

Why Do We Doubt?

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0:00] Well, for a wee while together, I'd like us to turn back to Matthew 14. Let's read again in verses 31 to 32. But when Peter saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink.

He cried out, Lord, save me. Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, O you of little faith, why did you doubt?

Matthew 14 records two of Jesus' most famous miracles, the feeding of the 5,000, and then the walking on the water. And these, like all the other miracles recorded in the Gospels, are serving to identify and verify who Jesus is and why he came.

In other words, the fact that Jesus' ministry was accompanied by these extraordinary miracles is telling us that he's no ordinary person. Because miracles like this don't normally happen, and people like us can't do them.

And so all of this is pointing to the fact that Jesus is unique. And because of that, one of the big purposes of the miracles is that they should give us confidence.

[1:08] Jesus claims to be the Son of God. He claims to have authority. He claims to be the Messiah who's come to fulfill all that the Old Testament anticipated. He claims to be the Savior that we desperately need.

And the miracles that are recorded in the Bible are there to help us have confidence that everything that Jesus is saying is actually true.

So the big aim is confidence. And yet so often, the way we feel and what we experience is the opposite.

Often when we read the Bible, often when we think about our faith, and often when we wrestle with the biggest questions of life and death and ultimate reality, instead of being full of confidence, we are actually like Peter in these verses.

We are crippled with doubts. And that's what I want us to think about today. And in doing so, we're going to just unpack the question that Jesus asks Peter in verse 31.

[2:14] And so that's our title. Why do we doubt? And as Jesus asks Peter this question, I think at one level, this is a word of rebuke to Peter.

And that's often, I think, certainly the way I instinctively read it. And I think that that's true, that Jesus is offering a word of rebuke, because Peter shouldn't have doubted Jesus.

But what I want us to see today is that I think that there's more than just a rebuke in these words. I think that in these words, there's also a profound and incredibly helpful moment of teaching for Peter and for us.

Because all of us have doubts. And one of the key ways of addressing them and maybe even overcoming them is to think very hard about the question that Jesus asks Peter.

In other words, when we have doubts about Jesus, we need to ask ourselves, why? And I think that the big thing that Jesus is saying to Peter is not so much a rebuke that says, you shouldn't have doubted me.

[3:24] I think that even more so, Jesus is saying to Peter and to us, not so much, you shouldn't doubt me, but you absolutely don't need to doubt me anymore.

And so we're going to unpack that under two headings. Doubting is totally understandable.

Doubting is totally unnecessary. So thinking first of all about the fact that doubting is understandable.

Doubts are a huge problem for us, no matter what stage we're at in our journey as Christians. For some people, this is why they're not following Jesus.

Because they've got doubts and they've got uncertainties about the claims of Christianity. And for many people, that's their issue. They're like, well, I'm just not sure, I'm not convinced, I'm not

persuaded, whether that's about the existence of God, the authority of the Bible, or about the whole way in which Christianity works.

For some people, doubts is the reason why they won't profess their faith. So maybe they do believe, maybe you do believe.

[4:30] But to actually make that public, to make that known, to say anything about that, you're like, oh, I can't. Because there's just a sense of doubt and uncertainty.

And many people are kind of waiting for something to happen. Something that will just take the doubts away and make it all absolutely crystal clear.

And that can often hold us back. And even for those of us professing Christians, once we start following Jesus, once we become members of the church, once we publicly profess our faith, that does not mean that doubts stop.

Not at all. Often we are battling against doubts as well. And that can happen no matter what stage we're at. And one of the things that makes it so hard is that when it comes to an issue like doubting, so often we fall into the trap of thinking that nobody else has this problem except me.

And we think, you know, everyone else is totally fine. They're totally sure. They're totally convinced. They're so confident. And why am I so different? And one of the things that we've got to recognize is that that's not actually true.

[5:41] All of us experience doubts. The other day, Una was tidying a cupboard and she found a wee pile of COVID tests. You remember COVID tests?

