

ENCOURAGE QUESTIONS.  
ADDRESS DOUBTS.  
**STRENGTHEN FAITH.**

# MESSAGE 1

**IS DOUBT  
ALWAYS BAD?**

# 1: Is Doubt Always Bad?

## Overview Outline

### Introduction

- Main Idea: To understand the “upside of doubt” and to respond more effectively to the potential dangers of doubt that is not properly addressed.
- Main questions:
  - What does doubt look like?
  - How does doubt affect us and grow worse?
  - How can we overcome, and benefit from, doubt?

### I. What is Doubt?

- Three misconceptions:
  - Doubt is not the opposite of faith.
  - Doubt is unforgivable, but it isn't.
    - John 20 and Thomas.
    - Luke 7 and John the Baptist.
  - Doubt is always unhealthy, but that isn't true.

### II. What Causes Us to Doubt?

- Doubt can target our minds.
  - We don't know *why* we believe.
  - We don't know *what* we should believe.
- Doubt can affect us through our emotions.
  - When faith is built on feelings.
  - When we have susceptible personalities.
  - When we have been emotionally scarred.
- Doubt can develop out of our will.
  - Doubt can multiply due to willful sin.
  - Doubt can grow when we have not fully committed to Christ.

### III. How Can We Grow Through Our Doubts? (Use “F-A-I-T-H”)

- Find the root of your doubt.
- Ask God and others for help.
- Identify a course of treatment (Matt. 7:7).
- Take care of your spiritual health (Ps. 34:8).
- Hold your remaining questions in tension.

# Message 1: “Is Doubt Always Bad?”<sup>1</sup>

**Message Videos:** We suggest using the video bumpers that are provided for each message. The videos candidly express questions and doubts about the Christian faith that are common in our culture. A panel of five non-Christians, in various stages of doubt or disbelief, were interviewed by Christian author and evangelist, Garry Poole. These videos are accessible in the Leader Content area of the Room For Doubt website.

**Welcome!** What you just saw was a panel of five non-Christians expressing their very real doubts and disbelief about the teachings of the Bible. For those of us who have been Christians for a long time, this can be uncomfortable to hear. But we need to know what people in our world are asking so that, as the apostle Peter challenged us in 1 Peter 3:15, we can prepare ourselves to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have in Christ. So as we launch this new series, part of our goal is to learn how to help neighbors, coworkers, and classmates who have the kinds of objections that we’ll see raised by this panel each week.

But there’s another reason we’re addressing these topics throughout this series. These questions are not just raised by people *outside* the church. They’re often raised by believers *inside* the church—believers who struggle with doubt....

“**I need your help,**” wrote a sincere Christian. “I see so many people around the church who have such a strong faith that I feel like I don’t fit in. I would like to feel confident and wish I didn’t have doubts, but I’ve got more questions than answers. Now I’m beginning to doubt whether I’m a Christian at all. What should I do? Could you get back to me right away?”

The letter was signed by a bright, sincere businessman who had been attending church for quite a while.

Have you ever felt like he did? Maybe you wrestle with questions like this man does—or like the people in the video. Maybe you doubt that God has really forgiven you. Or you wonder whether the Bible is the actual Word of God. Or you question why God lets people suffer. Or you’ve been praying for help with a struggle in your life, but so far there has been silence, and you’re wondering whether anybody is at home in heaven.

If you can relate to any of this, I’m glad you’re here! We welcome anyone who has honest questions, whether you’re a Christian with doubts, or someone investigating spiritual matters who wants to figure out what’s really true. That’s why today we’re launching this 6-week series called

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<sup>1</sup> Be sure to read “Basic Questions: Introduction to the Series and the Message Manuscripts.” This document offers important information to help you and others properly prepare for, and implement, the series and its many resources.

The Room For Doubt app and website ([www.roomfordoubt.com](http://www.roomfordoubt.com)) provide a variety of relevant articles and video resources. Encourage all participants to download and use the R4D app (for iOS and Android).

The “Leader Content” area includes specific recommended resources on this topic. This area is accessible with the license key that was provided when the materials were purchased.



