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SERIES: Choosing Faith Over Fear

Speaker: Nat Crawford (w/Arnie & Cara)

Title: New Testament Doubters Pt. 1 of 3

It was the summer of 2013 when I met Mike Moyles. Mike was an officer in the US Air Force and a fellow grad student at Biola. Mike was one of the smartest people I had met. While in seminary at Biola, he was working on his fifth master's degree. When I graduated from seminary, he was working on his sixth. A brilliant person. Apart from his intelligence, something else stuck out to me about Mike.

For those of you who know me outside of a preaching context, you know I am one of those people who isn't afraid to talk to anyone about anything. If I think my insight is valuable, I may just share it. If I have a question, I ask.

It was over one of our lunch breaks during residency; I had to ask Mike a loaded question. I said, "Mike, I don't mean to pry, but you have a prominent scar on your head. In fact, it's a scar that my son Landon has. What happened?" Mike was unshaken by my penetrating question, because it was a story he had shared many times before. Mike disclosed that he had been battling brain cancer for 15 years. At that point, Mike had 3 brain surgeries, 2 reconstructive surgeries, and many rounds of radiation and chemotherapy. I was amazed.

I was able to share about how my son Landon was a cancer survivor. At just 2 months old, Landon was diagnosed with cancer. He, too, had tumor removals, reconstructive surgeries, rounds of chemotherapy, and a zig-zag scar across his head.

Mike and I formed a special bond because of it.

Following that lengthy conversation, we discussed doubt. More specifically, we discussed the topic of "why." Why did God allow Mike to experience a seemingly endless battle with brain cancer? Why did God allow Landon, an 8 week old infant, to experience cancer? Questions we had asked God many times, but we both experienced no audible response.

You too today probably have a “why” question for God. Why did my spouse leave me? Why did my child rebel against me and my faith? Why did I get sick with this virus? Why was I chosen for the layoff? Why was that person chosen for the promotion instead of me? Why does my neighbor get a nice car, but I can never afford anything else but a rust bucket?

Why God?

You know, as Mike and I talked, we concluded that “If I were God, I’d give you an answer.”

Surely, God is not devoid of answers. God knows everything. He knows why things happen. He knows why He allows things to happen.

But it was at the end of that conversation that we confided, that even if we had received a specific answer, we would have still argued with God. What answer would have possibly been sufficient? We would have only asked one more question and another and another. You see, it was really a struggle with doubt.

We all doubt. We all struggle with following and loving a God who is infinite and mysterious, yet knowable. We look around us, and sometimes life doesn’t make sense. That causes doubt. I’ve learned not to pretend like I don’t struggle with it. I hope you won’t pretend either.

But doubt isn’t a lack of faith. Honest doubt is trying to find an answer. It’s trying to solidify something as true, or dismiss something as false. That’s not a sin. Questions are natural. They are expected. God is not offended by questions. Doubt is also natural. Doubt is expected in the walk of faith. God is not offended by doubt. Some people think doubt is contrary to faith, that doubt is a sign of weakness. Some even suggest that doubt is the opposite of faith. I disagree.

Disbelief is the opposite of faith. Doubt is the beautiful tool we use to strengthen our faith. In my pursuit of apologetics, I’ve learned to appreciate doubt, because I’ve come to believe doubt is actually beneficial to faith.

Discussion:

N: Now, before we get to the opening passage and our first doubter, Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney are here, and I want to ask you two, how has doubt played a role in your own faith?

C: My personal experience, I haven't say I ever doubted, because by the time I became a Christ follower, I was in my thirties, and it was a very dramatic conversion. I believed that Jesus is who He claimed to be, but I have struggled with God. I mean, I feel like I've actually wrestled with

Him. But a year ago, my son's friend was diagnosed with stage four cancer. And I remember going to a football game and seeing him there, and just saying goodbye to him, and kissing him on his little bald head, and just not wanting to let him go. And I'll tell you, Nat, what bothered me was the question that I had for God, which was, can my prayers change God's mind? And the reason I was so angry, was because I was afraid that they could, because if my prayers could change His mind, then all of the suffering that I was watching this family endure, was for nothing. And so it took me three days to really reconcile, get in the Word, research with trusted theologians, that my prayers don't change God's mind. His courses are purposeful. They can change the circumstance, which is different. So within that battle, there could be some comfort, maybe some mercy or some peace. So I changed my prayers to align, I think with God's will, *Your will be done*, but maybe an extend some mercy here, or you know, but I really wrestled with that. I was angry about it.