And you had to get that awful thing up your nose. And, you know, you do it and you test it and you'd say, oh, is it positive? Is it negative? Da, da, da, da, da. We had to do that loads. Imagine that that was a doubting test for Christians.

And you had to put the thing up your nose and drip it on the thing. And it would determine whether or not you ever have any doubts. If there was such a thing, all of them would always come back positive.

All of us have doubts. And perhaps the person who demonstrates that more than any other is actually Peter. Because I think Peter wanted to be this amazing non-doubter.

He wanted to be confident and he wanted to be a leader. And he wanted to be the one who was more confident and committed to Jesus than anybody else. And yet he couldn't do it.

[6:40] And in this chapter, you see such a powerful example of that. He's just seen Jesus feed the 5,000. He's just seen Jesus walk on water towards the boat. He's just stepped out into the boat and Jesus is right in front of him.

He's witnessing all this incredible stuff. And yet in that very moment, he's overcome with doubts. And all of it's reminding us that doubts are very common.

I have doubts. So does every other Christian that I know. And one of the important things I want us to recognize this morning is that at one level, doubting is totally understandable.

And it's understandable for two reasons. First, doubting is understandable because of the way we are. Now, there's two big things that the Bible teaches us about humanity.

The Bible teaches us that we are finite and we're fallen. So by finite, what I mean is that I highlight the fact that we are creatures. We're not infinite. And so we're limited.

[7:37] We're not omnipotent. We don't have the knowledge of God in the way that he has knowledge, the same kind of knowledge that he has. We are creatures. We are finite. And by fallen, we're recognizing that on top of our creatureliness, there's our sinfulness.

We've rebelled against God. We've fallen from what he created us originally to be. And these two things, finitude and sin, mean that it's impossible for finite and fallen humans to grasp and understand and handle everything that's true about God and everything that's true about what he's made and about what he's doing.

And because of that, because of finitude and sin, we have doubts. Most of the time in our lives, we can cope with day-to-day stuff. But when we are confronted with ultimate reality, when we are confronted with the biggest questions, the biggest truths, the biggest categories, we're quickly overwhelmed.

And you see that in this chapter. You see that in the description of the disciples rowing out to sea that in the middle of a storm, in the middle of the night, they see something extraordinary as Jesus walks towards them and they're terrified.

And all of this is reminding us that the gospel is going to lead us into a realm of knowledge where we're always going to be out of our depth.

[9:11] We're finite. We're finite. And so that means that our knowledge of God is always going to be like trying to put an ocean into a bucket. And we're fallen. And that means that sin has had a damaging effect on our minds.

Our judgment skewed. And our desires are disordered. Our perspective is obscured. So our bucket is leaking. And all of these combine to leave us doubting.

And maybe another way to say this is to say that the opposite of doubting, like the full opposite of doubting, is to have impeccable confidence at all times. And none of us have that.

So doubting is totally understandable because of the way we are. But the second reason why doubting is understandable is because of the world around us. And you see that very clearly in this chapter.

And not just in the incident with Peter walking on the water, but actually throughout the whole chapter. It gives us three powerful examples of how the situation around us can cause us to have doubts about Jesus.

[10:12] So we're going to go backwards through the chapter. In verses 28 to 30, you see doubts caused by dangerous circumstances. So Peter steps out of the boat, walks towards Jesus.

But he's quickly overcome with doubts because he can see the wind and the waves around him. And that's understandable. A storm like this would be incredibly intimidating and overwhelming. And other dangerous circumstances can have the same effect. Persecution, illness, isolation, disappointment. All of these things can leave us doubting. In verse 15 to 17, you see doubts caused by limited resources.

You've got the disciples here, huge crowd before them. And they're like, we need to send these people away because they don't have enough to eat. And they only have five loaves and two fish. They have nowhere near enough to feed the crowd. And that's understandable. This is just another example of the finitude problem. And often we feel the way the disciples felt.

