

Doubt

Sum Up

Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is part of the faith journey.

Scripture References: Matthew 11:2-6; Matthew 14:28-31; Matthew 26:69-75; John 1:21-34; John 20:24-29; John 21:15-17; 1 Corinthians 13:12

Key Verse

"I have faith; help my lack of faith!" (Mark 9:24)

Parent E-mail

The physical changes in teens are obvious. We literally get to witness them grow. We are well aware of the struggles that accompany this outward growth. However, the most significant changes in our teens are the changes that are happening in their processing and reasoning skills. The largest shift that occurs in teens from middle to high school teens is the movement from concrete thinking to what developmental theorists call "formal operational" thinking.

The shift in thinking can open teens to new and sometimes scary thoughts. During this time, teens may first experience doubt where they formally had faith. As children they generally accepted what they were taught without question. Now? Not so much. This unseen and often unprocessed struggle is very much real.

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This week we will encounter some of the Bible's biggest doubters and through them we will encounter the grace of a God who shifts doubt to even greater faith. Please pray for us as we gather this week.

Leader Note

Some youth want easy answers to faith questions. These easy, unprocessed answers can stunt faith formation in teens and put God in a “box” that is much too small. Sometimes attendance will fade at this time as teens begin to process doubt in an environment they feel that no one else is having doubts in. Creating an environment where teens can express and process doubt is actually critical in the faith formation of them all. Do the teens in our care feel secure enough to express doubt? How do you respond when a teen challenges a belief? Your non-anxious response and transparency can become a beacon of faith and an anchor as they encounter the shifting sands of doubt.

Frederick Buechner said, “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” Times of doubt and of assurance are part of our journey. Are we willing to walk with teens all the way through faith *and* doubt? Thanks for taking the journey with them.

Theology and the Topic

The New Testament is a story of faith. Over and over again, Jesus points to examples of faith. Faith is encouraged, faith is expected, and faith is rewarded. Faith is a gift. But what about doubt? The Scriptures do not necessarily encourage doubt, but

they do show us that even the closest companions of Jesus (especially Peter) dealt with doubt. The amazing thing about the disciples experiencing doubt is that Jesus doesn't doubt his disciples. Maybe the message is that regardless of our doubt, Jesus still has faith in us. Just as Jesus was planting seeds of faith in those that followed, he was planting seeds of faith in the disciples as well. It took the disciples a long time to "get it." In the final hours of Jesus' life most of the disciples abandoned him and hid. Only after the Resurrection did they truly believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

The most famous doubter, of course, is the disciple Thomas. In an act of heavenly humility, Jesus patiently allows Thomas to touch his wounds in order to believe. What a Savior! Jesus didn't reprimand Thomas. Because of his love for Thomas he used the circumstances to invite him into deeper faith.

As we know through church history, the disciples went on to spread the good news of the kingdom of God in hostile places and eventually many were martyred for their faith. The shift from doubt to fearless faith began when they encountered a risen Lord who encouraged instead or reprimanded and through that invited them into a faith that was deep and real—a faith literally to die for.

Leader Reflection

God has a plan for our teens. You are part of that plan. Whether you realize it or not, you answered the call by agreeing to work with them. As we prepare to lead this week consider the following questions:

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- What faith doubts have you worked through that led to a stronger faith?
- Do you remember some of the doubts you had as a teen?
- When faced with doubts (or even the poor theology) of teens, is your tendency to want to fix or faithfully walk alongside?
- Are you easily frustrated with teens who express doubts?
- How are you creating an environment where teens can express faith and doubt?

Prayer

Jesus, as you humbly invited Thomas to touch your side, I pray that I would be willing to humble myself in directing our teens to a deeper faith. I know that they are yours and that you are calling them to yourself. Help me to relax and serve knowing that you are in charge of their faith, not me. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Supplies Needed

- Biblical skit props

Gather Up

High Energy Option: Count 'Em Up

Form pairs and have partners face each other with one hand behind their back. The object of the game is to be the first one to count the total fingers that will be presented on “three.” To begin, each partner will decide how many fingers they are going to present on one hand. On your count of “three,” each partner brings that hand in front of

their face. The first partner to count all the fingers present from both partners and yell the correct answer wins. The defeated must take a seat. Those remaining form new partners and continue until you have one winner. Play several rounds.

Debrief Questions

- *What was difficult about this game?*
- *Did you try to predict the total before “three”?*
How did that work out for you?
- *Is it difficult not to have all the information? Why?*

Low Energy Option: Count Off

The object of this game is to count all the people in the room. Sounds simple huh? Each person will close his or her eyes and one person will begin by saying “one” then someone else will say “two” and so on until you have counted everyone in the room. The twist is if more than one person speaks at a time you have to start all over. (Resist the urge to interfere and to assign numbers.) Let them figure it out. Also, they cannot assign numbers. This will be incredibly frustrating and fun to watch.

