

“Confessions of a Pastor—Sometimes I Doubt God”

Today we’re continuing the series from last week and let’s jump right in. Today I want to confess that sometimes I have my doubts about God. I’ve had some faith struggles, I’ve had some questions about God that I can’t seem to find satisfying answers about. Some people seem to have a clean, simple faith journey. That’s not me.

It makes me sad that in lots of churches, people who have doubts are given the clear message, “If you have questions we don’t want to hear them. If you have doubts, keep them to yourself.” Rather than the church being the place where people can come with sincere questions, and real struggles and doubts, a lot of the time the church is closed-minded and belittles people who don’t have their kind of faith.

Craig Groeschel talks about how easy it is to reduce our faith to a bumper-sticker-faith. There used to be a bumper sticker that said, “Honk if you love Jesus.” There’s another version of that that says, “Tithe if you love Jesus. Anybody can honk.”

I’ve seen this one several times. “In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned.” I’ve heard there’s a non-Christian version of that one that says, “In case of rapture, I claim your car.”

Another one I’ve seen that just gets under my skin is this one: “The Bible says it; I believe it; That settles it.” I can understand why somebody would put that on their car as a statement of faith. But to a wondering world, that sounds so arrogant and insensitive. What that says is, “If you’ve got questions about God; if your faith is not as pure as mine is; if you’ve got some faith issues that are not settled, I don’t have time for it. Get your act together.” How insensitive and uncaring.

As follower of Jesus Christ we should be the most open, embracing people when somebody has questions, or doubts, or doesn’t understand. We should be able to say that the church is the safest place you’ll ever find to ask your questions and express your doubts. At Saint Paul’s that’s who we’ve been striving to be for a long time now.

So let’s hit this issue today. Sometimes some of us have our doubts about God. To get some bearings here, let’s look at an event in scripture. It focuses on a father who loves his hurting son very much. His son has an evil spirit that’s destroying the life of this boy. The father is desperate for answers and takes the boy to the disciples and says, “Hey, disciples, can you help me?” They tried, but they couldn’t do anything to help the kid. Nothing. They prayed and nothing changed. The father was determined and didn’t give up. He goes to Jesus and we get a glimpse of an awesome story of imperfect faith, mixed with doubt. We get to see how God handled a doubting father and loved him through his doubt.

How do we deal with our sincere doubts? We can learn some stuff here. One thing we can learn is to **acknowledge our doubts**. Sometimes the church, or the Christian world, puts off the message that we should stuff our doubts and pretend. But I say, no. Let’s do just the opposite. This is what the father did in this story. **“Jesus asked the boy’s father, ‘How long has he been like this?’ ‘From childhood,’ he answered. ‘It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us’” (Mark 9:21-22, NIV).**

Did you catch that faith-mingled-with-doubt statement in there? The dad says, “But if you can do anything. Help us.” This dad was living in the land of “if.” Maybe you can relate. He wanted to believe that it was possible but he wasn’t quite there.

You ever prayed “if” prayers? I have. “God, if you’re real. Show yourself right now! God if you’re real. Stop time for just a minute. God if you’re real have somebody call me right now.”

There’s the story of the little boy whose mom asked him to go into the basement and get a can soup from the pantry down there. The little boy said to his mom, “You know I’m afraid of the basement!” She said, “Honey, Jesus is going to be with you. Jesus is down in the basement.” The little boy opened up the door and yelled down, “Jesus, if you’re down there could you throw me a can of soup!” I can relate to that.

Do you ever feel like that? God if you’re there, prove it! If you’re real why don’t you do something so that I’ll know it? Some of you may not struggle with doubts at all and that is awesome! And if that’s you and you don’t struggle with doubt occasionally, don’t get all arrogant and look down on the rest of us. If you do have some doubts they probably fall into one of these categories.

The first category is *doubting God's existence*. You might find yourself saying, "God if you are there why don't you prove it?"

A second category is *doubting God's goodness*. "God, if you're good, why is this happening to me?" Ever been there before?

Another category is that you may *doubt God's involvement*. "God if you are powerful, why don't you do something? Where are you? Did you just start the world and step back and let things go?"

If you've asked questions like that, or are asking them now. It's OK. In fact, acknowledging our doubts builds an honest relationship with God. To have them, and fake like you don't creates a dishonesty and you can't build any kind of a relationship on dishonesty. At Saint Paul's we say, "Doubters are welcome. Come on in. Doubt in community. Ask the hard questions." How are we able to do that? Because we believe that God is bigger than our doubt. Just because I have doubt does not mean that the equilibrium of the universe is going to be changed!

