



Session 6: Faith & Doubt



Martin Luther, Billy Graham, Mother Teresa and many other spiritual giants have confessed their doubts about God.

In truth we probably all experience both faith and doubt. It's good to know that faith and doubt can co-exist. There is much in this world to convince us of the goodness and reality of God (the birth of a baby, a beautiful view, answers to prayers) and much to cause even the most faith-filled people to question God (suffering, senseless tragedy, the silence of God). Ultimately our faith comes down to trusting a person – Jesus, who seemed to believe in the reality of God and his kingdom as easily as we believe in gravity.

Previous session review

- Recap on your experience of the previous challenge. How did it go? Was it helpful?
- If you weren't able to try the challenge, explore the question: Where and how did you experience God last week?

Read

Read the passage several times through, slowly and prayerfully. It might help to use your imagination to picture the scene. At the end of the text you will find helpful background information in our 'Setting the Scene' section.

As you read, look out for shockers and blockers.

Shockers – a phrase, word, image or something from the text that resonates, stands out or connects with you.

Blockers – something from the text that raises questions for you.

Mark 9.14-29

When Jesus and his three disciples came back down, they saw a large crowd around the other disciples. The teachers of the Law of Moses were arguing with them. The crowd was really surprised to see Jesus, and everyone hurried over to greet him. Jesus asked, "What are you arguing about?" Someone from the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought my son to you. A demon keeps him from talking. Whenever the demon attacks my son, it throws him to the ground and makes him foam at the mouth and grit his teeth in pain. Then he becomes stiff. I asked your disciples to force out the demon, but they couldn't do it."

Jesus said, "You people don't have any faith! How much longer must I be with you? Why do I have to put up with you? Bring the boy to me." They brought the boy, and as soon as the demon saw Jesus, it made the boy shake all over. He fell down and began rolling on the ground and foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" The man answered, "Ever since he was a child. The demon has often tried to kill him by throwing him into a fire or into water. Please have pity and help us if you can!"

Jesus replied, "Why do you say 'if you can'? Anything is possible for someone who has faith!" Right away the boy's father shouted, "I do have faith! Please help me to have even more."

When Jesus saw that a crowd was gathering fast, he spoke sternly to the evil spirit that had kept the boy from speaking or hearing. He said, "I order you to come out of the boy! Don't ever bother him again." The spirit screamed and made the boy shake all over. Then it went out of him.

Setting the scene:

- Three of the disciples (Peter, James and John) had just witnessed the 'Transfiguration' (Mark 9.2-8), where Jesus appeared to them in his true glory. They were returning from the mountain with Jesus (asking all kinds of questions to try and comprehend what had just happened) and ran into a situation whereby the other disciples' failure to heal a boy was causing a commotion.
- There is doubt and lack of faith all over this event. The Scribes' 'argument' may well have been over the disciples failure to produce healing, the disciples were wondering why they hadn't the power to perform the healing, the father is also doubting the disciples' ability and the crowd were at best confused by the whole situation.
- Jesus' words (probably addressed to the crowds, rather than the disciples) in verse 19 (You people don't have any faith...) is a partial quote from Psalm 95.10 regarding God's patience with faithless generations. In doing so he draws the crowd's attention away from the failure of the disciples.
- Regarding the father's statement: 'Help us if you can' – he is probably weary of his boy's suffering that has nearly killed him, weary of not being able to help him and he has almost lost hope. He confesses his doubts, appealing to Jesus to create in him a heart that can believe more firmly. Jesus responds with compassion and restores the boy's health and gives him a new future.

The boy looked dead, and almost everyone said he was. But Jesus took hold of his hand and helped him stand up. After Jesus and the disciples had gone back home and were alone, they asked him, "Why couldn't we force out that demon?" Jesus answered, "Only prayer can force out that kind of demon."

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

Reflect

After you have all had time to read the text, pause and be still to listen to God through the Scriptures.

Begin your reflection time by each naming your shockers and blockers. Listen carefully to each other, share your thoughts and reflect on this passage together.

You might also like to explore these questions:

Q1. Do you think that doubt and faith can co-exist?

Q2. What encourages you to believe in God? What causes questions and doubts?

Group Prayer

Commit to praying for each other this week. Pray for God's peace to be with you in your hearts, minds, homes and places you work. Pray that each will person will find a richer experience of God as you keep company with him this week.

Respond

Faith & Doubt challenge: This week create a challenge that might help you to increase your faith in God, or choose one of the following.

Challenge ideas:

1. Reason for God

You might like to investigate rational arguments for the existence of God and read some good books on this theme – for example, Dr Tim Keller's book *Reason for God*. You might also be interested in Andy Frost's book *Losing Faith* which features the stories of nine people who have struggled to believe. John Ortberg's book *Faith and Doubt* is also a great read on this theme.

2. Lectio Your Doubts

You could explore this Scripture passage further by using a practice called lectio divina. As you re-read through this session's passage several times, you might like to have a conversation with God about your own questions and doubts – knowing that God understands our partial knowledge of him and our limited human abilities to understand. You might like to follow this up in conversation with a compassionate and wise Christian leader.

3. Faith Building

How about taking some small risks this week? You might like to offer to pray for someone who has specific needs and seek God's healing together? Or talk to someone about your faith and doubts? You might ask God to reveal himself in new and fresh ways this week? Consider some ways in which you can build your faith this week.