

Faith and Doubt – Matthew 28:16-17

Questions in red

For further reading see 'Faith and Doubt' by John Ortberg.

Introduction

Matthew 28:1-10 and v.16-17 – “When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted” – Jesus is alive, all is good, faith, worship, hope, sun is shining!
- But some doubted...used to think these were bad people.

- Started to become aware of this element within Scripture – doubts... Psalm 22 – ‘My God, my God...’ Psalm 42 – “I say to God my rock, why have you forgotten me?”
- I thought Christians should never doubt, never struggle...yet in Scripture we find this very real view of life where there is faith (there is the victory, the life), but there is also doubt.

Faith – We all hope

- **We all hope:** If we don't hope, we fall into despair...
We are all hoppers. We are creatures who cannot stop wishing. We are four leaf clover collectors, we wish on the evening star, we tell stories about genies coming out of bottles to grant three wishes. Wish bone...where did that come from? It didn't do the turkey much good.
- Even people who wouldn't say they have faith, still hope...

AS Christians we have a strong hope, a faith, and we have a good reason to hope...

- **Miracles:** babies, earth is here, we're here, Jesus, examples of saints...
- **Prayers answered:** Roger and Wendy's grandson moved to Southborough and hasn't had a space in the school since October, but they prayed on Wednesday and received a text at 10am that morning.

Alvin Platinga said we all have “a sensus divinitatis, that is triggered by the marvellous impressive beauty of the night sky; the timeless crash and roar of the surf that resonates deep within us; the majestic grandeur of the mountains”.

→ We have faith because we must hope, we have to, but alongside that there is doubt

Doubt – We live in uncertainty, we long for truth...

Objections:

- Suffering (Haiti, babies that die)
- I can't see (not enough proof): why doesn't God show himself?
- Christians are hypocrites...product doesn't work.
- Personal disappointments: miracles didn't happen, prayers weren't answered.

- We want hope, but we want truth: we must question things...we want to be real in the world we live in, and intellectually honest.

Tension: Faith vs. Doubt

- Worship, praise, faith, love, hope... and then doubt, uncertainty, questions, 'ifs'...
- Doubt and uncertainty can lead us closer to God, and closer to truth, but often it can go wrong.

When Doubt goes Wrong

- [Friend at LST](#)

- James 1:6-8: "he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind..."

1. The Skeptic: "I'm gonna suspend judgement. I'm not gonna commit myself, because the demand for sufficient evidence has not yet been met". Dynamic under the surface is 'I don't want to be wrong' – fear, fear of disappointment. "I would rather stand on the side lines like an intelligent observer than risk trusting.

- e.g. Thomas: "I must see before I believe"

2. The Cynic: Not looking for answers but offering conclusions. Conclusions about the world that paint it in a negative light: the world is not fair, people cannot be trusted, circumstances get worse. "Give skeptic a hug and they'll doubt if you mean it. Give a cynic a hug and he will check for his wallet to see if you've picked his pocket"

– but scratch surface and you will find a wounded idealist. Because of previous pain or disappointment, cynics make their conclusions about life before the questions have been asked. Skeptics abstain from voting, cynics abstain and then criticise all the candidates.

E.g. Pontius Pilate: "what is truth?"

3. The Rebel: refusal to trust. Not someone who simply doesn't believe, but someone who doesn't want to believe. They don't want the story of Jesus to be true. Colours every bit of evidence or argument so that they find a way not to believe. Skeptics question, cynics suspect, rebels defy.

CS Lewis – Strongest desire – "No word in my vocabulary expressed deeper hatred than the word interference...and the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures placed at the centre what seemed to be a Transcendental Interferer"

- e.g. Saul: rebelled and visited occult. In the end Saul took his own life rather than bend his knee before God.

Do you recognise these tendencies in yourself? What things make you cynical or sceptical? How do you avoid these ways of thinking?

The Gift of Uncertainty

1. Room for Doubt makes trusting possible: as long as you have faith you will have doubts. E.g. 20 quid – I have £20 in my hand, who believes me? I am about to

destroy your faith – he now knows I hold the note. He sees the bill and doesn't need faith anymore. Faith is required only when we have doubts, when we do not know for sure.

