



## The Thomas Factor - Chapter 7: Additional Suggestions

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

*This is Chapter 7 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 7 - Additional Suggestions

Did you ever go through a really tough emotional time in your life while being thankful that you had already learned some major lessons that had suddenly become very helpful? It's like having the right tools in your trunk when the car breaks down. We do seem to get ample opportunities to deal with (and hopefully control) our emotions. During the years when I went through the various species of doubt, I never really had to face any serious emotional trauma at the same time. Even when I wrote my first book on doubt, I was able to do so from the intense personal experience of questioning seriously my faith for many years and of subsequently talking to dozens of others who had done the same. But I always wondered how my faith would fare in a real emergency. I got that chance a few years later.

My entire life came to a screeching halt, almost like a slow motion movie, one sunny spring morning. After days of testing and comparing results, my dear wife was diagnosed with

inoperable cancer. Four months later, almost to the day, she died. It was one month after our twenty-third wedding anniversary. We celebrated it while she lay in bed. Except for two weeks in the hospital, she spent all of her last days at home, with our four children, myself, and many loving relatives.

To say that it was a trying time would be the greatest of understatements. My wife and I had been exceptionally close. Amid the multiple rounds per day of feedings and medicines that had to be put through a tube, I was forced to deal not only with my own raging emotions, but also with those of my children. Friends and loved ones wanted to know how things were going, and, during daily updates, I told the story perhaps hundreds of times.

Do biblical strategies really work at "crunch time," when the going is at its toughest? Can our beliefs hold firmly when what seems to be the worst possible scenarios in life are thrown at us? I always wanted to know these answers. I thought for sure that my darkest doubts would certainly return after years of dormancy, and I said so to my closest friends.

But God was good and the questioning never returned. I discovered great comfort from many of the same techniques that are found in this book, especially those in the last chapter. I used them again and again, just as they are presented here. Reading and meditating on the story of Job was a special help, as I've pointed out in *Forever Loved* (College Press, 1997). I always knew these methods worked, because I had seen them in action, in both my life and with others.

But now I had forcibly discovered their real power. God's prescriptions had sustained me precisely during the time when I could hardly even imagine my life being any more strenuous. It was an incomparably valuable lesson, taught to me under the most grueling of circumstances. God promised that no temptation would be more than we could bear (1 Corinthians 10:13), and I learned that truth in a first-hand manner.

### By Whose Power?

Before recommending a number of other helpful hints for dealing with emotional uncertainty, we

need to repeat an important lesson from the last chapter and spend a little time explaining it further. The believer does not conquer doubt by his or her own power. Biblical suggestions for conquering worry are not to be carried out in our own strength, by somehow "hyping" ourselves to do a task by our own energy and skill. We do not pull ourselves up by our own boot straps, so-to-speak. These would be self-help scenarios, but they are not what we find in Scripture.

Pete was a popular guy who was always viewed by his friends as an upbeat, optimistic person. A long-time advocate of positive thinking techniques, he seemed to have his life together. After he became a Christian, however, he reached a time of conflict. Attempting to have a consistent testimony, he began to get the impression that everything depended on his own ability to "hang in there." Always having to appear on top of the world, avoiding sin by his own efforts and abilities wore him down. While he was definitely glad that he gave his life to the Lord, he often wondered why his quality of life seemed to go down hill after his conversion. He simply grew tired of the constant fight and effort it took him to behave like a Christian.

It is true that the Bible very frequently exhorts Christians to change their unbiblical behavior and embrace God's truth. The apostle James assumes that his readers have enough free choice to decide either for God or for Satan. He encourages them to submit themselves to God and resist the Devil (James 4:4-10). Similarly, Peter warns us to beware of the Devil's tricks, so that we might resist him and stand firmly in our faith (1 Peter 5:8-9). Persevering in the Christian faith is a popular theme in the New Testament (Hebrews 10:36; 2 John 9; Revelation 22:7).

In a classic text, Paul begs his readers to offer themselves to God by revitalizing their minds, so that they will be able to know God's will (Romans 12:1-2). Peter encourages believers to turn from sin and crave God's path of spiritual growth (1 Peter 2:1-3; 2 Peter 3:18). Believers are to check themselves regularly in order to ascertain whether they are still following the Lord (1 Corinthians 10:12; 11:28, 31; Galatians 6:4-5). John tells Christians that they need to obey God and walk as Jesus did (1 John 2:3-6).

