

Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith – 6. Doubt and the Existence of God

Psalm 19:1; Psalm 139:13-14; Mark 9:24

February 11, 2024

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We are in the last week of this 6-week sermon series entitled *Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith* where we have spent time considering issues that may cause us to ask questions and sometimes, have doubts about our faith. Things like, is what the Bible says true? Is heaven real? Why do my prayers seem to go unanswered? And how do we reconcile all the suffering we see in the world with a loving, caring God? If you remember nothing else from this series, I hope you hear this. It is okay to admit that you have doubts about your faith and ask questions. Having doubts does not make you a bad Christian. In fact, it is by working through our questions that our faith can become stronger. Pastor Bethany and I have heard from many of you how helpful this series has been to you. If you missed any of these messages but would like to check them out, you can find them on our websites at messiahchurch.org/live/ondemand. And so today, we wrap up this series with the question, does God really exist?

How would you answer that question? What evidence or argument could you make to support your answer? For some, the question of God's existence is an ongoing source of doubt. Some believe modern science has replaced our need for God or even the very idea that God exists. But if you go back to the founders of the scientific revolution of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, almost all of these scientists were people of deep faith. Yes, they were coming up with revolutionary scientific ideas to help us understand the mechanics of how the world works, but many were people of faith.

Take Copernicus for example, the astronomer who first proposed the idea that the planets orbit around the sun. He was not only a scientist but also Catholic priest. Galileo believed his views of astronomy and the movement of the planets were consistent with his faith in God. Francis Bacon, one of the founding fathers of the scientific method, had a deep faith in Christ. And Sir Isaac Newton wrote more about theology than he did about science. These were all people who believed that science did not discredit the idea of God but instead, believed that the existence of God and the creation of the universe were two compatible ideas. Everything we do in modern science today was built on the foundation that they laid. And most of them were people of deep faith.

Today I want to share with you three reasons why I believe that there is a God and my reasoning behind it. **The first one is the beauty and order of creation** that leads me to believe that there is a higher power, an intelligence behind everything that exists. Throughout most of human history, the order, the beauty, and the sheer existence of this world has led humans to a faith in a Creator. But as science has identified the laws, the forces, and processes behind much of the natural world, there is a sense among some that all that exists can be explained in purely naturalistic ways.

For example, when theoretical physicist and cosmologist, Stephen Hawking, was asked if there is a God said this, *If you accept as I do that the laws of nature are fixed, then it doesn't take long to ask: what role is there for God? This is a big part of the contradiction between science and religion, and although my views have made headlines, it is actually an ancient conflict. One could define God as the embodiment of the laws of nature. However, this is not what most people think of as God. They mean a human-like being, with whom one can have a relationship. When you look at the vast size of the universe, and how insignificant and accidental human life is in it, that seems most implausible.*

So, let's consider for a moment Hawkin's words and the conflict between science and creation, specifically the creation stories found in the first and second chapters in the first book of the Bible. The first story is found in Genesis chapter one. It is poetic in the way God speaks everything into being. On the other hand, Genesis, chapter two, is a short story written in prose that begins with God creating the first human from the topsoil, then creating the plants, then the other animals and finally in response to man's loneliness, God creates woman from the man's rib. It is here where they eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. When we read these two stories, we can see that they disagree regarding the order of creation. They are both beautiful and powerful and meaningful. They both teach profound truths, but neither was written to be a science lesson. Much of the conflict between science and faith comes from Christians attempting to teach these biblical stories as science lessons. The aim of the first story was to show that behind all creation there is a God and that God's creation is good and beautiful and that humans were created in God's image. The goal behind the second creation story is to help us think about the meaning of life, the power of relationships, and our very human struggle with temptation and sin. Neither one is trying to explain the *how* of creation, but instead the *why* and *who* of creation. It is the scientific methods that help to reveal the *how* of creation. So, science doesn't threaten my faith. In fact, everything I learn from science leads me to stand in even greater wonder and awe of God.

When you look at images from the James Web Space Telescope, you see galaxies, hundreds of thousands of them. And every one of those galaxies, like our own Milky Way, has hundreds of billions of stars. So, when you look at this, one can't help but be blown away by the vastness of it all. When the Old Testament psalmist looked at the heavens and said, Psalm 19:1-2: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.*

Or consider what we know now about the intricacies of the atom and how it is the fundamental building blocks of all matter or the amazing complexities of DNA and how it is the code behind every living thing on our planet. Or how about the beauty of a sunset or the intricacies of a snowflake? It's things like these that make me believe that there is a beautiful artist, a loving God behind all that is - no matter what the mechanics or the processes are by which they happen. I can't help but wonder if the biblical authors could look at these things and understand these things the way we do today, would they be more in awe or less in awe of God? I think they would say even louder, *I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.* Psalm 139:14

Scientists will continue to uncover the laws and mathematical formulas of the cosmos. But does that work render God unnecessary as Hawking said, or do these amazing discoveries make an even greater case for the Great Creator? Your answer is your choice. What you choose to believe is a leap of faith. Do you believe in the magnificent, vastness and beauty of creation as merely an accident or as the result of a Great Creator?

