Doubt and Trust

Do you have doubts? Ever wonder if God is really there? Does doubting deny our faith or Jesus?

The purpose of this workshop is to look in scripture and see that we aren’t the only ones to have experienced doubt. There is a benefit to doubt, and we can trust times of doubt to expand our understanding of and relationship with God.

Workshop Guide:

- In preparation for the workshop take time to read through the following perspective on doubt; writing down any questions that come to your mind and/or experiences that ‘ring a bell’ with you. Workshop leaders could choose to present a portion or all of this perspective by taking turns reading aloud, reading portions when they apply, etc.
- Using the scripture references below (Psalms 88 and 73), prompt youth to describe if and how the scripture verses cited ‘ring a bell’ for them.

We all know what a ‘Doubting Thomas’ is; someone who refuses to believe without direct personal experience. Doubting Thomas is a reference to the Apostle Thomas, who refused to believe that the resurrected Jesus had appeared to the ten other apostles, until he could see and feel the wounds received by Jesus on the cross.

The Benefit of Doubt

Doubting one’s faith in God is a very tough place to be. Faith in God is what keeps it all together when you are facing one of life’s many challenges things. Sometimes things happen in our lives—it may be one big catastrophe or a line of smaller things that pile up—and you start having a lot of doubts. At first, when you have those disruptive thoughts, you try to push them to the side, hoping they’ll just go away, before God notices. They don’t and he doesn’t.

So you feel your faith in God slipping away—and it is unsettling, disorienting, and frightening to watch that happen. You doubt that God cares, that he is listening; you doubt that he is even aware of who you are—that he even exists. In such a state of doubt about God, you feel like there is clearly something very wrong with you. “Maybe I’m not smart enough. Maybe I’m a faker. Maybe I haven’t memorized enough Bible verses. Maybe I need to go to church more often.” Whatever it is, you’re doing something wrong. It’s all your fault.

And so we do the only thing we have been taught to do. We do everything in our power to get out of that state of doubt as quickly as we can. For some, if doubt persists, they live lives of quiet desperation, ashamed or afraid to speak up. Others simply walk away from their faith.

Surely, doubt is the enemy of faith, right? To have faith means you don’t doubt, right? Doubt is a spiritually destructive force that tears you away from God, right? Wrong.

There is a benefit of doubt. Doubt can do things spiritually that nothing else can do.

Sometimes we think of our faith as a castle—safe, comfortable, familiar. But what if God doesn’t want us to be comfortable and safe? What if comfortable and safe keep God at a distance? Doubt tears down the castle walls to force us on a journey. It may feel like God is far away or absent when in fact doubt is a gift of God to move us to spiritual maturity. Doubt is not a sign of weakness but a sign of growth.

Doubting God is painful and frightening because we think we are leaving God behind, but we are only leaving behind the idea of God we like to surround ourselves with—the small God, the God we control, the God who agrees with us. Doubt forces us to look at who we think God is.

If we’re honest, we all think we’ve got God figured out pretty well. We read the Bible and maybe memorize some of it. We go to church a lot. Maybe even lead Bible studies or something. We’re doing great, and God must certainly be impressed. It is so very easy to slip into this idea that we have arrived—that we really think we’ve got all the answers and that we almost possess God. We know what church he goes to, what Bible translation he reads, we know how he votes, we know what movies he watches and books he reads. We know the kinds of people he approves of.

God happens to like all the things we like. We feel like we can speak for God very easily. All Christians who take their faith seriously sooner or later get caught up in that problem. We begin to think that God really is what we happen to think he is.
There is little more worth learning learn about the creator of the cosmos. No need. God is the face in the mirror. By his mercy, God doesn’t leave us there—and doubt is God’s way of helping that happen.

“I want you to die constantly.” — God
Doubt is experienced as distance from God. But that doesn’t mean that God is dying for us. Doubt signals that we are in the process of dying to ourselves and to our ideas about God. Jesus talks about that. He says, "take up your cross" and,"lose your life so you can find it" (Matt 10:38-39)

Paul talks about being crucified with Christ—"I no longer live, Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20); or “You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3).

All that talk of dying and being crucified and hidden does not describe a one-time moment of conversion. It describes a required daily mode of Christian living—where you surrender control—all the time. Dying is a normal mode of Christian existence, and doubting is a common way to get the dying process moving. And when you are in that process, God feels far away—but that is when he may be closer to you than he ever was.

Don’t run away from doubt. Don’t fight it. Don’t think of it as the enemy. Pass through it—patiently… and honestly… and courageously…. When you are in doubt, you are in a period of transformation.

