

Sunday 28th September 2025 - How To Read The Bible: The Place of Doubt

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Date: 28 September 2025

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[0 : 00] Good morning. As Matt said, we're continuing in our series this morning, How to Read the Bible. And I've got the tough little topic of doubt.

So, seeing is believing. That's what they say, isn't it? What do you think?

Starter for 10 then. Fingers on buzzers. Who is this a painting of? Doubting Thomas? Yeah. Oh, poor old Thomas. That's harsh.

Okay, then who painted it? Raphael? It's a Banksy. No, it's not a Banksy. It's actually, it's a tougher question, that one actually. It's Caravaggio. Yeah, Caravaggio.

It was on the tip of your tongue, wasn't it? You were just about to remember that. But it's called The Incredulity of St. Thomas. It was painted in 1602. And it's kind of, you don't get the full effect, because obviously it's on the screen.

[1 : 12] But it's interesting that it's sort of composed in such a way that it draws your attention, actually, to the face of Thomas. Slap bang in the middle.

And then looking at his reaction, and then to the wound in Jesus' side. And I don't know, it is a little bit grim, isn't it?

You know, because he's sort of got his finger stuck there in the side of Jesus. And maybe, and I think there's something about this painting, we've been a bit too quick on the doubting Thomas narrative.

So just hold that thought, we'll come back to it. Seeing is believing, then. Well, maybe not. You might remember this image back in 2023.

It was created with just a few prompts on artificial intelligence, a program. Of course, that was two and a half years ago.

[2 : 13] And the technology has kind of moved on somewhat since. And at the very least, I suspect, it's made us a bit wary of what we hear and what we see.

And certainly there's been plenty of retweets and posts on social media that people have come to regret when they realise that they're sort of peddling a fake news story.

And all of this, I think, kind of feeds into a growing mistrust or a scepticism or annoying doubt about the messages that we are so often bombarded with on a daily basis.

And, you know, understandably so. But more, in a way, insidious is that it can eat away at our trust in our institutions, in the news that we watch, in those that we've elected that represent us.

And over time, I think that impacts our mental health. It provides fertile ground as well for others who want to sow seeds of doubt and discord.

[3 : 22] And all sorts of silly nonsense like this, which I'm sure you've seen in the news, you know, it gets put out there.

It's reckless statements that scare people with no proper reason. And heap, in this case, even more guilt onto women about the choices they make.

What really annoys me about this is it's intentionally muddying the waters. And so we're left struggling to know what is real and what is not. And if you just take a look at the horse for a bit, it's like this.

It feels to me like this, if you want to have an image, that things become distorted and confusing.

You know, is the horse going to the left? Is it going to the right?

Is the bottom moving independent of the top? Well, you can have all of those. They all work. And so this morning, I kind of want to look at the positive place of doubt in the Bible and how it can help us on our faith journey.

[4 : 35] And it's a different perspective, isn't it? And maybe one that's difficult, I think, to get right. And, you know, I get it.

I do get it. For some of us, doubt can become an all-consuming affliction on our mental health. It can feel like a dark cloud that casts this long shadow over us.

And clearly, that's not healthy. Maybe for some of us, I guess many of us, doubt sort of creeps up on us, seeps into our decisions, our thoughts, our actions, our conversations, our relationships, and, of course, at times, our faith.

Maybe there have been times when you've sort of said, why has God let this happen to me or to those that I love?

Or maybe God just feels, I don't know, a long way off. I'm just not sure he or she is there anymore. It's like radio silence.

[5 : 44] Or maybe it's, I read the Bible, and if I'm honest, I'm not even sure now I can go along with some of this anymore. And you know what?

It's okay. It's okay to not be okay. Our job as church is to hold one another up in love and in prayer as we go through those ups and downs.

So be assured you're in good company. You know, as uncomfortable as those times might feel, so whether that's grief or lament and doubt, they are crucial to our maturity and growth.

Sometimes you just need to sit with uncertainty. A mature faith has to learn to hold those things in tension. And I know that's not easy.

But the Bible refuses to infantilize its readers. It presents us with complexity, with paradox and tension.