In each of these passages, it is assumed that believers are capable of making the appropriate decisions to turn from sin and follow God with all their hearts (Matthew 22:35-37). Accordingly, we are exhorted to give ourselves wholeheartedly to God.

But it is also clear that this ability comes through God's presence in the believer's life. Paul plainly states several times that the power to conquer evil is God's, not ours (2 Corinthians 4:7; 12:9-10; Ephesians 6:10). Further, the weapons are God's, too (1 Corinthians 10:3-5; Ephesians 6:11-18). It is God's life at work within us (Galatians 2:20; Philippians 4:13). If the power, weapons, and life come from God, victory in the Christian life certainly requires his interaction with us!

Several passages include both the believer's responsibility to be committed to God, as well as the divine action that is involved. One of the best known texts here is Philippians 2:12-13, where Paul tells Christians that they are take part in working out their own salvation, only to conclude that God is the One who works in us. While we are saved totally by God's work in us rather than by our own actions, we are saved in order to do good works afterwards (Ephesians 2:8-10). We shun sin by the leading of the Holy Spirit within us (Galatians 5:16-26). John exhorts his readers to obey God and love each other, while explaining that God lives in us (1 John 3:23-24).

Paul leads us through the perhaps painful lesson that he learned on this subject. He had been a Pharisee with a noteworthy pedigree, even referring to himself as "a Hebrew of the Hebrews" (NIV) (Philippians 3:4-6; cf. Acts 22:3-5; 26:4-11). It would probably have been very difficult for him not to think that, due to his holiness, he had the means at his disposal to conquer sin in his life. But he learned that this was simply beyond his power. The things that he didn't want to do, he did. The things he wanted to do, he didn't (Romans 7:14-25). Although there is some controversy as to whether Paul was saved during this period of failure that he describes, there is no debate that he found his victory not in his own strength, skill, and self-control, but in the victory provided by Jesus Christ (Romans 8:1-4). And it was the Holy Spirit who infused Paul with the power to defeat sin (8:5-11).

We conclude that believers are required to think and act in a responsible manner that chooses God over sin and our personal desires. We are called to radically commit our lives to our Lord. Yet, the power, weapons, and life itself come from God. He provides all that we need to get the job done, but God doesn't force us to do his will.

How does all of this work itself out in practical terms? It seems that we are back again at our key text in Philippians 4:6-9. While Paul calls upon his readers to yield to God's truth and to practice obedience, the prayers, praise, and thanksgiving are directed to God, both for who he is and for what he has done. He effects the changes. He is clearly the focus of Paul's treatment, since it is through God's strength and power that the victory comes (4:13).

## More Techniques

Christians need not be able to figure out all the fine lines between our responsible acting and God's power. This is part of a larger theological issue that has plagued theologians for centuries. We obviously won't solve the issues here. But even if we think that we could, objections could always be raised by other well-meaning believers who think differently.

We have said enough for our present purposes. That both human and divine interaction is necessary at this point is well grounded in Scripture. Christians must decide to follow God, while all the time relying on his weapons and power. The best way to do this is to apply the techniques taught in God's Word, without laboring under the illusion (another lie!) that we are responsible for the positive changes that occur in our lives.

In this chapter we will offer eight additional techniques that may also be applied during times of emotional doubt. Each is cognitive in nature, meaning that, like Philippians 4:6-9, these are items to be integrated into our thinking. They are truths that need to be constantly considered, remembered, and meditated on, especially in worrisome times. In the next chapter, we will introduce several behavioral ingredients to fulfill Paul's exhortation that we practice God's truth. In short, biblical principles need to be both carefully thought through and applied.

There is no special order to the suggestions in these two chapters. The reader can pick and apply whichever recommendations are most helpful. This "mixing and matching" can be used in addition to the techniques in the last chapter, or developed into their own pattern of thinking and acting.

**(1)** We need to constantly remind ourselves that emotional doubts do not constitute any evidence against Christianity. No matter how great our inner turmoil may be, this particular species of doubt is not chiefly due to our questioning of the facts. So the truth of the matter is that Christianity does not hang in the balance here. This is certainly a fact that needs to be learned and used in personal times of crisis, since the doubter often tells him or herself that the Christian faith is in question. We have seen that this is due to the very nature of emotional uncertainty's mood-relativity and orientation toward feelings.

In the last chapter, Shannon found this out for herself. She experienced a great victory when she realized that her moods had nothing to do with the actual state of her salvation, as she had originally feared. She had learned to concentrate instead on what God's Word told her was true.