“Room For Doubt.”

Our hope is that this series will encourage you, even in the midst of doubts and questions, by providing answers that will help you find a confident faith in Christ. Or, as I said, if this is not an area you struggle with personally, we hope this series will equip you with answers so you can help friends and family members who do struggle with these issues.

If you’ve never experienced doubt before, there’s a good chance that at some time you will. It’s just natural, from time to time, to wrestle with some spiritual questions, issues, hesitations, or concerns. And, by the way, this is not just a Christian experience. People from all points of view—even atheists—often struggle with doubt. It is a *human* experience.

The big questions are these: *How can we prevent doubt from growing out of control and damaging our faith? And, equally important, how can we respond to doubt in ways that will ultimately help us?* That’s what we want to discuss today, with these three objectives:

- First, we’re going to examine doubt closely to see what it really looks like.
- Second, we’re going to see how doubt affects us and what makes it grow.
- Finally, we’ll look at practical ways to overcome, and even benefit from, doubt.

In other words, **what is doubt**, what **causes it**, and **how can we grow through it?**

## I. WHAT IS DOUBT?

A good way to answer this question is to look at **three misconceptions about doubt**.

**(1) First, you may think doubt is the opposite of faith, but it isn’t.** The opposite of faith is *disbelief*, and that’s an important distinction. What is disbelief? Well, disbelief refers to a willful refusal to believe, or a deliberate decision to disobey God.

But that’s not what doubt is. To doubt is to be indecisive or ambivalent over an issue. It’s where you’re hung up between certainty and uncertainty. You haven’t come down squarely on the side of disbelief; you’re up in the air over something. You’ve got questions or concerns about some facet of your faith.

In fact, *you can have a strong faith and still have questions*. You can be heaven-bound and still express some uncertainty over some theological issues. You can be a full-fledged Christian without having to feel like every question of life has been settled. In fact, it has been said that struggling with God over the issues of life doesn’t show a *lack* of faith—that *is* faith. Just read the book of Psalms!

**(2) The second misconception is that some people think that doubt is unforgivable, but it isn’t.** You see, God doesn’t condemn us when we question him.

For example, do you remember how Jesus dealt with the one often referred to as “**Doubting Thomas**”? Jesus didn’t condemn him for raising questions about his resurrection. Instead, **John chapter 20** tells us Jesus appeared to Thomas and gave him additional evidence to prove he had

risen from the dead! Jesus said to him in verse 27, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” And the next verse tells us Thomas was convinced, and he proclaimed, “My Lord and my God!”

You can also see that God does not condemn those with doubts through what happened to John the Baptist.

In fact, if anyone should have had total certainty about Jesus being the Son of God, it was John the Baptist. He once pointed to Jesus and said: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” He baptized Jesus and saw the heavens open up and heard God proclaim: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” He once said: “I have seen and I testify that *this* is the Son of God.”

But then what happens? He gets arrested.

*Question: what happens to many of us when tough times come?* Doubts begin to creep in, don’t they? And that’s what happened to John. Now he’s not so sure about Jesus.

**Luke 7:18-19** says, “Calling two of [his disciples, John] sent them to the Lord to ask, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’”

So they track down Jesus and sheepishly say, “You know John. Well, he got busted—and he’s freaking out and now he’s not so sure about who you are. So could you just tell us point blank?”

And how does Jesus react? Does he slam-dunk John for doubting? Does he criticize or shame him? No, **Luke 7:22** says: “So he replied to the messengers, ‘Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.’”

In other words, go tell him about all the evidence that confirms my identity as the Son of God. And does this now disqualify John from any role in the Kingdom of God? On the contrary, Jesus says about him in verse 28: “I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John....” *John the doubter!*

The truth is that Jesus didn’t condemn Thomas for doubting, he didn’t condemn John for doubting, and he won’t condemn you for doubting either—if you come to him with your sincere questions.

Don’t you think that God would rather have you be honest with him about your doubts than to profess a phony faith? An honest relationship means we need to tell the truth about how we feel. So doubt isn’t unforgivable.