[6 : 56] Characters, you know, shaking their fists at God. We've got four different gospels, and they don't always align. We've got Paul and Peter disagreeing about crucial matters of faith and practice.

Because for me, the Bible's not this big book of answers. Rather, the Bible is infused with God's living spirit.

It's meant to cultivate wisdom in us. And, you know, one of the ways I think it does that is to refuse to provide simple and easy answers.

It expects us to wrestle with it. And so reading different books of the Bible in a purely literal sense, which kind of Matt was leaning into last week with Jonah, or reading it out of context or beyond its cultural context, gets you into all sorts of problems.

Here's a clip from the series West Wing. Some of you might be familiar with that. With Martin Sheen as President Bartlett that makes this point, I think, well.

[8 : 13] Excuse me. Ladies and gentlemen. Ladies and gentlemen. The President of the United States. Thank you.

Thank you very much. Thanks a lot. I wish I could spend more than a few minutes with you, but the polls don't close in the East for another hour. And there are plenty of election results still left to falsify.

You know, with so many people participating in the political and social debate through call-in shows, it's a good idea to be reminded every once in a while. It's a good idea to be reminded of the awesome impact.

The awesome impact. I'm sorry. You're Dr. Jenna Jacobs, right? Yes, sir. It's good to have you here.

Thank you. The awesome impact of the airwaves and how that translates into the furthering of our national discussions, but obviously also how it can... How it can...

[9 : 19] Forgive me, Dr. Jacobs. Are you an M.D.? A Ph.D. A Ph.D.? Yes, sir. In psychology? No, sir. Theology? No. Social work?

I have a Ph.D. in English literature. I'm asking because on your show people call in for advice and you go by the name Dr. Jacobs on your show and... I didn't know if maybe your listeners were confused by that and assumed you had advanced training in psychology, theology or healthcare. I don't believe they are confused. I don't believe they are confused. No, sir. Good. I like your show. I like how you call homosexuality an abomination. I don't say homosexuality is an abomination, Mr. President.

The Bible does. Yes, it does. Leviticus. 18.22. Chapter and verse. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I had you here. I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery, a sanctioned in Exodus 21.7.

She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be? While thinking about that, can I ask another? My chief of staff, Leo McGarry, insists on working on the Sabbath.

[10:27] Exodus 35.2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it okay to call the police? Here's one that's really important because we've got a lot of sports fans in this town.

Touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean. Leviticus 11.7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point?

Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side by side? Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads?

Think about those questions, would you? One last thing. While you may be mistaking this for your monthly meeting of the ignorant tight-ass club, in this building when the president stands, nobody sits.

How we interpret and understand the Bible is always more complicated than just reading the text.

[11:30] And the Bible rarely hides away from doubt and questions. If anything, I think it showcases them. You know, of the 150 psalms that there are, nearly a third of them are laments.

They're songs, essentially, of complaint. They're sort of questioning God, doubting what's happening. It's a waltz and all cry, if you like, from the psalmist.

And as we'll see in a minute in the book of Job, doubt can actually be one of the primary ways that God can speak to us. Now, I know, you might be thinking, well, that seems quite counterintuitive.

And part of the problem here, I think, is the language, the cultural baggage that comes with this word, doubt. You see, for some of us, it is seen as the opposite of faith, okay?

As a spiritual failing or a weakness to be overcome. Or even worse, a sin that must be confessed.

[12:41] But Jesus never rebuked Thomas. In fact, he offered his wounds for examination. He met Thomas just where he was at.

You can go and read that. It's in chapter 20, verses 24 to 29. This is Thomas who said he was ready to die with Jesus.

Thomas who was devastated by Jesus' crucifixion. Thomas who missed, for whatever reason, that first resurrection appearance.

And simply couldn't accept second-hand testimony about something so, so important. And I think when he says, unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.

I don't think he's being stubborn. I think he's being honest about where he's at. But, you know, the church went with doubting Thomas.

[13:55] And the stigma of that has shaped our language. So let's just park this word doubt for a moment. Okay, what if, instead of that word, we used these words or these words?

Holy curiosity. Does that feel different? To me it does. Yeah, the asking questions might be a holy rather than a harmful thing.

