

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

April 25, 2021

The Doubters Club: Making Doubt Work for You

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Are my experiences with God real? That prayer I prayed as a child, when I talked to God was that real? That time I laid in my bed searching for answers and I called out to God and felt like I connected was that real? That time that life brought me to my knees and I said, if there's a God speak to me, was that real? We've all asked those questions. We've all had those experiences. We wonder everyone wonders. And I wonder if wonder is a form of believing? I think it might be.

There's a story actually, in the Bible of a man who came to Jesus at a moment when life brought him to his knees in Mark, chapter nine and he came to Jesus asking if he would heal his son. He wasn't asking if he would, he was asking if he could, if he had the ability. And Jesus responded, saying, "*If you believe.*" And in that moment, in that moment of doubt, he said, "*I believe, help my unbelief.*"

I think everyone deep down inside resonates with the longing to believe that this man displayed and we all have moments of wonder, moments of belief, moments that we question, are they real or are they not? I would like to challenge us that they are. What if at the end of the day, these moments of wonder, are actually God intersecting our world, with his world, with an invitation, an invitation to follow him on a path that leads to the ultimate connection and relationship with the God who created us at a place of revelation. And let's be honest, we all have places of doubt where we're stuck. We all have places - you may be stuck at the very beginning. Or you may have begun, but now you're stuck somewhere along the way, because of an experience because of something that you saw, or went through.

We all have a junk drawer in our house, right? Anybody else? I've got a junk drawer in my house, and everything that matters, but doesn't have a place goes in the junk drawer, right? Or my 21 year old son has a junk closet.

Your doubts matter. Your questions matter and all the things that you don't know what to do with they matter. Your insecurities, your fears, your hurts, your anger, it matters. And the invitation today is to stop stuffing those in the junk drawer of your life and to find a place where they belong because they have a place in your life.

Welcome to part three of the doubters club, the least exclusive club in the world. If you missed part one Pastor Mark, spoke an amazing, challenging, inspiring word on framing doubt. If you missed part two, with Pastor Joshua, you missed a deeply vulnerable message that speaks to this cultural moment and gives us opportunity to listen and learn and points us toward hope. In fact, the work we are committed to here at NCC, the work of diversity, moving toward unity, moving toward a beloved community is not easy work. It's not just a Sunday word. It is a Sunday to Sunday work.

And I just want to challenge you right now I just, can I just..., I just have this picture of my high school coach, Coach Jackson coming up to me when I was playing football. And when I was frustrated, and when it was hard, and where you know what, I wasn't getting the calls and the ref wasn't calling it my way and the guy was holding me and wasn't allowing me to play and things. And he would look at me and my frustration and he would say, Schmidgall don't you quit on me? I want to speak to us today as a beloved community. I want to speak to all of us today. And I want to challenge you, don't quit on me. Don't quit on me right now. We need you. We need you, you need us but more than that our culture needs us. We got to stick together. When somebody says something that is upsetting don't quit on us. When somebody doesn't say something that upsets you don't quit on us.

That's not my sermon tonight so let me bring it back. The Doubters Club, I've decided to title the message tonight 'Making Doubt Work for You'. And thanks again to Pastor Mark for the introduction and I just want to give a special shout out to my NCC online family. I see you, I love you guys. All the all across the world as he said from Patagonia, Argentina, Harry and Graziella to Suzy in Boise, Idaho to Grace in Berlin, Germany, to Kerry and Phoenix, Arizona, to Melissa in Atlanta. I see you guys all over, there are so many of you. We are becoming a beloved community and I am so excited about what God is doing among us. And not just around the world but right here in the DC area. Those of you who are joining with us and are a part of this community this is us, we are NCC and I'm excited to be able to share with us tonight.

Rene Descartes, the originator of Cartesian doubt, essentially put all beliefs, ideas, thoughts, and even matter in doubt, everything, doubt everything. Some call Descartes the Father of Doubt. He actually influenced philosophy and science in a way that pushed it forward in a very positive way, but not without consequence due to the reaction of unguided doubt. The consequence, in fact, is the deep skepticism that has become the foundation of modern philosophy, science, and even politics. The side effect is that it has built toward an ever growing feeling of anxiety that is at the foundation of all of our ideology. More and more we as humanity are uncertain of who we are, why we are and what we believe.

