a predicament that strengthened faith.

So do all Christians experience doubt at some time in their lives? Where are these biblical examples of doubting believers? What about unbelievers? This takes us to our next subject.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Both Believers and Unbelievers**

A Christian friend of mine once had dinner with a world-renowned atheist. During the meal, the believer asked the philosopher if he had ever doubted his atheism. To his surprise, the friend told me later, the atheist responded basically like this: "Oh yes, I question the truth of my atheism all the time."

Does this episode surprise you, too? Have you ever wondered why it is sometimes so difficult to believe? Have you ever thought that non-Christians have it so much easier because they have nothing to doubt (or to believe, either)? How about an even tougher question? Have you ever (privately, of course!) scared yourself with the (hopefully!) fleeting thought that it might even be preferable to be a non-believer, since this would uncomplicate your life?

We have said that the subject of doubt involves many twists and turns, including some that are very much unexpected. Some Christians might think that doubt only affects believers, while others may conclude that only non-Christians should fit this description. Yet, both are described in the New Testament by the term.

It seems to me after talking to doubters for more than twenty years, that there are strong reasons to think that virtually all Christians raise questions about God or their faith at some time. Only on two occasions have I ever heard a Christian deny that this was the case in their own lives. The first time, I heard the comment during a lecture given by a nationally known professor and author of dozens of books. (He had also written an article on the subject of doubt.) He insisted that he had never even once questioned God or his faith. The statement was made so firmly, and seemingly with full knowledge of the nature of doubt, that it haunted me for a few years. Later, the professor and I were alone for a meal and I brought the subject up again.

"Oh, you misunderstood me," he explained. "I was only referring to not having certain types of questions. I often wonder why God does things the way He does or doesn't, when it appears to me it should happen some other way!"

I had learned another lesson that day. Once again, this topic defied expectations.

The other time someone told me they had never doubted, I had the opportunity to pursue the comment on the spot. The individual was the child of missionary parents and had been raised on the mission field. But after I spoke to her and to someone who knew her very well, the final response was that she had still never asked any such questions. While still somewhat skeptical of the assertion, even to this day, it is one more reason not to be overly dogmatic when speaking about what must always be the case.

Was it also true in biblical times that believers frequently experienced doubt of one sort or another? Did our heroes of the faith likewise struggle with some of these same issues? What about unbelievers--do they ever question their beliefs?

#### Old Testament Examples

Throughout the Bible there are literally dozens of verses where true believers express their uncertainties, often in very strong terms. Several examples may be helpful in both illustrating points that we have already made, as well as in providing grounds for further lessons.

The Case of Job. The book of Job presents enough material for an entire chapter (or a book) on the expression of doubts concerning God, so we must be brief here. The basic story is a familiar one. God allowed Satan to test Job, a righteous man and His servant, to see if his faith was strong (1:6-12; 2:1-7). His sons and daughters were killed in a tornado-like storm. Most of his servants and livestock were killed by robbers. Job himself was in pain, inflicted over his entire body by sores (1:13-19; 2:7-8). Even his wife suggested that he give up his integrity, curse God, and then die (2:9). At first, Job remained firm: he accepted the calamity and praised God. He rejected his wife's advice and refused to sin (1:21-22; 2:10-11).

But during the middle chapters of the book, in the portions that seem seldom to be read and digested, Job posed heart-rending questions about his suffering, even blaming God for it. He seemed to gain momentum as he went. He expressed what today would be called a death-wish, stating his preference to have died in childbirth (3:11; 10:18-19). Then he requested that God would slay him (6:8-9). He charged God with oppressing him while approving the actions of the wicked (10:3). Further, he said that God was watching him, just waiting for him to make a mistake (10:14). Then he demanded that God just leave him alone (10:20-21) and stop trying to frighten him (13:21)! After all, he thought that God had destroyed any hope that he might have (14:19).

In a major sub-theme, Job asserted his prerogative to complain (7:11) and even challenged God to a debate (13:3)! He thought that he had a right to state his case and have God reply (13:22). Job wanted to offer his arguments in order to justify himself (23:4-5). But, as far as Job was concerned, God had not spoken to him; He remained silent (19:7; 30:20) and denied him the justice that he was due (27:2).

Interestingly, Job was not punished for all of these accusations against the God of the universe, as far as we know. Although he had sinned (34:37), he also repented (40:3-5; 42:6). God honored his response and blessed him with far more than he had before (42:10-17).

Through all of this, Job learned some tremendous lessons that were exceptionally valuable. Although he never found out why he suffered, he learned a greater truth: he realized that he knew enough about God to trust Him in those things that he did not understand (42:1-6). This information made him impregnable to the problem of why he suffered as he had. As long as he knew what he did about the nature of God, he also knew that there was a reason for the suffering, even if he did not know what it was. What greater lesson was there for him to learn? And it came at least partially through the doubt that he experienced.

The Case of Abraham. Next to Job, the best case of doubt in the Old Testament comes, paradoxically, from Abraham, whom Scripture calls a man of faith. In fact, perhaps no man in the Old Testament is better known for this attribute. Still, his trust in God did not come easily, and his struggles can assist us thousands of years later. Abraham learned to trust God, which would be a great lesson for us today.

Like Job, the general overview is well known. God spoke to Abraham (who was still called Abram) and told him to take his family and move from his homeland, traveling westward to the land of Canaan. He was given a special promise: a great nation would come from him in this new country and, through them, all the peoples of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). Abraham and his family obeyed the Lord and, after several incidents, settled in the land of Canaan, which God had given to him. He and his wife Sarah lived together for many years and later died in that country. God greatly blessed them and Abraham became the father of the Israelites through his son, Isaac, and his grandson, Jacob.

Many centuries later, the book of Hebrews showcased the life of Abraham. For the Jews, he was the Most Valuable Player from a long history of stars. All of these accomplishments were won by faith in the God Who

called him. Abraham responded to God's call and migrated to Canaan, even though he did not know where he was going (Heb. 11:8-10). Later, he believed God's promise that he and Sarah would have a child, even though there were two huge roadblocks: both of them were well beyond child bearing years, and Sarah was childless. But because Abraham believed that God was trustworthy, he became the father of a great nation (11:11-12).

Further, Abraham was even willing to sacrifice his own son Isaac, the child of promise, again because he believed God and trusted Him. God would raise Isaac from the dead if He had to do it that way (11:17-19). James captured the chief idea like this: Abraham lived his life by faith and God honored and blessed him (Js. 2:21-24).

At this point, we might wonder what's the point of all of this? The history lesson is nice, you might think, but how can we really relate to Abraham? That's tougher than trying to hit a home run just because we know that Babe Ruth was able to hit so many!

And didn't Abraham have advantages that we, frankly, never have? Didn't God speak directly to him? Couldn't Abraham continue to talk directly to God whenever he wanted to do so? Didn't God always respond? Those were simply far different times from today, right? It cannot be the same for us.

But if we go back and examine the texts more closely, we may find something quite different. What if Abraham also struggled with the question of God's silence? What if he didn't hear from God on a regular basis? What if he, too, needed assurance that God was at work in his life?

For instance, at the close of Genesis 16, Abraham was 86 years old (16:16). As far as we are told, God didn't speak to him until 13 years later when Abraham was 99 years old (Gen. 17:1)! We cannot be dogmatic here, but it is at least possible that God did not communicate with Abraham during these years. From the other chapters, it doesn't seem that God conversed with Abraham on a weekly or even a yearly basis during the rest of his life, either. There may have been sizeable gaps. Wouldn't most Christians today even say that God had communicated with them more than once in the last 13 years?

Yes, Abraham was certainly a man of great faith. And God did speak to him, although perhaps not anywhere near as much as what we might have thought. But this did not keep Abraham from asking God for the assurance of His promises. How could he be certain that Canaan would be given to him (Gen. 15:8)? The Lord allowed him to know this truth by the use of a supernatural manifestation in order to make a covenant with Abraham (15:13-21). Faith does not exclude asking good questions and receiving good answers!

Yet, all of this--God's call and supernatural revelation--did not keep Abraham from undergoing several troublesome moments. Like Job, Abraham also struggled with his faith. On two occasions, Abraham purposely concealed the identity of Sarah in order to save his own life (12:10-20; 20:1-18). But we have to answer a tough question here: if Abraham really believed that God would raise up a great nation from him, why should he be so fearful for his life, as the texts tell us (12:12-13; 20:11)?

Then when Sarah still hadn't conceived the promised child, she convinced Abraham to bear a son (Ishmael) by her servant Hagar, in spite of God's promises (16:1-16). It seemed like she wanted to help God along. Yet, Abraham agreed with her. Then when the Lord repeated the promise that Sarah would bear a child, Abraham literally laughed at God (17:15-17), as Sarah did so later (18:10-15)! Where was that faith that made him so famous?

It would be wrong to malign Abraham's faith. These episodes were spread over twenty-five years (cf. Gen. 12:4 with 21:5), and that provides many chances for slip-ups. No one has lived a perfectly consistent life except our Lord Jesus Christ. Overall, Abraham acted in faith, and never allowed unbelief to master him. Besides, we should understand Abraham very well. Haven't we ever acted similarly, perhaps by attempting to rationalize our faith and help God along? We say, "Maybe what God really meant was . . ." We can understand Abraham and be encouraged by his actions precisely because, just like us, he failed several times. We can relate to that!

How did Abraham overcome his doubts regarding God's promises? Paul used Abraham as his example, in spite of these momentary lapses. When he could have walked away and ignored God's call, Abraham chose to believe instead. When he was promised a child, he did not disbelieve, even though all the medical data opposed it. Rather than give up or cease to believe, Abraham's faith was actually strengthened (Rom. 4:18-25). So here we find one of his secrets: Abraham not only exercised his faith, but it grew as he trusted God more and more, one step at a time, even after several failures.

Imagine having a faith that grows when life's pressures are at their peak! Yet that was Abraham's experience. Like Job, the primary reason for this is that he concluded that God was trustworthy: what he already knew about God was enough to trust Him in unknown areas (Rom. 4:20-21). New steps were taken, based on what had already transpired. Abraham trusted God and was strengthened even during the toughest of times.

Other Texts. Another Old Testament book that contains open, honest questioning by believers is the Psalms. Like Job, one theme is also that of evil. Several psalms charge God with allowing the wicked to enjoy life (like

74:1), while the righteousness of the godly gained them nothing but punishment (73:12-14). It is said that God defended and showed favoritism towards the wicked (Ps. 82:2). These sorts of doubts are found elsewhere, too (Jer. 12:1-2; 15:18).

A second theme, as with both Job and Abraham, concerned God's silence. David complained that his prayers went unanswered (35:13-14). Then, after sinning, he cried out to God to restore the assurance of his salvation, like he had once experienced it (Ps. 51:8-12). The Jews declared that they had not heard from God in quite awhile (74:9). This idea also occurs in other Old Testament books (Lam. 3:44; Isa. 57:11; 59:2). In Daniel 10:10-14, one of the prophet's prayer requests had been delayed for three weeks by an attack on God's angelic messenger by what appears to be demonic forces!

Perhaps the strongest complaints about God from a single text occur in Psalms 44. The writer, in very strong language, rebuked God for not fulfilling His promises even though Israel had done nothing wrong (44:17-26; cf. 89:38-39). Then, in a simply startling statement, the writer even blamed the God of the universe with sleeping on the job (44:23)!

A last example of God's silence occurs at the close of the Old Testament. Before the birth of Jesus Christ, about four hundred years passed without a canonical prophet or book. Of course, this does not mean that God was not at work. But like the comment in Psalm 74:9, many may have wondered how long it would be before the Lord officially spoke. Was God angry with His people? Had He cast them away and rejected them? Was He done giving the inspired Scriptures? Would no prophet come forward and speak for Him? When would the silence end?

Another verse in the book of Psalms may give a little hint. Just as the darkest of nights is still followed by a new sunrise (Ps. 30:5), so the Jewish "dark ages" were officially ended when the Messiah entered human history, to die and rise in order to offer redemption to the world. What an incredible end to the Old Testament! God's profound silence was broken by the most splendid turn of events in all of history.

#### New Testament Examples

Although much shorter and with significantly less narrative than its counterpart, the New Testament also presents some major cases of doubting believers. We can also learn from these examples.

In a startling but frequently overlooked text, while John the Baptist was in prison, he sent two of his disciples to Jesus. John had a question or two: was Jesus the Messiah or should John be looking for someone else (Matt. 11:1-11; Lk. 7:18-30)! On the surface, at least, wouldn't this seem like an unnerving question to ask the Son of God? "Are you the true Messiah? If you aren't, we may as well follow this other rabbi over here."

It's not just the question itself that's so staggering. If it came from someone in the crowd, it would probably be dismissed by many readers as being from someone who lacked faith. What turns it into such a bombshell is because it comes from John the Baptist, God's chosen forerunner for Jesus, predicted in the Old Testament (Isa. 40:1-3). Was John in danger of throwing his faith overboard?

First, let's note Jesus' immediate response. He didn't react in a vindictive fashion, such as by telling John to shape up, or to live up to his reputation, or by quoting verses to him and reminding him of his special position as the chosen herald of the Lord's coming. Neither did He, as some Christians would suggest, ignore evidences that might address John's need. Rather, He cured a number of suffering people right there in front of the two messengers and then instructed them to go tell John what they just witnessed. Apparently, Jesus thought that there was some relevance between His healing miracles and John's faith. That is a lesson in itself.

But the story doesn't stop there. Notice a second development. As the two visitors left, Jesus addressed the crowd concerning John. He asked them if, when they went out in the wilderness to see John, they had expected to see someone who was easily shaken by the wind (somewhat reminiscent of James' warning about weak faith in Js. 1:6-8). Or did they see a weakling in soft, comfortable clothes? Then Jesus told His listeners that John was not only a prophet, but He proclaimed that no greater man had ever been born! What makes this even more incredible is that John hadn't yet received Jesus' message, so Jesus was complementing John while he was still doubting! And while there was no rebuke for his lack of faith, Jesus did instruct John not to be offended because of Him (Matt. 11:6; Lk. 7:23). I take this to be like an encouragement that we often give someone today: "Hang in there! Don't give up."

I hesitate to mention another case from the Gospels, for fear that there be some misunderstanding. But what do we do with Jesus' distress in the Garden of Gethsemane? We are told that his mental suffering was so intense that He was sweating drops of blood (Lk. 22:39-44; cf. Mk. 14:33-36; Matt. 26:36-43). This signals an exceptional amount of strain. Jesus prayed to His Father and requested that the coming events be bypassed, but only if it was God's will. Certainly the portion of the prayer relating to God's will was accomplished, but what about Jesus' earlier request?

It is very difficult to address this incident. Taking the texts in a straightforward manner, Jesus undeniably suffered emotional anguish, brought about by the questions that He faced. We may agree that here is an

example where Jesus encountered some of the same problems we face, yet without sinning (Heb. 4:15). We might even say that this was one of the times where we are told that Jesus learned obedience by His suffering (Heb. 5:8). That is why believers today can identify with Him. He personally experienced the reality of emotional pain.

The case of "Doubting Thomas" (Jn. 20:24-29) is probably the best known example of uncertainty in the New Testament. Thomas wanted to see the risen Jesus with his own eyes before he would believe. Although Jesus did provide the requested evidence, He also issued a mild rebuke to His apostle. It would have been better if Thomas had believed the testimony of the other apostles who reported to him that they had seen Jesus alive (Jn. 20:29), the same witness that we read in the New Testament. Once again, Jesus does not shy away from using evidence to answer doubts, but He didn't think that Thomas' version--a direct appearance--was the most desirable option. Besides Jesus' prayer to His Father in Gethsemane, Paul specifically tells us that he prayed on three occasions concerning the removal of an apparent physical problem. Some think that he had problems with his eyes. After all, didn't he need to be healthy in order to minister? But Paul was not answered as he had hoped (II Cor. 12:7-10). He learned what Jesus already knew, that God's will was to be preferred above one's own. What about unbelievers? In more than one place, we are told that they asked questions, too. Paul says that Jews ask for signs (I Cor. 1:22-23). Jesus rebuked those who wanted proof that He was from God (Matt. 12:38-45; 16:1-4). He offered His miracles to other Jews who accused Him of making them doubt by not telling them who He was, but they refused to believe anyway (Jn. 10:24-26, 37-39). He even healed a boy whose father confessed: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mk. 9:24).

### Lessons

Before we return to our task of deciphering the maze of Christian doubt, we need to pause long enough to point out some lessons that come strictly from the texts that we have just discussed. We can learn from the experiences of believers who have traveled this path before us.

(1) As we have already said in our opening discussion, doubt is multi-faceted. This should be even more obvious after a brief survey of its expression in the Scriptures. The presence of evil and the issue of God's silence are two of the most common types. Assurance is another key issue, whether concerning the certainty of truth or of one's own salvation. Other saints struggled with God's guidance and His promises, especially as it impacted their expectations. At any rate, it is helpful just to see some of the various manifestations of this widespread phenomena.

(2) Some doubt is rebuked, as in the cases of Job and Thomas. And God honors repentance, as with Job. But not all doubt is reprimanded, and not all questions are deemed to be sinful (Abraham, Paul). Neither does doubt keep a person from being complimented for his righteousness (John the Baptist).

What about especially strong expressions of doubt that are uncensored like Psalm 44? It seems that the Holy Spirit allowed the honest expression of feelings by true believers, even when it was not always appropriate or true. But this is certainly not an excuse for us to try the same thing, or to blame God for whatever happens to us. Honest, unpremeditated questions are one thing; constant preoccupation with strong statements that question God's character may indicate something else altogether.

(3) Believers like Job, Abraham, and Paul grew during their times of doubt, even when their faith underwent the harshest attacks. Today, too, while uncertainty can certainly have negative results to be avoided, it can also help us to learn some indispensable lessons. Perhaps the main issue here is what Christians do about their struggles: to whom do we turn and what is our attitude towards what is happening? What applications do we make?

(4) One lesson is so crucial that it deserves mention by itself. Believers like Job and Abraham learned that God could, indeed, be trusted, even when they couldn't figure everything out. They discovered that they already knew enough about God in order to have confidence in Him in those things that they didn't know or understand.

Sometimes we, too, just need to trust Him more, in light of this truth. Few lessons are more valuable for us today, since we know far more than did these Old Testament saints. Just to be sure that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and rose again from the dead should make us willing to trust Him in times when we don't understand why things are happening as they are. After all, we don't have to figure out everything in order to know that these truths insure heaven, where we will understand! This approach needs to be generously applied to all of our struggles.

(5) Many times in Scripture, doubt is simply expressed without any remedy being provided. But when relief does come, we get some hints about what helped to bring the comfort. While the use of evidences is not the remedy in most cases, it is certainly one of the most frequent means of treating doubt and was employed when appropriate. Abraham received a sign of God's blessing, while John the Baptist's disciples presumably told him about Jesus' miracles. The risen Jesus appeared to Thomas. Other methods were also helpful. The psalmists suggested praise even when their circumstances hadn't changed yet (Ps. 35:27-28; 89:52). Another recommendation was to remember and proclaim what God had already done in history (Ps. 105-106; Lam. 3:21-26). Job found comfort through dialogue. David and Paul discovered consolation in God's truth.



(6) Concerning unbelievers, it appears that Jesus treated differently the various requests He received for a sign. John the Baptist wasn't rebuked, while Thomas received a mild admonishment, but neither was refused. On the other hand, the unbelieving Jews were strongly chided after they demanded a sign, although they were told that Jesus' resurrection would be a sign in their case, too (Matt. 12:39; 16:4). What was the distinction? Why were some shown miracles and others were denied? It seems that Jesus differentiated between His listeners, based on the state of their heart. The strongest reprimand was reserved for those who were closed to His work, no matter what He did.

But it cannot be said that He reserved His miracles for believers only. Not only did He heal the man's son after the former's confession of partial unbelief (Mk. 9:24), but it could even be argued that Thomas was not a Christian when he demanded to see the resurrected Jesus. Not only did Thomas refuse to believe the resurrection until Jesus appeared to him (and this event is an indispensable part of the gospel--I Cor. 15:3-4), but Jesus said that Thomas believed only after seeing Him (Jn. 20:25, 29). Lastly, as we mentioned, Jesus said that the sign of the resurrection would still be given even to the staunchest of His skeptics (Matt. 12:39; 16:4).

So the fact remains that some of Jesus' unbelieving hearers had doubts, too, and frequently severe ones. Today, as well, skeptics tell us that they have asked very similar questions. We saw this in the opening lines of this chapter.

Another example is provided by C.S. Lewis, who was an ardent atheist during his early teaching at Oxford University. He confessed that he sometimes experienced doubts about his faith after he became a Christian. But, he added, in the days when he was an atheist, there were times when the Christian faith appeared to be "terribly probable." No matter what you believe, Lewis says, you will doubt at some time. The more important matter is, how will you deal with the doubt when it comes? (*Mere Christianity*, Macmillan, 1952, pp. 123-124).

These statements by Lewis provide the opportunity for a reassessment of some of our earlier comments. Sure, Christians can certainly have some rough times. God has certainly not promised us anything different. Yet, how would it be to walk a mile in the atheist's shoes? How would you like to be an unbeliever and secretly fear that Christianity may, in fact, be true? How long would it take you to move from that thought to the petrifying realization that Hell might just await you?

In the passages we looked at, Scripture plainly reveals the presence of doubt in the lives of believers and unbelievers alike. Why should we think that unbelievers are exempt from religious uncertainty? People doubt for a very basic reason--all of us are human beings and we share a sin nature. This is the root cause of our uncertainty. In other words, our sinful human nature is the state from which all of this questioning springs. But this is not to say that all doubt is necessarily sin.

Randy was a believer who kept his questions concerning his faith to himself. But the more he did so, the more they bothered him. He never heard the subject discussed in sermons, so he concluded that very few Christians struggled with it. One day when it seemed to nag him a little more than usual, he took a chance and dropped some hints to a knowledgeable friend. It would be an understatement to say that Randy was surprised to find that it could be a very normal problem, and that even his friend was not exempt! Further, when his friend turned to one Scripture passage after another to illustrate his point, Randy grew more and more relieved. Just to know that other Christians struggled with this subject seemed to relieve much of his concern.

We conclude that religious doubt is very common and affects almost everyone at some time. It is not necessarily sin, nor must it be the opposite of faith. It can even produce some good results. But it can also lead to serious situations that need to be treated. Along the way, however, there are many misconceptions concerning this topic. It just seems that doubt has an image problem!

