

## God, I've got a question Can faith still have doubts?

I met up with someone a while back raised in a Christian family, done the Christian thing all his life, lead ministries and all, but over a period of time he began to question his faith, began to doubt. It wasn't just one thing, but a number of issues that slowly pecked away at his faith.

As this guy described his faith walk, he expressed many questions. And while he remained most impressed with Jesus as a person, he was most uncomfortable about "How can Jesus be the only way to God?" and one of the key stumbling blocks was the tension that he saw between a loving God and some who sends people to hell. And then the whole argument of evolution. You can spend hours debating each of these issues and in the end, no matter what side you end up on, it still requires faith. He is now not calling himself a Christian, but he remains part of a Christian community and as far as I can tell open to God.

There are lots of people out there like this guy. They may not be believers in Jesus, but they're not hostile to the Christian faith. In fact some are wide open to it. But they have questions and they want answers. They are not Atheists, the official term is agnostics – they are not sure what to believe. Some would say that they're looking for someone to show them the next step in their spiritual journey. You know people like that I'm sure. And that's what we want to be as a church, people who can offer a next step to someone who's looking for God. Last year we did a series "God, I've got a question?" One reason we did this series is so we'll learn our faith and be better equipped to help people take another step towards Jesus Christ. You can check them out on our website.

We had a couple of questions that we didn't get around to addressing last year, we addressed one of those last week and today we are very briefly going to look at "**Can faith still have doubts?**" Is it possible to believe in Jesus, yet wrestle with why bad things happen to good people or the reality of hell or the creation story of Adam and Eve? Do we have to resolve every one of our questions before we can follow Jesus? Or can a person be an authentic Christian and still wrestle with doubt?

For some, like the guy I talked with, their doubts have been so strong that it's caused their faith to collapse. But doubt can be a good thing. Doubt can drive us closer to God. Here is a great quote,

*"Those who believe they believe in God but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God himself."*

We recognise the struggle of faith with part of our vision statement. The amplified version of our vision statement to 'learn our faith' we have written "*We recognise that together we are on a journey and need to **Learn our faith**. There is nothing*

*comfortable about the Bible, nothing easy about our faith. We should never cease to question the Bible or be questioned by it. For most, understanding our faith is, and should be, a struggle because it challenges every part of our being. Let's learn our faith together."*

**So is doubt a good thing or a bad thing?** Is it possible to be a true believer in Jesus and still struggle with doubt? I believe, doubt is an integral part of faith.

There are all kinds of reasons why we can struggle with doubts about our faith.

- Some doubt's are triggered by **rebellion**. Youth who want to rebel against their parents sometimes do it by rebelling against the God their parents believe in.
- Sometimes doubt is driven by **disappointments**. God doesn't do something we want him to, like provide us a friend, or good health, or heal our marriage so we doubt whether he's really up there.
- **Personal or family wounds** can cause us to doubt. Where Christian parents or religious leaders let us down significantly.
- **Unanswered faith questions** can produce doubt.
- Or it can be as simple as certain seasons of life that can keep us so busy that we don't have time to reflect about God and that makes room for doubt.

Sometimes people are great believers but when they are young parents with their second or third baby, with not enough hours in the week, their spouse is sick and their boss is on their back – they simply don't have time to think, let alone time to connect with God and other Christians. If people don't make time to connect with God, their faith is not going to grow and doubts will creep in.

- Comparisons to others people's faith experience can cause doubt. Listen this young woman, and I bet there are plenty of us who have had similar thoughts *"I hate going to church (or reading facebook) because I hear all these claims that I'm not experiencing. I study the Bible and I pray, I work hard at ministry, but I don't get the joy, my prayers aren't answered, I don't feel the peace, nothing dramatic ever seems to happen to me."*

People's faith can look very vibrant on face book, but that doesn't usually tell the whole story.

There are all kinds of reasons for doubt. And if we're honest we all do battle with doubt. I know I do from time to time.

So if I have doubts, can I still be a Christian? Yes of course.

There's a story in Mark 9 that I love. If you have your Bible turn to Mark 9. Jesus had just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration, a mountain top experience with Peter, James and John. And when he got to the bottom he found his other disciples frustrated and embarrassed because they couldn't heal a boy who'd been brought to them by his father. They were humiliated and started arguing with those in crowd.

So Jesus steps in in Mark 9:19 and says, (I would love to know the tome of Jesus here.)

