

WHY CHRISTIANS DOUBT

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A memorable television commercial said, "When E. F. Hutton speaks, people listen." That's the way I feel about Herb Vander Lugt.

Now in his eighties, Herb has been an enormous source of information and inspiration for us. As a thoughtful student of Scripture and loving pastor of many churches, Herb has also read voluminously and widely with an uncanny ability to remember when and where he read something important.

Herb is also an honest man. So when he, as our Senior Research Editor, writes in the following pages about his own spiritual doubts and the doubts of others, I for one am ready to listen.

Martin R. De Haan II

PERSONAL TIMES OF DOUBT

Some of my Christian friends tell me they never have doubts about their faith. I can't say that.

My admission may surprise some who know me. I'm an optimistic person and am not inclined to be depressive or negative in temperament. Yet I have often struggled with doubts about my faith.

These doubts go all the way back to childhood. I still remember being disturbed by some of the Old Testament stories of the Bible. How could I believe in the goodness of a God who commanded the Israelites to kill all the Canaanites, even small children and babies? I felt uneasy about some passages in the Psalms because they seemed so vindictive. Psalm

137:9 even pronounced a blessing on those who slaughtered enemy babies!

As a teen during the Great Depression, I was attracted to socialistic writings that made me wonder how God could seem so unconcerned about the glaring injustices of life. I was also bothered by the pictures of dinosaurs that were said to have lived millions of years ago. This raised questions in my mind about the Genesis account of creation.

Time hasn't put an end to my doubts. When I see badly deformed and terminally-ill children in a hospital, or elderly people living on for years in deep pain or without their mental capacities, it still brings disturbing questions to my mind. And at times I'm still a bit shaken when some new archaeological finding seems to contradict Old Testament history.

I also have doubts that stem from my awareness of my own imperfection. I have believed in Jesus for more than 70 years, yet I'm still far from being the kind of person I know I ought to be and really want to be! Why do I still entertain thoughts I hate? Why am I still so self-centered? I see things

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in myself others do not see, but I know God does. I don't like what I see, and I'm sure God doesn't either.

In spite of these disturbing questions, I have learned over the years to be at peace with God. I have found that when I'm honest with Him, He helps me deal with my doubts. Even though many questions remain unanswered, I know that He

has forgiven my sins and sees me as one of His own.

I don't want you to think my doubts are larger than they are. I have many reasons for believing what I do, and I also realize that my finite mind can comprehend only a small fraction of the truth about an infinite God and a timeless eternity.

It's just as true that our faith does not rest on reason alone. According to the Bible, the God who wants us to know Him is willing to help us trust Him. This is the assurance Jesus promised to those who would follow their hearts to Him. Speaking to people who already had many reasons to believe in Him, He said:

He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him (Jn. 14:21).

STORIES OF WHY CHRISTIANS DOUBT

In the following pages, I want to do more than tell you about my own doubts and how I worked through them. I also want to tell you the stories of people I've known. I've found that as I've been honest with my own struggles I've also been able to help others. In each case, the names and some of the details have been changed to protect confidentiality. And in some instances, several events have been combined into one composite picture.

EMOTIONAL TURMOIL

Bob was an enthusiastic Christian who made things happen wherever he went. But he disappointed his friends at times when he failed to follow through on commitments and would

then blame others for what he didn't do. I was puzzled by this behavior until one day he told me that these failures stemmed from emotional tailspins. They threw him into such inner turmoil that he doubted everything he had professed to believe. During these times he somehow managed to function at his job and put on a happy face in public. But his wife knew how he really felt. He said he wanted to believe in God and be a good Christian, but he had not found the Bible to be true in his experience. He said that if it were not for his love for his wife and family he would quit trying to be a Christian. He thought he would be happier without having anything to do with God or the church.

I was not shocked at anything he said. I knew he was telling the truth when he said he wanted

to believe in God and be a good Christian. So I could overlook some of his emotionally charged statements about abandoning his commitment to Christ. When people are under stress, they often say things they don't really mean. And because they

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are being controlled by their emotions, they are not going to respond to mere information about reasons for belief. Assuring them that their times of doubt will pass may have some value, but it will not keep them from repeated cycles of distress and recovery.

