

WHEN YOU CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM YOUR MOST TROUBLING THOUGHTS - Part Two

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DOUBTS CAUSED BY INADEQUATE FOUNDATIONS

1 Peter 3:15 - "...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...."

Notice those words, "**...prepared to make a defense...**" They explain Peter's intent in this verse. It's not that we're to be ready to explain **what** we believe. But rather, we're to be ready to explain **why** we believe it. We're to give a "**reason** (not a **recitation**) for the hope that is in us." Note, it's not **what** we believe that's called for declaration. It's **why** we believe it.

This is a series on the unescapable dark thoughts of doubt. Last week we looked at doubts that come from a distorted picture of God. Remember the illustration of meeting a stranger in the airport? The picture we have of that person has a great deal to do with the kind of **reception** we will give, and the kind of **relationship** we are going to have with that person. When we looked at the source of **doubts from a distorted concept of God** we traced it back to **two**:

First, there are doubts that come because when a person was first saved he only cleaned up the **outside** of his life. He didn't abandon and replace old patterns of thinking about God and His world. Then, **second**, there are doubts that arise because **after** conversion, the Christian can, through the primary influences of the media, materialism, and unguarded friendships, let a distorted mind-set and world-view infiltrate and shape his perception of spiritual things. Beliefs can be **neutered** long before they are ever **denied**. And this can happen without that person even sensing the decay of what were once considered established and **relevant** beliefs.

In these two ways the professing Christian ends up with such a misshapen idea of God and the Christian life that, of course, he will find his devotion too remote and unconscious to sustain a strong vibrant faith. He will become "**double-minded**" in the truest sense - pulled in two directions. But that isn't because of any failure on **God's part**. Rather, it's because the **picture of God and the Christian life** this person is ending up with are totally warped and unworthy of God as He really exists. This person may think his faith is **sincere**, but it's **out of focus and divided**.

Today we're dealing with an entirely different kind of doubt. Today we're looking at doubt that comes from **inadequate foundations**. These are doubts of a more **intellectual nature**. This person knows **what** he believes. Unlike the person in the first lesson, this Christian **does** have a handle on true doctrine. This person **has** an adequate picture of God. He or she **knows what is meaningfully true and what isn't**.

"Well, isn't that enough, Pastor Don? Isn't it enough that I understand exactly what the Bible says about God?"

Yes and **no**. Certainly it **is** enough in order to be **saved**. If any person knows the truth about his or her sin and calls upon Jesus as He's revealed in God's Word, he will be saved. So it **is** enough to be saved simply to know the truth of the Christian faith and live it out as God enables you.

But there's another sense in which the answer is **no** - it's **not** enough just to know the truths of the Scriptures. And this is the point of today's study on doubt. **If you are unable to give a why to your faith, you will never be able to give a why not to your doubts**. Sooner or later, however sincere you are, you are going to come up against something or someone who is going to challenge you beyond your ability to answer. And odds are, he's going to come with some question about **why** (not **what**) you believe.

It happens all the time. People find their faith toppling, not because it wasn't **true**, but because they didn't know **why** it was true.

1) **HOW DOES FAITH END UP WITH INADEQUATE FOUNDATIONS IN OUR MINDS AND HEARTS?**

There are **sources** to this problem. And until we track them down and face them we may find ourselves, in spite of our sincerity, **sowing the seeds for future doubts in our own lives**. Here are some very common problems:

a) ***Sometimes people are actually taught that experience alone is an adequate foundation for faith.***

Ever since I was a child we used to sing, ***“You ask me how I know He lives. He lives within my heart.”*** Now, experience is absolutely **essential**. Facts stored in the head do not a Christian make. Each person needs to **experience** new birth for himself. So my message is not an argument against the importance of genuine Christian experience.

But remember, we’re dealing with **combating doubt**, not how to **become a Christian**. Faith in Jesus Christ is **all** that is needed to be **born again**. It is **not** all that is needed to **resist doubt**.