**(3) The third misconception is that people often think that doubt is always unhealthy, but that isn’t true.** The truth is that doubt can actually produce positive results in our lives. In other words, there really can be an *upside to doubt*.

When we’re dealing with doubts and we seek God’s answers to our questions, we can emerge stronger than ever because our faith has been confirmed, and that gives us new confidence in

dealing with doubt in the future.

**[Note: Use the following story or substitute a similar one of your own]**

It's like something that happened to Lee Strobel, the author of *The Case for Christ*, when he was a new Christian. He went to meet with a family who had visited his church and filled out a comment card saying they had questions. But the man turned out to be a scientist who had spent years studying books that attack Christianity.

As they sat down and talked over a meal, the man peppered Lee for hours with the most penetrating and challenging questions Lee had ever heard. He later wrote that it sent tremors through his faith.

In spite of how he felt, though, Lee said to him at the end of the evening, "I can't answer all of your questions, but I don't think that after two thousand years you've come up with an issue that will finally destroy the foundations of Christianity. I'm confident there are answers. Let me do some research and get back to you."

Then he went and researched those questions. He later went back to that man and said, "Here—let me share some good answers to what you've asked."

This experience served to strengthen his faith, and it prepared him for answering those same questions whenever they'd come up in the future. So while we shouldn't go out of our way to seek doubt, it can work to our benefit if we deal with it responsibly.

## II. WHAT CAUSES US TO DOUBT?

We've seen that doubt is not disbelief; it is not something that is unforgiveable; and it is not necessarily unhealthy. But can doubt actually be used to strengthen our faith. *But it can be dangerous unless we address it*—and we can't really do that until we know its source. So let's examine some of the causes of doubt.

There are several places where doubt can affect us—including *our minds*, *our emotions*, and *our will*. As I walk through each one, see if this might be the source of the doubts that you—or your friends—sometimes wrestle with.

### **First, doubt can target our *minds*.**

This is where we come up with intellectual objections to the faith, where we begin wondering whether things like heaven and hell, Satan and angels, miracles, and the resurrection are really rational to believe in.

**Doubt often develops in our mind, because we don't know *why* we believe what we believe.** For instance, it may start with a conversation with a friend who says, "So, you believe that Jesus is God?" You respond, "Sure, of course." And he says, "Well, why do you believe that?"

So you take out your Bible and you're about to show him a bunch of passages that demonstrate that Jesus is God, but he says, "Wait a second—you don't expect me to believe anything in *that* book do you?"

And you say, "Well, why not?" He says, "Everyone knows the Bible is full of contradictions and mythology. C'mon, this is the 21st Century! Why in the world would you believe that book is the Word of God?"

You say, "Uh, well, I just believe it, that's all!" *That's* when doubts appear. Maybe he's right, you wonder. How do we know the Bible is reliable?

It's been rightly said that Christians should *believe simply*—that is, have the faith of a child—but they shouldn't just *simply believe*. Because the chances are that someone—sometime, somewhere—is going to challenge your faith. And not knowing *why* you believe what you believe makes you vulnerable to doubt.

Sometimes, **doubt can also come if you don't know *what* you should believe**. For instance, having an inaccurate view of God can create doubt. If you know about God's love but nothing about his justice and holiness, you're going to develop doubts about why he does what he does and why he doesn't do what you think he ought to do. You will have an inaccurate view of God. And that's a breeding ground for doubt.

Or if you think God has promised to answer all your prayers in the way you want them answered, then you're going to develop doubts when he doesn't do so. Or if you think God guarantees health and wealth to all of his followers, you're going to begin doubting when health or wealth don't come your way.

But the problem isn't with God, since he never guaranteed those things. The problem is that you've got an inaccurate view of who he is—and that's an open invitation to doubt.

## **Second, not only can doubt breed in our minds, it can also affect us through our *emotions*.**

(a) For instance, **some people have a faith that's built on feelings**. They had a euphoric emotional experience when they first came to Christ, and they were emotionally pumped up for a while, but eventually that spiritual high begins to wear off. And they start wondering whether their faith is slipping or whether they're really a Christian at all.

