

OVERCOMING DOUBT

John 20:24–29

On February 15, 1947, an Avianca Airline flight bound for Quito, Ecuador, slammed into the side of 14,000 foot El Tablazo, a mountain peak not far from Bogota, Columbia. On that flight (there were no survivors) was a young New Yorker named Glenn Chambers. He was flying to Quito, Ecuador, to fulfill a life-long dream of becoming a missionary.

Before leaving the Miami airport earlier that day, Glenn had written a last note to mail to his mother. He had grabbed the only piece of paper he could find nearby, part of an advertisement that had the searching word WHY printed across the top. By the time his mother received that note in the mail, Glenn Chambers was dead. His mother asked “WHY?” concerning her son’s death, as have countless others throughout history. Reconciling the “badness” of life with the goodness of God is only one of many reasons people sometimes have doubts.

Doubt loves nothing better than a complex situation, such as the death of a missionary, to step in and tempt us to wonder if we’re right about God after all. Doubts are not sin. But if doubts are not managed and handled appropriately they can lead to despair—or worse. In this sermon we examine a situation in which a man named Thomas came face to face with the object of his own doubts. From his experience we can derive principles which will help us manage our own doubts, and do so in a way that will strengthen, not weaken our faith.

Doubt is not new in the spiritual experience of people who knew and trusted God. David and the other psalmists regularly cried out with uncertainty to God. Solomon wrote a whole book, Ecclesiastes, on what he considered the uncertainty of the reality we live in and around each day. And in the New Testament, John the Baptist was up front with his doubts, asking Jesus plainly, “*Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?*” (*Matthew 11:3*) And this after he had baptized Jesus himself in the Jordan River—seeing the dove descend from heaven upon Him and hearing the Father proclaim that Jesus was His beloved Son (*Matthew 3:16–17*)!

Doubt would love to move you from doubt to unbelief. But by applying the principles of this sermon you will learn to ask, and get answers for, those issues of faith which arise in every Christian’s walk from time to time.

FACING DOUBT

John 20 records the story of the greatest doubter in the Bible, Thomas—a disciple of Jesus. From what I can gather about Thomas in Scripture, he appears to have been a melancholy sort—what we might call a pessimist today. That’s not altogether a bad trait.

Melancholy people sometimes make good quality control experts because they’re the first to spot the flaws or mistakes. They’re always looking for proof. And being a doubter doesn’t mean Thomas was an unbeliever. He apparently had been a faithful member of Jesus’ band of twelve disciples. In fact, tradition suggests that it was Thomas who carried the Christian faith to India after the resurrection of Christ.

But it was the Resurrection that caused him to stumble. He had a hard time believing that Jesus was raised from the dead. Let’s track Thomas’ experience and see how his doubts were ultimately answered.

Doubt Develops in Isolation (20:24)

After the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples in a room where they had gathered. Apparently everyone was there except Thomas. We don't know why he was absent, but he was. Without speculating about what we don't know, let me set forth a principle that is true regardless of whether it was true of Thomas: Doubt flourishes in isolation. When you are separated from others who have strong faith, your faith can grow weaker. John the Baptist began to have his doubts about Jesus when he was isolated and alone in jail.

We can be isolated in more than a physical sense; we can also find ourselves isolated emotionally. I have found it to be profitable to take my emotional temperature whenever I find doubts coming into my mind. Sometimes if we are ill, or feeling discouraged, or we're separated from family and friends, doubts can find their way into our thinking much more easily.

One of my favorite sayings is that "our souls and our bodies live so close together they catch each other's diseases." And C. S. Lewis, the brilliant British apologist, said he struggled seriously with doubts when he would be on a trip and find himself alone in a hotel room, separated from family and friends.

So be forewarned—isolation is a breeding ground for doubts.

Doubt Demands Evidence (20:25)

In **verse 25**, Thomas won't take the word of the other disciples concerning Jesus' resurrection. He demands proof. He wants to see the nail-prints in His hands and the spear wound in His side. It was Thomas who had warned the disciples about going to Jerusalem, fearing they would all be killed. And now that his fear has been realized, he finds it hard to believe that Jesus' death has been reversed—that He is alive.

The church has been hard on Thomas throughout history for his doubts. But I wonder if some of the other disciples actually didn't have as much faith as Thomas did. Thomas at least expressed his doubt and verbalized his desire for evidence. What may have seemed like faith in some of the others may have been a mask hiding their own doubts. We have to give Thomas credit for expressing his doubts and not being afraid of what he would find regardless of which way his investigation went.

We should never be afraid of wanting evidence. Granted, we may not always be able to get our hands on every piece of evidence we would like. But God is not afraid of our questions. And history has not yet revealed any evidence to contradict the Biblical record of Christianity. So don't be afraid of asking for evidence.

Doubt Draws Us Back to Christ (20:26)

Eight days after Jesus first appeared to the disciples, He came to them again. And this time Thomas was with them. Perhaps Thomas purposed to stick closer to the group than he had done at first so as not to miss Jesus if He appeared to them again.

In our quest for answers and evidence we ultimately must come in contact with a person—the Lord Jesus Christ. Christianity is not about doctrines and creeds. Christianity is about Christ. If we examine the right evidence, what we will find are not answers but Christ. That's what happened to Thomas. In his search for evidence, he found Christ.

