

“Everybody doubts. Christians doubt. Atheists doubt. Scholars doubt; students doubt. Your pastor doubts and you doubt. Michael Wittmer takes this common phenomenon and shows us how our doubts can enrich our faith.”

—Haddon Robinson, author and Harold John Ockenga
Distinguished Professor of Preaching,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“If you’ve ever struggled with doubts about God, the Bible, or the reality of your personal faith (and who hasn’t?), this book is for you. Michael Wittmer fearlessly addresses these issues head-on, providing careful, honest, and gracious answers that make sense and give the reader a framework for a more confident and grounded faith.”

—Larry Osborne, author and pastor,
North Coast Church, Vista, CA

“I know from my own spiritual journey that misunderstanding doubt will trip you up. This is why I am happy to encourage you to read and digest Michael Wittmer’s very helpful *Despite Doubt*. He addresses the doubts of the mind and the heart and shows how they can coexist with robust faith. This book will greatly assist the conscientious Christian for whom honest wonderings can feel like unbelief. Let Wittmer lead you through your doubts to authentic belief.”

—Steve DeWitt, Senior Pastor, Bethel Church,
Crown Point, IN, and author of
Eyes Wide Open: Enjoying God in Everything

“Rather than rebuke or discourage readers, Michael Wittmer has supplied them with help to realize they have ample reasons to believe the claims of Christ. Written in clear, non-technical terms and a conversational style, this book should dispel the doubts of many and strengthen the faith of those who already believe. It deserves careful attention from all who wrestle with problems of doubt.”

—James E. McGoldrick, Professor of Church History, Greenville
Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Taylors, SC

“Mike Wittmer is to systematic theology what Carl Trueman is to historical theology: witty and full of (edifying) verve.”

—Andy Naselli, Assistant Professor of
New Testament and Biblical Theology,
Bethlehem College and Seminary,
Minneapolis, MN

“Michael Wittmer brilliantly helped me discover that while there is nothing wrong with doubt, there is everything right with faith. As I read from one chapter to the next, I found myself caught up in the undeniably profound wonders of the fully trustworthy God of the Bible. I ‘of little faith’ realized my puny faith is okay, yet I will get to watch it grow as I daily experience the powerhouse truths of God’s Word.”

—Doug Fagerstrom, Senior Vice President,
Converge Worldwide

Embracing
a Confident
Faith

DESPITE DOUBT

MICHAEL E.
WITTMER



DISCOVERY HOUSE

P U B L I S H E R S ^{LLC}

Feeding the Soul with the Word of God

Despite Doubt: Embracing a Confident Faith

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*For Tim, Randy, and Phil,
Faithful brothers who passed on what we have received.*

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Chapter 1

DOUBT AWAY

For what is more miserable than uncertainty?

MARTIN LUTHER

I have my doubts. How about you?

I have stood beside a casket and studied the dead man's face, looking for signs that he was alive someplace else. I believed his soul was in heaven, but how could I know for sure?

I have heard scientists cite evidence from fossils or the human genome to assert that no serious person could believe the Bible. Their confidence unnerved me, and I wondered whether they might be right.

I have watched Buddhist parents playing with their children, and I winced when I imagined what they would think about me if they knew what I thought about them. Was I mean to believe this family was in danger of hell if they did not repent of their sin and believe in Jesus? I suddenly understood why many people insist that all religions lead to God. It does make it easier to get along with others.

Doubts sometimes intrude when I'm reading Scripture. Every now and then I close my Bible and sigh, "Did that really happen?" Did Lot's wife turn into a pillar of salt, the Nile River turn into blood, and fire fall from the sky to consume Elijah's sacrifice? Did a

virgin give birth to a Son, and did this Son grow up to give sight to the blind and legs to the lame, feed thousands with five loaves and two fish, and rise from the dead? *Really?*

Such questions are occupational hazards for Christians in the twenty-first century. Anyone who is paying attention is bound to have them now and again. If these doubts have crossed your mind—and especially if they camped out for a while, pitching their tent on your tattered faith—then part 1 of this book is for you.

