

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

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket

DOUBTS CAUSED BY AN OLD SCAR TRYING TO PROTECT ITSELF

I want to show you a couple of truly amazing details from a passage of Scripture you probably know quite well. But I'll bet you never thought about a particular kind of doubt that's identified in it:

Luke 24:33-42 - "And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, [34] saying, **"The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!"** [35] Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread. [36] As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" [37] But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. [38] And he said to them, **"Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"** [39] See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." [40] And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. [41] And **while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling**, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" [42] They gave him a piece of broiled fish...."

Verse 38 is striking - "And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" And then, right on the heels of that verse we find the same idea unpacked in **verse 41** - **"While they still disbelieved for joy...."** Those are the phrases I want to try to capture today. Not all doubts have the same root system.

Now, certainly I can sympathize with their initial reaction to the news of the Resurrection of Jesus. Even though Jesus **said** he would rise, it wasn't a normal occurrence. So, understandably, it took some convincing and some evidence. I have no problem with that. This is the more common type of doubt.

But take note there are **two kinds of doubt** in this resurrection account. When the disciples **first** heard the news they didn't believe it. So they **doubted** the reports. This is the kind of doubt we looked at earlier in this series - doubts that are caused by a **deficient foundation**. These are the **intellectual doubts** that call out for further evidence. This is belief in search of proof.

At this first point the disciples do what anyone would do. They check out the facts. Half a day goes by and the evidence mounts - the **two women** come as eye witnesses to the empty tomb - the **two disciples report talking with Jesus on the Emmaus road** - **Simon Peter's first hand experience with the risen Jesus** was conclusive.

There seemed to be only one conclusion and they reached it after reviewing the evidence - **Luke 24:33-34** - "And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, [34] saying, **"The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!"**

This is the way we would expect belief to grow. Faith was already building in their hearts. Then something else happens. Jesus comes and **stands** before them and **talks** to them. That's where this **second** kind of strange doubt comes into the picture. After all the reports, after all the evidence, and after seeing Jesus right before their eyes, we read that they were **"disbelieving for joy"** the fact that Jesus was actually risen.

O, I know it didn't last long. But Luke seems to capture, as if with a snap-shot, this momentary hesitation - this lapse of faith - **not** because the news wasn't good **enough**, but because it was **too good to be true**.

This kind of doubt is a **self-protection** mechanism. It's one way we have of sealing ourselves off from additional disappointment and pain. And I think you can see this clearly in this account from Luke's gospel:

We probably can't even imagine the gaping wound the death of Jesus left in the hearts of His followers. You catch just a bit of it in the remarks of the two disciples to Jesus as they walked along the Emmaus road:

Luke 24:17-21 - "And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, ***looking sad***. [18] Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" [19] And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man ***who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people***, [20] and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. [21] ***But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel***. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened.

That second-last sentence has to be the understatement of the year - "***We had hoped he was the one....***" These men did more than just hope. They ***banked everything on Jesus***. More than once they told Jesus they had left absolutely ***everything*** to follow Him. They bet all or nothing on Jesus Christ. And then they watched Him die on that bloody cross.

The experience of the crucifixion had been a harrowing experience for them. After they watched it they just ran. Now they were hiding. They must have replayed those events a thousand times over in their minds. Sooner or later, they would try their best to get over it and put the pieces of their lives back together. Their old dreams and lifestyles were all they had left to live for now.

Jesus took them to such promised, unbelievable heights only to leave them afraid and lonely and flat on their faces.

Then - bang - right in the middle of all this, Jesus appears to them. And their minds begin to race. Here we go again. I'll tell you what I think that phrase "***they disbelieved for joy***" means. They didn't want to be heart-broken again. They were just getting ***over*** one wound. They couldn't stand to go through that ***again***. So, because the potential for ***joy*** was so great, and the fear of ***disappointment*** so overwhelming, they were caught, just for a moment, like a deer in a car's headlights. Frozen. Hesitating. Disbelieving for joy.

