

"GOD - I HAVE DOUBTS"

Frequently people say, "When I get to heaven, I'm going to ask Paul what he meant when he said ----", or "I want to ask Peter what possessed him to deny the Lord the night of His trial"; or "I want to ask the apostle John what it was like to be close to Jesus."

Many desire to have an audience with some great men of the Bible in order to satisfy a personal curiosity. But I've never heard anyone say, "When I get to heaven, I want to talk to Thomas."

Why should anyone want to talk with Thomas? We know he is called "Doubting Thomas", and is the one people think of as unbelieving. What could we learn from him?

Nevertheless, we shouldn't write off Thomas because we probably have as much (or more) in common with him than any other person in the Bible! He is the man whose faith faltered ----who had honest questions and doubts concerning Jesus Christ. Because his problem is recorded, we can all learn from his experience.

Doubt is one of our daily tormenters. How often have you said, "I just don't believe it," "It just can't be" - - - "That's impossible", "That's a likely story". Have you ever secretly said, "God ----I have doubts".

When we drop our masks of piety, we must admit most of us are plagued with secret doubts. Doubt is one of the destructive forces constantly at work eroding our confidence in ourselves and Christianity. Successful Christian living however dictates that we learn how to cope with it.

Doubt has been called the unsettled feeling in one's opinions or beliefs. It means one is inclined to unbelief (which is the antithesis of belief or faith). It's the nagging inner feeling that we will not be able to do what we've planned, or what we have believed may not be true after all.

Many things cause doubt. Calamities jar our confidence in ourselves or the future. If a doctor reports we have a terminal illness, it's a jarring experience. We want to believe with all our hearts that he's wrong, yet inwardly we have no confidence in our future health.

When faced by an impossible situation, doubts bubble to the surface, especially when past failures shake our confidence in our abilities to undertake a new venture. A church which has had nothing but struggles finds it difficult to launch a new expansive program believing God can and will supply. The same is true for an individual.

Failure to look beyond our natural abilities and resources breeds doubt. Doubt inevitability comes when we look at some of the situations we face and evaluate our resources for meeting them.

Many men (particularly in their forties) lack confidence in themselves. As they join the era of the four B's (baldness, bifocals, bridges and bulges) they entertain fears of losing their virility and manhood and may seek reassurance by having a fling.

Television ads make us uneasy about our social acceptance. We are barraged by advice to use a certain mouthwash, toothpaste, or dandruff shampoo in order to make us socially acceptable. We succumb to their appeal and spend our money on confidence-producing products. But all the time we are with people, we wonder (in the words of one deodorant mfg.) if "its working".

Abraham and Sarah didn't think they were physically able to accomplish the staggering things God promised them. As Abraham approached one hundred and Sarah ninety, God reaffirmed the promise they would have children (Genesis 18:10). Sarah's doubt concerning her ability to bear children at such an advanced age gave way to laughter. She really didn't believe god could do it.

The competitive atmosphere at work generates doubts. Many older men become unsure of their abilities to compete with the younger men. As years pass and their tasks become more complex, the question of abilities becomes more frequent. Doubts concerning ability to perform a task will hinder performance and halt promotions to higher levels of responsibility.

After years in a given career, some entertain second thoughts (doubts) as to whether or not it is the right career for them. They fear they will never amount to much in their given field of endeavor. As middle age approaches and promotions don't come as often, they begin to think about getting into another line of work.

John the Baptist had a moment like this. He spent his entire ministry preparing people for the coming of Jesus; he preached with great boldness condemning sin where he saw it (even in the palace of Herod); he pointed out Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel. but when Herod had him imprisoned John entertained second thoughts concerning his life's work. Could it be that he had wasted his life? Two of his disciples were dispatched to Jesus secretly to ask if He was really the Messiah. " Are you the Coming One, or shall we look for someone else?" (Matt. 11:3) To put it bluntly, John wanted to know, "have I wasted my life for a cause that wasn't worth it?"

People have doubts about God. They ask, "Could God love someone like me?" "- - - - Is the Bible really God's Word?" --"Can God help me with my problems?" Our personal doubts about God stem from our inability to believe God is interested in our problems.