Perhaps you are plagued by another kind of doubt. You have no problem believing in God or the Bible, but you wonder whether you are truly following Him. If the path to life is as narrow as Jesus said, then it might be easy to miss. Jesus warned that many people will lead very religious lives only to hear at the end, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” (Matthew 7:23).

This can be terrifying. I attend church, read the Bible, pray, and reach out to those who are worse off than me. But when I read what Jesus demands—“Sell everything you have and give to the poor” (Luke 18:22)—I sometimes wonder whether I am even saved. I hear stories of saints who have sacrificed everything to follow Christ, and I wonder whether my life is too ordinary to be Christian. If I was really born again, wouldn’t I be more radical?

I remind myself that salvation comes by faith and not by works. True enough. But how do I know I have faith? “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13), but how can I tell that my call is sincere? Jesus might be the Savior of the world, but how can I be sure He has saved *me*?

If you have wondered what God wants from you—and especially if you have shuddered from the terror that you might not be saved—then part 2 is for you.

Christians struggle with both types of doubt. Sometimes we wrestle with the objective doubts expressed in part 1:

Does God exist?

Is Jesus His Son?

Is the Bible His Word?

And sometimes we ponder the subjective questions of part 2:

Am I doing all that Jesus expects from me?

Am I even saved?

How would I know?

My response to both groups of doubt is expressed in the title of this chapter: "Doubt Away." This ambiguous phrase can be taken in one of two ways, and I mean both of them.

First, you should feel free to "doubt away." Doubts are essentially questions, and since asking questions is the only path to finding answers, you should go ahead and doubt. Frederick Buechner explains, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." Have you sat through a class or sermon on a subject you knew thoroughly? You didn't have any questions about the day's topic, and you struggled to pay attention, let alone learn something. The teacher may have tossed out many important facts, but since they were answers to questions you didn't have, they failed to rouse your imagination.

Every discovery begins with doubt, and the largest doubts lead to the biggest breakthroughs. Job dared to charge God with injustice, "Why have you made me your target?" "Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?" (Job 7:20; 13:24). When God finally gave Job his day in court, Job realized that he was the one on trial, and he pled no contest. "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know," he said. "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:3, 6).

John the Baptist risked offending Jesus by asking, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus did not disparage John for his doubts but used the opportunity to clarify the gospel ministry of the Messiah (Matthew 11:2–6). Though sinless, Jesus himself endured history's most excruciating doubt. On the cross He became so distraught He cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). The answer to that question holds the foundation of our salvation.

You must give yourself permission to doubt because really, what is the alternative? If you stifle your doubts and pretend you don't have any questions, you are stuffing a time bomb in your shorts. It's bound to go off later and at the worst possible time, when the shrapnel from your blowout may wipe out others whose faith looks to you.

When you stop and struggle through your doubts, you inoculate your faith against such tragedies. Most children receive the MMR vaccine, which immunizes them against measles, mumps, and rubella. This shot contains live viruses of all three diseases—not enough to make the children sick but enough to stimulate their bodies’ defenses to fight back. An immune system that has successfully practiced on small doses can fend off an entire army of viruses when they come.

I was born before the MMR vaccine was invented, and I remember the itching and chafing from my childhood case of the measles. But I did get my spiritual vaccine. When I was in junior high I climbed an apricot tree in my front yard and pondered the existence of God. My adolescent mind chased the arguments back and forth, and after a period of several months—not lived entirely in the tree—I concluded that I did believe in God. I did not wrestle through all of the arguments I would later encounter, but my small bout with skepticism did inoculate me against more virulent strains. Now it would take an extremely powerful argument to make me reconsider my faith in God, and I doubt it could be done.

But despite its benefits, doubt—especially the bratty kind that stamps its feet and demands your attention—is not necessary for a life of faith. This is the second meaning of this chapter’s title, “Doubt Away.” Christians are known as “believers,” so we are people who need something to believe. We don’t doubt for doubt’s sake. We ponder our questions, not to feed sugar to our doubts but so we can lull them to sleep. It’s a good day when you put a doubt to bed, or at least hear it saying its bedtime prayers. The tiny tyrant is no longer terrorizing your day, and he will soon be sleeping as peacefully as your faith.