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## **Chapter II**

### **Common Myths**

Have you ever been sick and purchased the medicine that you thought you needed, only to discover that you did not get any better? Perhaps after a trip to your physician, you got different medicine, and began to feel well. The key was obviously getting the proper diagnosis and treatment. If either is incorrect, one may never get rid of the symptoms.

So it is with doubt, too. Getting the correct diagnosis and remedy are crucial to overcoming the problem and finding relief. While we will deal more directly with these two topics in coming chapters, we will begin by noting many of the common myths concerning religious uncertainty. As in our story above, beginning with the correct information gives one a much more likely chance to cure the hurt.

Few topics are subject to more misconceptions than that of doubt. Since starting with truth is critical, we want to continue laying a foundation on which to build as we move along. Here are a few examples of how misbeliefs about religious uncertainty create problems:

Dave reasoned that since doubt was the opposite of faith, his continued questions must mean that he had committed the unpardonable sin. While he longed more than anything for forgiveness and fellowship with God, he believed he had forfeited both by his objections, which he thought of as canceling his faith. This conclusion caused him incredible amounts of emotional torment, including thinking that he would never be able to find what he wanted most of all in life: lasting assurance and peace.

Alicia thought that biblical characters never doubted because God was in constant and regular contact with them, unlike today. But she also knew that she and many of her believing friends did have questions about Christianity, including the feeling that the Creator had been silent towards them. Her incorrect beliefs led her to draw faulty conclusions about the nature of God. These, in turn, were detrimental to her spiritual growth.

John was an unbeliever who thought that doubts generally occurred only to conservative Christians, as a direct result of their strict social standards. It seemed that all he ever heard from them was, "Do this . . . . Don't do that." This largely accounted for his choice to avoid orthodox Christianity in all of its forms, including those persons who believed it, for fear that he might also become "contaminated."

Each of these individuals was suffering in one way or another due to believing and acting upon false information. You may recall my own testimony. I can understand these sorts of mistakes because I was also badly misinformed, even though I would have professed a long-standing interest in the topic. Let's investigate some of these misbeliefs that one frequently hears about the subject of religious uncertainty. Some of our assertions will make use of the Scripture passages that we viewed in the last chapter.

**Doubt never occurs to heroes in the Bible.** We devoted the last chapter to show that there are plenty of reasons to reject this contention. But because it is commonly thought to be true, we mention it again. Job, Abraham, David, other writers of the inspired Psalms, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and the apostle Paul are all witnesses against this charge. Although all these men were biblical superheroes, they were also human beings and sinners. They followed God, but they struggled at times, too. This is one reason why they can be such examples for us, even today. It would seem that anyone who takes the Bible at face value would have to agree.

We also saw that these biblical champions grappled with matters like the presence of evil in the world and the silence of God. Contrary to Alicia's belief in the story above, they were not in unbroken communication with God. They had many of the same questions as we do in our generation. Alicia needs to correct her false impressions so that she does not compromise her view of God's nature and stunt her spiritual growth.

**Doubt only affects Christians, but never atheists or other unbelievers.** We have also addressed this assertion in some detail and found it to be incorrect. Some unbelievers in Scripture were open to God, while others hardened their hearts against Him. Some didn't believe even after they saw Jesus' miracles. Hence, Jesus responded differently to each of them.

Not only do we have the witness of Scripture that non-Christians can live in a state of doubt, but contemporary writers like C. S. Lewis have given their own testimonies to this fact, as well. The biblical heroes we just mentioned even have something in common with these unbelievers: they are all human beings, existing in a fallen, sinful state. This is the root cause for the problem we have been discussing and the chief reason why doubt is not a respecter of persons. One related charge is that only conservative Christians are regular doubters, like John's complaint in our story above. Granted, the excessive following of rules can, without question, contribute to uncertainty at any of several levels. But we have already seen that far more than conservatives are involved; people from all walks of life question their religious beliefs. So John's complaint was itself too selective in not recognizing the pervasiveness of doubt. He had rejected orthodox Christianity for illegitimate reasons.

**Doubt is relatively rare.** Admittedly, just because both believers and unbelievers experience religious uncertainty, this does not mean that it is common. Neither does the Bible appear to answer this question, except by implication. Even so, since this phenomenon is so common throughout Scripture, involving so many persons, the thought that it is at least fairly frequent would seem to follow. One might offer two further biblical points, too: that so many of those who experienced doubt were spiritual giants only adds to the contention that it probably happens to many who are not so spiritually attuned. Further, since everyone shares a common human, sinful thread, we might even expect that this experience would be a regular occurrence. To these biblical considerations, we can add countless testimonies from people today--believers and unbelievers alike. I have already said that dozens of my own interviews have led me to suspect that it is exceptionally common. At least to me, it is obvious enough that I suspect it to be a very common experience. Of course, I don't claim scientific data for this conclusion.

**Doubt is the opposite of faith; it is actually unbelief.** This is another protest that we have already addressed. While doubt can tend in the direction of unbelief, and while it is expressed by unbelievers, this is certainly not the case with the majority of examples in the Bible. Most of the time, it is believers themselves who ask the questions and pose the problems. (Of course, Scripture chiefly addresses believers, so we cannot

use this to say that more Christians than non-Christians doubt.) In our definition, we saw that doubt more frequently contains the idea of being caught in between two positions. There is a Greek noun for belief (pistis) and another one for unbelief (apistia). Doubt is neither: it more commonly expresses ideas such as perplexity, worry, uncertainty, or perhaps weak faith.

To see if doubt is really unbelief, recalling a few of the instances that we have already looked at might be helpful. In the Old Testament, Job was not only a righteous servant of God when Satan began to tempt him, but he was vindicated in the end, too. Never was he addressed by God as an unbeliever. This was even more the case with Abraham, the man of faith. To call his questions the result of his unbelief is simply to miss the point of his entire story. While David sinned, he was also one of the chief examples of a man of God. Sure, he struggled with his faith on occasion, but he was unquestionably a believer.

In the New Testament, we dare not say that John the Baptist's doubt was unbelief, or we would be close to contradicting our Lord's assertion that he was the most righteous man ever born of a woman. Neither could it be properly claimed that Paul's unanswered prayers were unbelief. And what about Jesus' emotional struggles in the Garden of Gethsemane? It seems that we would have to do some fast talking here!

Therefore we conclude that doubt can be negative and does, on occasion, incline towards unbelief. However, its normal biblical use is to describe believers who struggle with various aspects of their faith. We even have cases where strong charges are made against God, but where the individual is definitely a believer.

**Doubt always indicates that something serious is wrong; perhaps it is even the unpardonable sin.**

This is the first of several charges that, while not totally wrong, are half-truths. But since part of the notion is correct, sometimes half-truths are more hurtful than total misbeliefs.

So we might begin here by noting a certain amount of general agreement with the assertion. Yes, the presence of ongoing doubt that is more than a passing mood or momentary pressure may well be a signal that something is wrong. That is why this book is being written. It doesn't follow, however, that this "wrongness" is something that is seriously, or necessarily spiritual, although it may certainly be these. It could also signal the presence of medical or emotional factors that need to be dealt with. But while emotional doubt, in particular, can be very painful, it doesn't always follow that the level of hurt indicates that something is terribly wrong. This frequent incommensurability between pain and seriousness is one of the many false alarms about doubt.

In contrast, the portion about the unpardonable sin would appear to be quite mistaken. Commentators usually agree that his condition is an ongoing state of mind, not the result of a momentary lapse. It generally proceeds from a settled attitude that rejects (and continues to reject) God, not from a brief, angry outburst(s). This is not to overlook the latter, because it can be serious, too, but only to say that it doesn't seem to qualify as an unforgivable condition. Most scholars say that Dave's attitude in the illustration above shows that he certainly didn't commit the unpardonable sin. His desire for repentance and his longing for God, along with the fact that questions about God do not automatically cause one to enact this dreaded sin, are the best indications of this.

Further, if normal doubts qualify one for the unforgivable sin, then why was it not committed by the writer in Psalm 44? Don't many of the other Psalms that challenge God end in thanksgiving and praise, without any indication that the authors are now unbelievers? Wouldn't Job's thirty chapters of constant and even excessive challenges against God show that he was in an unforgivable state? But God allows his repentance at the end of the book! How many strikes does Abraham get before he would have been called out? Could he ever be known as the man of faith and figure so prominently in Hebrews 11 if this objection were true? When David committed the double sin of murder and adultery with Bathsheba, causing his questions of assurance, why could he later repent, recover, and become a man after God's heart? What about John the Baptist's seeming readiness to turn to another "messiah"? If he had crossed the line to the unpardonable sin, could Jesus have paid him the tremendous compliment that He did?

It would seem that the biblical material, over and over again, causes us to reject the second part of this charge against religious uncertainty. To be sure, the unpardonable sin is real and to be avoided at all costs. But raising questions such as those we have been considering do not appear to qualify.

**Doubt shouldn't be admitted or discussed since it is basically a character flaw.** In a sense, religious uncertainty does come from a character flaw--we have been calling it sin! But it doesn't follow that it is therefore something that should be shut up and kept away from others, like a rabid dog, or some highly contagious disease! Here we have another half-truth. True, questioning one's faith can and has spread to others. But so does finding biblical, godly solutions. In fact, this is precisely one of the reasons why it should be both admitted and discussed. This is a subject where public examination can be one of the surest ways to find relief and healing.

There is another sense in which doubt is a character trait. It most frequently follows personality types, as we will see later, making it important that we recognize our personal tendencies and understand ahead of time where they very well might end up. Frequently, all we may need to say to ourselves during a period of religious vacillation is: "That's just me again! Calm down." Recognizing and reading our dispositions is an indispensable part of handling doubt. But this is a topic that comes later.

**Doubt is usually factual in nature; it is always satisfied by studying the evidence.** I said earlier that this was my initial thought back in my early days of doubting. Actually this conviction lasted through years of study. But I found myself wondering on many occasions why a careful marshaling of the facts, even in cases where this basis was almost overwhelmingly strong, did not always calm the uncertainty. This was especially so when the questioning took on emotional or volitional dimensions. In fact, I am understating the problem here. It was immensely frustrating to find that the doubt barely budged during passionate moments.

This led to additional struggles. Why weren't the facts working? Could this also be a problem? Had I not studied something correctly? Here I was faced with a secondary level of uncertainty. Sometimes I just wanted to walk away from the subject altogether, but I knew that wouldn't solve my quandary.

After years more of study I concluded that although there were often factual components involved, and answers ultimately returned to the issue of whether Christianity had a solid foundation, few doubts were solved by straightforward citations of the relevant facts. This often seemed to help in the short run, sometimes substantially, but it generally lasted for only a few days. Here I am reminded of the words spoken to me years ago by a colleague: "Faith is weak when it fluctuates according to the latest archaeological discovery." I had to admit: a faith that seems to need almost daily bolstering by the facts was also in need of something else to deal with the underlying issue, something more permanent.

So the facts by themselves fail to satisfy the emotional and volitional elements of doubt. One major reason for this conclusion is that humans are whole entities--we are more than data alone. As whole persons, we need to satisfy the other components of our being, as well. Doubt is rarely a problem in the realm of facts alone. So the solution, not surprisingly, spills beyond that narrow range.

**Doubt chiefly occurs to those who are intellectually gifted.** It may be the case that many doubters are highly intelligent people, but that is beside the point of how it is healed. Strangely enough, this makes it more dangerous for some doubters who are used to attacking problems head-on, with a good dose of "smarts." It figures that they will once again turn to what has always worked for them, but religious uncertainty usually arises for less than intellectual reasons. Unless the person goes beyond this approach for their answer, it will most likely remain impervious to correction, since they will not look for an emotional basis to their problem. When you don't think your emotions are a problem, it is not shocking if you don't look there for your answers.

Once again, digging out Christianity's strong foundation is quite valuable, since it is needed at so many junctures. But we must work forward from there to other areas in order to solve many of the most common problems of uncertainty. Dealing with the issues will push one quickly enough beyond the point of the facts alone. I have tested this principle probably hundreds of times, which accounts for my practical assurance that it really works.

But we cannot overemphasize the point about the intellectual capacities of doubters, since many of them are not overly intellectual. This could even be a help, since they are more likely to admit that they frequently struggle with their emotions. Thus they are closer to some solutions.

**Doubt generally follows similar patterns.** If this misconception sees religious doubt as a fairly one-dimensional or single-faceted phenomenon, proceeding along uniform lines, then few things about the subject are more mistaken. Uncertainty is as varied as are the people who experience it. And as we have said, it comes through at least three major avenues: factual, emotional, and volitional. So it certainly differs from person to person.

Having said this, however, it is also true that, once one properly identifies the species of doubt, it may follow a generally similar sequence. Of course there are personal twists and turns as varied as the personal experiences of those who venture down these paths. But the adviser who understands well the various facets and how they develop in each of their chief variations can often predict the trail it is taking in the individual.

Once I determine where the person stands, I generally use the route of predicting what he or she is saying to themselves, how they feel, and so on. Usually, the person wonders how I know all this. (If they only knew the years of painful steps that led me to this point!) I think such a process often instills confidence in the doubter, because it tells them that you understand their dilemma. It also lets them know that others have traveled this way before them. It is almost always a comfort to know that you are not a loner when you work through a problem area. If the prediction was inaccurate, I simply back up to the previous point, listen some more, and then try again.

**Doubt can generally be solved by the same remedy or response.** This is another half-truth, so it can have a good point to make. If it means that there is one step that all must apply, after which they will get relief, then I am very skeptical. For example, if it is suggested that all a person needs to do is to confess their sins, or pray, or get more spiritual, I am willing to listen. But this sounds a bit like Job's friends, who thought that they were giving good, spiritual advice, too, but God was not pleased with what they said (Job 42:7-10). To be sure, the recommendation could well work, depending on the particulars, but I think Scripture also varies its advice for different maladies, and with good reason.

If the point of the assertion is that, once a workable solution is found, it can often be applied across the board, then this is potentially very positive. Once again, it depends on the particulars, but in principle it is

possible. Sometimes more than one solution is very helpful. Different and even unconventional patterns work for various people. This is why we will provide a variety of suggestions. By analogy, physicians frequently prescribe two or more medicines for the same sickness, including varying the type or doses for different cases.

**Doubt never produces positive results.** We have already said many times that religious skepticism can do harm, and the word itself can lean in the direction of unbelief or despair. But just because negative results can result, doesn't mean they will. And it certainly doesn't mean that blessings cannot result. We will even take a chapter to outline some of the positive results that can and have followed from the dark nights of doubt.

We need to keep in mind that believers are not asking permission in order to indulge in a pastime here. They seemingly don't want to question their faith. They desire fellowship with God. So, given that doubt is a reality in their lives, its resulting in their growth and development is beneficial.

**Doubt always gets worse as one grows older, especially as one gets closer to death.** This would seem to be a very fruitful area of research that might yield some fascinating results. Perhaps contrary to popular conceptions, however, this assertion at least appears on the surface not to be the case. According to at least one massive survey (Faith Development and Your Ministry, Gallup, 1986) along with some other publications, older adults paradoxically seem to be more settled in their beliefs and thus experience less doubt.

There may be some good reasons why this is the case, too. Perhaps foremost on the list, developmental theory indicates that the elderly could well have moved past the formative stages of growth and come to rest in a settled sense of who they are, what life is about, and what they believe. Other considerations include the likelihood that they no longer have the immediate worries of providing for their children, there is less responsibility in general, and some have already experienced the death of their mate. Reasons like these could well ease the tension of questions that were more frequent earlier in life.

Once I had the privilege of interviewing an elderly Christian couple in their eighties who had always seemed to express a quiet, mature faith. I inquired concerning their beliefs, their worries, and their fear of death. I asked very frank questions, pushing for "behind the scenes" sorts of answers. They impressed me ever so much with this settled quality of life that I just mentioned. They appeared to be firm in their faith and not to be afraid to die. In fact, they rather strongly and confidently affirmed both. Further, they indicated that, while they had been worriers earlier in life, their present state had lasted for about the past twenty years or so. True, this is only one couple. But all I can say is that I was exceptionally impressed with their forthright answers.

### **Conclusion**

The falsehoods presented in this chapter were chosen because they are frequent Christian reactions to the subject of doubt. Singling them out and correcting them is crucial, but too seldom done. It is precisely because of such misbeliefs that many find their own conditions so difficult to unravel. After all, if we cannot identify and locate physical problems, we won't know what to treat.

This leads us to one of the most important principles of this book. To misidentify the specific nature of doubt is frequently to look in the wrong direction for the cure. We need something specific at which to take careful aim. But if I cannot determine the nature of the problem, it is certainly questionable if I will discover the surest route to healing, except by accident. Knowing the specific nature of the doubt allows me to see it in its clearest light and attack it from the best angle.

Just to know, for instance, that religious doubt plagues virtually everyone at some time is comforting in itself. Realizing that it is a common human condition is heartening; it at least reveals that I am not alone in my dilemma.

Further, to realize that the devastating affects of uncertainty can usually be cured and that the entire experience can even lead to very positive results can be equally liberating. All of this means that we need to learn more about the nature of doubt. This will be one of our upcoming goals.

We also need to be able to recognize the specific species of doubt and its general characteristics. All doubt is not created equal. It may follow various patterns and require more than one strategy before healing will take place. We have said that there are at least three distinct types (or species) of doubt. To understand the differences between each is to begin to zero in on some specific strategies with which to combat them.

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## **Chapter III**

### **The Other Two Species of Doubt**

Secrets come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes they are nice, and sometimes they are not. Once in a while,

what they seem to be is not what they, in fact, are. But sometimes they are something special--they lead to valuable discoveries. Like keys, they unlock doors to hidden treasures.

One of the best-kept secrets about religious doubt is that it comes in several forms. We have said that these variations can generally be characterized into three major species: factual, emotional, and volitional. It is crucial to understand the difference between these varieties of uncertainty. To be aware of the general characteristics and some of the root causes of each type is to get a good start in formulating a strategy for confronting it.

In this chapter, we will address the first and third types. Chapter 5 will begin our in-depth study of type two, which is the specific focus of this book. After definitions of factual and volitional doubt, we will explore a few of the underlying situations that seem to give rise to each.

### Identifying Factual Doubt

Factual doubt is chiefly concerned with the foundations of religious belief and whether they are well-grounded. Are there reasons for faith? Evidence for Christianity can come from many areas, for examples: biblical, logical, metaphysical, historical, scientific, or even moral. The central issue concerns the warrant for religious claims, as well as giving answers to others who pose various objections.

Confronting factual doubt, then, might involve bolstering a belief by providing reasons for it. Of course, having a number of strong evidences is preferable. But strangely enough, not all reasons to believe involve producing the cold, hard facts in a scientific laboratory or in a courtroom. Sometimes reasons come from seemingly unconventional arguments or sources, like the knowledge that all humans share, or the deepest longings of one's heart. Other times, counterstrikes are necessary against potential challenges to faith. This is the area of defending the Christian faith, or apologetics.

Factual doubt, then, might come in the form of questions about the truthfulness of the Christian faith. It could pertain to biblical topics (like concerns about conflicting teachings), logical items (such as issues involving the nature of God), or other areas of philosophy (including the existence of God or the problem of evil). Still more questions could come from historical areas (like verifying the resurrection of Jesus), or scientific enterprises (such as evidence for design in the universe or the origin of life).

One earmark of factual doubt is that, if this is the sole or primary component, it should be satisfied by the various data. This assumes that such evidences and explanations are available and that they are accessible to the individual. During and after many years of doubting, I've spent my entire professional life pursuing such avenues. I can testify that there is simply a staggering amount of confirmation of theism in general and Christianity in particular. But having received sufficient information, including possible follow-up issues, the doubter should then be satisfied.

Of course, apologetics shouldn't be left just to the professionals. The apostle Peter commands all believers to always be ready to give an answer or defense (Greek, *apologia*) for their hope to anyone who asks (1 Pet. 3:15). This assumes that we have such answers at our disposal and that we know how to communicate them.

Karen was shocked by her college roommate's forceful challenge that all religious belief was simply a psychological crutch. "I have plenty of personal reasons for being a Christian," Karen responded.

"Personal reasons are not enough," her friend replied. "Unless you can point to things in the world that can be verified by science, your belief is no more than wish fulfillment."

What could she say? Since childhood, Karen had always been taught that all one could do was believe--no factual reasons were possible. She began a study of Christian evidences.

In the meantime, she spoke to a Christian friend who was a philosophy major. She learned that the demand for scientific corroboration was itself not scientifically grounded. In other words, the requirement that one produce scientific evidence is itself not scientific--so it fails its own test. Here the shoe was on the other foot. Why should Karen submit to the charge to produce scientific data when her friend could give no such reason for requiring that particular demand? On what grounds should this challenge itself be feared when it had flunked its own test?

Days later, her friend admitted rather sheepishly that she had no scientific reasons to require science as a test for truth. It had cost some time and energy, but Karen had learned that the challenge had been an empty one. Although she didn't react like she had won a battle, Karen was greatly relieved. She may not have realized it at the time, but she was also learning two more important lessons: not all challenges that refer to the facts are themselves factual. Further, one's faith might grow stronger if one is willing to take the time to answer questions.

What seems to be a factual question, then, is sometimes argued on faulty grounds. Granted, many issues cannot be dismissed so easily. Honestly assessing challenges and providing real answers is the domain of

apologetics. We will return to the topic of factual support of faith in Chapter 6, although we will not be able to provide the actual evidence in this book. While facts don't always cure doubt, they are a necessary starting point--a foundation on which to build.

### Aggravations to Factual Doubt

Several conditions may intensify factual doubt. There is not a strict causal relation between these situations and the uncertainty, however, since we have the ability to short-circuit the process and not allow the doubt to gain a foothold. We will have more to say about this later.

Still, we will list a few problem areas that can contribute to a distressed state of mind. While there may be some overlap between the categories, each has its own distinctions. It is hoped that understanding some of the root aggravations may help us to better grasp the nature of the doubt. This is a subject where knowledge is potentially the beginning of the victory.

1) Factual questions. Being asked challenging objections to one's faith is often the fastest way to experience factual doubts. The latter is probably more difficult because of the assumed confrontation of the moment. One often feels that it is "Put-up-or-shut-up" time! After all, if we cannot be sure of the underpinnings of Christianity, what's left? If a lack of knowledge keeps one from answering critical accusations, whatever the source, factual uncertainty is a distinct possibility.

