

It's OK to NOT be OK

Doubt

I want to start with a question. How many of you have ever found it difficult to believe in God? You don't have to raise your hand if you don't want, but if you're really honest, how many of you have found it difficult to believe in God?

Maybe you have questions, academic, historical questions, and some of the answers you've heard about faith just don't add up for you. Maybe in life has been the realities you've experienced really don't feel congruent with the story of a good and loving God. Maybe just the prayers you've prayed haven't been answered. Maybe part of your life experience has been a sense of letdown about where God *could* have showed up, but He didn't.

You know, we've been in this series called *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, and we've looked at some pretty difficult topics like suffering and loneliness. I have to admit, part of me kind of goes back to the question, "Well, God, why do we have to talk about this in the first place? Why do people go through these experiences in the first place? Isn't this why it can be so challenging, so difficult to believe?"

There's a writer named Philip Yancey. Many of you know his work. Someone wrote him a letter and kind of expressed why they found it so difficult to believe in God.

Listen to what this person wrote. They said, "I have been going through an enormously difficult couple of years—at times, it seems I will crack beneath the pressure. All of this has shaken my faith in Jesus Christ, and I am still trying to pick up the pieces of a once unshakable faith. [...] I look back on all I've said and done in regards to him, and I wonder, 'Did I really mean what I was saying?' I mean, how can I say I have faith in God when I constantly wonder if He is really there? I hear of people praying for things and that God told them this and that, but I find when I say those 'spiritual' things I am only trying to impress someone or just being plain dishonest. It makes me sick to my stomach to think of it."

Maybe that's you. Maybe that's someone you know or someone you love. Maybe you carry these kinds of questions. Maybe you hold these kinds of doubts. Maybe you find yourself thinking, "Gosh, when I go to church, I say

these things, but I almost feel like I'm being dishonest sometimes. I almost feel like I'm not authentically expressing what's actually going on."

I just want to say if that's you, if you've ever had doubts or disappointments, you are in the right place. It is okay. Whether you believe in the Bible or not, the Bible is not just a book for believers; the Bible is a book for doubters.

There was a time when Jesus' disciples doubted and they said so right to His face. Jesus didn't send them away or "fire" them from being His close followers. Instead, He answered their doubts.

It was one day when a storm hit Jesus and His disciples. The Bible calls the storm a "furious squall".

Did you know that there have been about 2,000 shipwrecks in Lake Erie? 800 to 1,000 of them are still in lake. When the wind gets blowing waves can get to be 10 -13 feet – that's enough to break apart most boats. Being out in a boat *can* be very dangerous!

The furious squall in this story was a huge storm. Some of Jesus' first followers were experienced sailors, they'd seen storms before, but this one was more than their skills could handle.

That's the kind of storms that come to all of our lives – problems and events that are more than we can handle. Maybe you love somebody, and they die, or maybe somebody you love hurts you and the relationship dies or it feels like you're going to die. Or the storms come with that call from the school or the police station that no parent wants to get. Maybe for you the squall is when the doctor says that word we fear most: cancer. Or maybe it's something financial.

Weathering storms has to do with the questions asked. In this story, the first question is one the disciples ask: they say to Jesus, ***"don't you care?"***

That sounds like they're doubting Jesus' concern for them, doesn't it? Well it sounds that way because they were. The Bible isn't some set of sterilized spiritual stories. It's full of real people with real reactions in real life situations.

It's not hard to imagine why they have doubts of Jesus. I mean, the boat is sinking and where's Jesus? Sound asleep in the back! Did you ever know anybody who could sleep through anything? I don't know if Jesus was just a super-deep-sleeper or what, but sleeping through a storm like this while the ship looks like it's going to sink? No wonder they ask Jesus, "don't you care?"

Have you ever doubted if God really cares? Has pandemic and the turmoil of the past year brought questions to your mind, like: “God, don’t You see what’s going on? Don’t You care?”

It’s one thing to know in our minds that God promises He really cares, and to know that God doesn’t break His Word. But it’s another thing altogether to trust deep down in your heart that God cares when you’re afraid, or confused, and the waves are above your head.

Sometimes, we can get the idea that, if we trust God and if we’re following Him, then God should somehow pony-up and not allow certain storms to come our way – those serious, doubt-inducing, fear-inducing storms. Jesus, however, was straight-up with us. He said ***“In this world, you will have many troubles.”*** If you’re not in it now, you’ve either just come out of trouble, or you’re headed into it. ***“In this world, you will have many troubles.”***

Other folks, hear some preachers say that “if you just believe hard enough, all your doubts will go away, and all your troubles will go away.” They think that if you believe God’s going to do a miracle, and you “claim” that miracle, that is demand that miracle from God, then God’s GOT to do it. But Jesus never promised to save you from problems and pain. He promises to save you through storms. Sometimes the best learning and growth in your character happens when suddenly the wind starts howling in your life. You grow so much closer to God and trust Him so much deeper.