[11:16] Church is short of people, short of money, short of influence. As individuals, we're short of time, short of energy, short of experience. And all of it leaves us doubting as to whether or not we really can accomplish anything for Jesus at all.

So there's doubts caused by dangerous circumstances, doubts caused by limited resources. But perhaps most importantly of all, in the early part of the chapter, you see doubts caused by harmful influences.

Doubting is basically when we're in two minds about something. And that's exactly what you see in Herod in regard to John the Baptist. On the one hand, he sees John as a threat.

And as verse 5 indicated, he'd have been glad to put him to death. But at the same time, he was afraid about the public's respect for John. And actually, if you read Mark's Gospel, he discovered that part of Herod also liked to listen to John, even though John had been critical of him.

So Herod was very much in two minds about John the Baptist. But the tipping point comes through an influence. It comes through Herodias, his wife.

[12:23] And Herod, as we read, had backed himself into a corner with his oaths. Herodias had exploited this through her daughter. Herod and Herod makes a decisive choice as he capitulates to external pressure.

And there's two massive points of application arising here. The first is that it's reminding us that external influences can flood our minds with doubts about the Gospel.

And that's happened to so many people. It happens at so many different stages in life. It can happen when you're young. It can happen as you step out to go to university, step into work. It can happen when things go wrong in your life or things don't work out the way you want them to. It can happen when you face the challenges and fears and vulnerability of old age. And often this can come if our worldview is not clearly shaped by the Bible.

And also it can come when we don't have the kind of categories and understanding in our mind, which means that we can critique the voices that are challenging us and that are steering us away from Jesus.

[13:29] But one of the things that that's highlighting is that it's so important for all of us not to dismiss the Gospel or to accept an alternative simply because other people are telling us to do it.

And this is something you often see. Very often people, especially younger people, as they grow up, they'll reject the Gospel because they think that they're making up their own mind. And yet all they're actually doing is following the crowd.

And so we've got to think very carefully about the effect that external influences can have in that regard. But following that, and this is the second key thing that arises from the incident with Herod, is that it's showing us that doubting involves choosing.

Peter chose to judge the situation according to the wind and the waves that he could see. The disciples chose to dismiss the possibility of feeding the crowd because they had such limited resources. And Herod chose to listen to the harmful influences in his ear.

Doubting involves a choice. In doubting, we're in two minds and you're choosing one way or another. And in all of these examples, we have to recognize the fact that the doubts are understandable.

[14 : 48] You can understand why Peter doubted that he would be safe. And you can understand why the disciples thought, well, there's no way we can feed this crowd. And you can even understand why Herod doubted whether or not John the Baptist was worth protecting.

But the crucial point in all of them, but especially in Herod, is that here we can see people making an understandable, terrible choice.

They're making an understandable, terrible choice. And the big point there is that understandable does not mean good.

It does not always mean good at all. And so often, people who are in two minds about the gospel will choose to reject Jesus for understandable reasons.

They're afraid of change. They're anxious about what people might say. They're uncertain about what might lie ahead or whether they might make mistakes. There's feelings of inferiority or inadequacy.

[15 : 58] And feelings that you don't have exactly what somebody else has. All of these are understandable reasons that can lead you to make a terrible decision.

And that can happen. It happens to so many people. A massively clear example of that is way back in Genesis 25 with Jacob and Esau.

Esau came into the field. He was exhausted. He was starving. And he says to Jacob, please give me some of this food. And Jacob, who is in no way squeaky clean in this incident, he says, well, sell me your birthright and I'll give you my meal.

Now, Esau was the oldest, so as the eldest he had certain privileges. But Jacob says, sell that to me. And Esau says, I'm about to die. What use is a birthright to me? And so he hands it over.

That is a crystal clear example of an understandable, terrible decision. And we've got to be so careful about that. And all of it is taking us back to the question that Jesus asked Peter.

[17 : 04] Why are you doubting? In other words, if you are doubting today, which all of us will be or we will have done at certain times in our lives, why is it that you have these doubts?

