

## **WHEN YOU CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM YOUR MOST TROUBLING THOUGHTS - Part Seven**

---

Teaching #1904 - Sunday, July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016 - 10 a.m.

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket

### **DOUBTS CAUSED BY PRESSING THE LIMITS OF UNDERSTANDING**

Last week we established the central truth that the emotions can cause doubts that immobilize a well established, carefully reasoned faith. We used the illustration of the fear of flying, even in the face of overwhelming statistical evidence for its safety. Statistics are frequently outgunned by irrational but intense emotions like fear.

We wrapped up that teaching focusing on the need for the *mind* to regulate the *emotions* if the Christian faith was to have the solid foundation the Bible intends. And the Holy Spirit wants to *help* with this ongoing discipline. That's why one of the fruits of the Spirit is "*self-control*" - Galatians 5:22-23 - "**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.**"

Take note that one of the fruits of the *Spirit* is strangely called *self-control*. Which means the *self* is somehow still involved in this spiritual process. We must cooperate with the Holy Spirit in this work. This principle of the spiritual *mind* controlling the *emotions* needs protecting and explaining. Even this Biblical principle can be exploited by the Devil through our own ignorance of how it all works. That's why this week we are looking at doubts caused by *pressing the limits of understanding*.

In other words, if last week's lesson focused on the *importance* of reason in the life of faith (*if you can't give a why for your faith, you will never be able to give a why not to your doubts*), this week's lesson focuses on the *limitations* of reason alone.

Do you have a peep hole in your front door? Have you ever had the experience of looking through it when you weren't sure who was outside? I've had a few occasions when people I know - people who in their fallen state, were trying to play some kind of joke on me - I've had people like that come to my door, see the peep hole, have *one* person ring the bell and stand there while *several other* people, waiting just outside the peripheral vision of the peep hole, were ready to yank me out into a snow bank.

Now, none of that argues *against* the value of the peep hole for identifying legitimate causes of fear or concern. It simply means that if you *just* use the peep hole, there are going to be times when you will arrive at false conclusions about who is outside your front door. The peep hole is *important* and *necessary*. But in certain situations it can also be *inadequate* and even *misleading*.

This applies to the place of human reason in the life of faith. Reason is absolutely essential and central in a strong Christian faith. But, by itself, it will never comprehend everything that comes to the door of your life. Reason has its limits. You can't sort everything out. There is mystery. There is confusion at times. For now, there are questions we can't answer. The Apostle Paul says *we see through a glass darkly*.

And here is how all of this relates to our study of doubt. If we don't *recognize* the limits of our own reasoning powers - if we simply are too *impatient* to accept and live with some unresolved questions - we will *force* explanations for our circumstances and questions that just aren't true. We will come to our own conclusions about God - why He is allowing this to happen to us - why suffering and pain come to the godly while sinners prosper - why we aren't healed when we pray in faith - why godly parents can have wayward sons and daughters - and a host of other bewildering issues.

If you let your reason run out of bounds - if you *must* have an explanation for everything, even when the explanation isn't given - you will end up *passing judgement* on God with your own thoughts. Or, you will *create* a less than worthy God just to satisfy your impatient inquisitiveness. And the God you create won't satisfy your heart. Your faith will soon wane. You will always end up doubting a God who is small enough to fit totally in your own head.

Let me try to give some practical steps to take when you can't find the answer to the question, "*Why, God?*"

#### 1) **YOU NEVER KNOW THE VALUE OF SOMETHING UNTIL YOU KNOW ITS LIMITS**

Let me give you the most basic example of this. We talk about teaching children and youth the *value* of money. By that we mean they need to know it must be *earned*. It doesn't *grow on trees*. We also mean it shouldn't be *wasted* on trivialities. We also want them to know that there are some things *money can't buy*.

All of these truths are important. We will enjoy and make better use of money **over the long haul** when we know the **value** of money. It's when something is **used properly**, within its proper **boundaries**, that it can be most fully appreciated and utilized.

In other words, something must be **used properly** in order to appreciate fully its **usefulness**. Just like the peep hole in the opening illustration. It's a valuable tool for seeing the face of the stranger standing at the door. But you don't look through it if you want to say good-bye to your spouse. That's not what it was designed for.

**Here's the main point this morning.** There are all sorts of Christians who grow frustrated and angry and impatient with God simply because they're trying to solve a problem with **reason** what can only be faced with **trust**.

But this trust isn't a **blind** trust. It's a **reasonable** trust. Let me explain this further in the next point:

## 2) THERE ARE TIMES WHEN WE MUST SUSPEND JUDGEMENT IN OUR WALK WITH GOD

I don't mean we are to suspend **thought** in our walk with God, but we are to suspend **judgment**. The two are not at all the same. And the distinction is very important in the battle with doubt. Here's why:

Because we live in a Fallen world, and because we are finite human creatures, it is simply an honest statement of fact that we will not always be able to know **what** God is doing in every situation of our lives or **why** He is doing it as He is. Some things are opaque to us right now. We see through a glass darkly, or we see only partially through the peep hole.

