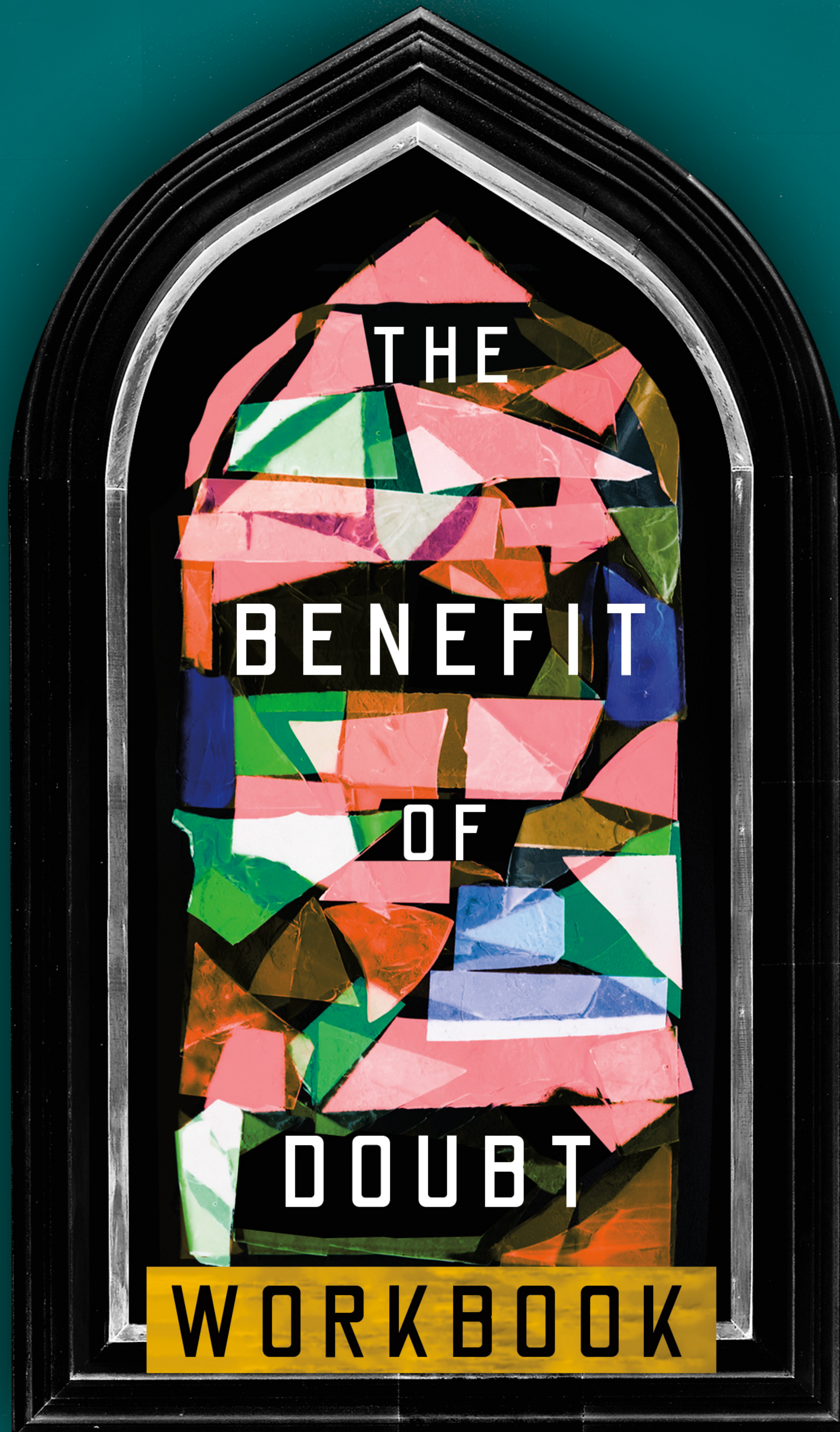


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WITH DUDLEY J. DELFFS



HOW CONFRONTING YOUR DEEPEST QUESTIONS
CAN LEAD TO A RICHER FAITH

The Benefit of Doubt Workbook

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PERMISSION TO DOUBT

The *Benefit of Doubt*. Maybe you paused when you read that title and wondered if that's really a thing. Can doubt actually have a *benefit*? After all, doubt is typically viewed in a negative light. We're told it implies a lack of confidence on our part. An uncertainty in our convictions. A lack of strength in our resolve. And when it comes to doubts regarding our *faith*—well, the message we usually receive is that we shouldn't go there. *Don't question . . . just believe.*

The reality, however, is that doubt is not your enemy. Rather, when you take the appropriate steps to work through your spiritual doubts, you will develop a deeper understanding and a more authentic relationship with God. Your doubts can actually lead you to a richer faith and be a great benefit in your spiritual walk.