They've misunderstood the role of emotions and faith. Faith is not fundamentally a feeling, even though feelings do accompany faith; rather, faith is a decision of the will to follow Jesus Christ, and it doesn't ebb and flow depending on how emotionally pumped up you are.

(b) Besides the mistake of building one's faith solely upon emotion, there's **another way that our emotions can lead us to doubt**. Some people have **personalities** that are susceptible to mood swings and depression, and they find that when they're emotionally down, that's when doubts creep in. And those with a melancholy personality are especially vulnerable to doubt because they take a sort of questioning and contemplative approach to life in general. That's just how they're wired.

(c) Doubt can also **stem from emotions within people who've been emotionally scarred** from their past. In other words, if you've suffered parental abuse as a child, if you've been abandoned by your parents or a spouse, if you've felt unloved or unworthy of love, that can affect the way you view God. You may develop chronic doubts and uncertainties because deep down inside you're just waiting for God to let you down like people have in your past.

In fact, a study by psychologist **Paul Vitz** demonstrated that many famous atheists—such as Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell, Sigmund Freud, Jean Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Madalyn Murray O'Hair—had their father die or abandon them when they were young, or they had serious conflict with their father.

While most victims of parental abandonment or abuse don't resort to atheism, it's true that people can find it difficult to trust a Heavenly Father when they've been so mistreated by their earthly father. Where there's a lack of trust, doubt soon follows.

### **Third, in addition to afflicting our emotions and our mind, doubt can emerge out of our will.**

For instance, **doubts can multiply when a Christian makes the willful decision stay in a pattern of sin.** Sin, of course, creates a lack of peace and a sense of being separated from God.

So when the person can't find peace, he questions why God isn't comforting him. And when he feels that God is distant, he begins to doubt whether he's there at all. When actually, the underlying cause of his doubt is his own willful decision to cling to sin.

And a **stubborn sense of pride** also can cause doubt to breed. Author Os Guinness wrote: "The proud man *needs* to doubt because the sense of his own importance demands it. It is not in his nature to bow to anyone." So he goes out of his way to drum up doubts in order to justify his own willful decision not to allow God full access to his life. Somehow he thinks that, if he can create doubts, he has some excuses for not believing.

**Doubts can also run rampant if you have never committed your life to Christ in the first place.** In other words, you might have doubts about your relationship with God because *you don't really have one*. In this case, it's no wonder you have doubts about God's presence in your life or you feel that God is distant. You'll keep feeling that way until you put your trust in Christ and begin a real relationship with him. And that is something you can do today!

So doubt can breed in *our will, our emotions* and *our minds*. And before I go on, I have to acknowledge the role that *Satan* can play in implanting doubts in us and encouraging them to multiply out of control. Jesus called Satan "the father of lies," and he whispers those lies in our ear to create mistrust and confusion.

We shouldn't ignore the threat Satan poses, but we shouldn't get fixated on him either, because the Bible says in **1 John 4:4**: "Little children, you are from God, and . . . the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

So those are just a few of the ways we can get afflicted with run-away doubt. And once that happens, it's imperative that we do something to regain our spiritual health. Now, that's not



always easy, but there are some practical steps that will help.

### III. HOW CAN WE GROW THROUGH OUR DOUBTS?

I'll mention five steps in battling doubt. To help remember them better, I'll take the word **"FAITH"** and use each letter as the beginning of each step.

#### The **"F"** in FAITH stands for this step: ***FIND the root of your doubt.***

In other words, you need to diagnose the source of your doubt before you can deal with it. I've just gone through some examples of how doubt can spring from our minds, our emotions, and our will. Maybe as you heard one of these, you said to yourself, *"Hey, that's me."* Discovering this is a good first step.

#### The **"A"** in FAITH stands for: ***ASK God and others for help.***

Be as honest with God as the father of the demon-possessed boy was in **Mark 9:24** when he said to Jesus: "I do believe; help my unbelief." He admitted his doubts, but he had faith that Jesus could help his son and help him overcome the doubts. He asked Jesus to help him—and Jesus did. Jesus healed his son.