Are they intellectual doubts where you've just got questions about, you know, how does everything work? Is this true? Is this not? Am I confident that what the Bible says is accurate?

Are your doubts relational? In other words, are you concerned about what people might say or concerned about other people's influence? Are doubts to do with convenience?

You're thinking, this is going to affect things too much. This is going to mess up my routine. This is going to bring things into my life that I'm not sure I want. Are your doubts a result of being hurt?

That's a very, very common cause of doubts where maybe somebody has hurt you in the past, connected with church or connected with the gospel. Are your doubts linked to anxiety that you're just fearful, anxious, uncertain?

[18 : 10] Why you are doubting is the crucial question to ask. We've got to ask why. But the big point I want us to see is that when we discover why, the gospel is going to show you that you don't need to.

Because although doubting is totally understandable, doubting is also totally unnecessary. If you look again at verses 28 to 33, I want you to see the massive difference in the yous.

Now, what do I mean by that? Well, there's the you of verse 31. Jesus speaks to Peter and says, There's you of little faith. Why did you doubt? There's that you.

But contrasting with that is the you of verse 28. Lord, is it you? And the you of verse 33.

Truly, you are the Son of God. And the crucial point is this. The fact that Jesus is the Son of God, that makes all our doubting unnecessary.

[19 : 29] And you see that when you probe into the question that Jesus asked Peter. Imagine that you could pause everything right here between verse 30 and 31.

Imagine you could pause everything at that moment. Massive storm, raging wind, crashing waves, but you press pause. And you were able to walk up to Peter as he's standing in the water, slipping down, soaking wet, freezing cold, and looking terrified.

And you said to him, Peter, why exactly are you doubting? What do you think he would say? I think he would say, Have you not seen the size of these waves?

Can you not feel the wind howling against you? I can't reach the boat. I've come too far. I'm slipping under the water. I'm absolutely exhausted. And I'm going to drown.

And every one of those reasons makes his doubts and fears understandable. But the key point is that if that is true, in verse 33, every single doubt in Peter's mind at verse 31.

[20 : 47] is totally unnecessary. Yes, the waves are huge. Jesus can calm them in an instant. Yes, the wind is howling.

Jesus, the Son of God, can command it to be still. Yes, the boat is out of reach. But Jesus, the Son of God, is reaching for him. Yes, the water is rising.

But Jesus, the Son of God, has just grabbed his hand. And yes, death feels so close. But Jesus, the Son of God, is holding Peter and will never let him go.

Jesus' question, why are you doubting? It's not so much rebuking Peter. I think first and foremost, it is reassuring Peter. And it is teaching him that as soon as we realize who Jesus really is, all of our doubts become totally unnecessary.

And so yes, doubts are so common, and doubts are totally understandable, but an accurate view of Jesus immediately shows that they're unnecessary.

[22 : 05] So I can understand if you have intellectual doubts about Christianity, but they're totally unnecessary. Because the Gospel gives us a beautifully coherent worldview that integrates time and eternity, that integrates the spiritual and the physical realities, that combines the ethical and functional aspects of life, the personal and the relational.

In other words, the Gospel explains everything. It explains why there's mechanical order in the world that science can examine. It explains to us why concepts like justice and truth and compassion are not just social constructs from human society.

It tells us, the Gospel tells us why every single human life is precious. And that transcends any economic status, racial background, or anything else like that. And the Gospel tells us why love matters far, far more than survival.

Our finitude means that we will have intellectual doubts. But one of the crucial things that you've got to remember is that our finitude will mean that we will never be able to give a perfect explanation for everything.

But one of the things that I can absolutely say that I have discovered in my life is that no Christian can explain everything perfectly. We're finite. We can't.

[23 : 16] But absolutely, I can tell you this. Every alternative to Christianity is worse. On all of these massive questions about life and truth and human identity and justice and fairness and time and eternity, physical, spiritual, everything else, all the alternatives, the ones who throw stones at Christianity, they are worse.

