

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Learning to Doubt Our Doubts

John 20:24-29

Sunday, May 22, 2022

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If you've ever doubted God's existence or know someone who has, this message is for you. If you are afraid to express your struggles with faith, this message is for you. The truth is 99 percent of us are in one of those categories, and the one percent is lying! So this message is for everyone!

I have gone through seasons of doubt. It's called being human. It is normal. I wouldn't be much of a preacher if I didn't struggle with doubt. I wouldn't have much to offer you. I believe with Frederick Buechner that "doubts are the ants in the pants of faith; they keep it alive and moving."

There is more faith in doubt than you might think. John Wesley said that doubt is the front porch to faith. You show me someone who has never gone through seasons of doubt and I'll show you someone with a shallow faith.

So I'd like to share some insights I have learned in my struggles with doubt, and I hope they can help you. If you open your heart to today's message you may begin to doubt your doubts and experience the power of faith.

Here's a question: Why can't God do something spectacular for those who doubt him? "God, if you exist give me a hole in one on this next golf hole!" Why can't God just sky write a message in the sky that says, "I love you, God." Or how about God doing a world tour, appearing in every city with a message for the world: "I do exist!"

Ever wondered why God doesn't do something spectacular like that? It would remove all of our doubts and silence skeptics and cynics.

When British philosopher Bertrand Russell was asked what he would say if after death he found himself confronted by God, Russell replied, "I would say, 'Why didn't you prove yourself to those who doubted you?'"

A clever comedian once said that he would have no difficulty believing in God. "All God would have to do would be to deposit \$1,000,000 in my bank account."

Unfortunately, for whatever reason, God does not operate that way. There is an old saying, "If there is a God he is the ultimate under achiever." But is he really? Has God really left us with no evidence or proof that he exists?

When I think about the moment Paul was born or when I look at a sunset, or gaze at the stars, I ask "What more proof of God do we need than that?" All we have to do is look at the glory of creation to see that there is a God. Theologians call this the design argument. When we look at wonders around us we conclude that all of it did not occur by chance. There has to be a designer.

However, there are some who are not so sure. I had a friend in college who had a very strong faith. He grew up in a strong Christian home and was very active in his church. He began his freshman year determined to hold on to his faith. He was exposed to new knowledge of science and biology. He also learned from the religion department that there were alternative ways to interpret the Bible and faith. It wasn't long before many doubts crept in. These doubts led him to give up his faith. Today he has embraced the faith again and is active in a church but he still has many doubts and questions.

My friend reminds me of the man who came to Jesus with his sick boy in the gospel of Mark. He said to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief." If we are honest, that's where most of us live. Most of us live on top of that semicolon between belief and unbelief. There are days when we feel like Jesus is holding our hand and there are days we feel completely in the dark.

If you struggle with doubts and questions about God's existence you're in good company. The Bible is filled with people who doubted God. One of the famous doubters in scripture doubted so much that doubting became his first name - "Doubting" Thomas. His signature scene appears in the 20th chapter of John. Appearances of the resurrected Jesus were happening everywhere. Most of the disciples had encountered him, but not Thomas. Here is what Thomas had to say about that:

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” –John 20:24-25

At one time or another we have felt like Thomas: “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Maybe today you wish God would just prove himself in some way.

Well, Thomas got his wish. Take a look:

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” –John 20:26-28

Wouldn't you love to have that experience? “Finally! He showed up. I see proof with my own eyes. Now I believe!” But notice what Jesus said next:

Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” –John 20:29

Why would Jesus make that statement? “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” It would make more sense if Jesus had said, “How noble and amazing are those who come to believe without proof.” But that is not what he said. He said they were “blessed.” Why would those who believe without proof be blessed? Because experiencing God goes much deeper than experiencing proof. It is beyond the physical. Those who experience God beyond what can be seen by the eyes are truly blessed because they experience God on a deeper level.

God is not a science experiment. God is a personal being. God is not an object to be observed; God is a spiritual power to be experienced. How do I know that? Well, let me share a few reasons why I believe this:

Proof of God Doesn't Guarantee Belief in God

It's impossible for God to prove his existence. Why? Because God gave us freedom of thought. Anything

God could or would do to prove his existence would be refuted or explained away. For example, say God did send a comet in the sky to write to the world, “I love you, God.” Or say God toured the world like Elvis and gave a show filled with miracles and wonders. You would still have folks who would not believe there is God. Instead they would say:

“-The people witnessing the demonstration were hallucinating or dreaming -The demonstration was an optical illusion or a freak occurrence of atmospheric conditions

-The demonstration is natural phenomena which science will eventually explain -The demonstration was not caused by God, but by someone else, possibly someone masquerading as God

-The demonstration was misinterpreted: aliens made a mistake when they tried to contact us, the scientists who documented it made mistakes or were biased towards theism, etc” ([https:// www.rationalchristianity.net/proof.html](https://www.rationalchristianity.net/proof.html)).

Regardless of what God tried to do to prove his existence, some folks would still find some way to refute it. So proof of God doesn't always guarantee a belief in God.