One of the most important things you can do is ask God to bolster your faith in the midst of doubt. **James 4:2** says, "You do not have because you do not ask." Turn to God for help—not as a last resort, but as a first priority. Ask him to lead you to answers and to give you wisdom and confidence.

Also, turn to Christians for help—especially those who are more mature and knowledgeable in the faith. Small groups can also be of great help, because they offer safe places where you can admit you're grappling with questions and you can ask for input on what the root cause of your doubts might be. Let them encourage you and pray with you. **James 5:16** says that we should admit our struggles and shortcomings to each other and pray for each other. Why? So, the verse says, that we may be healed.

#### The **"I"** in FAITH stands for: ***IDENTIFY a course of treatment.***

Now that you've found the root cause of your doubt and you've sought God's wisdom and the input of others, what course of treatment are you going to implement to overcome and grow through your doubt? The best course of action really depends on what you discover about the root cause—or causes—of your doubt.

For instance, if your doubt stems from *intellectual* concerns, instead of just saying you've got some vague questions about the faith, figure out what specific questions you have. Pinpoint them and write them down, because then you can pursue answers, remembering that Jesus promised in **Matthew 7:7**, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

Or maybe you're realizing that *emotional* issues are generating your doubts. If so, maybe it's time to see a Christian counselor who can help you to recognize and deal with the particular emotional barriers that are responsible for your doubts.

If your doubts are a matter of your *will*, you need to look deep inside yourself and uncover why you are resisting God. The choice is yours: You can let disobedience or pride keep feeding your doubts for the rest of your life, or you can submit your whole life to God and begin to experience the benefits and joy of authentic Christianity. Be honest with yourself. Are you really open to God, or are you using doubt to cover up your willful resistance to God?

This very day, you can exercise your will to say "yes" to God. His salvation is a gift, and it's available to everyone today. Are you willing to say "yes"?

I hope these thoughts can help you identify some ways you can best address your doubts and come to God with conviction in your head and in your heart.

### **The "T" in FAITH stands for an important preventative measure: *TAKE care of your own spiritual health.***

Just as a physical body's defenses are strengthened through nourishment and exercise, you can help ward off serious bouts with doubt by building up your faith with knowledge and action.

By *knowledge*, I mean learning more about God and why He's trustworthy. Systematically study the Bible and regularly attend church services in order to build up a healthy, balanced understanding of who God is and why it makes sense to trust in him. Explore good books and websites that will provide positive reasons for the truth of Christianity and help you answer objections to the Christian faith. This will lead you to be more confident when doubts come into your life, and it will also prepare you to help others deal with their doubts.

And through day-to-day *actions*, you can build up your faith by exercising it. After all, we learn best by doing. And we learn best about the trustworthiness of God when we make the daily decision to submit our lives to him. As King David said, "taste and see that the Lord is good" (**Ps. 34:8**).

When you do those things, here's what happens: When doubt hits, it's much easier to look back on your knowledge about God and your personal experience with him and say:

*I may not know the answer to this particular question yet, but I've got plenty of evidence that God is real and plenty of reasons that the Bible is true and plenty of experience that shows that God cares about me. And all of that gives me confidence that God has an answer for this question too. So I'm not going to panic or toss my faith out the window. I'll keep trusting God because he's shown me in many ways that he can be trusted.*

That's why spiritual health is so important. It can strengthen you against doubt before doubt grows into something that is spiritually dangerous.

**Finally, the “H” in FAITH stands for this: *HOLD your remaining questions in tension.***

We're limited creatures with limited minds, so we can't understand everything about our unlimited God. Therefore there are bound to be some questions that we'll have to wait to get full and complete answers to. Maybe as we mature in our faith and continue to seek God's wisdom, we'll get a better glimpse of an answer.

Or maybe we'll have to wait for the day when we get to heaven so we can raise our hand and say, “Jesus, I've got a question that's been bothering me for a while. Exactly how does predestination fit in with free will? Exactly how does this Trinity thing work? Why didn't I seem to hear from you that time when I was in need? Why did I have to lose that loved one when I was so young?

