



The Thomas Factor - Chapter 4: Emotional Doubt: What if ...?

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The Thomas Factor: Using Your Doubts to Draw Closer to God

This is Chapter 4 of The Thomas Factor: Using Your Doubts to Draw Closer to God. Gary Habermas wrote the book for 'Christians who doubt' or are just a little unsure about their faith. Subsequent chapters will be placed online in due course, and all sections of the book will be linked together.

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Chapter 4 - Emotional Doubt: What if ...?

Listen to people talk about it. Emotional pain can be the very worst hurt of all. Once I heard a person say, "I would literally give my right arm if I could stop doubting. No, I'm really serious. I would give it up without even thinking about it!" Unquestionably, emotional uncertainty can be painful. We have called it the most common and distressing of the three species of doubt. This combination means that it affects many believers who want real relief. Beginning in this chapter we will turn most of our attention to this variety of questioning.

Identifying Emotional Doubt

Emotional religious uncertainty is the most common variety. It is also the most painful. Its chief cause is one's moods and passions, which explains its more subjective nature. But it frequently masquerades as factual doubt by attempting to address the same issues. Following

our major emphasis in this book, we need to concentrate further on the nature of this frequent state of mind.

This species can be identified when the individual is actually judging by how she feels about the subject, rather than the particulars of the subject itself. The most important item is not the bothersome issue, whatever it is, but how the person is responding to it. Distraught psychological states are sometimes evident.

The single most revealing ingredient in identifying emotional struggles is the "What if ...?" element. Sometimes this question is asked directly. On other occasions, it is implied. Rather than accepting the data in a straightforward manner, this response is made in spite of the available facts.

Allison frequently proclaimed her uncertainty about many aspects of her Christian faith. But those who listened carefully knew that she did not question the actual gospel facts of the deity, atoning death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rather, when asked why she always seemed to be in so much unrest regarding her beliefs, Allison responded, "Yes, the gospel facts are strong, but what if Christianity just isn't true? What if, in the end, believers are simply mistaken?"

It is in her response to the gospel that the true nature of Allison's doubt is identified. She did not object to the facts themselves, as some had originally thought. She was bothered by the unlikely scenario that her faith could just somehow be wrong, in spite of all the evidence.

Strangely enough, it appeared that no amount of facts (even those that Allison fully accepted) could cause her to stop wondering if it was still just possible that Christianity might still be false. Here the emotional content of her doubt was evident.

Emotional doubt frequently poses as its factual sister. It has some of the same concerns and raises some of the same questions. Yet, the issues are determined and the evidence is judged by how one feels about them. Conclusions come from one's moods or feelings.

The emotional doubter is often very intelligent and appears to be raising serious objections to the

truthfulness of Christianity. But, in reality, the uncertainty is not primarily factual and the questions are far more subjective.

So what distinguishes emotional from factual doubt? In the former species of uncertainty, the major factor is not the actual issues that are raised, but what is being said and thought about them. In typical cases, the individual's attention is not centered on the specific facts themselves, but on certain unlikely possibilities surrounding them.

Melissa was in constant turmoil as to whether she was really a Christian. She clearly remembered surrendering her life to Christ in faith, trusting him to forgive her sins. Yet, she still repeatedly wondered if she had really said the right words and really meant them.

Bill was a believer who was regularly nagged by a fear of Hell and judgment. He sometimes pictured standing before Jesus' throne and being told to depart to the fires of Hell. This usually happened as he was trying to sleep at night. In order to deal with the pain, he started questioning whether there was, in fact, any such place as Hell.

It is important to notice the main cause of Melissa's and Bill's worries. They both accepted the facts of Christianity. They both knew that there was a time when they tried, with all their heart, to trust Christ. However, their secret fear was that, for some unaccountable reason, they had unconsciously overlooked something crucial. In both cases, their doubt actually focused on the unlikely possibility that they had responded incorrectly to the Lord.

These are very typical responses for emotional doubters. This phenomenon is not so much affected by the results of careful study, but by the improbability that something has fallen between the cracks.

As a result, no amount of factual evidence brings final peace. When his friend gave him reasons to believe in Hell, Bill's fears came back. In fact, they sometimes grew worse.

