

Introduction

A defendant was on trial for murder. The prosecutor's case was overwhelming except that there was no corpse. In his closing statement, therefore, the defendant's attorney spontaneously told the jury: **"I have a surprise for you. Within one minute, the person presumed dead will walk into the courtroom."** All the jurors instantly looked toward the courtroom door and waited but nothing happened. The attorney's point though had been made. **"You obviously have doubt that someone was killed in this case,"** he said, **"Which means you must return a verdict of not guilty."** The jurors, noticeably confused, then retired to deliberate. Shortly thereafter, however, they came back and returned a verdict of guilty. **"But how could you,"** the defendant's attorney inquired, **"You must have some doubt because all of you looked at the courtroom door."** **"That's true,"** the jury foreman replied, **"But we realized your client didn't."**

Doubt, as you can see, must be dealt with in a court of law. It can be fatal to someone's case if it isn't. Similarly, it must also be dealt with in your life and mine. It can be fatal to our faith if it isn't and that's what I'm going to preach about in two sermons, dealing with our doubts - using Lee Strobel's book, *God's Outrageous Claims*, as a resource.

All of Us Had/Have Doubts

Our text records that Jesus was traveling about Israel, teaching and preaching (verse 1) and doing many mighty works. Those works, according to verse 5, included making blind people see, lame people walk, deaf people hear, dead people live, and poor people be blessed. As He was doing those things, disciples of John the Baptist approached Him and, according to verse 3, asked Him a question. Was He the Messiah that the Old Testament prophesied would come? Verse 2 explains why they asked Him that. John the Baptist had instructed them to do so.

That he did seems odd doesn't it? We know from John 1:19-34

that he had devoted his entire adult life to preparing the way for Messiah. We also know that he firmly believed that Jesus was He. He had pointed to Jesus in John 1:29, for instance, and declared, **“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”** He had also baptized Him and testified in John 1:32 that he saw the Holy Spirit descending upon Him as he did. But the fact that he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, **“Are you the Messiah”** implies something. He now had doubt about that. He wasn’t sure that He was the Messiah or that He wasn’t.

John the Baptist illustrates one of the inexorable facts of human life. Everyone has doubts. By doubts I mean uncertainties, hesitations, questions, or concerns about some of their beliefs.

That’s true of atheists. I sometimes imagine that I believe the opposite of what I do. I then analyze that belief to determine its weaknesses and strengths. I did that with atheism. I imagined that I believe that there is no God. I then analyzed that belief to determine its weaknesses and strengths. I can sincerely say this in that regard. The weaknesses are overwhelming. I realize as a result that all objective and thoughtful atheists have significant doubts about what they believe.

One of the most brilliant persons of the 20th century, C.S. Lewis, confirms that. Lewis was an atheist who became a theist and then eventually a Christian. Listen to this instructive reflection of his: **“Now that I am a Christian I do have moods in which the whole thing looks improbable, but when I was an atheist I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable.”** We can be sure of it. All objective and thoughtful non-Christians, especially atheists, have times of doubt about some of their beliefs.

But so do Christians. Notice what Lewis admitted. He had times of doubt as a Christian, which is the very lesson we learn here in our text. Jesus’ description of John the Baptist in verses 7-11 is quite revealing. According to verse 10, God called him to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah 40:3-4 and Malachi 3:1 – to be the forerunner of Messiah, to prepare His way to the people. According to verses 7-9, he faithfully answered that

call and became a deeply spiritual man. He was so deeply spiritual in fact that Jesus boldly declared in verse 11 that no person who ever lived was greater than he was. But despite all of that, he had doubt about the very one whose way he had prepared.

The moral is that doubts about Jesus and/or His gospel are universal among Christians – not just new ones but long established ones like John as well. There are basically three kinds of Christians: those who have had doubts, those who do have doubts now, and those who are brain dead. You get the point. All Christians have had doubts or have them now. There's no avoiding this except to be thoughtless.

I speak from experience. I've had times of doubt in my life with God. For many years, I had doubt about hell, for instance. How can finite human beings possibly deserve infinite punishment in hell? Yes, it's just that Joseph Stalin and Adolph Hitler live a million years in hell. But how can it be just that they, finite creatures, live forever in hell? For many years, I had serious doubt about the reality of hell.

Let me ask you. Have you had doubts? If so, what were they? Let me ask you. Do you have doubts now? If so, what are they?

The subjects of their doubt vary from one Christian to another. I read about one troubled six year-old boy who said, "**I prayed for a puppy and got a little sister instead.**" The doubt of Christians can be about the effectiveness of prayer, the justness of hell, the goodness of God, the inspiration of the Bible, the blessedness of heaven, the power of good to overcome evil, the possibility of forgiveness, and much more.

Gary Habermas is a noted scholar who studied the doubts of God's people in the Bible. He sums it up well this way: "**True believers can experience doubt. In both the Old and New Testaments, believers clearly express wide ranges of questioning, especially on such topics as pain and evil, God's personal dealing with his people, and the issue of evidence for one's belief. On each of those subjects, doubt is clearly expressed by prominent believers.**" One of those prominent believers, as we've seen, was John the Baptist.