For me, the words holy curiosity transformed doubt from a problem to be solved into a spiritual practice to be cultivated.

And if you think about it, that certainly lines up with the rabbinic tradition, which has a long, long, long history of arguing with God and with scripture.

And there are thousands and thousands of pages in the Talmud of different rabbis doing that. What if holy curiosity, far from being the opposite of faith, is actually an integral part of it?

[15:11] Like a refining fire that reveals the truth and helps us to move into a deeper faith. Here's another way of thinking about it.

What if faith and doubt aren't opposites? What if they're dance partners? Like Bill and Oti, okay?

In Strictly. Dancing together. That they actually need one another. So faith without doubt becomes rigid and dogmatic and soulless.

But doubt without faith can just become cynical despair. But together, they create this sort of dynamic tension.

Living, breathing spirituality that's stronger because of the tension. Sharpening our faith. And what if our doubts don't separate us from God, but actually align us with God, who's far more interested in urging us on into the dance than just ending it?

[16:29] It's a lot of questions, isn't it? Let's have a look at the book of Job in the Old Testament in relation to this and see what we might learn from that.

Job is part of the wisdom literature. Most biblical scholars understand the text not as history, but as a story along with poetry and lament that explores the big question as to why there is suffering and innocent suffering at that.

And Job also questions exactly what is our relationship with God. Just out of interest, how many people have at some point read Job?

Okay. You know it is not an easy book to fathom. Okay. How many people, because I asked Lisa, my wife, this the other day, how many people after having read Job didn't then read it again?

Okay, you've read it several times. Okay, well, well done. It is really quite a tough, tough book. There are no easy answers in the book of Job.

[17:42] There are 42 chapters, most of which, chapters 3 to 37, are kind of like lament, poetic dialogues in which Job's so-called friends stick the boot in well and truly, theologically speaking, because they are certain that God only punishes the wicked.

So, I will touch on some specific passages, but for now, I want us to have an overview of the book. And I've used an animated clip from the Bible Project to do that.

Just, again, quick show of hands. Who's looked at some of the videos of the Bible Project? No? Not familiar with that one? Okay. If you haven't come across it, it's a great resource available on YouTube.

They are animated summaries of all of the books on the Bible and different themes running through the Scripture. So, they're well worth a look at.

So, let's get an overview of Job. There are three books in the Bible known as the Wisdom Literature.

[18:51] Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. The first, Proverbs, showed us that God is wise and just. Yeah, we learned that God has ordered the world so that it's fair.

The righteous are rewarded. The wicked are punished. In other words, you get what you deserve. But then we meet Ecclesiastes, who observes, people don't always get what they deserve.

Yeah, he said the world isn't always fair. That life is unpredictable and hard to comprehend, just like smoke. And this makes you wonder, okay, well, is God wise and just?

Exactly. And so, it's that question that is being explored in the final book of wisdom, Job. All right, let's dive in. So, Job begins with a strange story that takes place up in the heavens, which are described something like a heavenly command center.

So, God is there with these angelic creatures called the sons of God, and they're all there reporting for duty. And God points out this guy, Job, his servant, showing how righteous and good he is.

[19:53] And then one of these angelic creatures approaches. He's referred to in Hebrew as the Satan. The Satan. Who is this? Well, this word is actually a title, which literally means the one who is opposed.

So, out of this whole crew, he is the one questioning how God is running the world. And he proposes that Job might not actually love God, that he's only a good person because God rewards him.

If God were to take away all of the good things he gave to Job, then we would see his true colors. So, he thinks Job is just working the system? That's exactly right.

Maybe he's obeying just to get what he wants. So, God agrees to this experiment and allows the Satan to inflict something on Job. And Job loses everyone and everything that he cares about. It is devastating. And remember, he deserves none of this. God himself said so. The remarkable thing is that in the midst of all this suffering, Job still praises God.

[20:55] At least for chapters 1 and 2. But then in chapter 3, we find out how he's really feeling inside. He unleashes this poem that reveals this devastation. It's a long, elaborate curse on the day that he was born.