2) Questioning intellect. A source for many worries comes from those who enjoy asking questions and doing their own research. While it may be a hobby that the person really enjoys, this may backfire for any of a number of reasons: we may get too busy and have less time to spend with the problems, or come up against someone who challenges them more than normal. Sometimes a mind that works like this outgrows the interest in perpetual curiosity, but the questions still remain. Thus, this sort of person may gain both strengths and challenges from their intellectual pursuit.

3) Sidetracked by pseudo problems. This is another very common variety of this species of doubt. But unlike the first two, this one occurs when a believer is confronted by seeming problems that are not central to the truthfulness of Christianity. In fact, these issues don't make any substantial difference no matter which view is correct! In other words, whoever is right or wrong, Christianity need not change a single iota! I have in mind questions pertaining to subjects like the age of the earth, the sign gifts, eternal security, various issues in eschatology, or differing convictions concerning separation from the world. True, these are all important and the Bible does say something about them. But the possible positions generally have nothing to say about the overall facticity of Christianity. Yet, it might be argued that these topics get the most heated attention among believers. The combatants will frequently argue that unless their position is true, Christianity suffers in some grotesque fashion!

But this is not to say that this sort of question only surfaces among believers. Unbelievers also challenge Christians with seeming problems that don't threaten the classic truths of orthodox Christianity. Yet, as if no one noticed this, believers respond as if their spiritual lives depended on the outcome.

So why do we experience this consternation? I think the chief reason for the doubt, in addition to factors like pride and ignorance, is that believers far too seldom distinguish between absolutely crucial and non-crucial issues. It is often thought that everything Christians believe (whether theological, ethical, social, or political) is of equal importance. But since it is obvious to all that there are different expressions of orthodox Christianity (Is your church Calvinistic?), these sorts of problems are bound to arise. In short, given the differences, believing that everything in Christianity is of equal weight will lead some to doubt.

Ben had been raised in the same church all of his life, as well as attending its Christian school. After marriage, he moved across the country and began attending a different church. It was not long before he noticed some differences. In particular, his new pastor seemed to be far more open on issues of separation than Ben's previous pastor had forbidden to true Christians. Being a layman and having relied all of his life on his pastor's opinions, Ben wondered if a complaint that he had sometimes heard was really true after all: "The Bible totally depends on how it is interpreted. There are no objective teachings in it." Over the months, he began to struggle concerning which of his former beliefs could be trusted and which ones could not.

4) World view commitments. Some doubts are related to struggles over issues that are only as sound as the worldview in which the position is held. In other words, some rival ideas are inadequate by themselves, but can only meaningfully exist as part of a larger ideology. The Christian may reject the non-Christian system but not realize that there is no problem apart from that worldview. The doubt may come from attempting to answer the challenge in a vacuum.

For example, earlier we saw that Karen was initially challenged by the contention that all religious experiences were psychological crutches. But if her friend's own world view is mistaken, and especially if some reasons could be cited against the positions that make such charges, then the point about all personal religious experience being only subjective would seem to be questionable itself. Then whose position was really wish fulfillment? It all depended on who is correct in their total outlook.

In fact, as a well-known atheist once said to me, the knife cuts both ways here--it could be the unbeliever who has a psychological crutch because they do not wish to believe. This sort of critique gets us nowhere unless we anchor it to a system.

Knowing where the enemy is coming from is half the battle. If believers know what sorts of conditions are likely to lead to factual doubt, it would make sense that they would be more able to prepare for them.

### Identifying Volitional Doubt

Volitional religious doubt is chiefly concerned with one's will. It is perhaps most frequently revealed in matters such as whether an individual is willing to believe, to grow in faith, to forsake sin, or to be motivated to live the Christian life. Many times it concerns the "fire" we have to continue our ultimate commitment to the Lord.

At each of these points, the issue of decision making should be apparent. Volitional uncertainty, at its very heart, has to do with one's willingness to implement a choice regarding one's faith.

Ironically enough, the problem might even be the unwillingness to apply certain healing techniques to the problem. In this sense, volitional aspects are present in all types of uncertainty.

Years ago Jason had several factual questions about the truthfulness of Christianity. When no one answered these to his satisfaction, it began to affect him emotionally: "What if the Bible isn't true, after all?" Following a number of unsolved bouts with his emotions, he slowly concluded that his beliefs just were not as important to him as they once had been. He was no longer motivated concerning his previous religious commitment.

Unfortunately, doubt sometimes appears to follow just such a pattern. It can progress from fairly simple (but unanswered) factual questions, through emotional quandaries, to a "deadened" level where the entire issue no longer appears crucial to the individual. Believers can get here through other kinds of hurts, too, like losing a loved one or being rebuffed by someone who matters to them. But when the results affect one's will in regards to one's faith, it becomes a volitional issue.

This stage is probably the most serious time of all for the person who questions, since they just may not care that they are struggling and, therefore, may not wish to do anything to stop it, including talking about the subject. The reverse of emotional doubt, this species may hurt the least, but be the most dangerous.

The key to volitional matters is to gain a new angle on our life--to view it from God's perspective. These doubters need to get "fired up" about those things that are of prime importance to us (Matt. 6:21). Jesus said that we need to get excited most of all about God and His Kingdom (Matt. 6:19-33). After all, eternal life lasts longer and is of far better quality than our earthly existence. Further, directing our minds towards eternity improves the quality of life here on earth, as well. Jesus' message should excite the believer, since it affects both our present, as well as our future. But this is also another matter. (Chapter 12 includes some suggested readings.)

Understanding volitional doubt helps us not only on its own grounds, but it provides insights into the other species, too. All doubt has a willful aspect. Now we will look at some conditions that tend to irritate our resolve.

### Aggravations to Volitional Doubt

As we did with factual doubt, we will state several circumstances that may contribute to and intensify volitional doubt. Again, one doesn't cause the other, but these problems can contribute to the distressed condition.

1) Weak Faith. Frequently a doubting believer has the sense of wishing they could increase their faith, but concludes that it is too difficult to believe any further. In James' terms, they see themselves as wavering between two positions (Js. 1:6-8). During my own struggles I well remember thinking that this was a chief issue for me: how could I help my faith to grow?

2) Immature faith. Sometimes faith suffers from a lack of development, perhaps from factors stemming from the time when a person first committed her life to Christ, or from wrong ideas afterwards. Perhaps the individual was very young at the time of conversion and simply doesn't remember exactly what happened. Did I do the right thing? Was I pressured in making my decision? Was I totally committed to Christ?

While there could be emotional or other factors present, the chief issue here is one of the will: did the person truly commit herself to Christ? Whether immaturity was present is not of prime importance. We are discussing the surrender of the will.

At this point someone will blurt out: "But that's precisely my problem. I'm not sure whether or not I trusted Christ." In cases of real uncertainty as to whether a person trusted Christ, I usually encourage them to pray



and express their trust in the Lord once again. They can pray the same "sinners prayer," reciting the facts of the gospel, and tell the Lord, "If I'm already a Christian, then this is simply a prayer of further commitment. But if not, I'm trusting you right now." This usually solves the problem of being unsure. Some may disagree with this practice, but I personally find nothing here that disagrees with Scripture.

3) Lack of growth. Doubt can result from the believer's failure to grow in the Christian life. Some even seem to shun the idea of getting serious with the Lord, as if getting too close to Him will somehow hurt, as in being sent to Africa as a missionary. Whatever the reason, not growing is a decision that can lead to uncertainty. Adding to this dilemma is that maturing in faith, in itself, is one of the chief means to stem the tide of doubt. As in human relationships, a lack of growth can lead to drifting apart. Conversely, growing commitment is itself a doubt preventative.

4) Self-sufficiency. Arrogance towards God creates its own brand of uncertainty. But it should be plain that this sort of rebellion that places self above God is not the biblical breeding ground for a meaningful relationship with the heavenly Father. Unless the situation is corrected by repentance and God's grace, it would seem that this sort of situation, humanly speaking, will only get worse.

5) Lack of repentance. Unforgiven sin certainly contributes to a sense of separation from God, thereby encouraging doubts. The decision not to repent can be made either implicitly or explicitly, but just as this sort of situation affects the relationship between a husband and wife, it also militates against having peace.

Emily, a young woman with an outstanding Christian testimony, began experiencing some rather severe doubts after deciding that her marriage relationship was too binding. She spoke to a close Christian friend who wouldn't agree with her evaluation. Sadly, as long as Emily remained in her rebellious state, the doubts also remained. Yet, she refused to repent.

An older Christian man, Frank, was obviously depressed and hardly wanted to discuss his questions of assurance with his pastor. During their counseling, Frank admitted his years of indulging in sin and admitted that this was very possibly the reason for his lack of certainty. But he was unwilling to change. Neither did his uncertainty diminish.

6) Difficulty of application. I have saved for last one of the most common (and inexplicable) causes why volitional doubters don't get relief. Shockingly, there is often a reluctance to apply the biblical steps for healing, even when they are known. Since it is sometimes difficult to concentrate on the application during the doubt, some conclude that it is easier to apply the steps only sporadically, or not at all. Just like pulling weeds is not fun, sometimes it is also difficult to deal with these problems in one's life. But one of the most frequent comments I've ever heard is that, when biblical steps are applied, the doubt diminishes or disappears. Conversely, when these steps are not taken, the uncertainty returns.

This sounds similar to something we frequently hear people say: "When I take my medicine, I feel better. When I don't, I fail to get relief." Do you ever wonder what you're missing when you hear these things?

## Conclusion

We have said many times that the root cause of religious certainty is sin. Beyond that, we are finite beings who have imperfect grasps on reality. The result is that we mess things up. Sometimes we get them so twisted up that it is exceptionally difficult to unravel them.

In this chapter we tried to identify some of the characteristic marks of factual and volitional doubt, along with some of the conditions that often aggravate them considerably. These are not exhaustive lists. Hopefully these items will still show some of the inner workings of these two species of doubt, contributing later to their healing.

Emotional uncertainty is the major focus of this booklet. But before we investigate it in more detail, it should be carefully noted that the species of doubt are seldom as clearly delineated as our illustrations may indicate. We are whole human beings and factual, emotional, and volitional elements overlap. Doubt is no exception: it often reveals a combination of traits.

Medical doctors are often confronted by a similar phenomenon. They must also view multiple symptoms and treat the major one(s) causing the discomfort. So we must endeavor to do the same. The prominent, painful elements of doubt should be located and identified as closely as possible so they can be treated, whatever the species.

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## Chapter IV

### Emotional Doubt: What if . . . ?

Listen to people talk about it. Emotional pain can be the very worst hurt of all. Once I heard a person say, "I would literally give my right arm if I could stop doubting. No, I'm really serious. I would give it up without even thinking about it!" Unquestionably, emotional uncertainty can be painful. We have called it the most common and distressing of the three species of doubt. This combination means that it affects many believers who want real relief. Beginning in this chapter we will turn most of our attention to this variety of questioning.

### Identifying Emotional Doubt

Emotional religious uncertainty is the most common variety. It is also the most painful. Its chief cause is one's moods and passions, which explains its more subjective nature. But it very frequently masquerades as factual doubt by attempting to address the same issues. Following our major emphasis in this book, we need to concentrate further on the nature of this frequent state of mind.

This species can be identified when the individual is actually judging by how she feels about the subject, rather than the particulars of the subject itself. The most important item is not the bothersome issue, whatever it is, but how the person is responding to it. Distraught psychological states are sometimes evident.

The single most revealing ingredient in identifying emotional struggles is the "What if . . . ?" element. Sometimes this question is asked directly. On other occasions, it is implied. Rather than accepting the data in a straightforward manner, this response is made in spite of the available facts.

Allison frequently proclaimed her uncertainty about many aspects of her Christian faith. But those who listened carefully knew that she did not question the actual gospel facts of the deity, atoning death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rather, when asked why she always seemed to be in so much unrest regarding her beliefs, Allison responded, "Yes, the gospel facts are strong, but what if Christianity just isn't true? What if, in the end, believers are simply mistaken?"

It is in her response to the gospel that the true nature of Allison's doubt is identified. She did not object to the facts themselves, as some had originally thought. She was bothered by the unlikely scenario that her faith could just somehow be wrong, in spite of all the evidence.

Strangely enough, it appeared that no amount of facts (even those that Allison fully accepted) could cause her to stop wondering if it was still just possible that Christianity might still be false. Here the emotional content of her doubt was evident.

Emotional doubt frequently poses as its factual sister. It has some of the same concerns and raises some of the same questions. Yet, the issues are determined and the evidence is judged by how one feels about them. Conclusions come from one's moods or feelings.

The emotional doubter is often very intelligent and appears to be raising serious objections to the truthfulness of Christianity. But, in reality, the uncertainty is not primarily factual and the questions are far more subjective.

So what distinguishes emotional from factual doubt? In the former species of uncertainty, the major factor is not the actual issues that are raised, but what is being said and thought about them. In typical cases, the individual's attention is not centered on the specific facts themselves, but on certain unlikely possibilities surrounding them.

Melissa was in constant turmoil as to whether she was really a Christian. She clearly remembered surrendering her life to Christ in faith, trusting Him to forgive her sins. Yet, she still repeatedly wondered if she had really said the right words and really meant them.

Bill was a believer who was regularly nagged by a fear of Hell and judgment. He sometimes pictured standing before Jesus' throne and being told to depart to the fires of Hell. This usually happened as he was trying to sleep at night. In order to deal with the pain, he started questioning whether there was, in fact, any such place as Hell.

It is important to notice the main cause of Melissa's and Bill's worries. They both accepted the facts of Christianity. They both knew that there was a time when they tried, with all their heart, to trust Christ. However, their secret fear was that, for some unaccountable reason, they had unconsciously overlooked something crucial. In both cases, their doubt actually focused on the unlikely possibility that they had responded incorrectly to the Lord.

These are very typical responses for emotional doubters. This phenomenon is not so much affected by the results of careful study, but by the improbability that something has fallen between the cracks.

As a result, no amount of factual evidence brings final peace. When his friend gave him reasons to believe in Hell, Bill's fears came back. In fact, they sometimes grew worse.

Often the emotional doubter comes to the conclusion that the search has finally ended and that all is well, only to realize a few days later that something is still amiss. This is a vicious cycle that actually wages war against the peace that periodically comes. Oddly enough, that peace is often shattered by the thought, "Why am I feeling so well today? I've still not solved problem X." Not surprisingly, the peace doesn't stay around for long!

We have said that, in a very intense sense, much of emotional doubt is actually of the "What if . . . ?" variety. It is perhaps even chiefly characterized not by what all the facts point to, but rather what minimal possibilities may yet be true.

Melissa and Bill suffered from just such questioning. It was almost as if they asked themselves: what's the worst possible thing that could happen to me? And Jason in the last chapter also went through this stage after he thought his questions were not being answered.

Human beings are able to conjure up all kinds of fears. The questions, "What if Christianity is not true after all?" or, "What if I am not a Christian, in spite of everything I have done?" are really no different than the "What ifs" of our society at large. "What if I get AIDS?" or "What if I flunk next week's big exam?" take the same form. Only the subject matter differs.

Who hasn't experienced these and similar worries? Why should such fears--both religious and secular--surprise us? Doesn't it make sense that we just want to be doubly sure of our most treasured values? But the problem is that this normal desire may be pushed too far, causing our emotional struggles.

At any rate, it is not difficult to get emotionally distraught by the ceaseless questioning of our most cherished beliefs. This is especially so if the focus is on bare possibilities that cannot be touched by the evidence. This is one frequently forgotten aspect of these sorts of concerns: they are almost immune to the facts. A person can always counter, "Yes, I know, but just WHAT IF. . . ?"

One thing is for sure. The pain of emotional doubt is generally worse than that of its two sister species. It sometimes cries out for immediate help.

Emotional uncertainty can be a part of larger issues, too. Irritations lie at the root of these problems, often in diverse and difficult areas that span a large range: psychological or medical problems, child abuse, or the death of a loved one.

#### Aggravations to Emotional Doubt

As we did in the last chapter with factual and volitional questioning, we need to explore several conditions that, while they don't exactly cause emotional doubts, do tend to escalate them. Several situations can reinforce an outlook that already has a tendency towards an anxious, worried state. Again, there may be some overlap between these categories, but each represents a unique angle. Our purpose is to provide you with information that will encourage a better grasp of this painful topic, hopefully leading to significant growth and healing.

1) Psychological states. The most common irritant of emotional doubts (and perhaps even all types of uncertainty) is probably psychological states like anxiety or depression. It doesn't take long for agitated moods and feelings to move over to issues regarding our faith. Our concern most frequently centers on those items that are the most meaningful to us. I have spoken to many individuals who assumed that their problem had to do with evidence for faith, only to discover that their brand of questioning had to be dealt with in a different manner. The true focus had to be their attitude towards the subject, rather than the topic itself.

2) Judging by feelings. Another very common problem, especially with Christians who lack assurance of salvation, comes from reacting to situations based on one's feelings. "I don't feel the same way that I used to," or "Sometimes I don't think I'm saved," are regular fare for the counselor. The feeling that Christianity might not be true after all may plague all believers at some time. One is reminded of C. S. Lewis' fictional character Uncle Screwtape, who challenged the young demon Wormwood on how to tempt Christians: "But there is a sort of attack on the emotions which can still be tried. It turns on making him feel . . . that all his religion has been a fantasy" (The Screwtape Letters, Macmillan, 1961).

A pastor of a prominent southern church, George called a close friend who was also a pastor and explained that his Christian walk was not as vibrant as when he first became a Christian. Although trained well in a major seminary, he had fallen into some of the same pitfalls that he had helped others through many times over the years of his ministry. After a few discussions, he realized that his questions were caused by his emotions, and not by his failing faith, as he had thought. Once able to identify the area on which he most needed to work, he began to experience relief.

3) Medical states. A number of medical factors can also contribute heavily to religious doubt, including internal conditions like manic depression or diabetes, as well as externally prompted conditions caused by the consumption of alcohol or other types of drugs. To be sure, it is frequently not easy to decide which factors are most to blame. Still, while the origin is medical, doubts that grow in this manner show up in chiefly

emotional patterns.

Todd was a young graduate student who was constantly in need of counseling and tended to dominate one of his faculty member's offices. Almost on a whim, the professor noticed a certain pattern of thinking and referred him to the university clinic. Todd was diagnosed as being manic depressive and was given a prescription for appropriate medicine. After he knew the nature of his problem, he also took additional steps, making tremendous strides regarding his doubt. The process took a few months, but he learned that the input of the medical community was imperative on certain issues related to the treatment of doubts.

4) Childhood problems. I am far from buying into Freudian principles, but it is still the case that experiences from our younger years can have a profound affect on our doubt. For example, child abuse in various forms can make it very difficult for one to accept God's love, or to trust Him.

Jill and Megan were two intelligent young women who had been abused as children, one sexually and the other physically. Megan still had a scar on her face that witnessed to this fact. Both were willing and eager to discuss their problems, but they had many sessions of discussion before beginning to get control of the situation. Both women struggled with how God could ever love them when they thought that their parents never had. Their counselors found it very difficult to convince them otherwise. Jill, a student, found great relief through the love of a man she eventually married, along with that of other family members and close friends. Megan experienced substantial healing by practicing some principles that her counselor taught her.

5) More recent wounds. Painful situations throughout life can also influence religious doubt. The death of a loved one, breaking up with a lover, or the betrayal by a special friend are instances of wounds that could sway a person to wonder if he can fully trust God. In this sense, the situations and results are similar to those related to childhood trauma.

6) Need for attention. In some cases, the expression of doubt is due to the need for friendship and love, often from one who feels a lack in their own life. This is one of the conditions that is commonly expressed by a person who wishes to dominate the counselor's time and grows to depend on the interaction. The person in need is frequently the opposite gender of the counselor, so discernment is needed here. The doubt could certainly be real, but the need for companionship, attention, and love is perhaps a greater need. If so, the problem might appear never to get solved.

7) Lack of sleep and adequate diet. A regularly overlooked aggravation of a doubting condition can sometimes be remedied as simply as getting a normal amount of sleep and healthy food. A biblical example of this is Elijah, who, when he experienced depression, laid down to sleep. After Elijah had rested, an angel recommended food (I Kings 19:4-6).

Travis came to see me, experiencing some rather troubling questions. He was a leader in the Christian community. After a little discussion we pinpointed the type of doubt as emotional and then pushed a little further for the variety. Among other things, it became obvious that he was suffering from a lack of sleep. In fact, soon after we spoke, he went to bed one day and woke up two days later! He decided to make an effort to get more sleep on a regular basis. Along with practicing some other principles, he began doing much better.

Soon afterwards Travis left the area for a new ministry but kept contact with me over many years. Every time we talked, I asked how his doubts were coming and he reported that everything was "back to normal." This just illustrates how cures for doubt are not always the typical ones!

8) Peer pressure. I have long thought that one difficult pressure that is exerted on believers is to be more moderate in their views. This assault is not a frontal attack, but is one that continues to build up to quite a level in its call to trade in old "wives tales" in favor of "modern" approaches. To be more like "normal" people is a desire that is difficult not to heed. Let's be honest. Doesn't it hurt to think that others may think we are stupid? If we believe that only a few intelligent people hold our position, this can produce devastating results, especially over time. Often the change occurs in the form of a slightly modified position on the issue in question. Our emotions are particularly vulnerable to this. This pressure produces no new facts, just the same old temptation to change.

9) Imagination versus reality. Reading fictional writings can affect us more than we might ever think. Even more influential are graphic movie and television impersonations that bring us face to face with people and ideas. Here we meet a subtle temptation to identify with the problems of the characters and view issues of good and evil through their eyes, instead of through our own world view.

Years ago I personally recall watching a popular science fiction movie where I was so caught up with the plot that I found myself despairing because of the evil in the world. I am embarrassed to say that for about half an hour my own perception was colored until I realized the obvious: I was witnessing someone else's unreal conception of the issues! But if such subtleties are allowed to go unchecked, one could experience emotional doubts simply by identifying with others.

