

Can faith still have doubts?

Series: The Case for Faith

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On the 6 hour plane ride home from Bolivia a few weeks ago I had a lot of time to talk with a man by the name of Alberto who was sitting next to me. Alberto's a civil engineer who works for the Army Corp of Engineers and is in charge of a number of commercial building projects in Bolivia. He was born and raised in the capital city of La Paz, but received his higher education in the United States, first as a high school exchange student in Minnesota, and then as a college student at the University of Kansas.

After talking quite a bit about his profession, he asked me what I had been doing in Bolivia. So I shared with him some of my experiences at the pastor's conference in Santa Cruz. Well, it didn't take very long for Alberto to open up about his own spiritual journey. He said that he wasn't happy with his spiritual life and knew he needed to take another step, especially now that he and his wife had just had their first child. Well, I was ready to give him all kinds of next steps. But I held myself back and decided to start by listening to his story.

And it was interesting to me that as Alberto described his spiritual life, he expressed two of the questions we've been answering in this series. The first was, "How can Jesus be the only way to God?" Alberto said he believed in God, but he wasn't ready to accept the idea that Jesus was the only way to get to God. He thought that there were many roads to God. So I tried to explain to him the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. That he was different than anyone else who ever lived and proved his claim to be God.

His second question was, "How do we know that the Bible really is the Word of God?" After all it's been copied again and again and translated into different languages and maybe some things were changed or lost in the process. I had to laugh to myself because I had just taught on that one the Sunday before. So I shared with him all kinds of evidence for the authority of the Bible. It was a delightful conversation with lots of interaction.

And by the end of our discussion I said, "Alberto it's been great to talk about these things. When we started you said you wanted a next step in your spiritual life. Well the best next step I can give you is to

read the words of Jesus himself." And so I pointed him to the gospel of John and encouraged him to read it through, a chapter a day, and then decide if he believes in Jesus. That's why John wrote his gospel. He said in John 20:31, These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. He thanked me and let me pray with him and then we landed in Miami and went our separate ways.

I'm convinced that there are lots of people out there like Alberto. They may not be believers in Jesus, but they're not hostile to the Christian faith. In fact, they're wide open to it. But they have questions and they want answers. And they're looking for someone to show them a next step in their spiritual journey. You know people like that I'm sure. And that's what we want to be as a church, people who can offer a next step to someone who's looking for God. That's one reason we've done this series called The Case for Faith, so we'll be better equipped to help those like Alberto take another step towards Jesus Christ.

Today we wrap up the series by considering the question, "Can faith still have doubts?" Is it possible to believe in Jesus, yet wrestle with why bad things happen to good people or the reality of hell or the creation story of Adam and Eve? Do we have to resolve every one of our questions before we can follow Jesus? Or can a person be an authentic Christian and still wrestle with doubt?

For some, their doubts have been so strong that it's caused their faith to collapse. That was the case for Charles Templeton and that was the case for Dan Barker, a former pastor turned atheist. He wrote a book called Losing Faith in Faith in which he said, "In their most inner thoughts, even the most devout Christians know that there is something illegitimate about belief. Underneath their profession of faith is a sleeping giant of doubt.... In my experience, the best way to conquer doubt is to yield to it."

But doubt can be a good thing. Doubt can drive us closer to God. That's what Madeleine L'Engle thinks. She said, "Those who believe they believe in God but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God himself."

Andre Resner believes that having doubts isn't evidence of the absence of faith, it's the very essence of faith. He said, "The struggle with God is not lack of faith. It is faith!"

So is doubt a good thing or a bad thing? Is it possible to be a true believer in Jesus and still struggle with doubt? To answer these hard questions Lee Strobel flew to Dallas, Texas, to interview a Christian leader who understands the confusion, the guilt, and the maddening ambiguity of uncertainty. A person whose faith journey has repeatedly taken him on torturous detours through the valley of the shadow of doubt. His name is Dr. Lynn Anderson.

