

Faith, Doubt, and Diligence at New Years Eve 2023

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. As we come to the end of the Christmas season with the New Year right around the corner, I felt it would be appropriate to talk this morning about faith, doubt, and diligence in the coming year.

We hear so often of heroes of the Christian faith who possessed incredible and unshakable faith. Missionaries and apostles who leave everything behind and walk solely by faith. Martyrs who pay the ultimate price and give up their lives with a faith that doesn't waver in the face of vulgar, humiliating pain, suffering, and death.

Faith is a beautiful and glorious virtue, but its counterpart, doubt, can fill us with the same scope and depth of emotion in the opposite direction.

Whereas a powerful, trusting faith can give the world purpose, meaning, and fill you with a spirit of rejoicing in all things, a powerful doubt shakes the rickety floor beneath your feet, threatening to throw you from a secure place into an infinite, dark, and foreboding death.

[1 : 32] It can be terrifying. And yet, doubt, in so many Christian circles, is seen simply as something you experience before you're saved.

It's something that happens perhaps while you're in the process of coming to Christ, but once you're saved, it doesn't come up anymore. After all, once saved, always saved.

There's a perception that a good Christian simply doesn't struggle with things like doubt. But that can be a very harmful perception, indeed.

It can make you feel like you're the only one who struggles with doubt. That there's something wrong with you, and it's something to be ashamed of. Or worse, something to be frightened of. So perhaps you try your best to ignore it, or bury it, or hide it. But such methods never do anything to actually solve doubt.

[2 : 38] That doubt is a flaming barbed arrow shot from the evil one. It sticks in you, and it digs deep, and it hurts to wrestle with it, and you can't seem to pull it out.

Covering it up, ignoring it, hiding it. It makes sense at the time, but it's such an irrational and animalistic response.

How often do terrible wounds get better from being ignored? For me, personally, I've witnessed and experienced things in my life that absolutely defy any rational explanation.

I've been given mountains of evidence, and sometimes feel God so close in my life. Yet, I think I've struggled more with doubt than any Christian that I've ever met.

I don't know if that's actually true, but it certainly feels that way sometimes. Sometimes it almost even seems seasonal. Doubt in the power of God.

[3 : 44] Doubt in the sacrifice of our Savior. Doubt in the inerrancy of Scripture. Doubt if we've ever been saved at all. Doubt in the law. It's not something that I want to admit, but I think it's important for us to do so.

Because there's times I've felt there must be something wrong with me. Because other Christians seem to believe just so effortlessly. But I think a lot more of us struggle with doubt than we're willing to admit.

Of course, some people truly do have an ironclad faith in which they rest assured in Christ and never struggle with doubt in their walk.

And that is a wonderful, amazing gift. Christ even draws special attention to those who believe with that strength and purity and trust and humility of a child that they will inherit the kingdom of heaven. But that isn't something that everyone possesses. And so often doubt is associated with detractors of God.

[4 : 46] However, people who are opposed to God aren't the only ones who doubt Him. Because when we go to the Bible and we look through Scripture, it is filled with individuals who are called by God directly.

Only to be filled with doubt and fear. Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ, the rock of the early church, was walking on water with Jesus Christ.

Physically, standing right in front of him. And we read that Peter's fear led him to doubt. And he started to sin. In Judges 6, we read the account of Gideon.

The angel of the Lord appears to Gideon. And the angel of the Lord is often used to refer to the pre-incarnate Christ in the Old Testament. Gideon only has six lines in Judges 6.

And it's nothing but doubt. Gideon first says, When told he's going to be an instrument of salvation, Gideon says, Please, Lord, how can I save Israel?

[6 : 14] Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.

Followed by, If I have now found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me.

Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you.

And when he sees physical proof, Gideon says, Alas, O Lord God, for now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face.

And then upon receiving instruction from God, we read Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of his town, he did it by night.

Then, still within the same chapter, Gideon says to God, If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, Behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor.

If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said. And when that was done, Gideon said to God, Let not your anger burn against me.

[7 : 25] Let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground. Let there be dew.

God called Gideon a man of valor and said he found favor in him. Yet every single response of Gideon's is riddled with doubt.

Often, when we struggle with doubt, we wish that we could receive signs the way Gideon or Peter did. We want clear signs and obvious proof that doesn't require any faith.

We tell ourselves that if we could just receive some small, minor little sign, not even necessarily a miracle, a small sign like maybe a bird coming through a window and landing on a sill at just the right moment, that's all it would take.

But we're lying to ourselves. This might sound like an excuse, but even if we could put God to such tests, I don't think any amount of testing would ever satisfy us.

