

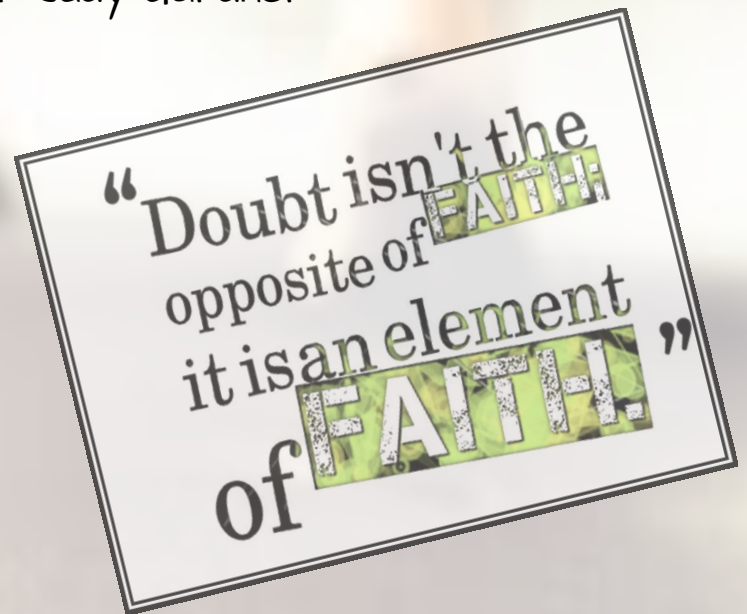
August 5-9, 2024 Edition

Following
The Year^(s) Of ^Jesus Part 136

Faith & Doubt

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

August 3/4, 2024



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

Definition Of Faith: Confidence or trust in a person or thing: Belief that is not based on proof:

The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd.
Hebrews 11:1 (MES)

Reflection: Faith and doubt. Why are we talking about faith and doubt? I'm glad you asked. When I was a younger man I had what you might call a crisis of faith. I was confronted with what I believed to be scientific "facts" and was basically led to believe that I could either embrace the intelligent conclusion and reject God or check my intellect at the door every time I went into church because science had disproved the possibility of a God.

It's like the Snapple lid I got once (don't you love those? So many tidbits you never knew or even wondered about). It said, did you know that a frog has to close its eyes to swallow? Sounds like what I thought I would have to do to believe in God.

But I did believe. That was the problem.

When I was a younger man I needed saving. Badly. I was stuck in a life I couldn't get out of. I had tried everything I could think of to change but I could never achieve lasting change. I was desperate. So I turned to Jesus. I wasn't sure what I really believed about Him at that point. What I had learned as a child about Him seemed silly. It was a shaky foundation to attempt to build my life upon. But I had no other good options.

So I gave Jesus a try. And do you know what happened? I recovered my life. I was transformed. When I really stop and think about it I'm blown away to this very day.

And so I was sold on Jesus. I had trusted Him with my life even though I had a hard time synthesizing what I thought was fact (scientific proof) with what I had experienced to be true (that Jesus knows what He's talking about when it comes to transforming the human life). There have been a TON of books put out lately by evangelizing atheists. Their purpose (according to their own authors) is to stamp out the dangerous plague of faith and convert people to the more rational and safer arena of atheism.

What drives them the most crazy (as far as I can tell) is when people of faith ignore facts and proof and swallow what they're told in church even if they have to close their eyes to do it (like the frogs from the Snapple lid). But what I've learned over the last 35 years is this: that argument is overblown. I can have faith AND I don't have to be an idiot to believe (although to be fair... lots of idiots do believe... and some people might say I am an idiot but I digress).

This week we'll look at an overview of faith and doubt and try to work out together how the two relate.

Prayer: Father, give me the grace to be able to trust that Jesus knows what He's talking about when it comes to transforming the human heart... because my heart needs a LOT of transformation. In Jesus Name, amen.