Often the emotional doubter comes to the conclusion that the search has finally ended and that all is well, only to realize a few days later that something is still amiss. This is a vicious cycle

that actually wages war against the peace that periodically comes. Oddly enough, that peace is often shattered by the thought, "Why am I feeling so well today? I've still not solved problem X." Not surprisingly, the peace doesn't stay around for long!

We have said that, in a very intense sense, much of emotional doubt is actually of the "What if ...?" variety. It is perhaps even chiefly characterized not by what all the facts point to, but rather what minimal possibilities may yet be true.

Melissa and Bill suffered from just such questioning. It was almost as if they asked themselves: what's the worst possible thing that could happen to me? And Jason in the last chapter also went through this stage after he thought his questions were not being answered.

Human beings are able to conjure up all kinds of fears. The questions, "What if Christianity is not true after all?" or, "What if I am not a Christian, in spite of everything I have done?" are really no different than the "What ifs" of our society at large. "What if I get AIDS?" or "What if I flunk next week's big exam?" take the same form. Only the subject matter differs.

Who hasn't experienced these and similar worries? Why should such fears – both religious and secular – surprise us? Doesn't it make sense that we just want to be doubly sure of our most treasured values? But the problem is that this normal desire may be pushed too far, causing our emotional struggles.

At any rate, it is not difficult to get emotionally distraught by the ceaseless questioning of our most cherished beliefs. This is especially so if the focus is on bare possibilities that cannot be touched by the evidence. This is one frequently forgotten aspect of these sorts of concerns: they are almost immune to the facts. A person can always counter, "Yes, I know, but just what if ...?"

One thing is for sure. The pain of emotional doubt is generally worse than that of its two sister species. It sometimes cries out for immediate help.

Emotional uncertainty can be a part of larger issues, too. Irritations lie at the root of these

problems, often in diverse and difficult areas that span a large range: psychological or medical problems, child abuse, or the death of a loved one.

Aggravations to Emotional Doubt

As we did in the last chapter with factual and volitional questioning, we need to explore several conditions that, while they don't exactly cause emotional doubts, do tend to escalate them. Several situations can reinforce an outlook that already has a tendency towards an anxious, worried state. Again, there may be some overlap between these categories, but each represents a unique angle. Our purpose is to provide you with information that will encourage a better grasp of this painful topic, hopefully leading to significant growth and healing.

1. Psychological states. The most common irritant of emotional doubts (and perhaps even all types of uncertainty) is probably psychological states like anxiety or depression. It doesn't take long for agitated moods and feelings to move over to issues regarding our faith. Our concern most frequently centers on those items that are the most meaningful to us. I have spoken to many individuals who assumed that their problem had to do with evidence for faith, only to discover that their brand of questioning had to be dealt with in a different manner. The true focus had to be their attitude towards the subject, rather than the topic itself.

2. Judging by feelings. Another very common problem, especially with Christians who lack assurance of salvation, comes from reacting to situations based on one's feelings. "I don't feel the same way that I used to" or "Sometimes I don't think I'm saved," are regular fare for the counselor. The feeling that Christianity might not be true after all may plague all believers at some time. One is reminded of C.S. Lewis's fictional character Uncle Screwtape, who challenged the young demon Wormwood on how to tempt Christians: "But there is a sort of attack on the emotions which can still be tried. It turns on making him feel ... that all his religion has been a fantasy" (*The Screwtape Letters*, Macmillan, 1961).

A pastor of a prominent southern church, George, called a close friend who was also a pastor and

explained that his Christian walk was not as vibrant as when he first became a Christian. Although trained well in a major seminary, he had fallen into some of the same pitfalls that he had helped others through many times over the years of his ministry. After a few discussions, he realized that his questions were caused by his emotions, and not by his failing faith, as he had thought. Once able to identify the area on which he most needed to work, he began to experience relief.

3. Medical states. A number of medical factors can also contribute heavily to religious doubt, including internal conditions like manic depression or diabetes, as well as externally prompted conditions caused by the consumption of alcohol or other types of drugs. To be sure, it is frequently not easy to decide which factors are most to blame. Still, while the origin is medical, doubts that grow in this manner show up in chiefly emotional patterns.