10) Christian hypocrisy. Doubt sometimes skyrockets after an observation of the beliefs and actions of fellow

Christians. Unjust wars, tortures, persecutions, and other crimes have all unquestionably been carried out in the name of Jesus Christ. And this is not to mention secret sins that periodically have been made public and splashed across our headlines. While these are horrors that certainly need to be corrected, they do not touch the truthfulness of the Christian world view at all. Christianity is not affected by what others have done in its name. These are two differing trails that do not intersect. But we perhaps need to be frequently confronted with our failures, as a reminder of both the sin from which God has rescued us, as well as providing impetus for further action against it. The latter includes insuring that they will not happen again.

What is the affect on the lay person when their pastor or another spiritual leader falls? Unfortunately, among the sorts of fallout from these and other sinful actions is the uncertainty of Christians who think that, if Christianity is true, then believers should be more faithful. While there is no direction connection between truth and Christians who sin, it is still sad that these actions, have been hurtful to fellow believers.

11) Forgiven sin. The fear that one's sins have never really been forgiven has always been a prominent reason for many believers to doubt. But the idea that one has committed the unpardonable sin so that one cannot be forgiven strikes even more fear in some believer's hearts. Could anything seem worse to the sensitive Christian?

Fred shocked his adult Sunday School class one day by expressing a horrifying fear. He believed that the very fact that he had asked questions about God from time to time, sometimes a bit passionately, might mean that he had finally committed the unpardonable sin.

The teacher pointed out the implied but highly emotional "What if . . ." in Fred's announcement, and reminded the class that we could raise this question about any scary thing. Then wisely, the leader remarked that this popular conception about doubt was mistaken. Many well-known Bible characters had challenged God and are today known as heros of the faith. Doubt needed to be dealt with, and could lead to negative results, so Fred should not take it lightly. But this was not the same as having committed the unpardonable sin.

12) Anxiety about the future. It is not enough for Christians to be worried about the present. Anxiety concerning the unknown future has probably been a cause for fear in most believers at some time or another. For some, it might be the uncertainty that their faith can really "hold out" until the end, perhaps in the context of persecution. But God never asks us to hold out by the sheer force of our wills. A study of Scripture is certainly needed, but this alone will probably not solve the problem, once the emotional element is involved. The latter obstacle needs to be addressed.

13) Faulty view of God. To have a wrong concept of God can be a germ that flowers into a case of full-blown emotional doubt. While no believer has a perfect view of God, some errors are more harmful than others. For instance, to believe that God does not answer prayers, especially during times of stress, or that He is morally responsible for pain can lead to a personal crisis. To say that bad theology can have this kind of influence on our walk with God will surprise some believers, but it is a subject that deserves our constant inspection and correction.

14) Judgment and Hell. Even in believers one frequently encounters the fear that, after all, perhaps it is still the case that one could have done everything that the Bible requires for salvation (as far as one knows) but still be sent to Hell. Needless to say, this makes the prospect of Judgment a rather "iffy" situation!

Over the years, I have asked dozens of adult groups this question: "How many of you have, after salvation, ever considered the possibility of being sent to Hell?" If these informal surveys can be trusted, this fear is very widely experienced by many Christians at some time. Here we find another misbelief raising its head: Jesus Christ may send true believers to Hell. We need to forcefully confront and contradict the thought when it enters our minds.

There are probably more potential aggravations to emotional doubt than to any other species. This should not be surprising, since it is so common and comes in so many forms. The "What if . . ." format allows for so much variation! Yet, there is a crucial need to deal with this uncertainty, too.

## Conclusion

Here we have a good news-bad news scenario. The negative tidings involve the very nature of emotional doubt--how many believers are affected by it and how painful it can be when it enters our lives.

The good news is that gaining relief from the pain of emotional doubt is often easier than we might think. The majority of cases can be substantially relieved with less effort than it takes to combat other sorts of problems. But it may have to be treated regularly and systematically. There are a number of specific strategies for healing that can be employed, even if you, like me, are neither a medical doctor, psychologist, or professional counselor. We will spend the rest of this volume working on various aspects of this subject.

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## Chapter V

### A Solid Foundation

Years ago I spoke at Stanford University on the subject of religious doubt. I addressed most of my comments that evening to the topic of emotional questions about faith. During the discussion afterwards, a student offered an especially penetrating protest that I have repeated in many of my lectures since.

As I recall, he said: "Of course these techniques you are suggesting will work--they are based on sound psychological principles. But this amounts to nothing but mind-bending. We may change our perspective on the subject, yet that's all that changes." He was objecting that, while we may alter our thinking in order to avoid the accompanying pain in our lives, it was all simply a cerebral exercise. True, we may thereby eliminate the mental anguish, but what additional benefit was there in the "real world"? I had to admit that it was an impressive complaint, indeed.

I responded, "Your charge is totally correct--if Christianity is not true. If the Christian faith is not true to reality, then, yes, all we can hope for is the quieting of the emotional pain in our lives. Let's just note in passing that this would still be a very positive affect in itself. Yet, as helpful as that might be, you have put it rather succinctly--we would only be mind bending."

But, I continued, "The entire issue rests on whether Christianity is true--out in the 'real world.' If it is correct, it now becomes a more direct issue of whether we will apply that truth to our thinking.

"In other words, if reality is shaped along the lines of the Christian faith, we have a twofold truth here. We have the truth of the message itself. But we are then left with the challenge of whether we will employ it in our lives. Will we personally fill the prescription and apply the remedy? And here's the crunch: if we fail to apply it, we are not living in accord with the real world! The tables have completely turned on us!" The student did not offer a follow-up response.

This is nothing short of an astounding realization for us. If Christianity is not true, all we can hope for by applying our approach is to still the emotional pain. This would still be a noteworthy goal in itself, especially since this is what caused the person to seek help in the first place. After all, when we go to a physician, we want healing, not the answer to all of our philosophical questions!

On the other hand, if Christianity is true, we have two trophies for the price of one. Not only do we have this present reality of salve for our emotional pains, but we also have the proper background that guarantees a more lasting, eternal balm. Then both the truth and the application could be ours for the taking. We have our cake and we can eat it, too! What more could we possibly ask for?

Still, we have to choose both to believe the truth and to apply the emotional ointment. If I decide to forego either one, I receive much less benefit than I otherwise could. What a surprising benefit--both facts and healing are mine for the asking! Has there ever been a better offer? Medicine for my deepest emotional hurts in the present and eternal reality for the future are at my fingertips! Even winning the lottery doesn't compare!

Years ago, I had begun to discover this wonderful truth in my own life, during my own times of doubt. But it didn't come without years of intense struggle. And when it did come, it was in a disguised form. I was surprised--and a little angry, I admit--that knowing the facts alone didn't totally heal the hurt. I had spent years on this factual aspect. Sometimes it didn't even take very much of the pain away. How dare it not work? How could it not be the answer I was seeking? Back I would go to my studies. But at least the facts usually kept the infection from spreading!

The point here is that, unless a solid basis exists, any effort to solve doubts might be viewed as a mind game. Thankfully, it may still be the aspirin we need to take for the pain of the moment, but as the student had forcefully pointed out, we want something that is true in the "real world," too. If Christianity is true, then strategies that are based on this foundation are well-grounded. We do want more than temporary relief.

So that We might Know

So is Christianity true? Do we have the basis that we need in order to build the best possible emotional base throughout the remainder of this book?

This is not an apologetics textbook. So we will not provide here any of these arguments. Evangelicalism is privileged, however, to have literally dozens of such volumes at its fingertips. At least an introductory treatment of many of these items will be provided by the sources listed in Chapter 12, "For More Study." Topic divisions along with a brief annotation of each volume may provide some tips concerning where one might look for specific answers.

## Theism

In this chapter, we will have to be content with the briefest of overviews of some of the avenues at our disposal. Christianity does have a solid, factual foundation that exists at two levels. It can be shown, first of all, that theism is true. This means that a personal God exists who is the Creator of the universe, but who remains separate from the creation. This Being has a relation to the limited, changing persons who live in the world. At this first level, we cannot differentiate between the religions, but we can learn several crucial truths. Naturalism, which teaches that there is no supernatural realm whatsoever, is the "odd man out" if theism is true. Interestingly, Scripture makes some of these same claims.

That such a God exists is evident from the existence of the world (Heb. 3:4). Anything that is finite, beginning to exist at a point in time, needs a cause. Contemporary astrophysics clearly teaches that the universe came into being about 15 billion or so years ago. Regardless of how old the universe actually is, if it began to exist at a certain time, then it is finite. As such, it needs a cause for its existence.

The presence of life in the universe also needs an adequate explanation (Acts 17:28). Even a lowly amoeba depends for its existence on the presence of DNA, the building block of life. Yet, the DNA of the amoeba, which makes the organism what it is, contains more information than exists in many scholarly volumes of books! Since DNA is absolutely required in order for life as we know it to exist, the DNA could not have evolved after the first of earth's organisms. We're not talking here about a spark of light or bolt of lightning somehow mysteriously causing the first one-celled creature in a primeval sea, with the DNA coming along later. We must explain the DNA as a fact that guides the beginning of life. This needs to be adequately explained. But how can this incredible complexity, containing more information than what is found in several volumes, originate by chance? How could this burst of information co-exist with the initial, one-celled life? Does this appear, at face value, to be the work of a mindless universe, or one that is heading in a specific direction (cf. Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:19-20)?

There are many other building blocks of life, too. A single enzyme requires the line-up of a number of amino acids. These amino acids must come in a specific order, without even a single exception. To use the Arabic alphabet as an example, an enzyme requiring 15 amino acids would have to have a line up in A-B-C . . . M-N-O order. If even a single amino acid was out of line or in another order, the enzyme would not result! And yet, there are some who would have us believe that the existence of every single enzyme is due to random ordering that just happened to be right, rather than what it more clearly points toward--the work of a Creator who has a specific plan for creation.

Morality is not just a list of dos and don'ts that someone invented to keep order in our society, or just because things seem to work better that way. There is an intrinsic right and wrong in the universe that is far different from man-made laws such as driving through the green light and stopping for the red one (Rom. 2:14-15). The major examples of such moral prescriptions hold not only cross-culturally, but even as grounds for judgment between nations and cultures. The Hitlers of society can be held to an ethical standard of truth. To hold that there are good reasons to reject these objective ethical grounds even appears to be contradictory. The presence of morality is an indicator not only that God has created more than just the physical components of the universe, but also more personal truths, such as our relationships to each other.

The evidence for life after death is especially strong. For example, near-death experiences that are independently verifiable are powerful indicators that some component of our personality survives the death of the physical body. Like morality, this would be another sign that God is interested in us personally. And like the other pointers here, it is a major roadblock for naturalism.

Indications like the finite universe, the prerequisites for life, signs of objective morality, and verified accounts of consciousness after death all argue that persons are not accidents in an impersonal universe. The truthfulness of theism is a far better explanation for all these, as well as other, facts.

## Christianity

The second level of response is that Christianity is the specific form of theism that best accounts for additional data available to us. This can be seen from several more lines of evidence, each of which is both more specific and more personal than the general indicators for theism that we just mentioned. As with theism, Scripture also uses arguments like these in order to show the truth of Christianity.

Fulfilled prophecy argues that God is intricately involved in the march of human history. God even proposes prophecy as a test that He is Lord (Isa. 41:21-24; 45:20-22). Three areas that need to be investigated are those of distinctive city and nation predictions, specifications concerning Israel, and details pertaining to the coming of God's chosen Messiah. I think the best overall case is one that is constructed of a few quality predictions in each category, rather than using larger numbers of less-verifiable instances. The choices would be those that were plainly given beforehand and clearly pertained only to the events in question, in order to rule out vagueness and manipulation. In such instances, the more specific these prophetic details are, the stronger the predictive value that results.

Jesus' miracles are seldom used today in Christian apologetics, but are still a worthwhile evidence in an overall case for Christian theism. Jesus claimed several times that His miracles indicated that His message

was true (for examples, Mk. 2:10-12; Lk. 7:20-22). His followers agreed (Jn. 20:30-31; Acts 2:22). These events are exceptionally well-attested, being found in every level of strata in the four Gospels, and are even admitted by Jesus' enemies. Several of them are either attended by intriguing historical details that can be otherwise verified, or offer other marks of authenticity. Certain examples from recent medical literature reveal some fascinating, evidenced parallels that may argue that God is similarly active today. For reasons like these, contemporary critics treat very seriously these aspects of the Gospels narratives.

Without question, the chief verification of Christian theism comes from the resurrection of Jesus. This extraordinary event can be shown to be historical even when only a bare minimum of historical facts is used, each of which is both admitted by unbelieving critical scholars today, as well as being strongly attested by the known data. Further, alternative attempts to dismiss the resurrection on natural grounds have failed to account for the same data, as even these same critics generally admit. In the New Testament, both Jesus (Matt. 12:39-40; 16:4) and His apostles (Acts 2:22-24; 17:31) pointed to the resurrection as the chief sign that He was God's messenger.

That the Bible is a trustworthy document can be shown through a variety of avenues: manuscript number, copying accuracy, archeology, geography, extrabiblical confirmation, ancient legal and other customs, as well as studies concerning the dates and authorship of the writers of the various books. The inspiration of Scripture is also a crucial truth. Fulfilled prophecy points to at least portions of the Bible being God's words (cf. Deut. 18:17-22). Jesus' miracles are helpful in this regard, too (Jn. 14:11). But the strongest argument for inspiration is that this was the testimony of Jesus, whose teachings were confirmed by His resurrection from the dead.

A crucial component of Christianity concerns the deity of Jesus Christ. Not only are Jesus' claims concerning Himself (especially as indicated by His titles Son of Man and Son of God) established on very strong textual grounds. They are vindicated by the prophecy He fulfilled, the miracles that He performed, and especially by His resurrection. The latter was the chief indication that God confirmed Jesus' teachings (Acts 2:22-24; 17:31), and His deity, in particular (Rom. 1:3-4). After all, God would not raise a heretic from the dead.

On the other hand, there are extremely potent answers to the objections that are raised by the critics of Christianity. Each challenge has been thoroughly researched and explained by competent scholars.

The result has been a large body of data arguing that Christianity is both self-consistent and true. Further, believers have found that their belief makes sense out of life like no other system does, making life worthwhile.

A wide range of fulfilled prophecies, Jesus' miracles, His resurrection from the dead, the nature of Scripture, and the deity of Jesus Christ are formidable arguments for the truth of Christianity. Each plays a key role in showing that this is the proper approach to God. The conclusion is that Christian theism is true.

While witnessing, Richard was asked a question that he couldn't answer adequately. Even though he sensed that he fumbled with the answer, the person to whom he was speaking seemed to be satisfied. Still, Richard grew more bothered about the subject. So he visited with a friend who was well read in the area of apologetics. Amazingly, Richard's question was answered thoroughly in just a matter of minutes.

"Thanks so much," Richard called out lightheartedly as he waved and left his friend's house. His satisfaction on the issue, even in the days ahead, showed that his doubt was factual in nature.

What about the World Religions?

We live in strange times. In an age where the earth has seemed to grow smaller and the world religions have broken beyond their traditional boundaries, rival religious claims are more commonly heard today. Many Americans know non-Christians, such as the Hindus living in our neighborhoods or the Muslims who work with us side by side. Without much question, these situations have compounded Christian doubt. How can Christianity still be considered to be unique, as it teaches?

But perhaps the answer is even stranger. Surprisingly, Jesus has no real challengers among the founders of the major religious faiths. None of the others even claimed to be God, let alone teaching that they were a unique, one-of-a-kind, divine manifestation of the Almighty. Buddha was very possibly an atheist! Confucius and Lao Tzu were teachers of ethics, not theologians. Abraham, Moses, and David never came close to teaching that they were deity. Neither did Mohammed, who is believed by the Muslim faithful to be Allah's chief prophet, but under no condition to be compared to deity.

Neither do the orthodox followers of the major non-Christian world religions believe that their founders rose from the dead. There is no credible evidence that anything like this ever happened in any case other than that of Jesus Christ. In fact, there is very little that might even be called historical evidences in these belief systems, either. All of this is certainly significant.

At the college that Aimee attended, she often heard that other religions made very similar claims to those made by her Christian friends. It made sense to her that this was the case. Wouldn't believers in other faiths



view their founders as being similar to Jesus? She assumed that this applied to her Buddhist roommate, too. But this conclusion led to questions whenever her pastor preached that Christianity was unique. She decided to do a study in this area for an upcoming research paper that was due in a few weeks.

She was both relieved and amazed to discover that Buddhists do not claim that Buddha was God. Her roommate didn't even know whether or not she was a theist. Further, claims that Buddha performed miracles were taken from religious texts that dated from literally hundreds of years after the wise man lived. Lastly, she discovered no contentions that he was ever raised from the dead. Her friend simply shrugged off the disparities, without further comment.

"I guess there are some major differences, then, and in some central areas, too," Aimee concluded. She was very careful not to sound haughty when talking to her friend. But she was still very pleasantly surprised at the results of her research.

### Seeking and Finding God

However, our brief look at some of the arguments for Christianity is only one side of the coin. Judging from the literature, we might get the impression that many Christians don't really care that there is so much evidence for their faith. It is often said that the present generation is searching for experience of God rather than arguments. Far from wanting more intellectual ammunition, they might ask how they can encounter God more fully.

This question is also relevant to doubt. The issue of whether God interacts with us today haunts many, even as it did in biblical times. Is He active in our lives? Why doesn't He reach out to us even more than He does? If personal experience is as important as we are led to believe, then this is a central concern for many believers.

Some scholars think that God respects our freedom enough that He doesn't force Himself on us. He is content to lure us to Himself by various means, sharing some brief glimpses of what more fellowship with Him would be like, without obliging us to seek Him. Those who wish to turn from their sin and believe may do so (Rom. 6:20-23) by the power of the Holy Spirit, while those who, for whatever reasons, are content not to do so will remain separated from God (Rom. 1:18-32).

Why would this be God's approach? Perhaps He desires our love and fellowship without coercion. As the old saying goes, God may have decided that it was better to have loved everyone and lost some than never to have loved any of us at all. But He wants those who come to Him to do so by their own choice, not because they must. This is how much He respects the free will with which He created us.

There might be an analogy here to finding a spouse. If we had the ability to force someone to love us merely by making a private decision, we might momentarily entertain the possibility of activating that choice. I think that, as enticing as it might appear, most of us would concede that such forced love is ultimately not worth pursuing. Regardless, there is hardly any question that love that is freely given is better by far. Judging by how He created us, it seems that God apparently thinks so, too.

On this thesis, evidence like that we have mentioned in this chapter is enough to convince those who look for God with an open mind, but not enough to absolutely prove the truth to those who prefer to ignore Him. Those who respond to the wooing of the Holy Spirit find God (Acts 17:1-4; I Cor. 2:11-15; II Cor. 5:16-21), while those who freely reject Him get their will, too.

So where do we go from here? God has provided far more than enough evidence for those who are open to it. The question is not why there isn't more data. The real question is whether we will believe and follow Him. Like little children who tire of one toy after another on Christmas day, we throw aside God's gifts, demanding that He give us even more. But there are already far more than enough presents to make us eternally happy. We just need to slow down and see what He has already done.

One way to follow God and cultivate our relationship with Him is to practice regularly the so-called spiritual disciplines. The main idea here is that Scripture teaches a variety of ways for the believer who wishes to seek God further, and while we pursue some of them, we neglect the majority of avenues that He has provided for ongoing fellowship with Him. Studying the Bible, witnessing, fellowship, and prayer are more popular among believers. But we usually avoid many other practices such as Christian meditation, true worship, fasting, simplicity, service, getting alone with God for times of silence, and so on. This is a very large subject and many recent books have been written on this topic. We will make some reading suggestions in Chapter 12.

### Conclusion

What does all of this have to do with the subject of doubt? It is precisely because Christianity has such a firm foundation that strategies dealing with religious uncertainty that are based on this truth are well-established. Not only is the Christian faith true, bringing eternal life to those who trust in God's path, but it is also practical--it still changes lives today and points the way to a meaningful, lasting relationship with Him. Like the answer to the Stanford University student, since Christianity is true, we are making the wrong move if we don't take the proper steps of application.

Having a firm foundation that is grounded in the facts can help deal with problems pertaining to the truth of Christianity. While it seldom calms the more raging sorts of worries that come from our emotions or volition, it provides the sort of grounding that is necessary in order to move to these other areas. In the next chapter we will explain that the primary answer to emotional doubt is not to provide more evidence. But it is still crucial that there be such a backdrop of truth.

Yes, believers can experience God more fully and have greater fellowship with Him than they have previously had. It costs us our commitment to Him, however. How dare we expect God to fill our desires for Him at no cost to ourselves? How much time do we reserve for God each day? After all, if we gave our spouse or best friend the same time that we regularly give our Lord, how long would it take our human relationships to crumble?

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## **Chapter VI**

### **Mapping a Specific Strategy**

Emotional dilemmas occur to all of us. No matter who we are, everyone gets bothered from time to time, some of us more frequently than others. But it is especially convicting when you have written and lectured so frequently on similar topics!

Once I was fretting about something that was so serious that I no longer even remember the subject, though I've tried. (Isn't that so typical?) My wife, who had often heard me lecture on emotional doubt, walked through the room while I fumed about the long-forgotten scenario. As she passed me, rolling her eyes in mock frustration, I heard her say, "What if . . . ?, What if . . . ?, What if . . . ?" Her voice trailed off as she passed around the corner and out of sight.

How convicting! I had been caught! I can assure you that I stopped my worrying on the spot.

Precisely because Christianity has a solid foundation, we can launch out into well-grounded strategies that address the problem of emotional doubt. In dealing with such feeling-oriented dilemmas, we must progress beyond the facts themselves, to the truth that comes from them.

We need to be very clear that the approach we will favor in this chapter is not the only way to deal with emotional uncertainty. Neither is our specific listing of steps necessary for healing. Combining strategies can be very helpful. In fact, we will turn to some other options in the next two chapters.

We are concentrating chiefly on those doubts that seem to come from anxious worry, as opposed to other emotional struggles. This focus is deserved because these doubts may well be the most common variety, as well as being among the most painful. They cry out for a remedy.

It should be carefully noted before we begin that the biblical approach is not a "self-help" scenario. We do not act by the sheer force of our willpower. The power to change a Christian's emotional doubt is of the Lord; the weapons are His (II Cor. 10:3-4). Our personal efforts and the application of certain techniques are commanded, but these are not the Source of the healing.

#### A Strategy for Healing Emotional Doubt

How do we begin the process of conquering emotional doubt? We will stretch the process out over three chapters in order to give you plenty of ammunition from which to pick and choose a remedy that meets your needs. In this chapter, we will look briefly at a crucial biblical passage that deals with worry. Then we will present some further strategies to help implement this biblical advice.

