



## WHAT DOES GOD THINK OF DOUBTERS?

Matthew 14: 22-33

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When the question, “What does God think of doubters” was asked, I immediately became enthusiastic. Several people leaped into my brain – Moses, Peter, Sarah, Joseph – all interesting characters that could make for fascinating exploration.

But, as I began to prepare for this sermon I must confess I got somewhat nervous. I myself have had considerable doubts over the course of the years. And there are certain aspects of the faith that still trouble me.

Furthermore, I realized that those passages I could easily recall were all of a single mindset. They all served to bolster my own position. As I began to dig a little bit deeper into Scripture, the picture wasn’t quite as simple as I thought at first.

It also quickly became clear that God does not have a single point of view when it comes to doubters. So, rather than trying to emerge with one particular answer this morning, we will explore several passages to gain a better understanding on the Biblical point of view of doubt and, hopefully in the process, a well-rounded perspective on our own sometimes-stumbling faith.

Perhaps it should go without saying, but God prefers that we have faith rather than doubt. But evidently the Bible thought it needed saying because in Hebrews we read,

*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists... (Hebrew 11:6)*

Faith is not only for our own benefit; our belief pleases God. It is clear that, at times, God becomes quite frustrated with our lack of trust. It kindles God’s anger against the people of Israel. God has presented you and me with creation as evidence of power and planted the Holy Spirit within us that confirms his existence. Yet, we still doubt.

Peter’s doubt exasperated Jesus. He performed miracles in front of the disciples and they still hesitated to fully commit themselves.

When Moses went up the mountain to be with God, it did not take long for the people to devolve into doubt which morphed into idol worship. Remember they erected a golden calf and credited it with liberating them from Egypt. God was furious!

This incident reveals the true danger of doubt. As humans we will always worship *something*, whether it’s success, sex, or power.

In our doubt we can be easily led to abandon our morals, to seek personal gain at the expense of others. It is lack of faith in God that enables the Enron’s of the world to bilk hard-working people out of millions. It is lack of faith in God that has enabled us to treat God’s creation as a personal sewer dump at various times in history.

In the face of doubt, God will take firm action. You remember Zechariah? Upon seeing an ANGEL speak of the coming birth of his Son, he asks for proof. Here was the angel Gabriel’s response,

*.. you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words... (Luke 1:18-20)*

God will reprimand doubters and train them into faith. God did not take away either the call of Israel nor the promised child to Zechariah because of their doubt. But God did discipline them.

When I was a young boy, on Sunday afternoons, we would often go to my grandparents’ house for Sunday lunch. Grandma made the most amazing roast beef! The slow-cooked carrots were the only vegetable I would ever eat! and I’ve still, to this day, never tasted gravy quite as good. (sorry mom!)

But since there were four boys fighting to sop up the last bit of gravy with her homemade bread, occasionally we caused a bit of a ruckus... knocked over a chair or two and maybe a lamp, might have even used some language that didn't suit the Sunday afternoon meal.

Discipline meant the dreaded Deacon's bench. Grandma Rian would sit me down, look me straight in the eye while leaning over, and pointing her finger at my face instructed me to consider the error of my ways or something of the sort.

I would sit there for what seemed like a full hour – absolutely bored out of my skull. That was, in fact, the worst part of the punishment.

I can't imagine now that it was actually that long. But as the minutes ticked by, eventually my mind turned to the precipitating event.

Granted, I spent most of the time fuming that it was my brother's fault, not mine, while concocting various means of revenge. And, yet, eventually, there was always a part of me that did contemplate my sin. Even saying it now, it sounds so archaic. And upon reflection, that punishment, that discipline, I believe has made me a better person today.

Zechariah's punishment was somewhat similar. He was forced to be silent, rather than a Deacons' bench, he would have silence unto himself. This would make him completely unable to invent any rationalizations or excuses to those around him, thereby forcing him to struggle internally with everything that happened.

But, having faith rather than doubt is not simply about pleasing God.

*And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, ...even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. (Matthew 21:21)*

Now I am not sure it is as simple as that... Yes, I guess I am doubting the word of my Lord...

It is clear, faith by its very nature is empowering. There is a tremendous difference on

the golf course when I believe I can hit the drive and when I don't. The former will lead to many pleasant outcomes, the latter to a day of drudgery, sifting through the forest to find my ball. That belief in myself allows me to access the gifts God has given me as meager as they may be.

If belief in my own gifts makes for a better day on the golf course, imagine what belief in the power of God can unlock.

If you believe Jesus, it gives power to move mountains.

It is not so much that God sits back waiting for us to acknowledge him and then extends a blessing to us, as it is that faith is the critical component to receive God's outstretched hand.

And though doubt frustrates God, God can still work with it. This is crucial to understanding that there is productive doubt as well as doubt that devolves into idolatry.

In fact, God prefers doubt to two other alternatives – disbelief and indifference.

Disbelief is different than doubt. The person who doubts still has a part of themselves connected to God. The person who doubts is wrestling with God. The person who disbelieves has completely abandoned any sense that God exists. And indifference, the mirror image of disbelief, God finds even more troublesome.

The indifferent person, like those who disbelieve completely, fails to engage God or act upon Godly principles. You remember God's anger in Revelation at the church in Laodicea? God says, "because you are lukewarm, neither cold nor hot, I am going to spit you out of my mouth!"

I think those who worshipped the golden calf did so not out of doubt of the existence of God, as they didn't want to be troubled with the hard parts of faith.

They didn't want to bother reaching out to God within their hearts; they wanted it to be easy and

so they made a golden calf, a god that they could see and make their own.

They knew the golden calf wouldn't tell them to do things they didn't want to do. So, perhaps, it was not so much doubt they were experiencing as it was the reality that they didn't really care about God. They were indifferent to the Lordship of God.

The disbeliever and the indifferent both fail to connect to God.

Contrast this with Peter's actions. The disciples see Jesus walking toward them while they're in the middle of a lake. Though they are all afraid, Peter is the only one with enough courage to speak. As he is walking toward Jesus on the water, the wind and the waves suddenly shake his faith. But, though his faith is shaken, he cries out not just to the wind but to Jesus, "Lord save me!"

And therein lies the key.

Peter, though he doubts clearly, is not lukewarm and God can work with that! And so...

*Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31)*

When he sees Jesus walk on the water, a part of him wants to believe. So, even in doubt, he takes that bold move to step out onto the water when nobody else would. Yes, Peter has doubt. Yes, Peter begins to sink because of his doubt.

But, because Peter had enough faith to step out of that boat...

...he was the only one of the disciples to walk on water.

...he was the only one to feel the hand of the Lord lift him up.

Yes, God can work with doubt. God can work with your doubt, but doubt that is active, not doubt that sits on its hands but doubt that takes those faltering first steps toward him.

I don't think Jesus' response to Peter was a reprimand, but rather an expression of longing on Jesus' part. He longed for Peter's faith to be fully strong, because he knew that Peter was going to need it.

When you doubt that God is at work, when you doubt that God cares – challenge God; cry out to God. When your faith is faltering, take that step, that first step toward God...and you too will feel the hand of the Lord lift you up.

What does God think of doubters like Peter, doubters like us?

God loves them.

Amen.