Welcome it as a gift—which is hard to do to if your entire universe is falling down around you. God is teaching you to trust him, not yourself. He means to have all of you, not just the surface, going to church, volunteering part. Not just the part people see, but the part no one sees. Not even you.

The Dark Side of the Bible
God wants you to doubt? Really? What about John 20:31: “These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

John seems to be saying, “If you know your Bible, you won’t doubt but believe. So Christian, if you doubt, you just don’t know your Bible well enough. Your faith is weak. Maybe go to one more Bible study that week.” But think of this from another angle. Jesus himself had his moments where he doubted God and God was very distant from him—God abandoned him—and he knew his Bible very well. In the garden and on the cross, Jesus said what psalm after psalm says: “God where are you? I don’t see you anywhere. Are you even there? I am giving up all hope.”

That one passage in John doesn’t cover everything. It just means that John wrote his Gospel so people could see how great Jesus was and put their trust in him. It does not imply “henceforth thou shalt be a perfect faith machine and never doubt.” Also, I don’t expect the New Testament to say, “Doubt is God’s way of making you grow.” The New Testament doesn’t answer every question we might have for all time. It describes the early mission of the church.

The Old Testament is another matter. The Old Testament records Israel long history of day-to-day life with God. And the Old Testament writers aren’t shy about the dark side of their faith. For example, the Psalms talk about God’s distance. In nearly half of the 150 psalms, something has gone wrong—some barrier has arisen between Israel and faith in God. At times, the psalmist feels abandoned by God and he is holding on by a thread.

One example is Psalm 88. In summary, here is what the psalm says: “God, I have been on my knees to you night after night. I am so troubled, and in so much agony, I might as well be dead. I am absolutely without hope…and you don’t care. All night and all day I call to you—I’m on my knees—but nothing. I am in absolute pain and the only friend I have is darkness.”

Feel free to call this a faith crisis. Maybe he doesn’t know his Bible well enough. Maybe he needs to go to another Bible study so he can learn you shouldn’t feel this way, let alone talk this way. I mean, what’s wrong with him and his weak faith? This “abandoned by God” experience is in the Bible because it is valued as part of normal Christian experience. John Calvin said that the Psalms are a “mirror of the soul.” Sometimes the soul looks like Psalm 88. If your soul ever looks like Psalm 88, at least know that you are good company.

Another example is Psalm 73. Basically this is what the psalm is about: “Yeah I know how the system works: God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked. I’ve read the Bible. I’ve been to Hebrew school. I get it. My problem isn’t that I have forgotten what the Bible says. My problem is that what the Bible says doesn’t work.” This writer goes on and on about how the Bible says that God is supposed to bless the faithful and punish those who are not. But he looks around him and sees the exact opposite. The wicked and arrogant, they are healthy, strong, they prosper. But he’s doing his best, and—nothing. “I am wasting my time. Why bother? The world makes sense without you. Hey God, if you were there Donald Trump wouldn’t own half of new York City and homeless shelters wouldn’t be struggling for every dollar.”
The dark places of the Bible connect with the dark places of our souls.

I know a lot of people raised in the church who are like the writer of Psalm 73—but they are afraid to talk about it. They have heard sermons and Bible studies their whole lives where they were taught to think of the world in a certain “Christian” way, and then maybe in high school, maybe in college, they begin to see that it’s more complicated. Then there is a major disconnect between what they had been taught and what they see. Faith is no longer a convincing way of explaining the world, and so they leave it.

When you feel like that, realize that you are right where so many of the writers of the Psalms are—not to mention Ecclesiastes and Job.

Your period of doubt has value—to move you further on in the journey, even when you feel like you’ve left the path altogether. Doubt gets you moving.

Listen to Some Deep People. Embrace the doubt. Call it your friend. God is leading you on a journey.

Spiritual masters of the Christian church caught on to this long ago. Many Christians tend to intellectualize the faith—we live in our heads. Our faith tends to rest in what we know, what we can articulate, what we can defend, how we think. We tend to place “thinking” over “being” rather than the other way around.

That is why doubt for people like us is the great enemy. We spend a lot of effort in removing doubt. Our world is flooded with books and apologetics organizations whose job it is to give the answers quickly and easily—no struggle, no doubt—all this Jesus stuff, piece of cake.

That attitude robs us of a spiritual experience that you can’t avoid anyway and that wiser Christians, since almost the beginning of Christianity, have told us is vital for the Christian life. This experience of deep doubt is sometimes referred to as the “dark night of the soul.” That expression has come to us through the writings of two sixteenth century Spanish Catholic mystics: John of the Cross and his mentor Teresa of Avila.

