

Dealing with Doubt

Heart to Heart, Part 5

1 John 3:19-23

Germany was beginning its quest for world domination under Adolph Hitler and Churchill's warnings had been ignored for several years.

Great Britain had assumed the posture of isolationism and had turned a blind eye toward Hitler's agenda in hopes that they would be left alone.

Winston Churchill of course, pounded away in Parliament that Great Britain was already in trouble and Hitler could not be appeased.

He was often shouted down and many believed him to be exaggerating to gain attention.

But then Churchill was elected Prime Minister; and when he moved into the Prime Minister's residence at Number 10 Downing Street, everything changed.

The policies of peacetime were over; the attitudes of political naiveté were packed away.

Up until then, No. 10 Downing Street had been a comfortable private home, where everything went smoothly and quietly, with messengers summoned at the tinkle of a bell; where clean towels and ivory brushes lay ready in the cloakroom and everything reminded its inhabitants that they were working at the heart of a great empire, in which haste was undignified.

But then everything changed. Churchill arrived on the scene like a summer squall at a sailboat race. It was pandemonium. Bells were ringing constantly, telephones of various colors were being installed in every nook at No. 10 Downing Street and the new prime minister was producing an endless stream of directives from his cabinet room, his bedroom and even his bathroom, with replies expected within

minutes. They staff began early in the morning and retired at midnight. One of his staff members would later write, it was only then that all realized – we were at war.¹

Of course, Churchill was elected, by the providence of God, just in time to save Great Britain – and perhaps the rest of the world – from falling into the hands of Hitler.

In his letter to the Ephesian believers, the Apostle Paul talks in the language of war that either isn't believed by the average Christian, or simply ignored.

And to our own peril.

Paul reminds us that since we are at war with the enemy of our heart and our gospel and our mission that we are to put on our spiritual armor, taking up the shield of faith so that they can ***withstand the fiery arrows of the evil one (Ephesians 6:16)***.

Every day, Paul implies, new arrows are fashioned and fired at the believer . . . primarily at the thinking process – the mind of the Christian – who daily must battle in being conformed and transformed – by the living word of God.

The Christian who gains ground is the Christian who understands that he is at war with the world's temptations, the flesh and the devil (***Ephesians 6:12***).

The target of Satan's attack is the glory of God; the worship of Christ; the communion of a believer with his Lord and other believers; and the strategic communication of the gospel to an unbelieving world.

So how does Satan hope to keep the Christian from worshipping and communing with the glory of Christ and faithfully serving his Lord as he testifies

with his life that Christ is the way the truth and the life?

One of the primary weapons fired by Satan at the believer is the weapons of doubt and uncertainty.

Doubting, uncertain Christians are ineffective soldiers.

So is it any wonder that Satan will most often attack the certainty of our faith in the gospel – the certainty of our salvation – the assurance of our standing in Christ?

In his book, entitled, *By Grace Alone*, Sinclair Ferguson names several fiery darts of devil fired at believers:

The name of one fiery dart is: “God is against you.” In other words, “God is really not even on your side . . . how can you believe He is really interested in you when you see the things that are happening in your life.” God is actually against you.

The name of another fiery dart is, “You really can’t be saved because you keep on sinning.” In other words, “How can you truly belong to God when you keep on sinning against Him; I mean how can you believe God even wants you when the only thing you consistently do is sin?”

Following closely to the first two fiery darts is another which is named, “Payback is coming.” In other words, payback from God is going to come to you, one way or another.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It might be unanswered prayer, problems at work, health issues, financial difficulties and difficult relationships – these are all forms of God’s displeasure with you.

Besides, a real Christian would never do what you did or think what you thought or say what you said . . . so, you must not be a Christian.

The president of Puritan Reformed Seminary, in his commentary on First John wrote that “Failing in faith, in love, in obedience often prompts us to wonder, “Am I really a Christian?”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is actually part of Satan’s wartime strategy, along with our fallen flesh and the lure of the world system which all collaborate together.

In fact, keep in mind that Satan and the world system effectively have an agent working on the inside – a traitor – our own flesh – our own fallen personality – our fallen mind – our fallen affections – our fallen flesh working against us in treasonous collaboration with the enemy. ***For in our flesh dwelleth no good thing (Romans 7:18).***

Which is why Paul the Apostle lamented about his desire to be delivered from his body of death – his corrupted flesh. (***Romans 7:24***)

These fiery darts find their mark in the heart and mind of the believer and create despair, disillusionment, uncertainty and a thin veneer of doubt that covers all of life – doubting God’s love; doubting God’s care; doubting God’s forgiveness, thus doubting your own salvation – effectively keeping a Christian hobbled in uncertainty – pinned down in his foxhole, so to speak – rather than fighting the good fight and running with joy the race of faith before him.

