

The Devilish Dilemma of Doubt

by Jeff Strite

John 20:24-20:29

Does anyone know who Kirsten Powers is? (A few hands went up).

Kirsten is a columnist for USA Today, and Newsweek and a contributor to Fox News, and some time back she told of her transition from being an atheist to believing in Christ. She explained that at one time on one she knew was a Christian. All of her friends were New York liberals and if they ever spoke of Christianity, they spoke with disdain at the ignorance and foolishness of people who wasted their time going to church.

Someone once asked her if there were any deal breakers in dating for her. She had replied: "Just nobody who is religious." But then she began dating a Christian. And somewhere along in their relationship he asked her if she believed that Jesus was her Savior. She was quite blunt: "No."

Then he asked her: "Do you think you could keep an open mind about it?"

Well, of course. "I'm very open-minded!" Even though I wasn't at all. I derided Christians as anti-intellectual bigots who were too weak to face the reality that there is no rhyme or reason to the world. I had found this man's church attendance an oddity to overlook, not a point in his favor.

As he talked, I grew conflicted. On the one hand, I was creeped out. On the other hand, I had enormous respect for him. He is smart, educated, and intellectually curious. I remember thinking, What if this is true, and I'm not even willing to consider it?

She started going to church with him and found the sermons shook her faith in her atheism. After a while her life went through some rocky times and a friend suggested she go to a specific Bible Study in an apartment in New York. She said "I remember walking into the Bible study. I had a knot in my stomach. In my mind, only weirdoes and zealots went to Bible studies. I don't remember what was said that day. All I know is that when I left, everything had changed. I'll never forget standing outside that apartment ... and saying to myself, 'It's true. It's completely true.' The world looked entirely different, like a veil had been lifted off it. I had not an iota of doubt. I was filled with indescribable joy. (PAUSE)

The horror of the prospect of being a devout Christian crept back in almost immediately. I spent the next few months doing my best to wrestle away from God. It was pointless. Everywhere I turned, there he was. Slowly there was less fear and more joy. The Hound of Heaven had pursued me and caught me—whether I liked it or not."

(<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/november/fox-news-highly-reluctant-jesus-follower-kirsten-powers.html>)

Kirsten was a woman who doubted God.

And we would expect to see doubt in the lives of atheists and agnostics.

We'd expect to see doubt in the lives of people who don't go to church.

We would EVEN expect to see doubt in the lives of those who just play at being Christians.

But committed followers of Christ?
They'd never doubt would they?

(PAUSE) Yeah, every once in a while, they do too.

Here in our story today we find that one of Jesus' closest followers... doubted. In fact, his very name has become a byword for doubt. When we encounter someone who refuses to believe something that is true we call them a "doubting.... Thomas."

Thomas will forever be known as the one who doubted.

Now, as I was preparing for the sermon this morning, I thought I'd investigate what Greek words were used for doubt... and I was surprised to discover there are several different Greek words translated "doubt" in the New Testament.

For example: there's the word "diakrino". It means to "hesitate."
That's the word Jesus used when He said: "if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not DOUBT (hesitate) in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them."

Then there's the Greek word "distazo" which means "doubt."
That's the word used when Peter walked on the water.
Do you remember that story? Jesus came out, walking on the water and Peter asks if could do the same. Sure, says Jesus, come on out. And Peter WALKS on the water.
He's almost to Jesus, and do you remember what happened? That's right he begins to feel the wind and sees the waves, and he takes his eyes off Jesus and he begins to sink.
He cries out for help, and Jesus reaches down pulls him out of the water, and when they get into the boat Jesus asks him: "why did you DOUBT?"

And then... the word used here in John 20 about Thomas' doubt is "Apistos".
The Greek word "pistos" mean "faith", and the "a" at the beginning of the word means "no".
Thus, apistos literally means "no faith".

Now, what that says to me is that there seems to be several "flavors" of doubt.

- There's the kind of doubt where I want to pray for something... but I hesitate because it just seems to bold and outrageous. Whatever it is I want seems to be

too outlandish to bother God about... so I hesitate. I'm not sure I want to ask that big a request of God.

- Then there's the kind of doubt where (like Peter on the water) I suddenly feel overwhelmed by my circumstances and I take my eyes off of Jesus and find myself focusing more on the crashing waves around me.