Looking at how God dealt with His fearful and

doubting servant Elijah (1 Ki. 19) can be helpful in such situations. God understood the physical and psychological factors that contributed to Elijah's irrational fear of Jezebel. After the Mount Carmel experience (1 Ki. 18), the prophet was emotionally drained and physically exhausted. In addition, he undoubtedly had expected that the spectacular display of God's power on the mountain would become the norm for him. The prophet needed rest, food, and instruction. So God saw to it that he slept and ate (19:5-9). Then He corrected the prophet's idea that he could always expect His supernatural intervention. God showed Elijah that He normally works through a "gentle whisper" rather than through spectacular displays of His power. After this, God commissioned His servant to anoint two kings and a

successor through whom He would accomplish His purposes.

Christians with a personality like Bob's need to learn from God's dealing with Elijah. First, they must become aware of their emotional and physical limitations. They must be realistic about how much they can take on. Second, they must modify their expectations. They are not always going to see God step in and give them spectacular results. Third, they must recognize the abundance of God's resources. He can carry out His program without any of us pushing ourselves beyond our limits.

Bob took these lessons to heart. He was more careful about what jobs he accepted, modified his expectations, and trusted others to do some of the things with which he had been involved. He still

has occasional down times, and his old doubts sometimes reappear—but never to the extent that they did before. He assures himself that the down time will end and he can work through his doubts and fears without making his wife miserable or giving up on a task and angrily blaming others.

MISLEADING THEOLOGY

A man I will call Gil traveled more than 100 miles to see me because he doubted his salvation and didn't dare tell his pastor. He repeatedly had heard his pastor say that all believers can live consistent and successful Christian lives by yielding their will to the Holy Spirit. Fellow believers in the church affirmed this teaching. They publicly stated that they had found spiritual fulfillment in a life of surrender to God. They

said they had discovered that “letting go and letting God” was the answer. They seemed to have found a level of spirituality that lifted them above previous struggles.

Gil couldn't identify with their claims. Although he wasn't entangled in any scandalous behavior, he continued to struggle with wrong thoughts and desires. His attempts to “let go and let God” didn't eliminate his strong urges to tell lies in some situations, to fantasize about an illicit sexual relationship, to envy those more successful and talented than he, and even to feel hateful toward some who had wronged him.

In addition to that, he felt a sense of frustration because he was not able to be the kind of person he wanted to be. From what he had heard his pastor and fellow church members say, he had concluded that he

would not be having these struggles if only he yielded to the Holy Spirit, set aside all self-effort, and allowed Christ to live His life through him. He had said all the right words to consecrate himself to God and had done everything he knew to do to become a Spirit-filled believer. Yet the struggle-free life of which his pastor and friends spoke had not happened for him. He was beginning to doubt the reality of his faith.

I told Gil that his fear was largely the result of misleading theology. He had been taught a one-sided view of the Christian life. His pastor was right in emphasizing the need for a conscious yielding to the Holy Spirit. We must look to the Holy Spirit to give us the right desires and to develop within us the virtue that Galatians 5:22-23 calls the “fruit of the Spirit”—love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

It's also true that through our union with Jesus we have died to sin and have been raised to a new way of life as taught in Romans 6:1-4. Through our union with Christ we already have a share in all the spiritual riches of the heavenly realms (Eph. 2:6-7).

But Galatians 5:16-21, Romans 7:14-25, and many other passages make it just as clear that as long as we live in our present bodies we will have an inner battle with the self-centered inclinations of our own flesh.

Through a better understanding of the Scriptures, Gil realized that spiritual maturity develops in the presence of an ongoing internal struggle. Surrender to the Spirit of God happens in the midst of a battle with wrong motives and evil thoughts. There's

no way to avoid the fact that spiritual growth occurs in bodies that never lose their inclination to sin.

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We can see this ongoing process in the life of the apostle Paul. He was an example of a transformed person who showed what it means to live by the Spirit of God. But in his letter to the Romans, he described an ongoing inner struggle that he knew far better than those who saw only his outward appearance and actions (Rom. 7:18-25).

Gil now sees that his own struggle to be all he wants to be is by no means a reason

for doubting his salvation. Instead, he identifies with Paul, who in another letter wrote, “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me” (Phil. 3:12).

SPIRITUAL INSENSITIVITY

Joe, a young husband and father, had a good reputation in his church, but he refused a request to teach in the young people’s program. This must have bothered him, because he felt the need to tell me why. He said that his life was not what it appeared to be. He and his wife were not getting along. He seldom read the Bible and prayed. He had begun to have a variety of doubts. Sometimes he doubted the truthfulness of the Bible. At other times he wondered if he was a true believer. He confessed that

his doubts were making him miserable.