[8 : 38] Gideon met an angel and struggled with doubt the same day. Peter was looking directly at Christ and actively experiencing a miracle, and he doubted.

Thomas, who was a disciple of Christ, who likely performed miracles given to the disciples to do, like casting out demons, but when the other disciples came to Thomas and told him Jesus rose from the dead, he doubted.

Unless I physically touch not just him in his wounds, I don't believe you. Moses, the great patriarch, said, I can't go to Pharaoh.

I can't do that. And of course, Jonah, when called upon by God, sprinted in the opposite direction. So, okay, if heroes of the Old Testament and disciples of Jesus doubted, maybe the problem then is that we're human.

Angels have God readily available and right in front of their face, constantly. But all that does is shifts the goalposts.

[9 : 50] Look at Satan. How much more proof could an entity possibly need? Yet he not only rebelled against God, but even in his defeat, he still leads a constant struggle.

Not only against God, but against God's creation. And it isn't just Satan. We read multiple times in Scripture that Satan wasn't cast out alone. There were other angels that went with him.

Of course, once they were cast out, we don't really refer to them as angels anymore. We refer to them as demons. And we don't think of demons as once being angels in heaven or servants of God.

One of my favorite depictions of Satan is a painting of a beautiful angel sitting down. And he's holding his own hand and is just brimming with anger.

And it's a wonderful contrast to God touching Adam's finger in Michelangelo's famous Sistine Chapel painting. So, what then is the point?

[10:53] If doubt isn't based on physiology as humans, and it isn't based on the amount of evidence we've received, what then causes us to doubt? It's emotion.

It's desire. Satan has more evidence than any human could ever have. But Satan wants to be in charge. So, the evidence doesn't matter.

When the waves and the wind roared around Peter, Jesus was right in front of him. But he was afraid. So, the evidence didn't matter. Gideon, chosen for being a man of valor to save Israel, had just confirmed and tested that the God of Israel was on his side.

But when Gideon was afraid of the admonition of his own family, the evidence didn't matter. I have a bit of a lengthy quote here from C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* that I think explains this perfectly. For example, my reason is perfectly convinced by good evidence that anesthetics do not smother me and that properly trained surgeons do not start operating until I am unconscious.

[12:14] But that does not alter the fact that when they have me down on the table and clap their horrible mask over my face, a mere childish panic begins inside me.

I start thinking I am going to choke and I am afraid they will start cutting me up before I am properly under. In other words, I lose my faith in anesthetics.

It is not reason that is taking away my faith. On the contrary, my faith is based on reason. It is my imagination and emotions. The battle is between faith and reason on one side and emotion and imagination on the other.

Lewis then goes on to say, I am not asking anyone to accept Christianity if his best reasoning tells him that the weight of the evidence is against it.

That is not the point at which faith comes in. But supposing a man's reason once decides that the weight of the evidence is for it, I can tell that man what is going to happen to him within the next few weeks.

[13:21] There will come a moment when there is bad news or he is in trouble or is living life among a lot of people who do not believe it and all at once his emotions will rise up and carry out a sort of blitz on his belief.

Or else there will come a moment when he wants a woman or wants to tell a lie or feels very pleased with himself or sees a chance of making a little money in some way that is not perfectly fair. Some moment, in fact. Hmm. At which it would be very convenient if Christianity were not true. And once again, he wishes and desires will carry out a blitz.

I am not talking of moments at which any new real reasons against Christianity turn up. Those have to be faced and that is a different matter.

I am talking about moments where a mere mood rises up against it. Now faith, in the sense in which I am using the word here, is the art of holding on to things that your reason has once accepted in spite of your changing moods.

[14:31] For moods will change. Whatever view your reason takes, I know that by experience. Now that I am a Christian, I do have moods in which the whole thing looks very improbable.

But when I was an atheist, I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable. This rebellion of your moods against your real self is going to come anyway.

That is why faith is such a necessary virtue. Unless you teach your moods, where they get off, you can never be either a sound Christian or even a sound atheist, but just a creature dithering to and fro, with its beliefs really dependent on the weather and the state of its digestion.

Consequently, one must train the habit of faith. The first step is to recognize the fact that your moods change. The next is to make sure that if you have once accepted Christianity, then some of its main doctrines shall deliberately be held before your mind for some time every day.

This is why daily prayers and religious reading and churchgoing are necessary parts of the Christian life. We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in our mind.

[15:54] It must be fed. And as a matter of fact, if you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument.

Do not most people simply drift away? So that ultimately brings us to the point of today's message. What do we do when we fall into doubt? Thankfully, the answer is quite simple. But simple and easy aren't always the same thing.