This idea of embracing your doubts might cause you to feel uneasy. Perhaps you're afraid that if you examine your doubts too closely, it will lead you down the slippery slope to skepticism (or even cynicism). Or maybe you worry that your doubts will poke holes in some of your long-held beliefs. Or perhaps you are concerned that if you have doubts—and express them openly—it might cause

those who look up to you to also begin to doubt. You may fear that your doubts could become contagious and infect their thinking as well.

The truth is that closely examining your doubts will likely not lead you to cynicism but to the ability to better understand why you believe what you do. Your doubts may indeed poke holes in some of your long-held beliefs—but instead of patching the holes, you'll get to press in to discover what *you* believe about God, not what others have told you to believe. And those who look up to you will benefit by knowing you have doubts you're not afraid to confront. It will encourage them to wrestle with their own doubts.

Virtually everyone, from the committed Christian to the hardcore atheist, struggles with doubt at times. What is important is not that you *have* doubts but what you *do* with those doubts. If you choose to ignore them, what began as benign uncertainty can metastasize into a destructive mindset that resists believing in anything—that slippery slope we mentioned to cynicism. But if you are willing to honestly address your spiritual doubts, you will find a greater capacity for knowing and loving God.

As a companion to *The Benefit of Doubt*, this workbook is an invitation for you to reconsider doubt as an integral part of your spiritual journey. It is intended to help you wrestle with your doubts—whether individually or with others in a small group—toward the goal of pursuing a richer faith. While no one can promise that you will never doubt again, the hope is that your doubts don't become a destination but a doorway to a more intimate relationship with God.

God *welcomes* your doubts. So, no matter what questions you're asking or how loud your doubts shout, you can take them to Jesus—for the first time or the hundredth time. If you seek the truth with an open mind, a tender heart, and a willing spirit, God will meet you there.

So don't be afraid to doubt. Take a deep breath, and let's get started.



DEALING WITH DOUBT

Facing your doubts so that you can grow in your faith may sound counterintuitive. You might worry about doubting to the point of wandering too far from your touchstones of truth. But the Bible reveals that dealing with doubt is part of being human—and part of developing a genuine relationship with God that can endure life’s twists and turns. God not only permits us to have doubts but also reveals himself when we seek him with open hearts. Rather than ignoring, compartmentalizing, or fearing your doubts, you can push through them to find a foundation of God’s truth for assessing your beliefs. Here are the key principles you will explore in part 1:

- Your doubt doesn’t disappoint God.
- Your doubt doesn’t define God—or define you.
- Your doubt doesn’t deny your faith or disqualify you from ministry.
- Your doubts may be driven by circumstances, intellect, emotion, or other people.
- Your doubts may be driven by misperceptions and false assumptions about God based on your relationship with your earthly parents.
- Your doubts may be driven by your personality as well as by the choices you make and habits you develop.
- You can’t have a reconstruction of your faith without a deconstruction of your beliefs.



IS IT WRONG TO HAVE DOUBTS?

*The strongest faith isn't a faith that never doubts.
Rather, the strongest faith is a faith that grows through doubts.*

CRAIG GROESCHEL

Having doubts about your faith can be a lonely experience. Even when you know that other people doubt, you might still be reluctant to voice your doubts for fear of what others will think. You've probably witnessed those who've expressed their doubts being shut down, whether in a casual conversation, a small-group gathering, or a Bible study. This is unfortunate because these should be safe places to air your doubts without fear of judgment.

While it might be helpful to know that people beside you in church have doubts, it can be even more helpful to know that some of history's most renowned Christians had doubts. People like Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, who not only questioned the theology and practices of the Roman

Catholic Church in the sixteenth century but who also continued to have doubts about his salvation throughout much of his lifetime.¹

Or take C. S. Lewis, the great twentieth-century apologist and author of iconic classics like *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. As an academic professor, Lewis continued to wrestle with doubt intellectually. The problem of loss, suffering, and grief was not simply philosophical and theological but deeply personal for Lewis, who married late in life and then lost his wife to cancer. Even as he became known as one of the great apologists for the Christian faith, Lewis had to keep working through his own questions.²

Then there's Mother Teresa, who was known for her commitment to serving the impoverished and those with severe medical ailments. She mostly kept her doubts private during her lifetime, but after her death in 1997, her diaries and journals revealed a believer brokenhearted by her lack of intimacy with God. Many people found her candor relatable and her faith even more admirable. She clearly continued living out her commitment to love and serve God even in the midst of lonely bouts that left her questioning her relationship with him.³

Numerous other famous followers of Jesus experienced doubt even while serving, ministering, preaching, and teaching—including John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, and Pope Francis. These believers exercised their faith by trusting God and living out his calling on their lives even in the midst of their unanswered questions. They learned to accept doubt as a necessary part of their spiritual growth.