Todd was a young graduate student who was constantly in need of counseling and tended to dominate one of his faculty member's offices. Almost on a whim, the professor noticed a certain pattern of thinking and referred him to the university clinic. Todd was diagnosed as being manic-depressive and was given a prescription for appropriate medicine. After he knew the nature of his problem, he also took additional steps, making tremendous strides regarding his doubt. The process took a few months, but he learned that the input of the medical community was imperative on certain issues related to the treatment of doubts.

4. Childhood problems. I am far from buying into Freudian principles, but it is still the case that experiences from our younger years can have a profound effect on our doubt. For example, child abuse in various forms can make it very difficult for one to accept God's love, or to trust him.

Jill and Megan were two intelligent young women who had been abused as children, one sexually and the other physically. Megan still had a scar on her face that witnessed to this fact. Both were willing and eager to discuss their problems, but they had many sessions of discussion before beginning to get control of the situation. Both women struggled with how God could ever love

them when they thought that their parents never had. Their counselors found it very difficult to convince them otherwise. Jill, a student, found great relief through the love of a man she eventually married, along with that of other family members and close friends. Megan experienced substantial healing by practicing some principles that her counselor taught her.

5. *More recent wounds.* Painful situations throughout life can also influence religious doubt. The death of a loved one, breaking up with a lover, or the betrayal by a special friend are instances of wounds that could sway a person to wonder if he can fully trust God. In this sense, the situations and results are similar to those related to childhood trauma.

6. *Need for attention.* In some cases, the expression of doubt is due to the need for friendship and love, often from one who feels a lack in their own life. This is one of the conditions that is commonly expressed by a person who wishes to dominate the counselor's time and grows to depend on the interaction. The person in need is frequently the opposite gender of the counselor, so discernment is needed here. The doubt could certainly be real, but the need for companionship, attention, and love is perhaps a greater need. If so, the problem might appear never to get solved.

7. *Lack of sleep and adequate diet.* A regularly overlooked aggravation of a doubting condition can sometimes be remedied as simply as getting a normal amount of sleep and healthy food. A biblical example of this is Elijah, who, when he experienced depression, laid down to sleep. After Elijah had rested, an angel recommended food (1 Kings 19:4–6).

Travis came to see me, experiencing some rather troubling questions. He was a leader in the Christian community. After a little discussion we pinpointed the type of doubt as emotional and then pushed a little further for the variety. Among other things, it became obvious that he was suffering from a lack of sleep. In fact, soon after we spoke, he went to bed one day and woke up two days later! He decided to make an effort to get more sleep on a regular basis. Along with practicing some other principles, he began doing much better.

Soon afterwards Travis left the area for a new ministry but kept contact with me over many years. Every time we talked, I asked how his doubts were coming and he reported that everything was “back to normal.” This just illustrates how cures for doubt are not always the typical ones!

8. *Peer pressure.* I have long thought that one difficult pressure that is exerted on believers is to be more moderate in their views. This assault is not a frontal attack, but is one that continues to build up to quite a level in its call to trade in “old wives’ tales” in favor of “modern” approaches. To be more like “normal” people is a desire that is difficult not to heed. Let’s be honest. Doesn’t it hurt to think that others may think we are stupid? If we believe that only a few intelligent people hold our position, this can produce devastating results, especially over time. Often the change occurs in the form of a slightly modified position on the issue in question. Our emotions are particularly vulnerable to this. This pressure produces no new facts, just the same old temptation to change.

9. *Imagination versus reality.* Reading fictional writings can affect us more than we might ever think. Even more influential are graphic movie and television impersonations that bring us face to face with people and ideas. Here we meet a subtle temptation to identify with the problems of the characters and view issues of good and evil through their eyes, instead of through our own worldview.

Years ago I personally recall watching a popular science fiction movie where I was so caught up with the plot that I found myself despairing because of the evil in the world. I am embarrassed to say that for about half an hour my own perception was colored until I realized the obvious: I was witnessing someone else’s unreal conception of the issues! But if such subtleties are allowed to go unchecked, one could experience emotional doubts simply by identifying with others.