They're just getting over the pain, and suddenly, there's Jesus. The game is on again. Immediately everything is on the line again. Now as I said, fortunately, in their case, this kind of ***disbelief for joy*** lasted only a moment. But such is not always the case. I want to look at the very same ***kind*** of doubt when it's left unchallenged and unchecked in our hearts.

I've called this teaching ***doubts from an old scar***. That title may not be perfect, but I think it captures a key idea. For those disciples that wound - still pretty fresh - was the apparent loss of their Master. And even if their ***theology*** was wrong, their ***disappointment*** was genuine and keen. And it was that ***scar*** - that ***disappointment*** - that kept them, just for a moment, from believing - ***even with all the best evidence in the world!***

The problem wasn't with the ***evidence***. Jesus was ***standing*** right there in front of them - ***talking*** to them! No, their momentary disbelief had nothing to do with any lack of ***proof***. The problem was something ***inside*** them. The problem was the disappointment of losing Jesus three days earlier. And the problem was the ***defense mechanism*** this had triggered in their souls. ***After something so devastating could they put their hope in anything so wonderful again?*** It almost seemed too much to hope for - more than they had a right to expect.

People can get themselves into those kinds of strange situations where they get so accustomed to ***shutting out hope in God*** that they ***close off a part of their heart to yielding and submitting and believing and coming to Him***.

Let me try to flesh this out a bit and make it practical for you and me:

1) **THIS KIND OF DOUBT COMES WHENEVER A PROBLEM TAKES GOD'S PLACE IN THE HEART**

It's more common than you might think. It is, perhaps, the most commonly justified form of idolatry. Some crisis, some pain, some issue with another person becomes the ***dominant shaper of our thoughts and choices***.

Gradually, subtly, we begin to look at God through the lense of our problem, rather than looking at our problem through the lense of faith and trust in God. At this point, we no longer **have a problem**. The **problem has us**.

I have seen this happen many times. There are people who, even though they know better, find a certain comfort in **defining their lives by their problems**. If they were guaranteed a solution they would have to get on with life, and that might be risky.

This kind of doubt germinates whenever **personal experience** (and usually **bad** experience at that) becomes absolute in the life rather than God. The bad and painful experience colors the life rather than faith in the Risen Christ. The painful past shapes their attitude so habitually they would feel incomplete if they suddenly had to move on in fresh grace and promise of provision in Christ.

2) EXAMPLES OF SCARS THAT CAN GERMINATE THEIR OWN DOUBTS

This is not some remote, psychological problem. Let me give some examples that happen over and over again:

- a) ***Sometimes a string of disappointments can steel the heart against expecting anything genuinely good up the road for fear of being disappointed again.***

The danger of this kind of withered faith is that what looks like **humility** is actually **self-pity**. And it can start to taste pleasant when it's indulged in.

I had a lady tell me she didn't pray for her wayward son anymore because she couldn't stand having that prayer go unanswered. And she couldn't see the twisted circle in her thinking. If anyone refuses the risk of unanswered prayer, they will, by elimination, never know the joy of answered prayer either.

True enough, the cross was a painful experience for the disciples. But it was no excuse for rejecting the life and power of the Risen Christ when He was standing right in front of them!

I said they had no **excuse**, but there was a **cause**. There can come a strange kind of comfort - **a predictability in not daring a venturous, risky, passionate trust in God**. You will never have to **stretch** if you're content to **settle**. But the cost of that comfortable self-pity is never experiencing what you actually long for most - the fresh, transforming touch from the Hand of God!

It can happen any Sunday we have prayer for needs. The marvel of God's promise and provision is swallowed up in the painful awareness that you came forward **last** week and are no better off right now. So you protect yourself from disappointment by not even coming today.

