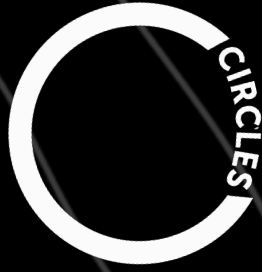


DEALING WITH DOUBT



CIRCLE 01/04: **DOUBT YOUR DOUBTS**

"Maybe I have been wrong about God for my entire life," I scribbled in my journal late one night. "Is God even real?" I sighed to myself at the beginning of another sleepless night.

Don't get me wrong. I loved Jesus. Faith was the foundation of my upbringing. My mother worked sixty hours a week for a church the size of a shopping mall. This meant that I spent more time in a church building than I did in my own house. Christianity was the nucleus of my life — the central hub that powered everything around me. I listened to Christian CDs. I wore Christian t-shirts with cheesy slogans across the chest. I fervently took color-coded notes while listening to three sermons a week. In that same black notebook, I silently wrestled with my belief in God.

As a teenager, my faith morphed into a facade. I carried around a big leather Bible, but I questioned its validity. I listened to praise music, but I struggled through the lyrics. I publicly prayed to God, but I privately doubted His existence.

I didn't doubt God due to philosophy or science. My doubt took shape as I suffered through debilitating depression. Every day I was haunted by dark thoughts and a nagging lack of interest in life. It wasn't just despair; it was a disease. "Pray it away," seemed to be the summary of sermons. I prayed and prayed and prayed. Regardless, my mental illness remained. As the cycle repeated, my doubt developed.

Doubt often happens when our expectations don't match our experiences. We expected our teenage years to be the best years of our lives, but every day breeds a new struggle. We expected God to heal our grandfather, but now we are sending out funeral announcements. We expected God to make His plan crystal clear, but we are feeling lost and directionless.

Here is a message I wish someone shared with me while I was wrestling with my faith. Doubt is natural. Doubt is normal. Doubt is inevitable. So what do we do when we face uncertainty, questions, and doubt? Let's examine the simple advice of Jude.

READ: Jude 22

"Be merciful to those who doubt."

It's easy to hide your true self from your friends, but it's much harder to hide from your family. Your siblings know your shortcomings and secrets better than anyone else. When we are reading Jude, we are reading the words of Jesus' brother. This should speak volumes about the legitimacy of Christ, as his own brother fought for his message. Some of your siblings wouldn't even write you a job reference.

Jude wrote this little letter to warn Christ-followers about false teachers. Nomadic prophets made a good living traveling around Palestine to spread a distorted perspective of Jesus. Wanting to ensure the truth of his half-brother's message was crystal clear, Jude wrote this epistle to encourage faith in the midst of doubt.

Jude says, "be merciful to those who doubt" (22). This short verse packs a strong punch. What is our response to doubt? It's not arguments, anger, or aggravation. Not at all! We are called to mercy. It's easy to think God would be harsh on those who doubt, but that's far from the truth. Jude encourages us to be merciful when we encounter doubt. The same is true for our Father. God's heart harbors mercy, not hostility, towards doubters.

We see this throughout scripture. The Bible is packed full of godly people who wrestled with doubt.

John the Baptist had doubts. After being locked in prison for teaching others about Jesus, He sent people to investigate the legitimacy of Jesus. "Are you really the Messiah?" they asked. Jesus didn't lash out at them; He lovingly reassured them.

Jesus' dear friend Thomas is likely the best-known doubter in scripture. After hearing rumors of resurrection, he announced, "I won't believe it until I place my hands in the scars on his arms!" Jesus came to him, allowed him to feel the wounds on his hands, and embraced him with open arms. There was no judgement, just love.

Abraham, the father of the Jewish faith, wrestled with debilitating doubt for most of his life. He and his wife were promised many children and descendants, but their struggles with infertility made this hard to believe. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was nearly ninety years old. The mere thought of having a child made her burst out laughing, but God had the last laugh. He blessed their family with a beautiful, healthy baby named Isaac. (His name even means laughter.) Doubt didn't disqualify them from God's promises.