Part of acknowledging your faith struggles is to pinpoint the source. Don't let it hang out there in vague-land. Don't be vague, get specific. Write them down. Pinpoint them. This allows you to think them through. And then turn to and begin to look at God's Word. Read books. Talk to people. When I do this, most of my questions are answered. Most of the big questions, the big intellectual issues out there, can be answered. But it takes some work! For a lot of people their doubts about God come from a painful experience in life. Name that; pinpoint it, and work through it.

Some of you are going, "Well, I just can't have faith. I can't believe until everything is answered, until there is absolute certainty." Well, if that was the case, there would be no faith. That's not faith. Most of our questions can be answered, then God will bring us to a point where we step over the line. Get specific when you doubt. God is allowing that and using that to take you to a deeper level with him. And yes, this takes work, but we can't be afraid of that. The work of facing our doubts is hard work, but it's important and it takes us deep, really, really deep.

So often I'll talk to people who have intellectual concerns about God, Christ and the Bible. That's real for a lot of people but it's also awfully easy to have sin issues and mask them with intellectual issues. Sometimes we'd rather live in sin and hide behind doubts, as opposed to facing the doubts and the possibility that we have to turn from the sin. Some people don't want to deal with doubt because if they do, they have a pretty good idea that God is real, and if God is real, then he will have something to say about how they live their lives. So get specific, and find answers.

So what do you do if you have doubts? You acknowledge them--God can handle them. And you **let Jesus meet you where you are**. Jesus will meet you right where you are. Back to that event in the Bible. The dad says, "If you can do anything, please help." Jesus said, "**If you can?'** said Jesus. **"Everything is possible for him who believes."** (Mark 9:23, NIV). This is an important response we have here in front of us. The dad shows some doubt, "If you can..." but does Jesus chew him out and say, "I'm not doing anything for you. You're doubting." No! Jesus met him right where he was. And if you're doubting he will meet you right where you are!

Jesus doesn't berate you, or chew you out, or walk away from you because you have doubts. He meets you where you are. I've seen it happen over and over and over. I've had it happen to me, over and over and over!

You acknowledge that you have faith struggles when you do. You let Jesus meet you right where you are. And **you go with the faith you have**. Whatever level of faith you do have, go with it! That's what this dad did. Right after Jesus said everything is possible. It says, "**Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'**" (Mark 9:24, NIV).

What an amazingly raw, honest response. He's saying, "I'm leaning toward belief. But I need help with the part that doesn't believe. Help me with the unanswered questions. Help me with the tension where things don't add up. Part of me believes, help me to fully believe."

The Greek word for unbelief there is the word *apistia*. It means not fully persuaded. “**Apistia = not fully persuaded**”. I’m somewhat persuaded, but not completely. I want to believe but I’m not there yet. Maybe that’s you today. You want to believe but you’re not 100% there. If you were honest you’d say, “I want to believe, but help me a little bit God.”

Listen, I know, some of you are here today because somebody compelled you. (That’s a nice way of saying “dragged you to church”). You’re here today just to stop a wife, or a husband or a parent from nagging you. You’ve had some faith, but over time it’s not as clear, or simple, or pretty as it was before. Some of you have had a tragedy in your life. You’ve been really hurt, your faith has been rocked. You want to believe, but it’s not as clear as it used to be. Say it, “I believe, help my unbelief.” Own it. Go with the faith you have. If you’ve got 90% faith, go with it. If you’ve got 50% faith, go with it. If you’ve got 3% faith, mustard seed size of faith, tiny, go with the faith you have.

Look at that dad again. He came to Jesus with some faith mingled with doubt. But he went with the faith he had. Look at him. He had enough faith to bring his son, didn’t he? He didn’t stay home. And he had enough faith to approach Jesus. He didn’t stay at the back of the crowd. He had enough faith to risk failure in front of the crowd, yet he believed there was a possibility it might all be true. In the eyes of Jesus, that dad gave him enough room to work. Jesus didn’t send him away. Jesus answered the man’s request. Can you imagine the way this family’s life was changed? Go with the faith you have.

My last suggestion on dealing with doubts is to **make a distinction between doubt and things you don’t understand**. This has been an important element in my spiritual growth. There are some things that I have a hard time understanding. The concept of the Trinity--one plus one plus one equals one. How do we reconcile the vengeful God of the Old Testament with the grace of Jesus in the New? What’s God’s understanding of time? If Jesus is God in human form, when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, who was he talking to? How does prayer really work? Why does it seem like sometimes my prayers are answered and sometimes not, even though I pray them in the same way? These things don’t make me doubt, but I just don’t understand. Part of my faith journey is to work on understanding them while I’m on the journey.

