

(4) Dealing with Doubt

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[0 : 00] So the reading is taken from 2 Timothy chapter 3, starting to read at verse 10. You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and Lystra, which persecutions I endured.

Yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. While evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness. That the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. We'll be looking especially at verses 14 to 17, the latter part of that passage. But while you're turning to that passage, if you're not already there, let me say what a pleasure it is for me to be with you this morning.

[1 : 16] It's good to come and visit neighbouring churches. We've had a special connection over the years since your beginning, in part through a friendship with Simon that predated the formation of Grace Church Dulwich.

But something that's been cemented through the Good Friday works, but also through the opportunities for contact between our members of our respective congregations. I want to speak to you this morning about the issue of dealing with doubt.

And it's one of the curious things, I think, in the Christian life that we, one of the biggest struggles of the Christian life is also probably one of the most least acknowledged issues of the Christian life.

That even though we feel something and wrestle with something deeply in our own lives, our own experience, we are slow to admit it. Not merely to those around us, perhaps even to ourselves.

That's the issue of doubt. For some people, it's the very real issue of having doubts and questions over the message of the Bible. Is it reliable? Is it true? We've been bombarded in recent years with full-blown attacks on the reliability of the Bible.

[2 : 30] Not just from people outside the church, like Richard Dawkins and Dan Brown, in a more popular way. But from inside the church as well, those who claim to be Christians. Those even who claim to be evangelical Christians have raised major questions over whether or not we can trust the Bible.

And whether we can, as Simon has just prayed, treat it and acknowledge it as God's Word and God's infallible Word. Some people wrestle at that level.

Other people have got questions over their experience, doubts about whether or not they have really believed. They can say the words. They know the gospel. They know the facts, if you like.

But their struggle is whether or not they've actually put real faith, personal faith, in the Lord Jesus Christ. And do they merely go through the motions when they come to church on a Sunday morning?

Do they simply say the words? But actually, in terms of anything deeply personal and life-changing to them, then it's something that they have major reservations and questions about.

[3 : 32] I think it's a relief to realize that the Bible has no embarrassment whatsoever about acknowledging the extensiveness of this problem. Even though perhaps you and I might be loath to confess that we have these struggles to those around us for fear of letting the side down, for fear of suggesting that we perhaps are not as strong as we would like to be seen to be.

But the Bible has no reservations at all about facing these issues. There's a psalm that is devoted entirely to this issue. Psalm 73. It's one of the greatest psalms in the Psalter. A psalm that begins with a man confessing his belief in the central truth of the Bible, that God is good to his people. But then immediately goes on to say, But I've looked around and I see the wicked prospering and I see the righteous suffering. And he had reached the point where in his words he said, As for me, my feet had almost slipped.

He came close to stumbling, close to abandoning the faith. And it's only when we reach the great turning point, at the center point of that psalm, Until I entered the sanctuary of God, then I understood, he says.

Only as he went back to the Bible, back to God in prayer, that his doubts were resolved. Or even for those of us who are in the ministry, and yes, ministers have doubts as well, believe you me.

[4 : 53] It's great to see that there's a chapter in Jeremiah that is devoted almost entirely to the struggles of a gospel minister. The prophet Jeremiah, the one who was the great expander of God's words in that period of Old Testament history.

And he bears his soul and he confesses how he was crumbling inside, wrestling with God, wondering, had God betrayed him? Had somehow God let him down?

And we have given a wonderful insight and analysis of the struggle that even ministers of the gospel have with the question of doubt.

You move into the New Testament, there's an entire book of the Bible devoted to the question of doubt, the book of Hebrews, addressed to a great company of converted Jews, who were so struggling in the face of persecution that was being unleashed against them, and the difficulties of living the Christian life, and the disappointments they were seeing in the church, as those who profess to be Christians so often proved to be such a major heartache for those around them, that there's an entire book that is addressed to persuasion, persuading these people that the gospel that they had believed, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, was not some false message, but a message that they could completely rely on.

It struck me, not all that long ago, just reading again through the second letter of Paul to Timothy, which happens to be probably the last letter he ever wrote before he was put to death in Rome.

[6 : 27] And so for that reason, he knew that his execution was imminent, and that I imagine would have concentrated his mind, and enabled him to say things that he saw as being really significant under those circumstances.