After I did a little probing, he admitted that he and his wife had been doing something he knew was wrong. Thinking they could help their marriage by rejuvenating their sex life, they had begun to watch pornographic videos. He obviously felt shame as he related his story and admitted that the thought of dying and standing before God for judgment terrified him.

It wasn’t hard to figure out what had happened to him. He along with his wife had gradually lost their spiritual sensitivity. By repeatedly disregarding their own conscience, they no longer could hear the inner witness of which Paul spoke in Romans 8:16,

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.

Christians troubled by doubts and fears would do well to take their spiritual temperature. All of us can easily become less sensitive to wrong in ourselves and in our culture. If we are not renewing our minds and hearts regularly, we are apt to allow the spiritual temperature of our culture to cool our own hearts.

Christ and His apostles didn't teach us to withdraw from our culture. Jesus shocked the religious people of His day by being friends with "tax collectors and sinners." But in the process, He didn't lose sight of His distinct calling and relationship to His Father. He wasn't in the world to indulge in its sin. He was in the world to go to the rescue of those who had lost their way.

If we are not continually checking our motives and our relationship with the

Spirit of God, we will lose the fine edge of sensitivity that reminds us that we are God's children called to be representatives of Christ to our generation.

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The challenge is not an easy one. Jesus sends us out as sheep among the wolves. To be on guard against spiritual compromise and danger, we need to stay close to our Shepherd. I learned this truth when serving in the military during World War II. I had grown up in a strong Christian home, had committed myself to Christ at an early age, had gone to Christian

schools, and had worked with believers in a small food store. I was very much aware of the dangers of sin when I went into the service. I had a healthy fear of God and a sense of dependence upon Him.

You can well imagine that my first night in the barracks was an unsettling experience. I wasn't ready for the obscene and profane language. So I tried to let the guys know that I wasn't comfortable with this kind of talk. Of course they tried to laugh me off, but several of the men later confided that they knew I was right.

Over time, however, I became less careful about my own personal time with the Lord. Slowly I began to change. I hardly noticed the obscenity, profanity, and bragging about sexual conquests. Little by little God seemed more remote to me, and I started doubting beliefs I had seen as all-

important. Yet the thought of falling into an immoral lifestyle frightened me enough to drive me to confession and a plea for God's help. I went back to regularly reading my Bible and praying.

I went through this cycle several times and learned that my sensitivity to sin and assurance were in direct proportion to the quality of my day-by-day walk with God.

One of the essentials in "pure and undefiled religion before God" is "to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (Jas. 1:27). And "whoever . . . wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (4:4). Believers who become so insensitive to sin that they can regularly engage in immoral activity can't expect to hear the comforting witness of the Holy Spirit. Because they are not walking in fellowship

with God, they will likely have doubts, fears, and an uneasy awareness that things are not right between them and the Lord.

Unfortunately, my appeals to Joe went unheeded. He and his wife divorced, bringing indescribable harm to their small children. Their spiritual insensitivity has cost them dearly. The last I heard, neither of them was experiencing the peace and joy that ought to be part of the Christian life. I have lost touch with them and can only hope they have since recovered their spiritual sensitivity to the Lord.

NEW TESTAMENT CRITICS

Bill, an outstanding college student, had received Jesus as his Savior and was in no way a rebel. But he began to lose interest in the church activities in which he had always been active. His

Christian parents were wise—the kind of parents a struggling teen can trust. Instead of berating him, they asked him if he would like to explain his changed attitude. He told them that he could no longer hold to the beliefs he had been taught. A college teacher had convinced him that Jesus never said most of the things attributed to Him in the Gospels, and that the account of His resurrection was a fabrication.

Bill's parents consulted their pastor, who suggested that he and Bill work through a new book he had just finished reading: *The Case For Christ* by Lee Strobel. The author is an award-winning journalist with a Master of Studies in Law degree from Yale Law School. He was, in his own words “living a profane, drunken, self-absorbed, and immoral lifestyle” (p.268) and a religious skeptic when

his wife became a Christian in 1979. Seeing the change in her caused him to wonder if she was right. This led him into a thorough investigation of the evidence for the truthfulness of the New Testament that “spanned more than 600 days and countless hours” (p.267). He describes what he did on November 8, 1981:

I talked with God in a heartfelt and unedited prayer, admitting and turning from my wrongdoing, and receiving the gift of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus. I told Him that with His help I wanted to follow Him and His ways from here on out.

