



The Thomas Factor - Chapter 6: Mapping a Specific Strategy

Gary R. Habermas

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

This is Chapter 6 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.

The full Table of Contents links to each chapter, along with a brief description.

Chapter 6 - Mapping a Specific Strategy

Emotional dilemmas occur to all of us. No matter who we are, everyone gets bothered from time to time, some of us more frequently than others. But it is especially convicting when you have written and lectured so frequently on similar topics!

Once I was fretting about something that was so serious that I no longer even remember the subject, though I've tried. (Isn't that so typical?) My wife, who had often heard me lecture on emotional doubt, walked through the room while I fumed about the long-forgotten scenario. As she passed me, rolling her eyes in mock frustration, I heard her say, "What if ...?, What if ...?, What if ...?" Her voice trailed off as she passed around the corner and out of sight.

How convicting! I had been caught! I can assure you that I stopped my worrying on the spot.

Precisely because Christianity has a solid foundation, we can launch out into well-grounded

strategies that address the problem of emotional doubt. In dealing with such feeling-oriented dilemmas, we must progress beyond the facts themselves, to the truth that comes from them.

We need to be very clear that the approach we will favor in this chapter is not the only way to deal with emotional uncertainty. Neither is our specific listing of steps necessary for healing. Combining strategies can be very helpful. In fact, we will turn to some other options in the next two chapters.

We are concentrating chiefly on those doubts that seem to come from anxious worry, as opposed to other emotional struggles. This focus is deserved because these doubts may well be the most common variety, as well as being among the most painful. They cry out for a remedy.

It should be carefully noted before we begin that the biblical approach is not a "self-help" scenario. We do not act by the sheer force of our willpower. The power to change a Christian's emotional doubt is of the Lord; the weapons are his (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). Our personal efforts and the application of certain techniques are commanded, but these are not the Source of the healing.

A Strategy for Healing Emotional Doubt

How do we begin the process of conquering emotional doubt? We will stretch the process out over three chapters in order to give you plenty of ammunition from which to pick and choose a remedy that meets your needs. In this chapter, we will look briefly at a crucial biblical passage that deals with worry. Then we will present some further strategies to help implement this biblical advice.

A Biblical Pattern

The Bible contains various kinds of instruction for those who suffer distress. So we do not pretend to offer advice from a single passage as if to say it's the only possible technique to use with hurting people. At the same time, one text, in particular, is very helpful in dealing with anxiety.

The apostle Paul addresses the subject of anxious worry in Philippians 4:6-9.

6Do not be anxious about anything, but in

everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. 9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Although doubt is not his chief target, questioning that comes from an anxious spirit can still be treated this way. This variety of uncertainty is perhaps the most common sort, and Paul's advice is quite applicable. Rather than exegeting the text, we want to draw some specific conclusions concerning religious doubt. This is a very profound passage that promises God's peace to those who apply the principles to life.

After telling the Philippian believers to rejoice (Philippians 4:4), Paul addresses the issue of anxiety (4:6). His language indicates that these Christians were currently in a state of worry, which is an encouragement to us when we suffer from similar symptoms in relation to doubt. Paul's initial advice is to pray and petition God with our needs.

While Paul doesn't give us many details here (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18), Peter provides some advice on the same subject in 1 Peter 5:7. The apostle tells us to give our anxieties to the Lord, which is probably what Paul meant by petitioning God. These burdens are not for us to carry. So this is our starting point.

During my time of doubt, I once heard a speaker ask, "Why worry when you can pray?"

I distinctly remember my caustic response: "The only person that this advice will help is one who isn't worrying in the first place! The minute you give something to the Lord, it comes right back!"

But we ought not stop here, since Paul makes some further suggestions. After mentioning the initial step, he encourages the believer to thank

the Lord (verse 6). Later he mentions praising God (verse 8b). While thanksgiving and praise are not the same, I think they combine to make a powerful, but too seldom practiced, technique for the treatment of doubt.

In order to test this hypothesis, I very frequently ask a question of my audience when I lecture on this subject. "How many of you have ever, either intentionally or unintentionally, spent at least ten minutes thanking God for a blessing and/or praising him precisely during a time of doubt?" Without fail, hands shoot up across the room. "What happens when you respond to your mood in this manner?"

Without ever rehearsing or hinting at the reply I am seeking, without exception here's the answer that someone calls out: "Whenever I do this, my mood changes. My doubt subsides." Although this is admittedly an informal survey, to say the least, many believers have testified that Paul's advice about thanksgiving and praise is worth its weight in gold. It is difficult to experience anxiety during concentrated efforts to honor and worship God.