It struck me just how much of 2 Timothy is addressed to this whole issue of the doubts that were beginning to surface, not just in the church generally at that time, but in Timothy in particular, who was by nature a somewhat fragile person, and who was prone to doubt and uncertainty and insecurity.

It's partly because the church was facing the major crisis of its foremost missionary theologian, its figurehead, if you like, of the New Testament world, Paul, who was so instrumental in not only establishing New Testament churches, but teaching and training the New Testament church.

Now he's in prison. He's been abandoned by his friends. He is left to face death almost alone. And the faith of the church is being shaken, and doubts are rising.

You read back, and you see people being named in this epistle. You see people being named as having once walked with God, but now having walked away.

[7 : 44] You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me. Everyone, including Fagellus and Hermogenes. What a disappointment. Churches that once thrived were now failing.

You had other leading figures who were no longer teaching the truth. People like Hymenaeus and Philetus, chapter 2 and verse 17. And they were denying the resurrection of Christ.

And they were spreading a teaching that was spreading like gangrene. And it says, verse 18, they were destroying the faith of some. And then if we'd taken time to read the whole of chapter 3, Paul gives this stark warning.

But mark this, there will be terrible times in the last days. And he is not speaking about merely those final few years before the Lord Jesus Christ returns, but rather the last days in the New Testament is a technical term that speaks about that whole sweep of Christian history, from the ascension of Christ to the day of his return.

And during that whole time in which Paul and Timothy and the Christians of their day were living, they would see terrible things not only happening in the world around, but happening even in the church itself.

[8 : 55] And in all of that, in all of that, there was the recipe for the crumbling of the faith of many Christian people and even the shaking of the faith of someone like Timothy who was meant to lead them and to teach them.

And Paul knows that. And Paul says so wonderfully, as he does in several places through this epistle, which is so stark in so many different ways, he says, but as for you, even though this may be the trend among many who profess to be God's people, even though there may be disappointment on every side in the days that you're living in, as for you, you must be different. That even though you may be sorely tempted to depart from the way of the Word and the work of the Word as a Christian minister, as for you, continue in the things that you've learned and become convinced of.

What are they? The Holy Scriptures which you have learned from childhood. Continue in the way of the Scriptures. Continue in the way and the work of the Word that God has entrusted to you. You're calling, Timothy, is to be a minister of the Gospel. You are to be a proclaimer of the Word. But to do that, you are called first and foremost to be a Christian, a faithful man of God, who not only believes these sacred writings, but also upholds them, that you proclaim them to those around you.

[10 : 38] What I want to do just briefly this morning is to listen to the way that Paul reasons this through with Timothy. And it really is quite fascinating.

Because if we were to put ourselves in Paul's shoes and think, well, how would I deal with a Timothy if I was trying to encourage him, if I was trying to strengthen his faith in the face of these doubts that were rising up within him, how would I do it?

And I'm pretty sure we would do it in the opposite way to what Paul does. And you'll see what I mean as we go through. Paul puts forward three compelling arguments as to why Timothy should continue in the way of the Word living as a Christian and the work of the Word serving as a Christian minister.

And they are these. First of all, continue in the way of the Word and the work of the Word. Reason number one, because of the impact the Word has made upon people you know.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of. Why? Because you know those from whom you learned it. You know those from whom you learned it.

[11 : 58] Now, I think what's so fascinating about that is the fact that Paul reaches in the first place, not for some heavyweight theological argument, that comes later on in the passage, because we are so often inclined to reach for the heavyweight biblical arguments to try and make a case.

But rather, Paul, wise pastor that he was, wise pastor, reaches in the first place for a very human argument. He says to Timothy, in his fragile condition, just think about the people who taught you the Bible.

Just think about those people who had a formative influence upon your life that brought you to faith in Jesus Christ, persuading you that this message was indeed a true message.

He tells us who these people are, because if we just flick back in our Bibles to chapter 1 and then later on into chapter 3, we see these people named. We see the first two people that he has in mind named in chapter 1 and verse 5.

I've been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice. And I am persuaded now lives in you also.

[13 : 12] Who were the first people to make an impact upon Timothy spiritually? It was his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice.

These two believers, Jewish believers. It's more than likely that his grandmother at least would have been technically not a Christian, as the New Testament would use that word, but rather would be a Jewish believer, part of God's family.

Someone who was very much in the state of salvation, but would not have been a Christian because she predated that time whenever being a believer meant being a Christian.