For the past few years on Christmas Eve, someone here at Messiah Church has left a bag full of baked goods at my office door for me to take home and share with my family during the holidays. The first time our kids arrived at our house on Christmas morning and saw the pile of tins and containers on the counter, they asked is *Where did those come from?* If I had replied, they just showed up, they'd never believe me. If I continued and said, "No, seriously, it self-generated on its own", they would keep on me until I eventually I would have to tell them where they came from. They required a baker. I wonder how one can look at baked goods and know that they were not self-generated and yet, look at the entire universe and somehow think that it was self-generated into being. Creation required a creator.

The second reason that I believe is because of the experiences of God in my life. My dad was in the military, and we moved every four years and the first thing we did when we arrived in a new town, was find a United Methodist Church. So, from a very early age, I've heard the stories of Jesus. But it wasn't until I was in middle school that I began to have an idea of what a personal relationship with Jesus looked like. One of the ways that I experienced that was through music. Many times, I have been overwhelmed by the lyrics or the melody of a song to the point where my soul is stirred, I get a lump in my throat, and I must stop singing. I feel the love and the presence of God that personally.

Then, as I read the stories of Jesus as teenager, I began to feel like Jesus knew me by name and that I was never alone. And it changed my life. It changed the way I lived, the way I loved, the things I invested my time, energy, and resources in. I've said this before, but I believe that my belief in God has made me a better wife, mother, friend, and pastor. Every morning when I wake up, it's the first conversation I have of the day. The times I feel the closest to God is when I am out on a walk, when I walk and talk and listen for God to speak to me. I am continually amazed at the number of times I can be stuck thinking about a problem, or feeling unsettled about a situation, and when I go on a walk and have a holy conversation with God, I feel better. Sometimes I find new God-inspired answers to my problems but not always. And still almost all the time, I feel better. It is a proven fact that those who participate in a healthy religious faith are more loving, more caring, more just, more kind, more generous. It creates a deeper sense of joy and peace and satisfaction in life.

Finally, the last reason that I believe there is a God is the impact faith has had on others. I've watched people who battle with addiction or are overwhelmed with guilt and shame for something they did or something that happened in their lives, find grace and mercy through the stories of Jesus. I have watched people who are self-absorbed, angry, greedy, who begin to change as they begin to follow Jesus and allow that love to change who they are and how they live in the world. People just live differently when they are followers of Jesus because they are living with a purpose, the purpose to make this world a better place, to bring heaven here on earth, like Jesus talked about.

Every Christmas season here at Messiah Church, we receive an offering of which 100% is given away to recipients that are chosen by our mission team. Typically, half of the offering is earmarked for a local impact and the other half goes to an international project. This past Christmas, we invited you to give to Imara International, our mission in Nanyuki, Kenya for young moms and babies so to build a fence around their large garden to keep the monkeys and elephants from eating their produce. The second recipient was Totes for Hope, a ministry of Messiah Church to support the families of Bloom, the day care and early learning center located right here in our building, with a mini-food shelf right here in our building. The goal was to raise \$30,000, \$15,000 for each project. But you gave over \$50,000 total, so that children and families can have the essentials that they need to thrive. You did this, Messiah Church. This is just one example where together we say, we are going to live our lives as followers of the One who came to be the light of the world, who said love your neighbor as yourself. To follow the words of the prophet Micah who said, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. That is the impact that following Jesus has on our lives.

So, faith is always about taking a leap and making a choice of what you choose to believe. You look at the evidence, listen to the stories and then make a choice to believe that or not. Atheists choose to believe that God does not exist. That's a faith decision. But when I read the stories of Jesus and his resurrection, I choose to believe. I can't prove that there is a God, I can only say

that I choose to trust what I read about the resurrection of Jesus and my personal lived experiences of the risen Lord in my life.

Over the 19 months that I have been your senior pastor, I've officiated at 20 celebration of life services. I walked with many families as they've said goodbye to their loved ones. The thing that seems to hold them up is the sense that they will see their loved one again. That belief brings them hope. Their faith in God sustains them in their darkest place. The promise that God will walk with them through the valley of the shadow of death means something to them. They don't have certainty or proof, but they choose to take a leap of faith and in doing that they find hope, and a peace that passes understanding even in the face of darkness.