If you find yourself racked with doubt, then you need to pray. You need to read Scripture.

You need to wrestle with that doubt and cross-examine it. Is that doubt truly genuine? or is it just that there's something in your life that you want that Christianity is stopping you from having?

[17:03] Is there an emotion that threatens to consume you like despair or depression and in that moment seems so comforting and alluring to sink into? Now, Scripture and prayer are probably the last thing anyone's going to want when they're dead.

But, that's simply when they need it the most. If you physically feel weak and tired and unwell all of the time, you know that what you need to do is to start eating healthy and start getting regular physical exercise.

exercise. But, I am sure we've all experienced that, haven't we? When you drag yourself back into a physically healthy routine from a long absence?

Getting on the treadmill for the first time in months is just agony. Our emotions start blitzing us with, why are you doing this? This is foolishness. We're not running away from anyone.

You just need to lie down and have some snacks. Why then should it be any different when we crack open a Bible in the midst of doubt? Your emotions will start flailing just the same way with all the usual attacks screaming at you.

[18:24] It's harder since faith seems to be in the realm of the mind so it feels that those emotions have more weight than they should. If anything, the gym is ten times easier since you can just turn on music, try and turn off your brain and do the exercises and try not to think.

Scripture, however, actively encourages thinking and dwelling on difficult concepts. It's mental instead of physical, which is exactly where the attacks seem to be coming from.

To make matters worse, hiding doubt seems much easier than hiding physical weakness. weakness. You can disguise doubt for years, but a growing waistline less so.

But the horrible truth is that that's a lie. When you're struggling with doubt, people notice. When your relationship with God feels thin and you despair of what once gave you such strength and hope, people notice.

it's not as hidden as you might think. I've had atheist friends in my youth have a borderline intervention with me when I was in my teenage years and struggling with doubt.

[19:45] We were driving someplace and they both turned around and said, Matt, we notice you don't pray as much as you used to. We also notice that your cousin more is is everything all right?

Are you doing okay? I thought I had hidden it perfectly fine, but even people outside the Christian sphere can pick up on it, how much more so than our brothers and sisters in Christ.

It can be frightening to wrestle with doubt or to talk about it with someone you trust because it can feel that speaking it out loud manifests it and makes that doubt somehow real.

It's much easier to bury your head in the sand and pretend you're not afflicted by it. But we all know how hiding a flaw works out. Whether it's a flaw in the foundation of a building that you tried painting over or a burning arrow that's deep and dug within your flesh from the evil one, covering it up never, ever solves the problem.

Sometimes it helps to have someone to talk about it with, but ultimately it's your own unique relationship between God and you. Christianity doesn't have a distant and unknowable God, a shrouded entity spoken to only by a sacred priesthood.

[21:10] No. Jesus is our personal Savior. And we have to call on him, speak to him, pray to him.

him. We have to rely on him and trust him, even if we can't see him or touch his side. And if you want proof, that proof does exist.

We're told not to put God to the test like the Israelites did at Massa or how Satan tempted Christ in the desert. Sorry. But what if I told you that God invites us to test him?

When the Israelites, the Pharisees, or Satan himself are testing God, they're complaining, they're mistrusting, they're probing for weaknesses, and we're told that's wrong.

But there's a kind of test that we're encouraged to partake in. And it's a test to taste and see that God is good. less of a test, perhaps, and more of an invitation.

[22:20] In Psalm 34, we read in verses 8-10, O taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. O fear the Lord, you saints, for those who fear him have no lack.

The young lion suffers hunger and want, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. And then Isaiah 55, we read in verses 1-3, Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and he who has no money, come, buy and eat, come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in rich food.

Incline your ear and come to me, hear that your soul may live, and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast and sure love for David.

God won't submit himself to our whims. God will be subject to being confined and placed under a microscope and have experiments conducted on him if such a thing were even possible for an entity so beyond our understanding as mortal creatures.

[23 : 51] God although we see times in scripture, like with Peter, Thomas, and Gideon, where God directly answers doubters with physical evidence, that isn't the way he answers for us, or at least it is very, very rarely.

And why? Why has God chosen that to be the way that this universe works? Why is that the way he set our relationship with him to be?

I don't know. I suspect that it has something to do with the fact that we've been given rational minds and we're expected to use them.

But I know that Jesus is the truth, the way, and the life. And it is only through him that we come to the Father. And I know that faith changes every single aspect of your life.

internally, you know there's a plan. You might not always know what the plan is, but the chaos that exists around you is not empty and random. It often feels that way, particularly when it comes to seemingly senseless tragedy and disease.