You and I, in other words, are in pretty good company if we have some times of doubt about Jesus and/or his gospel. Doubts are an unavoidable part of our lives with God.

The Effects of Doubts

But they aren't just unavoidable. They're defining as well. They never leave us where they found us. They will do one of two things.

One is weaken our faith in Jesus and His gospel or perhaps even destroy it. That occurs in one of two ways.

One is that we consider our doubts as reflections on Jesus and His gospel. Charles Templeton was a classic case in point. Templeton was a charismatic evangelist who outshined his partner in ministry Billy Graham. But he eventually became one of the world's most acclaimed atheists, explaining his transformation this way: **"I had gone through a conversion experience as an incredibly green youth. I lacked the intellectual skills and the theological training needed to buttress my beliefs when – as was inevitable – questions and doubts began to plague me. My reason has begun to challenge and sometimes to rebut the central beliefs of the Christian faith."**

He illustrates one way that the weakening or destruction of our faith occurs. We consider our doubts as reflections on the credibility of Jesus and His gospel. He and it must not be real or true, we conclude, or we wouldn't have the doubts we do. So, we quit following Him and it.

It occurs in a second way. We consider our doubts as reflections on us. Lee Strobel received a letter from a successful business executive who he was considering for a leadership role in the church. It read: **"Lee, I need your help. I would like to feel confident. I wish I didn't have doubts, but I've got more questions than answers. Now, I'm beginning to doubt whether I'm a Christian at all. Can you relate to any of this? What should I do? Could you get back to me right away?"** Many if not most of us can relate to that can't we? We must not be Christians, we think, or we wouldn't have the doubts we

do about Jesus and His gospel. And since we aren't, we might as well just give up following Him and it.

That then is one thing that doubts can do – weaken or even destroy our faith. But there's another and it's the flip side of the coin. They can strengthen our faith as well.

Some Christians have what is called an **"inherited faith."** They believe the things they do because they're what those they loved and respected taught them. Other Christians, in contrast, have a **"rebuilt faith."** That's what one of the 20th century's most influential Quakers, Rufus Jones, called it. Listen to what he wrote about that: **"A rebuilt faith is superior to an inherited faith that has never stood the strain of a great testing storm. If you have not clung to a broken piece of your old ship in the dark night of the soul, your faith may not have the sustaining power to carry you through to the end of the journey."** Maybe you're feeling disoriented because of the doubts you have. Focus on what Jones said if you are and use it as an opportunity to rebuild your faith, as I'll explain next week. You will emerge from the cloud of those doubts stronger in that faith if you do.

So which will it be? Will doubts weaken or even destroy our faith or will they strengthen it? It depends. If we respond passively and just give in to them, they'll weaken or destroy it. But if respond actively and deal with them, they'll strengthen it. So, let's deal with our doubts.

We deal with them by doing four things, each of which I'm going to explain - one now and the other three next Sunday.

Get Doubt in Perspective

We deal with our doubts first of all by getting doubt itself in perspective. We see it for what it really is and isn't.

We start with the word's etymology. Its root is the Latin word **"duo,"** which means **"two."** To believe something means to be **"in one mind"** about accepting it as true. To disbelieve something means to be **"in one mind"** about rejecting it as true. To doubt something, in

contrast, means to be **“in two minds.”** It means to waiver between accepting and rejecting it as true. The celebrated theologian Karl Barth defined it well: **“Doubt does not mean denial or negation. Doubt only means swaying and staggering between Yes and No.”**

That’s where John the Baptist was in our text. Notice, he didn’t reject that Jesus was the Messiah. If he had, he wouldn’t have sent his disciples to ask the question. But he also didn’t accept that Jesus was the Messiah. If he had, he wouldn’t have sent his disciples to ask the question. He wasn’t sure that He was or that He wasn’t the Messiah.

That helps us get doubt in perspective. Many if not most Christians think that it’s the opposite of belief, but it isn’t. The opposite of belief isn’t doubt. It’s unbelief. Unbelief is the willful refusal to believe. It decides not to believe. Doubt, by definition, hasn’t decided that and so isn’t the opposite of belief.

The implication is profound. We can have doubts, as I did about hell, but still have a strong faith. We can be disciples of Jesus without having settled all the questions and uncertainties that His gospel and He raise. As Lee Strobe points out, struggling with God over the issues of life doesn’t show *lack* of faith. It is faith. That’s true, which implies that just because we have doubts doesn’t mean we aren’t Christians. Grasping that is, I think, the first step in dealing with our doubts. We will just passively give in to them if we don’t grasp it. We will move on to deal with them if we do. So, let’s get doubt in perspective.

Conclusion

John Ortberg wrote a book titled *Faith and Doubt*. That title seems innocuous enough but in reality it makes a profound point. Let me ask you. What is the most important word in the title? The answer is **“and.”** Ortberg contends that we can have faith and doubt at the same time. He’s right, as we’ve seen. Nonetheless, doubt is dangerous and we need to deal with it. It will weaken or even destroy our faith if we don’t. It will strengthen our faith if we do. So, let’s deal with our doubts.

Them him

All have doubts – what they are

Can destroy is or make us stronger

1. Confess it
2. Get it in perspective (atheists – not opposite of unbelief)
3. Understand
4. Engage God