Strobel interviewed 13 well-known and respected scholars to see if the claims of the Christian faith were valid. The following is a summary of their answers to the claims of skeptics who

reject the New Testament message.

1. Can we be sure that the books of the New Testament were authentic and accurate records written in the first century by the writers to whom they are ascribed? The answer is a resounding “Yes!” In the first place, the number of surviving manuscripts is astounding: 5,664 Greek manuscripts plus another 16,000-18,000 in other languages, some of them dated as early as AD 130 (according to Dr. Bruce Metzger of Princeton). Compare this to existing copies of ancient manuscripts accepted as authentic by current scholars: 10 copies of Caesar’s “Gallic Wars”; 8 copies each of the highly valued histories by Thucydides and Heroditus. All are 900 years removed from the originals.

Dr. Craig Blomberg,

professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, says that even if we accept the dating of nonbelieving scholars, most of the New Testament documents were in circulation less than 40 years after Christ's resurrection, in time for enemies who had been contemporaries of Jesus to refute any false claims.

2. Can we be sure that the text of the original handwritten manuscripts has been reliably preserved? Here again the answer is yes. Skeptics often declare that more than 180,000 variations occur in the New Testament manuscript copies we possess and that it is therefore impossible to determine the real original text. The fact is that all except about 400 of these variations involve minor matters in spelling (like the English *honour* compared to the American *honor*). And

of the 400 occasions where the sense of a passage is involved, not one is of such a nature that even one basic Christian doctrine is at issue.

According to the renowned Dr. Metzger, painstaking comparison of thousands of manuscripts has enabled scholars to conclusively determine that the text we have today can be fully trusted both historically and doctrinally.

The Bible we have today can be fully trusted, both historically and doctrinally.

3. Is there any secular confirmation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? Dr. Edwin M. Yamauchi, recognized as a

leading authority in ancient history, says that while we do not have a great deal of corroborating evidence, we have enough. The Greek and Roman scholars seldom, if ever, referred to the followers of Christ during the early years of church history because they viewed the movement as an insignificant Jewish sect.

We do have several existing secular references to Christians, however, that date from the last half of the first century and early second century. The Jewish historian Josephus tells of the trial and execution of James, whom he calls “the brother of Jesus” (*The Antiquities*, 20.200). He also refers to Jesus as “a wise man” who, though crucified, had a great number of followers who persisted in declaring Him to be the Messiah (*The Antiquities*, 18.63-64).

The Roman historian

Tacitus in AD 115 (*Annals* 15.44) and the Roman governor Pliny the Younger in AD 111 (*Letters* 10.96) both refer clearly to Jesus. Pliny even said His followers chanted praises to Jesus “as if he were a god.”

4. What about archaeology and the New Testament? Dr. John McRay, who has been called upon for his archaeological expertise by the secular media, says that while archaeology cannot prove that the New Testament is an inspired document, it strengthens the case for its credibility.

Some historians, for example, said they could prove that Luke was wrong when he named Lysanias as tetrarch in Abilene in about AD 27 (Lk. 3:1) and in referring to city officials as *politarchs* (Gk.) in Acts 17:6. Archaeological evidence, however, was uncovered that showed Luke was right.

Critics said John 5:1-15 was wrong in describing the Pool of Bethesda as surrounded by five colonnades. But the pool has now been excavated, and the Bible was right—it was surrounded by five covered porticoes.

Archaeology has repeatedly confirmed the New Testament. The evidence has never proven a biblical statement wrong.

5. Did Jesus, and only Jesus, accurately fulfill Old Testament prophecy?

One needs only to read five of the many Old Testament messianic prophecies to see that they point to Jesus Christ and to Him alone.

Micah 5:2 predicts that the One “whose origins are of old, from days of eternity” (literal rendering) will come out of Bethlehem—the place where Jesus was born.

Daniel 9:25-26 foretells the coming of the Messiah 69 weeks (483 years) after

the decree to “restore and build Jerusalem,” a decree of Artaxerxes in 458 BC—483 years before Jesus began His public ministry in AD 26.

Isaiah 7:14 declares that the One who will be called “Immanuel” will be born of “the virgin.”

Written when crucifixion was unknown, Psalm 22 graphically portrays our Lord’s crucifixion, including the taunts of the onlookers and Christ’s cry of desolation.