Some Christians mistakenly coddle doubt. They wish it wouldn’t pester them with nagging questions, but what can you expect from a modern child? Our secular age makes it difficult to believe in Jesus, so perhaps the best we can do is make a virtue out of our doubt. If faith requires risk, then maybe it’s a good thing that we don’t know for sure. After all, how can we take the leap of faith if we know in advance how our jump will end? And so we conclude

that knowledge rather than doubt is the enemy of faith. The less we know, the more space we open for the leap of faith.

But this leap *of* faith is often a leap *from* faith. Faith does not mean acting against our better judgment, jumping into the void and trusting God to take care of us. Christians aren't required to begin each day with shouts of "Geronimo!" Faith means to trust or commit to something, and the wisest believers rely on what they know, not what they don't.

If faith requires knowledge, then the important question is not "What are your doubts?" but "What do you know?" The encouraging surprise of this book is that you may know more than you think—more than enough to believe, more than enough to put your doubts away.

Part 1

BELIEF IN GOD

Chapter 2

SKEPTICISM

Faith is believing what you know isn't true.

MARK TWAIN

Recently I was riding as a passenger in a car. When we stopped for a red light, I looked out my window and noticed that jagged fingers of wood were shredding off a nearby telephone pole. I cringed to think how easily a passing jogger might brush up against the pole and pick up splinters. The menacing shards turned my thoughts to Jesus. How it must have hurt His hands and feet to be nailed with spikes to such rough lumber! I shuddered and tried not to imagine it.

So my thoughts ran in another direction. The solidity of the telephone pole reminded me that the cross was real. A man named Jesus was nailed to a post like that. But then I thought, what if He wasn't? How did I know the gospel stories are true? Or what if He was, but it doesn't change anything? How does the horrific death of a condemned Jew on the other side of the world in a different millennium affect my life today? It is comforting to think that Jesus' death bought me everlasting life, but what if I'm wrong? Then I will simply disappear when I die, like any dog, flower, or fly.

For a moment, it seemed as if a hole in the universe had opened

up. I had climbed up and out, and I was looking down on the world from above. I felt that maybe I was seeing the way things really are, for the first time. Then a wave of nausea washed over me, and I snapped out of it. I was surprised by my sudden doubts. I have been a Christian for more than forty years, yet the mere sight of a telephone pole had rattled my faith in less than a minute. How is that possible?

I suspect my doubting daydream says less about the weakness of my faith and more about the strength of skepticism in my world. I live in a secular age, when even committed believers walk a razor's edge between faith and nagging doubt. In his award-winning book, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor explains that our secular period is a new development in human history. About two hundred years ago it became markedly more difficult for Europeans and Americans to believe in God. Atheists and agnostics argue that this secular step is a sign of growth. After thousands of years we have finally matured into adults who know too much to believe. Christians counter that this secular stage may turn out to be nothing more than a blip, a phase through which every adolescent must pass. Western society grew strong on its belief in God, and once it works through its doubts it may turn to Him again.

Both sides agree that our time is different. There have always been atheists, such as the ancient Epicureans, but they were outliers. Atheists swam against the tide; they had to work at not believing in God. But now atheism, or at least agnosticism (there may be a God but I can't know Him), seems like our culture's default position. We start from skepticism, and we will only believe in God if we find enough evidence to prove His existence. We still may believe in God, but we must fight our way there. Being a Christian today is hard work. It's possible, but it's also tiring.

This chapter and the next one are not going to solve the problem of believing in God—the rest of Part 1 attempts to do that—but they aim to help us understand our predicament. Why is it so hard to believe today? Why does the Christian faith seem like it's merely one option among many, and often not even the best option? How did we get *here*?

Victims of Our Success

Until recently, Westerners assumed the world was enchanted with the presence of God. Medieval Christians would lift their eyes to heaven, bask in the warmth of the sun on their face, and believe they were feeling God's kind embrace. They often took a rustle of leaves as a sign that God was passing by, and they interpreted near misses of lightning and booming thunder as the expression of God's displeasure.

