

Doubt is something we all have to live with. It's part of our human make up. It's that mental state of uncertainty, that questioning, that checking, that hesitation. Being a mental state, doubt is both personal and a spectrum - how it affects you may not be how it would affect others. If folk didn't doubt there'd be no advances in science, medicine or society.

Christians Doubting God can take many forms but it's usually about His activities or what He permits rather than His existence. Doubt is not the same as unbelief - we don't destroy our relationship with God just because we query His actions. If we never have questions or doubts or uncertainty - how can we engage more deeply with Jesus. God's Word even encourages doubt in the right circumstances. God's Word advises sensible doubt - cautioning about false teaching, being led astray by others, the need to be alert. Questioning is NOT a betrayal - it kicks us out of complacency. The challenge for the Christian is to wrestle with doubt and use it as an opportunity to grow closer to God. Causes of doubting God are unique in the detail but there can be general similarities

Like relying too much on a nagging need for proof - for evidence. Thomas demonstrates it perfectly. Poor Thomas - "Doubting Thomas" - a by-word for doubt - yet all the disciples had doubt at times but it's Thomas who's remembered. Was Thomas being unreasonable? - faced with an apparent impossibility - what would you have done? He just wanted the evidence - the proof the others had been given in verses 19-23.

Unfortunately there's no such thing as proof - despite what advertisers tell - the best we can get is high probability. Different people accept different things as proof - some rely on logic - making sense of things, while others seek the tangible - "seeing is believing". Some live in a world of questioning - whether it's the skeptic or the conspiracy theorist. The bottom line is that proof or evidence - is what we individually are persuaded by - what we can live with. Our proof of God's existence is our relationship with Him. It's what makes sharing our experience of Jesus with each other so important - we learn from each other.

Critically, Jesus didn't reject Thomas for his doubt. John doesn't record whether Thomas actually touched Jesus - what he does record is that when Thomas saw Jesus he made the strongest statement in any of the Gospels about who Jesus is - 'My Lord and my God!' (v.28) - and that came because he doubted! Jesus understood Thomas' doubt and provided the reassurance Thomas needed - showing His wounds. Jesus didn't reject Thomas didn't abandon or disown him, didn't ridicule or punish him. Paul reminded us we'll never know everything "For we live by faith, not by sight." 2 Corinthians 5:7 NIVUK. Thomas found that despite his doubts, Jesus accepted him, reassured him, and gave him what he needed. Thomas' wrestling with Doubt changed him and according to tradition led to his founding the church in India

Like focusing too much on our problem not God's Awesomeness. Demonstrated clearly by Peter. All the disciples in the boat were terrified at what they saw only Peter overcame his fear and stepped out of the boat onto the water. Then reality hit - the unexpected - the curve balls - things he hadn't thought about. The water lapping up his legs, winds getting stronger, Jesus seeming so far away, and, then the fear returned. He took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink

Unfortunately life is totally unpredictable. Curve balls work because they are totally unexpected. We have no idea what life will throw at us next - great stuff we never question God but distressing stuff we question why God allows it. It's when we think we're in control - on top of things - we get hit by a curve ball - the unexpected, completely out of the blue - destroying our confidence in coping - we doubt. The bottom line is that so often we don't know how awesome God is until He answers our desperation like He did Peter's

Critically, Jesus didn't reject Peter for his doubts. Matthew records that all the disciples were able to say "Truly you are the Son of God." - and that was because Peter challenged his doubts. Jesus understood Peter's doubt and provided the reassurance he needed - took Peter's hand and got them both into the boat. Jesus didn't reject Peter, didn't let him flounder, didn't disown or abandon him - He reassured him with what he needed. Paul again reminds us where our true source of strength comes from "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline." 2 Timothy 1:7 NIVUK. Peter found despite his doubts Jesus accepted him, reassured him, and gave him what he needed. Peter's wrestlings with doubt built him - just look at what's recorded about him in Acts

Like forgetting there are direct attacks from the devil. He knows which buttons to press. The devil pushes the idea he doesn't exist - it's perfect camouflage. He makes us think doubt is a weakness - a failure - letting God down. He knows the more we worry about ourselves - our uncertainties - the less we focus on God. The devil sows the seed of "can?" New situations inevitably create uncertainty cos they're new - so the devil prompts us - can? Jesus really help in this situation. The devil sows the seed of jealousy. The devil hooks into the need we have to compare ourselves to others - sports, business, keeping up with next door. He then encourages us think we're not as good (whatever that is) as other Christians. The devil exploits any feeling of inadequacy. He makes us think God can't use us because we lack this or that skill, the knowledge, the resources. The devil makes us feel guilty if we don't have all the answers that others have to the big questions. Big questions like why God doesn't answer my prayer my way, or how do I know God's will, or the why does God allow x or y. Nobody knows those answers but God. The bottom line is that Christians are in a spiritual battle which we don't always recognise. Yet again Paul reminds us. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Ephesians 6:12 NIVUK. Jesus did not abandon Thomas and Peter and He doesn't abandon us. Wrestling with doubting God can bring us closer to Him. The very fact we're questioning, not running away, engages us more with God - draws us closer as we seek answers

Engaging with God because we're doubting Him takes us back to basics. By sharing our doubts with God in prayer. Wrestling doubt in prayer brings everything to God - knowing His shoulders are unbelievably strong and can take anything we throw at Him. Blindingly obvious when we think about it - so often it's the last thing done. Sharing our struggle with God in prayer is common sense and effective. We can't con God - He is totally aware of everything about us. Prayer actively engages with God "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Philippians 4:6 NIVUK.