But she was a Jewish believer. She believed the same gospel that runs from beginning to end in the Bible, believed the same promise of God that leads to salvation. And her own daughter had come to faith, and now these two women had a huge influence on Timothy as he was growing up in that home.

It was a divided home because as far as we know, his father, who was a Greek, wasn't a Christian and wasn't a believer. But these two women not only taught Timothy the Bible, but they showed

Timothy what it meant to believe the Bible.

[14 : 41] And it was that combination, wasn't it, of not only being faithful teachers to this young boy growing up in that home, but being faithful examples to him as well.

Those two things going hand in hand. But Timothy not only knew the Bible stories that were being taught him as he got older, began to understand their significance and the truth and the principle that was being conveyed through them.

But it was the fact that he saw in flesh and blood in his grandmother and in his mother the embodiment of what a Christian is, the grace of God lived out in daily experience.

He not only heard these godly women pray for him and pray with him, but they saw the way that their lives were changed through prayer as they lived in such obvious dependence upon God, not only for salvation, but for all things.

Because prayer is an expression of how we depend upon God for all things. We don't just pray in emergencies. Prayer is to be the very oxygen of our daily living. Timothy saw in the lives of these women what true Christianity is all about.

[15 : 58] He saw it over all the years that unfolded from his childhood right through to adulthood. He saw their faithfulness. He saw them weather the storms of life.

He saw them in the extremes of life. He saw them in every circumstance and he was struck by the fact that these were women who continued faithfully at all times.

But then there was somebody else that Paul had in mind and that was himself. He was in many ways Paul, Timothy's spiritual father in the faith. He says in verse 10, you, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, and so on.

It's not just that you were influenced by these women who were used instrumentally to bring you to know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, but it was also through your relationship with me, through the friendship that was formed, through that special relationship that we came to enjoy, that you were, again, not only exposed to some of the greatest teaching from one of the greatest teachers that the world has ever known, wouldn't you just love to sit at the feet of the Apostle Paul and be taught by him?

But he was able to live with him. He was able to see Paul, not just on duty, if you like, in the pulpit, preaching and teaching publicly, but he saw him in private.

[17 : 28] I think it's a curious thing that in John Calvin's Geneva, whenever men were being trained for the ministry, there was an expectation that they would not merely attend classes with their professors, but they would go and live with their professors.

That they would see these men not just publicly and formally, but they would see them privately in their own homes, 24-7. And of course, Calvin's concern was that these men, these young men, would realize that you're not just, that the ministry is not just a profession, something that you do whenever you're on duty, but it's something that you are in every way.

And your Christian and ministerial calling should be evident in your homes as much as in your churches. That's the test, isn't it? That's the real test for all of us.

It's one thing to come to a public meeting like this and to put our Christianity on display in a way that is carefully controlled and carefully choreographed so that there are no cracks and no flaws.

But what are you like at home? What are you like with your kids? What are you like with your parents? What are you like whenever you're, if you like, off duty and out of public view? Because it's in that context that our Christianity makes its biggest impact.

[18 : 50] It says a lot to those of us who are parents that we, or let me back up on it, it says a lot to those of us who are married. How do you treat your wife? How do you treat your husband? Setting aside for a moment the public profession of your faith in a situation like this.

How do you treat your spouse privately? How do you treat your siblings? How do you treat your parents? And for those of us who are parents, how do you treat your children?

Because there's nothing more damaging to a child growing up in a Christian home than to hear the official line taught in church, taught at times of family devotions, but then to see that contradicted in the kind of life that's being lived.

Paul has a lovely thing to say over in, across the page in Titus, talking about how the gospel makes its impact. Speaking about slaves, he says this, telling slaves who were the most hard, done-by class of people in the ancient world.

He tells them to live the kind of godly life that is going to make an impact upon the masters who own them. And he says this, to show that they can be fully trusted so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.

[20 : 14] Live in such a way so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.

Or as an older version of the Bible put it, that they might adorn the gospel of God our Savior. See what it means?

The gospel is a beautiful thing in itself, but the gospel becomes even more beautiful whenever it's adorned by godly lives that live out the truth that it teaches.

There's the first reason then, to continue in the way and work of the Word, rising above our doubts, dealing with our questions. Remember those who taught you the gospel, those whose lives were impacted by the gospel before yours was.