For me, it all boils down to this. If I come to the end of my life, and in that moment, right before I die, I find out that I had been wrong this whole time and in fact, there is no God, will I have any regrets about having followed Jesus with my life? I can honestly tell you, I will not. To be clear, I believe there is a God but to be honest, I still have some doubts. And sometimes I just have to say, Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. If faith in God has been hard for you to come by, I want to encourage you to take that same leap of faith and say, Lord I believe, help my unbelief.

Let's pray: God, I choose to trust that you are. That you know me and love me. That the universe is your handiwork, an expression of your beauty and love. I choose to take that leap of faith and trust that you are. In Jesus name, Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 11, 2024

Weekly Prayer

Loving God, open my eyes and my ears to what you would have me read and hear today. Through your Holy Word, convict me, challenge me, and comfort me. Open my mind to new insights and fresh perspectives. Open my heart to the moving of your Spirit. In the name of Jesus Christ, your son, Amen.

Monday, February 12

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1, 8, 39

Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out without knowing where he was going.

All these people didn't receive what was promised, though they were given approval for their faith.

Observation

"Faith" does not mean never having doubts. Over 90% of people report facing times of doubt. Hebrews 11 defined "faith" as trusting despite causes for doubt, saying, "Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see." It described the patriarch Abraham's great faith. But Genesis said his next act was a deceitful act born of fear (Genesis 12:1-4, 10-13). Trusting "what we don't see" can never totally exclude doubt.

Application

What are some of the most beautiful sights you've seen, or deepest loving relationships you've had? Was their beauty or love something you could "prove" with abstract logic, or did you need to take the risk of experiencing and trusting them? Scholar Leon Morris noted, "There are realities for which we have no material evidence, though they are not less real for that. Faith enables us to know that they exist." What are one or two realities beyond "proof" that make your life better?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you call me to trust that your spiritual world truly is more real, joyful and free than the material world that's always tugging at my heart. Keep growing that faith deep within me. Amen.

Tuesday, February 13

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-24

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved. It is written in scripture: *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will reject the intelligence of the intelligent.* Where are the wise? Where are the legal experts? Where are today's debaters? Hasn't God made the wisdom of the world foolish? In God's wisdom, he determined that the world wouldn't come to know him through its wisdom. Instead, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching. Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's power and God's wisdom.

Observation

The apostle Paul knew his central message was "foolish" to some and "scandal" to others. He knew no PR person or mythmaker would try to impress Greeks, Romans, or Hebrews with a crucified savior. Yet he preached Christ crucified as a life-changing physical and spiritual fact with utter conviction. He relied on God's power, not sheer human logic, to change people's lives and thinking. He trusted that God's wisdom and strength were greater than this world's and found that they were.

Application

Paul knew his message was "foolishness" to the Greeks and "scandal" to the Jews (verse 23). Just telling the story seemed to invite people to mock. The message sounded "weak," yet it carried God's power. Verse 18 stated Paul's conclusion: God's weakness is greater than human strength; God's foolishness is greater than human wisdom. In what part(s) of your life today do you need to trust that God's saving wisdom is wiser than any other kind of wisdom you might rely on?

Prayer

Dear God, I am grateful that your strength and wisdom are greater than the world's! I need that—I can't save myself. Help me to trust and depend on you for what I need most. Amen.

Wednesday, February 14

Scripture: Mark 9:14-27

When Jesus, Peter, James, and John approached the other disciples, they saw a large crowd surrounding them and legal experts arguing with them. Suddenly the whole crowd caught sight

of Jesus. They ran to greet him, overcome with excitement. Jesus asked them, "What are you arguing about?" Someone from the crowd responded, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, since he has a spirit that doesn't allow him to speak. Wherever it overpowers him, it throws him into a fit. He foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and stiffens up. So I spoke to your disciples to see if they could throw it out, but they couldn't." Jesus answered them, "You faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring him to me." They brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a fit. He fell on the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been going on?" He said, "Since he was a child. It has often thrown him into a fire or into water trying to kill him. If you can do anything, help us! Show us compassion!" Jesus said to him, "If you can do anything? All things are possible for the one who has faith." At that the boy's father cried out, "I have faith; help my lack of faith!" Noticing that the crowd had surged together, Jesus spoke harshly to the unclean spirit, "Mute and deaf spirit, I command you to come out of him and never enter him again." After screaming and shaking the boy horribly, the spirit came out. The boy seemed to be dead; in fact, several people said that he had died. But Jesus took his hand, lifted him up, and he arose.

Observation

In Jesus' day, most of today's medical and psychological insights didn't exist. People called nearly all inexplicable ills, like the probable case of epilepsy reported in today's reading, "demon possession." The father's plea in verse 24 feels familiar to most Christ-followers at times. He sounded like Donald Miller's friend in the book *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*, who said, "There is this part of me that wants to believe.... I feel as though I need to believe.... But it is all so completely stupid."