In the same way, rather than allowing doubt to undermine our faith, we're called to trust that God will meet us in the midst of our struggles. Doubt only becomes a problem when we're unwilling to push through it. Having doubts about your faith doesn't mean you're a bad Christian. Having doubts about your faith means you're in good company!

- ◆ Who has influenced you when it comes to expressing your doubts? How would you summarize your general attitude toward doubt until now?

IS IT WRONG TO HAVE DOUBTS?

- ◆ How does your doubt contribute to feelings of loneliness or isolation? When have you remained silent rather than express a doubt about matters of faith?

- ◆ What difference does it make in knowing most believers experience doubt at times? What's your reaction to the doubts experienced by well-known Christians?

- ◆ Which well-known Christian's life has inspired you in your faith journey? What do you know about how he or she handled times of doubt?

EXPLORING THE TRUTH

We've established that it's not wrong to have doubts. But that doesn't mean you've immediately identified, clarified, rectified, and welcomed your doubts as a gateway to a richer walk with Jesus. You're probably still harboring nagging doubts about doubt, wondering if it's really okay to express your feelings, and asking how your doubts can grow your faith.

This sense of unease about leaning in to your doubts makes perfect sense. If "faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1), then it's natural to assume that *lacking confidence* in what you hope for and *wanting assurance* for what you do not see must mean that you're a bad Christian.

This is simply not true!

Consider the story of perhaps the best-known doubter in the Bible: Thomas. He was one of the twelve disciples who was handpicked by Jesus and is often remembered mostly for . . . well, doubting. But if we look at how he became known as the original “Doubting Thomas,” we quickly realize that he got a bad rap.

After Jesus’ resurrection, Thomas wanted to be certain that his Master had returned to life in a body that was not only flesh and blood but also bore the scars of the crucifixion. Basically, he wanted more than secondhand testimony from the other disciples. He wanted *firsthand* evidence in order to believe what was humanly impossible. As you read the passage below, imagine how you would have responded if you had missed out on witnessing the presence of Jesus after he rose from the grave—and then received a second chance.

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “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.”

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

²⁸ Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

JOHN 20:19–29

IS IT WRONG TO HAVE DOUBTS?

- ◆ How does Thomas's response to the other disciples' statement, "We have seen the Lord" (verse 25), reflect the way that you might have responded if you had been in his place? Do you usually believe what others close to you tell you, or do you need to decide for yourself?

- ◆ How do you typically respond when others ask you to provide proof about something? How does that compare to the way Jesus responded to Thomas?

- ◆ What might Thomas have been thinking when Jesus offered to let him touch his wounds? How would you have responded in this situation?

- ◆ Notice that Jesus didn't tell Thomas simply to "stop doubting." What did Jesus say to him right before he said that phrase—and then right after? How does Jesus' response to Thomas color the way you view doubting?

QUESTIONING THE TRUTH

The interaction Thomas had with Jesus makes it clear that we never have to feel ashamed of having doubts. Thomas wasn't being difficult or seeking extra attention—he was merely being honest about wanting evidence before he bought in to the resurrection. Nor was the doubt Thomas expressed an indicator that his commitment to Jesus was weak, half-hearted, or fickle. If we back up before this post-resurrection scene, we find that Thomas displayed boldness, courage, and a fearless attitude in his dedication to Christ.

In fact, based on what we find in the Gospels, Thomas might have been one of the most faithful followers of Jesus. In one story, Mary and Martha, the sisters of Jesus' friend Lazarus, sent word that Lazarus was sick. When Jesus heard this news, he remained where he was for two days, and then said, "Let us go back to Judea" (John 11:7). Now, there was a good reason for Jesus and the disciples *not* to go back to Judea. The Jewish religious leaders there were looking for Jesus and intended to kill him. The disciples pointed out this fact to Jesus, but their concern didn't slow him down.

The disciples knew that to accompany their Master back to Judea meant that they might be killed as well. It was a sobering possibility that surely made them all think twice—well, all except for one. As we read, "Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him'" (verse 16).

There is no doubt here about Thomas's courage, conviction, and commitment. He wasn't afraid to speak up and express his willingness to face whatever Jesus was about to face. Nothing is mentioned about the other disciples saying anything in solidarity. Thomas didn't waver or hide—he displayed a kind of "risk everything" faith without hesitation.

Let's also remember that Thomas kept hanging out with his fellow disciples even after he expressed his desire for tactile proof of the risen Savior. Even though Thomas needed more than the others' testimony of the risen Lord (see John 20:25), he didn't abandon hope. In fact, we are told, "A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them" (verse 26). Thomas didn't have the firsthand evidence he needed yet, *but he still showed up*.

