

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 15, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:8,9

“We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed” (Good News Bible).

ENCOURAGING WORDS FROM GOD’S WORD

(2) DON’T LET YOUR DOUBTS DEFEAT YOU

We all have doubts. We all have a tendency to second-guess ourselves and say, “Did I do the right thing?” “Did I make the right decision?” “Should I take it back to the store?” And there are many kinds of doubt. When we doubt the future, we call it worry. When we doubt other people, we call it suspicion. When we doubt ourselves, we call it inferiority. When we doubt God, we call it unbelief. When we doubt what we hear on television, we call it intelligence. When we doubt everything, we call it cynicism or skepticism, or agnosticism.

Men typically go through a period of doubt that we call “the midlife crisis” when we doubt our ability, our virility, and our senility! “Midlife crisis” is the age of the three “B’s” — bifocals, baldness and bulges.

James says in James 1:6, “Whoever doubts is like a wave in the sea that is driven and blown about by the wind... (he is) unstable in all that he does.”

Now, do Christians doubt? What a question! Should Christians ever doubt? Well, let’s see what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:8,9 (Good News Bible): “We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed.” The point Paul is making here is that it is possible to have doubts, but not be defeated by them.

Now today I want to do a couple of things. I want to look with you at three causes of doubt; and then I want to talk to you about how to deal with your doubts. How do you overcome them?

1. The Causes of Doubt. The Bible says that there are three different causes.

a. **Critics.** Critics cause us to doubt God — these people who challenge you and ridicule your beliefs. The Bible talks a lot about “scoffers.” All of us have been in the classroom, or at work, where our faith was criticized and challenged.

I heard about a boy one time, in school, and the teacher stood up and said, “The Bible doesn’t make sense; it’s impossible to understand.” And the young man raised his hand and said, “Sir, the Bible is God’s love letter to Christians, and that’s what you get for reading someone

else's mail!"

Critics cause us to doubt God. David had to deal with critics. Psalm 73:8-11 (Living Bible) says, "They scoff at God. . . How proudly they speak! ... And so God's people are dismayed and confused, and drink it all in. 'Does God realize what is going on?' they ask." David is saying, "Yes, the critics can cause us to doubt. We drink it all in. We're adversely affected by these scoffers." Notice that he says here, "They're proud!" Most critics are egotistical and opinionated; you know -- "You're a dummy if you believe all that religious stuff!" And folks, I don't care how many degrees a person may have, if he doesn't believe in God, he is a fool. That is exactly what the Bible says (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). All you have to do is look at the overwhelming evidence that the creation was made by a Creator. To say that this vast universe just fell into place is really incredulous when you think about it.

Isaac M. Singer, the inventor of the sewing machine, was a devout Christian, and he didn't think much of the more radical theories about evolution that were prevalent in his day. His first sewing machine had 17 parts to it, and he used to say, "If you put those 17 parts into a revolving drum, and let them rattle around for all eternity, they would never come together to make a Singer sewing machine!" The hand of the Creator must be at work.

Critics cause us to doubt God. I've heard people say, "I accept only what I can understand." Well, then, you're going to doubt a lot! I can't understand Einstein's theory of relativity (although God knows I've tried!). But I can accept the fact that his theory has revolutionized our view of the universe. If God could be completely understood, then He wouldn't be God. Look what Psalm 42:10,11 (Living Bible) says, "...again and again they scoff, 'Where is that God of yours?' But O my soul, don't be discouraged. Don't be upset. Expect God to act!"

And remember this -- critics can't stand to be around joyful Christians! They want us to be miserable too! And so they're always trying to criticize, and that can cause us to doubt.

b. Conscience. Our conscience can cause us to doubt. In other words, when you feel guilty, you have a tendency to rationalize your beliefs in order to fit your lifestyle. 1 Timothy 1:19 (Living Bible) says, "For some people have disobeyed their consciences and have deliberately done what they knew was wrong. It isn't surprising that soon they lost their faith in Christ after defying God like that." Paul is saying, "Do you have a guilty conscience? If so, then you're soon going to begin denying your beliefs."

It's like my driving down the highway at 70 mph and getting a speeding ticket and then coming to church the next Sunday and announcing, "I don't believe in the Highway Patrol. I don't believe in the Traffic Court. I don't believe in judges. I don't believe in the 55 mph speed limit." That doesn't change anything. It's still a fact -- I broke the law, I got a ticket, and I'd better pay up. Unbelief is often an excuse to justify our lifestyle.