Tuesday:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. Hebrews 11:1-2 (NIV)

The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd. Hebrews 11:1 (MES)

Reflection: This week we're looking at the relationship between faith and doubt. I used to think that if there was a relationship between those things then you weren't doing it right (as a follower of Jesus). Those were strange days for me because I've always been a bit of a skeptic and a cynic at heart. My Sunday school teachers accused me of doubting because I asked so many questions about the stories they were telling me as a 3 year old (ok- maybe I was a tad older than 3 when I was accused of being a doubter but I was still a little kid ;o)

But faith and doubt don't have to have a contentious relationship within us. In fact until we accept the fact that they will both exist within the life of a follower of Jesus we will always feel like we're living in a blizzaro upside down world where nothing makes much sense.

Hebrews chapter 11 is the Bible's "Hall Of Fame" or hall of heroes. It is the "faith" chapter in the Bible. It has definitions of faith and examples of how heroes of faith lived out that faith. All of those heroes have 2 things in common. First that they are all flawed, messed up, weak people who made as many mistakes as they did things right. And secondly they all struggled with doubt. All of them.

Hey, they sound a lot like me. And they sound a lot like you too if we're being honest here. So why are they in the hall of heroes? Because they chose the "act of faith" even when they had their doubts. It's called faithfulness and we'll discuss it next week. Faith is not 100% certainty. I don't know about you but that makes me say, "PHEW!" I have a lot of doubts running through my brain. I'm still a cynic and a skeptic at heart. My initial thoughts about anything are almost always skeptical and cynical. So why am I a preacher? Because a life in which faith and doubt have learned to coexist has led me to this point.

I tried to tell God it wasn't a good idea (He knew that). I tried to tell Him about my doubts (He knew all about those too). All God has ever asked of me is that I faithfully take whatever next step He puts in front of me (in spite of my doubts) and when I do that more often than I don't- things work out miraculously in my life. Not perfectly. Not without pain. Miraculously.

But still I struggle with doubts. The day I agreed to let Jesus manage my life I prayed a simple prayer: "God, if You're really there and if You really want my life then I'll give it to you. But I don't know what that means right now. So here's the deal- I'll do the things I think you want me to do and I'll try to stop doing the things I'm pretty sure You want me to stop doing. And I'll dedicate my life to learning what I don't know yet. Does that work?"

I have to tell you, I expected clouds to part and light from heaven to shine down into my room and angelic voices to sing but none of that happened. In fact it felt like nothing happened. So what did I do? I woke up the next morning and started trying to honor my

agreement. And do you know what happened?

My life exploded.

I was not a happy camper (and seeing as how I was at a camp that analogy really rings true for me). I expected everything to get easier after I made my "deal" with Jesus. Why didn't it? Well for one whenever anyone decides they're going to make positive changes in their lives (especially involving Jesus) they make two very powerful enemies. The Bible calls them 1) the forces of darkness and 2) the sinful nature. Before I had decided to follow Jesus I believe Satan had a hands off policy with me. Why bother me? I was doing his infernal work for him by living a powerless, meaningless, purposeless life. And before I decided to get my cravings for drugs and alcohol under control my sinful nature didn't have a beef with me. After all- I gave it everything it asked me for. But when I started trying to discipline myself and say no to what I naturally craved my sinful nature threw a hissy fit.

Combine those two things and the recipe for a tough week/month/months was complete. But it didn't take long for me to start seeing God at work in my life. And that was the most miraculous thing I had ever experienced. I was hooked. And God "proved" Himself to me in a way that I could never prove to you. All I can do is point to a life that was swirling around the toilet bowl of life that Jesus saved and is using to this day.

Nobody saw that coming. Especially not me.

But I still have my doubts. Faithfulness isn't the absence of doubts. It's the act of faith in spite of my doubts and God can do miracles with that. We wouldn't think so. But He can. So choose "the act of faith".

Wednesday:

Be merciful to those who doubt. Jude :22 (TLB)

Reflection: Did you know that verse we just read was in the Bible? I didn't. Not until I was in my 30s and had been preaching for a while. In the church I grew up in doubt was a four letter word (yes I know... it's actually a five letter word but we didn't go in for accuracy or even logic very much... you just were supposed to swallow what you were told even if you had to close your eyes to do it... you know... like those frogs from the Snapple lids ;o)

But that verse is in the Bible. It's an important lesson that doubts are not inherently bad. In fact, doubt is just part of the human condition.