Pausing for a moment, Paul says that the result is being kept by the peace of God (4:7). The word sometimes translated "keep" (Greek *phroureo*) is a military term indicating to "guard" or to "garrison." God's peace acts as a fortress that protects the believer's mind.

Besides praying, thanksgiving, and praise, Paul goes on to explain that believers need to occupy their minds with God's thoughts (4:8). They ought to concentrate, respectively, on those things that are true (*alethes*), honorable or holy (*semnos*), righteous (*dikaios*), clean or pure (*hagnos*), on that which provokes love (*prospiles*), or whatever has a good reputation (*euphema*). Two other possible categories for concentration are those thoughts that are excellent in virtue or moral quality (*arete*) and whatever deserves praise (*epainos*).

The Christian ought to focus on truths such as these. Paul's last verb, "think" (*logizomai*), indicates a stronger action than simply casual attention. It refers to the process of habitually dwelling or reflecting on a topic. This is the biblical practice of meditation – filling our minds deeply and single-mindedly with God's truth.

Jeremy was a believer who regularly wondered if Christianity could just possibly be false. This uncertainty gnawed at him continually, in spite of his having no reasons to support his fear. He did not solve this dilemma until he first learned to constantly remind himself that anything could be questioned by such untrue feelings – his finances, his health, or even his exam next week. Then he began informing himself of the truth: he was a believer. He rehearsed these things every time he began to worry, until he achieved substantial relief.

The single-minded meditation on proper thoughts that Paul calls for here needs to be practiced (*prasso*) until it becomes a habit (4:9). Christian "modeling" is also evident in this verse, as Paul, the mature believer, serves as a guide for other Christians. Lastly, the believer is again promised peace (4:9b).

This passage provides at least four biblical steps for treating anxiety like that which might accompany emotional doubt. These teachings may be listed as follows:

- 1) prayer of petition
- 2) thanksgiving and praise
- 3) edifying thinking
- 4) practice and Christian modeling

In the last chapter we mentioned the exercise of the classic Christian disciplines as a means of increasing our fellowship with God. It should be noted that each of these steps denotes separate regimens for the believer to develop and practice. Alone they represent powerful means of seeking God. But together, they are nothing short of an awesome array of four weapons that we are to employ during our emotional struggles.

In short, the problem should be committed to God in prayer, with thanksgiving and praise, with believers exchanging their old, anxious thoughts for God's truth. This ought to be practiced until it becomes a habit, or even a way of life. Paul attests that the application of these truths promotes healing and peace to those who follow the prescription. His overall teaching is that Christians need to stop worrying, by changing their anxious thoughts, including doubts, for wholesome ones.

Exchanging our Anxious Thoughts for God's Truth

I am not a psychologist. I realize that many believers are suspicious that the theories and techniques used by Christian psychologists are not based on Scripture, and sometimes with good reason. Yet, I don't think that this justifies "throwing the baby out with the bathwater," as the saying goes. After years of personal research on many related subjects, I think the better approach is to make use of those psychological techniques that are true to Scripture. Some teachings of Christian psychologists frankly do not conform to God's Word, while other counselors utilize excellent techniques that make the most of exceptionally helpful insights gleaned from Scripture. Since any truth we find in creation ultimately goes back to the Creator, we should not avoid it when it meets the scriptural standard.

I have come to the conclusion that forms of the "cognitive method" are the closest to Scripture, with certain behavioral techniques providing follow-up application. The cognitive method is based on the principle that change begins in our thinking, working out into our emotions and will. In other words, clear, biblical thinking must be applied to our whole lives: to how we feel, to the things we tell ourselves, and what we decide to do. In this book, we are chiefly interested in applying biblical truth and thinking to our painful emotions.

Doesn't this sound like Paul's advice in Philippians 4:8? We have seen that the apostle exhorts believers to exchange their worrisome thoughts for God's truth. We must meditate on God's instructions instead of our own. He emphasizes edifying thinking patterns, rather than the faulty ones that led to the anxiety that he describes in verse 6.

But this can be a very difficult assignment, especially in the middle of our times of anxiety. I have seen many doubters who understand the principles, but who just do not seem to be able to apply them when they are most needed. Is this really surprising? We've already said that Paul's readers were also currently in a state of anxiety. That's why he wrote these things to them. It's not that these techniques fail to work; in fact, I have never been told that by the sufferers themselves. Rather, as paradoxical as this sounds, believers

just seem at times to be impotent to make the application, even though they readily admit that, when they apply the instructions, they do work. Paul commands that we change our thinking. Some additional pointers on how to apply his teaching might be helpful here.