I think of a college student who came to his pastor and said, "I don't believe in God any more." He probably expected the pastor to be bowled over by such a momentous statement - "Oh no, a real live atheist!" The pastor said, "So... I'm not interested in the fact that you don't believe

in God so much as I'm interested in why you don't believe in God." The pastor continued, "Let's just suppose that God exists. If you believed that God really does exist, let me ask you — are there some changes you would have to make in your lifestyle?" And he said, "Well, yes, of course there would. There are some things I'm doing now that I don't want to give up." "So," said the pastor, "the real issue is not whether you believe in God or not. The real issue is -- are you willing to change?" You see, our morality determines our theology and the way we want to act. Did you ever meet a practicing homosexual who believed what the Bible says about homosexuality? Or a pro-choice advocate who believes that it is a little live baby within its mother's womb, as the Bible emphatically declares? They say, "Oh, that's your interpretation, but I believe this..." Have you ever heard that line? "I don't care what the Bible says, I believe this..." They simply refuse to believe the truth. So conscience can cause us to doubt God.

c. Circumstances. This, by far, is the number one reason why people doubt God. Circumstances can certainly cause us to doubt God -- when our prayers go unanswered, when a tragedy strikes, when we're faced with a seemingly impossible situation, when our fondest dreams are smashed to atoms.

Jesus is out on the Sea of Galilee with His disciples. He is asleep in the back of the boat when a great storm comes up. And there, in Mark 4:35-41, we read how they woke Jesus up, exclaiming, "Teacher, don't You care if we drown?" That's a typical reaction when we are under pressure. We start to doubt — "God, don't You care about me?"

It was Mother Teresa who, in a dark hour of the soul, cried out, "God, You would have more friends if You treated the ones You have a little better." Tragedy and heartbreak can cause us to doubt God.

George Gallup says that 96% of Americans believe in God. It's the type of God that they doubt. What is He like? Is He personal? Is He loving? Can He be depended on? Is He interested in me? Those are the kinds of doubts people have.

Now I must admit that I have never met a full-blown, genuine atheist who doubted God for purely intellectual reasons. The fact is that everyone I've met who claims to be an atheist doubted God because of some tragedy or because some Christian had burned them, or they were soured by some poor samples of "Christians" they had run up against; so they said, "If that's all that believing in God can do for a person, forget it! A lot of "atheists" are simply resentful people who've been hurt by so-called "Christians."

So critics, our conscience, and circumstances can cause us to doubt God.

2. How to keep your doubts from defeating you.

Let me give you three precepts from the Word of God:

a. Admit your doubts. Be honest about it -- "I've got some doubts." You can't overcome them until you recognize them. So many Christians are intimidated by their doubts: "Oh my goodness, I've got these doubts; maybe I'm not a Christian; maybe God won't love

me!” And they can’t face the fact that they have some honest questions.

Jesus said concerning John the Baptist, “Among those born of women there is no one greater than John.” (Luke 7:28). And even John the Baptist had doubts. One time, John was in prison. Everything was going wrong. He was at a low point in his ministry. And he sent some people to Jesus to say, “Was I wrong? Did I make a mistake? Are You really not the Messiah?” He had doubts. And Jesus sent those people back to John to reassure him. Jesus didn’t condemn him or criticize him. And then Jesus turned around and said to the crowd, “No greater man than John has ever lived!” And that verdict came right after John had expressed doubts about Jesus.

You remember the story of Thomas, one of the original disciples. He missed the first resurrection appearance of Jesus, and when he rejoined the other ten they said, “Hey, you missed out on it. Jesus was here!” And he said, “No way. You fellows are just putting me on. I won’t believe it till I see Him myself.” And when Jesus came to them again, what did He do? Did He criticize Thomas? Did He put him down? Did He scold Him? No, He opened His arms in love to Thomas, and Thomas became a believer.

What’s the point? The point is that not even your doubts can stop God from loving you. Even if you doubt Him, He loves you. That’s what Thomas’s story is all about. Look at Jude 22 - it says, “Be merciful to those who doubt.” Now why does Jude say that? Because, folks, there’s a difference between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is when honestly you just don’t know what God wants to do in a situation. Have you ever felt like that? You may even say, “I don’t even know how to pray about this thing.” Doubt is when you don’t know what God wants to do. But unbelief is when you know exactly what God wants to do. You’ve read the Bible, and you still choose to say, “I don’t believe that; and I’m going to do something different.” That is unbelief, and that is sin.

“Be merciful to those who doubt.” You see, the strongest faith comes out of struggles with your doubts. David, in the psalms, keeps saying, “God, I don’t know what’s going on. Why are You allowing this? Why do bad things happen to good people?” Job kept saying, “God, do You really love me? Do You have the power to change my awful situation?”

