**“Without becoming weak in faith he [Abraham] contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness.” —*Romans 4:19–22 (NASB)***

The term “doubt” conjures up uneasy feelings. On the one hand, we know critical thinking and the experience of uncertainty are essential ingredients for learning. We consider those who have no ability to question or critique *slaves* to whatever authoritarian rule controls them. On the other hand, doubt is always at hand during the dark nights of the soul. Doubt is the fuel for despair, and in those moments, doubt is despised.

**What is “doubt”?** According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “doubt” means “to be uncertain about (something): to believe that (something) may not be true or is unlikely,” or “to have no confidence in (someone or something).” Stated simply, **“doubt” describes** **“the absence of certainty.”**

Naturally, the concept of doubt is immensely important to the broader topic of the Christian mind. When contemplating what it means to think *Christianly*, we must consider the role that doubt should or should not play in the process of thinking. Doubt exists; there’s no denying it. But should it, and if so, in what form? Since doubt is the absence of certainty, should Christian thinking strive for absolute certainty devoid of doubt, or should it always be uncertain and permeated with doubt?

**Doubt is the absence of certainty**

To answer these and other such questions we must resist looking to personal experience for answers. We are seasoned skeptics. Uncertainty is in our DNA. Our bias toward doubt is clear. It arrived with the very first temptation when the Serpent invited Eve to think this thought: “Indeed, has God said . . .”? (Gen 3:1). Eve took the bait, and uncertainty has marked mankind ever since. This penchant for doubt has spawned all kinds of assumptions and self-justifications on our part. We encourage, rationalize, and revel in our doubt whenever we can—even when we despise it.

Instead, a correct understanding of doubt must be developed from the teaching of God’s word. If we are to understand doubt’s origin, nature, and validity, we must look to Scripture for answers. When we do, we recognize that doubt is treated in different lights. In some cases, doubt is the very foe of true faith. In other cases, doubt is the helpful servant that propels us to stronger faith. And in yet other cases, doubt is the exercise of vigorous faith. What makes these expressions of doubt different?

**Doubt as the Foe of Faith**

Scripture’s most direct teaching on the topic of doubt is decidedly *negative.* In the New Testament, wherever the standard terms for doubt are found, there we find doubt as the antithesis to faith.

* Matthew 14:28–33 – “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (v. 31).
* Matthew 21:20–22 // Mark 11: 21–24
* Matthew 28:16–18
* John 20:25–29
* Romans 4:18–22 – “He did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith” (v. 20).
* Romans 14:22–23 – “He who doubts is condemned” (v. 23)
* James 1:5–8 – “But he must ask in faith without any doubting” (v. 6).

A survey of these texts leads to several important conclusions. First, **doubt is a common experience**, even among those who closely followed Jesus (Peter, Thomas) and who looked to him for deliverance (the father of the demon-possessed child). Yet, **doubt as a response to God’s word or to His ability is always the antithesis of biblical faith**. Those who doubt in this way are clearly described has having “little faith” (Peter) and being “doubleminded,” while those who did *not* doubt God’s word (Abraham) are considered models of faith. Finally, **this kind of doubt sets man’s senses, reason, or intuition in opposition to the authority of divine revelation**. This is particularly illustrated in Thomas, who demanded empirical verification before he would believe in the testimony that Jesus had risen from the dead. While Jesus did provide Thomas with the opportunity to verify by his own senses, Jesus also indicated it would have been far more virtuous to believe the testimony *by faith.*

This kind of doubt is what the Christian must seek to mortify. It is the enemy of his faith. John Frame (*Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, 217) summarizes this when he writes,

The Bible presents doubt largely in negative terms. It is a spiritual impediment, an obstacle to doing God’s work . . . . In Matthew 14:31 and Romans 14:23 it is the opposite of faith and therefore is a sin. Of course, this sin, like other sins, may remain with us through our earthly lives. But we should not be complacent about it. Just as the ideal for the Christian life is perfect holiness, the idea for the Christian mind is absolute certainly about God’s revelation.