Many recent books have encouraged believers to think differently, in keeping with God's truth. Two Christian psychologists who support such an effort are William Backus and Marie Chapan. One of their co-authored volumes, *Telling Yourself the Truth* (Bethany, 1980), is not specifically addressed to the issue of religious doubt, but presents some sound techniques for dealing with emotional struggles of different sorts. So their particular method, termed Misbelief Therapy, is applicable to emotional doubts. In this section, I will present some of their ideas, making specific application to those who question their faith. Page numbers in parentheses can be traced to the above book.

Backus and Chapan explain that our feelings are largely caused by the things that we say to ourselves. So if we tell ourselves untruths or lies, they can certainly cause us harm. These misbeliefs "are the direct cause of emotional turmoil, maladaptive behavior and most so-called 'mental illness'" (p. 17). Even those things that we fear (like embarrassments or failures) do not usually cause us as much havoc as do our misbeliefs about them. "What you think and believe determines how you feel and what you do" (p. 22).

For example, if a Christian repeatedly tells him or herself that Christianity may not be true, or that they are probably going to Hell, it should not be surprising if they begin to believe it after a while. At this point, what the Christian is saying is contrary to his deepest desires. Conflict is sure to be the result unless there is a change in these unbiblical thoughts. Later, improper behavior may also reflect these untrue thoughts.

Backus and Chapan assert that the correct response to these misbeliefs is a threefold strategy that is reminiscent of the last two steps of our biblical pattern from Philippians 4:6-9. They outline their approach in the following steps (p. 15):

1. Locate your misbeliefs.
2. Remove them.
3. Replace misbeliefs with the truth.

So we need to listen to ourselves in order to pick out the lies that we say to ourselves every day. These misbeliefs need to be removed, which is done by arguing against them. Here we need to respond to ourselves forcefully: "No, that is not true, because ...". Lastly, God's truth is supplied in the place of the lies. We do not simply dismiss the anxious thoughts, but replace them with truths like those Paul mentions in Philippians 4:8. We think godly thoughts instead of the anxious ones.

Backus and Chapan challenge the hurting person [to realise] that they can control their own emotions. God has even told us to do so. The real issue is whether or not they will follow God's prescription (p. 24):

... you can change your emotions ... no matter what you have experienced in your life and no matter what your circumstances are.

The first time Tracey heard that she controlled her emotions, she objected: "Maybe others can be healed like that, but it won't work with me. I've already tried everything, but nothing works." The battle was over for her before it even started – precisely because, ironically enough, she had made a choice not to use her own choice! In other words, she didn't believe that she could control her thoughts by simply choosing to do so, thus her choice to do nothing ruled out the possibility of healing.

Hold it right there! This is as good a place to begin as any other. What is the nature of Tracey's complaints? She was basically telling God that the prescriptions in his Word against worry don't really work, after all! Her comments need to be directly identified for what they are: lies!

Whenever we catch ourselves thinking that our misbeliefs are true, we must stop ourselves immediately and correct the thoughts. How is that done? We need to work through each of Paul's four steps in Philippians 4:6-9. Then we can apply the three rules suggested by Backus and Chapan in order to implement Paul's command in verse 8 that we change our thinking. We can get so used to this total sequence that we can quickly identify

our lies on the spot and perform the entire exercise in just a minute or two. It can be done almost anywhere. As we get better at it, we progress to the point where we seldom think the lies in the first place. That is, indeed, a happy realization and victory!

So now we see where the blame for the faulty thinking is to be placed: squarely on the shoulders of the one who is suffering! There are few more profound truths on the subject than this one: people and events around us can't force us to doubt or worry. We can't blame our emotions on them. The key is how we respond and how we interpret the occurrences in our lives. Changing our wrong beliefs really does alter both our feelings and our actions.

While our outward circumstances may not change immediately, what we tell ourselves about them can change right away. The change in ourselves may be gradual, but it can happen; our problems can be remedied (pp. 14, 17, 24-27, 75).

Emotional Doubts

How does all of this apply to emotional doubts? The first time I ever heard this last assertion, I missed the point completely. "So what if what I tell myself changes immediately?", I often asked. "The problems that are causing my grief have not gone away yet."