And by showing up, Thomas received what he needed in order to believe! Jesus not only appeared again to the disciples but also offered Thomas the opportunity

- ◆ What specific questions continue to nag at you in the midst of your faith journey? Which one troubles you the most at a personal level? Why?

DIGGING DEEPER INTO DOUBT

Thomas wasn't the only follower of Jesus who had doubts. Even some who had encountered the risen Son of God after the resurrection still doubted. And those two times when Jesus crashed his disciples' gatherings in the upper room were not his only post-resurrection appearances—not by a long shot. The New Testament mentions more than a dozen times when Jesus appeared to his followers after the resurrection and before his ascension to heaven.

The women outside his empty tomb met him (see Matthew 28:8–10), as did two men walking to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13–35). Ten of the disciples (meeting without Thomas) saw Jesus as they were hiding from the Jewish leaders (see John 20:19–25). When some of them later went fishing, they encountered Jesus on the beach (see John 21:1–23). Christ even appeared before five hundred people at one time (see 1 Corinthians 15:6).

In Jesus' final appearance before the ascension, he instructed the disciples to meet him on a mountain so he could give them their assignment: to go into all the world and share the good news of the gospel (see Matthew 28:19). But this scene wasn't tied up with a bow. Even though the eleven remaining disciples met up with Jesus, right before he gave them the Great Commission, there is a detail that must not be overlooked: "When they saw him, they worshiped him; *but some doubted*" (verse 17, emphasis added).

Yep, these were the disciples who knew Jesus intimately and had been with him for the past three years of his ministry. They had not only witnessed his betrayal (by one of their own, no less) and his arrest and tortured death—but they had encountered him in the flesh when he rose from the grave. And yet . . . some *doubted*? It's easy to imagine they worshiped him—but some still doubted. Maybe even some who worshiped him had doubts.

DOUBTFUL AT BEST

Your doubts offer an opportunity to deepen your faith, which in turn grows stronger and helps you push through those doubts. It would be nice if the stronger your faith gets, the fewer doubts you have—and if that’s your experience, count your blessings. But experiencing a closer relationship with God doesn’t necessarily guarantee that you won’t still have doubts from time to time. Like the first disciples, you can worship Jesus and still have doubts.

This tension results from the fact that no matter how strong your faith becomes, you still live in a broken world. You’ll find a similar dynamic at work in many aspects of living out a commitment to Christ. Experiencing God’s peace doesn’t mean you will escape the chaos in the world. Receiving his love doesn’t mean you won’t have struggles in this world. Basking in his joy doesn’t mean you will never have a bad day. However, what you *will* have is God’s presence in the ups and downs of life. You can experience his peace, love, and joy despite your circumstances. Similarly, you can exercise faith despite the doubts you encounter.

Perhaps nowhere in Scripture is this tension expressed more poetically than in the Psalms. One of the best-known and most beloved of them, Psalm 23, describes how you can experience God’s love, protection, rest, and provision even in the midst of unwanted challenges: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (verse 4 ESV). In the next verse, the psalmist addresses this awareness once again: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (verse 5).

Having doubts doesn’t mean you don’t also have faith. When you’re walking through dark valleys, you keep walking and take comfort in knowing that God is with you. You don’t have to be afraid, because God’s presence is greater than any evil the enemy throws in your path. Similarly, you can experience the kind of divine intimacy that comes from being a beloved guest at God’s table—even while your enemies are still present.

Learning to recognize this tension allows you to reconsider your doubts, and as you reframe them within a more accurate context, you can see their benefits. So, based on what you read in chapter 1 of *The Benefit of Doubt*, as well as the doubts you identified from the end of that chapter and the exercise in this lesson, it’s now time to dig deeper into what these doubts can reveal to you about your beliefs, their basis, and potential benefits.

IS IT WRONG TO HAVE DOUBTS?

While it might be tempting to list every doubt you've ever had in your life, consider sticking with the ones that presently trouble you or continue to linger—perhaps the “top ten” on your list. Be completely honest in your response even if these doubts seem irrational, subjective, inherited from others, or trivial. Try not to judge yourself for having doubts but instead let yourself be curious about them. Be a doubt detective as you explore each one.

DOUBTS YOU HAVE	BASIS OF THIS DOUBT	BENEFIT OF THIS DOUBT
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

THE BENEFIT OF DOUBT WORKBOOK

NOTES

1. Jesse Carey, "Seven Prominent Christian Thinkers Who Wrestled with Doubt," Relevant, June 9, 2021, <https://relevantmagazine.com/faith/seven-prominent-christian-thinkers-who-wrestled-doubt/>.
2. Carey, "Seven Prominent Christian Thinkers Who Wrestled with Doubt."
3. Carey, "Seven Prominent Christian Thinkers Who Wrestled with Doubt."