Second reason why Paul tells us to continue is because not only of the impact of the Word, but also because of the promise of the Word. It comes there in verse 15, and how from infancy you've known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

[21 : 28] make you wise for salvation. Now, in one sense, there's nothing surprising about Paul saying that the Holy Scriptures, the Bible, make us wise for salvation.

Tell us who gets to heaven, if you like. Because that's the message of every sacred book, of every religion that the world has ever known, that it's all about salvation.

That's what the selling point of religion is. It talks about redemption. salvation. It talks about deliverance. The Bible talks about deliverance.

It talks about salvation. But you know as well as I do that there have always been all kinds of people who can read the same Bible as we read and come up with a different way of getting to heaven.

There's some people who think, well, if you follow the teachings of the Bible, then that will get you a place in heaven. Some people think that if you simply read the Bible and say your prayers, that will get you to heaven.

[22 : 31] Some people think that if you try to keep the Ten Commandments, that will get you to heaven. Some people think, well, the Bible talks about meeting together as God's people. If you come to church, that will get you to heaven.

But Paul is very specific here. He says, the Scriptures make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul is saying what's so distinctive about the Bible as opposed to other religious books? And what's so special about the Bible if you read it with integrity?

If you make it your business to not just pick out the nice bits or the things that you feel comfortable with. But if you read the Bible with integrity and establish what is it teaching?

What is it saying? Then from beginning to end, it's saying one thing. It's saying salvation comes through Jesus Christ. You find Jesus on every page of the Bible.

[23 : 34] Even though his name may not be there, you'll find Jesus in every page of the Bible. I had a professor at seminary and he would dare the students. He'd say, give me any verse and I'll preach Christ from that verse. And he would do it not in some artificial contrived way, but in a way that was utterly, utterly persuasive.

Because the Bible is the word of Christ and Christ is the word in human flesh. But why is that so significant? Why does that help us to deal with doubt? Because that tells us that the promise of salvation comes not in word only, but it comes through what God has done in space and time and history.

That's the thing. that any sacred writing can say, I promise you salvation. And many interpretations of the Bible can speak the words that promise salvation.

But something inside, every one of us cries out and says, well, how can I know that this promise is real? Like these internet messages that we get, you've just won a million dollars on whatever, just contact this number and give me your bank details.

how do you know that that kind of message is real if it even crosses your mind? You've got to have proof, haven't you?

[24 : 51] Well, to be told, not merely that you have become the inheritor of a great wealth, but to be told that your life itself is going to be secured for all eternity, that's a pretty monumental promise.

How can you know that it's true? To be told that when you die that will not be the end, but you'll go to heaven. And when you go to heaven that will not be the end because the day will come and your body will be raised to life again and you will spend eternity in a resurrected, perfected body in a new heaven and a new earth.

That's a pretty monumental promise. How on earth can you know that it's true? And not just extravagant words from persuasive preachers. Well, here is the reason.

Because the promise of salvation that is found in the Bible is linked inextricably to the coming of Christ Jesus in flesh and blood in space and time to live a life publicly before a watching world in such a way that no one could bring any charge against him that would stick because he is the only person who has ever lived a perfect life fulfilling the requirements of God's law.

but then to be executed publicly again before a watching world. To be put to death in a way that when he was dead he was guaranteed to be dead.

[26 : 15] Such was the expertise of the execution party that did the job. But then most significantly of all having foretold not only his death but also said again and again on the third day I will rise.

you can predict your death and you can engineer your death but you cannot engineer your resurrection. And the third day he rose again from the dead and he appeared to hundreds and thousands of people sometimes in crowds of 500 plus at a time so that it was manifestly obvious that the one who died is also risen and then was taken into heaven before his watching disciples. God has not only said something in the Bible God has done something that is a fact of human history. So even those who have opposed the Christian faith and there were none more antagonistic and opposed to the faith than those who were there at the time to those who had the ability to produce the bones of Jesus if they were to be found that the facts have endorsed the message and confirmed the promise.

Paul and Timothy were living within living memory of the events that were recorded in the gospel and they had heard the eyewitness accounts. Paul himself had seen the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus.

So in the face of all that would shake their faith and Paul himself was even in a worse position if Paul had any doubts about the trustworthiness of the gospel all he had to do was to say to Nero Caesar is Lord and he would have been spared the executioner's sword but rather he said I know whom I have believed and I am persuaded utterly persuaded that he is able to keep what I have entrusted to him against that day.