**Doubt as the Servant of Faith**

Does Scripture invalidate all forms of doubt and uncertainty? Is skepticism and critical inquiry in every form sinful? While Scripture directly labels doubt that questions God’s word or His abilities as sin, it does not reject all forms of doubt. It does affirm a kind of doubt that is actually helpful to faith. This is doubt that has as its target *one’s self*, not God*.* When uncertainty is directed to the doubter’s own intuition and feelings, it is healthy.

* Proverbs 3:5–7 – “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil.”
* Romans 12:16b
* 2 Corinthians 13:5 – “Test yourselves *to see* if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?”
* James 4:13–17
* Job 42:1–6
* Psalm 26:2; 139:23–24

These texts lead to additional insights on the nature and validity of doubt. First, **doubt is beneficial when it reflects a lack of certainty in *oneself*.** This is not doubt in response to God and his word, but doubt in response to the inadequacy, insufficiency, and fallibility one sees in himself. Second, these texts testify that **doubt is virtue when it moves the doubter in the right direction—to a greater hunger for God’s truth and not to a deeper despair of life.** It is a doubt that says, “Stop trusting your own counsel. Seek truth only where truth can be found.”

This kind of doubt is quite the opposite of what today’s proponents of doubt advocate. For them, doubt is beneficial when directed at God and his word, but it is psychologically devastating when directed at one’s own self. Ours is the age of *self-esteem*, when one’s “heart” must be trusted above all else. The Bible completely rejects this effort to find certainty in self. Again, John Frame writes,

We should not conclude, however, that doubt is *always* sinful. . . . To doubt what God has clearly spoken to us is wrong. But in other cases, in fact, it is wrong for us to claim knowledge, much less certainty. Indeed, often the best course is to admit our ignorance. (*Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, 217)

“Doubt Thee, my Lord? I could doubt all except Thee; and doubt myself most of all.” *—Charles Spurgeon*

**Doubt as the Expression of Faith**

But not only are we to refuse putting certainty in our own flesh (reason, intuition, senses), we are called upon to scrutinize all that is *less* than God’s word. Any claim to truth, any proposed narrative of reality, any assertion about right or wrong, or any judgment made between beauty and ugliness, should be scrutinized by a *sanctified* critical judgment. This kind of judgment views all of life through the lens of God’s word, presupposing it as ultimate authoritative truth. It is thus an expression of strong, vibrant faith to question all other truth claims.

* 2 Corinthians 10:5 – “*We are* destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and *we are* taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.”
* Colossians 2:8 – “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”
* 1 John 4:1 – “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”
* Revelation 2:2

These texts emphasize *testing* and *discernment* and communicate an important principle about a posture of uncertainty. **Scrutiny is the necessary first response to any human assertion about reality, morality, or beauty**. It would be a misuse of the revelation God has given us, and of the mind that God has given us, to believe naively anything that a person communicates to us. By exercising critical reasoning with God’s word as the grid, doubt becomes a chief expression of true, biblical faith—doubt directed at the claims to truth we hear all around us.

**How do I determine the benefit or validity of my doubt? Answer these four questions:**

*Consider doubt’s object—What is it that is doubted?*

*Consider doubt’s direction—Toward what is it moving?*

*Consider doubt’s foundation—Upon what authority is it operating?*

*Consider doubt’s motivation—What is providing its energy?*

**How must we respond?**

1. **Doubt the right things.** There is a desperate need for critical thinking today, especially as the culture becomes increasingly comfortable with *totalitarianism* (“totalitarianism” is a form of government that seeks control over all aspects of life). The power of the government, large corporations, and media companies to invent and spread narratives in order to influence the population’s thinking has never been greater. And the fact that independent thinkers and those asking hard questions are today so routinely “cancelled” only further illustrates the need. Christian men must challenge this status quo and ask the hard questions.

But healthy skepticism should not only be directed to those who seek to control the narrative; it should be our approach to our own feelings, intuition, and private judgments. To think Christianly means to refrain from giving our thoughts, intuition, and feelings automatic and unrestrained influence. To think Christianly means that every thought, feeling, or impulse should be—as a matter of habit—put on hold until it is proven consistent with the standard of truth (see 2 Cor 10:5).