This just proved that I had not internalized this last truth. External problems do not and cannot force me to doubt. The doubt doesn't come until I give myself permission to question. The uncertainty, then, is caused by my own, private thought life! I was clearly disobeying Paul's commands. Therefore, if what I am telling myself can change immediately, then I am already on my way to healing my doubt with the truth! What a bombshell!

Instead of believing the misbeliefs we tell ourselves, we need to locate them, argue forcefully against them, and cite the truth. Instead of thinking that believers may be sent to Hell or that Christ may someday abandon us, Christians need to object, replacing these lies with the truth: "Jesus does not send saved persons to Hell. I know this to be true based on the authority of the resurrected Jesus himself. Besides, the Lord of

the universe loves me and I have a unique place with him" (John 3:16-18; Romans 8:28-39; Ephesians 1:3-14).

For Jeremy, mentioned earlier, who wondered whether Christianity could just possibly be false, he learned to stop questioning immediately and point out the misbeliefs. He could doubt anything on the grounds of mere possibility alone, but wise persons don't base their lives on this "What ifting." A review of Christian evidences helped Jeremy a bit, too. He learned that he needed to strengthen his faith by daily practice, rather than by allowing emotional questions to trample him underfoot.

Shannon often had times when her moods were troublesome. Particularly during these moments she was prone to "feel" unsaved. This bothered her for years: "It's like denying what is most important in my life," she frequently told her mom. "This is incredibly painful."

Then one of her pastor's sermons helped her to see what she was doing to herself. She began to react to her moods by directly confronting them. "Feelings are irrelevant to my salvation," she forcefully declared. Then she reinforced this truth with some appropriate biblical texts that she wrote down and kept with her at all times. She even memorized verses that described her true condition and blessings in Christ. The more practiced she became at reciting these truths, the better she felt. That was all the encouragement she needed to continue preaching to herself.

When we do not "feel" saved we must not allow a frequent course of events to take place: an emotional letdown and further "What ifting," followed later by a "Who cares?" attitude. Like a cold splash of water in the face, we could jolt ourselves with the question, "Who cares how I feel? Since when do my feelings determine whether or not I am saved?" Like Shannon learned, reinforcements can come from follow-up truth statements composed of relevant biblical texts.

Dana wondered why God did not answer very many prayers today, as he clearly did in biblical times. After months of frustration, he finally decided to seek the counsel of a friend. Challenged by his wise Sunday School teacher, they got together a few times and shared a Bible

study. As Dana later declared their surprise discoveries to the class: "We found that many Bible heroes asked this very same question, usually without answers. Job, David, John the Baptist, and Paul all reported similar frustrations."

Then, over a period of one year, the class began keeping a list of all their prayer requests, which led them to another discovery. The majority of their petitions were answered! "I guess I overemphasized the ones that I thought God was ignoring, while forgetting the others," Dana concluded with a shrug. His circumstances were never his chief problem. The real issue was what he told himself about them.

What about emotional complications that frequently accompany doubts, such as depression and anxiety? Again, I am not a psychologist. But Backus and Chapien address these concerns from their professional expertise, extending Misbelief Therapy to each topic.

They explain that depression is almost always provoked by a loss of some sort (such as a person, health, or finances), after which the individual devalues him or herself, their surroundings, and/or their prospects for the future. Perhaps this is the triggering mechanism for doubting their faith, or maybe it is their faith that they think they have lost. This condition is also reported in Scripture, such as the psalmist who is "cast down" (Psalms 42:5-6; 43:5).

Each situation must be placed in the proper perspective by identifying the misbeliefs. Lies might consist of telling ourselves that we cannot go on after the loss, or that the emotion itself is the worst thing in the world. Yet, many others have faced both similar losses and the accompanying feelings, while still leading successful lives (p. 43):

Experience bears out the deception here. Many of us have told ourselves we "cannot live without" some person, object, scheme or notion. Then this adored "whatever" is removed from our lives and wonder of wonders, we recover.

The one who responds like Tracey did above, "Yes, but it's the other guy who recovers, not me," is likewise stating a misbelief. This vicious cycle must be broken. The lies need to be identified and

rejected. A proper response might be, "Okay, I feel very bad, but this is not the end of the world" or "I've felt horrible before and, with God's assistance, I've always recovered." When a person continues reacting to a loss past a normal period of time, it is no longer the loss but the misbelief that is crippling them.