Doubt is present in all of our most important decisions and most important relationships. If you won't move forward if you have doubt you will never take a step.

When I married Judy I have to admit... I had my doubts. So did she. So did the president of the college we attended (I don't think he thought much of me). When he was in southern California (where I was from) raising money for the college my friends asked him if he knew the girl I was marrying. He said yes. They asked if he thought she was a good match for me and he said, "she's marrying beneath herself". Now don't get me wrong... I know it's true but he didn't have to say it out loud to my friends!

But even though I was marrying up and knew it, I still wasn't 100% sure it was the right decision. What ifs swirled around in my head. But I was sure I didn't want to spend the rest of my life without her and so I took what the philosophers call a leap of faith.

And am I ever glad I did. Because what I thought was true turned out to be true... that even when things got tough she wouldn't just give up and walk out. That no matter how tough life got she was always tougher. She has held me together more than I could ever have imagined and if I could go back and make that choice again I'd do it in a heart beat (but don't tell her that... I wouldn't want her to get a big head... she already knows she married beneath herself ;o)

My point is... faith is required in every relationship. Marriage, friendship, family, even jobs. If you never make a leap of faith you will never get married, you will never make a friend, you will never take the chance of bringing children into this world.

In other words... without faith you will never do anything that makes life worth living. Faith & doubt are part of the human condition. If you want a doubt free existence you have chosen the wrong species. So embrace being human and live with doubts- yours and others. And take Jude's advice and be merciful to those who doubt- others and yourself.

Prayer: Father, today I want to thank You so much for that little piece of the Bible in Jude :22 because I doubt a lot. Teach me to be merciful to others who doubt and teach me to be merciful to myself when I doubt. In Jesus Name, amen.

Thursday:

It is impossible to please God without faith. Hebrews 11:6 (NCV)

The righteous will live by faith. Galatians 3:11 (NIV)

Reflection: Like I said on Monday, I used to think that those who believed what the Bible says and who trust Jesus with their lives were the people with faith and that those who disbelieved the Bible were people of science. I wouldn't let go of my faith because Jesus had proven Himself to me by giving me everything I needed to recover my life but I still felt sheepish about my faith. But then one day I heard a preacher talking about this concept and it changed my life.

That's right... hard to believe, isn't it? Something a preacher says changing someone's life? But it happened for me. So what did he say, pastor Ed? Don't keep us waiting. In a nutshell what he said was this:

Imagine a conversation between two people. One of them says, "The universe is nothing but a pile of stuff." The other one says, "No. I think it was created by someone, by a personal God for a reason." Here's my point. This is not a conversation between a person with faith and a person without faith. Neither position can be proved. Both positions are faith statements. Both rest on a series of beliefs but with both the evidence eventually runs out and you have to make a leap of faith. Both views are resting and relying on faith.

I had to really think about that. I started to think about the fact that the proof that there is no God rests on two things (at least that's what I deduce based on my conversations with people who wanted to argue about the perceived ridiculousness of believing in a Creator): the big bang and evolution. I had never really stopped to think about the fact that both of those arguments rely on a theory. And while I know scientists would disagree with me, when you boil it down, a theory is really just another word for faith.

My atheistic friends (yes... I have friends who are atheists) follow the evidence that can be scientifically proven but whether you're talking about the big bang or evolution there is a place where the evidence stops. They look at the evidence and then make a leap of faith that says there is no God. We are living in a cosmic accident. I look at the same evidence and conclude we are living in a creation. An amazing universe designed by a loving Creator.

We'll talk more about the relationship between science and faith in coming weeks but here's my main point for today.

You don't have to feel like an idiot if you are a person of faith. Because all of us as it turns out, are people of faith. We just put our faith in different things.

Galatians 3:11 says that the righteous will live by faith and that's true. But what nobody seems to want to say out loud is, so will everyone else. All of us live by faith.