In fact, they're empty. So if you have intellectual doubts, I can understand that.

They're totally unnecessary. If you have relational doubts, if you're anxious about what people will think of you, that's also unnecessary. I can understand that. I can understand that. But it's unnecessary. Because if you follow Jesus, and if other people around you find out that you're following Jesus, or if you are following Jesus, but you have to step into a new stage in school or a new stage in work or whatever, and people discover that you're a Christian and you're not going to follow the cloud, two things are going to happen.

People will either respect you far more than you expected. People will respect you far more than you expected. Or you will discover that what other people think matters far less than you thought it did.

If you have doubts in terms of convenience, I can understand that. But again, it's not necessary. Because Jesus reorientates our priorities. And so often, the things that we think will be hard in life

are actually brilliant.

[24 : 43] And when you follow Jesus, one of the amazing things that happens is that the things that are difficult, even the things that we dread, become precious. I spoke to somebody a few months ago who had had a very difficult medical diagnosis, and they said, I needed this.

And I'm thankful for it. And that's the change of perspective that the gospel gives us. I can understand if you have doubts because you have been hurt.

I can definitely understand that. But even though these are so real and hard, the doubts are not necessary.

The pain, yes, is necessary. And that's appropriate. But not the doubts. Because the doubts...

Somebody treating you badly in life does not mean you have to doubt Jesus at all.

And the reason for that is because Jesus brings healing into our lives. And I'm not saying that the bruises disappear. The bruises don't disappear. But they don't need to leave us doubting. In fact, the bruises that come from people and from life and from disappointments and from things going wrong, that doesn't give us reason to doubt Jesus.

[25 : 58] It's just confirming that we need to run to him. And that in him, we'll find the healing that we need. And I can understand if you have doubts because you're anxious.

And all of us have fears and anxieties. But these two are unnecessary. Can you remember what Jesus' favorite commandment is? His favorite commandment is do not be afraid.

And the reason Jesus can say that is because he's the son of God. All his authority.

All his limitless power. All his sublime wisdom. All his endless compassion. All of it combines so that you do not need to doubt.

And you do not need to be afraid. And so, yes, all of our doubts are real. All of them are understandable. But all of them are unnecessary.

[27 : 07] And so, if you doubt that you're good enough, if you doubt that you know enough, if you doubt that God is actually listening, if you doubt that God can use you, if you doubt that you can step out for him, all of those doubts are real.

All of them are understandable. You do not need to do them anymore. Because all of them are unnecessary. And the key to it all is where we're looking.

And that's exactly what we see in verse 30. It was when Peter saw the wind and the waves. It was when his view came off Jesus and went on to his circumstances.

That was when he started to doubt. Doubts, we can actually say doubts make sense and doubts make no sense. It just depends where you're looking.

And if we're looking away from Jesus, then doubting makes sense. But the minute we look at him, all doubting becomes unnecessary.

[28 : 10] In us, in me, there are many reasons to doubt. In Jesus, there are none. And so, as we conclude, oh man, time's running out.

One minute conclusion coming up. If you're doubting today, if you've doubted in the past, or if you do doubt in the future, I absolutely want to say this. I do not want you to despair.

Do not load yourself with guilt. Do not despair. Because doubting is understandable. It's to be expected. It happens to us all. But when it happens, always ask yourself, why exactly am I doubting?

And I think the moment we do that, it'll help turn us back to Jesus. And as we turn to Jesus, the strength of our doubts evaporates. And we see that we don't need to doubt him at all.

And I think all of that's confirmed by one final thing I want you to see in these verses. And this is maybe the most important thing of all. In verse 31, when Jesus asks Peter the question, why are you doubting?

[29 : 13] Why did you doubt? What's Jesus doing? He's already holding him. In other words, if you are a Christian, or if you become one, the only place that you ever have doubts is in Jesus' arms.

And the only reason you're doubting is because you've forgotten that that's where you are. Amen. Let us pray.