**(2)** Our unedifying thoughts are often accompanied by worries and other unwanted emotions. But these reactions usually do not indicate the absence of faith. Here is one of doubt's real paradoxes: our emotions most frequently point precisely to our true faith!

How can that possibly be? Just think about it for a minute. Unless our faith was crucially important to us, we would not react at the thought that we were not believers! If we didn't really care, we wouldn't be upset at all!

So what are our emotions saying to us? They are telling us to stop thinking the way we are! Believe it or not, they are actually dictating that we cease what we're doing to ourselves because it hurts. Isn't that incredible? Not only has God told us in Scripture how to deal with emotional uncertainty, but he has also provided us with an early warning system that screams for attention when we disobey him!

Here is something on which we should meditate deeply. Instead of the anxiety that we are not saved, or that Christianity is not true, we should substitute the real truth: emotional doubt usually indicates the presence of true faith. We care about our belief! We want to live with God for eternity.

Initially, Shannon panicked when it seemed that her horrible feelings might mean that she was not really saved. But later she actually rejoiced in the realization that the exact opposite was true: these emotions were being disturbed precisely because her thoughts were so contrary to her own strong Christian convictions! She was reacting, not to the true state of her heart, but to the lies she was feeding herself! This was the final nail in the coffin of her emotional doubt. She was saved – and cured!

**(3)** When suffering through emotional doubt, a very helpful technique is to minimize the problem without neglecting its correction. In other words, it is beneficial to remember and concentrate on the fact that many others have faced what you have and suffered similar obstacles (1 Corinthians 10:13). You are not alone in this. Doubt is common to human beings in general. This is not an excuse to treat religious uncertainty lightly, but knowing that others are also struggling with it somehow has the effect of allowing us to relax a bit.

Years ago I was teaching a seminary class that attempted to apply apologetic principles to ministry. One of the assignments required the students to find someone who was doubting and attempt to counsel them through it.

One student discovered an example of how truth telling can heal. He reported that the doubter he worked with (a fellow seminary student) was so amazed to find that Christians frequently questioned their faith that this single fact alone brought him substantial relief. This realization minimized the force of the problem. It led, in turn, to another liberating thought: the original problem was emotional in nature, and needed to be treated as such, and not as some deep-seated spiritual dilemma.

**(4)** Anxiety during doubt is frequently short-lived. In these cases, one technique is to remind

ourselves that the fear or other negative feelings need not last very long. Where the pain lasts longer, applying techniques like those we discussed in the last chapter usually lessens the time element considerably.

Once Philip realized this truth, he confronted his customary fear by forcefully declaring to himself: “Just calm down. Relax! This will only last a few minutes.” Then he projected his thoughts to an hour or so in the future, and pictured being calm and restful. He experienced peace almost immediately. Each time he did this, he was able to sit back and watch as the levels on his “doubt barometer” dropped. Like some medical prescriptions, he repeated the dose whenever needed. He found that once he had taken the edge off his unruly emotions, it became much easier to deal with the fear itself, which was now declining even more quickly.

**(5)** When suffering in the grips of acute emotional doubt, another remedy will perhaps give the fastest relief: Change the subject quickly, forcefully, and completely. The sufferer needs to concentrate his or her attention on another topic altogether. One of the methods we’ve already mentioned should suffice, such as prayer, thanksgiving, praise, or addressing our lies directly.

Or you might wish to try a “secular” behavioral alternative like calling a friend on the phone, jogging, walking, biking, or swimming. The latter methods are best seen as band-aids in the sense that, while they don’t heal the problem, they will temporarily ease the pain, and often quite quickly.

Alexis was close to a panic attack. Those uncontrollable thoughts were attacking her faith once again. Would she ever get a handle on these doubts? And they hurt so much! Absolutely anything was preferable to these awful feelings! She was now pacing, spinning rapidly on her heel, and starting back in the other direction. Her pulse and breathing had both picked up considerably. If it would only stop!

When the telephone rang Alexis ran to pick up the receiver. It was her best friend with news about last night’s blind date. Two minutes into the conversation, Alexis rather absent-mindedly remembered that she had not been feeling well.

But now she felt fine!

Later reflection brought a flood of lessons to Alexis' mind. She was simply amazed at how quickly the panic had subsided. Literally, one minute it was there, and the next minute it wasn't! "I'll have to remember that trick next time," she told herself light-heartedly, cringing slightly at the thought that the feeling might return. Additionally, she realized rather sheepishly that she wasn't dying, like she was beginning to think during the attack.