Martin Luther was sure that the fierce storm that rolled in on him was God's way of telling him to leave law school. He panicked and cried out to St. Anne, pledging to become a monk if she would spare his life. Why St. Anne? She was the patron saint of miners (Luther's dad was a copper miner) and those caught in thunderstorms. So Luther's prayer was a twofer. The storm eventually passed and Luther kept his vow and entered a monastery, which set off a chain of events that changed the course of history.

This week a string of angry tornadoes ripped through a large American city, lifting eighteen-wheeler tractor trailers one hundred feet into the air and twirling them around like toys before hurling them to the ground. The television anchor happily noted there were no fatalities, but he did not thank God or even ask what message God might be sending. He simply broke away to a meteorologist, who explained that this impressive "act of nature" occurred because a spinning upper mass of cold air slammed into a stationary front, which had been unseasonably warmed by record-setting temperatures.

I am not suggesting that God was sending a special message to this city, but I noticed the meteorologist seemed confident that his scientific account had sufficiently explained the tornadoes. He may be surprised to learn that the very science that left God out of the conversation could not have arisen without Him.

It's not a coincidence that modern science sprouted in the West. Eastern religions claim that the physical world is merely an illusion, so there is no point in studying it. Buddhism produces few scientists. But Western Christians learned from Scripture that this world

is real and good because God made it. They read that God put us on Earth to govern and develop this world on His behalf (Genesis 2:15). So when we research the mating habits of blue whales, the migratory patterns of red-tailed hawks, and the family squabbles of meerkats, we are obeying the first command God ever gave us, to “Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28).

This biblical worldview inspired scientists such as Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, and Galileo to study the universe and expand our mastery over it. They kick-started modern science, which has improved our lives beyond their wildest dreams. Modern science delivered indoor plumbing, smartphones, and medication for high blood pressure, which we need to cope with our smartphones. We have gone to the moon, and back.

But our scientific achievements have cost us spiritually. The more power we gained over nature, the less we thought we needed God. Do you see the irony? We studied nature because God commanded us, but we got so good at it we supposed we could take His place. Who needs God when you can solve your problems on your own?

Initially we kept God around as a security blanket. We became deists who believed there was a God who watched over us, but He lived far away and would not interfere with our lives. God had wound the world like a clock and let it go, to run entirely by the consistent tick-tick-tick of natural law. Learn these laws, and you will unlock the mysteries of the universe. We no longer expected God to miraculously intervene in our world, nor did we think we needed Him to. He created the laws of nature, and we could take it from there.

It's a short step from a distant God to a nonexistent God, and deism soon dissolved into naturalism. This secular worldview believes the universe is all there is. There is no God, no souls, and no afterlife. You live, you die, and then you fade away, never to be seen or heard from again. This is a depressing viewpoint, as even its supporters acknowledge.

People of the Middle Ages believed that humans were the focus of creation. We stood between heaven and earth, the image bearers

of God on the planet that was the stationary center of the universe. But as Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo obeyed God's command to study His world, they discovered that we were not even the center of our own galaxy, for the earth revolved around the sun. They insisted that we were still important, for Scripture said God had placed us here to steward this world on His behalf. But eventually even this belief groaned and gave way beneath an avalanche of scientific discovery.

We felt ourselves growing up, and soon we were too smart to believe a religious book taught to children. We were in charge now, and the more we learned to control nature the less we depended on God until finally we displaced Him altogether. Our rise was also our demise, for there is no value in bearing God's image if God no longer exists. The moment we believed we were gods was the moment we destroyed ourselves.

And so our culture is stuck. We cower before the consequences of not believing in God, yet our grown-up minds demand proof that we know isn't there. We want to believe in God; we just don't think we can.

But wait. Backed against the wall by the ruthless skepticism of science, we reach into our pockets and feel a grenade. It's a foolish idea that probably won't work, but desperate people will try just about anything. Brace yourself, for our problem is about to get a whole lot worse.