1. **Submit to the right authority.** Doubt forces us to seek the right authority to validate or invalidate a claim to truth—unless, of course, it is a malicious kind of doubt which only leads to despair. This pursuit of an authority is not wrong. In fact, it is essential. But for critical thinking to be healthy and helpful, it must seek to make its inquiry with the *right* authority—an authority that cannot later be repudiated. This authority is God’s word—not intuition, reason, feelings, traditions, or anything else outside of God.

 “Just as faith cannot be undermined by scientific argument, it cannot be convincingly established by it. It always rests on revelation, authority, a divine word, whether true or presumed, and is therefore always only a fruit of faith, a faith that – for whatever reason – recognizes this authority and bows before it in obedience.”

—Herman Bavinck, *Certainty of Faith, 2*4

In fact, the Apostle Paul asserted that even an angelic proclamation could not change his understanding of the gospel. It had been revealed to him by the word of God—and that was the only authority that counted (see Gal 1:8–9). In the struggle with faith, the doubter must submit to that same standard.

1. **Affirm the right faith.** “Faith” is the embrace of God’s promises on the basis that *He* has uttered them, and not on the basis of a third-party verification. This understanding of faith is communicated succinctly in Hebrews 11:1 – “Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (see also v. 6). Similarly, in his monumental exposition of the nature of saving faith in Romans 4–5, the Apostle Paul points to Abraham and his faith as the standard. Abraham looked at his old age and Sarah’s infertility, then looked at God’s promise of a son. There were many subjective reasons *not* to believe—or at least to *doubt*. But because it was God who made the promise, it *had* to be true, and he lived in light of that certainty (esp. Rom 4:18–25).

Reaffirming this understanding of faith is essential in light of the attempts to redefine faith according to the postmodern spirit of the age. These false definitions of faith lead only to confusion. Faith is not *a leap in the dark* or *an ecstatic experience*. Faith is neither *irrational* nor *speculative.* It is not *beyond belief* or *bereft of truth.* Faith is a whole-hearted, submissive response to revelation—because *God himself* has revealed it.

1. **Appeal to the right help.** Doubt is corrosive when it propels the doubter away from the only source of certainty and confidence—God. Conversely, one can always tell when he is handling doubt correctly—when such uncertainty creates a hunger for truth and increasingly propels the doubter to God. The believer rightly handling his doubt beseeches the Lord in the same way that the father of the demon-possessed child beseeched Jesus: “I do believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). As J. C. Ryle stated, “Doubting does not prove that a man has no faith, but only that his faith is small. And even when our faith is small, the Lord is ready to help us” (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of Matthew*, 170).
2. **Provide the right ministry.** In the same way that there are different kinds of doubt, there should also be different responses to it in the church. Those who are skeptical about the trustworthiness of Scripture are expressing a much different kind of doubt than those who question the genuineness of their conversion. The former casts uncertainty on God (see Gen 3:1); the latter casts uncertainty on self (see 2 Cor 13:5). The former requires admonition, warning, and even separation when it persists; the latter requires compassion, instruction, and encouragement. The church must be a place where those who are weak in their faith can receive the strengthening they need (1 Thess 5:14; Jude 20–23).

**For Further Study**

1. Memorize Genesis 15:6 and Hebrews 11:1.
2. Review the three kinds of doubt discussed in this session (doubt as the foe of faith, the servant of faith, and the expression of faith). Summarize each of these categories in your own words, list a couple key texts that substantiate them, and consider which are most present and absent in your life.
3. Often people describe their doubts about God’s word as merely “humble enquiry.” But why is placing God’s word under the examination and judgment of human skepticism the exact *opposite* of humility?
4. What are the four key questions to ask in order to determine the *benefit* or *validity* of a person’s doubt? Explain how each of these questions help distinguish between healthy uncertainty and unbiblical skepticism.
5. Spend extra time in prayer this week asking that God would give you the right kind of certainty with respect to his word, and the right kind of critical judgment with respect to everything else (your intuition and feelings, the narratives of the world, etc.).
6. Sing through the hymn, “He Will Hold Me Fast” (*Hymns of Grace*, #388) several times this week. Consider the rich truths this hymn expresses, and how these truths can minister to you during times of uncertainty.

**Audio, video, and handouts for this session:** gracechurch.org/motw

Submit a question through this QR code

**Next meeting:**November 17, 7pm – “Knowledge Puffs Up”