Extend mercy to people who doubt. Especially when that person is you. You aren't alone in your questioning. Your doubts will never disqualify you. Your doubts will never prevent God from pursuing you. Your doubts will never stop God from loving you. Your doubts aren't evil, they're natural.

It's human to face doubt, but it's not healthy to live in doubt. When big questions keep you up at night, address them head-on. Let questions lead you to seek answers. Let confusion invite you into a bigger conversation. Let frustration push you towards faith. Doubt is natural, but it's also deceitful. When you encounter hard questions, be sure to examine them. Your doubt will inevitably make way for deeper belief.

Doubt your doubts.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Why is it important to address your questions and doubts?

Q2: How do you think your friends or family would respond if you told them you were questioning an aspect of your faith?

Q3: If someone shares doubts with you about their faith, how can you show them mercy like we're taught to do in Jude?

Q4: What are some good sources to help you discover the truth about your questions?

Q5: What can you do to address your questions proactively this week?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Philippians 4:4-7

Proverbs 3:5-8

Psalms 46:1-6

Psalms 46:7-10

2 Timothy 1:7

Psalms 56:1-4

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 02/04: **DEVELOP THROUGH YOUR DOUBT**

567,715 Americans are homeless.

This statistic both blows my mind and breaks my heart. I have always had a roof over my head, a refrigerator full of food, and functioning central heating. Thus, I have a hard time wrapping my head around the severe reality of this statistic. One day, my whole perspective on the topic was shattered. These numbers took on new meaning when I learned someone's name.

"The name's Tony," a bearded man said with a smile while petting his black and white dog. Tony was one of the thousands of homeless people living on the streets of San Francisco, California. Tony used to live in the city next to mine in North Carolina. He served on the Air Force base I used to visit on class field trips. Bad luck and illness snowballed until he couldn't afford rent. Now, he was homeless. His kindness was contagious and his stories were hilarious. Befriending Tony gave me a whole new perspective on the homelessness statistics you see printed on posters in the subway. These statistics represent thousands of stories. These numbers represent thousands of names.

"Seeing is believing," people often proclaim. I believed that homelessness existed, but my understanding shifted when I met Tony. There is a huge difference between knowing something and experiencing it. Let's examine the life of someone who got to experience something He couldn't explain. Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus, struggled to believe in something he couldn't see. Everything changed when Jesus showed up.

READ: John 20:26-27

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

This exchange in John chapter twenty takes place in the middle of sheer madness. A killer named Barabas was recently released to the streets, so people were frightened for their lives. Jesus was publicly beaten, murdered, and buried. His public execution triggered earthquakes and plague-like darkness.

After that, his closest friends all scattered. Can you blame them? They were followers of a convicted criminal so they had a target on their backs. Fear led them to hide in terror. After a grim experience on Friday, they couldn't imagine the glory of Sunday. Jesus wasn't just speaking metaphorically when He talked about resurrection. His eyes open wide, his deflated lungs filled with air, and life entered His body as he broke out of that borrowed grave!

Can you imagine the disciples' shock and celebration when Jesus appeared before them on the first Easter (John 20:19). Filled with joy, they took turns hugging their rabbi.

They could feel the scars on His arms and see the bruises on his face. Everyone got to celebrate with Jesus, except for one (John 20:24). Thomas was probably out fishing, applying to jobs, or waiting in line at the market. Thus, He missed Christ's holy homecoming.

When Jesus was executed, it undoubtedly shook Thomas to his core. Jesus, his friend and mentor, was beaten to death while the public applauded. He couldn't look away as Jesus was nailed to a cross. His stomach turned as soldiers stabbed a spear through His ribs. Thomas, the doubting disciple, was convinced that Jesus was going to change the world. Then he watched Him die a criminal's death. Thomas gave up everything to follow Jesus, and his entire world was falling apart after the tragic events at Golgotha.