#### A Biblical Pattern

The Bible contains various kinds of instruction for those who suffer distress. So we do not pretend to offer advice from a single passage as if to say it's the only possible technique to use with hurting people. At the same time, one text, in particular, is very helpful in dealing with anxiety.

The apostle Paul addresses the subject of anxious worry in Philippians 4:6-9. Although doubt is not his chief target, questioning that comes from an anxious spirit can still be treated this way. This variety of uncertainty is perhaps the most common sort, and Paul's advice is quite applicable. Rather than exegeting the text, we want to draw some specific conclusions concerning religious doubt. This is a very profound passage that promises God's peace to those who apply the principles to life.

After telling the Philippian believers to rejoice (vs. 4), Paul addresses the issue of anxiety (4:6). His language indicates that these Christians were currently in a state of worry (*meden merimnate*), which is an

encouragement to us when we suffer from similar symptoms in relation to doubt. Paul's initial advice is to pray and petition God with our needs.

While Paul doesn't give us many details here (cf. I Thes. 5:16-18), Peter provides some advice on the same subject in I Peter 5:7. The apostle tells us to give our anxieties to the Lord, which is probably what Paul meant by petitioning God. These burdens are not for us to carry. So this is our starting point.

During my time of doubt, I once heard a speaker ask, "Why worry when you can pray?"

I distinctly remember my caustic response: "The only person that this advice will help is one who isn't worrying in the first place! The minute you give something to the Lord, it comes right back!"

But we ought not stop here, since Paul makes some further suggestions. After mentioning the initial step, he encourages the believer to thank the Lord (v. 6). Later he mentions praising God (v. 8b). While thanksgiving and praise are not the same, I think they combine to make a powerful, but too seldom practiced, technique for the treatment of doubt.

In order to test this hypothesis, I very frequently ask a question of my audience when I lecture on this subject. "How many of you have ever, either intentionally or unintentionally, spent at least ten minutes thanking God for a blessing and/or praising Him precisely during a time of doubt?" Without fail, hands shoot up across the room. "What happens when you respond to your mood in this manner?"

Without ever rehearsing or hinting at the reply I am seeking, without exception, here's the answer that someone calls out: "Whenever I do this, my mood changes. My doubt subsides." Although this is admittedly an informal survey, to say the least, many believers have testified that Paul's advice about thanksgiving and praise is worth its weight in gold. It is difficult to experience anxiety during concentrated efforts to honor and worship God.

Pausing for a moment, Paul says that the result is being kept by the peace of God (4:7). The word sometimes translated "keep" (*phroureo*) is a military term indicating to "guard" or to "garrison." God's peace acts as a fortress that protects the believer's mind.

Besides praying, thanksgiving, and praise, Paul goes on to explain that believers need to occupy their minds with God's thoughts (4:8). They ought to concentrate, respectively, on those things that are true (*alethes*), honorable or holy (*semnos*), righteous (*dikaiois*), clean or pure (*hagnos*), on that which provokes love (*prospheiles*), or whatever has a good reputation (*euphema*). Two other possible categories for concentration are those thoughts that are excellent in virtue or moral quality (*arete*) and whatever deserves praise (*epainos*).

The Christian ought to focus on truths such as these. Paul's last verb, "think" (*logizomai*), indicates a stronger action than simply casual attention. It refers to the process of habitually dwelling or reflecting on a topic. This is the biblical practice of meditation--filling our minds deeply and single-mindedly with God's truth.

Jeremy was a believer who regularly wondered if Christianity could just possibly be false. This uncertainty gnawed at him continually, in spite of his having no reasons to support his fear. He did not solve this dilemma until he first learned to constantly remind himself that anything could be questioned by such untrue feelings--his finances, his health, or even his exam next week. Then he began informing himself of the truth: he was a believer. He rehearsed these things every time he began to worry, until he achieved substantial relief.

The single minded meditation on proper thoughts that Paul calls for here needs to be practiced (*prasso*) until it becomes a habit (4:9). Christian "modeling" is also evident in this verse, as Paul, the mature believer, serves as a guide for other Christians. Lastly, the believer is again promised peace (4:9b).

This passage provides at least four biblical steps for treating anxiety like that which might accompany emotional doubt. These teachings may be listed as follows:

- 1) prayer of petition
- 2) thanksgiving and praise
- 3) edifying thinking
- 4) practice and Christian modeling

In the last chapter we mentioned the exercise of the classic Christian disciplines as a means of increasing our fellowship with God. It should be noted that each of these steps denotes separate regimens for the believer to develop and practice. Alone they represent powerful means of seeking God. But together, they are nothing short of an awesome array of four weapons that we are to employ during our emotional struggles.

In short, the problem should be committed to God in prayer, with thanksgiving and praise, with believers exchanging their old, anxious thoughts for God's truth. This ought to be practiced until it becomes a habit, or even a way of life. Paul attests that the application of these truths promotes healing and peace to those who

follow the prescription. His overall teaching is that Christians need to stop worrying, by changing their anxious thoughts, including doubts, for wholesome ones.

#### Exchanging our Anxious Thoughts for God's Truth

I am not a psychologist. I realize that many believers are suspicious that the theories and techniques used by Christian psychologists are not based on Scripture, and sometimes with good reason. Yet, I don't think that this justifies "throwing the baby out with the bathwater," as the saying goes. After years of personal research on many related subjects, I think the better approach is to make use of those psychological techniques that are true to Scripture. Some teachings of Christian psychologists frankly do not conform to God's Word, while other counselors utilize excellent techniques that make the most of exceptionally helpful insights gleaned from Scripture. Since any truth we find in creation ultimately goes back to the Creator, we should not avoid it when it meets the scriptural standard.

I have come to the conclusion that forms of the "cognitive method" are the closest to Scripture, with certain behavioral techniques providing follow-up application. The cognitive method is based on the principle that change begins in our thinking, working out into our emotions and will. In other words, clear, biblical thinking must be applied to our whole lives: to how we feel, to the things we tell ourselves, and what we decide to do. In this book, we are chiefly interested in applying biblical truth and thinking to our painful emotions.

Doesn't this sound like Paul's advice in Philippians 4:8? We have seen that the apostle exhorts believers to exchange their worrisome thoughts for God's truth. We must meditate on God's instructions instead of our own. He emphasizes edifying thinking patterns, rather than the faulty ones that led to the anxiety that he describes in verse 6.

But this can be a very difficult assignment, especially in the middle of our times of anxiety. I have seen many doubters who understand the principles, but who just do not seem to be able to apply them when they are most needed. Is this really surprising? We've already said that Paul's readers were also currently in a state of anxiety. That's why he wrote these things to them. It's not that these techniques fail to work; in fact, I have never been told that by the sufferers themselves. Rather, as paradoxical as this sounds, believers just seem at times to be impotent to make the application, even though they readily admit that, when they apply the instructions, they do work. Paul commands that we change our thinking. Some additional pointers on how to apply his teaching might be helpful here.

Many recent books have encouraged believers to think differently, in keeping with God's truth. Chapter 12 contains an annotated list of some of these volumes. Two Christian psychologists who support such an effort are William Backus and Marie Chapan. One of their co-authored volumes, *Telling Yourself the Truth* (Bethany, 1980), is not specifically addressed to the issue of religious doubt, but presents some sound techniques for dealing with emotional struggles of different sorts. So their particular method, termed Misbelief Therapy, is applicable to emotional doubts. In this section, I will present some of their ideas, making specific application to those who question their faith. Page numbers in parentheses can be traced to the above book.

Backus and Chapan explain that our feelings are largely caused by the things that we say to ourselves. So if we tell ourselves untruths or lies, they can certainly cause us harm. These misbeliefs "are the direct cause of emotional turmoil, maladaptive behavior and most so-called 'mental illness'." (p. 17) Even those things that we fear (like embarrassments or failures) do not usually cause us as much havoc as do our misbeliefs about them. "What you think and believe determines how you feel and what you do." (their emphasis, p. 22)

For example, if a Christian repeatedly tells him or herself that Christianity may not be true, or that they are probably going to Hell, it should not be surprising if they begin to believe it after a while. At this point, what the Christian is saying is contrary to his deepest desires. Conflict is sure to be the result unless there is a change in these unbiblical thoughts. Later, improper behavior may also reflect these untrue thoughts.

Backus and Chapan assert that the correct response to these misbeliefs is a threefold strategy that is reminiscent of the last two steps of our biblical pattern from Phil. 4:6-9. They outline their approach in the following steps (their emphasis, p. 15):

1. Locate your misbeliefs.
2. Remove them.
3. Replace misbeliefs with the truth.

So we need to listen to ourselves in order to pick out the lies that we say to ourselves every day. These misbeliefs need to be removed, which is done by arguing against them. Here we need to respond to ourselves forcefully: "No, that is not true, because . . . ." Lastly, God's truth is supplied in the place of the lies. We do not simply dismiss the anxious thoughts, but replace them with truths like those Paul mentions in Philippians 4:8. We think godly thoughts instead of the anxious ones.

Backus and Chapan challenge the hurting person that they can control their own emotions. God has even told us to do so. The real issue is whether or not they will follow God's prescription (their emphasis, p. 24):

**. . . you can change your emotions . . . no matter what you have experienced in you life and no**

## **matter what your circumstances are.**

The first time Tracey heard that she controlled her emotions, she objected: "Maybe others can be healed like that, but it won't work with me. I've already tried everything, but nothing works." The battle was over for her before it even started--precisely because, ironically enough, she had made a choice not to use her own choice! In other words, she didn't believe that she could control her thoughts by simply choosing to do so, thus her choice to do nothing ruled out the possibility of healing.

Hold it right there! This is as good a place to begin as any other. What is the nature of Tracey's complaints? She was basically telling God that the prescriptions in His Word against worry don't really work, after all! Her comments need to be directly identified for what they are: lies!

Whenever we catch ourselves thinking that our misbeliefs are true, we must stop ourselves immediately and correct the thoughts. How is that done? We need to work through each of Paul's four steps in Philippians 4:6-9. Then we can apply the three rules suggested by Backus and Chapien in order to implement Paul's command in verse 8 that we change our thinking. We can get so used to this total sequence that we can quickly identify our lies on the spot and perform the entire exercise in just a minute or two. It can be done almost anywhere. As we get better at it, we progress to the point where we seldom think the lies in the first place. That is, indeed, a happy realization and victory!

So now we see where the blame for the faulty thinking is to be placed: squarely on the shoulders of the one who is suffering! There are few more profound truths on the subject than this one: people and events around us can't force us to doubt or worry. We can't blame our emotions on them. The key is how we respond and how we interpret the occurrences in our lives. Changing our wrong beliefs really does alter both our feelings and our actions.

While our outward circumstances may not change immediately, what we tell ourselves about them can change right away. The change in ourselves may be gradual, but it can happen; our problems can be remedied (pp. 14, 17, 24-27, 75).

### Emotional Doubts

How does all of this apply to emotional doubts? The first time I ever heard this last assertion, I missed the point completely. "So what if what I tell myself changes immediately?" I asked often. "The problems that are causing my grief have not gone away yet."

This just proved that I had not internalized this last truth. External problems do not and cannot force me to doubt. The doubt doesn't come until I give myself permission to question. The uncertainty, then, is caused by my own, private thought life! I was clearly disobeying Paul's commands. Therefore, if what I am telling myself can change immediately, then I am already on my way to healing my doubt with the truth! What a bombshell!

Instead of believing the misbeliefs we tell ourselves, we need to locate them, argue forcefully against them, and cite the truth. Instead of thinking that believers may be sent to Hell or that Christ may someday abandon us, Christians need to object, replacing these lies with the truth: "Jesus does not send saved persons to Hell. I know this to be true based on the authority of the resurrected Jesus Himself. Besides, the Lord of the universe loves me and I have a unique place with Him" (Jn. 3:16-18; Rom. 8:28-39; Eph. 1:3-14).

Or instead of Jeremy's earlier wondering concerning whether Christianity could just possibly be false, he learned to stop questioning immediately and point out the misbeliefs. He could doubt anything on the grounds of mere possibility alone, but wise persons don't base their lives on this "What ifting." A review of Christian evidences helped Jeremy a bit, too. He learned that he needed to strengthen his faith by daily practice, rather than by allowing emotional questions to trample him underfoot.

Shannon often had times when her moods were troublesome. Particularly during these moments she was prone to "feel" unsaved. This bothered her for years: "It's like denying what is most important in my life," she frequently told her mom. "This is incredibly painful."

Then one of her pastor's sermons helped her to see what she was doing to herself. She began to react to her moods by directly confronting them. "Feelings are irrelevant to my salvation," she forcefully declared. Then she reinforced this truth with some appropriate biblical texts that she wrote down and kept with her at all times. She even memorized verses that described her true condition and blessings in Christ. The more practiced she became at reciting these truths, the better she felt. That was all the encouragement she needed to continue preaching to herself.

When we do not "feel" saved we must not allow a frequent course of events to take place: an emotional letdown and further "What ifting," followed later by a "Who cares?" attitude. Like a cold splash of water in the face, we could jolt ourselves with the question, "Who cares how I feel? Since when do my feelings determine whether or not I am saved?" Like Shannon learned, reinforcements can come from follow-up truth statements composed of relevant biblical texts.

Dana wondered why God did not answer very many prayers today, as He clearly did in biblical times. After months of frustration, he finally decided to seek the counsel of a friend. Challenged by his wise Sunday School teacher, they got together a few times and shared a Bible study. As Dana later declared their surprise discoveries to the class: "We found that many Bible heroes asked this very same question, usually without answers. Job, David, John the Baptist, and Paul all reported similar frustrations."

Then, over a period of one year, the class began keeping a list of all their prayer requests, which led them to another discovery. The majority of their petitions were answered! "I guess I overemphasized the ones that I thought God was ignoring, while forgetting the others," Dana concluded with a shrug. His circumstances were never his chief problem. The real issue was what he told himself about them.

What about emotional complications that frequently accompany doubts, such as depression and anxiety? Again, I am not a psychologist. But Backus and Chapian address these concerns from their professional expertise, extending Misbelief Therapy to each topic.

They explain that depression is almost always provoked by a loss of some sort (such as a person, health, or finances), after which the individual devalues him or herself, their surroundings, and/or their prospects for the future. Perhaps this is the triggering mechanism for doubting their faith, or maybe it is their faith that they think they have lost. This condition is also reported in Scripture, such as the psalmist who is "cast down" (Ps. 42:5,6; 43:5).

Each situation must be placed in the proper perspective by identifying the misbeliefs. Lies might consist of telling ourselves that we cannot go on after the loss, or that the emotion itself is the worst thing in the world. Yet, many others have faced both similar losses and the accompanying feelings, while still leading successful lives (p. 43):

**Experience bears out the deception here. Many of us have told ourselves we "cannot live without" some person, object, scheme or notion. Then this adored "whatever" is removed from our lives and wonder of wonders, we recover.**

The one who responds like Tracey did above, "Yes, but it's the other guy who recovers, not me," is likewise stating a misbelief. This vicious cycle must be broken. The lies need to be identified and rejected. A proper response might be, "Okay, I feel very bad, but this is not the end of the world" or "I've felt horrible before and, with God's assistance, I've always recovered." When a person continues reacting to a loss past a normal period of time, it is no longer the loss but the misbelief that is crippling them.

The greatest truth we can substitute in place of depression's lies is that Christians are already both loved by God and will receive eternal blessings from Him (their emphasis, p. 40):

**Christians don't have to base their work on achievements or attributes. Even without any achievements and without any special merit or attractiveness, the Christian can know for certain he/she is important and loved. Our lives have been bought and paid for with the blood of Jesus Christ and that means we're free from the pressure to be something, do something, own something, achieve something or prove something in order to be important and loved. We can do all these things or not do them and still be loved and important. Jesus loved [us] so much that He was willing to die on the cross so [we] could have eternal life with Him one day, as well as a fulfilling life here and now.**

Can you think of something that brings more freedom or peace than this truth? We don't have to be the best looking, the best dressed, have the best personality, or the most friends. Neither do we have to own the nicest house or car, be the best salesman or the best athlete in order to have these blessings. They belong to the believer, and they are free!

Further, no circumstances, pain, or loss can ever change these truths (Rom. 8:31-39). What an incredible blessing! Relying on God, we can never be ultimately disappointed, no matter how we feel now. It is simply a fact that eternal life with the God of the universe not only outweighs all our present suffering and pain (Rom. 8:18), but it gives us a tremendous perspective from which to view all of our problems (II Cor. 4:16-18).

Besides, virtually all depressed persons will recover (p. 45). So disheartened Christians can gain both probable recovery now, as well as God's riches throughout eternity.

Anxiety, on the other hand, "is ordinarily defined as fear in the absence of actual danger." (p. 68) It is overestimating the likelihood of peril and exaggerating how horrible it would be. Anxiety's recurring theme is that what others think about me is of "crucial importance" to my thinking (p. 68).

Like other emotional struggles, we teach ourselves to be anxious. It is not our circumstances that create the fear--it's our own doing. The lies we tell ourselves are the chief culprits here. One misbelief is that something "terrible" is going to happen (p. 76):

**What does "terrible" mean? Usually it means something far worse than you think you can endure. You tell yourself the "terrible" is beyond human endurance, worse than anything on earth. Truly, nothing of this sort exists.**

Another falsehood concerns the likelihood of our fears. Anxiety by its very nature generally involves imagining an evil that is actually very unlikely to occur. (How many of our worst fears throughout life have actually come to pass?) Still, the anxious person tells him or herself that this evil is unavoidable or inevitable.

We need to forcefully challenge such false beliefs with the truth that, although we may be feeling very bad, what we are imagining has not occurred. Even if something horrible has already happened, it's not the end of a meaningful life, for believers still have the Lord, His love, and eternal life. So nothing is as terrible as we thought and, while painful things do happen, believers still possess their ultimate hope. Others have lived through the same pain, and so can we, with God's help. Still, the object of most anxieties never occurs anyway. These are the sorts of truths that we must constantly tell ourselves.

#### Conclusion

The improvement and healing of these emotional conditions frequently takes time. I have seen numerous cases where doubting individuals have been significantly helped after just one (usually lengthy) meeting. But more often, healing the most painful affects of doubt takes practice, especially so the more it is ingrained in the person. Most of us have misrepresented reality to ourselves for so long that it should not surprise us that it also takes some time to cure the dilemma. Sometimes the condition is tied so closely to our personality that, rather than a complete cure, we should be thankful for a significant lessening of the condition.

A key here, as Paul tells us in Philippians 4:9, is repetition. We need to practice the biblical remedy until it is our predominant habit. We need to be transformed by truth. The best time to fight doubt is during the suffering itself. Beyond that, we need to continue to rehearse truth as a preventative measure, even when it is not directly needed. Thus, working through our thoughts and applying truth always produces good results, even when things already seem to be going well.

Yet, we have made no claims that these methods are the only healing remedies. In fact, such a claim would be far from the truth. Other researchers have presented additional biblical remedies which can also lead to healing. Besides, our next two chapters will develop other procedures.

Before we began, we were careful to note that Scripture does not promote a "self-help" scenario, as is so popularly declared today. Believers do not act in their own power or by the force of their own wills. The power to change our emotional doubts comes from the Lord. Paul explains at length that he had to personally learn this difficult lesson (Rom. 7:21-8:11). Yes, we are commanded to change by applying certain techniques. Yet, God is the Source of our healing; true change comes by His power (Zech. 4:6). We will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

Lastly, I do not conclude that the various treatments will always work on each type of doubt, largely because the personal factors vary so much. But I cannot remember ever having anyone tell me, after applying the truth of Scripture, that these techniques did not either ease or heal the problem.

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## **Chapter VII**

### **Additional Suggestions**

Did you ever go through a real tough emotional time in your life while being thankful that you had already learned some major lessons that had suddenly become very helpful? It's like having the right tools in your trunk when the car breaks down. We do seem to get ample opportunities to deal with (and hopefully control) our emotions. During the years when I went through the various species of doubt, I never really had to face any serious emotional trauma at the same time. Even when I wrote my first book on doubt, I was able to do so from the intense personal experience of questioning seriously my faith for many years and of subsequently talking to dozens of others who had done the same. But I always wondered how my faith would fare in a real emergency. I got that chance a few years later.

My entire life came to a screeching halt, almost like a slow motion movie, one sunny spring morning. After days of testing and comparing results, my dear wife was diagnosed with inoperable cancer. Four months later, almost to the day, she died. It was one month after our twenty-third wedding anniversary. We celebrated it while she lay in bed. Except for two weeks in the hospital, she spent all of her last days at home, with our four children, myself, and many loving relatives.

To say that it was a trying time would be the greatest of understatements. My wife and I had been exceptionally close. Amid the multiple rounds per day of feedings and medicines that had to be put through a tube, I was forced to deal not only with my own raging emotions, but also with those of my children. Friends and loved ones wanted to know how things were going, and, during daily updates, I told the story perhaps

hundreds of times.

Do biblical strategies really work at "crunch time," when the going is at its toughest? Can our beliefs hold firmly when what seems to be the worst possible scenarios in life are thrown at us? I always wanted to know these answers. I thought for sure that my darkest doubts would certainly return after years of dormancy, and I said so to my closest friends.

But God was good and the questioning never returned. I discovered great comfort from many of the same techniques that are found in this book, especially those in the last chapter. I used them again and again, just as they are presented here. Reading and meditating on the story of Job was a special help, as I've pointed out in *Forever Loved* (College Press, 1997). I always knew these methods worked, because I had seen them in action, in both my life and with others.

But now I had forcibly discovered their real power. God's prescriptions had sustained me precisely during the time when I could hardly even imagine my life being any more strenuous. It was an incomparably valuable lesson, taught to me under the most grueling of circumstances. God promised that no temptation would be more than we could bear (I Cor. 10:13), and I learned that truth in a first-hand manner.

By Whose Power?

Before recommending a number of other helpful hints for dealing with emotional uncertainty, we need to repeat an important lesson from the last chapter and spend a little time explaining it further. The believer does not conquer doubt by his or her own power. Biblical suggestions for conquering worry are not to be carried out in our own strength, by somehow "hyping" ourselves to do a task by our own energy and skill. We do not pull ourselves up by our own boot straps, so-to-speak. These would be self-help scenarios, but they are not what we find in Scripture.

