



## **A PLACE OF DOUBT**

Over the years I've had the chance to do several high school Q&As, and a question I've often been asked is: "Do you ever doubt?" To which my answer is, "Yes – almost every day" (which is perhaps not the answer you expect to hear from your Pastor!). But the reality is: most people have the odd doubt or 2. Put it this way: if you ever reach a point where everything has been empirically proven, then congratulations! You are now in glory!

But what does Jesus' experience in the desert have to teach us about the nature of doubt? Let's take a look ...

### **Luke 4:1-13**

"If You are the Son of God ..." Satan is picking up on a question that Jesus must have already asked Himself, otherwise it wouldn't be a temptation at all (that doesn't mean Satan can read our minds, but he has a good imagination). Now some of us can struggle with this, and it can produce an 'if' of its own: "Surely, if Jesus is God Himself, in the flesh, how could He ever ... *doubt?*"

The problem is that, for many people, doubt = unbelief. But that may not be entirely accurate. There are at least 3 different Greek words for 'doubt' in the NT:

- *Apistia*, faithlessness / unbelief. "O *unbelieving* and perverse generation ..." (Matthew 17:17).

- *Distazo*, to waver / to vacillate. "You of little faith ... why did you *doubt*?" (Matthew 14:31). And then ...
- *Diakrino*, to question / to scrutinise. "If you have faith and do not *doubt* ..." (Matthew 21:21).

We often interpret that last one negatively, but Jesus may simply mean, "If you believe and have no question that this is God's will" – an important distinction. God doesn't call us to bin our brains: He calls us to think about Him, to weigh up what is truth, to love Him with our minds. And where there is thinking and reasoning and logic there must be questions. Otherwise, we may just be bonkers.

So, what are our 'ifs', our questions? They might be:

### **Intellectual:**

- If God is really there, why can't we prove His existence beyond a shadow of a doubt?
- If the Bible really is the Word of God, why are there (apparent) contradictions in it?

### **Moral:**

- If Jesus loves us and cares for us, why is there so much suffering in the world?
- If Jesus is going to repair and restore everything, why hasn't He done it already?

### **Personal** (perhaps the biggest questions of all):

- If I'm really a Christian, filled with the Spirit, why do I still struggle and screw up?
- If I've prayed in faith for someone to be healed, why hasn't God delivered on it?

We're not going to tackle these now, in part because each is a series in itself, and in part because some of them can't be answered anyway (or the answers wouldn't help). But we are going to look at how we can plot a course through them.

Looking at 'The Temptation', how did Jesus do it?

**1) Keep On Knowing.** In life, there are things you think, things you hope, and things you know. When Job was struggling to understand what God was doing to him, he spoke these words: "I know that my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25). In a similar way, Jesus keeps going back to Scripture (to be specific, the Book of Deuteronomy), back to what He knows, about God, about Himself.

Thinking about my own faith, I ask more questions now than I did when I first became a Christian. It's not that I had more faith back then – I just thought I had it sussed. I realise now there are lots of things I don't understand – but what I do know, I *really* know. Jesus is real, the Bible is

true, everyone matters to God, everything is under His control, and every day is an opportunity.

What do you *really* know? Whatever it is: hold onto that.

**2) Keep On Trusting.** Now 'trust' means more than mere internal belief – we have to act. That's what Abraham did when God told him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. That's what Moses did when God led the people of Israel towards the Red Sea. That's what David did when he went out to face the Philistine champion, Goliath. And that's what Jesus did as He fasted for 40 days and wrestled with Satan.

Did these characters have their doubts, their questions? Of course they did. Even Jesus, who had a very definite sense of who He was and where His life was going, must have asked Himself, at some point: "Am I really God incarnate?" But He acted on His faith, not His questions.

We need to trust God, even when the path is difficult.

**3) Keep On Moving.** Jesus was led by the Spirit "into (or even 'through') the wilderness." But He was also led out again. I.e. He didn't stay put. He didn't give up. He didn't wallow in the darkness. He kept going.

Yan Martel, author of the book *Life of Pi*, puts it this way:

"If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer; if He burst out from the cross, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?', then surely, we are also permitted doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation."

It's good to question, to reflect, to analyse. But if that's all we do, we achieve nothing. We have to keep moving.

Knowing; trusting; moving – just as Jesus did.

### **The Hard Work Of Faith**

Doubt, then, is not necessarily a bad thing. It all depends on what kind of doubt it is – and what you do with it.

A final thought: take a look at John 6:28-29. Grab a Greek dictionary, and you'll find that the noun for "work" here, *ergon*, means exactly that – 'work', 'labour', 'toil.' And that's a pretty good description of faith, sometimes. Because believing is not a passive activity, it's an active one. It requires effort – effort to fight Satan's lies and accusations and temptations; effort to work through our own desires and weaknesses and inclinations; effort to keep on knowing, keep on trusting, keep on moving.

It took effort for Jesus. It takes effort for us, too.

But that is what a biblical faith is *supposed* to look like.