And a crucial lesson I learned, crucial lesson, was that I don’t wait to understand everything until I do something. I don’t sit on my hands because there are a few things I can’t get my brain around, and might never be able to get my brain around. No! I know that I’m to be in action. I know that faith without works is dead. I know that I’m to love God, love others and serve the world. The Christian faith is a faith that’s put into action. And along the way I begin to understand better. It’s in doing that understanding comes.

Listen, you don’t understand in order to believe, you believe in order to understand. It’s in taking the steps of faith that many doubts are addressed, and many of the things we don’t understand are understood.

It seems like doubt is on a cycle in my life. About every 4 or 5 years, something stirs in me that makes me wonder: Is God real? What if we’ve all just deluded ourselves into thinking there is a God to make us feel better, to make us feel like we’re significant, that our lives have purpose. Maybe we just made God up so we would feel less alone and less afraid of death.” “Or if there is a God, is he as loving as we say he is? Does he really care about our ordinary, daily lives, our struggles, our times of suffering?”

Every so many years question like that come bubbling to the surface for me and I have to honestly address them. One of my biggest struggles with doubt happened a number of years ago when a good friend was diagnosed with cancer. He was a great husband and father. He was a strong man of faith. He loved God, he loved others and he served the world. And after a long, ugly battle with cancer, he died. I spent weeks vacillating between being angry at God, and wondering if God was real, and if he was, did he care. I grieved with his family and walked with them through that time. It was a dark time for them. It was a time of doubt for me.

I decided then not to bury it, or ignore. I decided to push into it. To ask all my questions about God to God: Why don’t you heal us when we ask—you told us you’d give us what we ask for in your name? Why do we have to suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? How can you say you love us, and do this to a family? It was in facing those questions and doubts head on that I came to find answers. It took time. And the

result was a closeness with God I'd never had. Through that I came to realize that my faith wasn't dependent on my getting the outcome I wanted all the time.

I've had big faith struggles in dry times. What do I mean by dry times? Not times of grief or crisis. Times where I felt like I was doing things right, but I couldn't feel God's presence like I had in the past. Rather than burying my doubts in those times. I faced them head on. That led to a closeness with God. In those times I learned that feeling God's presence is different than God being present.

Maybe you don't ever wrestle with questions, or struggle in your faith, or are dogged by doubt. If not, awesome! Great! I thank God for you! But if you find yourself doubting, know that that can be a great gift from God. A season of doubt in your mind can be an amazing blessing as long as you are honest and truly seeking.

And while you're seeking keep your eyes open and God will make some things happen where you go, "Oh my! God you just tipped your hand! You're there, you care, you're real and you love us!"

Last week I had a doctor's appointment. It was an appointment that had been made in July, for August, but I had to change the appointment to September. I get there and five minutes after I arrive, a retired pastor friend walks in with his wife. We talk and he tells me he's there to get the results of a biopsy. I know it's serious because his kids are there too. We talk about things for a while and I get called back for my checkup. When I'm done I walk out and see his family in a room obviously talking to the doctor. I wait for them in the waiting room. When they come out I see on their faces that it was not good news. Cancer. They were in that state all of us are in when we hear that word. We talked about it and then said, "Let's go outside and pray." We prayed for peace, for God to use everything at his disposal for healing, for a complete recovery.

I walked away from that moment knowing, that I was there for a reason. That it wasn't an accident. That changing my appointment time wasn't just because of a scheduling conflict on my end. That God wanted my day to intersect with that man and his family to maybe offer some hope, some good news, a presence. I don't know exactly why it happened, but the reality of God's presence, and his care, his love, his interaction in our lives was so real in those moments.

I've had many moments like that in my life. When I doubt, it's those moments I look for. When I doubt, it's those moments I remember and my doubts fade, and my faith returns stronger than ever.

I've walked with people through times when they had faith crises. When an adoption fell through. When a custody battle was lost. When a job was lost. And almost every time, as they pushed into their questions, the answers came, God made himself known very, very clearly.

Doubt is not the enemy of faith. If we handle doubt sincerely, it can lead us to a place of deeper faith, a place where we find answers. A place of being closer to God than ever. Maybe today is the day to say, "I believe, help my unbelief. I believe in you Jesus, help me now to begin to get my brain around the things that I don't yet understand, the doubts that dog me." Jesus will meet right where you are, doubts and all. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Craig Groeschel of Lifechurch.tv, and Rev. Ed Young of Fellowship Church, for their insights on doubt.