Suddenly Thomas was told, "Jesus is alive! Everything He said was true!" But Thomas had his doubts, saying, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands" (20:27).

We often give Thomas a bad wrap, but I can relate to him. It's hard to believe something so marvelous during the worst weekend of your life. Everything changed when Jesus walked through the door. Let the strangeness of this situation sink in. A murdered man stood in Thomas' house. Sensing skepticism, Jesus calmly replied, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

How did Jesus respond to Thomas? He didn't lash out at him. He didn't teach him a lesson. Nope, Jesus just loved him. Christ gave Thomas exactly what he was asking for -- evidence. Thomas ran his hands across cuts, scabs, and bruises. His touch turned into an embrace when reality hit him. "Stop doubting and believe," Jesus repeated. It's important to see that Jesus said this after giving Thomas the evidence he sought.

Jesus is bigger than your doubts. He's not afraid of your questions or intimidated by your confusion. Instead, Jesus joins us in our investigation. It's pivotal that we let our doubts lead to development.

How do we develop through our doubts? Here are three pieces of advice.

Don't doubt in silence.

It's impossible to get answers without asking questions. Thomas let his questions be known. He started an open conversation about his doubts, which ultimately put him in the perfect place to grow in his faith. When you doubt in silence, you struggle. When you doubt in the open, you develop.

Bring your doubts to your friends.

We get a glimpse of Thomas sharing his questions with his close friends. Together, they worked towards closure. Doubt is completely natural, but it's crucial that your doubts start discussions. Ultimately, those honest discussions will fuel your faith. If your mind is filled with questions, please be open and honest about your doubts. Speak to a trusted friend or mentor.

Bring your doubts to Jesus.

We can learn a lot from Thomas. He told Jesus directly that he was struggling to make sense of it all. Jesus was ready to help him see and experience the truth. His doubts brought him closer to the divine. The same is true for you. When you have questions, bring them to Jesus. Pray that God increases your faith.

God won't always give you a crystal clear answer. However, He will always help you contextualize your questions. Your goal isn't to know all the answers. Rather, it's to grow closer to the One who does.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Have you ever wrestled with difficult questions about your faith before? What did you do about it?

Q2: We just learned, “God won't always give you a crystal clear answer. However, He will always help you contextualize your questions. Your goal isn't to know all the answers. Rather, it's to grow closer to the One who does.” What does this mean for us?

Q3: How can you bring your doubts to Jesus? How might he provide answers to your questions?

Q4: Are there any questions you've been struggling with in your faith that you'd like to bring to your friends in this group right now? We may not have the perfect answers in this moment, but starting the discussion is a bold step towards developing deeper faith.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Isaiah 43:1-7

Matthew 6:25-34

Psalm 121

Genesis 50:20

Hebrews 13:8

Ephesians 6:10-18

Psalm 4:8

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 03/04: **HELP MY UNBELIEF**

A high school senior gently knocked on my office door one Tuesday morning. She was the top student in my Comparative Religions class, so I was excited to chat. After sitting down, she gulped, "I am starting to doubt my faith." Her face appeared ashamed as she slumped into her chair. "That's amazing news," I announced. Shame morphed into relief. She responded, "Wait; I thought you'd be concerned. What do you mean?" Optimistically, I explained, "This means you are thinking for yourself. Let's talk!"

Doubt, within itself, isn't a bad sign. It's often a great one. It means that you are thinking for yourself, wrestling with your beliefs, and taking ownership of your faith. People don't abandon faith because of doubt. They leave because they never took true ownership of their faith. While doubt seems dangerous, it can be significant. It is often the first step to wisdom, growth, and understanding. Doubt, when properly approached, can lead us to deeper faith.

Faith can fluctuate in our lives. Sometimes faith flows like a fountain. Other times, faith feels like a fight. I'm sure you've been there. You're wrestling with complex questions while God seems silent. If you've ever felt this way, then you are not alone. Meet a fascinating figure in Mark's Gospel. A caring father is in the middle of a faith crisis, so he approaches Jesus with his doubts.