Debrief Questions

- *What was difficult about this game?*
- *Did you try to predict who was next? How did that work out for you?*
- *Is it difficult not to have all the information? Why?*

Warm Up

Faith Spectrum

Invite teens to stand and meet in the middle of the room/meeting area. Designate each opposing

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wall as the ends of a “spectrum.” One wall will represent “Strongly Agree” and the other wall will represent “Strongly Disagree.” The area in between the two walls represents varying degrees of agreement/disagreement. During this activity you will make a series of statements and your teens will stand somewhere along the spectrum to represent their answer. Tell them that they need to be prepared to defend their answer if you call on them. After each statement call on a few of your teens at various places along the spectrum to hear why they are at that particular point on the spectrum.

Leader Audible

As difficult as it may be, try not to correct teens’ statements during this exercise. Use this time to establish a baseline for openness and trust. You may be surprised at what you find in terms of great answers and real doubts that are expressed. There may be some debate along the way with your teens. Allow it as long as it is healthy debate and not mean-spirited.

Statements

- God loves everyone.
- God loves Christians more than non-Christians.
- Everyone has faith.
- Only some people have faith.
- The Bible answers all of life’s questions.
- The Bible has some of life’s answers.
- People express their faith in different ways.
- People of faith should express their faith in specific ways.
- People of faith always have doubts.
- People of faith sometimes have doubts.
- God answers prayers.

- God does not answer prayers.
- God is most pleased when we live by faith.
- God is offended when we express doubts.
- The most important aspect of faith is love of God.
- The most important aspect of faith is love of our neighbors.
- Heaven is for good people.
- Heaven is for imperfect people.

Invite the teens to be seated.

Ask:

- *What are some things that you don't completely understand but still believe in?*
- *How you can believe in something and still have doubts about it?*
- *Can we ever fully know and understand everything about God? Does that mean we should not have faith in God?*
- *Are our doubts about faith offensive to God?*
- *Do you think that it is OK to doubt?*

Look Up***Doubting Dudes and Scripture Selfies*****Ask:**

- *Can you recall any famous doubters in the Bible? Who are they?*

Say: “Several of Jesus’ disciples and even his own cousin were doubters. John the Baptist, Peter, and Thomas each had points in their journey with Jesus where they doubted. John the Baptist once sent someone to his cousin Jesus to ask, “Are you the one?” Peter denied even knowing Jesus when Jesus

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was taken away by the officials. Thomas needed to touch the wounds of Jesus to have faith in him.”

Leader Audible

If you have some teens who are pretty biblically literate, ask them to retell the stories mentioned above to get others up to speed.

Say: “As we begin our next activity consider how those closest to Jesus had doubts about him.”

Scripture Selfie

Divide the teens into three groups (groups can be as small as two people). Assign each team one of the characters and Scriptures below. The role of each team is to study the verses and then come up with two to four “selfies” that would capture the story and explain it to someone who had not read it before. Each group will need a narrator to describe each selfie. The only rule is that everyone in the group must participate, even if they participate as an inanimate object in the snapshot.

Leader Audible

Raid the church closets and provide a couple of props to add zest to this activity.

Give each group ten minutes to read the Scriptures and prepare their selfies.

The selfies are presented as snapshots that describe each character encountering his doubt. As each group comes forward, they are to get in place and present their scene as the selfie tells the story. Once the players are in position our narrator says, “Selfie!” they freeze for a couple of seconds. Then the narrator describes the scene. Groups continue

to move through each selfie with the narrator describing each snapshot.

Scriptures for Preparation

- John the Baptist: Matthew 11:2-6; John 1:29-34
- Peter: Matthew 14:28-31; Matthew 26:69-75
- Thomas: John 20:24-29

Talk Up

When each group has had an opportunity to present, ask:

- *What surprised you about these famous doubters?*
- *What did each of them have in common?*
- *How does Jesus respond to John the Baptist? to Peter? to Thomas?*
- *Did Jesus reprimand any of them for doubting him?*
- *What does that say about Jesus?*
- *What does that tell us about a relationship with God?*
- *Can you describe an experience where you felt God's presence in your life even when you have had doubts?*

Wrap Up

The pastor and writer Frederick Buechner said, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

Say: "We all will encounter doubts in our faith. It is important as we encounter doubts that we allow them to drive us toward, not away from God. Your doubts are not too big for God. As we encounter doubts along the way, know that many can be answered through Scripture and prayer."

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Others though may never be answered and are a special part of our journey that requires faith and trust in Jesus. He can be and always will be able to be trusted.”

Prayer

Circle up and hold hands. Challenge your teens to become quiet and consider one doubt they might be struggling with. Tell them they are going to do the “squeeze hand” prayer around the circle prayer. When the squeeze gets to them they can say, “Where there is doubt, God help me to pursue faith.” When it gets back to you, the leader, close in prayer.