Sometimes it is too easy to get completely wrapped in what we don't know, what we don't have answers for. In truth, the things we usually have questions about represent just a small minority, a tiny percentage, of the things revealed to us in Scripture about God and our faith in Him. And we get hung up on those things, majoring in minors. Someone has said we need to believe our beliefs and doubt our doubts. That's not bad

advice. If we do that, we won't welcome with open arms every doubt we have as if it is automatically accurate and correct. We will, instead, view our doubts with a measure of caution, even skepticism. We'll hold them at arm's length until we're sure they represent something to pursue evidence for. In doing so, we hold doubt at bay, keeping him under our control.

Doubt Deepens Our Faith (20:27)

It's possible that Thomas never would have seen Jesus if he hadn't doubted. He might not have rejoined the disciples without the motivation of seeing for himself whether Jesus was alive. And because he doubted and pursued the evidence, he had an amazing testimony to share. He had touched Jesus' wounds with his own hands. He had first-hand knowledge that the Jesus who died on the cross was the same Jesus who had come back from the grave.

Honest doubts have the potential for building an indestructible faith if you will follow those doubts. Just as Jacob wrestled with the angel in **Genesis (32:24)** and came out of that experience a changed person, so your own doubts can cause you to come out stronger and more resilient in your faith. I have heard more than one person say that as they began to search for evidence they found something they weren't expecting—a deeper relationship with God. They say, "I don't even care about the answers any more. I've found the Lord in a whole new way."

Don't be surprised if you discover more than answers when you begin to confront your doubts about your faith.

Doubt Defines Our Faith (20:28)

Somebody has said that "There is more faith in one doubt than in half the creeds." What that means is that when we follow a doubt all the way through to the resolution of it in our heart, we can say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God." That is one of the greatest professions of faith in all of the Bible, and it came on the heels of one man's doubts. Thomas' faith was defined like never before when he followed his doubts to their conclusion.

Some people are so steeped in the facts of Christianity that their faith has grown cold. They sort of keep it in reserve, like canned vegetables stored up for winter eating. When a doubt comes they're forced to get their faith off the shelf and redefine it to make sure of what they believe. That is a positive thing when it happens.

FIGHTING DOUBT

Admit Your Doubts Personally

This is not always easy to do. You're probably not going to be inclined to go to prayer meeting and stand up and give testimony to your doubts—especially while everybody else is testifying to how great his or her walk with the Lord is going. But honesty is where it starts. You don't have to announce your doubts to the church, but you do need to verbalize them carefully to yourself. And perhaps even to a trusted friend or mentor in the faith, or your pastor. Separating what you're not sure about from what you are sure about is step number one.

Articulate Your Doubts Clearly

If you don't do this Satan will grab the opportunity to convince you that you're just a doubter who can't believe anything. That's not true. If you're a Christian you already believe a significant number of things with

conviction. Be clear about the specific things you have questions about. Do you doubt the accuracy of the Bible? The reality of the Resurrection? The existence of heaven or hell? That there's only one way to God, through Christ?

And why do you doubt? Have you been influenced by a book? A professor? Another believer? A non-believer? Identifying your doubts and their source will help you understand what you need answers for and why.

Acknowledge Your Doubts Prayerfully

Here is the most important point I want to make about fighting doubt: You must turn your doubts into prayers to God. Think of the people in the Old Testament whom God greatly used who had doubts when they heard His plans for them—Sarah, Moses, Gideon, and Jeremiah just to name a few.

These people were approached by God Himself and they still doubted! And God knew their doubts just as He knows yours and mine. We don't turn our doubts into prayers to God in order to inform God of our doubts. We tell God in order to verbalize what we are thinking and feeling about our faith. That makes it more understandable to us as we try to figure out what is going on in our lives.

Go to God with your doubts. He is waiting to hear from you.

Analyze the Evidence Diligently

It's one thing to sit back and entertain your doubts and wonder what the answers are. It's another thing to take responsibility for finding the answers and search diligently for them. Sure, it takes some effort to do so. But the answers are there for most of the questions we have about the faith. You and I are not the first persons to have had the doubt we are having (***"There is nothing new under the sun."* Ecclesiastes 1:9**). Many brilliant Christian scholars have tackled the great questions of the faith and produced mountains of answers and evidence. If you don't know where to look, ask your pastor or visit a Christian bookstore. Part of the responsibility that goes along with having questions is being willing to seek out the answers.

Accept the Limitations Humbly

1. Accept your own limitations

The more I study, the more I discover I don't know—and I study all the time! I continually pray that God would give me greater capacity to learn and know about Him. But I accept the fact that I will never know it all—and so should you. There are definite limitations to what we have the capacity and intelligence to know. So work as hard as you can, but accept your limitations.

2. Accept the Bible's limitations

Here is what I mean by this: Everything in the Bible is true, but not all truth is in the Bible. The Bible is not an encyclopedia or textbook containing the answer to every question in the world. That is not why it was given to us by God. But here is the most important thing to remember: The Bible has everything you need to know in order to know God and receive eternal life through faith in His Son. If you have other questions which are answered in the Bible, all the better. But if the Bible doesn't have the answers, don't doubt the answers the Bible does have.

Adjust to the Universe's Complexity

There is so much about the universe, and the God who made it, that we simply do not know. The bottom line is that we will never understand God and all of His ways. We are not supposed to. If we could, we would be like Him (and the last people that aspired to that goal got all of us in a lot of trouble; Adam and Eve).

So we need to be reconciled to our place in the grand scheme of things. God's purposes, and what He has revealed to us of them, are moving ahead on His timetable. And He has told us what we need to know to make sure we are safely on board. As for what we don't know, use your doubts as assets, as tools to draw you closer to the truth. Put doubt in its place by solidifying your place in the faith.