

# iDoubt

Psalm 13; Matthew 11:1-11 <sup>1</sup>

John Claypool, the late Rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was a well-known and much-honored preacher and teacher of preaching, and his books have been a great help to me.

As has been true for some of history's most powerful preachers, Claypool's preaching was shaped in the crucible of pain. The darkest years of John's life were perhaps those surrounding his eight year-old daughter's death from cancer,<sup>2</sup> but his questions about the meaning of life, of doubt, and of faith began long before that darkness fell. Here's how he told the story:

"I was ten years old when a new family moved up the street from us in Nashville, Tennessee. The father had just retired from a career in the military. They had a son just about my age who turned out to be the most cosmopolitan peer I had ever encountered. He had lived in three different places overseas—the Panama Canal Zone, Germany, and the Philippines. He had actually been to places about which I had only read. I was utterly intrigued and stood somewhat in awe of this much-traveled lad.

"One Sunday afternoon we were playing in my backyard and my mother called me to come in. My friend was obviously upset because our play was disrupted and asked why I had to leave. Without sensing that I was walking into a land mine, I answered, 'I've got to go in and get dressed to go to church.'

"At the sound of that word, his face darkened and he said, 'Church! Do you believe in that stuff? My father says that anybody who thinks there is a God is just a plain fool!'

"I was flabbergasted at such a statement. My existence had been lived out in the protectiveness of the Bible Belt, and I had never heard words of this sort before. Here was a real live atheist in my own backyard! I was so frightened that I did what we humans usually do in panic—I struck back in anger at that which threatened me.

The best defense is a good offense, I suppose, so I, too, got red in the face and said, 'Well, my father believes there is a God. I think your father is the one who is a fool.' And with that word of loving witness, I turned on my heels and went inside to get dressed to go to church and learn how to witness to the pagans!

"I remember lying awake on my bed that very night, with my mother listening to "The Old-Fashioned Revival Hour" on the radio in the next room, sorting out this thing that had occurred. I remember saying to myself, 'Here I am, believing that there is a God because my father says that there is one. And here is my friend, doing the same thing, only he is coming to the opposite conclusion.' And then I was confronted by a question that I could not answer that night, namely, 'How do you know that your father is right and his father is wrong?'

"That incident marked the end of innocence for me as far as the whole question of religious certainty was concerned. It began to dawn on me that night that this is a big and diverse world, and that there are many fathers making many different affirmations about ultimate reality. There had to be a better reason for one's religious conclusions than the

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on July 1, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> John Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: Living & Growing through Grief*. The latest edition is Morehouse, 2003.

opinion of some other person. As of that night, I became a person with questions, acquainted with doubt, and I began a process of asking and seeking and knocking that was to take me in many directions and through all kinds of uncertainties.”

Our text this morning gets at the same kinds of questions. John the Baptist, who had introduced Jesus to the world by saying, “*I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One*” (John 1:34), was in such an uncertain place when he sent word to Jesus from prison, asking, “*Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?*” (Matthew 11:3). David was in a similar situation in Psalm 13: “*How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*”

The truth is that most, if not all, of the major characters of the Bible struggled with doubt about who God is and what it is that God is doing in the world. Jesus was quoting Psalm 22 when he cried out, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46), and Psalm 22 goes on to ask, “*Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest*” (Psalm 22:1b-2). Another psalmist wrote despairingly, “*You have taken from me friend and neighbor—darkness is my closest friend*” (Psalm 88:18).

So how **do** you know that **your** father is right and **his** father is wrong? Claypool continued: “At the time, unfortunately, I was not a part of a religious community which understood the relation between doubt and faith. I remember gingerly trying to discuss this matter with a few of the adults who went to our church, but all I got was an avalanche of condemnation. When I asked my Sunday School teacher how one could know that the Bible was true and the Koran false, she turned red in the face and said, ‘The idea—your asking questions like that with the kind of mother you have!’ Of course, this response had nothing to do with my question. I did not need condemnation or exhortation. I needed evidence.”

Unfortunately, that teacher’s response was probably not unusual. When others ask such fundamental questions, if we ourselves haven’t asked these questions and struggled honestly with them, our defenses go sky high. We unconsciously perceive that if we don’t know why the Bible is true and the Koran is false, then the Bible may not be true, and the entire superstructure of our faith is in imminent danger of collapse.

In such situations, we tend to do what John Claypool did in his backyard—we hit the questioner solidly and angrily over the head with the “party line,” the “canned response” that represents the “true faith once for all delivered to the saints.” I heard someone say that persons who have **accepted** their beliefs rather than having **chosen** them are more inclined to **defend** them than to **discuss** them, and that seems true to what I’ve observed over the years.

In the face of such a hostile onslaught, the questioner may very naturally fall silent, and we may suppose that we have solved the problem and won the battle. But the doubt, the honest question, the very real struggle has not been dealt with, though we ourselves may have temporarily avoided the anxiety of having to deal with it. And the Church goes on being a pretentious place where nobody ever hurts, nobody ever doubts, nobody ever sins, and nobody is ever “real.”

It often happens that when some brave, hurting soul begins to ask his questions or share her pain, the rest of us are quick to quote Bible verses and recite “the Baptist answer,” putting Band-Aids on before the pus gets out. One reason so many persons leave the Church when they go off to the military, or to college, or to work, is that they begin to hear questions for which they were never allowed to develop responses in the context of the Community of Faith, and they become bitter that they have been given no ammunition for the battle.

Somehow, we must find a middle way between being uncritical lovers of the Faith and unloving critics of the Faith. We must create a place together in which we can be honest about our struggles.

