

The history of Christianity is filled with many characters whom we admire. And while we are impressed with and inspired by the things they've done, we are often more in awe of their unwavering faith.

There's Mother Theresa, who dedicated her life to the poor, the sick, and the dying in India, and who's quoted in saying, "There is always the danger that we may just do the work for the sake of the work. This is where the respect and the love and the devotion come in - that we do it to God, to Christ, and that's why we try to do it as beautifully as possible." There's Jim Elliott who, in faith, traveled to evangelize the Auca tribe in Ecuador, whom were known for their violence. But Jim, and four others, made a commitment to each other that they would not commit violence against those whom they sought to tell about Jesus. They were killed by that tribe, but their work planted the seeds of that tribe converting to Christianity. Then there's George Mueller who, with barely enough food and money for his own family, took in a homeless orphan girl, beginning a ministry that would ultimately serve over 10,000 children. His biography says he "trusted God with a depth rarely seen. His faith...set a standard for Christians of all generations."

This morning we wrap up our series called "Hearsay or Heresy?", and today we are going to consider an idea that emanates from within the church itself. You see, when we hear these stories, it has a couple of effects. The first is that many of us look at ourselves in comparison to these people and say, "I've got nothing." Now, with all of our talk about purpose, hopefully you know that's false, and it's not the heresy we're addressing today. It's the other impact I want to talk about, and this one is a little more subtle. Our legitimate admiration of these people's faith can morph into the idea that they lived with unwavering, absolute certainty, that they never blinked in their pursuit of the Lord. And if we continue down that path, we risk arriving at the conclusion that there are only two kinds of people in this world: the real Christians who believe with absolutely certainty, and unbelievers. In other words, **believers don't doubt**.

But is that true? Does God call us to a life of absolute certainty? Can a relationship with Jesus include doubt? Or is it that, if you doubt, you're out? For us to answer these questions, we have to begin by understanding what faith is and isn't, and what doubt is and isn't.

Faith is not absolute certainty. Absolute certainty is perfect knowledge free from error. Every question has been asked and answered, no stone left unturned, and no room for skepticism. But absolute certainty is actually outside of faith because absolute certainty has no need for faith. Thankfully, a relationship with God does not require absolute certainty. It requires faith.

Faith is also not blind, mindless assent. Many of the most vocal critics of Christianity today claim that faith is a weak-minded crutch. Sam Harris, an avowed Atheist, says "Faith is generally nothing more than the permission religious people give one another to believe things strongly without evidence." The accusation is that the church is full of those who close their mind and eyes and live by the mantra "Just believe." And, while there are some Christians who hold that view today, that's not biblical faith.

So then what is it? [**Hebrews 11:1**] **Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.** Faith is the response of informed confidence in Jesus, based on perceptible aspects of his character and actions. It is not a feeling or emotion we manifest in

ourselves. It is thoughtful, reasoned trust grounded in evidence. So the tension we must live in isn't a choice between unbelief and absolute certainty, but in the space between unbelief and confident faith.

And that's where doubt comes into play, because doubt impacts where we are along this spectrum. One who is thoughtful about their faith is bound to ask the ultimate questions, some of which may not get completely answered this side of heaven. We are limited beings trying to understand one who is unlimited. Therefore, a vibrant walk with Jesus must include a tolerance for mystery. And wherever there is mystery, there is potential for doubt. That's what I want to spend the rest of our time on: What it is. What it can do. And how we should engage it.

Doubt is not denial, but it can be destructive.

Just like we need a clear understanding of faith, we need a clear understanding of doubt. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is unbelief. That means faith and doubt can co-exist in a believer's life. But it does not mean that we should take doubt lightly. Doubt comes in many forms. Big theological: Is Jesus really the only way? Personal: Why did God allow this person in my life to die? Small: Why won't God take these scary thoughts out of my head when I just prayed for him to? Scripture is clear that doubt is a threat to our faith and an impediment to a relationship with Jesus.

[James 1:5-8] ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Doubt isn't neutral. Doubt isn't something we can just ignore. Doubt is a tenacious force that erodes the foundation of our faith and our relationship with God. James tells us doubt renders the believer as double-minded, someone who wavers or vacillates between belief and unbelief, as unstable and unpredictable as a wave. If we are in a position of compromised faith in God, we are in no position to be asking anything of him. It would be like, on the day I proposed to Martha, I began by saying, "I'm not so sure about you, and not so sure about us, but will you marry me?" Now, I'm quite a catch, so she may have said "yes" anyway. But it would be a foolish move because why would she give herself into an unstable relationship. God requires us to approach him in faith, not in doubt. That must get settled before he moves on our behalf.