N: So then you would say that doubt was part of your pre-Christ life, and even in your current walking with Christ life.

C: Well, I think there's a lot of questions I have for God. And it's mostly when I see other people struggling, friends that are going through battles that never seem to end, and that's where I start getting like, why? Or you need to show up here, because they're starting to doubt. I think that has to do with my heart for wanting everyone to be saved. I do struggle. I have dealt with people who are sociopaths, or deal with mental health. I've had that struggle, like, is it fair? There's a fairness there, but you know what, when I wrestle with God and I come to Him, just kind of broken and with an honest want to know, and for the right reasons, I really want people to be saved. Well then I got the answer that I reconcile with, like, say a sociopath is that they know the difference between right and wrong, and so they have a way to come to Christ, and it absolutely is fair. So I do struggle with these battles, but it mostly has to do with other people in their walk, which I should stay in my own lane, but I just care so much about people, even obviously sociopaths. [Laughter]

N: I mean, they all need Christ at the end of the day. And we are really in the same boat. We may just manifest our sin in different ways. You said something there that reminded me of a story, and I'll just share real briefly, but there's a professor from Moody Bible. And what's crazy about this guy, is when he was a young man, he had been arrested, because he got into drug dealing and was struggling with all sorts of sexual sin, but it landed him in prison. Before his sentencing,

his mother, who was a believer, when questioned by the judge, “Hey, does anyone here have anything else they want to say before I sentence this man?” this man's mother stands up and says, “I just want you to give him the exact sentence, whatever it's going to take for him to fall on his knees and turn to Christ as Lord and Savior.” And I'm thinking to myself, man, I love my kids a lot. I don't know if I could tell a judge to sentence my son to as long as he needs, so he comes to a place of complete brokenness, you know. And that request, I would say was granted, because while in prison, he actually came to know Christ. And as I said, now he's a professor at Moody Bible, so that pain and watching people suffer is hard as an outsider, especially as a family member or a friend. But we know that it is in our brokenness that we need God most. And so that brokenness is used for God to reach people and for us to minister to them, as well for our outreach. What about you Arnie? How have you wrestled with doubt in your life, whether it's from a perspective before coming to Christ, or even as an adult who's now been walking with Christ for some time?

A: I think as a nonbeliever, my big thing was all roads lead to Heaven, and you couldn't tell the difference between one road or another, as long as you didn't harm anybody else, and tried to do good, that all roads led somewhere. So I kind of went, started that direction. And then the more I was searching, I thought, well, that, you know, maybe all roads don't lead to Heaven, because there's some pretty crazy things out there. And then I was talking to my brother one time, this was years before I became saved, and he said that, you know, all roads don't lead to Heaven. And he said, the reason he knows that is because of Jesus. So he said the real issue is, if you're going to say all roads lead to Heaven, then what you're really saying is that Jesus is a liar. That's really the issue is, because Jesus said He's the Way, the Truth and the Life, He's the only way. So either Jesus is a complete liar, and the worst person that's ever lived, because He's fooled all these people, or your way: all roads lead to Heaven is right. But it's one or the other. It cannot be both. So either Jesus is a liar and all roads lead to Heaven, or Jesus is telling the truth and you need to follow Him. So that was kind of the beginning of my journey towards Jesus.

C: Well I have a question though, Arnie and it's actually for Nat too. I want to know how you've wrestled with doubt, Nat and Arnie, because you both grew up in a Christian environment. So how do you, where do you think you started wrestling with doubt? Like how, where do you, where did that start?

A: Yeah, it was all head knowledge though, at least for me, and not heart knowledge. So I had all the information, but it most certainly didn't impact my behavior at all. So head knowledge without heart knowledge is a very dangerous thing for sure.

N: Yeah. You know, I was raised in a Christian home, went to a Christian school, attended church my whole life. Home life was far from perfect. I came from a very dysfunctional family. So I kind of got both a real world perspective, while being, I think encapsulated in and around believers in the Word of God. But it really wasn't, until I would say my early twenties, that I began really wrestling with faith. It was that part where I started going, well, is this really real or is this just the faith of my parents or my friends? And so I started to look around, and I started listening, and I realized we were all asking the same question, Christian, atheist, Christian, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, it really didn't matter. We were all struggling with the same questions of, why am I here? You know, if there's a God, why is there evil? If there is a God that's described in the Bible, why is evil so prevalent? Why won't He do something with it? Is He either not powerful enough or is He really not that good? How do we know that there is a soul? I mean, so I just started getting through that point.

