

Doubt

When it comes to reading and trusting God's Word, there's a huge difference between asking a question versus having doubt. As a long-time student of the Bible, I continue to ask questions about what I read. My questions will never be fully quenched, as there is too much knowledge in the Scriptures to grasp in one lifetime. But I've also had doubt. Thankfully, it's been almost thirty years since my doubts about God and His Word have been satisfied, removed. The evidence is so compelling that I no longer doubt what God says. I'm convinced. This essay aims to expose the difference between asking a question of the Lord and doubting the Lord.

In Luke chapter 1, we see an incredible contrast between two faithful people, one who doubts the Word of God, and one who simply questions the Word of God. The differences will be apparent as we explore the text. In verse 5 we're introduced to a man named Zacharias, who was a priest that served in the temple in Jerusalem. Zacharias was married to Elizabeth, and both were old and beyond child-bearing years. Having never had children; they petitioned the Lord for a child. The Lord sends the angel Gabriel to bring good news of their miraculous child birth to come.

Here's the account in summary, ***"there was a priest named Zacharias...and he had a wife...and her name was Elizabeth. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years."*** Notice that Zacharias was a believer, a man of righteousness. This is not a story about the doubt of an unbeliever.

Continuing in the passage, ***"And an angel of the Lord appeared to him...and fear gripped him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John.'"*** This would be the great John the Baptist, the final prophet of the Lord, before the coming of the Savior, Jesus. Notice Zacharias' fear, as we would likely all experience. Being fearful at the supernatural appearing of an angel can be expected, and this would not be what was held against him. As it is, the angel quickly puts him at ease. After Zacharias is calm, the angel provides more details about their future baby boy. This was a Word from the Lord, yet Zacharias doubted the validity of the message.

"Zacharias said to the angel, 'How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.' The angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words.'" Gabriel rightly interpreted Zacharias' doubt. In essence, Zacharias said, *"Why should I trust that the Lord will do this? What evidence will there be that these things will come to pass?"* That type of doubt is not tolerated by the Lord, especially not in the hearts and minds of a believer. Zacharias wanted evidence in order to believe that the Lord was trustworthy, so the Lord provided the evidence, and it was provided immediately. The evidence also served as a chastisement. Immediately Zacharias became mute, and this condition lasted until his son was born.

Others at the temple were wondering why Zacharias hadn't yet come out, knowing he should have been finished performing his duties by now. They obviously didn't know he'd been visited by an angel. ***"The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple. But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute."***

Now, jump ahead in Luke chapter 1 to verse 26. Six months have passed since Gabriel visited Zacharias, and now Gabriel will be giving God's Word to Mary about another miraculous birth. She'll hear that she herself, though a virgin, will bring forth the Savior of the world! Here's the story in summary.

"The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee...to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph...and the virgin's name was Mary. He said to her, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. The angel said to her, 'Do not be

afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.” As is normal, an angel appearing causes questions and fear. Mary was perplexed, and noticing her fear, Gabriel calmed her down, just as he had calmed Zacharias previously. Like Zacharias, Mary was a righteous God-fearing person, who trusted God and was found favorable with Him. The angel Gabriel continued to share the news that Mary would birth a son, and Gabriel explained who this child would be.

“You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

See the sharp contrast between doubt and questioning. Zacharias had expressed doubt in the form of a question. Mary on the other hand, believes the words of the Lord, spoken through Gabriel, but she’s confused as to how she, a virgin, could get pregnant. In essence, she says, *“I believe you, but help me understand how a virgin can get pregnant?”* This is a reasonable question which the Lord is happy to answer, and Gabriel responds by saying, ***“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.” And Mary said, “Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.”*** The Lord was pleased to satisfy Mary’s reasonable confusion, and God was just in punishing Zacharias for his doubt.

It’s important to know that, for a Christian, doubt can present itself with various levels of seriousness. Different degrees of doubt can last for a moment or carry on for long seasons of time. Doubt can also arise from a variety of sources; perhaps from a present trial one is enduring, or Satan’s deception, or the desires of the flesh. Other types of doubts might creep in caused by a skeptic’s clever argument, someone mocking your faith, some new scientific claim, or simply from a lack of sleep. Doubt doesn’t mean that one has no faith at all, but rather that one is battling through a particular issue of the faith. In other words, for a Christian, a doubt isn’t conclusive, it’s intrusive, and needs to be addressed and put behind him.