This past Monday, many in America were looking upward. And while I'd love to tell you it was because of a revival, and we were all looking up to God, it was, as you know, because of the solar eclipse. This rare, astronomical phenomenon can help us understand the impact of doubt. The moon travels on a certain trajectory until it begins to get in between the sun and earth. You see it begin to block out the sun just a little at first but, as time goes on, it covers up more and more. And for those in the path of totality, the sun ultimately became completely blocked out. Doubt is a lot like the moon. Doubt has its own trajectory, and if it remains unimpeded, it will begin to obscure more and more light in your life until it ultimately leaves you in darkness. And I can tell you that because I have experienced its relentless impact.

You may have heard me say that I first came to Fellowship in 1999 as a lukewarm Catholic accountant. But that is sort of a tongue-in-cheek description that falls woefully short of describing where I really was spiritually. You see, the truth is, I was in a crisis of faith. I came to faith at a young age and was on fire for the Lord, even witnessing to my older brothers at the breakfast table over a bowl of cereal. It drove them insane. But over time, as I got into high school and college, I started asking myself the big questions. "Is God real?" "Is this all really true?" "Did Jesus really have to die?" These questions began to turn to doubts, and I was too ashamed to admit it. I was the spiritual one in my family. I was the good guy on campus. I was the Christian in my workplace. I started feeling like a fraud, so I kept them to myself. And as the doubts grew, instead of running to God, I moved away from him. As I did, the questions and doubts became even more cynical. I started asking questions like, "Have I believed a lie?" "Have I convinced others to believe a lie?" "Have I wasted my life?" I was spiritually disoriented, and growing in hopelessness. This God whom I had loved since I was a child was slipping away from me, and I was ready to walk away from the faith.

That's the place doubt drove me to, and some of you here may be in the same place I was. That's what happens when we leave doubt unaddressed, to allow it to stay on its trajectory. You've had these doubts and you're not sure what to do with them, so you've just kept them to yourself. Let today be the last day you keep them in the shadows because, thankfully, there's a better way. That's because...

Doubt, not denied, can be productive.

If we agree doubt can be destructive, is there anything we can do about it, or are we subject to its whims? One of the most encouraging passages in all of Scripture, especially for someone struggling with doubt, is found in Mark 9. In it, we're going to see that engaging our doubt head-on actually presents an opportunity to expand our faith and grow in intimacy with the Lord.

[Mark 9:20-23] ²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²² And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." ²³ And Jesus said to him, " 'If you can'! All things are possible for one who believes."

What an incredible scene. You have this boy who has been dealing with this spirit for a long time. The disciples are having their own wrestling match with faith, thinking that casting out evil spirits is a formula based on their own skill and power. But I want to focus on the father.

The father has come to Jesus in the hopes of having his son healed, but it's clear the father is double-minded: "If you can do anything..." He has a sense that Jesus can do something about it, but he's not sure, and doubt has him wavering. As James says, the double-minded should not expect anything from God. So even though there is a request for Jesus to do something, and some recognition by the father that Jesus is the one he should ask, his double-mindedness needs to get settled, and his faith restored first. So Jesus confronts him: "If you can! All things are possible for the one who believes." How will the father respond?

[Mark 9:24-27] ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵ And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." ²⁶ And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.

The father responds with "I believe. Help my unbelief." Jesus, I do believe in you, but I'm struggling with something, and I need your help. **His confession of doubt becomes a profession of faith.** Jesus, you are the one to tell because you are the one the doubt is about AND you are the one who can do something about it. Once that's settled, Jesus acts, and heals the son.

Now, there's one thing I need to make clear, or we could quickly get into another heresy. I'm not, and this passage is not, saying that if you have enough faith God will always heal. There are some who believe that, if we can manifest enough faith, God will do whatever we ask. And he if doesn't do exactly what we ask, it must be because we don't have enough faith. The truth is that God's ways are not our ways, in his providence, he doesn't always answer our prayers in the way we ask them. And when that happens, it's not a matter of the amount of faith, it's a matter of God's perfect will.

What this passage does tell us is that we can draw near to God in confession of our doubt. This father did not receive scorn or rejection, but instead found redemption. He is the one who can help us with our doubt. He is the one who can move us to confident faith.

So, what do we do with this? This morning I intentionally used the word "can". Doubt **can** be an opportunity to expand your faith and intimacy with the Lord. Doubt **can** be destructive. Doubt **can** be productive. Because it all depends on what we do with our doubt. So there are three things I want to challenge you to do when it comes to doubt.

Pursue the mystery and risk the doubt. There's no such thing as, "I've learned enough about God. I'm good." Our God is so big and so majestic and so awesome that only eternity is a long enough time for us to fully know him. But some of you may be afraid to get thoughtful about God because digging deeper could expose some doubts, or create more doubts. The problem with that approach is that it leads to a stagnant faith. Some of you may be hesitant to get thoughtful about God because you think asking a question shows a lack of faith. "The Bible says it. I believe it. That's good enough for me." That, somehow, you're telling God to prove himself to you by wanting to know more. The problem with that approach is that it leads to a shallow or simplistic faith.