Isaiah 52:13–53:12 pictures the whole crucifixion scenario, telling us that He whose “visage was marred” by the maltreatment of His enemies and “bruised for our iniquities” will “justify many” and be honored as God gives “Him a portion with the great” because He “poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors.”

No person except Jesus

even remotely fits these prophetic pronouncements. Any person who is sincerely seeking the truth should carefully weigh the significance of this fact.

6. Did Jesus really die and conquer death by resurrection? It's a fact that Jesus really died. Roman executioners were experts. Moreover, the mixture of blood and water from the gaping spear wound was a certain sign of death.

People will suffer and die for a mistaken religious belief, but not for what they know to be a lie.

That Jesus rose and appeared to His disciples as the victor over death is the only valid explanation for the sudden change in His

followers. A group of people will suffer and die for a mistaken religious belief, but not for what they know to be a lie.

Bill, the college student I mentioned earlier, came out of his study sessions with the pastor with a satisfied mind. When it comes to the Christian faith, the more we know about what the Bible says and why we can believe its message, the better off we will be.

A BAD BEGINNING

Tom, who was not a Christian, was devastated when he learned that the girl he expected to marry was sleeping with one of his friends. Once burned, he decided to look more carefully at the character of any woman he would even consider dating.

His interest in character eventually led him to a Christian woman. He began attending church

with her, and after a few weeks he decided to put his personal faith in Christ. They eventually married and continued attending church together. One day she suggested that they set aside money for the offering. Tom disagreed and said that he didn't want to get so involved in church. He gradually found other things to do on Sunday.

Tom later told me that he was a believer at that time, but he had serious doubts about whether he could trust God with his life. He said he had morbid thoughts about dying and he had no sense of God's presence in his life.

Over time, Tom became increasingly disagreeable and difficult to live with. Then, to everyone's surprise, he consented to accompany his wife to church for a series of special meetings. The speaker spoke clearly about what it means to

follow Christ. After the service, Tom was critical of some things the pastor said and seemed even more out of sorts than usual. But he returned the next evening and to the delight of his wife publicly renewed his commitment to live as a follower of Christ.

What a change! Many of his fears and doubts seemed to fall away. In his renewed faith he became a better husband and father, a more pleasant person, and a generous financial contributor to the church. Only a few years later he was disabled by a serious heart attack, but he handled this trial with grace. He was only in his fifties when he learned that his death was imminent, but he was not upset. He told me that he had hoped to be around a few more years, but that he felt no fear of dying and had no reason to complain.

What changed Tom from a person full of doubts into someone who later was able to face difficult circumstances with grace and faith in God? He told me that inner peace came to him when he began to take seriously what Jesus said about discipleship:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life also, he cannot be My disciple (Lk. 14:26).

The people to whom Jesus spoke those words understood that to “hate” relatives and one’s own life meant to put devotion to Jesus ahead of everyone else.

Tom’s earlier decision to accept Christ as his Savior had brought him into a family relationship with God. But only when he acted decisively to follow through on his faith did he begin to

experience the benefits of wholehearted trust.

What was true of Tom is also true of us. The degree to which God will enter into an intimate relationship with us depends on the degree to which we surrender ourselves to Him.

UNHEALED WOUNDS

A man called me to express his disagreement with an article I had written about the cost people pay when they choose to be loners. He admitted that he himself was a loner but insisted that he did not choose this way of life. Born with physical problems that made it impossible for him to take part in the kinds of activities that healthy children enjoy, he was treated as a misfit by his parents and laughed at by other children.

After he graduated from high school, he found a job but still had no friends. He

tried church and sincerely professed faith in Christ, but no one took a personal interest in him. He concluded that even God did not want him.

Feeling profound spiritual rejection, he tried to find pleasure in a way of life he later regretted. Deep down, he knew he wanted God and Christian friends. After turning from ways that he knew were wrong, he began attending church again. But he could not shake his fear of spiritual rejection. Even after coming back to church, he continued to fear that God did not love him.

Through several lengthy telephone conversations, I tried to assure him that his physical problems did not reflect a lack of God's love or concern. I used the Scriptures to assure him that God shares his disappointment, that He will hold accountable those who mistreated him, and that He

loves him as much as He loves all His children. I challenged him to believe this and to show his belief by loving and praying for those he considered his enemies. This would be an obedient response to Matthew 5:43-45. But he responded angrily, "That is something I will not do. I have a right to hate the people who have made my life so miserable."

