

WRESTLING WITH DOUBT,
FINDING FAITH

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To all who struggle with doubt.

A WORD TO THE READER

Over the years I've had many people come to my office who struggled with Christian faith. Some were trying to hold on to their faith. Others had abandoned it altogether but, for some reason, still wanted to talk with a pastor about the faith they had left behind.

I enjoy these conversations. I am grateful and humbled that people come to talk, to share their doubts and questions of faith. I try to listen carefully and caringly. They nearly all have wrestled with some variation of the same issues. Some simply struggle to believe in the concept of God—that a personal, supernatural Being created and superintends the universe. Others believe in God, and have a deep appreciation for Jesus, but wrestle with specific Christian beliefs about Jesus, things like his resurrection from the dead. Still others tell me that the Bible, a book intended to inspire faith, is the source of their doubt: they mention things like the violence attributed to God in scripture, its subordination of women, its acceptance of slavery, and its teachings about sexuality as deeply troubling. Perhaps the

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greatest challenge to faith for many is human suffering and God's failure to act in response to suffering and injustice, natural disasters, and illness.

There was a time when, in meeting with people struggling with faith, I would have felt compelled to try to persuade them to believe. That seldom seemed helpful. What did seem helpful was to honestly admit there are legitimate questions that can be raised about faith; that there are things in the Bible that are troubling to thoughtful people; and that we all struggle with doubt, including me. I found that when I could articulate that I understood their questions, and that I, myself, had wrestled with some of these same questions and doubts over the last forty years, there was an openness to have a meaningful conversation about their doubts, and a greater openness to hear the reasons that, despite my doubts, I had faith.

Recently, over one thousand people took a survey we developed at Church of the Resurrection asking about their doubts. Respondents attended a variety of churches, and some attended no churches at all. Ninety-five percent said they struggle with doubt at least occasionally. Twenty-four percent said they regularly struggled with doubt. Their top doubts or sources of doubt were:

1. Suffering and the goodness of God
2. Is Christianity the one true religion?

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3. Is there really a heaven?
4. Does God hear and answer our prayers?
5. Can the Bible be trusted?
6. Does God really exist?
7. Does God really know and love me?

Forty-seven percent felt that their doubts ultimately served to help them find or strengthen their faith. Twenty-seven percent said their faith was neither strengthened nor weakened by their doubts. But 23 percent reported their faith was weakened by their doubts, and 3 percent indicated that their doubts led them to lose their faith altogether.

I am picturing this little book as a conversation with you, the reader. As I write it, I'm imagining us sitting down together over a cup of coffee discussing your questions, struggles, and doubts. My aim is to keep this book brief, something you can read in a couple of hours. It is not intended to provide all of the answers to your questions, but to be a starting point, offering a few responses to the doubts we all wrestle with, responses that I've found compelling and helpful in my own faith.

This book is written for people who have questions of faith or who wrestle with doubt, both Christians and non-Christians. My hope is that it will help to encourage you as you wrestle with doubt, and ultimately, that it might lead you to find faith.

INTRODUCTION

IN PRAISE OF HONEST DOUBT

There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Only God and certain madmen have no doubts!

—Martin Luther

Everyone doubts.

Regardless of your faith, or lack of faith, certainty is virtually impossible to come by. This is true not only in matters of religion but also in life. The night before marrying my wife, LaVon, I was 81.7 percent sure getting married was the right thing to do and that it would lead to a happy and fulfilling life for us—but there was at least 18.3 percent of me that wondered what on earth I was doing (we married the week after high school graduation!). I'm pretty sure I'm going to live a long life and be here to provide for my family. But I have life insurance just in case that

Much of this chapter was previously published in my book *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).

doesn't work out. And every time I get on an airplane, I feel confident that I'll make it to where I'm going and back home again, but I often leave a note to my wife and kids telling them I love them, just in case the plane goes down. *There are few absolute certainties in life.*

We want certainty,
but God gives us mystery.

When it comes to matters of religion—including the question of whether there is a God or not—it is no different. This is true for the atheist and for the believer. I am reminded of one atheist (who later became a Christian) who told of the anxiety he experienced as an unbeliever when he considered the possibility that God might actually exist. What is true for the atheist is going to be true for the Christian. We want certainty, but God gives us mystery. All who embrace a religious faith (and I consider atheism and agnosticism as a kind of religious faith as well) are going to have periods of doubt, and for theists, times when our faith seems ridiculous and we have more questions than answers. Some fear doubt. They fear that doubt might be just the tip of the iceberg and that if they allow themselves to doubt, to earnestly confront their deepest questions, they might very

well lose their faith in God altogether. Others believe doubt must surely displease God, and so, for God's sake, they can't allow themselves to admit to doubt. It implies a weak faith or even sin.

Doubt is not only natural, it is healthy, provided it spurs us to further reflection and a search for what is true.

I don't see doubt this way. Doubt is not only natural, it is healthy, provided it spurs us to further reflection and a search for what is true. Most of us wrestle with doubt from time to time, and our doubts become particularly pronounced in the face of adversity, or when encountering persons who see the world differently than we do. Some life events can't help leaving us searching, questioning, and wrestling with doubt. And some periods in our lives, the late teens and early twenties, are commonly times of doubt. Midlife can be another. These doubts and questions may lead to a crisis point, a place where all we thought we knew for certain has been called into question, and our religious, philosophical, and moral foundations are shaken.