Dr. Anderson has a doctor of ministry degree from Abilene Christian University, where he's been an adjunct professor for more than two decades. He served as a senior pastor for thirty years in churches in Canada and the United States. In 1996, he founded Hope Network Ministries through which he coaches, mentors, and equips church leaders. He's written a number of books, but his number one credential is his own personal struggle of faith. He wrote a book about it called *If I Really Believe, Why Do I Have These Doubts?*

So Strobel began his interview by asking Anderson to tell his story. He said that he grew up the son of committed Christian parents in rural western Canada. But his doubts about the Christian faith started early. He trusted Christ when he was eleven, but shortly after experienced his first disappointment with God. He prayed and prayed for a new bike, but he never got one and wondered why God didn't answer his prayer. As a melancholy child there were times when he felt really close to God, but most of the time he didn't and that scared him because he didn't want anybody to find out. He thought if they did those in his church would think he was bad, or they'd be angry, or they'd think his parents were spiritual failures. And he didn't want to disappoint or shame his mom and dad. So he kept his doubts to himself and thought he'd outgrow them.

But he didn't. Instead they grew inside him. In college his doubts moved from the emotional to the intellectual level. He started to question the Bible and wondered if God is so good, why is the world so bad? He describes himself as a "congenital doubter," a person who's always asking, "What if?"

There are all kinds of reasons that we can struggle with doubts about our faith. Some doubt's triggered by rebellion. Kids who want to rebel against their parents sometimes do it by rebelling against the God their parents believe in. Sometimes doubt is driven by disappointments. God doesn't do something we want him to, like give us a new bike, or a boyfriend or a girlfriend, or excellent health, so we doubt whether he's really up there.

Personal or family wounds can cause us to doubt. Anderson mentioned a woman whose parents were very religious and yet abused her. They made her kneel by her bedside and pray and then beat her. Of course, she's going to struggle with God. Unanswered questions like we've been dealing with in this series can produce doubt. Like those questions of Alberto. Certain seasons of life can keep us so busy that we don't have time to reflect and that makes room for doubt. Comparisons to others can cause doubt. One young woman told Anderson, "I hate going to church because I hear all these claims that I'm not experiencing. I study the Bible and I pray, but nothing dramatic ever seems to happen to me." There are all kinds of reasons for doubt. And if we're honest we all do battle with doubt. I know I do from time to time.

So does faith have room for doubt? Yes it does. There's a story in Mark 9 that I just love. If you have your Bible turn to Mark 9. Jesus had just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration, a mountain top experience with Peter, James and John. And when he got to the bottom he found his other disciples frustrated and embarrassed because they couldn't heal a boy who'd been brought to them by his father. They were humiliated and started arguing with those in crowd.

So Jesus steps in in Mark 9:19 and says, O unbelieving generation. How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me. 20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. 21 Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. 22 "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." 23 "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." 24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief!" 25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." 26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

The boy's father had enough faith to believe that Jesus could heal his demon possessed son. But he also had his share of doubts. And I love what he says in verse 24, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief. Faith and doubt can co-exist. So then, what does it mean to believe? And how do we overcome our unbelief? If faith is not the complete absence doubt, then what is it?

Some people think that faith is feeling, kind of like love is a feeling. So they think that having faith means being on some kind of constant spiritual high. And when the high wears off, and it always does, they think they've lost their faith. Feelings can be a way that faith expresses itself, but feelings aren't faith. Just like feelings can be a way that love expresses itself, but feelings aren't love.

Anderson tells the story about the guy that came to him once and told him, "I don't like my wife anymore. What shall I do?" Anderson said, "Go home and love her." He said, "I can't go home and love her. That would be emotionally dishonest. I don't feel love."

He said, "Okay. Does your mother love you?" "Yes, of course she does." "Well, about three weeks after she brought you home from the hospital and you were screaming with dirty diapers and she had to get up in the middle of the night dog tired and put her bare feet on the cold floor to clean up your miserable diapers and feed you a bottle-do you think she got a bang out of that? Do you think she felt loving feelings then?" He said, "No, probably not." "Well, then, I think your mother was being emotionally dishonest with you." The point is when we love someone we do loving things for them even when we

don't feel loving feelings. And faith works the same way. We make a choice to believe God even when we don't have a lot of positive feelings and even when we don't understand everything about God.

Because the bottom line is that faith is a choice. Faith is the will to believe. It's a decision we make. We examine the evidence, which is one thing we've been doing in this series, and then we make a choice, a decision to believe God. The Bible calls Abraham "the father of the faith" not because he never doubted, or always did the right thing, or always had pure motives. He failed on all those counts, but he made a choice to believe God and he wouldn't give up on that, even when it seemed like God had abandoned him. Genesis 15:6 says, Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Joshua is another example. He said to the nation of Israel in Joshua 24:15, Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.... But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

Jesus said a similar thing in John 7:17, Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. We have to make a choice to follow God even before we have all the information we want. And God will affirm our faith after we take the first step.