Application

Scholar N. T. Wright said Jesus came to rescue people "from the destructive forces that enslaved them. So, whether it was shrieking demons, a woman with a fever, or simply whatever diseases people happened to suffer from, Jesus dealt with them all... Jesus had joined in a struggle against the forces of evil." Are you ever tempted to shrug off the forces that cause suffering as just "the way things are"? In what ways have you (or will you) joined in Jesus' struggle against those forces?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you did not stay comfortable and safe while destructive forces were loose in your world. Give me the caring and courage to enlist, working with you to help all those who are hurt. Amen.

Thursday, February 15

Scripture: Jude 1:20-22

But you, dear friends: build each other up on the foundation of your most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, keep each other in the love of God, wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will give you eternal life. Have mercy on those who doubt.

Observation

We seldom read the little one-chapter letter of Jude. Most scholars are virtually certain the writer was the "Judas" named as one of Jesus' brothers in Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55. In the letter he called himself "brother of James," Jesus' brother who led the Jerusalem church. His letter mainly warned against false teachers, but in verse 22 he carefully distinguished the false

teachers from those who had questions or doubts due to the influence of those who held erroneous beliefs.

Application

Jude's and Jesus' better-known brother, James wrote about the need for belief to go beyond intellectual assent and become life-shaping faith (James 2:18-20). That's why facing doubts honestly is so vital. If we hide them, they can get us stuck in our head without ever involving our heart and hands. What helps you move from the intellectual aspect of most doubts to a level of trust that shapes your whole life while you keep wrestling with the mysteries of God?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I take comfort from the mercy you showed the father who wasn't sure you could help his son, and Thomas who resisted believing you'd risen. Thank you for showing me mercy when I struggle with doubt. Amen.

Friday, February 16

Scripture: Romans 8:22-25

We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience.

Observation

The apostle Paul faced many tests of his faith (2 Corinthians 11:22-28). Today's passage showed that he had moments of doubt as the apparently indestructible Roman Empire opposed the message of Jesus. Clearly, he couldn't "see" the Roman emperor accepting Christianity 300 years later, much less today when over 1 billion people identify in some way as Christian. But he chose to live "with patience" in his hope for God's invisible better world that he (and we) cannot yet see fully realized.

Application

What was the favorite gift you received this Christmas? Would you tell anyone you're still hoping for that gift you received? Of course not—you have it. In a much bigger way, that was what Paul meant when he asked, "Who hopes for what they already see?" But there is still brokenness and pain in our world. What helps you, like Paul, to anchor your spiritual hope in God, and live with patience and trust for God's full restoration of our broken world to its intended wholeness?

Prayer

Loving Lord, I want to trust you. I need to live in your hope. Go with me into this new year, that I may face none of its days entirely in my own strength. Amen.

Saturday, February 17

Scripture: Matthew 3:17, 4:1-11

A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread." Jesus replied, "It's

written, *People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.*" After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, *I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*" Jesus replied, "Again it's written, *Don't test the Lord your God.*" Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me." Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*" The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

Observation

The letter to the Hebrews said Jesus "was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). The temptations Matthew (and Luke 4:1-13) reported involved doubt about whether he really was God's beloved son, and if so, what that meant. Could/should he use his powers for his own benefit or stay on a path of service and self-giving? The temptations tugged Jesus to do things that would make his life easier by matching popular hopes about what the Messiah would do. Jesus, loyal to God's way, didn't "play to the crowd," even though that deprived him of applause that might help push away questions or doubts about whether this was truly what God's Son should be doing. Nor should we think this was a one-time test. Luke ended his account by saying, "The devil departed from him *until the next opportunity*" (Luke 4:13). With Scripture's principles shaping his response, Jesus overcame the questions and doubts that might have derailed his ministry.

Application

You never have to choose not to turn stones to bread or avoid throwing yourself off the highest point of Messiah Church. How are you tempted to use your unique abilities solely for your own benefit, instead of building God's kingdom by blessing others? How successful are you at resisting temptation and self-doubt? If you don't like your answer, know that facing inner struggles head-on can defuse them. Ask a gifted counselor or pastor for help. Scholar and pastor N. T. Wright said of the temptations we all face, "They are not simply trying to entice us into committing this or that sin. They are trying to distract us, to turn us aside, from the path of servanthood to which our baptism has commissioned us...as God's children, we are entitled to use the same defense as the son of God himself. Store scripture in your heart and know how to use it." How do you intend to deepen your inner supply of biblical understanding in 2024?

Prayer

Jesus, son of God, I face temptations every day. Plant the principles of your word firmly in my heart, that, like you, I might stay on God's path and resist the lure of going my own way. Amen.