After this, some of Job's friends come to visit him to offer their help. And all of them are like, Job, you must have done something horribly wrong to deserve this. After all, we know God is just, and we know the world is ordered by God's justice and fairness, so you must be getting what you deserve.

And for the next 34 chapters, the friends and Job go back and forth in very dense Hebrew poetry. His friends keep speculating about why God might have sent such suffering.

And they even start making up lists of hypothetical sins that Job must have committed. But after each accusation, Job defends his innocence. And Job is innocent. He is. He's also on an emotional roller coaster. At some moments, he's very confident that God is still wise and just. Yeah, in other moments, he's doubting God's goodness. He even comes to accuse God of being reckless, unfair, and corrupt.

[22 : 04] So by the end of the dialogue, Job demands that God come and explain himself in person. And God does so. He comes in the form of a great storm cloud.

Now, God doesn't give Job a direct answer. He doesn't tell Job about the conversation with the Satan. Yeah, he does something very different. He takes Job on a virtual tour of the universe. He shows Job how grand the world is. And he asks him if he's even capable of running it or understanding it just for a day. He shows Job how much detail there is in the world. Things that we might see every day but really don't understand at all. But God does. He knows it all intimately. He pays attention to the beauty and operations of the universe in ways that we haven't even imagined and in places that we will never see.

Then to conclude, God shows Job two wondrous beasts and brags about how great they are. Yeah, they are dangerous. I mean, they would kill you without even thinking about it.

[23 : 09] And God says they're not evil. They're actually a part of his good world. And then that's it. That's God's whole defense.

It's kind of weird. I mean, what was this all about? It seems to be this. From Job's point of view, it looks like God is not just. But God's perspective is infinitely bigger.

He's dynamically interacting with a whole universe of complexity when he makes decisions. And this is what God calls his wisdom. So Job asking God to defend himself is actually kind of absurd. He couldn't comprehend this kind of complexity even if he wanted to. So where does this leave us? Well, it leaves Job in a place of humility. He never learned why he suffered.

And yet he's able to live in peace and in the fear of the Lord. But that's not where the book ends. Because after this, God restores to Job double everything he had lost.

[24 : 12] And this, again, is surprising. I mean, is this a reward? Is God saying, congratulations, Job, you passed this elaborate test? No. I mean, the whole book just made the point that Job losing everything was not a punishment.

And so now getting it back isn't a reward. So why does he get it back? Well, apparently, God, in his wisdom, decided to give Job a gift. We don't know why. But what we do know is that Job is now the kind of person who, no matter what comes, good or bad, he can trust God's wisdom.

And that's the book of Job. Okay. Leaves us with a lot of questions still, doesn't it? Not a neat, tidy little answers there.

So if we can put aside for now this sort of bizarre chat that God has with Satan in chapter 1 of Job, essentially placing a bet on Job, I guess the phrase that most of us are familiar with in this book is the patience of Job.

Yeah? You've heard that. But if you actually read from chapter 3 onwards, what you find is some pretty raw emotional outpouring. And I'm not sure if I would describe it as patience.

[25 : 32] It's kind of more like despair and lament and even rage at God. So here's some passages that are taken mostly from chapter 3 onwards.

Why did I not perish at birth? I loathe my life. I will give free utterance to my complaint. Though he slay me, yet will I argue my case to his face.

It is all one. He destroys both the blameless and the wicked. He mocks the calamity of the innocent. And then we get to this passage in chapter 2 from Job's wife.

Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die. You know, when I was preparing this, I can't remember the last time I heard anybody teaching on the book of Job.

And when you read this, you sort of realise why. It is a pretty brutal stuff. And there is a lot of anger and suppressed grief here.

[26 : 48] What do you do with that? What do you do with that? Just to be clear, Job doesn't curse God. But equally, he's not going down without a fight.

But the theologian Carol Newsome says this, Job is a book at war with itself.

Because it contains multiple voices, genres and theological perspectives that refuse, refuse to harmonise into a single coherent answer about suffering.

And that is quite deliberate. Because it is inviting us, if we dare, to enter into the text and Job's struggles.

And then there's these four. The so-called friends of Job. Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and much, much later on, because I think he doesn't come in until chapter 32, Elihu.