Before Peter was indwelt with the Holy Spirit, and while Peter was still learning to trust Jesus, Peter was bold enough to ask Jesus if he too could come out onto the water where Jesus was standing. Once out on the water himself, Peter focused on the wind and waves and he started to sink. Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 14:31, ***“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”*** Peter would learn that his doubt was unfounded and needed to be dismissed. We can be like Peter, and sink, when we get our focus off of the truth from time to time. However, the lesson is the same, which is, Jesus can always be trusted! A Christian can have his doubts removed by the redirection that we receive from the Bible, or from doing some research about a particular point of doubtful curiosity, or by seeking wise counsel from a trustworthy pastor, etc. A Christian can be reassured from any doubts, and one can learn to discern truth from untruth.

The Bible nowhere promises that God will be equally clear to every person at every moment. Christians are to be merciful toward a weaker Christian who is struggling through an issue of doubt. In Jude’s book, verse 22 says, ***“And have mercy on some, who are doubting.”*** The wording here is important. There is a calling for ***“mercy on some,”*** but not mercy on all who doubt, but on some ***“who are doubting.”*** The difference is that there are those who hold to their doubt and refuse to be corrected. Those refusing correction should be rebuked, and if they persist, they ought to be dealt with seriously; such as being put out of the assembly of believers. Examples of those who are uncorrectable might be the stubborn atheists or false teachers who simply refuse to concede truth. But there is mercy to be extended toward some who are doubting. This refers to the weaker brother who is struggling through a particular issue, who is not in stark contrast with the Lord and refusing to be corrected. Jude is saying Christians aren’t to be quick to chastise a fellow brother in the faith, simply because something causes a degree of doubt. It’s these types of doubters who are open to the conviction of the Spirit. For these, we are to encourage their faith and help them to understand the root of their doubt and help expose truth from untruth. Most doubters are reasonable people who, in these circumstances, will accept truth and turn from their doubt. Jude’s words coincide with other Biblical text about the ministry of stronger brothers to confront and lift up weaker brothers. For example, Galatians 6:1, ***“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.”*** Or Matthew 18:15, ***“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.”*** The point being that a Christian

ought to know his need of other Christians! Believers can't say to other believers, ***"I have no need of you,"*** 1 Corinthians 12:21. When gathered, we can be a sounding board against doubt and build each other up!

Some ministers though, will wrongly preach that doubt is appropriate; that not believing all of God's Word is fine. This type of teaching is heretical (in contrast with Scripture). A famous minister and false-teacher, Steven Furtick, is notorious for teaching that doubting God's Word is not only acceptable, it's expected of Christians. I suppose he preaches this filth because he himself has doubt, at least that's what he says, *"If you don't doubt it (the Bible), you're not reading it. Or, you're reading it with no intent to live it. See, my doubt is the evidence of my growth. The closer I get, the more questions I have. I struggle to believe it; that I'm forgiven, that He forgives me, not only before I accepted Him, but for what I still do. Maybe He can forgive the past stuff. But what about the present stuff? I have my doubts."* Furtick suggests that anyone who reads the Bible will surely doubt what it says. What a terrible claim! Many who read the Bible embrace its truth and turn in genuine repentance! He goes further and directly doubts the capabilities of the Lord to forgive sin. He admits to having questions, which is not a problem, but his simple lack of trust in Jesus to forgive is a big problem. In another one of his sermons, Furtick was rightly criticized for suggesting that nobody can say that they trust in Jesus without a doubt for their salvation. For Furtick to say such a thing is simply a lie from Satan. I can, and should, trust the Word of God even when I don't understand all that God says.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, I have experienced doubt. When I was twenty years old, I was confronted by the Lord at a Christian men's conference. Speaker after speaker spoke about what it means to be a man of God, and they preached straight from the Word. After the conference, I spent two months wrestling with my doubt, *"Can I trust that surrendering to God will be best for me? Will I regret doing so? Can I trust what God says in His Word?"* Eventually, through the Lord's patience with me, and by the stirring of His Spirit in my heart, I came to embrace that God's Word is true, that I could trust Him with my whole life, that Jesus is who He says He is, and that the Lord will do what He says He will do. That was December of 1995; I entrusted myself to Jesus and surrendered to Him! I've never gone back on that decision. I still ask God questions all the time, but I never doubt His Word, even if I don't understand it fully.