[28 : 23] That's the promise of the gospel. It's the promise of the Bible. It promises salvation not in word only but in a way which has been demonstrated publicly and historically.

Last reason why we should continue in the way and the work of the word because of the source of the word. I guess if it was me who had been having this conversation with Timothy this is the one I would have reached for first and probably wrecked the poor man's faith and so do it.

But it is the most significant argument isn't it? We've got to be careful in the way in which we present our arguments in the faith and in our dealings with people. But he saves the best to last. He says all scripture is God breathed and is profitable useful for teaching rebuking correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. What is it that makes this book so fascinating so captivating so intriguing in so many ways because it's a book that just seems to resonate with our souls.

[29 : 44] That even for those who don't even come to believe it in the end they're still fascinated by this book and they still reach for this book and they still read this book. But there's something about this book that just seems to penetrate us in ways that nothing else can.

And it's the fact that we find ourselves first of all staring at our own reflection as we read its pages. Again and again we just feel our conscience being pricked.

We feel ourselves being convicted by this book. That it exposes thoughts and desires and feelings and behaviors that everybody else might think normal and acceptable but we know in our heart of hearts are wrong.

Why does it do that? Because this is God speaking to us in this book. The God who knows us better than we know ourselves.

The God who knows what we are and what we're meant to be. And God shows us what's wrong with us. God puts His finger on the raw nerves of our sin and our guilt and our need.

[31 : 06] It rebukes us. But the God who knows what's wrong with us also knows what needs to be done to put us right. And so this book that hurts when you read it is also the book that heals

because it rebukes but it also corrects.

It corrects us not by not merely by saying this is the way that you ought to live go and live it but it corrects us by bringing us to Jesus. Bringing us to the one in whom we have forgiveness for all our sin and failure.

The one in whom we have new life. The one who enables us as we prayed in the words of the confession at the beginning of the service that we might live in newness of life.

That all that we need to live the new life that we're called to in fellowship with God and as part of his family, all that we need is found in fellowship with Jesus Christ.

He is our all in all. And by his spirit he strengthens and enables and by his word he leads and he guides. And under his father he blesses and enriches which is why it goes on to say that we might be trained in righteousness.

[32 : 20] Whenever a person becomes a Christian you're all excited about the word. It's opened up a whole new world for you as you've come to understand what you need to know about yourself, what you need to know about Jesus Christ and what you need to know about God.

And having your appetite wetted, it stirs in you a passion for more. It's like getting the hors d'oeuvre in a great restaurant, that it just wets the appetite for the courses that will follow and you will not be satisfied until you've been through the menu from beginning to end and you have your coffee and you've enjoyed it and you've been filled.

Christian life's a bit like that. Conversion is a bit like the hors d'oeuvre, but that it's only the beginning. That you should have the passion, the longing, the yearning. Teach me more. Let me dig deeper.

Let me experience more of what it means to know God, whom to know is life eternal. And then the end point, so that the man of God may be complete, as some versions have put it, but thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Thoroughly equipped for every good work. That as this glorious word does its work in our lives, not only does it enable us to overcome our doubts and questions and reservations, but it actually brings us into a glorious depth and quality of experience of life in fellowship with God that leaves us longing for heaven.

[34 : 00] Somebody has said, I think quite rightly, that with 80% of certainty, there's always 20% of doubt. And it's good to realize that. In terms of our understanding of the Bible, it's probably true to say that if you think you've got a doctrine nailed, it means you haven't understood it.

Because there will always be questions and there will always be doubts as to what the particular teachings of the Bible fully mean. And our finite fallen minds will struggle to understand them.

God uses our doubt. God uses our question to make us more conscious of our own weakness and how unreliable we are in ourselves or even in trying to rely upon one another.

But as he drives us back again and again to this book, this wonderful book that he's put in our hands and challenges us to take it seriously and to dig ever more deeply, then he will prove himself to us ever more firmly with every circumstance that we face.

Shall we pray? Merciful God, we thank you that you're able to use even the darkest struggles of life and of experience to bring us to an end of ourselves and bring us to a deeper appreciation of you and a deeper dependence upon you.

[35 : 30] We pray, Lord, that in this world that we live in that is so full of doubt in so many ways, we ask, O Lord, that you would help us to overcome those doubts, by listening more carefully to all that you've said and trusting more daringly the promises that you've made for Jesus' sake.

Amen.