[28 : 02] And they are supposed to represent the best of Mosaic wisdom theology. And so their arguments are logical.

They are biblically grounded. They quote scripture accurately. And, you know, I'm sure in their own way, they believed that they were genuinely trying to help Job.

But in the end, God condemns them. Saying, and this is from chapter 42, verse 7, You have not spoken of me what is right.

And remember, these are the orthodox defenders of the faith. Okay? And God says, you have no idea of who I am.

And instead, it's Job's blasphemous honesty that God ends up endorsing. And when God eventually does speak to Job, from the whirlwind, that's chapters 38 to 41, there are no answers.

[29 : 15] There's only questions. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation, Job? Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?

Do you observe the carving of the deer? Can you lift up your voice to the clouds so that the flood of waters may cover you? And God sort of takes Job on this cosmic tour, describing everything from constellations to crocodiles.

And not once does he address Job's question about suffering. Maybe you're asking the wrong question, Job.

In the end, it's Job's humility that allows him to sustain his faith. But in a God that will not be contained, his relationship but without resolution, and trust but without explanation, that is difficult.

That is tough. Because we're invited into this text as well. The theologian Pete Rowlands talks about the sin of certainty.

[30 : 36] It's this idea of a belief that we can somehow contain the infinite God within our own finite understanding.

And there's a crucial difference between certainty and assurance. Certainty is rigid, it's brittle, and it's usually defensive, whereas assurance is strong, flexible, and open.

I can be assured of God's love without being certain about how that love works out in every situation.

Assurance can dance with doubt. Certainty won't even go to the ball. And so when we claim absolute certainty about God, we're not expressing faith, we're expressing our need to control, to make God in our own image, safe and manageable.

And that's not the God that shows up for Job. He doesn't get answers. He gets God's unfathomable presence.

[31 : 58] It's a book that leaves us with lots of questions. You know, and I'll be honest, it is disturbing. There's a feeling of uncertainty there.

But I think that is the whole point. And I know we are under the new covenant. But this is still our God.

Job, of course, was seen by the early church fathers as a foreshadowing of the suffering servant, the suffering servant, Jesus. And there are all sorts of theological parallels made between them, which you'll be relieved to hear.

I'm not going to get into. But suffice to say, the scandal really is that both Job and Jesus chose humility and vulnerability. And that faith isn't about having answers, but about a loving relationship with God.

And that God is found not beyond suffering, but within it and alongside us. So, did you know, during his ministry, the Gospels record that Jesus was asked 183 questions, thereabouts.

[33 : 24] So let me ask you a question. Okay, you can just shout out some answers. That's fine. Don't worry. It doesn't matter whether you're right or wrong. How many of those questions do you think Jesus gave a direct answer to?

None? Not many? Tom? Three and a half? Tom's closest. Okay. It is three or four.

It literally is three or four. It depends how you... Yeah, well done, Tom. It depends how you interpret some of those. So, three or four.

And the other 179 or so, he answers with another question, or a parable, or a cryptic remark. You know, and to give an example, so when one of the religious leaders asks him a trick question about whether or not they should pay their taxes, Jesus asks them for a coin and gives them this conundrum about, you know, rendering unto Caesar, which is brilliantly, you know, subversive. It really is. This is not a ministry of dishing out easy answers, is it, to life's questions? Quite the opposite. Jesus is recorded, again in the Gospels, as asking 307 questions of others.

[34 : 50] It's almost as if he's sort of teasing out this holy curiosity with everyone that he meets. And the parables, it seems, were one of the main ways that he did this.

And the word parable comes from the Greek word para and bola. Para, which means beside or alongside, so that's where we get words like parachute and paramedic. And bola, which means to sort of throw down or cast down. So it literally means to throw alongside two things that are not normally associated with each other.

Or to give a sharp contrast to get us thinking, to cast doubt on our assumptions. So, to quote a pretty well-known parable, there was a man who had two sons.

So there's the setup. Yeah? Younger, reckless, money-grabbing son and dutiful, righteous, older son. Okay? And you sort of know, don't you, what side Jesus expects his listeners to go with.