Many people have spent their lives thinking about what these and other mystics wrote concerning their experiences of God.

The “dark night” is a sense of painful alienation and distance from God that causes distress, anxiety, discouragement, despair, and depression. All Christians experience this sooner or later—some more intensely than others, some for longer times than others. But the feeling is the same: they lose their sense of closeness to God and conclude that they no longer have faith. And so they despair even more.

St. John’s great insight is that this dark night is a special sign of God’s presence. Our false god is being stripped away, and we are left empty before God—with none of the familiar ideas of God that we create to prop us up. The dark night takes away the background noise we have created in our lives in order to prepare us to hear God’s voice later on—in time, when God deems we are ready.

When the dark night comes upon us, we are asked simply to surrender to God and trust him anyway. The reason St. John calls this a dark night is very important: it is because you have no control over what is happening. That is a very important piece in all of this, because people want to control.

Imagine, like the Chilean miners, being all alone in a deep dark cave, miles down, with absolutely not a single ray of light—utterly pitch black. You have no idea where you are or how to get out. All you know is that you are helpless. You try to find your way, you grope, but nothing. You start walking slowly at first, and then you realize that wherever you are, it is big, dark, flat, and you can’t do anything about it. You are out of control. The point of the dark night has done its job.

Listen to Another Really Deep Person

In 1975, the Jesuit philosopher, John Kavanaugh, went to work for three months at the “house of the dying” in Calcutta with Mother Teresa. He was searching for an answer to some spiritual struggles. On his very first morning there, he met Mother Teresa. She asked him, “And what can I do for you?” Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him. “What do you want me to pray for?” she asked. He answered with the request that was the very reason he traveled thousands of miles to India: “Pray that I
have clarity.” Mother Teresa said firmly, “No. I will not do that.” When he asked her why, she said, “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” When Kavanaugh said, “You always seem to have clarity,” Mother Teresa laughed and said, “I have never had clarity. What I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”

The point of the dark helpless place is to strip us of absolutely everything so that only surrender and trust remain. That is the daily and severe Christian calling.

Are you one of those people who wonders why you can’t just be a happy Christian like your roommate or that lady in church? Listen to Mother Teresa. Apparently, she was in her dark night from 1948 until near the time of her death in 1997, with perhaps some interludes in-between.

You know all that great things she did? Don’t think her dark night wasn’t somehow connected to how she spent her life. You might even say that “spiritual greatness” and the dark night go hand in hand—you must pass through the one to get to the other. She learned trust—not certainty—trust in God. And all of that poured out to the people around her.

We’ve heard this many times: “Let go and let God.” It’s true—but “letting go” might be more than we bargained for.

We must be taught, for we will not willingly go there ourselves. When we are not letting go, when we try to stay in control of something, cling to something as Mother Teresa says, that’s when God turns off the light and makes it dark—not because he is against us, but because he is for us.

Being out of control is another way of saying “dying to yourself.” When we are out of control, that is when God can speak to us—without all of the layers of stuff we have piled up inside of us. God puts us out of our control so that we can learn to trust—like Mother Teresa said—not “believe” or “have faith” but something deeper and harder:

Trust. You can only trust when you have let go completely, when you don’t try to control. When we learn to trust God out of our emptiness,

- when God is out of our control,
- when God becomes God more deeply in us,
- when we surrender and trust,

we become liberated from our attachments, from our fears, and we learn to live with freedom and joy.

That is the Christian journey.

We see this even in our relationships with each other. You cannot have a truly growing, intimate relationship with another if one person is trying to control the other. That destroys true intimacy.

If we are trying to control God, what do you think he is going to do? Rather than leave the relationship entirely he may initiate a period of separation, a period of absence, a period of darkness—so that we can learn that in this relationship we have to surrender, we have to let go of control.

One cannot have contentment in the Christian life without the darkness. Dying is the only path to resurrection, and that is the only way of knowing God. There is no shortcut. Jesus himself is our model for this.

I think that is the heart of Paul’s mysterious words in Phil 3:10. Knowing Christ means experiencing both the power of his resurrection and participating in his sufferings, being made like him in his death. Death and life. Both are part of the Gospel life. It’s a package deal.

When your faith has no room for doubt, then you are just left with—religion, something that takes its place in your life among other things—like a job and a hobby, something soft and comfortable. Doubt is God’s way of helping you not go there.