It could have been my time in college too, but also observation, but I really began wrestling and struggling with these concepts. And honestly, I had to come to a point, where I reconciled the fact that I would pursue truth wherever it led. And if that meant away from Christianity, I was willing to let it happen. That was scary. That was deeply troubling that it could. But what I came to find out after studying world religions, after studying philosophy, after studying what the world has to offer, in comparison to Christianity, came to a point, where I realized Christianity provides the most reasonable answers for life's hardest questions.

Do I still have questions? Absolutely. Do I still have doubts? Yes, I do. I don't know if I'll ever come to a hundred percent certainty that what I believe is true, but I'm at like 99%, [Right]. And I think that's an important demarcation for all of us, is that you don't, I don't think on this side of Heaven will ever reach 100%, but we can be as reasonable as possible, just like a judge would in a case. And so it's been a process, and it's a process even today. But the reality is our doubts, your doubts, my doubts, and the doubts of our listeners, has actually been part of our story and our journey to strengthen our faith.

C: You bring up the hundred percent, and I remember my friend's dog died, and she called me, do dogs go to Heaven? And I said, let me get back to you on that. So I researched, researched, and I came up with, there's a 50/50 chance. But I said, here's the good news. When we meet our Creator, we'll be in 100% agreement with whatever he has.

N: And that is the perfect answer. And that's exactly right. The things that we're so concerned about today, we won't necessarily be concerned about in the future, when we're face to face with our Savior.

You see, I believe every Christian can strengthen their faith through doubt, just like we have. I believe that you can strengthen your faith by doing three faith-building actions. We'll discover these faith-building actions as we look at three biblical doubters, three people in Scripture who each used doubt to strengthen their faith.

As we begin our journey in Scripture in Mark Chapter 9, we're going to begin in Verse 20. Let me set the scene. Jesus is returning with Peter, James, and John to the disciples from the Mount of Transfiguration. He returns to a scene of people and religious leaders arguing. A man in the crowd identifies Jesus and calls out to Him to heal his son, who is possessed by a demon. That's where we'll pick it up in Verse 20.

“So they brought the boy. But when the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth.

“How long has this been happening?” Jesus asked the boy’s father.

He replied, “Since he was a little boy. ²² The spirit often throws him into the fire or into water, trying to kill him. Have mercy on us and help us if you can.”

“What do you mean, ‘If I can’?” Jesus asked. “Anything is possible if a person believes.”

The father instantly cried out, “I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!” (NLT, Mark 9:20-24)

Jesus was building his reputation as a healer and miracle worker. He could heal the sick and the crippled. He could even cast out demons. This man had encountered the disciples and asked for their help, but they could not remove this demon from the man’s son. The father must have followed the disciples knowing they would be reunited with Jesus. This boy is brought before Jesus, and immediately, he is abused by this demon. The man asks for mercy and help. And then

he adds, “if you can.” There is that hint of doubt. He is showing his cards. He has no other option, no other hope for his boy. All he has is a little bit of faith.

One commentary I read said this of faith, “True faith is always aware how small and inadequate it is...The risk of faith is more costly to the father than bringing his son to Jesus, for he can talk about his son, but he must “cry out” for faith. True faith takes no confidence in itself, nor does it judge Jesus by the weakness of his followers. It looks to the More Powerful One.”¹

He sees and hears this little bit of faith. From that little bit of faith, Jesus assures the man that anything is possible for those who believe. This man, says, “Jesus, I do believe! Help my unbelief!” Here in Verse 24, we find the first faith-building action **You Admit Your Doubt**.

This man is honest, humble, doubting, and yet is faithful. He *knows* Jesus is the solution for his son’s affliction, but he has doubts. He doesn’t lie about it. He admits it. He owns his doubt, but he admits his doubt, so it can be used to strengthen his faith. And the result is that his son is healed.

Prior to becoming a pastor, I was in full-time leadership development. When I would sit down with a client, I would ask them self-awareness questions. I was trying to gauge how aware they were of the current reality of their leadership, of their team, and their organization. It was not uncommon to hear delusions of grandeur. I would have to ask a leader or leadership team if they wanted a pat on the back. If so, I wasn’t their guy. If they wanted help and wanted to improve, then they would need to admit what’s really going on.

Because here’s the reality: You can’t improve what you don’t manage. And you can’t manage what you don’t know and frankly admit. So to strengthen your faith through doubt, you’ll need to admit your doubts. God already knows your doubts. He knows everything. You ain’t fooling Him! And guess what, you ain’t fooling any of us. Why? Because we all have doubts! It’s true. Each one of us has struggled in our faith. If you haven’t, then either you are lying or you have blind faith. Neither of those is preferred.