<sup>19</sup> *Jesus said to them, "You faithless people! How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."*

<sup>20</sup> *So they brought the boy. But when the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth.*

<sup>21</sup> *"How long has this been happening?" Jesus asked the boy's father. He replied, "Since he was a little boy. <sup>22</sup> The spirit often throws him into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us, if you can."*

<sup>23</sup> *"What do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked. "Anything is possible if a person believes."*

<sup>24</sup> *The father instantly cried out, "I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!"*

<sup>25</sup> *When Jesus saw that the crowd of onlookers was growing, he rebuked the evil spirit. "Listen, you spirit that makes this boy unable to hear and speak," he said. "I command you to come out of this child and never enter him again!"*

<sup>26</sup> *Then the spirit screamed and threw the boy into another violent convulsion and left him. The boy appeared to be dead. A murmur ran through the crowd as people said, "He's dead." <sup>27</sup> But Jesus took him by the hand and helped him to his feet, and he stood up.*

The boy's father had enough faith to believe that Jesus could heal his son. But he also had his fair share of doubts. And I love what he says in verse 24, *I do believe. But help me overcome my unbelief.* Faith and doubt can and does co-exist. So then, what does it mean to believe? And how do we overcome our unbelief? If faith is not the complete absence doubt, then what is it?

Some people think that faith is a feeling, kind of like love is a feeling. So they think that having faith means being on some kind of constant spiritual high. And when the high wears off, and it always does, they think they've lost their faith. This is often what happens to new Christians when they have an experiential encounter with God. Feelings can be a way that faith expresses itself, but feelings aren't faith. Just like feelings can be a way that love expresses itself, but feelings aren't love.

When we love someone we do loving things for them even when we don't feel loving feelings. And faith works the same way. We make a choice to believe God even when we don't have a lot of positive feelings and even when we don't understand everything about God.

Because the bottom line is that faith is a choice. Faith is the will to believe. It's a decision we make. We examine the evidence, and then we make a choice, a decision to believe God. The Bible calls Abraham "*the father of the faith*" not because he never doubted, or always did the right thing, or always had pure motives. He failed

on all those counts, but he made a choice to believe God and he wouldn't give up on that, even when it seemed like God had abandoned him.

So that's what faith is. It's the choice to believe what God has promised.

*Lord, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief.* How do we overcome our unbelief? How do we deal with pockets of doubt?

1. First, **choose to believe**. Make the choice to believe, even though you still have doubts and tons of unanswered questions. I am not talking about blind faith but based on the evidence you have, make the decision to believe God.
2. Second, **go where faith is**. Hang out with other people who believe. "If you want to grow kiwi fruit, you don't buy an acre of ground in the middle of Australia. You go where Kiwi fruit grows well. If you're going to grow in your faith you probably don't want to join Atheists for Jesus. Hang around people who have a walk of faith and learn from them and watch their life. At *OBC* one of the best ways to do that is to get into a small group or on a ministry team with others who are walking with God. That is called community. Get in community with other Christ followers. Your faith won't grow without it.
3. Third, **get to know God**. The Bible says in Romans 10:17, *Faith comes by hearing the Word of God*. Get to know God by filling your mind with faith-building materials like the Bible and good Christian books and teaching CD's and worship CD's. I know my faith sags when I'm not feeding on the truth. It's not the amount of our faith that's most important, it's the object of our faith that's most important.

I came across this illustration which I like, probably not as relevant in the sunny BOP but I'm sure you will understand it. In cold countries they talk about thick ice and thin ice. You can walk on a frozen pond or river in the middle of winter and if the ice is thick your faith can be very small but it will still hold you up. But if the ice is thin, your faith can be huge but you can still fall right through and drown. Getting to know God thickens the ice on which our faith walks. The only way we learn to trust a person is by getting to know them. It's not the amount of faith that needs to grow, it's the amount of God we have that needs to get bigger.

4. And fourth, **put your faith to the test**. How do you learn how to swim? Go to lectures, watch videos on swimming, and receive handouts with pictures. Maybe??? These can all help but eventually you have to get into your Speedos and jump in the water or you'll never learn how to swim. You can't stay dry and be a swimmer. You have to get into the pool.

Put your faith to the test – He wants us to experience what it means to walk by faith.

Does faith have room for doubts? Absolutely. We will all go to our grave with unanswered questions about God and his ways. But we can overcome many of our doubts by choosing to believe, by going where faith is, by getting to know God, and by putting our faith to the test.