- b) ***When we've been genuinely wronged by someone else in the past, we risk shutting God out of our present by cherishing unforgiveness.***

Matthew 5:23-24 - "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, [24] **leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.**"

These verses are designed to show clearly the impossibility of communion with God when there is a personal problem with a brother. It's the altar or the personal grudge. But **both** can't be held at the same time.

I'll tell you this, if the person doesn't go right away to fix things with that brother, however wrong that

brother may be, he will soon quit coming to the altar all together because nobody likes to live with that kind of condemnation and guilt. God will seem too demanding for the person who cherishes unforgiveness.

Soon the relationship with God will dry up, not because God isn't good and gracious and loving and able, but because the person was too ***comforted by the unforgiving feelings he justified toward his brother.***

The Risen Christ was right there, standing ready to pardon and empower, but this person missed Him because of some past hurt from a brother's hand. He holds God at bay in order to protect his wound from his brother. He knows if God comes into the situation, things will change. He won't risk that change. And eventually he will end up squeezing out the power and reality of God altogether.

c) ***Sometimes the perfectionist can shy away from God because he convinces himself that he isn't worthy of God's help and blessing.***

Of course, what looks like ***humility*** is really nothing but ***pride***. What about the times you ***did*** feel comfortable coming to God for help? Were those the times you ***were*** worthy?

Again, this kind of ***false humility*** is really nothing more than a way of justifying (remaining ***comfortable***) avoiding God, because we know that if we come for cleansing and grace ***right away*** He ***will pardon***. And then we'll have no excuse for staying home from church, skipping devotions, or turning down all those invitations to help teach Sunday School.

The common factor with all these attitudes, and many more we didn't even mention, is the same: ***the fear of letting go of the scar from the past is keeping the person from taking hold of the only One who could truly set him free.***

In becoming ***comfortable*** with the way we've adjusted to disappointing, hurtful, unjust, or compromising situations in the ***past***, we are prevented from taking hold of the One who could change our ***future***. Disbelief in what God could and would do is growing because we won't let go of the one thing we've adjusted to, our present state of low expectation and effort.

We won't have to worry about falling again so long as we never get up. And God ***insists*** on helping us up. So our only safe refuge is ***doubting and refusing the one thing we need and secretly want the most - the help and power of the Risen Christ.***

3) **WHAT TO DO WITH UNBELIEF THAT COMES FROM AN OLD SCAR**

Each kind of doubt calls for its own distinct remedy. These secret doubts aren't going to be helped by a book of proofs for the existence of God. Remember Luke's account of the disciples in our opening text. There was no lack of proof for the Risen Christ. He was ***standing right there in front of them!***

Doubts from an old scar don't come from ***lack of evidence***. They come from ***fear of believing***. They come from ***preferring the known bondage*** to the ***risk and challenge of being set free.***

In other words, the source of this problem is ***inward***, not ***outward***. The problem isn't with ***God***. And the problem isn't even with the ***circumstances of my past***. The problem is in my heart. ***I've made my wound my life-style.*** This is the ultimate example of false humility morphing into an idol. That's the problem, plain, but not so simple.

The remedy, for those with the courage, is to ***call my cherished scar what it really is - sin.*** Nothing else will do. These kind of barriers can't be psychologized away. Only confession and the blood of Jesus will do.

Fortunately, there is no lack of power in the blood of Jesus. The trick, again, is with our inward will and heart. It is the nature of these sins that they can't be cleansed while they hide deep in their burrows. They must be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the light of the cross.

The secret is to ***call these sins what they are***. They must be named very specifically. They must be ***tagged*** and ***identified*** deliberately, slowly, and carefully as the Holy Spirit finally gets into corners of our hearts long sealed up and closed. It's like making sure, when you wash the bathroom floor, you clean way back behind the toilet.

Then, like all other gracious cleansing, we can relearn the joy of walking in the light. Those cherished, comfortable excuses for sin weren't so beautiful after all. But only the light of the cross shows their ugly faces for what they truly are. ***Only the light of the truth can make these sneaky, closet, self imprisoned doubters free indeed.***