Proof Does Not Always Lead to Faith

Many make the assumption that if God showed up and proved he existed to everyone then all would be right with the world. Your Uncle Billy would stop drinking and come to church. Your atheist friend would convert and become a preacher. Sorry to burst your bubble, but proof of God does not always lead to faith in God. The Bible says, “Even the demons believe and tremble.”

We must remember that there were many people in the Bible who witnessed miracles but did not follow God. Countless people witnessed the miracles of Jesus and yet fell away when things got tough.

I like how [rationalchristianity.net](http://www.rationalchristianity.net) puts it: “Even if God provided proof that was satisfactory to everyone, faith and trust would still be required to follow God. The atheist's question would merely change from ‘Why doesn't God prove his existence?’ to ‘Why doesn't God explain why he did this and not that?’ Atheists themselves might come to believe in a higher power, but not all of them would become Christians: one can

believe God exists without believing he's worthy of worship, or that Christ saved us from sin" (<https://www.rationalchristianity.net/proof.html>).

Faith is an Inside Job

A relationship with God must take place on a spiritual level. It can't happen on the outside of you. It must happen on the inside. Faith is an inside job. God communicates to us personally and intimately. God relates to each of us individually.

King Duncan writes, "This means you cannot find God with the most powerful telescope ever built. You cannot find him with a slide rule, or a test tube or an enormous computer. There is only one way to find God and that is to take a step of faith, entrust your life to Him, and enter into a daily walk with Him as Savior and Lord of your life. I cannot prove to you the existence of God, but you can prove God to yourself by seeking a relationship with him.

"Look at it this way. Could I prove to you that love exists? A scientist could attach electrodes to the skin of a person in love and measure the pulse, the respiration and the blood pressure of a person in the presence of their beloved. But that would not prove love. Too much caffeine that morning at breakfast might cause the same bodily reactions. The only way you and I can ever prove love is to experience it - to love and be loved."

So it is with faith and experiencing God. The only way to truly existence the reality of God is by trusting him with your life and developing a relationship with him. The reality of God begins with an intimate connection with him and his love. As the old hymns proclaims, "You ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart." The prophet Jeremiah puts it this way: When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).

A relationship with God must be based on trust, not proof. ***Belief in God based on proof is a science experiment. Faith in God based on trust is a relationship.***

Maybe this is starting to make sense but you still have your doubts and you don't know what to do with them. Let me lift up a passage of Scripture for you from the gospel of John, chapter 6. People are hearing Jesus teach and preach and they find his teachings difficult. More and more people are leaving him. It was fun for awhile – healings and miracles. But then Jesus started getting more challenging in his teachings and doubt crept in. Verse 66 says, "Because of this many of his

disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

So there were doubts, struggles, and questions by many and some decided not to follow Jesus anymore. Sometimes doubts can do that to people. They allow their doubt to take over their lives and they stop believing in God. They become bitter about the church and religion. And that is where you may be today and that's okay. God still believes in you even if you don't believe in Him. But watch what happens next.

So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" –John 6:67

Jesus sees everyone deserting him and he turns to the twelve and says, "Everyone's leaving me. What about you? You want to leave me too?" Simon Peter replied with the wisest answer anyone could give:

"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." –John 6:68

Now sit with Peter's response for just a moment. Here is what I believe was going on inside the heart of Peter. When everyone else had chosen to walk away from Jesus, he thought about leaving too. I am sure he had his doubts. But perhaps he began to ask, "Where are they going? Who or what are they going to follow? What are they going to put their hope in? What are they going to put their trust in? Who are they going to put their faith in? In themselves? In others? In the Roman government? In pleasures?

Jesus is the only one who can hold water! He is the only one I can really lean on!" So he said, "Lord, where else can I go? Where else can we go? You have the words to life. There is only you! I may have questions and doubts but there is only you."

When I have gone through periods of doubt and questioning I remember Peter's words, "Where else can I go?" I can't go to anyone else! Who else can give me life!

The key question in the midst of doubt is "Who or what will I follow?" Think that through. Doubt God, struggle, get angry, search. It is good for you. But before you make the ultimate decision to abandon your faith, ask to whom or what will you go? Think about that. What is really going to satisfy you?

What is really going to help you discover the truth about your life? What is really going to give you meaning? There is only God. He is the answer to all your questions and doubts. "To whom can you go?"

A cynical young medical student confronted a pastor: "I have dissected the human body," he announced, "and I found no soul." The pastor said, "That's interesting. When you dissected the brain did you find a thought? When you dissected the eye did you find vision? When you dissected the heart did you find love?" The student answered thoughtfully, "No, I did not." The pastor replied gently, "Of course you believe in the existence of thoughts, of vision, and of love. The human soul is the totality of man's existence in relationship with God. Just because you cannot locate it on a medical chart does not mean that it does not exist" (source: "Frustrated by Lack of Faith" by King Duncan).

When we stop searching for proof of God on the outside and begin to seek an experience of God on the inside we will find all the proof we need.



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