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These crises commonly produce one of three responses. Some come to reject everything they had learned growing up, and the faith that they were raised with, and they turn away from God completely. Others suppress their questions and retreat to an intractable faith—a faith that is filled with certainties and is immune to questions. Often this is a fundamentalism that offers certainty based upon an inerrant Bible and lots of reassurance that what one believes is absolutely true. But there is a third option, one that faces doubt head-on and that carefully examines the presuppositions and assumptions of the faith that we've held up to this point. It accepts that there may well be truth in the faith we were raised with, while making room to question and critique elements of that faith, recognizing that perhaps not all we believed in our early life is true.

Once more, one of the premises of this book is that doubt and questioning are not the enemy of faith, but often a path to a deeper and more authentic faith. As Anglican writer Os Guinness once wrote, “If ours is an examined faith, we should be unafraid to doubt. If doubt is eventually justified, we were believing what clearly was not worth believing. But if doubt is answered, our faith grows stronger still. It knows God more certainly and it can enjoy God more deeply.”¹

The Bible itself is filled with stories of people who had their doubts. Abraham and Sarah, though known for

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“believing God,” seemed often to struggle with doubt. Jacob, Abraham and Sarah’s grandson, wrestled with God. When God called Moses to lead the children of Israel out of slavery, Moses offered excuses, an expression, I believe, of his doubts. Many of the psalms attributed to David point to his doubts, as did his moments of infidelity to God. A major theme of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament is the struggle God’s people, collectively, had in being faithful, a struggle to believe in, and serve, a God they could not see.

The New Testament records many examples of doubt. In fact, the New Testament opens with the story of Joseph’s doubt when told by Mary she had conceived a child by the Holy Spirit—Joseph becoming the first person to doubt the Virgin Birth (or at least the virginal conception). Religious leaders doubt that Jesus is the Messiah. Peter doubts when Jesus comes walking to him on the water on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus routinely notes that his disciples are those of little faith. After three years following him, the disciples doubt the women when, after his crucifixion, they tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead. And even after the other disciples have seen the resurrected Christ, and report this to him, Thomas still refuses to believe until he actually sees Christ for himself. Matthew begins with Joseph’s doubt and ends telling us that among Christ’s followers there were some who still doubted the Resurrection (see Matthew 28:17).

I love the story in Mark's Gospel of the father who brought his son to Jesus for healing. His boy was plagued with seizures. The man pled with Jesus, "If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!" (Mark 9:22). Jesus replied, "*If you can do anything?* All things are possible for the one who has faith" (9:23). And the boy's father exclaims, "*I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!*" (9:24 NIV, emphasis added). This has been my prayer on many occasions as well. "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."

There's a measure of faith required in almost everything in life.

Here's what is important to know: doubt is normal. There's a measure of faith required in almost everything in life. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, but often leads to a deeper faith. And while there are good reasons for a thoughtful, intelligent person to be a Christian, there is no irrefutable proof for the central claims of Christianity—nor those of any other religion, just as there is no irrefutable proof for atheism's claim that there is no God. They all, including atheism, require a measure of faith.

Ultimately, faith is a decision, a choice, based upon a thoughtful and even critical examination of a particular

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faith's historical, existential, and spiritual claims; its consistency with the world around us; the experience of those practicing the faith; and the implications and impact of the particular faith on the lives of its adherents and on the world.

I am a Christian. I believe the historic tenets of the Christian faith. I wake up daily seeking to follow Jesus. I pray each morning, offering my life to Christ. But I also know that the three pounds of gray matter at the top of my head are hardly adequate to fully understand the nature of God or the universe around me. I admit to myself and others that I could be wrong—I don't think I am, but it is possible. But until proven wrong, I cast my lot with the idea that there is a God who is behind the vastness and mystery of the universe; that this God came to us in Jesus who shows us who God is and what God longs for from us. I seek to follow Jesus's ethic of love, not warm feelings but a dogged desire to practice justice, kindness, and mercy toward others. I seek to live as he taught his disciples to live. I believe that in his death we see selfless love and receive mercy and redemption, and that in his resurrection we see the triumph of love over hate, kindness over cruelty, and life over death. But, I recognize that I could be wrong.

There are some who wait for absolute proof before they are willing to have faith. Some of these are paralyzed by the possibility they could be wrong. But if we act only

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on things we are certain about, we'll live a life of "analysis paralysis" and miss out on what scripture calls "the life that really is life."

This is true in every area of life. If I hung on to my doubt and allowed it to paralyze me, I would never have married my wife of forty-one years. I would have missed out on a lifetime of love and fulfilling, amazing experiences. If I insisted on absolute certainty, I would never have had children. I would never have boarded an airplane or jumped off the high dive platform as a child. I would never have become a Christian or a pastor or started the congregation I serve. And I would have missed out on most of the greatest experiences of my life.

When it comes to faith, we explore our questions, we critically examine the evidence for faith, we weigh the testimony of others, including the witness of the Bible itself, we explore our options, and then, we *make a decision*, we take a leap, and we trust. And for many of us, our prayer becomes "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."