By seeking answers in God's Word. God's Word is full of His promises, His faithfulness, His wisdom and His guidance so why wouldn't we turn to it? "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." 2 Timothy 3:16-17 NIVUK. Out of curiosity I did a Google search on just how many promises God makes in the Bible 7487. Sadly I don't know God's Word off by heart but experience gives me confidence it does have the answers. Oddly I have learned the value of asking Google for relevant verses from God's Word and then checking the verse and context

Engaging with God because we're doubting Him keeps us in tune with Him. Wrestling questions acknowledges we have a lot to learn about God and His plans - it keeps us humble. By remembering our relationship with God. Our relationship with God is a living evolving thing - certainly not static unmoving. Religion is more a helpful structure, rituals, ceremonies - things to

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do together, to encourage, help folk remember and support each other. Those things can be very helpful - but a relationship is the one that develops and grows.

By putting Doubt in its place. We remember Doubt is a consequence of Free Will and without it we'd have certainty - no free choices. Yet it's those free choices that God treasures - He wants us to love Him freely - NOT because we have no choice. We remember God has a plan for us - we can learn from Jeremiah all those centuries ago "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Jeremiah 29:11 NIVUK

By reminding ourselves to Live in the now - the present. How often are our doubts caused by hauntings from the past, living with the regrets of yesterday - but they're forgiven, gone, dealt with. We can't live life looking only at the rear view mirror "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9 NIVUK. Nor can we put handling doubts about God off until tomorrow - it might never happen. We can't live life with procrastination and a crystal ball. We need Jesus in the present - now - this moment - that's what matters

By remembering to See ourselves as God sees us. We are God's children - a statement of relationship to God through Jesus "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" 1 John 3:1 NIVUK. It's not how we see ourselves that matters "... God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong." 1 Corinthians 1:27 NIVUK. That means you and me - if God calls us it's because He knows we can do it and He will equip us with what's needed. Wrestling with doubt changes folk too - look at all the testimonies over the centuries or indeed today

Engaging with God because we're doubting Him makes us draw on His resources. If anything Doubt stops us from boasting - makes us draw on God more. By having to depend on God's Grace not our feelings "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no-one can boast." Ephesians 2:8-9 NIVUK. God's Grace is His unmerited favour, His freely given gift - we can't earn it and we certainly don't deserve it. Grace means our relationship with God is solid based on what Jesus achieved on the cross and by His resurrection. Grace means God is our faithful Guardian - loving, compassionate, merciful patient, persevering, never giving up on us. Grace means God knows all our weaknesses and yet still loves us - accepting us as works in progress giving us eternal life. Grace means God does not reject us because we have doubts

By gaining confidence from our journey so far with Jesus. Jesus promised to be with us "..... And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28:20 NIVUK. Jesus hasn't gone away He will get involved but only if we let Him. Our journey so far has demonstrated clearly that Jesus has never let us down - despite the slip ups we make and, He won't change now. Jesus will never leave us thrashing around alone in our doubts but will pick us up and remind us that He is faithful whatever. We can help by starting every day by inviting Jesus to be with us. A simple quick invitation to share the day with us or bringing Him into a Quiet Time. He understands us no matter how we feel - like He did Thomas and Peter "if our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." 1 John 3:20 NIVUK

By drawing on the strength of the Holy Spirit - don't wrestle alone. We received the Holy Spirit when we first gave our lives to Jesus. Peter couldn't have been clearer "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you

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will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.” Acts 2:38-39 NIVUK. We are born again as Jesus puts it but we choose whether to let the Holy Spirit influence us or not. He helps us avoid panic and catastrophising - to keep some perspective, The Holy Spirit pricks our conscience and keeps us on track with our choices

Wrestling with doubting God is helped by not hiding it. There's nothing shameful about doubting God. We need to share our doubts with others. We all have our unique relationship with God but He has given us companions to share the journey with - they're not just there for their looks “Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” Galatians 6:2 NIVUK. We need to be honest and open with a Christian friend. We are not the only people to have hit the brick wall of doubt. We need the courage and humility to recognise we need to talk to a friend. It will be a very odd Minister who hasn't been confided in before. It's usually part of pastoral training to give the skills to be alongside people - there will be something in their experience that can be drawn upon. It certainly won't be something they haven't come across before - maybe even had to wrestle with themselves? Ministers and others God has placed in Church leadership can help if you give them half a chance

We need to Remember we are also part of a Fellowship. It will be a very odd House Group that hasn't created a safe space where we are loved and respected and learn to share our views and experiences together. It will be a very odd Fellowship that doesn't care about us so have confidence in them

Final Food for thought - can we really have faith and trust without wrestling with the possibility of doubt? Don't fear doubt, or deny questioning but accept your wrestling with them and bring God into it - after all it's His actions your questioning. Two final verses

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;” Proverbs 3:5 NIVUK

“... God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’” Hebrews 13:5 NIVUK

If you don't have email to get the notes then I have few copies of all the verses