So, there are going to be times when I simply can't see the whole picture. I don't have all the facts. I don't know the end from the beginning. And when I don't have all the facts I must suspend judgment on the situation. It takes time to lean never to judge God by isolated events.

But (and this is the important point) just because I must suspend **judgement** I must never suspend **reason**. While I may not know what God is doing in my circumstances **right now**, or why He is doing it, I still know **why He trustworthy in whatever He does**. And that is where I must focus all the powers of my mind.

In the face of mystery, remember what you **can** and **do** know. Don't **overstate** your doubts. Don't give them more life than they already have. **"God, I don't understand You at all!"** That's a bad, untrue, emotionally driven statement that simply pours gasoline on the fire of your doubt.

**"God, in this situation I don't understand what you are doing right now"** There is nothing wrong with honestly saying that to God. Nobody understands God's ways in **every** situation. Then continue: **"I still know you work all things together for good for those who love You. I still know Your ways are higher than my ways. I still know you are the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. I still know nothing can separate me from Your eternal love."**

"Well, what's the difference, Pastor Don?" There's a huge difference. And that leads me into the next point:

## 3) WE ALWAYS HAVE SUFFICIENT REASONS FOR CONTINUED TRUST, EVEN WHEN WE DON'T KNOW WHAT GOD IS DOING RIGHT NOW

This is the **alternative** to allowing your impatient thoughts build an **inaccurate picture** of God and reaching an **unjust verdict** about God when you can't see what He is doing.

In other words, when we don't know the **path** God is taking us down right now, we still know the **God** who is with us on the path. When we don't know **why** God is doing what He is doing (and that frequently happens) we do know the **God** who knows what **He** is doing all the time.

It's this failure to remember that distinction that is the root of many times of doubt and confusion in our lives. You can see this in the life of the Psalmist in **Psalm 73**. He has an issue. God doesn't seem fair. God seems to be better to the unjust than He is to the just. And that creates all sorts of theological problems for those of us who believe in an absolutely holy and just God.

He pours out his complaint to God:

**Psalm 73:8-14** - "They [the wicked] scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. [9] They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. [10] Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. [11] And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" [12] Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. [13] All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. [14] For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning."

Note the big, sweeping, emotionally driven statement in **verses 12 and 13**. No one is *always* at ease. And David will soon see the reason for following his Lord. It wasn't *vain* at all.

Then we see a change in the Psalmist's thinking. His whole attitude changes:

**Psalm 73:17-26** - "....until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. [18] Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. [19] How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! [20] Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. [21] When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, [22] I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. [23] Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. [24] You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. [25] Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. [26] My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

The point of interest is that the Psalmist never *does* get the specific answer to the question he was asking. The issue of why the wicked prosper many times while the righteous suffer is an age old question that never does get specifically addressed in the Psalm.

But the Psalmist *does* end up satisfied in his heart. He does this with the help of the Holy Spirit (and he doesn't see all of this truth until he goes "**into the sanctuary of God**" vs.17 - There are things you are going to misunderstand about life and God if you skip church). He gets a bigger picture ("**....they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!**" 19..... "**afterward You will receive me to glory**" 24). And he focuses his attention on what he *already knows* to be true of God, even when he can't determine what God is doing *right now* - "**But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works**" (28).

Do you see what the Psalmist is doing? This is exactly what I said at the beginning of this point about *suspending judgement* without *suspending thought*. He isn't using his reason to get the answer to his question. He doesn't *know* the answer to that question. Perhaps he won't know in his entire lifetime. But he is still using his head. He's using the peep hole of his limited reasoning abilities to *recall to his mind what he does know about his God*.

So it's not *irrational* to suspend judgement in this difficult issue because he does know *for sure* that God is good and trustworthy. In other words, while the Psalmist doesn't know what God is *doing*, he does know the *God* who knows what He is doing.

This is the proper use of our limited powers of reason and it is the foundation for a faith that can stand up to perplexing issues.

The next point follows logically:

#### 4) **THE MORE YOU KNOW ABOUT GOD'S CHARACTER, THE MORE YOU WILL BE ABLE TO TRUST HIM IN CONFUSING SITUATIONS**

There is a deadly myth that has a wide following in many contemporary charismatic churches. It has gradually filtered down from many merchandisers of popularized Christian teaching and materials. The myth is this: ***Theological/doctrinal teaching isn't going to help people in this modern age. People need to hear contemporary, non-religious talks if they're going to get anything beneficial out of the Bible and church.***

Here's the problem with that. What you know about *life* isn't what is going to help you live life well. It's what you know about *God* that is going to help you live the rest of your life well.