Here's some of what God's Word says about doubt. James 1:6, ***"But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind."*** Matthew 21:21, ***"And Jesus answered and said to them, 'Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen.'"*** Luke 24:38, ***"And He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?'"*** Hebrews 11:6, ***"And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him."*** 2 Corinthians 5:7, ***"For we walk by faith, not by sight."*** Proverbs 3:5-6, ***"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight."***

When doubt enters in, it is to be fought against with truth. Remember in Mark 9, the father who had a son that was demon possessed. The man implored Jesus to do something, but the man was weak in faith and was doubtful if Jesus was capable of doing anything to help his son. The man said to Jesus, ***"If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!"*** Jesus questioned the man's doubt, ***"If You can?"*** The man's doubt was on display, but he had a shred of belief still within him. The man responded with a prayer to Jesus which showed two things; that he had some faith and not no faith at all, but that he also had faith mixed with doubt. In Mark 9:24 the man's prayer was, ***"I do believe; help my unbelief."*** His prayer reveals the challenge going on within the man's heart. After Jesus cast the demon out of the man's son, you can imagine that the boy's father had his doubt removed and his faith restored to a right and healthy place. In the same way, there's evidence available that reveals to us what is trustworthy and what ought to be dismissed. When in doubt, seek the Lord, pray, examine the evidence, own your disbelief, and address it.

Christians fight doubt by the Word, the Bible. Christians also fight doubt by choosing obedience. In the Bible, some doubters questioned where Jesus' authority came from; whether or not it was from God. Jesus addresses their doubt in

John 7:17 by saying, ***"My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself."*** So, Jesus gives an interesting answer, especially the part where He says, ***"If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know."*** Those who obey Jesus will realize that the power of Jesus Words will be revealed, and the fruit of their obedience will reveal Jesus' authority as divine. In short, obedient people have fewer doubts than disobedient people.

"Doubting Thomas"

Thomas was not Judas. Thomas doubted, and Judas betrayed. They're not the same. Some doubt is so dismissive that it's sinful. Keep in mind that a genuine believer, like Thomas, struggled with circumstantial doubt. So, what brought about Thomas' doubt? When we read the gospel of John, Thomas wasn't present that evening, that Easter Sunday, when Christ appeared to the other disciples. Despite the disciples reports to Thomas that they'd seen the risen Jesus, Thomas refused to believe until he saw Jesus for himself. John 20:25, ***"So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."***

This account is provided because God wants us to know that there are different ways a person can "see", and there's a type of "seeing" that matters most. Thomas listened to his fellow disciples enthusiastically report that they'd encountered the risen Jesus. Yet, Thomas was skeptical. Why? He knew these guys very well, and should have had good reason to trust their eye-witness account. It's likely though, that having witnessed Jesus' gruesome death, that Thomas was convinced nobody could come back from so terrible a bodily massacre. In fact, in all the gospel accounts, it was only Thomas who tells us about Jesus' nail pierced hands, ***"Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side."*** Thomas watched men hammer nails into Jesus' hands, and drive a spear into Jesus' side. The gruesome nature of Jesus' death made it impossible for Thomas to think a resurrection could be possible. Besides, Thomas had seen Lazarus raised to life, but Lazarus didn't undergo anything like what the Romans had subjected Jesus to.