Prayer: Father, thank You for making such an amazing universe. Thank You that You care about tiny little me... just a tiny part of this universe that you designed. Today I put my faith and trust in You. In Jesus Name, amen.

Friday:

The righteous will live by faith. Galatians 3:11 (NIV)

Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely. Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:12-13 (NLT)

Reflection: I want to spend just a few minutes pursuing more the thought that everybody lives by faith- whether they want to admit it/believe it or not. We live in a world that is looking more and more upside down to me. Most of us have heard the term "evangelical Christian" but what does it mean other than a pejorative used for Christians of a certain political bent?

Well evangelical comes from the word "evangelize" which basically means to persuade someone to come around to your way of thinking. The word was a beautiful concept in the New Testament:

Always be ready to answer everyone who asks you to explain about the hope you have, but answer in a gentle way and with respect. 1 Peter 3:15 (NCV)

The Greek word translated here as “answer” is the word we get evangelical from. Does it sound like it’s still used the same way it was intended to be used by the writers of the New Testament.

Nope.

But here’s the thing I want to get to today- we’ve all heard of evangelical Christians but there are also evangelical atheists out there. Atheists who dedicate their lives to convincing people to come around to their way of thinking. Over the last 20 years or so many books have been written by these evangelical atheists against the idea of “faith”.

Sam Harris wrote the book *The End of Faith*. In it he writes this:

We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there are no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common, we call them “religious.” Otherwise, they are likely to be called “mad, psychotic, or delusional.” While religious people are not generally mad, their core beliefs absolutely are.

Christopher Hawkins wrote a book called *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. The title pretty much tells you where the book is heading.

Richard Dawkins wrote a book called *The God Delusion*. At the beginning of the book, he says:

If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.

To give you a sense of his tone, here’s one quote:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction. (You notice the word “fiction” in there.) Jealous and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak, a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser, a misogynistic, homophobic, racist infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal ...

and then it gets kind of hostile after that, so I’ll stop there. These evangelical atheists argue against the concept of faith when the truth is they live their lives by faith every day. They can’t not (I know that was an awkward sentence structure but it gets my point across better than cleaning it up so there it stays ;o) They would argue they don’t but they do. Even skeptics live by faith.

Rene Descartes is most famous for his statement, I think, therefore I am. The thought being that Rene Descartes was skeptical of all reality. He didn’t believe one could prove that anything existed beyond himself. He was the one thinking all these things so, he reasoned, he at least must exist. I think, therefore I am.

A guy named Steven Pinker doesn’t think Descartes went far enough. He would argue that one can’t even be sure of one’s own existence. He wrote this:

There is no such thing as “You.” All there are are atoms. All there is is stuff. What we call “you” is nothing more than a series of brain states ... just neurons firing. There is no executive you at the core of your life. That notion of a “you” is just an illusion.

The problem with this is it's impossible to live out consistently. Even for Steve Pinker. Steve Pinker writes and sells books arguing that there is no such thing as Steve Pinker- that he is in fact an illusion. And yet- here's the funny thing- somebody keeps cashing the checks made out to Steve Pinker for the books that he writes claiming there is no such thing as Steve Pinker.

There's a famous story about a class on skepticism where at the final exam the professor put a chair on a desk at the front of the room and told the students their final exam was to write an essay. "Prove that this chair exists". Students agonized and wrote thousands of words trying to prove that the chair exists but the only A was given to a student who took less than a minute to write his argument. He simply wrote, "what chair?"

That's funny but here's the thing- skeptics would say it's impossible to know whether or not a chair actually exists and yet all skeptics sit down in chairs at some point and don't fall to the ground.

I know this has been a largely philosophical reflection but it just goes to show that all of us live by faith. We can't not (there's that difficult wording again- I guess we can't not live by faith and I can't not mess up the grammatical structure of trying to explain that fact).

Never let anyone tell you they don't live by faith. We all do. Every. Single. One. Of. Us.

Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely. Three things will last forever-faith, hope, and love-and the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:12-13 (NLT)