So that's what faith is. It's the choice to believe what God has promised. When a few of us started Valley View Community Church we believed so strongly that God wanted us to do this that we stepped out on faith. In fact, we knew that if we didn't start this church we would be disobeying God. But we didn't have all the information we wanted. We didn't know where the money was coming from, or where the people were going to come from, or where we were going to live, or where we were going to meet, or even how to start a church. And we didn't have big faith, but we believed in a big God who could supply all those things for us. And he has. He's been true to his Word. We've tasted and we've seen that the Lord is good! That doesn't mean we haven't doubted, and disobeyed, and been confused along the way. We have. But we also made a choice to hang on to God. And that's what faith is. And there are a lot of people at Valley View who could stand up here and tell you their stories of faith.

Lord, I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief. How do we overcome our unbelief? How do we deal with pockets of doubt? Let me end by giving you four steps to overcome doubt. These are the steps that have helped Lynn Anderson and lots of others.

First, choose to believe. Make the choice to believe, even though you still have doubts and tons of unanswered questions. Based on the evidence you have, make the decision to believe God.

Second, go where faith is. Hang out with other people who believe. Anderson says, "If you want to grow roses, you don't buy an acre of ground at the North Pole. You go where roses grow well. If you're going to grow in your faith you probably don't want to join Atheists for Jesus. Get around people who have walk of faith and learn from them and watch their life. At Valley View one of the best ways to do that is to get into a small group or on a ministry team with others who are walking with God. We call that community. Get in community with other Christ followers. Your faith won't grow without it.

Third, get to know God. The Bible says in Romans 10:17, Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. Get to know God by filling your mind with faith-building materials like the Bible and good Christian books and teaching tapes and worship tapes. I know my faith sags when I'm not feeding on the truth. It's not the amount of our faith that's most important, it's the object of our faith that's most important. God needs to get bigger.

In Canada, where Lynn Anderson grew up, they talk about thick ice and thin ice. You can walk on a frozen river in the middle of winter and if the ice is thick your faith can be very small but it will still hold you up. But if the ice is thin, your faith can be huge but you can fall right through and drown. Getting to know God thickens the ice on which our faith walks. The only way we learn to trust a person is by getting to know them.

And fourth, put your faith to the test. For a number of years I taught college students how to swim. And sometimes I would show them videos on swimming or give them handouts with pictures. Sometimes I would jump in the pool and demonstrate how to do a certain stroke or do some dry land simulation with them. But eventually they had to get into the water or they'd never learn how to swim. You can't stay dry and be a swimmer. You gotta' get into the pool.

And God wants us all to get into the pool. He wants us to experience what it means to walk by faith. And every time we obey God we take a little faith step. It starts when we choose to believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior. When we carve out time to read the Bible, we take a faith step. When we make time to pray, we take a faith step. When we fast, we take a faith step. When we give a portion of our income to the Lord, we take a faith step. When we forgive someone that we're really angry with, we take a faith step. When we talk to someone about the Lord and share our story, we take a faith step. When we come to worship on a Sunday morning, we take a faith step. When we enter into a small group, we take a faith step. When we resist a temptation, we take a faith step. When we follow a prompting of the Holy Spirit, we take a faith step. When we serve another person by making a phone call, or a visit, or a meal, we take a faith step. When we use our spiritual gifts, we take a faith step. Every time we obey God we take a faith step and as we do God shows himself to us. And the more we walk the journey the more we know it's true.

Does faith have room for doubts? Absolutely. We will all go to our grave with unanswered questions about God and his ways. But we can overcome many of our doubts by choosing to believe, by going where faith is, by getting to know God, and by putting our faith to the test.

This has been a wonderful series. One of my favorites and you've been so attentive. Lee Strobel has served us well with his book *The Case for Faith*. And so has Charles Templeton the one-time pastor and evangelist turned agnostic. I've appreciated his honesty and his willingness to share his struggle with us. And I'd like to close this message and this series by listening to him share one more time.

"Here is the greatest human being who has ever existed, had the highest moral standard, the least duplicity, the greatest compassion of any human being that I have ever heard of. There are other wonderful human beings, but Jesus is Jesus. In my view, he's the most important human being who has ever existed. And if I may put it this way, I miss him, I miss him. Enough of that."