This is especially true in situations when life doesn't make sense. **Os Guinness** puts it this way:

***"More specifically, the poorer our understanding of God is at the beginning of our coming to faith, the more***

***we will need to understand everything after coming to faith. If we do not know why we trust God at the beginning, then we will always need to know everything God is doing after in order to trust Him."***

That's a very good way of saying the very same thing I just said. If your doctrinal knowledge of God and His character is thin to start with, or goes unfed after weeks and weeks of churchgoing, then you had better hope no trying or confusing situations come up because you will have nothing with which to process them. When life is pleasant sound doctrine seems a waste of time. When life is hard doctrine is the only thing that will hold you up.

Here's why all this knowledge of God is so important:

5) **WHEN TIMES ARE DIFFICULT THE APPEARANCE OF GOD CHANGES TO OUR TROUBLED PERSPECTIVE**

Not that **God** ever changes, but His **appearance to us** changes. I think you get some glimpses of this idea in the teaching of Jesus:

**Luke 18:1-7** - "And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. [2] He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. [3] And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' [4] For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, [5] yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" [6] And the Lord said, "**Hear what the unrighteous judge says. [7] And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?**"

Now, certainly Jesus was **not** telling us that God is like an unjust judge up in the sky. He makes that very clear at the end of this parable. But He **is**, I think, telling us that there are certain situations - like the one Jesus was addressing - **unanswered or delayed response to prayer in the face of great need** - that make God **seem** like an unjust judge **to us**.

Circumstances don't change **God**, but they change the way we **perceive** God. And if you can't **suspend judgement** when you don't know what God is doing, you are likely to come to the false conclusion that God **is** just like that unjust judge.

We're vulnerable to these unjust pictures of God forming in our mind **unless** we know enough about God already to very reasonably **rule out** those false conclusions. And, when the chips of life are down, its not going to be some peppy talk about how to put the spice back into your marriage, or some counsel on how to cope with stress, or a bit more information on how to get ahead financially that will keep your life glued together. **It's what you know about God that counts**. This is the most practical subject in all the world.

6) **DO YOU KNOW WHY YOU TRUST GOD?**

What God is **doing** may be a mystery. What he **has already done** is not. This is always the safest, surest footing for solid, confusion proof faith.

**Romans 8:32-39** - "**He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?** [33] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. [34] Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. [35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? [36] As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." [37] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. [38] For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is really a great tragedy that **verses 33-39** so frequently get read and quoted severed from **verse 32** - "**He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?**"

**Verse 32** is the **reason** for **verses 33-39**. Without verse 32, verses 33-39 are just a weak wish. Paul looks **backward** for faith in the face of trial and persecution and confusion. Such strong conviction comes, not from knowing how all the persecution and pain are going to turn out, but from knowing what God has **already** done in

sending Jesus Christ on our behalf.

Here's Paul's conclusion: ***There is no issue I cannot leave with God if He is the Father of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.***

***"My faith has found a resting place,  
Not in device or creed:  
I trust the Ever Living One,  
His wounds for me shall plead.  
I need no other argument,  
I need no other plea;  
It is enough that Jesus died,  
And that He died for me."***

## 7) **ONE FINAL CAUTION ABOUT DEALING WITH THIS DOUBT**

Don't deepen the problem by driving this doubt underground by ***denying*** the trial or the confusion. What I mean by that is this: There is all the difference in the world between ***suspending judgement*** on some particular issue because of what I know to be true of God through Jesus Christ, and ***denying*** the situation that is causing my confusion and pain in the first place.

In other words, to suspend judgement on ***why*** something is happening is not the same as ***denying that something is happening***. The kind of approach I'm talking about in this teaching isn't ***make-believe***. It is trusting God when I have no answer ***based upon*** the proof of God's trustworthiness in Christ Jesus.

But there is a kind of ***faith teaching and emphasis that is nothing more than repression of the problem***. Many people try to ***force*** some confession of faith in a way that is nothing more than repression and denial.

And sooner or later - usually later - that festering of internalized doubt will tear your soul apart. Nobody ever crawled away from Jesus confessing, ***"I'm healed! I'm healed!"*** Biblical faith is always bigger, stronger and more realistic than that.

I'm afraid of the way many Christians are actually encouraged to try to ***confess things into reality*** that just aren't there. They are foolishly encouraged to ***praise God for all the bad things that are happening to them***. These distortions only serve to turn the attention from faith in ***God*** to faith in ***faith***. In the long run people get hurt and confused.

Remember, when you don't know ***why***, and you don't know ***how long***, you still can be sure of the God who knows both. And you can always trust the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Romans 8:28** - ***"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."***