Thomas remained in doubt for over a week. It wasn't until eight days after Thomas had proclaimed his doubt, that Jesus came and revealed Himself to Thomas. John 20:26-29 says, ***"After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."*** When seeing the fine details, it seems that although Jesus extended the invitation for Thomas to physically touch His hands and side, it's in Thomas simply seeing Jesus, not touching Him, that Thomas believes. Jesus says, ***"See My hands."*** ***"Because you have seen Me, have you believed?"*** Thomas repents and outwardly replies, ***"My Lord and my God!"*** Jesus' rebuke of Thomas is certain. Others who had not seen Jesus with their own eyes, still believed in the testimony of those who were eye-witnesses to Christ's resurrection. Jesus says that those who didn't require sight with their own eyes, yet who still believed, are blessed, ***"Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."*** Those who didn't see in person, relied on the "eyes of faith", rather than their physical eyeballs. Magnifying this truth, Peter would later write in 1 Peter 1:8-9, ***"And though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls."*** Seeing by faith results in a greater joy than eye-seeing. Sadly, many saw Jesus with their eyes and still doubted. I think Jesus was setting a precedent, that His disciples are to be believed as they take their eye-witness account of Jesus to the world!

The Bible doesn't say that faith is to be blind faith. Not at all. No Christian is ever expected to have blind faith, but faith based on evidence. Therefore, the sightless faith that is upheld in the Bible is the type of faith that sees reality beyond what the physical eye can see. This is the reality which is far more important than what a man can see with his natural eye. Hebrews 11:1 says, ***"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*** In John

9:39-41, Jesus preached about these things, ***"And Jesus said, 'For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.' Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, 'We are not blind too, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.'"*** Physical eyesight was never enough for many people who physically saw Jesus, even though Jesus walked and talked to them and performed miracles in front of them. Physical eyesight comes short, compared to opening the eyes of the heart and mind. Thomas' doubt should teach us never to say, ***"Unless I see I will never believe,"*** but rather, ***"I believe; help my unbelief"*** (Mark 9:24).

John the Baptist's Doubt

Jesus says in Matthew 11:11, ***"Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!"*** That's an amazing thing to say, especially given the amount of high-profile people that had lived before and during John's life. I suspect John was considered the greatest man in part due to the miraculous nature of his birth, his being filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born, his ascetic life, his excellence in doctrine, and his unparalleled work as being the one who got to usher in the ministry of the Savior, Jesus Christ. John was the final prophet of the Bible, and was in fact an expert in the prophecies of the Messiah. Yet, despite having seen Jesus, and having recognized His identity as divine, and even having witnessed the Heavenly Father and Holy Spirit affirm Jesus' identity at His baptism, John would eventually become doubtful as to whether Jesus was the Messiah. What happened to cause the greatest of men to have doubt?

John's circumstances had changed. This great man, found himself in jail. Even though John was innocent, having been arrested for preaching the truth, he found himself in jail and suddenly doubting what he knew to be true. While locked up, John sent some of his disciples (those who assisted John in his ministry of baptism) to go and seek out Jesus and ask for confirmation as to whether Jesus was in fact the Messiah. In Luke 7:20-22, we see the interaction between John's disciples and Jesus. ***"John the Baptist has sent us to You, to ask, 'Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?' 'At that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He gave sight to many who were blind. And He answered and said to them, 'Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.'"***

John might have been hoping that Jesus would provide evidence of His divine nature by delivering John from jail. Sometimes even Christians find themselves in bad circumstances and we start to doubt if God is who He says He is, and we ask Him to do something for us in order to prove Himself. This may or may not be what John was thinking. Whatever John's motives in seeking assurance, Jesus wouldn't provide a physical deliverance from jail as evidence for John. Jesus would provide deliverance, but it would be a spiritual deliverance. The evidence Jesus provides would put John's heart and mind at ease, though he'd physically remain in jail. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah as evidence that He is the expected Messiah. Jesus tells John's disciples to go and report back to John what they are seeing and hearing. In other words, Jesus is saying, ***"Go tell John the things that I'm doing. And since my ministry is the fulfillment of the Scriptures, that'll be the evidence that John needs to know that I am the One."*** Jesus says, that through Him, the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the dead are raised, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. In other words, Jesus is essentially saying, ***"The Word of God is the evidence. John can trust the Scriptures to answer the questions of his heart. No further evidence beyond the Scriptures will be provided, as God's Word is sufficient."*** When you're in a jam, however you got there, innocent or guilty, you shouldn't call on Jesus to ***"get you out"*** in order to prove Himself to you. Instead, you can trust the Scriptures to know and understand that Jesus is God and that Jesus can and will deliver you spiritually, which is the greatest deliverance you can be granted. Don't doubt. Believe and be set free!