The deep, deep root level anxiety, I felt it. It's gripped me at different points in my life and specifically in relation to my spirituality. I remember as a teen, I believe that God is going to speak to some teens, that are listening to this message tonight I have a firm conviction in my... I love teenagers. You guys are so important. And you know what I remember as a teenager, how I struggled with my faith and my spirituality because it was difficult. I was trying to formulate my own faith and bring it into a place of understanding and I struggled with doubt. I remember in my 20's as I struggled to find meaning and purpose in life. I remember then as I moved into my 30's and the breakdown of my marriage, which led to a divorce brought me to my knees like nothing I've ever experienced in my life and I questioned everything. I remember, only three years ago, when I was diagnosed with small lymphocytic leukemia and once again, it all came back. I was pastoring, I was leading, I was trying to be the spiritual leader and yet in my own life, I was questioning what's happening. You see, we all struggle at different

moments and at different places with doubt. And I think maybe what has kept me from getting stuck is that I believe that doubt creates a choice that you can make it work for you.

Doubt in Scripture comes from the Greek word, *diakrino*. Literally, coming from this idea of two-ness, or double-ness, a divided heart. The Latin etymology of the word has the prefix *duo* in it, which we know means two. But what allows doubt to work for you is realizing that of those two roads that divided-ness that you can choose a way forward. The problems I personally find, specifically when we're talking about spiritual doubt, with choosing not to believe in God are the following. And I'm going to skim through these really quickly. I would encourage you, if you would like to do a deep dive on this to pick up Tim Keller's book and it's called *Making Sense of God*. It's a great book to dive in deep because I'm going to do a quick skim on this.

A couple problems I find with choosing the road of “not God” first, the problem of meaning. Where do I find meaning without God? Is my purpose, is my meaning in life simply that I am a random compilation of cells that are using me as a host? And all they want to do is to replicate and to reproduce, and to keep the species moving forward. And really, that I don't have any choice in anything I do, I just think that I have a choice because the cells are making me think that only to further themselves. I have a problem with that.

Second, the problem of identity, where do I find my identity with secularism other than in myself? I love myself. Not really. Let's just be honest. I know me, I'm limited. And that identity is extremely fragile, but finding my identity in God, a God who not only made me but made me to love me, that resonates with me, it actually floors me. I went through an experience this past year, that was transforming to me to move into this place of understanding that at a whole new level that God designed me as I am has chosen me to be who I am with my flaws, with the cracks in who I am, and loves me tremendously and deeply. And I believe that there are some people right now in the sound of my voice who you're struggling with this. I want you to know that there is an identity that can be found.

You know what? This morning, my five year old son, Bert was getting ready to go to school and he came into my office at home. And he said, “Dad, I want a hug”. And he gave me a hug and we hugged for like, three, four seconds. And he picked his head up and looked at me and he said, “Dad, I wish I could hug you forever.” Come on. I just want ‘Father of the Year’ for pulling that one. But you know what, that is the kind of relationship that our Heavenly Father desires to have with us, to have us look into his eyes and for him to look into our eyes and for us to have... that is the identity that is at the foundation of a relationship with God. I have a problem with identity without God.

Third is the problem of freedom. Secularism defines freedom as the absence of restrictions. But if that is true, that is completely antithetical, antithetical to love. The greater the love, the less free you are. But studies show that the more committed love relationship that you are in, the happier you are. How does

that work? Romans 5:8 says, “*But God demonstrates his love toward us in this while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.*”

Fourth, is the problem of existence itself. The probability that something was created out of nothing is a problem.

Fifth is the problem of moral obligation. I can explain moral feeling without a higher power, I can't explain moral obligation. But secularism says that morality is relative, that it is relative to each person and that you cannot usurp your morality over somebody else. And so therefore the highest morality is everybody's own human moral feeling or concept. That's a problem. Because you know what, at the end of the day, there has to be a higher moral law, that if you don't agree with some morality, there is a law above that says, well, that's not okay. You must agree with certain components of morality, that is called moral obligation, and it doesn't exist within the context of secularism.

And last, how do we explain the human race in its good and evil? How do we explain evil? The beauty of the Christian story is a God who created us to share his love with us. Second, that the fall of man explains the problem of evil in the world. And third, that God wrote himself into the story, that God wrote himself into the story, to be the sacrifice for all of our sins. Why? Because justice was a part of God's character, and he couldn't just forgive without having someone to pay the price. And so he wrote himself into the story, to pay the price out of love.

So one road to choose is the road that leads away from God, but I struggle with its problems. The other road is to choose God. And for some of you today, I want to invite you to choose God. And I know that you still have doubts. That's okay. Others of you, you have chosen God, but you are stuck in your spiritual journey, you have struggled to move forward. And I would dare say that it's because of a doubt that you are struggling with right now in your faith. And I want to invite you that with that doubt, to make that doubt work for you, and to choose to move forward.