So this morning let’s be honest. Do you ever have doubts? If you do, congratulations! You’re human! How do you keep your doubts from defeating you? Admit them.

b. Doubt your doubts. This is very important. It’s ironic that so often we doubt our beliefs and we believe our doubts! That doesn’t make sense, does it? What we need to do is to believe our beliefs and doubt our doubts. Look what Solomon said in Proverbs 3:5, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” What he’s saying is this: “What are you listening to the most?” Do you listen to God’s Word or do you listen to your feelings? “Oh, I don’t feel loved. I don’t feel God in my life. I don’t feel that God has a plan for my life. I don’t feel that I’m good enough...” Do you listen to your feelings and your circumstances, or do you listen to what God’s Word says? “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” Doubt your doubts.

I must confess that four years ago when we stepped out in faith to join a Bible-believing

denomination, and to forge a new congregation, I had some doubts. I was at retirement age, and I knew that by leading you out, I was committing myself to years of further ministry in building up a strong congregation. Was I up to it? But God kept saying to me, "It's the right thing to do, and you can trust Me to see you through!" And here we are four years later -- God is blessing in the most wonderful ways; I have never been in better health in my life; I have so many subjects to preach about that it will take me at least ten years to do so; and I have no thought of retirement! Doubt your doubts. When God tells you to do something, you don't have to figure out all your doubts before you say "Yes" to the commitment.

And that brings me to the last point. How do you overcome your doubts? You admit them; you doubt them; and,

c. You begin with the faith you already have.

There's a beautiful story in the New Testament about a man who came to Jesus with a sick son. Jesus looked at the man and said, "I can heal your boy; if you will believe, I will heal him!" And it was a classic statement that the man made. Look at it in Mark 9:24; "Lord, I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" Have you ever felt like that? Can you be filled with faith and doubt at the same time? Yes, you can. You can have the faith that God wants you to do something and be scared to death at the same time. This man had faith and doubt at the same time; and yet, in spite of his honest doubts, he went ahead and left his son in Jesus' hands, and Jesus performed the miracle.

Now here's the point -- No matter how weak you think your faith is, it's enough to get you through. It doesn't take much faith. Look at Matthew 17:20: "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." Mustard seed faith can move mountains. Now don't get this reversed. Many of us want to read this verse backwards. We want it to say, "If you have faith like a mountain, you can move a mustard seed!" - as if it takes enormous faith to do a little bitty task. "Oh, I just don't have enough faith. I could never believe God for a big thing like that..." Everybody has faith. You have faith. You had faith this morning that your wife hadn't poisoned your coffee! You have faith every time you get out on the beltway. Indeed, that takes a lot of faith! You had faith when you sat down on that chair -- you believed it wouldn't collapse. You have faith every time you ride an airplane. Everybody has faith -- it's just what you put it in. And you don't need a lot of faith to become a Christian - you just need a little faith in a great Savior. Here's an equation for you: little faith + big God = big results.

Let me ask you this question: What are you doubting this morning? What are you doubting about God? You may be doubting His love -- "If God loves me, why did He allow that to happen?" Some of you may be doubting God's care -- "If God sees and knows what's going on, and He really cares about me, why doesn't He do something?" Or maybe you're doubting God's power -- "God, horrible things are happening to me. If You have all the power You claim to have, why aren't You displaying it in my life?" Some of you may be doubting God's forgiveness. You know that something you did was wrong, and you've confessed it and God has forgiven you; but still you feel guilty. And God says, "Accept by faith what I have promised. Why go on doubting My forgiveness?" Some of you may be doubting God's faithfulness.

“What’s going to happen to me? What does my future hold? What if I lose my job, or come down with cancer?” We all have doubts. You admit them; then you doubt them; and then you begin with the faith you have.

Let me ask you this: Is it possible for you to know without any shadow of doubt that you’re going to go to heaven when you die? The answer is -- absolutely yes. The Bible was written to assure you of that. 1 John 5:13 says, “I write these things to you who believe in the Name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” You can be absolutely confident of your eternal salvation.

That doesn’t mean that you will never sin again; it doesn’t mean that you won’t sometimes disappoint yourself or other people. But, thank God, you don’t have to be perfect to get to heaven, but you do have to put your faith in Christ alone for your salvation. We can’t work our passage to heaven, just because we have “all sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Jesus said, “I am the Way... No one comes to the Father but by Me” (John 14:6). You put your faith in His redeeming death on the Cross, not in your own efforts, or your own goodness.

What was it that turned “doubting Thomas” into a believer? It was a personal encounter with the risen Christ. If you’ve never had that, then, regardless of your religious background, that is what you need. You need to meet Christ personally at the foot of the Cross. And you can do that right now.

Will you?

AMEN.