[25 : 07] But know that God is in control of all things. things. And we believe that not only is God in control of all things, but that he works all things for the good of those who believe.

And that's a difficult passage to understand. But when we put it into practice, it changes your entire perspective.

you have to let go of your pride and trust in something greater than yourself. Humans have a tendency to only see what we're looking for.

If you need a hammer, then your eyes scanning the room, you're scanning for any object that can be used as a hammer. If you have a political group that you despise, then people will look online every single day, searching to be outraged, to find new sources for their self-righteous indignation. Satan and detractors of Christ look eagerly at Christians for weaknesses, flaws, and hypocrisy. We see what we want to see.

[26 : 28] Test them that God is good. I'm not saying blind yourself in ignorance. I'm saying you stop blinding yourself. To blessing. Look instead towards Christ and you will see him.

Look towards Jesus and trust him when he says, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.

God, the weight of life can be crushing. But as the famous hymn says, if we turn our eyes upon Jesus, the things of earth will grow strangely dim.

Look full in that wonderful face in the light of glory and grace. Taste and see that the Lord is good. When we walk in faith, it makes us more optimistic. We aren't looking at the blazing furnace around us, but instead at the gold that is going to be produced by the refiner's fire.

[27 : 44] We need to know that we aren't perfect and there is dross in all of us that needs to be consumed. James 1 reads, Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness, and let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without a reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind, for that person must not suppose he will receive anything from the Lord, for he is double-minded of mind, unstable in all his ways.

Sometimes there are impurities in your life that need to be consumed, and that consumption will be painful, and we aren't static creatures.

We make mistakes, often the same mistakes, over and over and over again, just like the Israelites. Sometimes it seems that we're just building the cross back up.

But doesn't that just track with every other discipline in our life? If you're caught in a riptide, you're either making progress towards the shore, or you're being dragged further out.

[29 : 28] there's no middle ground. If you're maintaining a garden, how quickly can one season of neglect allow it to be overgrown by weeds that choke out flowers and vegetables?

If you're training physically, how much does even one month of not doing cardio make you feel like you've lost all the stamina you built on?

So when you feel the weight of doubt, do not let Satan tempt you to despair. Remind yourself that your faith is based on reason, not emotion.

Turn instead to Christ. Pray and seek your Savior earnestly. Get back in that spiritual garden, or gym, or whichever metaphor you prefer, and get back at it.

It's easier to see the result in the garden or in the gym after a couple of months of hard work, but those results exist for your prayer life as well.

[30 : 38] Studies have shown that even just 11 minutes of prayer a day over the course of 8 weeks makes such a noticeable impact on your brain that the shape is actually changed, and they can see it during an MRI scan.

According to scientific studies, regular prayer increases the size of the prefrontal cortex and posterior cingulate cortex, which is the mid-front and back portions of the brain.

It turns out that those areas of the brain are responsible for self-reflection and for controlling emotion. And we have a additional studies that show, clear as day, that prayer and meditation are highly effective in lowering our reactivity to traumatic and negative events.

Because prayer focuses our thoughts outside of ourselves. And just as when a physical disaster strikes, and you'll be glad you're physically in good shape, or that your garden is yielding a good crop, so too does your prayer life serve as a bastion against the darkness of this world.

Because during stress and trauma, our limbic system becomes hyperactivated, which forces us to freeze and throws us into a high-octane fight-or-flight mode.

[32 : 00] It shuts down our executive functioning and prevents us from thinking clearly, which is why we make poor decisions, or act in self-destructive ways, when we're afraid or stressed out.

The part of the brain that's able to override that, however, and regain control and rein in that chaos, is the part that grows in response to regular prayer.

But you need to train it. Just like a firefighter needs to daily hit the weight bench so that he has the strength to lift a burning beam off of someone when the need arises, you need to hit your knees in prayer diligently and daily.

It makes a real physical change. And when trauma and trial come, and you withstand it better than the unbelievers around you, that is when you'll have the opportunity, as Peter speaks in 1 Peter 3 15, always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that you have.

But do this with gentleness and respect. Let's come together now in prayer. God, help us to be confident in you in the coming week.

[33 : 31] Help us to taste and see that you are good throughout this new year, Lord. though the world around us rages like a storm with shouts of war and famine and plague.

Help us to be diligent in coming to you daily, that we might be filled with peace, knowing that we are not of this world, that we are your children, and that your love surrounds us and guides us.

Help us to freely give to others the love and forgiveness and compassion that you have freely given us, and build in us the kind of faith that will throw the devil's mountains into the sea.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.