Other conclusions dawned on her some time afterwards. She realized that the intruding thoughts were not as uncontrollable as she had thought. After all, a rather minor interruption was all it took! And the worries weren't the unbearable horrors she had thought they were at the time. She had lived to tell about it, hadn't she? All of this came from a simple phone call! But unfortunately, she knew that the feeling would return as they had always done before, and she desired a longer-lasting remedy.

**(6)** Don't argue with yourself concerning the factual grounds for Christianity during an attack of anxious doubt. Commonly, when one mistakenly identifies emotional questioning as being factual in nature, the doubter often resorts to arguing the evidential basis for Christianity, concluding that this will cause the emotions to retreat. But as we've said many times, emotional doubts are not usually corrected by factual recitations. Thus, pulling the facts out at this point will allow them to be colored in one's mind by the emotional element. Although it may be tough to admit, when our emotions go to war against our reason, the emotions usually win. So why invite disaster?

Here someone may raise a question: "Hey, wait a minute. We've said many times that we should argue during our episodes of doubt. So why shouldn't we do it here?"

This observation is correct, but the distinction lies in the nature of the arguing, as we've carefully pointed out. Facts are used with factual doubts, while cognitive and behavioral techniques are used with emotional questioning. These latter grounds should be argued immediately. But since facts seldom end the emotional doubt, we shouldn't cross that line. There is plenty of time to

return later to the facts for Christianity, after one is calm, but not before then.

**(7)** During attacks of emotional doubt, it is helpful to continue affirming our belief in the foundations of the Christian truth. When our faith is being assailed, we should concentrate on trusting God, regardless of the circumstances.

Is a man considered a good friend or a poor one if he gives up on his best buddy as soon as a stranger challenges him or her? How about our ongoing commitment to a faithful spouse during a tough time? In the same way, why should we deny Jesus when someone questions him? Persons are not the same as ideas, and the former require greater allegiance. Christians need to affirm their allegiance to their Lord.

**(8)** Pick a biblical hero who went through tough times – like Job, Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel, John the Baptist or Paul. Study their life carefully and recall both their struggles and their victories. Why was Job satisfied without ever learning why he suffered? How did Abraham overcome his lack of faith so that he became known as the man of faith? Why were the psalmists content even when God was silent? How did Jesus treat John the Baptist's emotional doubts that he suffered while he was isolated in prison?

Think through their struggles once again. What other problems were faced by these saints? How did they deal with them? Did they achieve victory immediately? What did they learn from these conflicts?

Then consider what you can learn today from their past struggles. What are the parallels? Do we suffer pain today? Is our faith sometimes weak? Do we wonder why our prayers are not always answered the way we think they should be? Are we ever isolated, without Christian fellowship? Do our emotions rage, too?

How can we draw strength from these biblical testimonies? Can we also make a similar move from the problem to the solution? Concentrate on these issues and take note of some biblical lessons that might be learned and applied.

At least a few of these eight additional suggestions should be beneficial in combating

emotional uncertainty. I would suggest trying each one during worrisome moments and utilizing those that show the most promise. The "Helpful List" can then be reviewed periodically in order to see if any others might be added.

## Conclusion

Christians are continually exhorted throughout Scripture to resist the Devil and sin. We are also told to follow God with all of our hearts. All of this only makes sense if we have some responsibility in the process. But we are additionally told that it is God's power, weapons, and his indwelling of believers that produces the victory. We must decide to follow him and apply the techniques that he commands, but we do so in his strength.

So how did Pete resolve his dilemma about reacting to life in his own strength? It took a while, but he learned that Christianity was not about working oneself up into a frenzy in order to obey a list of negatives. Rather, it was an integrated lifestyle that allowed God to work through the believer so that they actually preferred to make the choices they did. Thus, Pete felt liberated when he learned that the Christian faith is more about exuberant, committed living in light of eternity than it is about always having a burden to react against everything.

But for some believers, the problem does not come from any lack of conviction that they need to do something. After all, they are in pain! They desire remedies that work. The question concerns which techniques best treat their specific form of doubt and how they should be exercised, especially during their struggles. Applying the truth they know is perhaps the most crucial decision they will make on this subject. Hopefully, the suggested cognitive procedures in the last two chapters will provide some thoughtful sorts of consolation. In the next chapter we will turn to behavioral changes that also address our emotional struggles with faith.

*Now read Chapter 8 of the book: "Practice! Practice! Practice!"*