I'll tell you what: my arm is going to be in the air. Maybe yours will be, too, and that's okay. God will answer. Hey, we've got all of eternity to satisfy our curiosity.

And until then, we can say, *I may not have answers to every one of my questions, but the answers that I do have point me unmistakably toward God being real, being dependable, and being the Heavenly Father who loves me. So my faith can stay intact while I hold some remaining issues in tension.*

That's not irresponsibly ignoring your doubts; that's dealing with them responsibly by making an *informed decision* to suspend judgment for a while based on the facts that we *do* have. It is not possible to have absolutely certain answers to every question. But it *is* possible to have a *reasonable faith*.

So those are five steps we can take. **F-A-I-T-H**, to help us grow through doubt:

**F - *FIND the root of your doubt***

**A - *ASK God and others for help***

**I - *IDENTIFY a course of treatment***

**T - *TAKE care of your spiritual health***

**H - *HOLD your remaining questions in tension***

If you're struggling with uncertainty today, why don't you put these steps to the test? And as you do, remember, you don't have to be afraid of questions, because God isn't. And you don't have to be embarrassed to bring them up around here; that's a big part of why we're here.

*Use your doubt as the impetus to grow stronger in your faith than ever before.* And as you do, you'll personally experience “The Upside of Doubt.” Doubt is *not* always bad.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR CONCLUDING THE MESSAGE

Before we close let me **quickly mention three things** that are designed to help us address our doubts and questions and grow more confident in our faith:

- The first is to be sure to **come back for part 2 of our Room For Doubt series next week** when we'll be discussing the topic, "How Can We Be Sure God Really Exists?" It's a question that many of us have never really thought about; we just grew up believing in God! But after we review some of the powerful evidence that backs up our belief in him, we'll leave with a more confident faith. Also, be sure to bring any friends who might be wondering about why they should believe in God.
- The second is to encourage all of you, if you haven't already, to go to **sign up for one of our Room For Doubt discussion groups**, which will be having deeper discussions each week on the topics we discuss in the messages. So jump in right away, and don't miss this first week's interactions!
- The third thing to mention is that a number of additional resources for this Room for Doubt series can be found on the Room for Doubt website at [www.roomfordoubt.com](http://www.roomfordoubt.com). We also recommend a little book by Mark Mittelberg called *The Reason Why Faith Makes Sense*. It provides brief answers to many of the most common questions you might have about Christianity.

[NOTE: The church may want to purchase and provide this book for visitors, the discussion groups, or the group leaders. It's *possible* to get a discount on these books if ordered in quantity. For information, contact Room For Doubt at [roomfordoubt@lincolnchristian.edu](mailto:roomfordoubt@lincolnchristian.edu).]

I'd like to conclude by doing something a little different. I'm going to take the Living Bible rendition of the words of the Apostle Paul in **1 Corinthians 13:12** and turn that into **our closing prayer**:

Father, we can see and understand only a little about you now, as if we were peering at your reflection in a poor mirror; but someday we are going to see you in your completeness, face to face. Now all that we know is hazy and blurred, but then we will see everything clearly, just as clearly as you see into our hearts right now. And, Father, we can have confidence in this because of what you have already chosen to reveal to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.<sup>2</sup>

**Note:** Encourage everyone to download the Room For Doubt app (for iOS and Android) and to use the Room For Doubt resources ([www.roomfordoubt.com](http://www.roomfordoubt.com)). They can submit their own questions and easily share helpful information with others.

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<sup>2</sup> This message was adapted by Mark Mittelberg from Lee Strobel, "The Upside of Doubt." Some of Strobel's inspiration came from Dr. Gary Habermas and his book, *The Thomas Factor: Using Your Doubts to Draw Closer to God* (Broadman and Holman, 1999). It was produced in partnership with the Room For Doubt leadership team under the direction of Dr. Richard Knopp at Lincoln Christian University in Lincoln, IL. Copyright 2016, 2019, v3.5. All rights reserved.