Pete was a popular guy who was always viewed by his friends as an upbeat, optimistic person. A long-time advocate of positive thinking techniques, he seemed to have his life together. After he became a Christian, however, he reached a time of conflict. Attempting to have a consistent testimony, he began to get the impression that everything depended on his own ability to "hang in there." Always having to appear on top of the world, avoiding sin by his own efforts and abilities wore him down. While he was definitely glad that he gave his life to the Lord, he often wondered why his quality of life seemed to go down hill after his conversion. He simply grew tired of the constant fight and effort it took him to behave like a Christian.

It is true that the Bible very frequently exhorts Christians to change their unbiblical behavior and embrace God's truth. The apostle James assumes that his readers have enough free choice to decide either for God or for Satan. He encourages them to submit themselves to God and resist the Devil (Js. 4:4-10). Similarly, Peter warns us to beware of the Devil's tricks, so that we might resist him and stand firmly in our faith (I Pet. 5:8-9). Persevering in the Christian faith is a popular theme in the New Testament (Heb. 10:36; II Jn. 9; Rev. 22:7).

In a classic text, Paul begs his readers to offer themselves to God by revitalizing their minds, so that they will be able to know God's will (Rom. 12:1-2). Peter encourages believers to turn from sin and crave God's path of spiritual growth (I Pet. 2:1-3; II Pet. 3:18). Believers are to check themselves regularly in order to ascertain whether they are still following the Lord (I Cor. 10:12; 11:28, 31; Gal. 6:4-5). John tells Christians that they need to obey God and walk as Jesus did (I Jn. 2:3-6).

In each of these passages, it is assumed that believers are capable of making the appropriate decisions to turn from sin and follow God with all their hearts (Matt. 22:35-37). Accordingly, we are exhorted to give ourselves wholeheartedly to God.

But it is also clear that this ability comes through God's presence in the believer's life. Paul plainly states several times that the power to conquer evil is God's, not ours (II Cor. 4:7; 12:9-10; Eph. 6:10). Further, the weapons are God's, too (I Cor. 10:3-5; Eph. 6:11-18). It is God's life at work within us (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 4:13). If the power, weapons, and life come from God, victory in the Christian life certainly requires His interaction with us!

Several passages include both the believer's responsibility to be committed to God, as well as the divine action that is involved. One of the best known texts here is Philippians 2:12-13, where Paul tells Christians that they are take part in working out their own salvation, only to conclude that God is the One who works in us. While we are saved totally by God's work in us rather than by our own actions, we are saved in order to do good works afterwards (Eph. 2:8-10). We shun sin by the leading of the Holy Spirit within us (Gal. 5:16-26). John exhorts his readers to obey God and love each other, while explaining that God lives in us (I Jn. 3:23-24).

Paul leads us through the perhaps painful lesson that he learned on this subject. He had been a Pharisee with a noteworthy pedigree, even referring to himself as "a Hebrew of the Hebrews" (NIV) (Phil. 3:4-6; cf. Acts 22:3-5; 26:4-11). It would probably have been very difficult for him not to think that, due to his holiness, he had the means at his disposal to conquer sin in his life. But he learned that this was simply beyond his power.



The things that he didn't want to do, he did. The things he wanted to do, he didn't (Rom. 7:14-25). Although there is some controversy as to whether Paul was saved during this period of failure that he describes, there is no debate that he found his victory not in his own strength, skill, and self-control, but in the victory provided by Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:1-4). And it was the Holy Spirit who infused Paul with the power to defeat sin (8:5-11).

We conclude that believers are required to think and act in a responsible manner that chooses God over sin and our personal desires. We are called to radically commit our lives to our Lord. Yet, the power, weapons, and life itself come from God. He provides all that we need to get the job done, but God doesn't force us to do His will.

How does all of this work itself out in practical terms? It seems that we are back again at our key text in Philippians 4:6-9. While Paul calls upon his readers to yield to God's truth and to practice obedience, the prayers, praise, and thanksgiving are directed to God, both for who He is and for what He has done. He effects the changes. He is clearly the focus of Paul's treatment, since it is through God's strength and power that the victory comes (4:13).

#### More Techniques

Christians need not be able to figure out all the fine lines between our responsible acting and God's power. This is part of a larger theological issue that has plagued theologians for centuries. We obviously won't solve the issues here. But even if we think that we could, objections could always be raised by other well-meaning believers who think differently.

We have said enough for our present purposes. That both human and divine interaction is necessary at this point is well grounded in Scripture. Christians must decide to follow God, while all the time relying on His weapons and power. The best way to do this is to apply the techniques taught in God's Word, without laboring under the illusion (another lie!) that we are responsible for the positive changes that occur in our lives.

In this chapter we will offer eight additional techniques that may also be applied during times of emotional doubt. Each is cognitive in nature, meaning that, like Philippians 4:6-9, these are items to be integrated into our thinking. They are truths that need to be constantly considered, remembered, and meditated on, especially in worrisome times. In the next chapter, we will introduce several behavioral ingredients to fulfill Paul's exhortation that we practice God's truth. In short, biblical principles need to be both carefully thought through and applied.

There is no special order to the suggestions in these two chapters. The reader can pick and apply whichever recommendations are most helpful. This "mixing and matching" can be used in addition to the techniques in the last chapter, or developed into their own pattern of thinking and acting.

(1) We need to constantly remind ourselves that emotional doubts do not constitute any evidence against Christianity. No matter how great our inner turmoil may be, this particular species of doubt is not chiefly due to our questioning of the facts. So the truth of the matter is that Christianity does not hang in the balances here. This is certainly a fact that needs to be learned and used in personal times of crisis, since the doubter often tells him or herself that the Christian faith is in question. We have seen that this is due to the very nature of emotional uncertainty's mood-relativity and orientation toward feelings.

In the last chapter, Shannon found this out for herself. She experienced a great victory when she realized that her moods had nothing to do with the actual state of her salvation, as she had originally feared. She had learned to concentrate instead on what God's Word told her was true.

(2) Our unedifying thoughts are often accompanied by worries and other unwanted emotions. But these reactions usually do not indicate the absence of faith. Here is one of doubt's real paradoxes: our emotions most frequently point precisely to our true faith!

How can that possibly be? Just think about it for a minute. Unless our faith was crucially important to us, we would not react at the thought that we were not believers! If we didn't really care, we wouldn't be upset at all!

So what are our emotions saying to us? They are telling us to stop thinking the way we are! Believe it or not, they are actually dictating that we cease what we're doing to ourselves because it hurts. Isn't that incredible? Not only has God told us in Scripture how to deal with emotional uncertainty, but He has also provided us with an early warning system that screams for attention when we disobey Him!

Here is something on which we should meditate deeply. Instead of the anxiety that we are not saved, or that Christianity is not true, we should substitute the real truth: emotional doubt usually indicates the presence of true faith. We care about our belief! We want to live with God for eternity.

Initially, Shannon panicked when it seemed that her horrible feelings might mean that she was not really saved. But later she actually rejoiced in the realization that the exact opposite was true: these emotions were

being disturbed precisely because her thoughts were so contrary to her own strong Christian convictions! She was reacting, not to the true state of her heart, but to the lies she was feeding herself! This was the final nail in the coffin of her emotional doubt. She was saved--and cured!

(3) When suffering through emotional doubt, a very helpful technique is to minimize the problem without neglecting its correction. In other words, it is beneficial to remember and concentrate on the fact that many others have faced what you have and suffered similar obstacles (I Cor. 10:13). You are not alone in this. Doubt is common to human beings in general. This is not an excuse to treat religious uncertainty lightly, but knowing that others are also struggling with it somehow has the affect of allowing us to relax a bit.

Years ago I was teaching a seminary class that attempted to apply apologetic principles to ministry. One of the assignments required the students to find someone who was doubting and attempt to counsel them through it.

One student discovered an example of how truth telling can heal. He reported that the doubter he worked with (a fellow seminary student) was so amazed to find that Christians frequently questioned their faith that this single fact alone brought him substantial relief. This realization minimized the force of the problem. It led, in turn, to another liberating thought: the original problem was emotional in nature, and needed to be treated as such, and not as some deep-seated spiritual dilemma.

(4) Anxiety during doubt is frequently short-lived. In these cases, one technique is to remind ourselves that the fear or other negative feelings need not last very long. Where the pain lasts longer, applying techniques like those we discussed in the last chapter usually lessens the time element considerably.

Once Philip realized this truth, he confronted his customary fear by forcefully declaring to himself: "Just calm down. Relax! This will only last a few minutes." Then he projected his thoughts to an hour or so in the future, and pictured being calm and restful. He experienced peace almost immediately. Each time he did this, he was able to sit back and watch as the levels on his "doubt barometer" dropped. Like some medical prescriptions, he repeated the dose whenever needed. He found that once he had taken the edge off his unruly emotions, it became much easier to deal with the fear itself, which was now declining even more quickly.

(5) When suffering in the grips of acute emotional doubt, another remedy will perhaps give the fastest relief: Change the subject quickly, forcefully, and completely. The sufferer needs to concentrate his or her attention on another topic altogether. One of the methods we've already mentioned should suffice, such as prayer, thanksgiving, praise, or addressing our lies directly.

Or you might wish to try a "secular" behavioral alternative like calling a friend on the phone, jogging, walking, biking, or swimming. The latter methods are best seen as band-aides in the sense that, while they don't heal the problem, they will temporarily ease the pain, and often quite quickly.

Alexis was close to a panic attack. Those uncontrollable thoughts were attacking her faith once again. Would she ever get a handle on these doubts? And they hurt so much! Absolutely anything was preferable to these awful feelings! She was now pacing, spinning rapidly on her heel, and starting back in the other direction. Her pulse and breathing had both picked up considerably. If it would only stop!

When the telephone rang Alexis ran to pick up the receiver. It was her best friend with news about last night's blind date. Two minutes into the conversation, Alexis rather absent-mindedly remembered that she had not been feeling well. But now she felt fine!

Later reflection brought a flood of lessons to Alexis' mind. She was simply amazed at how quickly the panic had subsided. Literally, one minute it was there, and the next minute it wasn't! "I'll have to remember that trick next time," she told herself light-heartedly, cringing slightly at the thought that the feeling might return. Additionally, she realized rather sheepishly that she wasn't dying, like she was beginning to think during the attack.

Other conclusions dawned on her some time afterwards. She realized that the intruding thoughts were not as uncontrollable as she had thought. After all, a rather minor interruption was all it took! And the worries weren't the unbearable horrors she had thought they were at the time. She had lived to tell about it, hadn't she? All of this came from a simple phone call! But unfortunately, she knew that the feeling would return as they had always done before, and she desired a longer-lasting remedy.

(6) Don't argue with yourself concerning the factual grounds for Christianity during an attack of anxious doubt. Commonly, when one mistakenly identifies emotional questioning as being factual in nature, the doubter often resorts to arguing the evidential basis for Christianity, concluding that this will cause the emotions to retreat. But as we've said many times, emotional doubts are not usually corrected by factual recitations. Thus, pulling the facts out at this point will allow them to be colored in one's mind by the emotional element. Although it may be tough to admit, when our emotions go to war against our reason, the emotions usually win. So why invite disaster?

Here someone may raise a question: "Hey, wait a minute. We've said many times that we should argue during

our episodes of doubt. So why shouldn't we do it here?"

This observation is correct, but the distinction lies in the nature of the arguing, as we've carefully pointed out. Facts are used with factual doubts, while cognitive and behavioral techniques are used with emotional questioning. These latter grounds should be argued immediately. But since facts seldom end the emotional doubt, we shouldn't cross that line. There is plenty of time to return later to the facts for Christianity, after one is calm, but not before then.

(7) During attacks of emotional doubt, it is helpful to continue affirming our belief in the foundations of the Christian truth. When our faith is being assailed, we should concentrate on trusting God, regardless of the circumstances.

Is a man considered a good friend or a poor one if he gives up on his best buddy as soon as a stranger challenges him or her? How about our ongoing commitment to a faithful spouse during a tough time? In the same way, why should we deny Jesus when someone questions Him? Persons are not the same as ideas, and the former require greater allegiance. Christians need to affirm their allegiance to their Lord.

(8) Pick a biblical hero who went through tough times--like Job, Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel, John the Baptist, or Paul. Study their life carefully and recall both their struggles and their victories. Why was Job satisfied without ever learning why he suffered? How did Abraham overcome his lack of faith so that he became known as the man of faith? Why were the psalmists content even when God was silent? How did Jesus treat John the Baptist's emotional doubts that he suffered while he was isolated in prison?

Think through their struggles once again. What other problems were faced by these saints? How did they deal with them? Did they achieve victory immediately? What did they learn from these conflicts?

Then consider what you can learn today from their past struggles. What are the parallels? Do we suffer pain today? Is our faith sometimes weak? Do we wonder why our prayers are not always answered the way we think they should be? Are we ever isolated, without Christian fellowship? Do our emotions rage, too?

How can we draw strength from these biblical testimonies? Can we also make a similar move from the problem to the solution? Concentrate on these issues and take note of some biblical lessons that might be learned and applied.

At least a few of these eight additional suggestions should be beneficial in combating emotional uncertainty. I would suggest trying each one during worrisome moments and utilizing those that show the most promise. The "Helpful List" can then be reviewed periodically in order to see if any others might be added.

## Conclusion

Christians are continually exhorted throughout Scripture to resist the Devil and sin. We are also told to follow God with all of our hearts. All of this only makes sense if we have some responsibility in the process. But we are additionally told that it is God's power, weapons, and His indwelling of believers that produces the victory. We must decide to follow Him and apply the techniques that He commands, but we do so in His strength.

So how did Pete resolve his dilemma about reacting to life in his own strength? It took a while, but he learned that Christianity was not about working oneself up into a frenzy in order to obey a list of negatives. Rather, it was an integrated lifestyle that allowed God to work through the believer so that they actually preferred to make the choices they did. Thus, Pete felt liberated when he learned that the Christian faith is more about exuberant, committed living in light of eternity than it is about always having a burden to react against everything.

But for some believers, the problem does not come from any lack of conviction that they need to do something. After all, they are in pain! They desire remedies that work. The question concerns which techniques best treat their specific form of doubt and how they should be exercised, especially during their struggles. Applying the truth they know is perhaps the most crucial decision they will make on this subject. Hopefully, the suggested cognitive procedures in the last two chapters will provide some thoughtful sorts of consolation. In the next chapter we will turn to behavioral changes that also address our emotional struggles with faith.

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## Chapter VIII

### **Practice! Practice! Practice!**

Seldom have I seen anything more marvelous than watching the appropriate techniques "catch on" with someone who has suffered grievously from the affects of religious doubt. I have often said that the good

feelings are not unlike watching someone come to the Lord. Fantastic blessings can be the result for those who learn and continually practice the biblical prescriptions, even when the situations looked so bleak at the beginning, and involved an exceptional amount of work. Two cases, in particular, come to my mind.

When Missy came to talk with me, she seemed to be suffering from more than the ordinary sort of emotional doubt. I sent her to a counseling clinic, where she was diagnosed with a potentially serious psychological disorder. She was treated with medicine and released. But she still had to deal with what she was telling herself concerning her salvation.

We met many times while she attempted to grasp the essentials of assurance. Many other painful things were going on in Missy's life, too. There were multiple symptoms with which to deal. For several months there were ups and downs. Sometimes things were better, other times they were not. But she began to progress very slowly. The more she practiced, the stronger she got.

Due to the complicated nature of her situation, far beyond the emotional doubt alone, Missy needed some time to work everything through. At first, she failed to apply the principles in Philippians 4:6-9 in any consistent manner. But later it was these very precepts, in particular, that really changed her life.

The change has lasted for the long term, as well. Twelve years later, a few conversations showed that she no longer struggled with the issues that had dominated her life. She indicated that they were not even a factor. Although her path didn't always travel straight upwards, and there were trials along the way, the trip ended with a fantastic victory. The principles she had learned affected more than just her doubt. They became beacons for her life, as she applied them to other subjects, too. Today, Missy is a missionary in Eastern Europe, sharing her testimony with other hurting people.

The second case came fairly early in my growing number of instruction sessions with doubters. It involved a graduate student, James, who repeatedly and sometimes rather belligerently charged God with not loving him. No amount of discussion would cause him to think otherwise. Some rather serious child abuse, along with some even more dangerous medical problems that altered moods, added much to his doubts.

We talked often about his questioning, but the meetings more often seemed to take the form of his challenging me to convince him that the biblical methods would work. Many a morning I would round the last corner to my office, only to find him sitting there without an appointment, wanting me to address his needs right then and there. Calls at home, or meeting me at sporting events for more discussions, were commonplace. But all during this time, James steadfastly refused to even try to apply the biblical principles. To this day, I have perhaps never seen a case where there was consistently so little effort in application. In short order, I was worn out!

One night James came to a college game to talk because he knew I would be there. I had finally had enough, and it had taken a long time for me to get to that place. I told him that he and I were going to duck into the first place we could find after the game ended. I was going to repeat the principles to him one more time, and if he didn't make any more effort to apply them than he had done in the previous few weeks, we were done talking. That meeting after the game seemed to be the turning point! He was a very intelligent man and he certainly knew the proper responses to his doubt. Now he began to practice them. And he made very rapid progress.

Once, a few months later, James and I were having lunch and he was telling me how well he was doing. A young lady came over to our table and asked if she could sit and talk for a few minutes about her problems with doubt. Imagine my surprise when, before I could respond to the problem she had outlined, James held up his hand.

"May I handle this one?" he asked me. Dumbfounded, I wanted to see what he would say, realizing that I might have to jump in at any moment in order to rescue the woman from who-knew-what-kind of advice! But to my utter astonishment, James made a flawless case for beating emotional doubt! She walked away encouraged!

James' changed life has also been proven over the long haul. He, too, had some tough times ahead, largely due to the outside factors mentioned above. In fact, he even needed surgery to correct some of the damage of the child abuse he had withstood. But fourteen years later, he is doing magnificently. There are no traces of the radical version of emotional doubt that had afflicted him. He just recently told me that it was all due to his finally beginning to practice principles like Paul's in Philippians 4:6-9. He has since matured into a strong Christian leader, and is today pastoring a thriving church.

What else can we say? God changes the lives of those who practice His principles!

Why Do We Resist the Practice of God's Truth?

Why did both Missy and James drag their heels so much when provided with a remedy to their emotional doubt? Both were suffering a significant amount of pain. Their problems were affecting every aspect of their lives. Doesn't it seem that they would jump at the opportunity to get some relief? So why did they basically

refuse to act, and for such a long time, too? For that matter, why does anyone fail to apply God's truth when they have come to the end of themselves? There are few more intriguing sub-plots involved in this topic.

In my experience, the two most difficult points in the entire process of dealing with emotional doubt is discovering the falsehoods we tell ourselves and implementing God's truth. It seems especially tough to do the latter precisely during the time in which we are most in need. These are the subjects for this chapter.

Of course, the bottom line for not applying truth is always the same: we prefer our ways to God's ways. We more readily admit this in cases involving unbelievers (Rom. 1:18-32). But we also saw in the last chapter that believers, too, struggle with disobeying God even after we know His will (Js. 4:1-10; I Pet. 2:1-3).

Given that even believers ignore God's teachings and disobey Him, why, more specifically, might a Christian fail to apply God's directives concerning their emotional doubt, even when they are so obviously hurting? One reason it is difficult to pinpoint our unedifying thoughts in the first place is that doubters sometimes reject the view that they would ever lie to ourselves at all. But the emotional doubter needs to face the fact that they are obviously telling themselves something that is out of whack, or they wouldn't be experiencing the emotional difficulties in the first place!

God has forewarned us that it is very difficult to know our hearts and why we do the things we do (Jer. 17:9). It would seem that we are all candidates for misdirecting even ourselves.

A major justification for ignoring the untruths we tell ourselves is that some Christians think that there actually is some truth in their anxious thoughts. I hear this one quite frequently. "Well, didn't I just flunk my big exam?" or "Isn't it true that I was just diagnosed with a very serious illness?" When you hear it for the first time, this complaint really does sound like a show-stopper. What if the worst thing has just happened to them?

When truth is mixed along with the untruth, the doubting individual is often tempted to wonder if this procedure really works at all. This sort of case is more difficult to work through, but only because the person is less likely to see that they are still repeating untruths. And since the misbeliefs are present along with the truth, the former must be corrected if we are to achieve victory over our emotional questions. After all, it is the mistaken portion of the belief that causes the harm.

The hidden lies that often rear their heads in these circumstances are more devious, due to the fact that the negative things have already occurred. The misbeliefs sometimes abound: "Because of these horrible things, my life is forever ruined. I'll never be the same." Or, "My anxiety is completely justified, due to the hurt in my life. My circumstances have caused all of this." Or, "The worst things possible have just happened to me."

But our lives should not revolve around half-truths or temporary truths. Even though something has happened here, the unnoticed misbelief causes the anxiety. In cases like these, the half-truth hurts more than the outright lie.

Once after lecturing on this subject, Chuck came up to me to talk. He had just lost his job and was in a state of turmoil. He discovered that he was more prone to question God's goodness now. "How could God really love me?" Granted, this was a serious predicament for he and his family. But Chuck never realized that, while losing his job was definitely significant, it was also temporary. In no sense was it the worse thing that could possibly happen to him. Unfortunately, he told himself that it was just that: unbearable.

In situations like Chuck's, it's not the lost job that trips people up and causes the pain. If you still question this statement, then think about it: how can losing a job make us jump to the conclusion that God has done something to us, unless we're drawing conclusions from the event? The problem is what we tell ourselves about losing the job: "I'll probably never be happy again." Or: "We'll have to move and the kids will hate it." Or: "Even if I do get a job, it'll be for less money. We'll have to change our lifestyle." Or: "I won't like the job as much, either." After giving him a list like this one, I asked Chuck if he was saying things like these to himself. He admitted that he had been.

In other words, the chief obstacle with half-true statements is that the false portion will work on us, frequently causing anxious doubt. Like an undetected physical sickness, the lie stays hidden behind the truth until it is strong enough to produce some harm. Then it is much more troublesome to remove.