I haven't heard from him for some time, and I'm quite sure he is still doubt-ridden and convinced that not even God loves him.

People who see themselves as "different" in a negative sense often have a difficult time believing that God loves them. In school they are often shunned and made to feel inferior. When told that God loves them, they tend to doubt it. They ask questions that are similar to the one my daughter Cathy, who was brain-damaged at birth,

asked me, “If God loves me as much as others, why did He make me ‘different?’”

I assured her that I don’t believe God caused her misfortune (even though for His own reasons He allowed it). I’ve concluded that many birth accidents and other abnormalities take place because we live in a world that has been broken and

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plagued by laws of natural consequence.

I’m convinced that God doesn’t directly cause birth defects, inherited

imperfections, crippling diseases, or debilitating accidents. Instead, I believe He allows His spiritual enemy and the inherited consequences of sin to touch all of our lives in different ways. A child born into a Christian home, but who has a genetic disposition to diabetes, for example, seems to have the same statistical chance to develop this disease as one born into a family of atheists.

It might seem that such natural law would rule out God’s presence and involvement in a troubled world. But the Bible makes it clear that God remains in ultimate control of the world, even though He is never the source of evil. He enters with us into our plight. He grieves over our pain. In so many personal ways He shares the burdens of His suffering creatures. (See Isa. 63:9; Lk. 19:41-44; Jn. 11:37.) For those who

trust Him, He is there to use our pain to make us better people (Rom. 5:1-5) and to bring good out of our most distressing circumstances (Rom. 8:28).

People who are “different” need to know and believe that their pain doesn’t indicate that God loves them any less than anyone else. To help them believe this, they need love and acceptance by the Christian community. They respond best when they are accepted without displays of pity or excessive pampering. They do best when held accountable to the same standards as others. They too are sinners who must place their trust in Jesus and deal with their sins and weaknesses. They must be challenged from the Scriptures to overcome bitterness, self-pity, and an unforgiving attitude.

When trying to help despondent people, it’s

probably not wise to call their attention to others who have overcome debilitating problems. This might cause them to feel guilty and resentful. I know from close observation that being “different” is a hard trial. But I also know that people who see themselves as “different” can become loving, caring, and valuable members of the Christian community.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

I occasionally encounter people who are so deeply troubled by the terrible suffering and injustices of life that they say they can’t believe in a God who is both good and all-powerful. But generally speaking, few are deeply concerned about the problem of evil until something bad happens to them.

A young husband and father asked me, “Why did

God let my wife die? She was a wonderful wife and mother, a sincere Christian, and a loyal friend to so many people. Couldn't He have prevented her cancer? Or cured it? Doesn't He care about me and our children who needed her so much?"

How can God allow babies to be born with deformities, teens to be killed in accidents, or the terminally ill to suffer in seemingly purposeless pain?

Questions like these also flow from anguished hearts when a baby is born with a deformity, when a small child dies, when a teen is killed in an accident, or when a terminally-ill loved one suffers on and on in

what seems to be purposeless pain.

Those of us who try to help in times of grief like to keep our answers as simple as possible, but sometimes we have to deal with some philosophical issues—whether trying to help the intellectually troubled or emotionally distraught. Ultimately we must answer some basic questions: Why do all people everywhere suffer and die? How can we account for the fact that human beings can show great intelligence and wonderful nobility and yet also be so self-centered and cruel that wars, torture, rape, family abuse, and shameful social injustices abound everywhere?

Non-Christian Responses. Some naturalists tell us that evil of all kinds is present in our world because the universe and everything in it are

the product of a blind evolutionary process. They believe that the material forces operating in our world are devoid of any moral or spiritual content. So violence and pain, even life itself, have no meaning or purpose. They reluctantly admit that the universe appears to have been designed for human life (some call it the anthropic principle). But they refuse to consider the possibility of a Designer and Lawgiver.

In many instances, naturalists' everyday lives contradict what they say they believe. Their denial of the existence of a divine mind or spirit logically demands that they view themselves as nothing more than chemically programmed and predetermined creatures. Yet they express their thoughts, argue for their viewpoints, and make moral choices every day.

Others can't accept naturalism and have opted for belief in a higher power who is less than what the Bible describes. Deists believe that God is the original Designer and Creator of all things but that He has nothing to do with anything that happened after He got things going.