Notice how Jesus responded to his cousin. Jesus offered no criticism of John's question. He didn't become angry or defensive. He didn't belittle John at all. To the contrary, Jesus asked John to thoughtfully consider the evidence of Jesus' miracles as testimony to who He really was, and then went on to say, "*Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist*" (Matthew 11:11).

Think about that. Even in the face of John's very serious doubt, Jesus said that John was as great in God's eyes as Moses, Deborah, Elijah, David, Isaiah, Mary, Paul, or anyone else who could be named (and most of them doubted, too).

If we pay attention as we read the Bible, we'll notice that God never forbids us to speak our sorrows, our questions, or our despair. And if we're honest with ourselves, we'll have to admit that it's just as normal to experience anger, doubt, and frustration toward God as it is to experience wonder, adoration, and praise. Seasons of doubt and faith come each in their turn, and I think the books of Job, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes have been given in order to give us permission to offer the full range of our emotion to God.

There have been seasons in my own life when I've been very grateful for Ecclesiastes. It's been comforting to know that it's possible to be as cynical as that essay is and still be in relationship with God. It's as if God says to us, "Tell me all that's in your heart. Keep nothing back. If you are weary and burdened, tell me so in the most expressive terms. If all the color has gone out of your world, spare nothing in your description of the darkness or of the storm that makes your soul afraid."

We tend to think it appropriate to express only our happier and more faith-full feelings to God; but who do we think we're kidding when we hold our other feelings back? God already knows all that's in our hearts (John 2:25). We don't express our doubts so that God will know them, but because it's in the acknowledgment and expression of our doubt and pain that we begin to sense the beginning of healing and restoration in the depths of our souls.

Oh, for the grace and the courage to speak to each other from our darkness as well as from our light; to share both the truths that are saving us and the places where our struggles are still most acute. The pus and the poison must come out if real healing is to come.

Several years ago, our family was experiencing significant trauma and pain. At the time this was going on, I was a seminary professor as well as the Chair of the Deacons in our church, and Jill and I wondered whether to tell others of our pain or to try to keep our wounds and our pain hidden. On the one hand, we wanted to avoid what we expected to be the shame of acknowledging our trouble; on the other, we needed the support, love, and prayer of our friends while we were in the storm.

We decided to ask for help. I stood before our sixty Deacons and told them what we were experiencing, and after that meeting, a number of friends whom I thought I knew pretty well came up to me privately to say, "This has happened in our family as well." "We're going through the same thing." "I'm going through that, too." Because Jill and I were willing to share our pain and struggle as well as our joy and gladness, our friendships deepened and we received the help we needed—friendships that continue to nourish us to this very day.

As you and I begin to open our souls to each other here, we also begin to say to ourselves, "If Bob or Jane is struggling with this, maybe I can admit my own struggle and

we can find hope together.” After all, the Bible tells us that “[God] *comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God*” (2 Corinthians 1:4).

You’ve perhaps heard the story about two soldiers in a foxhole in a firefight. One of them was being shot at for the first time; the other had seen many battles. The one experiencing battle for the first time said to the other, “Aren’t you afraid?” The other responded, “Sure, I’m afraid. Only a fool wouldn’t be afraid. Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is doing what you have to do in spite of your fear.”

In a similar way, having faith doesn’t mean having no doubt. Having faith doesn’t mean having all the answers. Having faith doesn’t mean believing things that are not true. Having faith doesn’t mean holding on to another person’s opinion, even if that person is your father. Having faith doesn’t mean being blindly loyal to an institution, even if it is the Church. Having faith doesn’t mean unthinking confidence in a book, even if it is the Bible.

Having faith means having had sufficient *personal experience* with the *Living God* that we are persuaded that God is trust-worthy, and being therefore willing to trust God and to obey God beyond what we can fully understand or comprehend. Let me say that again. **Having faith means having had sufficient *personal experience* with the *Living God* that we are persuaded that God is trust-worthy, and being therefore willing to trust God and to obey God beyond what we can fully understand or comprehend.** The Bible says that faith “*is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*” (Hebrews 11:1).

Look with me for a moment at Psalm 13: <sup>1</sup> **How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?** <sup>2</sup> **How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?** <sup>3</sup> *Look on me and answer, LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,* <sup>4</sup> *and my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,” and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

<sup>5</sup> **But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.** <sup>6</sup> **I will sing the LORD’s praise, for he has been good to me.**

Psalm 13 gives voice to the awful aloneness that we feel in the valleys of Shadow through which growing faith inevitably takes us. It also testifies to that quiet peace and confidence that come to us as we choose to trust God in those same valleys.

I think we don’t really understand the full power of God’s peace until we’ve experienced the anguish of the Darkness. Perhaps we don’t really understand the gift until we begin to understand that from which we have been saved. Psalm 13 begins in winter and ends in springtime. Until we have known the first, we may not be able to truly know the second.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm may well be the best-known and best-loved six verses in all the Bible. I suspect that this is because the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm gives poetic voice to what we’ve been thinking about this morning. Each of our lives moves from “green pastures” through “dark valleys,” and, if we are in Christ, to a feast of celebration beyond. As an old Scottish preacher put it, “The Lord is my shepherd, aye, and more than that, he has two fine collie dogs, Goodness and Mercy. With him before and them behind, even poor sinners like you and me can reach home at last!”

Don’t be afraid of your doubt. Face it, offer it to God, and then keep following the best light you have. As a man once famously said to Jesus, “*I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!*” (Mark 9:24).

A.W. Tozer once wrote that “Those who know Christ at all well come to give him a blind trust. They do not know what he will feel it right to do, nor what they themselves ought to ask from him; but they are entirely sure of his interest in them, and his compassion toward them, and his power to carry through what no one else could do for them. And they leave it at that, with the inner peace that only he can give.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, 1948; latest edition 1982.