Doubt gives us a nagging feeling that we can no longer rest in the power of God. We become a bundle of nerves with no confidence in anything. When confidence in God is gone, we can expect to live a tense, uneasy and jumpy life, because we are left with only our own resources.

Doubts weaken our witness for Christ. People are desperate for something or someone they can believe. Having tried many unsuccessful cures for their ills, they are now ready to hear what God says and turn to the Christian to ask if it's real. But if we witness with "I hope" --- "It may be" ----"I think", they will not be interested. In witnessing for Christ, don't tell people your doubts; they have enough of their own!

Unresolved doubts condemn us to a life of mediocrity. The great men who were filled with doubts never became great :because their potential for greatness was sabotaged by doubts. Their greatness simmered in the pot of doubts, leaving them in the category of those "who also ran."

"Thanks a lot!" You say, "Until you ripped the covers off, no one knew I had doubts; but now I've been exposed. My self-condemnation was bad enough, but having doubts exposed really hurts."

It's not a sin for a Christian to have doubts; sin results when we persist in unbelief. Living with doubts shows us we are failing to trust God. We don't have to live this way because God has made deliverance from doubts possible.

The best way to come to grips with doubts is to learn from one who has been there --- "Doubting Thomas." An examination of Thomas' experience (John 20:19-31) reveals some pertinent principles that, if followed, will enable us to escape the stronghold of doubt.

We learn to escape four basic principles from Thomas.

First: Honestly admit our doubts. Thomas did! After the resurrection, ten of the apostles were together in the upper room when Jesus made His first appearance to them. Thomas was absent. When he returned he found the ten in an uproar. "Thomas, guess what? We've seen the Lord: He was here in this room while you were gone!"

Thomas was unimpressed. "You fellows are putting me on. I don't believe you."

The ten persisted. "he's been resurrected and we've seen Him!"

Thomas probably reacted with, "Men, I'll be honest with you. Unless I see Him with my own eyes and touch Him with my hands, I won't believe you."

He flatly rejected the testimony of the ten because he didn't believe it could happen. And the enthusiasm of the ten didn't seem to phase him. "----- Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my hand into His side', I will not believe." (John 20:25)

Give Thomas credit. He had the fortitude to stand up to the ten and say, "I don't believe you." He honestly admitted he didn't believe Jesus had risen._

What a striking lesson! If we ever hope to deal with doubt, we must reach the point where we are willing to honestly admit that we don't believe. Thomas wasn't willing to live out his life pretending to believe something he didn't. He couldn't smile and proclaim "He is 'risen'" while not believing inside.

It is impossible to drown our doubts in the creeds of the church, singing loudly (when our hearts don't believe what our mouths are saying) won't make them go away. Through the years the church has often communicated the idea that "nice people don't have doubts about God." As a result, people don't begin to suspect the church doesn't have answers to life's problems.

Have you had a discussion with someone where they become disappointed in the church because they couldn't get help with answers to questions that troubled them others asked? Questions about creation, science and the Bible began to bother them.

They ask their pastor, "Why does the Bible say the earth was created in six days and scientists claim its billions of years old? and what about the evolution of man? who is right?"

And --- the pastor's response was shattering: "We don't ask questions like that around here." And then the pastor ushered you out or he left quickly.

So many now believe that church is not the place where honest questions and doubts about God are discussed or even doubts of their leaders. Most concluded the church did not have answers to the doubts that plague men; and many leave and never return. A bright young mind is lost to the cause of Christ because their doubts were hushed when they should have been dealt with honestly. What a tragedy; Let the church come out of its bomb shelter of fear and handle the honest doubts of the people.

Until we are willing to honestly admit our doubts, we won't overcome them. When we are able to say, "I know I'm supposed to believe that, but I need proof," we're on the road to liberation from the tyranny of doubt.

You know if you ever sat and listened to a rap session young people have and the problems they face, you'll hear one of them or more will say and they put their finger on the pulse of the issue when they say, "From the time we were little we believed certain things because our parents told us. But there comes a time in our life when we no longer believe something just because our parents tell us. We want to know why we should believe these things."

They at least admit what everyone knows and feels. We all have doubts that must be satisfied by facts, not pious clichés from a church that is hiding its head in the sand.