The opposite of doubt, is not certainty, the opposite of doubt, is to believe. The word believe in the Greek is the word *pisteo*, also translated, to commit to, to trust in. So believing is choosing a way, it is committing to a way and it is trusting in a way. It's a verb; it's not simply a mental decision. But it is an action; it is a choice to move forward. And some of you that are stuck at this intersection of mental choice and moving forward are stuck there because of the reason that you feel like it would be inauthentic to move forward without fully having a full belief in what you are moving into. And I think that is a false assumption.

In 1931, Kurt Gödel published Gödel's Theorem of Incompleteness. It is considered one of the most foundational findings in mathematics and mathematical logic. Essentially, what Gödel proved, is that there does not exist a combination of mathematical rules that lead to a system whereby all things can be proven. Yet in order for the advancement in the study of mathematics, every mathematician must choose

to believe that even though absolute proof is not possible within that given system, that it is true in order to use that to be able to find additional breakthroughs. I don't know if you're tracking with me here, but essentially in math, it cannot fully be proven within a system. In fact, the second proof was that if there was a system that were absolutely provable, the proof could only come from outside of the system that the system is trying to be proved. The system that is cannot understand the system required to validate itself. Man, that's a whole lot of crazy talk, right? But here's the point, in order for science to move forward, science doesn't move forward because it knows everything it moves forward, because it sees what it has and it chooses a way and it moves forward to find the next advancement. Everything in this world, in this life, from foundational math, to physics, to spirituality, to logic requires belief in something that is improvable within the system to get to the next proof.

So here's the question, "How do I move forward?" I want to give you four postures of the heart that I believe allowed doubt to work for you and I'm going to go through these really quickly. But these come out of a passage in Mark chapter four, on the parable of the sower, and I don't have time to read it, but Mark four, one through 20, I encourage you to read it. In fact, I encourage you... we're going to dive into it in NCC daily this coming week. So I'd love you to sign up for that if you're not already. Or if you are signed up but you haven't been engaging, engage in this, this week, as we look at the parable of the sower. And there are four types of soil. There's the rocky soil, there's the path, there is the soil with the weeds and then last, there's the good soil.

My wife and I love to garden. In fact, the last several years, we've started gardening, and I think we've got some pictures. Our first garden was this four by eight garden that, that's pretty impressive, right? That's a good looking garden. It's called the square foot garden. We got it goin'. Year two garden 2.0, we decided to add a little bit of fence because you know what the deer like their garden too. So we added some other some other planters around it. Then came garden 3.0, we added another box. Look at that box down there. We got strawberries in there. We still got all the others garden. You can see my wife's feet up there making the magic happen. But this year, garden 4.0, check that baby out, we added another four by eight garden, we got this trellis right here for the pole beans to grow up. It's going to be a harvest this year. Come on somebody. And you know what we did this year? We mixed our own soil. We decided to get our own soil mixture and we put amendments in it and we mixed it up and we made it because you know what I've learned. Besides that I'm basically a farmer. I've also learned that it's all about the soil. The soil is where it's at. And so you know what, in order for faith in order for us to use the doubts that come our way, and in order for us to choose faith and choose the seed of faith and planting it in our lives, it involves forward momentum, a believing that is an action that takes us forward, even though we don't have it all figured out. And even though those doubts are there choosing to move forward by preparing the soil of your heart for God to do something.

And so I want to hit four things real quick. First, the seed that was thrown on the path represents the areas of our life that have been walked on, where we've been walked on, where we've been walked over, where we've been hurt, and there's pain because of what others have done in our lives, the seed that

lands on those areas of our life cannot grow. And so we must move forward first, toward forgiveness. Forgiveness is a major key to God, being able to do a work in your heart the work that he wants to do. Forgiveness is not about letting somebody off the hook. It's about letting yourself off the hook. I've had to go through times where I had to forgive people, where I've had to forgive the church. I've had to forgive churches by name, and I've had to forgive the church at large. I've had to forgive the different, you know, areas where I grew up. I've had to forgive people who are part of the church that have hurt me. I've had to forgive myself in the process. Forgiveness is so key and this could be something that you need to consider.

The second move is the move toward vulnerability. It says the seed in the rocky soil died because it was shallow. Deep soil requires vulnerability and rocks can represent in our life, the hard parts of our life where we are creating this false shell of protection to guard ourselves but when we guard ourselves in this way, it doesn't allow the vulnerability and the depth of who we are to receive the seed of faith in our lives. I think one of the biggest dangers to ourselves in our faith and others is the lack of vulnerability. One of the most pivotal moments in my life was when I was a teenager, and I was struggling with my faith. And I went to my dad, who was a pastor at the time and I was like, oh, man, Dad, I got a question for you, this is zinger. Give me an answer to this and I'll believe. I was really pushing and challenging. And you know what; I asked my dad the question and you know what he said? He said, "Man, Robb, that's a good question. I don't know." You don't know? What? My father's "I don't know", gave me permission to not know. And that vulnerability that he gave in relationship where he just didn't come up with, "Oh, you just got to believe son, you just gotta, you just got to, you know." But he chose to speak into that moment in a moment of vulnerability. And vulnerability requires community it requires being in relationship. Vulnerability matters.

