

# Help! I'm Struggling With Doubt

- I. We were flying from Dakar, Senegal to Johannesburg, South Africa and I had 7 hours and 57 minutes to kill. I was too excited to sleep but also too exhausted to read some of the books I brought with me. So I scrolled through the “in-flight” movies to see which one would be the best to watch and came across this movie called *Doubt* starring Philip Seymour-Hoffman and Meryl Streep.
- II. The plot of the movie is about a Catholic Priest engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior with a minor and a nun who does not know for sure if the priest committed the atrocities but is fairly certain. The movie is a back-and-forth polemic between the priest and the nun wrestling with why things are happening and what she is to do.
- III. What starts as doubt in the activity itself climaxes at the end to, what seemed to me at the time, to be doubt in God and the whole system she grew up on. We are never told whether the allegations are true we are only left up to our own suspicions (doubts) to the validity of the situation. At any rate the movie closes with Meryl Streep talking with another nun and crying saying, “Sister, I have doubts!”
- IV. Doubt. What does that word even mean? Could it be suspicions? Could it be serious questions one has? Where does doubt even come from to begin with? Why do we doubt? Is there ever going to be a time in our lives where we have no doubts whatsoever?
- V. Why this topic? Doubt comes from different sources and different circumstances. A couple of weeks ago the world was shocked as it watched the country of Haiti turn into rubble in a matter of seconds. Then we were told that there was a 6.1 after-shock that came. The numbers are not back as of yet but I am told that somewhere between 70-75K people have died as a result of this. That means one out of every eighty Haitians are now dead.
- VI. This inevitably leads some people to look at the idea of God and think to themselves, “How could he let this happen?” Out of the painful circumstances I see this to be a fair question. Scholars classify those types of questions *theodicy*. Theodicy is a word made from the Greek word *theos* meaning, “God” and the

Greek word *dikao* meaning, “to be just or right.” Combine them and it means making God just in what he does.

VII. In other words how do we justify God being an all-loving, all-merciful God with the reality that sometimes seemingly bad people seem to prosper while good people seem to struggle.

VIII. This leads many to proclaim, much like Meryl Streep, and say, “I have doubts!”

IX. So tonight we will look at a story and then try to find help in the midst of a context that lends itself to pain. We are not going to sit here and try to offer proofs for the existence of God nor am I going to offer you arguments on the Problem of Evil and Suffering. I do recommend a book by Tim Keller called *Reason for God* that may be just what you need in this situation.

X. My objective is to, much like what Jesus would do, is to simply help you go in the right direction.

## **BODY:**

- So what do you think of when you think of stories of doubt? My first instinct is to jump to the story of Thomas in the Book of John and how he could not accept the FACT that Christ had risen until he could physically see Jesus.
- I even thought about discussing the Scribes and the Pharisees and showing how they doubt despite all of the evidence given to them. But that is not helpful in our context.
- I saw another story that was powerful...but before I go to that story I want to tell my story first.

## **I. My Story**

- A. My training for my undergraduate degree was very philosophically based. Ingrained in my thinking were proofs, patterns and the understanding that given the right amount of evidence one could, without a shadow of a **DOUBT**, completely know something.
- B. It was a tradition based on the groundwork of a man by the name of John Locke who paved the way for Stone-Campbell thinking and much of the thinking that came from the Enlightenment Period. Locke said that we are all born with a blank slate (Latin *tabula rasa*) and we all have the tools to look at the empirical evidence (senses) and be able to prove things like God, Jesus, Scripture.
- C. This was my training. So if you wanted to look at baptism it was my assumption that we all have the same thinking capabilities to look at all of the evidence and prove something. Perhaps, like baptism, that is possible.
- D. I heard verses like **1 John 5:13** which says, “***I write these things that you may KNOW you have eternal life.***”
- E. I believe that verse and hold fast to it...but is it a bad thing to have questions to

God in our efforts to have a genuine relationship with him? I was told not to doubt because, as **James 1:6** says, those who doubt are like *“waves on a sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.”*

- F. Is it bad that we approach our Creator with questions about his creation? Let’s look at a story that I think will HELP in our discussion of doubt.