Still another reason that we fail to apply God's truth to our doubt is that it may not be pleasant. Like pulling weeds, losing weight, or having a cavity filled, the final results might be quite nice, but we can never quite get around to performing the difficult procedure. Ridding our lives of doubt is admittedly not as simple as taking two aspirins and going to bed. God has told us that we must be willing to follow the instructions. Especially since the remedy is best applied during the problem (like medicine), this adds to the uncomfortable nature of the clean-up. Anxiety is tough enough on us itself without us having to do something else amid the turmoil. It's like we're crying out: "Just leave me alone with my worry!" We would rather procrastinate than face the music.

There are still other reasons that sometimes figure in when someone exhibits a problem with emotional doubt,

but fails to join the program. Some just don't get the point and, in spite of all indications to the contrary, still think that circumstances cause the emotions. Other doubters prefer the process of counseling more than they wish to be healed. Perhaps craving either attention or friendship, curing the uncertainty would effectively cut the water supply. Others cannot admit that they have a problem because that would militate against their sense of spiritual well-being or personal worth. It is far easier to deny the problem altogether or to place the blame elsewhere--probably on the offending events.

At any rate, there comes a time when doubters must make a choice. No one else can tackle their questioning for them. But the good news is that there is a remedy that works. As difficult as it may be for them, it just needs to be applied.

When should We Practice?

Therefore, there is no substitute for practice. With all diligence, we should exchange our anxious doubts for God's glorious truths. God's peace has been promised to us.

We have said that the most difficult instance in which to implement God's instructions is during the time of the doubting, since it sometimes takes an extraordinary effort to change subjects when our thinking is dominated by the painful dilemma itself. But this is also when we most need to apply one of God's strategies. It is precisely because we are changing the subject that the quandary subsides. It is like taking medicine: it might not taste good, but we require it most when we are sick. Like digging for splinters in a child's hand, temporary pain is the way to gain lasting relief!

So the onset of the condition is the signal for action. Load the canons and begin the assault! If healing and spiritual growth are desired, then we have to be willing to pay the price. Who knows? The solution may even be easier than expected, especially when some healing occurs. Like going home, when familiar territory comes into view, we are more willing to push ourselves.

I think the application comes much more easily to those who are willing to force their way doggedly toward the finish line. In this chapter, I've used examples from those who had lengthy healing processes. But it need not be that way. I've seen far more cases where the individual was almost completely healed of the more painful elements of their doubt by a concentrated application over a short period of time.

The chief idea here is to practice God's truths, and to do so particularly during the roughest times. The truth should be applied whether we feel like it or not. Paul tells us in Philippians 4:9 that rehearsing proper thinking until it becomes a habit is one of the keys to achieving peace.

We have already said that preventative therapy is also important. Like taking vitamins or participating in an excise program, preparation ahead of time can be very helpful. As we get vaccinated during healthy times, so doubt prevention furnishes the necessary means to equip us for future needs, perhaps even keeping that rough time from coming altogether. Certainly, it often lessens the force of the emotional storm.

The main target for this strategy is those who know they have a tendency towards doubting. Remember that minimizing doubt is very helpful. Thinking through the options ahead of time allows us to greet the presence of questioning with the response, "Oh, you again. I've been waiting for you!"

What should We Practice?

In the last two chapters, we concentrated on a number of cognitive practices that provided us with ammunition against doubt. Here we will provide some behavioral techniques that address Paul's command to continually rehearse truth until it becomes a way of life (Phil. 4:9). Once again, the doubter may pick and choose methods that best meet their particular needs. Since each of the suggestions is biblical, applying any of them will be a positive step.

(1) Pray through the doubt. Paul (Phil. 4:6) and Peter (I Pet. 5:7) both command prayer during troubled times. Our petitions should be specific. While this is a great privilege, Scripture speaks of conditions for God's answers. We are told to confess our sins beforehand (Ps. 66:18), to exercise faith (MK. 11:24; Js. 1:5-8), to be obedient to Him (Jn. 15:7; I Jn. 3:22), and to pray according to God's will (I Jn. 5:14-15), and in Jesus' name (Jn. 14:13-14; 15:16). In ancient Israel, prayers sometimes went unanswered when God's people lived in a state of unrepentant sin (Lam. 3:42-44; Isa. 57:11).

To turn the cognitive exercise of prayer into a behavioral one, several things could be done. We could write out our prayer requests, as well as the results. One helpful way is to list the specific requests in the left-hand margin, the results in a middle column, and any special notations on the right side of the sheet. Like Dana and his Sunday School Class in Chapter 7, this exercise could even be done with others. Answers would be an encouragement to faith and serve as a preventative against the common form of doubt that questions God's involvement in our lives.

I kept a list of prayer requests and answers over a period of about two years. Approximately two of three

prayers were answered. Some of these were of the very difficult (even "impossible") variety, and most of those received positive responses, too. Later, a seminary student told me that, like Dana, his Sunday School class also made a record of their classroom requests, and interestingly, they came up with a very similar result--about 70% of the prayers were answered.

We could also share with others in corporate prayer times, not only praying aloud, but rejoicing in the answers, too. I have often said that one of the main things I would emphasize if I ever returned to the pastorate would be to highlight the answers God sends, as well as the prayer requests. This is a tremendous encouragement to believers, but seems often to be neglected.

(2) Meditate through the doubt. Many times in Scripture, believers are told to meditate on God's truth (about a dozen times in Ps. 119 alone). As opposed to the Eastern view of emptying the mind, biblical meditation is thinking deeply and single-mindedly on God's truth. We've already mentioned briefly some examples of content in discussing Paul's exhortation in Philippians 4:8.

Meditation is a wonderful avenue by which to both deal with particular cases of doubt, as well as practicing doubt prevention. During many of my years doubting, I made more use of this method than any other. Usually sitting on my porch on a dark, starry evening, I worked through various problematic issues, one by one. Usually, my chief methods were going through either Philippians 4:6-9 or Backus and Chapian's three stages, step by step. It's a great way to think about God's truth, as Paul commands.

But meditation can also be practiced corporately (Ps. 48:9;63:2). It can be a public exercise for believers who, together, concentrate on the Lord's truths, perhaps centered around a certain theme. Strength could be drawn from the aspect of sharing these thoughts together.

(3) Worship through the doubt. We've discussed Paul's exhortation to practice both thanksgiving for God's blessings and praise for His character. These two methods are especially helpful during times of uncertainty. Thanking and praising, in a very special way, liberate the believer to look beyond their immediate problems to God. It is very difficult to practice either one and yet remain engulfed in one's troubles.

A behavioral component can be easily constructed here. We could compose our own psalm unto the Lord. Whether or not you consider yourself a poet, share your deepest words of adoration with your God. Say them aloud. Or sit on your porch on a still morning during sunset and sing praises to God. What is your favorite hymn or praise chorus? Perhaps you would prefer to go for a walk and say or sing your words of praise.

Further, it is crucial to attend a Bible-believing church that takes worship seriously, where the emphasis is on meeting with God in fellowship with other of like mind. The corporate element adds a spark to our personal adoration.

(4) Memorize through the doubt. Take note of your most bothersome doubts. Which verses best apply to them? Write or type each text on a note card, arrange them in a meaningful order, and keep them together. Which biblical truths most apply to your misbeliefs? How can you think more clearly about them?

For years I carried with me everywhere I went a small container of business cards on which I wrote the truths that I most needed to be reminded of. I read them so much that the edge of every card was tattered and worn. I got tired of seeing the same things as I flipped through them, so I repeatedly told myself, "Yes, I know that." But then my efforts against the doubts would stagnate. On one of the days when I thought I was making too little progress, I wrote across the bottom of one card: "If you know it, then do it!" I wanted more action! Less knowledge, more practice!

(5) Journal through the doubt. Keep a diary of your daily spiritual walk with the Lord. What doubts plagued you today? What things happened to you that might have interpreted negatively, providing the stimulus for these thoughts? How did you respond to them? What methods worked? Which ones did not work so well? Could you have reacted in ways that would have been more profitable? What did you learn about God's truth and its application?

Then periodically go back through previous days and see if you have made any progress. Do you notice any trends? Overall, do you find yourself returning to certain methods rather than others? Many believers have gained major insights into their walk with the Lord by taking the time to record thoughts and ideas like these.

(6) Recall through the doubt. Many biblical texts encourage believers to review past history in order to see what God has done (Ps. 105, 106, 114). In the last chapter, we suggested an exercise of picking a biblical hero or two who underwent doubt, in order to learn from his trials. As an additional exercise, make a list of their problems, their circumstances, how they responded, and how it turned out.

Another sort of recall is to count the answers to prayer that we have received over a specific period of time. Write them down. Meditate on the things God has done in your life. How many times have you triumphed due to His goodness? How does this show how He is active in your life today? During times when I have questioned God's involvement, this method has never failed to be a ready antidote.

(7) Talk through the doubt. With emotional doubts, few things are as helpful as having a close friend or relative assist us in picking out our misbeliefs. Of course, the helper has to understand the "system," so clue them in and watch this technique work. Loved ones often see the improper things we tell ourselves, even when we do not. Time and time again I've known the informed friend to notice what the doubter didn't. Additionally, not only is the method readily available, but it can be a forceful change of subject, as we saw with Alexis in Chapter 8.

Wendy discovered that it was quite difficult for her to recognize her own distortions of the truth, since she had been believing these unedifying thoughts for so long. She frequently let things pass that she should have caught. Besides, it was hard to think that she would actually deceive herself. But on one occasion, her close friend Amber happened to ask her why she had just made a certain comment.

Recognizing that this was one of the things she had been working on, but had missed, Wendy explained the basic ideas of Philippians 4 to her roommate. After that, Amber began to help Wendy discover her falsehoods. Together they labored to weed out these untruths. Wendy even found a few of Amber's problem areas, too!

## Conclusion

Through all of our cognitive tools and behavior changes, we need to remember that victory rests chiefly on God's power, weapons, and indwelling. Explaining our predicament to God and giving it over to Him, while at the same time expressing our faith in Him regardless of whether or not we obtain immediate answers, are moves in the right direction. They all help us to reaffirm our reliance on God, even when the way ahead is not clear. This is one way to strengthen our faith.

Unfortunately, when we believe our own lies, we also fail to look beyond our immediate circumstances. But temporal matters, even when truthful, are different from ultimate truth.

In contrast, Christians should be most concerned about ultimate truth (Matt. 6:19-34): we need to obey our Lord and lay up treasures in heaven, just like Jesus instructed us. One truth to continually drive home is that, even when Christians flunk big exams or think that God did not answer their prayer, they still have eternal life. They should view the present in light of their eternal future. If believers cannot appreciate the force of this, it could be because they have not really struggled with their salvation.

Here is the major point: Christians do not have to pass exams, keep their jobs, or even have the most successful prayer lives in order to be saved. Neither do they have to be the most popular, the best dressed, or the best athletes in the world. They don't even have to be able to handle their doubt well! In fact, they do not have to do or be anything, except believers in Jesus Christ, in order to have the ultimate blessing of eternal life.

It is from this eternal perspective that all other problems should be viewed. Even death itself is not the definitive issue; that distinction belongs to the priority of God and His Kingdom (Matt. 6:33). This is the ultimate truth to be practiced.

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## Chapter IX

### Living with Questions

In the process of addressing emotional doubt, we have raised another question that is so large that it demands a separate treatment. Actually, few subjects raise more doubts than this one. To get over this problem would bring relief to many believers. How can we be content in our Christian lives even though we may still have many unanswered questions, some of them rather major? And how do we face the fact that many brothers and sisters in Christ differ from us in some rather important areas of theology?

Ken was obviously flustered by this whole issue. No, this is a rather glaring understatement. He was absolutely at his wits end when he called me from his midwest church where he had become a very successful pastor. Even though he had never been my student, I was lumped in with his seminary professors.

"You guys taught us theology," Ken accused, "as if all evangelicals believe the same thing. But I've discovered that they don't. In fact, they're quite different." Then he dropped the bombshell: "I've just come to think that theology is all a matter of interpretation." Although he didn't say it, he then implied that he was considering leaving the pastorate because of this conclusion!

"Wow!" I said. "All this comes simply from discovering different expressions of theology among believers?"

Ken and I talked for some time. I was reminded that an area that had never really been a concern to me in my doubting days did plague many Christians. But why would they take the conclusion in the direction of



Ken's radical stance? I couldn't fathom how he could get where he was for those reasons.

A second example came some years later. I had spent considerable time making several theological distinctions in a doctoral class. One of the students, Gene, was a pastor who had struggled with some similar issues. He came up to me privately and thanked me profusely for the discussion. For years he had been bothered by a particular doctrinal attitude that was not even taught in the Bible! His consternation had come from feeling that he needed to take the company line on a perspective that he never believed. But his questions caused him to have doubts, wondering if he was some sort of hypocrite because he didn't support the status quo of his denomination.

What do these two cases have in common? Why do Christians seem so puzzled when they find other believers from a slightly different perspective than their own? How should we handle the special sort of doubt that often results?

Why are there Theological Differences?

Why are there major distinctions between religious denominations? Why do Bible-believing theologians down through the centuries struggle over enduring questions like the sovereignty of God and the free will of created persons, the perseverance of the saints, the sign gifts, or the age of the earth? How should we respond when we think that we have solved one of these issues for ourselves, only to discover that there are equally well-meaning Christians who do not agree?

I think one reason these scenarios especially plague Christians is that many of our leaders constantly teach that all truth can be known absolutely. We're also so bold as to imply (if not directly teach) that my interpretation of a particular doctrine is the only possible position on the topic. In short, truth is what I say it is.

This at least adds to the confusion, if not being a chief reason for it. Obviously, if I (along with a few buddies who agree with me) am the sole arbiter of truth, but there are other true believers who disagree, then someone is clearly wrong. Unfortunately, the issue is often solved by imperial edict: "I am your leader and I am right. If you want the truth you'll listen to me." This sort of attitude just adds to the conflict, as well as to the sensitive believer's doubt.

If the Bible is the inspired Word of God, then why should you believe one thing, while I believe another? Is Ken right--is it all just a matter of interpretation? Why are there so many denominations--and differences? Let's begin by noting a few reasons why this may be the case.

Some denominational differences are not theological, but political, social, and even geographical. Historical surveys will show that theologically similar groups were formed either before they came to America, or originated many years ago in different areas of the country. Others share similar theological stances, but tend toward varying political and social views. Social status can account for other differences. Unfortunately, too many deviations from each other are more related to power struggles, church splits, and leadership influence than to biblical interpretation.

Closely aligned with these reasons, changes in the earthly body of Christ over two thousand years have developed doctrinal discussions to levels beyond what is encountered in Scripture. In other words, dozens of cultural, racial, world religious, missionary, and theological situations have pushed Christians to make distinctions that sometimes, frankly, go beyond what we are told about these issues in Scripture. As such, they add to the confusion.

Further, virtually everyone experiences some sort of doubt simply because they are human beings. We have said throughout that the root cause of our uncertainty is our sin nature. While this does not mean that all doubt is necessarily sin, it does imply that many of our differences are due to the fact that we are finite persons. Questions arise simply because, by nature, we don't know all the answers. Yet, we sometimes respond by dogmatically asserting what we don't know.

These initial responses can explain a fair amount of the theological differences among believers. But they do not explain them all. Our last answer will probably shock many readers. Maybe the Bible Itself does not always clarify all these answers.

Who says Scripture has to clear up every doctrinal matter? Is it possible that there are many items that God simply didn't want to tell us? If this is so, much of our confusion would then come from our attempting to force issues and place God's truth within boundaries. We need to admit that it is inviting, to say the least, to think that we have been given the keys to all theological truth. That would be just like humans, wouldn't it--to take dogmatic stands on subjects where we don't have enough data to make these judgments?

I think there is clear biblical precedent for this view. Job concluded that he knew enough about God to trust Him in those things that he didn't know (Job 42:1-6). Remember that Job never received an answer from the Lord concerning the reason for his suffering, yet he was blessed. Why? Scripture tells us that God's ways are not the same as ours, but are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). How many times throughout history has God

not explained a similar question to a hurting believer?

Let me take a further step--and perhaps a startling one. I think the New Testament provides other examples where certain areas were purposely left unresolved. One excellent instance comes from a topic that is still in the forefront of current discussions today--the time of Jesus Christ's return for His church. In answer to His disciples' question (Mk. 13:3-4), our Lord warned us that He didn't even know the time for this event and that we always needed to remain alert and ready (13:32-37). Later the disciples asked again, and again they heard the same answer--God was the sole Authority on this subject and He alone knew the time of the end (Acts 1:6-7).

But Christians today repeatedly qualify Jesus' remarks so that, while we don't know the exact moment of His return, we presume to know at least the decade! Believers have been responding this way for centuries, in distinction to Jesus' admonitions to make sure that we are looking for His return without worrying about the timing. That knowledge has simply not been given to us.

There is another sort of example where clear direction is not given to believers. We are even told that it is permissible for different Christians to hold more than one view on certain personal, ethical, or theological subjects, without the writer resolving the differences for us.

To begin, take the personal argument between Paul and Barnabas. The quarrel was so sharp that the two missionaries split up (Acts 15:36-41). It would seem from Luke's choice of words in verse 39 that the matter was rather heated. Of course, it might just be concluded that this was a clash of personalities that is inevitable whenever human beings work together long enough, and that would be fair. But we still don't want to miss the obvious point: either Paul or Barnabas was ultimately right or wrong. But Luke never tells us the answer. Apparently, that was not his purpose. And neither do we have to jump in and decide, as we attempt to do with so many other issues!

There were other times when there were clashes between early Christians, with verdicts being given. The dispute between the two apostles, Paul and Peter, contained theological roots, as well as a personal element. Paul states that Peter was wrong (Gal. 2:11-14). Scholars are not sure whether Acts 15:1-35 and Galatians 2:1-10 are the same occasion. So we have either one or two situations where unnamed Christians who pushed the issue of Law observance brought about an early apostolic assembly to decide the nature of the gospel. In both texts, Paul was vindicated.

In Romans 14:1-4, the same apostle Paul who disagreed with Barnabas and announced Peter's error turns to ethical differences between early believers without casting any blame. In fact, he specifically tells his readers not to pass judgment in certain disputes like that of diet. Both he who eats meat and he who does not is accepted by God (14:4b, 6b, 10). Similarly, Paul addresses the question of eating meat offered to idols by declaring that the one who refuses to eat is no better off than the one who eats (I Cor. 8:7-8; cf. I Cor. 10:25-30).

But personal and ethical issues are not the only ones on which Paul fails to take sides. He also addresses a topic of crucial theological significance in the early church--that of the observance of special days. Paul probably has in mind here the earth-shaking subject of Sabbath observance, that split Gentile and Jewish believers. Once again, he judges that there is room for different convictions. Paul was perhaps at least open to Jewish believers who wished to observe the Sabbath (Rom. 14:5-6, 10).

This is really an incredible conclusion in light of Paul's comments elsewhere that the observance of special days may indicate that a person is no longer following the path of God's grace (Gal. 4:10-11; cf. 3:1-3). Sabbaths were shadows of future realities fulfilled by Christ (Col. 2:16-17).

Perhaps the key is that Paul thought Jewish believers had an option that Gentile believers, who don't obey the Jewish Law, didn't have. But in Romans 14:5b, he allows everyone to be persuaded by their own convictions, without any absolute commands.

But amid the freedom that believers have on such matters (Gal. 2:4; I Cor. 10:30), Paul still cautions us not to be stumbling blocks to weaker believers. If others are bothered by our actions, we should refrain from pursuing our will when we are with them (I Cor. 8:9-13; 10:23-33). All believers work for the same purposes, to bring people to Christ and to edify believers (I Cor. 3:1-9, 22-23; 10:23-24, 31-33). So we may have to subject our freedom to our ministry objectives.

In sum, our last reason for the presence of differences among believers is that Scripture seems to teach that not all issues--personal, ethical, or even doctrinal--can be figured out (as with Job's lesson or the time of Jesus' return), or decided in strict terms (as with the various issues in Paul). But we will variously ignore the biblical teaching on some topics, plunge in where we have not been given full instruction on others, or force rules of various sorts on all Christians.

Our conclusion is that we have created yet another false belief here! While some Christians seem to think that biblical areas are always knowable in concrete terms, this is plainly not the case. Often we allow external, non-biblical reasons to create turmoil, forcing answers beyond the clear data in Scripture. We also ignore the

facts that the Bible specifically tells us both that we will not always know certain things, and even that more than one view on a subject is not necessarily bad. So why do we finite beings think that we can always figure out all theological matters?

Since we are human beings, questioning to one extent or another will probably be a lifelong experience. So get used to it! We should not attempt to reach some sort of utopia in this life where there are no more uncertainties. They will always be present with us. But these need not be the same as doubts. One important question, then, is how we should differentiate those matters that we will not always know from those that we must know in order to be orthodox believers. This is a crucial distinction. Maybe we will find some concealed blessings along the way--some personal freedom and a new appreciation of others in the body of Christ with whom we do not agree on 100% of all issues.

### Differentiating Theology

One way to answer the critical question concerning Christianity's nonnegotiable areas of theology is to distinguish between beliefs that are absolutely indispensable and those that demand further research. But how do we do this? What are the parameters for such a study?

There are several ways to help us establish our fundamental beliefs. Crucial doctrines that are foundational to Christianity have at least four earmarks that set them apart. They are clearly taught in Scripture, as well as being identified as centrally important. There are also strong evidential reasons to accept each one. (Some of these reasons were mentioned ever so briefly in Chapter 6.) Lastly, they occur prominently in classic Christian statements of faith down through the ages. In sum, the fundamental doctrines not only figure both clearly and prominently in Scripture, but are also supported strongly in terms of both apologetics and church history.

At the head of the list belongs the content of the gospel. What is the absolute minimum of data that makes up the heart of the Christian faith? When Paul defines his central message, there are three doctrines that are repeated each time: the Deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus. One is saved by exercising faith in the Person of Jesus Christ, in light of these truths (Rom. 10:9; I Cor. 15:3-4; II Tim. 2:8-9). Other items are also mentioned, but it appears that these are the only ones always included without exception.

Besides faith in the gospel, other fundamental doctrines that fulfill our four criteria include the belief in one God (Deut. 6:4), in three separate Persons (Eph. 4:4-6), creation (Gen. 1:1-3; Col. 1:16), the inspiration of Scripture (II Tim. 3:16; II Pet. 1:21), the virgin birth (Matt. 1:18-23) and incarnation of Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:14), His Second Coming (Acts 1:9-11; Rev. 1:7), the sinful nature of human beings (Rom. 3:23; 6:23), eternal life for believers (Jn. 6:47; 14:1-4), and eternal judgment for unbelievers (Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:41-46).