Over the last couple of months, I've had a wonderful exchange with a young lady in our church. She has been a believer for a long time, has had some real struggles in her life, and has wrestled with some big questions about God. Her questions include "Why did God allow Eve to sin?" "Why did God wait so long to send Jesus?" "Why does God allow pain and suffering?" "Why won't God remove my sinful desires?" "How does God see me now?"

Now, if you're hoping to get answers to these questions this morning, you will leave disappointed! But understand, she has a choice. She could sit on those questions and doubts and let them fester. And every time she saw a news story about suffering in the world, it would enflame that unaddressed doubt and push her further and further away from God. But she's going a different route. She's embracing the mystery and asking the questions. But it's been a joy for me to have this dialogue with her, to see her get clarity on some things, and to see how the answer to one question leads to more questions, and to see how this is impacting her faith and increasing her peace.

And I tell you her story because I want you to know that a question asked with a sincere heart, with the attitude of wanting to know God more, is one He will always honor. Just read the Psalms and you'll see a constant refrain of questions and requests to know God more and more. "God, why..." "God, how..." "God, when..." Sometimes God will give you an answer. And for the things we can't know, he'll give you peace by reminding you of the things you do know.

In faith, confess your doubt. Doubt can drive us either towards Jesus or away from Jesus, either towards confident faith or towards unbelief, either towards a resolution that allows us to move forward with God, or towards a confirmation of our doubts that allows us to move on without God.

One of the sweetest and most fruitful times of my relationship with Jesus was when I began to confess my doubts to him. I was at my end, I couldn't do it anymore, so I thought I'd tell God about them and see what happened. Just like the father in Mark 9, my confession of doubt was also a profession of faith. Through it, I drew near to the Lord and discovered proximity breeds faith. I started focusing less on my doubts and more on discovering the truth. It increased my dependence on God, gave me incredible freedom and peace, and began what was a time of unparalleled spiritual growth in my life.

Doubt is a spiritual wedge that can only be removed by confession. In faithful confession of doubt, draw near to him, and see what he does. Quit trying to hide it...he already knows.

Call in reinforcements when you doubt. When I was in the time of seriously doubting my faith, I was going through it alone. The extent of my Christian community was when the priest would instruct me to turn to the person sitting next to me and tell them, "Peace be with you." I had no one to bear the burden with me, no one to pray for me, no one to encourage me, no one to exhort me to engage it, no one to remind me of the truth. That isolation only added to my misery and feelings of hopelessness, and it left me more and more vulnerable to the destructive power of doubt. And then I got to Fellowship, and God's people went to work. It was Dave Fortune's class called *Tough Questions*. It was Lynn and Larry Pritchard teaching me the foundations of our faith. And I joined a group of other men who, in grace and mercy, welcomed my questions and doubts.

All of us need Christian community, particularly when we are struggling with doubt. And here at Fellowship, as you've heard a lot this year, Life Groups are where we find that community. In Life Groups, we dig into who God is. This week, we'll be looking at Psalm 77, where the writer confesses his doubts, asking if God's love has ceased, if He has forgotten His graciousness, if

His promises are at an end. These are serious doubts, and doubts all of us could potentially have. And when doubts arise, Life Groups are the best place to bring them out in the open and let the people of God join you in the battle.

And I have a challenge for our Life Groups. How would you respond if someone showed up to your group this week and confessed they were having doubts about their faith? **[Jude 22]²² And have mercy on those who doubt.** I want Fellowship Dallas to be a church where we can be open and honest about our doubts. Our groups need to be a place of encouragement, not shame. A place where we built each other up, not tear each other down. What an incredible ministry of mercy and love and hope our groups can have to those in our midst who are struggling with doubt. And this is a particularly fertile place of ministry for those of you who really don't struggle with doubt. I'm married to one of those. Over the years, I've told Martha about my doubts. She usually replies, "Yeah, I don't really struggle with that." And, though she didn't intend to, it made me feel stupid. But, as I matured, what I realized is that, in times of doubt, I could lean on her faith as a way to encourage my faith. If you are one who doesn't wrestle with doubt, let your confident faith be contagious to those who are struggling.

If you have doubts, you are in great company. Hebrews 11, known as the Hall of Faith, could also be called the Hall of Doubters, because almost every single person in that list, though their lives are marked by great faith, had moments of doubt as they walked with God. And while we celebrate the great people of faith throughout the history of the church, we can be equally inspired by those who have confessed and overcome doubt: names like John Calvin, C.S. Lewis, Billy Graham, and even Mother Theresa. You have permission to doubt, but don't sit quietly in it, because it will eat you up. It's not how much faith we have, it's the object of our faith that matters. Jesus said that, if you have faith the size of a mere mustard seed, you can move mountains. And it's because of one we have faith in.

I believe. Help my unbelief. He is big enough for our doubts, and he can take those doubts and grow our faith through them. Draw near to him, and let him go to work.