## II. The Story

*Matthew 14:22-27 - 22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."*

- A. Get a picture of the boat.
- B. Before we get too critical of the disciples I want you to envision yourself in their context. The boat they had was not like the Ranger boats we have now. These boats were useless in a huge storm. Another indication that the disciples were legitimate in their concern was the amount of time they had fought the sea.
- C. The Scriptures tells us that they were beaten by the waves all the while Jesus was on the mountaintop praying. It was only in the fourth watch where Jesus finally came out. Scholars suggest that the Romans divided the night into four watches each consisting of three hours starting at 6pm and ending at 6am. The 4<sup>th</sup> watch could be between 3am-6am.
- D. Some suggest that if the disciples started battling the storm at 6pm that means they were beaten, tossed and their boat mangled for nearly 9 hours!!!
- E. Perhaps there was some legitimate reasons for their fear. Have you ever battled something for 9 hours and still did not get anything solved?
- F. It was a circumstance producing distress that created doubt in them. When panic happens and the whole world turns to chaos often people will turn to doubt and suspicion especially if they have rough past experiences to go with the immediate chaos.
- G. Was there legitimacy to their doubt?

*Matthew 14:28-33: 28 And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." 29 He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."*

- A. Notice Jesus is getting Peter to do something that I think is healthy and perhaps beneficial for us! Jesus looks at the faith of Peter (walking on water) and looks at the reason for his doubt. Jesus, in my opinion, is not scolding Peter for having doubt but he is wanting Peter to work with, through and from his doubt.
- B. Peter doubted but he still called on the only one who could save him. Doubt for Peter was not a question in the identity of Jesus, but perhaps an internal struggle. To be an honest, a legitimate internal struggle.
- C. It seems also that Jesus is being a little unfair to his disciples because here they are struggling for hours and Jesus just sits there and prays. Then Peter goes out to see him and falls in the water while he watches the whole process.
- D. So what is the deal here? Isn't it legitimate to doubt?

### III. Our Story

- A. So what about you and me and how does this relate to the idea of doubt and where can we find help.
- B. My first recommendation (not that I speak from expertise) is that you be honest with your doubts.
  - 1. Imprecatory Psalms contain some of the most vivid language in all of Scripture. An imprecation is a divine curse that brings judgment upon the enemies who are against the Psalmist. One Psalmist says this: ***“Blessed is he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock”*** (Ps. 137:9). One must keep in mind that the Psalmist is in an intense struggle and he does not know the outcome but places the struggle in the hands of God.
  - 2. Consider another cry of doubt by the 6<sup>th</sup> century prophet Habakkuk as he starts his book.
 

***“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!"  
and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity,  
and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are  
before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed,  
and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous;  
so justice goes forth perverted.”*** (Hab. 1:2-4).
  - 3. Letting God know about your frustrations, your fears and your disappointments is a little like letting your spouse or friends know the very same disappointments.
- C. Secondly, to help with your doubts, remain in dialogue with someone on this journey.

- 1. The worst thing I could do with doubts is to remain closed and shuttered

from all communication.

2. If I have doubts and reservations about something and do not tell anyone about it then I will only make my own situation worse. The doubt may be legitimate and the pain may be real but to shift the blame to God does not solve the issue but perhaps makes it worse.
3. I have noticed that in hard times of my life I need to be in constant dialogue with Christians who have had many struggles and then learn from their experiences of faith.
4. Cynicism breeds cynicism. I understand someone who questions/doubts God due to rough life circumstances but someone who questions God from a point of mere intellectual polemics...that bothers me.

D. Finally, to help with our doubts, we need to be involved in the spiritual disciplines.

1. Prayer, study, meals, meditation, service, fasting, contemplation and other aspects of Christian living can all bring meaning to the struggles of life.
2. A reorientation of our mind may provide meaning in the deepest corners of our existence.
3. How fair is it to start questioning God, his motives, his ways and his creation yet we are not intimately acquainted with his ways.
4. "How could God do this?" is not a fair question if you do not know the ways of God. With Haiti...that is not something God did.

Conclusion:

1. So what do we do? We study, we pray, and we dialogue and perhaps we struggle.
2. One of the most helpful verses in all of Scripture comes from the very same prophet who was questioning God with his doubts. Habakkuk 3:17-19

***Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail  
and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold  
and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation. 19GOD, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the deer's;  
he makes me tread on my high places.***

This does not solve everything and may produce more questions but we journey with God as we find help from him.

Psalm 121:1-2