Unless we are willing to honestly admit our doubts, we will continue to mouth the creeds of Christianity while inwardly saying, "I will not believe." We will be torn by what we know we should believe, but don't. Liberation begins when we honestly say, "God ----- I have doubts."

Second: We need to rely on the fellowship and association of other believers. Where was Thomas when the Lord appeared to the ten? What he feared most, happened his Lord had been crucified; but instead of remaining with the others, he sought refuge and consolation in isolation. In his absence, Christ came and Thomas missed his appointment with the Lord. The ten were enthusiastic about the resurrection because they were there and saw Him; but Thomas had set himself apart and thus doubt quenched his joy.

We need the fellowship of other believers to strengthen our faith. Isolation from the assembly breeds and nourishes doubt. The longer we remain in isolation, the greater our doubts become. Experience in counseling has shown me that people who are infrequent attenders of fellowship with other believers have far more doubts than those who fellowship with other believers.

These occasional attenders the "nod to God crowd") miss encouragement to their faith that comes from being with other believers it is no accident that we are exhorted "not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some." (Heb. 10:25) Our faith is strengthened by the corporate, collective witness of other believers.

Third: We need to remember the promises and power of God.

Apparently, Thomas forgot a promise Jesus often repeated. Jesus frequently spoke of the cross, but He always affirmed that He Would rise again. In His personal grief Thomas forgot the wonderful promise of the resurrection and was unable to believe the resurrection announcement. (Do you have trouble with this one?)

Many doubts arise because we have either forgotten or don't understand God's promises concerning our problems. We are told in Scripture: "I can do all the things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Don't be like Thomas; remember the promises of God to you.

We also need to recount the power of God that has already been demonstrated. Thomas had been an eyewitness to many miracles. He had seen water turned into wine, lepers healed, blind eyes opened, the dead raised, but when it came to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, he said in effect, "God can do anything but that." Every miracle should have prepared him for that momentous occasion, but they slipped his mind, and he refused to believe.

We face situations when prudence says we best not raise our hopes too high. When a doctor says there is no hope we have a bad habit of taking his word for it! We should not give up hope so quickly. If we stop and recount the times we've seen God turn impossible situations into happiness the easier it will be for us to say along with Abraham, "Is anything too hard for God?" (Genesis 18:14) The only justification we have for giving up is when we rely on our own power rather than God's. When doubts begin to rise, we need to remember the promises and the power of God. The impossible situations are opportunities for the Power of God to work.

Fourth: We need to bring our doubts directly to the Lord.

Thomas wanted a personal audience with the Lord Jesus. He heard' the ten declare the resurrection but was unwilling to accept their testimony without personal experience with Christ. For eight days Thomas wallowed in his doubts. Then Jesus came again: " - - - Peace be with you! Then He said to Thomas, reach here your hand, and put it into my side; and be not unbelieving, but be believing." (John 20:26-27).

Our Lord in loving grace presented Himself to Thomas and invited his personal examination. We have no record of Thomas accepting the invitation. The next words records the worship of a now-believing disciple. Thomas cried out, " My Lord, my God." (John 20:28)

The visible presence of Christ was enough to dissolve Thomas' doubts, and he fell before his Lord in worship and adoration.

Jesus dealt tenderly with doubts of Thomas. But He did not stop there; He added special benediction for believers in the centuries to follow. "----- Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." (John 20"29)

We are able to believe without a personal audience with Christ. We can bring our doubts directly to God and have Him deal with them. When we cry out, "I don't know how God could love me," we can be reassured because of the visible reminder of the cross. It makes us fall in adoration and worship of him who really loves us.

When we wonder, "Lord, what can you possibly do with me?" We know He did something with a man like Thomas and He can do something with us. When we bring our doubts directly to God, we will find He deals with our doubts in love and tenderness.

We have to admit we are at times plagued with paralyzing doubts. But at the same time, we know God has provided a way to deal with doubt. Through the experience of Thomas we know doubts can be dissolved if we will.

I God delivered "Doubting Thomas" from his doubts. Why not come to Him and let Him deal with your doubts and restore you to effective service?

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