READ: Mark 9:17; 20-27

"Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech"... So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. 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." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes."

The young boy in this story was mentally tormented for his entire life. His family must have been mentally tormented as well. Imagine going through every day knowing your son could attempt suicide at any moment. Most parents get to watch their kids develop, grow, and thrive. In desperation, these parents saw their son experience suffering, torture, and darkness. The distress developed into doubt.

This doubting dad pleads, "Help me with my unbelief" (9:24). These aren't the words of a devout, happy-go-lucky, faith-filled follower of Jesus. Nope, this discussion drips with desperation and doubt. He's asking for two miracles. First, he wants his child to be rescued. Second, he wants his faith to be restored.

Without hesitation, Jesus moves in power. The boy convulses on the ground as a plume of red dust rises around him like steam from a kettle. Suddenly, the madness becomes motionlessness. After an uncomfortable stillness, he rises to his feet, dusts

himself off, and smiles wide. The son encountered restoration, and the father's faith experienced resurrection.

What do you do when doubt seems daunting?

Pray: "God, Help my unbelief."

This is a phrase we will all pray at one point or another. Questions will become too big. Life will become too hard. Doubt will become too dark. Jesus didn't tell this man, "Sorry pal, you're out of luck! You don't believe, so you're stuck." Instead, Jesus encouraged this man to begin with the little bit of faith he already had. It was small, but it was a start.

Start With The Little Faith You Have

We must follow this father's lead. Start with the faith you have, even if it's only a little. Take inventory of all the ways you've seen Jesus move in the past, then write them down. Look at all the good things in your life and thank God for them. Place your hand on your heart and count your heartbeats. Know that each pump is proof of God's purpose for you. You don't need to have faith the size of a mountain; you just need faith the size of a mustard seed (Matthew 17:20).

What are some places where you're struggling to trust Jesus? Tell Him right now. Are you questioning the correlation between faith and science? Bring that to God. Are you losing sleep because God has seemed silent? Tell that to your loving Father. Are you questioning God because your experience didn't match your expectation? Go to God instead of running the other way.

If you have doubts, pray this today. "God I have a little bit of faith, but I have doubts too. Can you help me with my unbelief?" You don't need supersized faith, just some faith. Take that fragment of faith and apply it to a conversation with God. The Apostle Paul encourages you to walk by faith. He doesn't teach you to sit by faith, think by faith, or rest by faith. It's a verb. It encourages us to move forward in faith. Faith isn't an idea, it's an action. Faith formation can require a journey, discussion, or a wrestling match.

We eclipse our doubts when we walk in faith. That's your calling today. Walk forward in the faith you have, even if it's small.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: How can doubts actually lead you towards growing in your faith?

Q2: Do your circumstances tend to impact how confident you are in God's goodness?

Q3: Why is it so easy to doubt God when life gets really hard? How did the father in this story respond to a desperate situation with his son?

Q4: Have you been struggling to trust Jesus through a specific situation? How could you begin to walk in faith instead?

Q5: Think of an area of your life where you question God's ability to help you or someone you love. Commit to praying "God, help my unbelief" every day this week.

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Psalm 136:1-5

Psalm 136:6-10

Exodus 14:14

John 14:27

1 John 4:16-19

Matthew 5:14-16

2 Corinthians 5:14-16

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 04/04: **REASONS TO BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION**

Single events can change the course of your entire life. From devastating breakups to college acceptance letters, little moments have big impacts. This is true in our lives, but it's also true in human history. At the center of universe-shifting moments, there is one supreme event.

The resurrection of Jesus reigns as the most extravagant and significant event ever to happen. All of history hinges on that single Sunday morning in ancient Jerusalem. Faith movements were sparked. Kingdoms began to crumble. All of humanity was gifted a direct connection to God.

Reinforcing this truth, Paul cuts right to the chase when he explains, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:14). The resurrection isn't just a significant event. It's the central event. Our entire faith firmly holds to this foundation. Without it, we have nothing.