The disciples ask, “Jesus, don’t you care?” They were doubting God cares. Now, it’s **not** OK to doubt God when you are being stubborn and intentionally choosing to not believe God, and you’re doing that over and over. That kind of doubt can destroy you. But this kind of doubt that the disciples show, is coming from their fear and their weakness, and they’re turning to God. It’s o.k. to be honest with God about your doubts. In fact, it’s important. In this story it says “don’t you care?” was something they *cried out* to Jesus.

It’s interesting, if you take the word “cry”? and you search the Scriptures? the word comes up over and over again. Like even just in the book of Psalms, if you start reading through, it speaks over and over and over again of crying, of crying out to God. More than 50 times in just that one book of the Bible the word shows up. And so often it’s talking about crying out to God in pain and doubt and confusion, “don’t you care?”

What this means for you is : it’s not only OK to cry out to God with whatever you’re feeling, it’s IMPORTANT. I mean, think about it: part of having

a close relationship with anybody is sharing with them what you're feeling, right? Why should your connection with God be any different? Cry out to Him with whatever questions and doubts and misgivings you have. He can handle it. It's what His followers do. It's part of learning love Him more and trust Him more. When your life is filled with BIG troubles, and even little troubles, come, pour out to God whatever it is you're feeling. He can handle it. Your honesty and willingness to go to Him can bring you closer to Him.

So the disciples *cry out* to Jesus, Jesus wakes up, and He speaks just a few words, and amazingly the wind and the waves are gone. Jesus takes care of this particular storm with just a few words.

Now, I know we all wish that that was the pattern for weathering storms: "cry out to God, God'll do a miracle, then it's all good." We wish that was the norm, but it's not. Even for the disciples in this situation, Jesus calming the storm wasn't the end of them learning to weather it. After He calms the storm, He asks them the next question for storm-weathering: ***"Why are you so afraid?"***

I think we hear that question and maybe we assume that Jesus is telling them they *shouldn't* be afraid, like He's getting on them for being afraid. But that's not what's going on. When He asks "why are you so afraid?", He's trying to help them see something. Like we said, the disciples, some of them had spent their whole lives on this lake, and they had weathered all kinds of storms before on their own. And truth is, that's why they were so rattled by this storm. They were used to handling storms themselves and this one they just *couldn't* handle on their own.

I love this story because we're so much like them. When the storms hit, we do what comes naturally: we try to take care of it ourselves, fix it ourselves, we try to handle everything ourselves. After all, we're very much into self-reliance, right? Self-reliance is a good thing, right? Isn't that what we want for our kids? We want our kids to be strong enough to go out into the world, earn a living, ... and pay for our retirement.

When it comes to the really *big* storms of life, "self" doesn't help – but hurts. When the big storms of life come my way and I turn to self and ask self to help, self can't get it done. Self can say "try harder," or self can say "work a lot," or "have another drink," or "go shopping" to escape the pain" but self can't help. If self-help could really help, then Jesus would have just given us all a gift card to the nearest bookstore and said "Go get a self-help book. Get a

latte. Have a nice life.” No, when it really counts, self can’t help. And so, I’m going to need some other help. So I’m going to have to ask somebody else to help who can really help.

And as simple a thing as it may sound, this is real important in facing the doubt-inducing, security-rattling storm that have come my way in life. When times of trouble come and my world is threatened, I’ve got to place my hope and trust and confidence somewhere other than myself.

Maybe what God’s been saying to you through your anxiety and struggles is this: “the more you look to yourself, the worse the storms are going to rock you.” So God says, “You gotta look to Me because you can’t get yourself through this, only I can.”

Friends, one of the greatest things God is trying to do in our lives is strip us of our dependency on self. It’s painful, but we need Him to do this. He’s trying to teach all of us to trust ultimately, only in Him.

And maybe you’re thinking, “Well, gee thanks, Paul, but how do I do that? How do I learn to trust God more and rely on myself less?” Well, I’m glad you asked me that, because that brings us to the next question in the story.

Next Jesus asked His disciples, “***Do you still have no faith?***” Again, this may seem like a kind of scolding question, but it’s really not. He was trying to remind them of why they could trust Him in the storm.

Even though this storm comes fairly early in their years spent with Jesus, they had already experienced so much. They had seen Him heal diseases, they’d seen Him cast out demons, battle the forces of darkness like no one else could. They’d seen Him do who-knows-HOW-many great things. But when the storm came, it was like they forgot all they’d already experienced. So “Do you still have no faith?”, that wasn’t Jesus chewing them out; He was trying to get them to focus on all the reasons they already had to have faith and confidence that He would come through for them.