Still others affirm belief in a personal God but do not accept the biblical portrait of Him as all-knowing and all-powerful. They see Him as good and as involved with us, but they think of Him as unable to do anything about the bad things that occur. Rabbi Kushner's *Why Bad Things Happen To Good People* eloquently expresses the view that if God were both perfectly good and all-powerful He would not let the world be the way it is. But to say this is to raise a host of new problems, not the least of which is that it's

contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures.

Christian Responses.

Those who believe the Bible share the conviction that the way things are doesn't invalidate our conviction that God is both all-powerful and perfectly good. But Christians present different answers to the problem of evil in a world that came from and is under the rule of a God who is morally perfect, merciful, gracious, all-powerful, and all-knowing. Some place emphasis on His eternal decrees while others emphasize the role of the free will of His creatures.

The God's-Decree

Answer. Some theologians teach that God decreed the existence of evil and brought it into the universe to carry out His eternally preordained program. In this view, God decreed that He would glorify Himself by the exercise of His basic moral

qualities—His justice and His love, His mercy and His wrath—through creating moral beings who were predestined to sin—all with the goal of providing eternal salvation for a select group of people. But this explanation for the origin of evil makes God the author of sin and compromises His goodness.

By contrast, the Bible teaches us that God is the Holy One, the One who, in His essential being, is completely separate from the limitations and imperfections of the world He created. The prophet Habakkuk said to Him, "You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness" (1:13). The brother of Jesus said that God "cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone" (Jas. 1:13). These Scriptures and many others contradict the idea that God willed sin

into existence and brought it into the world.

The Free-Will Answer.

A better answer seems to be that when God created the universe He placed in it moral beings—first angels and then humans—who had the capacity to choose between being proud and self-centered or humble and God-focused.

Sin began in the realm of the angels when the “son of the morning” led a group of spirit beings in a rebellion against God’s authority. (This sin in the angelic realm is alluded to in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. Though these prophetic oracles are directed toward earthly kings, they include elements that obviously go beyond these men to the evil being who works through them.) The “morning star” is Satan. Cast out of heaven to the earth because of his prideful attempt to dethrone God, he played a prominent role in

leading Adam and Eve to succumb to pride and self-centeredness. Natural evil followed as the consequence of moral evil.

God did not ordain the bad choices made by the “son of the morning” and by Adam and Eve. Nor did He influence them in the wrong direction. Their choices were freely made. They could have chosen to do what was right. And when they made the wrong choice, God could have destroyed them. But He didn’t. Because of His love, He already had a plan of redemption by which He could bring good out of evil.

One of the leading Christian philosophers of our day puts it this way:

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free

creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of *moral good*, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil

only by removing the possibility of moral good (*God, Freedom, And Evil*, Alvin Plantinga, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1977, p.30).

Natural evil is the consequence of moral evil. According to Genesis 3:16-19, Adam and Eve's sin is the reason for pain in childbirth, marital tension, contrary forces in nature, wearying toil, and physical death. Romans 8:19-22 personifies nature with an outstretched neck looking eagerly for the day she will be liberated from the "futility" of her present state. God placed this sentence upon her because sin invaded His world, but the day is coming when she will be freed from her "bondage of corruption" and be brought into the "glorious liberty of the children of God." Like a woman giving birth, she suffers now—but with anticipation.

While the “free-will answer” does not handle every question that may arise in our minds, it does enable us to face life as it is without abandoning the biblical teaching that God is both omnipotent and infinitely good. It offers an adequate explanation for the fact that we humans are thinking beings with the capacity for abstract thought and the ability to make moral choices.

FAITH-DOUBT AMBIVALENCE

After trying to help scores of doubting Christians, I have concluded that the most frequent source of spiritual distress is what I would call a faith-doubt ambivalence. It's not the kind of doubt that lacks any inclination to believe.

In Susan's case, for example, it was a matter of swinging from periods of confidence to times of

despair. She was an elderly widow who had been an exemplary homemaker and active church member. She asked me to pray for her during one of her times of despair. She said she had never admitted her problem to anyone, not even to her late husband.