[36 : 08] And Jesus uses these parables in this sort of subtle way, maybe not so subtle, to subvert what we think living in God's kingdom is like.

To make us pause and think. What does this mean? They're not cookie-cutter stories with easy moral messages.

You've got to wrestle with them. If you're not disturbed, then you've probably missed the point. Because they're digging into the truth and at the same time, they're digging into us.

And that catches us off guard. So, here's another question. What do you think is the most well-known parable?

Good Samaritan. You're all in agreement. It's Good Samaritan. It is the most well-known parable. If you ask people whether from a faith background or not, it'll probably be the Good Samaritan.

[37 : 12] And the trouble with that is that we're all rooting, we're all rooting for the Samaritan. Because we know the punchline. You know, but it is still a powerful message and it can still challenge us today.

You know, what would I have done? What would you have done? In a similar situation. Because we want to, I hope, identify with the Good Samaritan in the story.

But if we're honest, on a bad day, maybe we're the priest or the Levite. You know, we're just too tired. We're too busy.

We're too afraid or overwhelmed to take care of someone else. But the Good Samaritan, I'm guessing, is still the character, you know, I hope most of us aspire to be like.

But just in the spirit of this holy curiosity, let's shake this up a bit. Let's make this a little bit more uncomfortable. What if the parable is meant to upset the categories that we've got of good and bad, of giver and receiver?

[38 : 25] Rather than the Good Samaritan then, what if we start off with identifying with the man lying in the road?

Hmm. It's a bit more edgy, isn't it? A bit more uncomfortable, maybe? He's the only character in the story that has no identity at all, except that he is naked, vulnerable, and in need.

And so being a neighbour, from this perspective, involves not only giving help, but also being willing to receive help.

And that raises some interesting questions. What if the parable wants us to experience and empathise with what it means to be wounded?

With what it means to be vulnerable and alone? To be the traveller left for dead. You know, the indignity of being naked, the pain of those wounds, and the humility we must experience to lean on the help of strangers.

[39 : 44] That's a different take, isn't it? And this sort of holy curiosity then brings something else to this parable. I think doubt is something that to some degree we all experience.

And maybe in terms of our faith that can feel unsettling, or even at times a little bit scary. And as a church it matters, doesn't it, that we create a safe space so that we can voice our questions, our concerns, our doubts.

And if people trust us enough to share, well, that's a pretty big step, actually. And I think it would be dishonouring to rush in with answers, to think that we have to fix things, or fix them.

I think mostly people just need to be heard, not fixed or judged. Often, you know, we just want to know we're not alone in how we feel, that our questions are valid, or that our anger is understandable.

And what we need is to be surrounded by others in love and encouragement, to just keep showing up to the conversation, even when it doesn't feel like God is.

[41 : 24] And so the language that we use with each other really matters. We need to affirm each other where we're at, and be honest with ourselves that we don't have all the answers.

Be willing to practice this sort of holy curiosity, and to be more like Jesus, and inclusive of everyone. So may we learn to doubt faithfully, and believe humbly, to question lovingly, and affirm courageously.

And I pray that St. John's is a safe place for those seeking a genuine encounter with the living God. And may we know and believe the love that God has for us, and that God is love.

And those who abide in his love, abide in God, and God abides in them. Let me just close with a prayer.

[42 : 41] Lord, we want to honor you, and we want to tread carefully here. We treasure your word. Help us with our questions.

Lead us deeper into your mystery. May our uncertainty keep us humble, keep us searching.

And may we find companions on our journey, as honest seekers. Give us the courage to say, I don't know.

And the wisdom to realize that this is the beginning of knowledge, not the end. And may we find, as we wrestle with your word, that you change and transform us, becoming more and more like your son and our saviour Jesus.

Help us to discover that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear. Fear of questions, fear of mystery, fear of you, as a God too big for the boxes that we've created.

[43 : 58] And so may we go in peace, not because we have all the answers, but because we have the assurance of your love. And go in faith, not because we figured you out, Lord, but because we trust you, and we know that you know every hair on our head, and that you love us unconditionally.

Amen. Amen. Amen.