For me, when I look at the pandemic going on right now and how deadly that can be and it can spread without knowing it, I can become afraid. When I think of how tired I am of wearing a face mask, or not gathering with friends and family just to have fun and enjoy them, I can grow weary or have a pity-party for myself. But then when I look back in my life, and I remember there were other times – when I was a student and we had nothing, or the last economic crisis

when our house value fell and for several years we owed more to the bank than it was worth. Those times were just as tough although tough in different ways than what we are going through now. But every one God somehow provided and got Sue and me through. And when I remember that, then I know that God will do the same today. That's kind of what I think Jesus was trying to get His disciples to do when He asked them, ***“Do you still have no faith?”*** Jesus is trying to get His disciples to remember all that they've seen God do already in their lives. Jesus asks the question to help the disciples realize that they can be sure that God will do the same loving things, right then to carry them through the fix they found themselves in. ***“Do you still have no faith?”*** is a question that moves them to remember what God HAS done, so that they trust that they have nothing to fear.

Another word that's just all over the place in the book of Psalms is the word “remember.” “Remember” means to intentionally bring to mind and dwell on what God has already done for us. And when the storms rage, we can gain confidence in God by intentionally remembering the other crises He's brought us through. We *can* remember and gain confidence in God, but that doesn't mean we *will*.

Right now, right where you sit, think about something: think about the times when you thought you were sunk; remember when it felt like there was no hope for you, no way out, and somehow God made a way. Maybe how He got you through of a real low point in your life, or got you out of a sudden crisis that seemed way, way bigger than you could handle. Maybe He just recently got you through it. Either way, you look back on it and you know it was Him, not you, who got you through.

When the winds blow, the waters rise, and it seems like we're going to drown, we can weather the storm by hearing God calling us to remember how He's gotten us through so much before. I know there may be times in your life that you feel like maybe God wasn't there for you, but remember all that God has brought you through. He didn't bring you this far to leave you. He didn't teach you to swim to let you drown. He didn't give you faith in Him just to destroy it in doubt and despair. Whatever you're going through today, I promise you, you stick with Him, He'll stick with you. You will find that whatever you are facing today WILL NOT be the storm where God DOESN'T come through for you. He's been there for you before, and He'll be there for you again.

The last question for weathering the storms is a question that the first Christ-followers asked that through our storms, God is continually leading us to ask: **“Who is this?”** In our storms, the main thing God is up to is not just getting us through them. God’s aim is to draw you closer to a deeper, more personal and fuller understanding of Him.

Through this storm, the disciples realized they were in the presence of so much more than a great teacher and healer. Their own Scriptures said, “O Lord God Almighty, who is like you? You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.” –Psalm 89:8-9 (NIV) They knew that the power to calm that storm is a power that belonged only to God. This deeper realization just blew them away.

The truth is a lot of us have an overly domesticated view of Jesus. We believe in to a toned-down, meek and mild Jesus, and fail to grasp who we are dealing with -- who it is that is living and active in our lives. And it’s only through the storms that we get a fuller, deeper grasp of who this is we follow. We forget that the Jesus we follow could stand up in the boat and just SPEAK a hurricane or a typhoon or a tornado into submission.

I realize that when we hear this story and we see Jesus calm the storm so impressively, so instantaneously, we wish He would do that in our lives, too. We might say “If He worked that way in my life, if He calmed my storms like that, I’d appreciate who He really is, too!”

It’s ok to hope and pray for miracles, but what’s more important is to cling to what God has already said He would do to get you through. Jesus had already said to the disciples **“we’re going to the other side of the lake”**. He didn’t say “let’s go out into the middle and drown.”

Miracle or no miracle in whatever storm you are facing in your life, He has promised that one way or another, He’s going to get you to the other side of it. I love these words from the Bible, they’re words we can all cling to get us through whatever storms come our way.

“When you go through deep waters of great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown!” (Isaiah 43:2) When miracles come and God intervenes impressively in our lives, it’s a great thing, but the more important thing is to learn to weather the storms by clinging to who Jesus is and what Jesus has already said.

Here’s the deal: Trust Him. Trust Him when He promises that He will never allow anything to happen that can take you away from Him or that will be

so big that He won't get you through it. Whatever storm you're facing, He has promised one way or another to get you through it.

We don't know how long this story took to happen in real time. From the time the storm struck until the time that they knew everything was going to be OK. And in our own lives, we can't know where we are in the storms of our lives, how long it will be until God shows us that our confidence in Him is well-placed. All's I know is that there is One who speaks these words to your heart of hearts. No matter what you're going through, ***"When you go through deep waters of great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown."***

Amen.