George had a different kind of ambivalence. He had committed himself to Christ in his youth and had been a model of Christian conduct, but now in his late fifties he confided to me that all along he had felt like the father who said, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk. 9:24). He believes what the Bible says about sin, Jesus Christ, and salvation—so much so that deep down he desires to please the Lord. He has made private and family devotions an important part of his life. He is a faithful and active church member. Yet time after time an

assortment of doubts troubles him. Certain disappointments make him doubt the value of prayer. The seemingly untimely death of a close friend for whom he had offered many prayers made him doubt God's goodness. A sensitive man, he can't let himself think about the millions of malnourished and abused people all over the world without entertaining fleeting doubts about God's existence. He has shared his doubts with only a few people. The last thing he would want to do is shake the faith of others. These recurring doubts make life difficult for him.

People like Susan and George must recognize that their doubting is neither a sin nor an indication that they are not true believers. As long as we live with brains that are subject to chemical imbalances, we are going to have emotional

ups and downs that affect us spiritually. If anything, bouts with doubt and fear give strong evidence of spiritual reality.

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People struggling with doubt must also take to heart the assurance of 1 Corinthians 10:13. God will not allow them to be tested to the breaking point but will provide them adequate grace for every trial that may come into their lives.

If we take this biblical assurance to heart, we will

not live in continual fear of what tomorrow may bring—even death. It is said that when someone asked D. L. Moody, who at the time was in robust health, if he had dying grace, the evangelist replied, “No, but I’m not dying yet.” When his time of departure came, however, he obviously received that dying grace. Those who were with him in the moments before he died reported that he was fully at peace, and that at the moment of his departure he spoke triumphantly of “earth receding” and “heaven beckoning.”

Here are four practical pointers to people who are distressed by faith-doubt ambivalence:

1. Be prepared for frequent bouts with doubt. We are imperfect flesh-and-blood beings who become tired and face disappointment, pain, and grief with a sin-damaged

psychological makeup.

2. Find a well-grounded Christian with whom you can talk about your doubts. Discuss encouraging Bible passages and pray together.

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3. Use Psalm 42 as a pattern for a dialogue between yourself and God. Recognize that you are a creature of time in a changing world, and at the same time a citizen of eternity. Ask yourself, “Why are you cast down, O my

soul? And why are you disquieted within me?” Then tell yourself, “Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance” (v.5). As a creature of time and change, acknowledge that you, like the psalmist, are engulfed by His “waves and billows,” but as a child of eternity express your gratitude that God will direct His love toward you and give you a song (vv.6-8). As an earthbound creature, tell God all about your inner turmoil. But as a person redeemed for eternity, ask yourself how you can justify your dejected spirit (v.11).

This kind of dialogue will help you sort out your feelings and place foremost in your mind the fact that you are still an imperfect person on a troubled and changing planet, and that you by grace are, above everything else, a child of God and a citizen of heaven.

4. Keep in mind that faith is believing what God has done and said—enough to commit your life to Him. Your continuance in spite of your doubts and fears testifies to the reality of your faith. Don't let yourself be influenced by people who offer an easy fix. There are no magic formulas, no special secrets known only

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THE CYCLE OF FAITH AND DOUBT

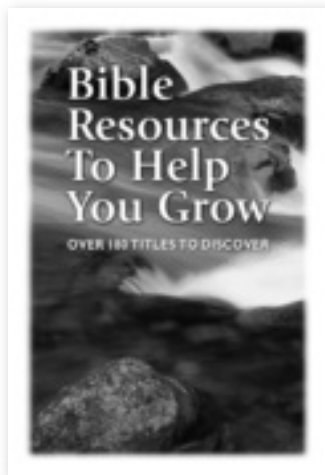
All areas of life have their cycles. A vocation, a marriage, and a relationship to Jesus generally begin with a honeymoon period, then enter a time during which the realities of life gradually replace the early building stage. This often leads into a time marked by varying degrees of disillusionment and discontent.

It is at this point that crucial decisions must be made. At work, one can quit, continue as a disgruntled worker, or see the problems through. In marriage, one can escape by divorce, continue in a lackluster relationship, or set about to mend the marriage. In the Christian life, one can drop out, continue as an unhappy and defeated believer, or determine to

work through the difficulties. Going the full cycle often brings on a new level of satisfaction in the workplace, lifts honeymoon love to the level of mature mutually-enriching love, and transforms the euphoric faith with which we began into confident trust. Even then, struggles will continue.

As long as we are imperfect people living in this fallen world, we will confront doubts. But Jesus promised, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (Jn. 8:12). Because of our human frailty, we will sometimes step off His path into the darkness. But if we follow the hymnwriter's admonition to trust and obey, we will soon be back on His path. The light of Christ, not the darkness, will be our home.

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