10. *Christian hypocrisy.* Doubt sometimes skyrockets after an observation of the beliefs and actions of fellow Christians. Unjust wars, tortures, persecutions, and other crimes have all unquestionably been carried out in the name of

Jesus Christ. And this is not to mention secret sins that periodically have been made public and splashed across our headlines. While these are horrors that certainly need to be corrected, they do not touch the truthfulness of the Christian worldview at all. Christianity is not affected by what others have done in its name. These are two differing trails that do not intersect. But we perhaps need to be frequently confronted with our failures, as a reminder of both the sin from which God has rescued us, as well as providing impetus for further action against it. The latter includes insuring that they will not happen again.

What is the effect on the lay person when their pastor or another spiritual leader falls? Unfortunately, among the sorts of fallout from these and other sinful actions is the uncertainty of Christians who think that, if Christianity is true, then believers should be more faithful. While there is no direct connection between truth and Christians who sin, it is still sad that these actions, have been hurtful to fellow believers.

11. Forgiven sin. The fear that one's sins have never really been forgiven has always been a prominent reason for many believers to doubt. But the idea that one has committed the unpardonable sin so that one cannot be forgiven strikes even more fear in some believer's hearts. Could anything seem worse to the sensitive Christian?

Fred shocked his adult Sunday School class one day by expressing a horrifying fear. He believed that the very fact that he had asked questions about God from time to time, sometimes a bit passionately, might mean that he had finally committed the unpardonable sin.

The teacher pointed out the implied but highly emotional "What if ..." in Fred's announcement, and reminded the class that we could raise this question about any scary thing. Then wisely, the leader remarked that this popular conception about doubt was mistaken. Many well-known Bible characters had challenged God and are today known as heroes of the faith. Doubt needed to be dealt with, and could lead to negative results, so Fred should not take it lightly. But this was not the same as having committed the unpardonable sin.

12. Anxiety about the future. It is not enough for Christians to be worried about the present. Anxiety concerning the unknown future has probably been a cause for fear in most believers at some time or another. For some, it might be the uncertainty that their faith can really "hold out" until the end, perhaps in the context of persecution. But God never asks us to hold out by the sheer force of our wills. A study of Scripture is certainly needed, but this alone will probably not solve the problem, once the emotional element is involved. The latter obstacle needs to be addressed.

13. Faulty view of God. To have a wrong concept of God can be a germ that flowers into a case of full-blown emotional doubt. While no believer has a perfect view of God, some errors are more harmful than others. For instance, to believe that God does not answer prayers, especially during times of stress, or that he is morally responsible for pain can lead to a personal crisis. To say that bad theology can have this kind of influence on our walk with God will surprise some believers, but it is a subject that deserves our constant inspection and correction.

14. Judgment and Hell. Even in believers one frequently encounters the fear that, after all, perhaps it is still the case that one could have done everything that the Bible requires for salvation (as far as one knows) but still be sent to Hell. Needless to say, this makes the prospect of Judgment a rather "iffy" situation!

Over the years, I have asked dozens of adult groups this question: "How many of you have, after salvation, ever considered the possibility of being sent to Hell?" If these informal surveys can be trusted, this fear is very widely experienced by many Christians at some time. Here we find another misbelief raising its head: Jesus Christ may send true believers to Hell. We need to forcefully confront and contradict the thought when it enters our minds.

There are probably more potential aggravations to emotional doubt than to any other species. This should not be surprising, since it is so common and comes in so many forms. The "What if ..." format allows for so much variation! Yet, there is a crucial need to deal with this uncertainty, too.

Conclusion

Here we have a “good news–bad news” scenario. The negative tidings involve the very nature of emotional doubt – how many believers are affected by it and how painful it can be when it enters our lives.

The good news is that gaining relief from the pain of emotional doubt is often easier than we might think. The majority of cases can be substantially relieved with less effort than it takes to combat other sorts of problems. But it may have to be treated regularly and systematically. There are a number of specific strategies for healing that can be employed, even if you, like me, are neither a medical doctor, psychologist, or professional counselor. We will spend the rest of this volume working on various aspects of this subject.

Now read Chapter 5 of the book: "A Solid Foundation".