We shouldn't DOUBT like that... but we do.

It's almost normal for us to hesitate once in a while or to become overwhelmed by our circumstances.

But this "Apistos" thing - this doubt that Thomas had - this is a different kind of doubt.

It's a dangerous form of doubt.

The other flavors of doubt will slow us down in our faith or cripple us as crucial moments of crisis in life. BUT the kind of doubt - this "apistos" (no faith) kind of doubt that Thomas had - this kind of doubt will destroy us.

THIS kind of doubt will cut us off from God.

Paul warned Titus "To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe (apistos), nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted." Titus 1:15

The writer of Hebrews warns the Christians he's writing to: "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart (apistea), leading you to fall away from the living God." Hebrews 3:12

And Revelation declares: "But the cowardly, the unbelieving (apistos), the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death." Revelation 21:8

People who have an unbelieving heart will end up in hell!

That's not a good thing!

(PAUSE)

Now let's step back for a moment and take another look at Thomas.

Thomas is a pretty good guy.

In fact, it helps to know that Jesus prayed all night before He selected His 12 disciples... and Thomas made the cut.

He's a man who shows promise.

He's a man who has the ability to believe and act on his belief.

In fact, all the other times Thomas shows up in the Gospels... he looks pretty good. When Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem in the midst of a dangerous situation,

"Thomas said to the rest of the disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'" John 11:16

And later, when Jesus told His disciples that "In my Father's house there are many rooms"... and I'm going to prepare a place for you... You know the way to the place where I am going." John 14:4

Thomas piped right up and said: "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" John 14:5

And Jesus responded: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6

So, in Thomas we have the picture of a committed follower of Christ.

He loves Jesus.

He walks with Jesus.

He's willing to suffer and even die for Jesus.

But then he shows up late to the party after Jesus rose from the grave.

The other disciples try sharing their excitement with him but he's having nothing to do with it.

You can almost sense the anger in his voice:

"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will NOT believe it." John 20: 25

Whoa! I WILL NOT BELIEVE IT???

Not, "I have my doubts."

Not, "I'm having trouble accepting it."

Not, "You're kidding me, right?"

No --- I WILL NOT believe it!

The Other Disciples may have had their doubts until they saw Jesus but they NEVER said

"I WON'T believe!"

That's a dangerous way to deal with God.

I mean, doubt is one thing, but telling God WHAT you'll accept as proof is another thing entirely. Telling God to come down and settle things on your terms is not generally a good idea.

So, Thomas is being so unreasonable here.

But if Thomas is being unreasonable why would Jesus even bother to show up?

Why let Thomas put his fingers into the holes in his hands and his side?

Why would Jesus show mercy to him when Thomas REFUSED to believe?

You know what the answer is? (PAUSE)

I don't have a clue. I don't know, the Bible doesn't say.
All I know is that Jesus DID show Thomas mercy.

And it's a good thing too, that Jesus showed him mercy.
Have you ever said anything stupid to God or about God?
If Jesus could show mercy to Thomas here, it's good to know that He'll probably show us mercy as well.

But notice, Jesus did tell Thomas to "stop it."
"STOP doubting and believe." John 20:27

Jesus showed Thomas mercy but he put him on notice: DON'T PUSH IT!
Don't walk around the edge of faith and gaze down into unbelief.
Don't push it! Don't take your faith for granted! Don't do it!!!
Thomas - your very salvation is at risk here!!!

But, what was it that Thomas was doubting?
He was doubting that Jesus could do what He promised.
For weeks before this... Jesus repeatedly promised He would rise from the dead

Matthew 16:21 tells us "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be RAISED TO LIFE."

Then in Matthew 17:22 Jesus tells them
"The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he WILL BE RAISED TO LIFE." And the disciples were filled with grief.

In Matthew 20:19 Jesus said it again: "(they) will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he WILL BE RAISED TO LIFE!"

So, Jesus had made a promise... over and over and over again.
But Thomas REFUSED to believe that Jesus could do what He had promised.
He had NO FAITH in Jesus' promise .

Now I want you to notice what Jesus said to Thomas after allowing him to touch His wounds:
"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." John 20:29

You know what Jesus was saying? He's saying: I'm going to cut you some slack

here Thomas but you have to realize not everyone is going to get this break. People will have to make up their mind to believe in me without touching.