The greatest truth we can substitute in place of depression's lies is that Christians are already both loved by God and will receive eternal blessings from him (p. 40):

Christians don't have to base their work on achievements or attributes. Even without any achievements and without any special merit or attractiveness, the Christian can know for certain he/she is important and loved. Our lives have been bought and paid for with the blood of Jesus Christ and that means we're free from the pressure to be something, do something, own something, achieve something or prove something in order to be important and loved. We can do all these things or not do them and still be loved and important. Jesus loved [us] so much that He was willing to die on the cross so [we] could have eternal life with Him one day, as well as a fulfilling life here and now.

Can you think of something that brings more freedom or peace than this truth? We don't have to be the best looking, the best dressed, have the best personality, or the most friends. Neither do we have to own the nicest house or car, be the best salesman or the best athlete in order to have these blessings. They belong to the believer, and they are free!

Further, no circumstances, pain, or loss can ever change these truths (Romans 8:31-39). What an incredible blessing! Relying on God, we can never be ultimately disappointed, no matter how we feel now. It is simply a fact that eternal life with the God of the universe not only outweighs all our present suffering and pain (Romans 8:18), but it gives us a tremendous perspective from which to view all of our problems (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Besides, virtually all depressed persons will recover (p. 45). So disheartened Christians can gain both probable recovery now, as well as God's riches throughout eternity.

Anxiety, on the other hand, "is ordinarily defined as fear in the absence of actual danger" (p. 68). It is overestimating the likelihood of peril and exaggerating how horrible it would be. Anxiety's recurring theme is that what others think about me is of "crucial importance" to my thinking (p. 68).

Like other emotional struggles, we teach ourselves to be anxious. It is not our circumstances that create the fear – it's our own doing. The lies we tell ourselves are the chief culprits here. One misbelief is that something "terrible" is going to happen (p. 76):

What does "terrible" mean? Usually it means something far worse than you think you can endure. You tell yourself the "terrible" is beyond human endurance, worse than anything on earth. Truly, nothing of this sort exists.

Another falsehood concerns the likelihood of our fears. Anxiety by its very nature generally involves imagining an evil that is actually very unlikely to occur. (How many of our worst fears throughout life have actually come to pass?) Still, the anxious person tells him or herself that this evil is unavoidable or inevitable.

We need to forcefully challenge such false beliefs with the truth that, although we may be feeling very bad, what we are imagining has not occurred. Even if something horrible has already happened, it's not the end of a meaningful life, for believers still have the Lord, his love, and eternal life. So nothing is as terrible as we thought and, while painful things do happen, believers still possess their ultimate hope. Others have lived through the same pain, and so can we, with God's help. Still, the object of most anxieties never occurs anyway. These are the sorts of truths that we must constantly tell ourselves.

Conclusion

The improvement and healing of these emotional conditions frequently takes time. I have seen numerous cases where doubting individuals have been significantly helped after just one (usually lengthy) meeting. But more often, healing the most painful effects of doubt takes practice, especially so the more it is ingrained in the person. Most of us have misrepresented reality to

ourselves for so long that it should not surprise us that it also takes some time to cure the dilemma. Sometimes the condition is tied so closely to our personality that, rather than a complete cure, we should be thankful for a significant lessening of the condition.

A key here, as Paul tells us in Philippians 4:9, is repetition. We need to practice the biblical remedy until it is our predominant habit. We need to be transformed by truth. The best time to fight doubt is during the suffering itself. Beyond that, we need to continue to rehearse truth as a preventative measure, even when it is not directly needed. Thus, working through our thoughts and applying truth always produces good results, even when things already seem to be going well.

Yet, we have made no claims that these methods are the only healing remedies. In fact, such a claim would be far from the truth. Other researchers have presented additional biblical remedies which can also lead to healing. Besides, our next two chapters will develop other procedures.

Before we began, we were careful to note that Scripture does not promote a "self-help" scenario, as is so popularly declared today. Believers do not act in their own power or by the force of their own wills. The power to change our emotional doubts comes from the Lord. Paul explains at length that he had to personally learn this difficult lesson (Romans 7:21-8:11). Yes, we are commanded to change by applying certain techniques. Yet, God is the Source of our healing; true change comes by his power (Zechariah 4:6). We will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

Lastly, I do not conclude that the various treatments will always work on each type of doubt, largely because the personal factors vary so much. But I cannot remember ever having anyone tell me, after applying the truth of Scripture, that these techniques did not either ease or heal the problem.

Now read Chapter 7 of the book: "Additional Suggestions".