The third move is the move towards simplicity. It says the soil with weeds choked out because there was too much distraction, right? Because there was too many things competing, and this soil represents the distractions of our lives. How can we focus in? Pastor Mark talks about it all the time, he says, you know, "How can you be filled with God when you're filled with yourself?" Well, how can you hear God, when there are so many other voices in your life? We need to create some moments where we're not listening to so many voices, but we can quiet ourselves.

And the last move is the move toward integration. You see, faith is not just a Sunday thing. Faith is complex. It requires integration into all of who we are. My wife this year bought a soil testing kit. I'm like we're legit farmers now we're testing our soil. Why? Because she needed to see if the soil had all the right components. It's got to have the right amount of nitrogen and it's got to have this and it's got to have that. Healthy soil requires all the things right? It requires a little bit of decaying stuff. We don't like decaying stuff in our life do we? It requires a little bit of compost. Oh, y'all know you got some compost in your life? The question is, are you integrating that as part of your faith? Are you seeing the value of all the things, the struggles, the doubts, and letting them all come into balance with one another, to become a fruitful soil that can produce? We need the worms, we need the bugs, we need the heat, you

need the moisture there. When you stick a seed in the ground, it needs the heat and the moisture. Why? Because it creates pressure. You need pressure in order for the seed of faith to be able to rise up inside of you and to produce what you are looking for. You see, the dirt has purpose as much as the seed has potential. Stop hating the dirt. Stop. Rather use your doubt, to make an active choice.

I've been walking with a friend who 12 months ago, was a self proclaimed atheist. From the age of 12, after he finished his last CCD class, he said, "You know what? Nope. This isn't for me, I don't believe." And it wasn't. He's in his 30s now and it was until this last year when life brought him to his knees and he cried out to God. Step one - and then he told somebody. Step two, and then he stepped into community. Step three and we've been meeting for the last seven, eight months, just studying the text and looking at the greater narrative of God. And we were talking just the other day and he was telling me, "I have not grown like this ever in my life, in my faith." And it is beginning to integrate into all of who he is.

The invitation today is to use your doubt and let your doubt work for you. I want to invite our worship team, I want to pray a quick prayer and then I have a unique invitation today that I want to make.

Father right now in Jesus name, I just pray that your Holy Spirit would do its work, do your work, it is you Holy Spirit. It is you drawing and us choosing to respond right now. You are drawing hearts, thank you Jesus.

I want to make a unique invitation today. Here's what I want you to do, I want you to pull your phone out. And I want you to take your phone, and we want to know where you're at and this one is an all play. Okay, every single one of us, we want to know where you're at. I want to know where you're at as an NCC online community and as an NCC as a church, help us know you and where you're at. This would be a great way to become a part of sharing so we can continue to grow and learn and know who is a part of our congregation. We have a QR code that you can scan right now. And when you scan that, it's going to pull up a text on your phone. If you don't have the ability to get the QR code, you can just type in the number 844-504-0861. And here's the thing, four options, okay, here they are

- Option number one. I would like to make a decision to follow Jesus today. If that's you, I want you to put the number one in the text and hit send.
- Option two, I'm a believer, I'm a follower of Jesus. I want you to put the number two in your phone. I said this was an all play; we want to know everybody where you're at. Number two, put the number two in your phone and hit send.
- Number three, you say I still have questions. Put the number three in your phone. If you're like, you know what, man, this is really interesting. I'm feeling the draw. I still have questions. Number three, hit send.
- And number four, you say you know what? I'm not interested, right now to make a decision. And you would put number - you know what number four I respect number four. I respect that. We want to know that and we want to be a safe place for you.

But would everybody just do that right now just engage in that way? And I want to close with this and I'm gonna... you know what I'm gonna do something. I want that song that we sang that song that said you can have my heart God? Are we allowed to change like the songs? Are we allowed to do... Am I allowed to? Hey, I'm in charge. Can we do that?

That song just grabbed me. "You can have my heart." Where are you stuck today? Where are you stuck? I want you to give your heart today. I want to invite you - where are you stuck? Let's give it to God. That song was just resonating with me and I want...

Let me close with this. Are my experiences with God real? When I prayed that prayer as a kid was it real? That night I laid in my bed and cried out to God. Was it real? That time when life took me to my knees? Was it real? I think it was. I believe it was and I believe that you can respond today with a humble heart, with a hungry heart and by giving your heart to God today. Let's lift this song together.