So the first action to strengthening your faith through doubt is by admitting your doubt. This is what the soldier did. You should admit your doubt too.

¹ Edwards, J. R. (2002). [*The Gospel according to Mark*](#) (p. 280). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos.

N: Cara, that quote I read, that we shouldn't judge Jesus by the weaknesses of his followers, I think it's an important point. Don't you?

C: Well, I mean, I think people might be sick of me repeating myself, but I always say how Christians behave, has no bearing on whether or not Christianity is true. So what is Christianity at its core: Did the Resurrection happen? And to research that, to seek out truth, how Christians behave has no bearing on whether or not this is true. And that's what you should always focus on, especially when there's people who aren't, who say they're Christians, who aren't exactly living that Christian life.

N: And there that gets into a whole other debate: you know, whether people are authentically saved or not. But the reality is, we need to always be pointing people back to Jesus. And that's why, when I meet a nonbeliever, and we're talking, and I ask him the question, Hey, have you ever actually just walked with Jesus? And they tend to say, Uh, no. And I go, Okay, well here's what I mean by that. Have you ever just read through a Gospel? Have you ever just listened to Jesus from His own mouth? Have you watched how He interacted with people? And people when you ask that, they always say, Well, no, not really. And so I just say, you know, I give you this challenge. Read the book of John, listen to Jesus' words, and let Him show you who He is, and make your judgment based off of that, and not based on what I have said, or what someone else may have said or done. Instead, go back to the founder of our faith, and see what your conclusion is, based on His words and His life.

C: I turn that around too, and say that as believers, we put a lot of emphasis on non-believers acting a certain way. Like we get so bent out of shape when a nonbeliever does something, but why would we expect them to act like Christians, when they're not Christian? And so we should just see lost people, and not focus on what they're doing that is sinful.

N: Right. Because at best, what we could do is prescribe behavior, but at the end of the day, that behavior does not reform the heart. You always have to deal with the soul of the person, in order to have true life transformation, and true heart change. [Truth.] So Arnie, I find great encouragement that in the story of the father, he admits his doubt, but also that Jesus doesn't credit that disbelief against him. There's no guilt, there's no shame. There's no lecture. Instead, the faith that he did have and did declare, is what Jesus focused on. What are your thoughts on that?

A: Yeah, I think that is tremendously awesome, because a lot of times in a relationship, if somebody doubts you, it's like, Whoa, it's such a big thing, and all of that. With Jesus, He just took it in stride. And doubt is a natural thing in some regards, not enough to stop you, not enough to stop your growth, but I think it is tremendous that Jesus didn't define people by their doubts.

N: He defines them, by who they are in Him, and also He sees the faith that they do have, and that's true for this father, but it's true for us today. Now let's break away to another part of the message here and talk about that management principle, that you can't manage what you don't know. So why do you feel it's good to take an inventory of how you're doing spiritually?

C: Well, God leaves it open to always know more about Him. I think if you're sitting on your high horse thinking that you've got it all figured out, you're probably going to run into some trouble with that. You're going to get challenged at some point, and you're probably being tripped up, and you don't even know it. So I think it's really important, to see how far you've come, but then to not get so cocky about it, and to keep going. You know, this is what's so cool about God, and just this world we're living in. The truths are already there. We get this awesome adventure of discovering things that are going on with our planet and with God. So I think it's really important to take inventory, and make sure that you're still learning, and you don't know it all. That's such a good place to be.

N: Right. We will never really meet the finish line here on this Earth. So it's a constant and never ending process that we're in. I know as a pastor, it was always a challenge trying to assess where people are at, and people would come into my office and say, you know, I'm struggling spiritually. I don't know God like I should; I want to know Him better. Is there anything I can do to gauge where I'm at? And I would say, you know, it's kind of a heart check, and you know, talking to God, but I came to find out that there are actually tools that are available to assess where you're at, and where you can grow, and that also provide assistance in your growth. Arnie, would you talk about that?

A: Yeah, I'd like to say too that we measure what we value. I agree. You can't manage what you don't know. But we do measure what we value, and especially on spiritual things and struggles, and how long we're struggling with things, we've found how struggles really block you from moving closer to Jesus today than you were yesterday. And so, you know, we've developed tools that help people move closer to Jesus each day, based on giving them Scripture that matches

their struggles, and letting the Holy Spirit help them get through the day, if you will, or win the day, and goTandem is one of those things that we've had great success with.