Let's be honest. A dead person coming back to life is difficult to comprehend or even believe. I agree. I have been there and processed that. However, the Bible authors basically dare people to disprove the resurrection. This wasn't something that happened thousands of years ago to their audience. It was trending news. Thus, it would have been relatively easy for Rome to disprove the resurrection. So why didn't they?

This brings us to our discussion today. Here are three reasons to trust the validity of the greatest moment of human history - the resurrection.

Jesus Definitely Died & Was Buried

The Romans bragged about their ability to torture and execute their criminals. They didn't just invent crucifixion, they perfected it. After his brutal beating and crucifixion, which was enough to kill anyone, they plunged a spear into his ribcage. The Bible explains that water poured out, which modern doctors attribute to fatal blood loss. There is no way someone could have survived such suffering and trauma.

After Christ was pronounced dead, soldiers lugged his lifeless body to a little tomb on the outskirts of town. They didn't just shut the door; they built a fortress. Public officials were warned that the body might go missing because His followers predicted a supernatural resurrection. Thus, dozens of skilled centurions rolled a massive boulder over the entrance of the cave. Twenty-four hours a day, a squad of battle-ready soldiers guarded the tomb with shields and weapons. Rome didn't just want Jesus dead. They wanted Jesus' corpse protected by immovable boulders and military force.

Some people try to claim that the body was stolen by the disciples. But how on earth could they pull off this mission-impossible-level heist? It's impossible to comprehend how a few fishermen from the suburbs could successfully steal a 160-pound human body being protected by the strongest military in the world.

The Tomb was Definitely Empty

We can be assured that Jesus publicly died before a highly-protected burial. However, we can also affirm that His body went missing. When rumors of resurrection swept through the city, Rome wanted to shut it down.

There was one simple solution -- show people Jesus' dead body. Rome was notorious for putting deceased criminals on display in public courtyards. This gruesome practice was designed to intimidate criminals and prevent further rebellion. If Jesus was still buried, they would have simply drug his body through the street or put it on display downtown. They didn't do this because His body was nowhere to be found.

Jesus grew in popularity after his execution. The resurrection was the big news story in the Roman Republic. Hundreds of people shared supernatural stories of Christ encounters in the following days. Christianity spread to thousands of people in just about two months after the resurrection. The world-changing reality of the resurrection initiated this explosion of faith. If Rome could have proved it false, they would have. The only logical explanation is that the tomb was empty, and Jesus was alive.

If It Was a Lie, Why Did They Die?

If Jesus' resurrection was a hoax, then the disciples must have been involved. Why would they all sacrifice their lives for a scam? History tells us that Peter was crucified upside down. He wouldn't be willing to die if He didn't speak to Jesus after His resurrection. Thomas was stabbed to death in Syria. He wouldn't have preached the gospel to a hostile crowd if He hadn't touched the wounds of his risen friend, Jesus (John 20:28). John was imprisoned on the island of Patmos during the rule of the Dominion. He went for months without food or clean water. He could have easily denied Jesus to be sent home, but He didn't. This is because He sat at the foot of the cross while Jesus died, then He had breakfast on the beach with Him a few days later (John 21:2).

So many of these early followers went all the way to their deaths to defend Jesus' life, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Their experiences with Jesus were so real that execution was the least of their concerns. Not a single person would die for a sham they fabricated — let alone dozens of people.

Doubt is inevitable. However, doubting the resurrection takes more faith than believing in it.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Work together to summarize the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Q2: What reasons have you heard people provide for questioning the validity of Jesus' resurrection?

Q3: What facts help you comprehend that Jesus' death and resurrection are true?

Q4: What is the significance of Jesus' resurrection? What does it mean for us?

Q5: If you believe in Jesus' resurrection, what should your response be to such a supernatural sacrifice? How do you want to live in accordance with that response this week?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

1 Samuel 17:1-18

Psalm 4:8

Daniel 1:3-7

Luke 24:1-12

2 Corinthians 5:3-7

Hebrews 11:1-4

Hebrews 11:39-40

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

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