Hebrews teaches us: "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things NOT SEEN." Hebrews 11:1

And it also tells us: "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists AND THAT HE REWARDS those who earnestly seek him." Hebrews 11:6

To have faith you have to be able to believe what you can NOT see. And not only that - you not only have to believe that God exists... but that He actually DOES stuff.

Let's use an earthly illustration for this:

When a man says, "I believe in my wife," is he saying the same thing as "I believe that I have a wife?"

Of course not! If a man says "I believe I HAVE a wife" that means he can verify it by going back to the house and seeing if she's still there. But if he believes IN his wife, that means he believes he can trust her. He knows that she'll speak well of him, do things for him, and encourage him and not hurt him.

Thus, when we say we believe IN God... that's different from saying I believe God exists.

You can't say: "I believe IN God and then say I don't believe that He could do what the Bible says He can/did do.

ILLUS: This past week, our associate minister Scott's daughter Elizabeth had a problem the doctors couldn't figure out. She simply could not walk. So Scott contacted me and asked if I could get the Elders together to come over to their house and anoint Elizabeth with oil, lay hands on her, and pray for her healing. Why did Scott ask us to do that? He asked because James 5:14-15 says: "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well..."

He asked the Elders to come over because he believed the promise of God.

And you know why I and the Elders went over to their house? Because WE believed the promises of God.

And guess what happened? Elizabeth got up and walked the next day.

Can I explain it? Do I understand it? No. But I don't let what I can't understand or explain dictate what I believe.

CLOSE: My point is this... admitting you are struggling with your faith is not a bad thing. One of my favorite verses in the Bible is where a Jesus heals a boy with an

evil spirit. The boy's father brings him to Jesus and says "if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us"

"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes."

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Mark 9:22-24

When the father pled "help me overcome my UNBELIEF" he was using the same word that described Thomas lack of faith: "apistos". But this time THIS man is admitting his weakness. He wasn't saying he will NOT believe in Jesus... he's just admitting he's having a problem. But in spite of his struggle with unbelief he's saying: I am making a conscious decision TO believe. "I believe – help my unbelief!"

ILLUS: Lee Iacocca (the creator of the Ford Mustang) once told a business associate, "The trouble with you is that in college they taught you not to take any action until you had all the facts. You've got 95% of them, but it's going to take you another six months to get that last 5%. And by the time you do, they will be out of date."

Somewhere along the line in your life you'll be faced with having to make a choice... and you'll not have all the information you'd like, but you still need to make that decision. If you always wait till you have ALL the information, you may never make a choice!

Thomas had all kinds of information. He'd walked with Jesus for 3 years and had seen Christ heal 100s of people by just touching them, feed 1000s with just a small amount of food, and raise people from the dead. He had far more information than you or I have, and yet because he sought that little bit extra, he almost ruined his relationship with Christ.

And at some point along the line in our faith... you and I had to make that choice about following God. We had to CHOOSE to believe. We had to decide that we believed God actually could do things in our lives. We accepted that we couldn't fully understand Him... but we believed IN Him.

ILLUS: Tony Campolo told of the time when he'd just finished a lecture a student stood and said: "Doctor, you seem like a reasonable man. How can you with your sophistication really believe the Bible?"

Campolo replied, "It's easy. I decided to. And, I have to explain; once I decided that I believe in it, I spent the next 35 years of my life accumulating arguments to support what I already believed. But reason only came in afterwards. It only supported what I'd already committed myself to.

Now before you get nasty with me (Campolo told him) I have got to ask you a

question. Why don't you believe the Bible? Isn't it because you've decided to? Please, don't tell me you've read it from cover to cover. Spare me that. And don't give me that jazz that it's full of contradictions because you can't name 5 (and they never can). Somewhere along the line, you decided not to believe and after you decided not to believe you've been accumulating to support your commitment to non-belief.

The kid looked at Campolo and said: "You don't understand. For me to believe in God, I have to have a God that I can understand."

And Campolo replied "God refuses to be that small!"

Now here's the deal. If your God were small enough to understand... He'd be too small to worship. We serve a big God who goes beyond anything we can understand or explain. We have a God who can accomplish way more than we can even begin to imagine in our minds. We need to boldly proclaim that our God can do exactly what He says He can do. And so doing, we'll make the world jealous of the one in whom we have our faith.

INVITATION