- Some people think I can't become a Christian because I have doubts. Faith is the only needed when people have uncertainty.

- Paul said "Now we see but a poor reflection, but we shall see face to face. Now I know in part (with questions and doubts); then I shall know fully even as I am fully known.

- Give £20. I have £1000 pounds in my hands. Who believes me? Too late. Faith is a gift and God needs to trust it to people who trust him. "Without faith it is impossible to please God".

- Relationships contain doubt and uncertainty, but also the ability for great faith, trust and love.

2. Doubt adds humility to faith

- St Peter interviewing a new arrival at the pearly gates. "You were a believer, yes. But you skipped the not-being-an-idiot-about-it part"

- Not many of us have the character to handle absolute certainty that we are right and everyone else is wrong.

- "I have a word from the Lord/God told me" language. Certainty that they know everything about God keeps them from knowing the truth for themselves.

- Particularly in climate with different truths.

- Sharing faith rather than ram it down people's throats. We can still be sure of the hope we have, but we can do it humbly...

Have you ever shared your faith in an way that lacked humility? Do you agree this is the best way to share faith? How do we remain humble but have boldness at the same time?

3. Uncertainty causes us to learn and seek truth:

- Our picture of God is imperfect and flawed. We make God in our own image.

- These doubts gnaw at us to pursue truth. We can repress them or stuff them down. E.g. not reading books by people like Dawkins. Faith isn't choosing to believe when there is no good evidence. People try harder with gritted teeth.

Dallas Willard: "followers of Jesus are required to pursue truth wherever it leads them". Search for truth and you will find Jesus.

"Who moved the stone?" OR "The Reason for God"

Have there been times of doubt in your life that have helped you to seek more?

4. Uncertainty produces growth

- Easy when things are good, but what about when things are hard?

- God wants us to become more faithful not more certain! E.g. marriage – not 95% certain so 95% commitment – no, I'm all in!

- Mother Teresa: Agnes – She wanted to do great things for God. "My soul at present is in perfect peace and joy", became a missionary, gave him everything.

Then God left her – *where is my faith? Even deep down I feel nothing but emptiness and darkness....My God, how painful is this unknown pain....I have no faith.*
- Didn't have negative understanding, it became part of her...

RECAP

Way forward to Faith

Turn away – leads to cynicism, rebellion etc. **Turn Towards** – uncertainty a gift.
Which way are you facing?

Flyer and Catcher: let go and trust

Flyer and catcher (Nouwen) – He hung out with circus with “The Flying Rodleighs” – it's pretty dangerous trapeze stuff. Three flyers, two catchers. Flyer grasps trapeze, leaps off platform and swings through air. The flyer then lets go and sails into air with no support, no connection, there is nothing to keep the flyer from death. Then catcher swings into view and times it perfectly as the flyer begins to descend and grabs flyers arms. The flyer cannot see him, everything is a blur. Letting go is all about trust – “As a flyer I must have complete trust in the catcher. The public might think I'm the star of the trapeze but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump.

How does it work?

The secret is that the flyer does nothing. The catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait”.

Henry asked him: “You do nothing?”. “A flyer must fly and a catcher must catch. The flyer must trust with outstretched arms that his catcher will be there waiting for him”.

There is an initial need to let go...What do you need to let go of?

Money, relationship, power, habit, grudge, pride, fear, reputation.

Pride: what if I'm wrong, money and being uncomfortable...Suffering often pushes people towards God, because it causes us to let go...

And then wait...“I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait”.

“Help my unbelief” – Mark 9:12

“If you can do anything take pity on us and help us”

“Everything is possible for those who believe”

“I do believe, help my unbelief”

- I believe and doubt. I hope and fear. I pray and I waver. I ask and worry. I believe, help my unbelief.

“Be merciful to those who doubt” – Jude v.22

Conclusion

"If I leap, if I trust, I do not know for some what will happen. What I do know is this: if I don't leap, if I don't trust, if I don't hope, if I don't ask, I will never soar" - Ortberg

→ Jesus says let go and hold onto me I've got big hands!

What do you need to let go of?

When have you had to trust God in the past? What do you need to trust him with now?