There are many ways in which the contemporary seeker church movement actually **contributes** to this problem. In an effort to attract large crowds quickly churches often cater to the shortest route to **pleasing the unchurched** rather than **feeding the saints**.

I listen to people who tell me about different churches. There are fast growing church all over Canada. I’ve talked to people about **what they like** about those worship structures. They’ll tell me they really like the **music**. It’s lively and upbeat. I’ve had people tell me they love the **warm fellowship** - the coffee and doughnuts, the interaction with the people. I’ve had people tell me how much they enjoy the **drama**. I’ve had people tell me about the wonderful ministry to **children**.

But there is one thing I have **never heard yet**. I’ve never had anyone come up to me and tell me they go to this or that church because **they are learning so much about the Christian life**. Not **one person** has ever said that to me.

“Why is that such a problem, Pastor Don?”

It’s a **huge** problem because whenever anything takes the place of **growing in truth** in the Christian life, something in the New Testament pattern for discipleship gets short-circuited.

And somewhere down the road, when the worship isn’t as hot, or the miracles as plenty, or the friends have moved on to a new town, the **foundation for faith that was laid is going to be challenged**. Doubts are going to come. And there’s going to be a whole generation of Christians who have been taught to **enjoy** deeply and **feel** deeply and **relate** deeply, but never to **think** deeply about their faith.

Please understand, I’m not saying these people don’t have **genuine faith**. I would never question that in a million years. What I’m saying is there was never established a **foundation** for the faith that exists. These people certainly do **believe**. Perhaps they believe **passionately**. I don’t doubt that. But the real question is **why** do they believe. Could they, in keeping with Peter’s instructions, give a **defense** for their faith?

b) ***Sometimes people form their faith for the wrong reason.***

Let me give you the **worst** reason for faith - and yet, one of the most common. There are many Christians who have formed their faith - and it’s a **genuine** faith - simply because it has worked in their lives.

Let me say it clearly, ***no one should be a Christian because it works for them.*** We are not Christians because our faith ***works.*** We are Christians because our faith is ***true.***

Mormons, Hindus and New Agers can all give powerful testimony of how their faith ***works*** for them. They can give testimony, reciting the benefits their faith brings. But this is ***not*** why ***Christians*** hold on to ***their*** faith. In fact, this is what ***separates*** the Christian faith from the others. Christians hold to their faith because it is ***true.*** That is the ***central*** reason for faith.

What I'm teaching here is entirely Scriptural. There is no getting around the ***central place given to absolute truth in the New Testament presentation of the Christian faith:***

1 Corinthians 15:12-19 - "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? [13] But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. [14] And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. [15] We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. [16] For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. [17] And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. [18] Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. [19] If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."

This is just one of many passages that we could use to support the New Testament's call to the ***primacy of the place of truth in genuine faith.*** It is of absolutely no worth to Paul whatsoever that these people may have been ***comforted*** by the hope of eternal life. It is of absolutely no worth to Paul that these people were genuinely helped by the ***belief*** that Jesus actually rose from the dead.

There is not one subjective note in this whole passage. Either Jesus rose from the dead or He didn't. And here's the important part: ***If He didn't, their belief that He did was not only useless, it was delusional.*** In other words, the issue of whether or not the people were ***helped*** by this belief never entered Paul's head. The only thing that mattered to Paul was whether or not Jesus, in fact, ***did*** rise from the dead. And if He didn't, their ***sincerity*** and their ***pleasant thoughts*** and their ***positive thinking*** about the issue were of no value whatsoever.