Actually, there is widespread agreement among orthodox believers on at least the general contours of these doctrines, and especially concerning faith in the Jesus Christ of the gospel facts. This is the case whatever the specific denomination. Disagreements and distinctives usually come in less crucial areas.

One way to discern the difference between absolutely crucial matters of theology and secondary ones is to ask whether one's beliefs on either side of that issue would threaten the essence of the Christian faith. The vast majority of the heated disputes among Christians would cause absolutely no adjustment to ultimate truth. They are lesser problems that we must not allow to prey on our emotions because they do not actually affect our faith whatever the view taken, within reason. (Obviously, someone could still take one these non-fundamental options to a ridiculous point. We're not addressing that.)

There are numerous examples of hot issues that do not affect the central truth of Christianity. They include such major controversies as the specific date of creation, the time of the rapture, the present existence of the "sign" spiritual gifts, perseverance of the saints, dispensationalism, or the varieties of church worship and government.

So that we are not misunderstood here, we need to quickly add that discussions on such issues are still needed. It is important that we formulate our own views concerning them. This is especially the case with preaching in local churches or when teaching theology. So the outcome of these questions is important. Non-fundamental theology is just that--not insignificant or inconsequential theology. Pastors and other teachers can both be clear about their own position, as well as pointing out that other believers hold alternate views. This should help situations like Ken's above.

However, since answers to secondary theological matters do not affect the truthfulness of the Christian faith, regardless of their outcome, differences on these subjects should not cause Christians to doubt. In other words, emotional theological quandaries should not result from topics that do not affect our eternal destiny.

Then we can move a step further. Not only should such differences not bother us, but we should actually celebrate them. It is nothing short of a great blessing to have the freedom in the body of Christ to hold divergent opinions on secondary matters. Differences of various sorts were present in the New Testament and are even more the case today. We should encourage believers to sit down with one another amicably, open up Scripture, and learn from each other. To share this common basis over a cup of coffee should be exhilarating.

Making such theological distinctions is crucial for our discussion of doubt. We must be able to give our attention to any number of theological matters, and enjoy doing it, but without causing any anxiety.

This is roughly what I explained to Ken that night he called. Once he distinguished primary from secondary doctrine, he recognized that his objection no longer had the force that he thought it did. So what if all evangelicals don't agree on all the specifics of secondary doctrine? Further, he realized that the firm basis for the fundamental doctrines, with as many as four types of checks and balances, certainly disproved his claim that these beliefs were just a matter of interpretation. Ken was not only significantly relieved, but in the many conversations we've had in the ten years or so since that evening, he has never struggled again with this issue. Today, he just smiles and shakes his head when the topic comes up.

"Bad night," he quips.

But that's the heart of emotional doubt in a nutshell!

## Conclusion

Kelly used to feel uncomfortable whenever her pastor prefaced a discussion by indicating that sincere Christians were divided over a certain issue. And it even troubled her when he explained that he just wanted to be honest about tough portions of Scripture. But she was especially relieved when, during a private conversation, he pointed out that none of these matters had any affect on the truthfulness of Christianity or her salvation. In fact, he explained how such an honest attitude allowed Christians to both take a personal view on the doctrine, as well as actually being excited about the continuing opportunity to study the matter.

Jarrod had a question about the doctrine of creation, which he rightly thought was one of Christianity's central tenets. Doing some research on the topic, he developed his own list of reasons for believing it. As a result, he was assured that this doctrine was both central and well evidenced.

Believers often experience doubt simply because they do not agree with each other concerning doctrinal issues that do not ultimately affect their faith either way, although these are still important areas of theology. We can live with questions like these, just as Christians did in the earliest church. Making distinctions like we have made here can keep us from unneeded uncertainty. Far from allowing difficult issues to cause us anxiety, this subject should actually even encourage us in that God has allowed freedom in the body of Christ.

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## Chapter X

### Negative and Positive Consequences

Emotional doubt can sometimes lead to dire consequences. Or it can help to produce believers who are vibrant and growing. It all depends on our response to it.

When Jennifer first called, she was a bit combative. Having read my earlier book on doubt, she wanted to argue about what kind of uncertainty she was experiencing. I listened to her description of the problem. Then I asked the same questions that we've discussed throughout this book.

"Don't tell me it's emotional," she responded.

"Why not?" I countered, sure that this was the nature of her unrest. "What would be wrong with that?"

"I just have an image in my mind of men in white coats," she answered.

It took a while to work through that misconception. Then, after realizing that I was probably correct in my identification, she issued her next challenge.

"And don't tell me to just pray and be spiritual. Everyone tells me that," she sputtered.

Over several lengthy phone calls, I understood more of where she was coming from. Fitting the description of the typical high powered executive, Jennifer was a Vice President in a large corporation. A good thinker with good people-skills, she was moving quickly up the ladder. A single woman and a believer with a strong family background, she also possessed a fine grasp of Christian truth. But somehow her faith and her business skills were not working out. It was her faith that was suffering. She had prayed to trust Christ literally hundreds of times, but somehow she still questioned her salvation so thoroughly that she didn't even consider herself to be a believer.

After many talks, including speaking at length about Philippians 4:6-9, she decided not to pursue a remedy for her doubt. Somehow, she just wasn't ready to apply the procedure. "I'm going to let it go for a little while and see what happens," she reported.

About three years later, she called back. I was quite surprised to hear from her, given the way she had called off the earlier discussions. At the time, I had felt like a salesman who couldn't close the deal!

In the meantime, she had changed jobs and, as judged by the business world, she was a raging success. But her private world was crumbling around her.

"My boss would think I was going nuts if he knew what I was calling about. He thinks I'm at the top of my career, but I'm completely miserable. What I most want, I can't have," she complained. "I don't care about money or success. I only want the Lord, but I don't think He wants me. It's affecting everything I do. I have to do something about it."

Jennifer's uncertainty had affected negatively every aspect of her life, including her business and her personal life. She testified that not a day went by that it didn't cause her exceptional grief. When she began the second round of calls, she told me that she had been brought to an all-time low point. She had a choice of either turning to the Lord or watching her life fall apart due to questioning her relationship with the Lord. This time around, she did not even question the identification of her struggles as emotional. She knew it to be the case.

Over the next few months we talked regularly, making a weekly appointment for a call. Jennifer started very slowly, still exceptionally leery of applying the biblical steps, or even admitting that they would be helpful at all. But once she began, she went at it tenaciously. The walls of emotional doubt crumbled around her very quickly, given the depth of her inner turmoil.

Jennifer developed into a textbook case of what can happen once the application of biblical principles takes place. In the next few months, she began to grow in her walk with the Lord. Having attended a biblical church all of her life, she had always been a worker. In the days to come, she began leading a woman's Bible study, as well as talking to other women about their struggles with emotional doubt. In my twenty-five years of giving advice on this subject, I've very seldom seen this drastic of a change. But the Lord turned all of that around when she decided to get serious in the application of His principles.

We saw similar patterns in earlier chapters. Missy found that even suffering from a psychological disorder did not keep her from gaining victory over her need for assurance (Chapter 9). James decided that the only way to conquer the severe childhood hurt in his life was to make the decision to apply biblical precepts (Chapter 9). Ken's changed perspective on the nature of theology led to a corresponding modification of his views on Christianity as a whole (Chapter 10). All three had changed from believers whose questioning dominated their lives. As the old saying goes, doubt can either make you or break you.

### Negative Consequences

Throughout this volume we have seen examples of changed lives that have come as a result of dealing with religious doubt. Yet, many persons suffered significantly until they made the decision to change. We've also seen some cases where people chose not to do anything about their doubt, accepting those consequences, as well.

In this chapter, we will look first at five unfortunate consequences to which religious doubt can lead. While there may be some overlap here, each presents a different angle on the problem. Notice the progression between the stages of reaction. Doubt frequently moves similarly.

1) Doubt often leads to a degrading view of God. The doubter almost always thinks that God has in some way abandoned him or her, or otherwise hurt them in some way. After all, shouldn't God, who can do anything, want to help us to feel better? Then why don't I have more peace and less pain? Somehow, it is surmised that God is at fault here. He must not care about me or want to help. This generally makes the emotional situation even worse, pushing the individual further from God and His truth.

Sadly, the bad theology keeps the sufferer from pursuing the truth: his own faulty thinking has produced this situation. As we have seen over and over again, our doubt arises, not from the circumstances around us, but from the things we tell ourselves about what happens. So not only is the doubter suffering, but he or she is likely compounding the uncertainty with bad thoughts about God.

2) Bad theology often encourages bad habits. The murkiness moves further. Habits like thanklessness also develop. When children learn traits like this one, adults are quick to point out: "You kids would complain even if you got every last thing you wanted." Or, "Children are so ungrateful. I wished I got everything you have when I was small."

But as adults, are we any more thankful? We respond: "Well, that's different, I didn't get everything I wanted." How dissimilar is this? We are just as quick to blame God for all of our frustration and even our shortcomings!

Cynicism develops, too. Once we've crossed the line to blaming God, everything can be laid at His doorstep. How convenient! We are no longer responsible for our thoughts and actions. God is supposed to kiss it and

make it all better! If He doesn't do so, He's obviously let us down. Sometimes we sneer at thoughts about Him. But if an answer to prayer is sandwiched in there some place, God is a Hero again. We can be such fickle people!

We could go on and continue to name more bad habits. But these are sufficient to make our point. Bad theology affects our attitudes. More seriously, sometimes there is no recovery from unthankfulness and especially cynicism. Once these attitudes are ingrained deeply into our psyches, it's hard to remove them. Did you ever start to really not like someone and notice what happens whenever you see them? Even when they're doing something positive, it's too late. Once we label someone a loser, it takes a lot to change that designation. It's just a short step to despising them. And when believers who suffer from this sort of doubt hear about God, they can begin to despise Him, too, if they are not careful.

3) Bad theology and poor attitudes affect our motivation. Why should someone follow God when they think that He has wronged them? And what if He doesn't care about us at all? Does that make us want to follow Him more?

When a believer loses his or her will to continue on the heavenly path, passivity sets in, like spiritual rigor mortis. Suffering a reversal of direction in our commitment to God can similarly be devastating. How do you get a dead person to move? There's the problem! It's so difficult to move what is no longer in motion toward a goal.

4) Now we reach the flip side of apathy. When we don't think and do the things we should, we lose momentum. Sometimes it's easier to do the things we shouldn't. Sin always seems like an easier move. Sin is also contagious. One sin often leads to another.

Maybe the person will keep the flood gates from opening--maybe they won't. But once we've crossed the line and let our defenses down, it is so much easier to do it again. Most of us know the feeling that comes when, after losing weight and gaining most of it back again, we reach a place where we feel like we really don't care whether or not we eat every cake and bowl of ice cream in the world! At that point, short of a major change of direction, we've lost the battle.

I will always remember one person who came to talk. While passing through the area, Lee came to see me about her doubt. A college graduate and a believer, she was concerned about her motivation to follow the Lord. She determined that she was lagging in her commitment to the Lord, due to the presence of regular sin in her life. But try as I might, she was no longer willing to turn to God. I will always remember the end of the meeting, knowing that nothing had changed and that she would not repent and commit herself to Him. It was a chilling departure that afternoon.

5) The most serious of the repercussions of religious doubt comes to the one who seemingly abandons all or part of their faith and hardens their heart against the Lord. Sometimes this comes as a result of a long struggle that started as factual questioning, moving on to emotional issues. Old wounds yield scars and perhaps a "Who cares?" attitude. It follows for many that if God isn't on my side, why should I have anything to do with Him?

This sort of believer has continued down his or her path and refused to benefit from all the many blessings of the Christian faith. Their decision comes in spite of all the evidences for faith, the emotional remedies provided by wonderfully healing texts like Philippians 4:6-9, and the possibility of victorious living in light of eternal life.

What are the possible signs that may indicate that someone is in danger? This is an exceptionally difficult question because we can never be sure of another's heart, or when someone has crossed the line. Neither should we presume to announce our opinions to or about such persons. But due to the seriousness of the situation, and out of sensitivity to our suffering brother or sister, we might still venture a humble, cautious response.

Perhaps the clearest indication is that the person is no longer thinking, acting, and talking in a biblical manner, or in keeping with their previous commitment. Maybe references to the Lord bring sneers or derogatory remarks. Or their own language about God may betray them--especially if it is flippant or callous. Another possible indication is the inability to make spiritual decisions. Like Israel, perhaps there is an insensitivity to spiritual things, as the writer of Hebrews warns (Heb. 3:1-15). Possibly there is a lack of fruit in their lives (Matt. 7:18-23; Heb 6:7-8). They have probably abandoned Christian fellowship (Heb. 10:25).

What characteristics are necessary in the spiritual counselor? Sensitivity is absolutely required. The person must first be sensitive to the Lord, then to the hurting individual. The latter must never be given an excuse to think that we are responding for any reason other than out of love and concern for God, His Word, and them. Humility is also an essential. There must be absolutely no sign of haughtiness or arrogance, which are condemned by our Lord (Lk. 18:9-14). Pray for discernment in these matters, for much may depend on the words of the adviser. Boldness may even be necessary here, if the situation demands it. The potential that a brother or sister in Christ may be in danger outweighs one's personal desire not to be involved in the situation.

How should the concerned person respond? What steps might be taken? Where do we begin? The best place to start is with ourselves. Spend time with the Lord in prayer. We need to search our own hearts in order to test our motives. Why are we getting involved? Is there any desire whatsoever just to meddle in someone else's life or see if we can uncover some tidbit about them? Do we feel like we "owe" them one? What about our own relationship to the Lord? Have we examined ourselves (I Cor. 10:12; 11:31)? Have we repented of all known sins? As far as we know, is there anything between us and the Lord or between us and another believer?

Next, seek the advice of mature Christians. This is not a decision that should be made lightly, or by the judgment of a single individual. Pray together and seek the Lord's will. Pray for the leading and intervention of the Holy Spirit. The work is His.

When meeting with the doubter, listen to his or her concerns. Ask good questions. Where are they now with the Lord? Be aware of any progression of the doubt. At what stage does it seem to be? Are they sensitive to the Lord? In what areas? How do they respond to the overall situation? Are they concerned? Remorseful? Where do they think their doubt might take them if they pursue their present course of action? Do you agree with their assessment? If necessary, be prepared to confront them lovingly, but firmly.

Some believers who are otherwise close to a serious problem may still respond, due to the work of the Holy Spirit. They may also be touched by your love and show of concern. If they are open to assistance, begin by suggesting repentance.

Then be prepared to suggest appropriate biblical steps that address the particular issue. We have made many such suggestions. Assist them in applying these principles or make immediate arrangements to do so. Regular follow-up and fellowship are also necessary.

Steve was a college graduate, a very committed Christian, and a very intelligent young man who was well versed in philosophy and apologetics. But a few of his close friends told me that he had recently become an agnostic while finishing his Ph.D. I called Steve one night and asked him about his shift of allegiance. Imagine my surprise when he admitted that what I had heard about his agnosticism was true!

We had several lengthy conversations during which he admitted the chief reason for his change, which was not factual, but a problem with sin. As is very common, he had concluded that those who would point out his problem were themselves the difficulty. It was almost as if he thought that rejecting his faith would still his conscience (and the convicting of the Holy Spirit).

I was firm in my comments, while still trying to speak in a compassionate manner. Convicted, he repented a couple of discussions later. I also addressed a few philosophical questions. Steve seemed serious about his return to the Lord. In fact, even a few years later when we talked again, he was holding fast to Christian theism.

#### Positive Consequences

Emotional doubt can also be the instigator that brings about positive results in the believer's life. We will list here seven of these advantageous side-effects in the hope that such will encourage the individual to both work on their uncertainty and continue to mature in their Christian walk, in spite of their questions.

1) Initially, we may learn how to study and discover answers for ourselves. Especially with factual questions, few habits are more useful or gratifying for their own sake. Some report that this is one of the most gratifying results of tangling with their religious quandary. This knowledge should be helpful in future situations or in assisting others who have similar questions.

2) Having worked through uncertainty, we grow as persons. Some researchers have even concluded that we do not grow as individuals unless we experience doubts and personally labor through various sorts of questions.

3) We learn that emotions are not our enemies. Contrary to the impression given by some researchers, emotions are not bad. They are God-given. Think of all the fantastic memories and other experiences that are ours because of this wonderful gift from God. More than this, we have seen that these same emotions can be trained to behave! They can be brought into agreement with our thinking. Why not have the best of both gifts? This is a key emphasis in this book.

4) In addition to achieving a new appreciation for our emotions, thinking properly also teaches us to love the life that God has given to us. Personal conflict helps us to appreciate existence without the problems. The only time pain feels good is when it subsides and finally stops. When we struggle with doubt, we value a life where the questioning has calmed down enough so that we can stop and smell the roses.

5) Emotional doubt extends an extra, rather shocking benefit. Some doubters talk about their doubt as an "It," a monster that grips them with fear at its every bidding. It chases and pursues them, scaring them

almost to death. But additional reflection shows that this is certainly not the case. Rather than being some sort of ogre that sneaks up on us and attacks, our emotions are obviously part of us. And we want the best for ourselves, don't we? So our feelings are like guard dogs, sitting by our side and watching out for us! They are not growling at us, but at the bad, unedifying thoughts that are approaching up the walkway towards us, as well as the ones we have already invited into our lives!

So emotions are spiritual alarm clocks, buzzing loudly when we are entertaining thoughts that we have no business contemplating. We may not like being awakened in the morning from a blissful sleep, but we're still happy for the availability of a wake-up call. This is what our emotions do for us. They are our alarm clock that sounds off when we cross the line into unedifying territory. We simply misinterpret its blessings, thinking we're being attacked! Chalk up one more misbelief on the subject.

Upon reflection, Terry discovered that her unwanted emotions were not evidence of her having "fallen away" from Christianity or some other dastardly thing. Rather, she surprised herself by discovering that her feelings occurred precisely because she had entertained thoughts that were contrary to her Christian beliefs. So she decided to make the most of her passions. Learning to relax whenever the feelings popped up, she allowed her emotions to become an early warning system, sounding off whenever she began to think in a nonbiblical manner! This was her signal to begin one of the biblical strategies that she found so helpful. The fear subsided substantially.

So the emotions that we thought were so negative have taken yet another ironic twist. Our feelings are on our side. They support our struggles. In a strange sort of way, God has spoken to us through them!

6) Not to miss the forest for the trees, the experience of doubt can actually lead to its own death! By dealing properly with our emotions, we can quiet at least the most painful side-effects of such questioning, as well. Assurance and peace can actually be its conclusion (Phil. 4:7, 9).

In other words, learning to apply God's truth to our emotional struggles of all types, our feelings can be trained in all its aspects. The application can be made in such a way that we learn to deal with all emotional matters, including emotional doubt, teaching us how to manage our most trying times in life.

When my doubt reached the emotional stage, it came on with such fury that all my canons had to be trained specifically on the painful elements in order to get any relief. But when the smoke cleared away and I learned to control the feelings, I realized an even more wonderful truth. The emotional species of doubt that had plagued me for so many years could be handled in roughly the same way. How many unforeseen twists were there to this topic? Doubt certainly was not everything it was supposed to be! And most of the revelations were positive, too.

7) Lastly, doubt helps our faith to mature. Our new thinking should contribute to a deeper spirituality. We should come away from these trying times of uncertainty with a deeper desire to come to know better the God whose truth we believe. In this sense, Christian growth is taking place.

Having actually grown in the midst of our suffering, thankfulness and praise to God are the natural results. We develop a new appreciation for how He works in our life. Just like Job, although we may have started out by questioning Him, we may end up actually being a living example of just how God works such a process out. How many ironies can come from this one subject? Paul calls us God's workmanship (Eph. 2:10) and adds that God will finish the work He has begun in us (Phil. 1:6). Being obedient through the process of doubt can aid in that process.

Dealing with emotional doubt has taken us to the practice of biblical disciplines like prayer, thanksgiving, praise, meditation, and personal study. In working through our questioning, we may have been pursuing the path of increased spirituality without even realizing it. The last thing we should do is stop this process of growth when our pain begins to subside. This is the very time we should be increasing our spiritual progress, not only as preventative therapy, but also as a means of continued growth.

The resulting maturation continues to push us in the direction of practicing the other Christian disciplines, too. If, with the Psalmist, we desire God and long for Him with all of our hearts, then we should seek Him (Ps. 42:1-2). We can pursue those practices that can increase our intimacy and fellowship with Him.

Some may now ask a great question that has perhaps been building throughout the book. Since religious doubt produces so many positive consequences, why do we emphasize corrective thinking and try to change the feelings?

Such healing is needed for at least three reasons. First, we have also seen that, perhaps because of the many surprises on this topic, believers draw many false conclusions. But failing to deal with doubt in the correct manner can also lead to serious harm. We would like to stop this sort of problem before it gets a chance to develop. Second, the emotional element is frequently so painful that the person at least feels like they need immediate treatment. It is normal for human beings to want to avoid pain, even if it produces some positive results. Third, the benefits that come from doubt generally come only after the uncertainty is treated. The blessings, then, are largely manifest only in retrospect.



## Conclusion

Over a period of 25 years, I have dealt with approximately 100 individual cases of doubting persons, keeping records on almost every one of them. The vast majority of these (about three quarters), both male and female, were emotional in nature. About three quarters of the total were followed up in subsequent talks, with well over half of these coming more than one full year later. I have had long-term contacts over the years with more than one-third of these persons.

The vast majority of individuals improved significantly. Almost without any exceptions, the emotional doubters, in particular, reported marked improvement, as judged by their own testimony. Since I never charged anyone or otherwise received pay from any of them, all they had to do if they were still hurting was to contact me again. As part of a very unofficial survey, their satisfaction was judged primarily by their follow-up testimony to me, but also by their not returning beyond the last contact, even though I always left that option open. This would seem to be a fair, twofold indication of a decent amount of ongoing contentment.

The bad news is that some refuse to follow biblical instructions. Rejecting God's warnings and failing to follow His recipe for peace, they continue in their pain and uncertainty. Often, they blame God and/or their circumstances, when their chief problem is what they tell themselves and how they respond to what happens.

In contrast, the great news is that emotional doubt is usually treatable. We may have victory through God's power, weapons, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is an added benefit of God's grace that something seemingly so painful and otherwise negative may be turned around (often quite quickly) to produce so many positive affects.