The issue here wasn't, ***is this belief a helpful belief?*** That didn't play into the picture at all. The issue for Paul was, ***is this a true belief?***

I fear there's a whole generation coming up that doesn't give due regard for the ***truth content*** of New Testament faith. As a rule, Mormons and Muslims know far more about ***their*** faith than Christians do about ***theirs.*** And sooner or later, that thinness of foundation is going to crack and fall apart.

c) ***Sometimes Christians are actually taught that faith and reason are contrary to each other.***

Forgive me, but I really need to be personal and direct here. I can't tell you the number of times I've heard some pastor from a Newmarket church, or some church leader, even in our own fellowship, say something like this: ***"You will never experience God's deepest new thing until you get past your own head. You've got to get your mind out of the way. You can't put God into the box of your own reason. Just let yourself go blank and get into God!"***

However it's worded, the idea is really not new at all. It's been around a very long time. And it's really not all that spiritual either. The idea is this - ***Faith is best evidenced by abandoning reason. Faith is best evidenced by a willingness to leap into the dark with nothing to cling to but God's Hand!***

And I can tell you what happens next. Usually they will quote some verse from the life of Abraham or a passage in the New Testament that talks about the doubt of Thomas:

John 20:27-31 - "Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." [28] Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" [29] Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." [30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

"See, 'Blessed are they who *did not see*, and yet believed!'"

But this passage is *not* about believing without any evidence. The reason Jesus chides Thomas *isn't* because Thomas wanted evidence, but because Thomas hadn't *embraced* the evidence he had *already been given*. By the time Jesus came again and appeared to Thomas He had already given proof of His resurrection over and over.

Thomas had heard Jesus *predict* His resurrection from the dead for almost three years. He had heard more than most people about it. The women who had gone to the tomb Easter morning had already *witnessed* to the risen Christ. The other disciples had already, against their will, been led to believe Jesus rose from the dead by His *personal appearance to them*.

That's what Jesus was addressing when He spoke to Thomas. It wasn't that he had been given no reasons for faith. He had simply not *received* the reasons he had been given.

Jesus *already had* given evidence of His resurrection. Jesus didn't rebuke Thomas because faith should stand *without* evidence. He rebuked Thomas because only *so much* evidence should be required.

New Testament faith is *always* founded on fact - rock hard, observable, objective fact. Without this foundation, faith crumbles.

Now, it's true that we sometimes are called to *exercise* faith when we don't have *all* the evidence we would like. There are *mysteries* in the faith that go beyond our ability to comprehend (Who understands the Trinity, or the Incarnation, or the unseen eternal world?).

But that's not the same as saying faith is *irrational*. Just because there are *areas* where God's revelation takes us *beyond* what our senses can grasp, that's not an excuse for not gathering all the information we have *available*. In other words, it's true that faith doesn't know *everything*. But faith will want to know all it *can*.

2) WHAT CAN BE DONE TO STRENGTHEN FAITH'S FOUNDATIONS?

- a) *Face issues squarely*. These kinds of intellectual doubts are like mold - they grow best in the *dark*. It is useless and futile to merely push them underground.

Primarily, Christians push these doubts underground because they think it is a sign of *sin* or *weak faith* to have such questions in the first place. But it isn't. In fact, the Christian faith is a faith that *invites* such inquiry. The whole New Testament was written to deal with questions of faith - to *supply reasons - answers* - to doubts:

John 20:30-31 - "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

John wrote his gospel to supply *reasons* for faith. He wrote it to *dispel* doubts. As we've seen, and will see further in this series, not all doubts are to be handled in the same way. But *these* kinds of doubts - intellectual questionings - are only going to be settled by studying the evidence where it is available.

So first, face your questions honestly. God isn't frightened by them.

- b) **Read.** This kind of doubt cometh out in no other way. There are wonderful, clear, tough-minded answers to your questions. You don't need to run from these kinds of doubts. In many ways, these are the easiest doubts to deal with. We'll see that in future weeks.

Whether it's the *trustworthiness of the Scriptures* or *the existence of God* or *the creation of the world* or *the deity of Christ*, or the *problem of evil* - there are answers that will satisfy your mind and strengthen your faith.

But you must study and read. No religious experience is *self-sustaining*. If you don't read and study you will run out of gas sooner or later. You simply can't *muster up faith* when these kinds of doubts are present at the door of your soul. You can't worship your way out of such doubts. You must face them and deal with them.

I believe every Christian should read *one good non-fiction, faith-building book each month*. I am constantly recommending good books on Sunday night. But I can't read them for you. You and I need to be constantly ready to *give a defense of the faith we hold*. The Bible says so.