Doubt is so significant an issue and it must be addressed.

It’s as if the Apostle John stops his deliberation and, almost parenthetically says, “Listen, we need to take a moment and talk about our hearts which are ever ready to condemn us!”

And he effectively reveals three dangerous characteristics about doubt that, when understood, diffuses its destructive power.

As we work through these next few verses in First John 3, I want to show you three dangerous characteristics of doubt and three divinely appointed counterattacks.

The first dangerous characteristic of doubt is this:

1. Doubt fixates on your personal deficiencies

First John, chapter 3 and verse 19. We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him – now notice – in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things.

Just a few words earlier, John began with the tender words, ***Little children*** – ***verse 18*** – he’s writing to Christians.

He’s just finished challenging us to love each other, not just with lip service, but with our lives. He’s confronted us with an ever-tightening challenge regarding murder, hatred and indifference.

But then he shifts gears, as if anticipating every Christian to wonder – since I don’t love like I ought to and since I’m guilty of indifference and even hatred and maybe even physical murder . . . how can I be a Christian?

You see, John knows that every honest Christian will feel the potential heat from a fiery dart that adds

a question mark to genuine faith from what he's just written.

So John immediately anticipates this – and the theme in these next few verses is centered around this word *assurance*.

This phrase can be translated here in verse 19, *We will have assurance in our hearts before Him*.

The word for assure means, to convince, to set at rest.^{iv}

John's desire isn't to create doubt, but to settle doubt.

He knows how our hearts are ever ready to join the enemy and condemn us. That's why he refers to our hearts condemning us, in *verse 20*,

In fact, the Greek word for *heart* is *kardia* [which gives us our word for cardiac arrest or cardiology – the study of the heart.

To the world of John's day, the *kardia*/heart was a reference to one's conscience.^v

It was the seat of morality.

And the word John uses here for *condemn* literally means, "*to know something against someone*."^{vi}

It's used in only one other New Testament letter – the letter from Paul to the Galatians where he explains that he had to confront Peter for inconsistency and ungraciousness toward Gentile believers - Paul wrote that Peter stood condemned.

In other words, Paul knew something about what Peter had done that was wrong and Peter needed to be challenged.

John is saying here that your conscience knows something about you that condemns you. Does it ever!

We happen to know more about ourselves than any other human being.^{vii}

And that's a good thing, isn't it?

The French philosopher Montaign once said that if all our inner thoughts were made public, each one of us would deserve to be hanged at least 10 times in our lifetime. He's too conservative!^{viii}

The truth is, a Christian's sensitive conscience can easily condemn them to the point that they question whether or not they are even a Christian.^{ix}

Notice what John writes next in *verse 20*. ***God is greater than our hearts and knows all things.***

Here's the counterattack – God already knows!

Satan will fire a flaming arrow at you through your conscience which offers up something true about you – so admit to it and confess it – but the

enemy tries to go too far with your conscience – remind him of God's omniscience.

When God saved you . . . he already knew the worst about you.

God is omniscient. Has it ever occurred to you that God has never learned anything? He already knows. Which means, no gossip can inform Him; no action on your part can surprise Him. No enemy can dig up anything against you; God knows where you were yesterday; He knows what you did last week; He knows what you're planning to do tomorrow; He knows what you're thinking right now; God knows your past, your present and your future.^x

The omniscience of God both convicting – when you need to get right with God – and reassuring – your conscience cannot condemn you for something Christ has already paid for at the cross.

God omniscience is greater than your conscience. He already knew.

Now John is not suggesting here that God minimizes our sin or downplays our sinful hearts.

John doesn't write here – in whatever way our conscience condemns us, don't pay any attention to it; it doesn't know what it's talking about.

The solution to battling this particular characteristic of doubt is not to diminish our depravity or downplay our sins.

The solution is to admit and confess our sins and then remember this amazingly encouraging counterattack that God already knows.

So, your future is not, and will never be, in jeopardy. For Christ, your Savior has forgiven everything He already knew you needed to be forgiven of.

Here's the truth about doubt.

Doubt fixates on your personal deficiencies – and by the way, it'll never run out of material.

2. Secondly, doubt feeds your spiritual uncertainties

Doubt says, "Look, the last thing you can expect is for God to be listening to your prayers . . . in fact, the last thing God wants is to even see you showing up in prayer . . . who do you think you are . . . I mean, look at the week you've had!"

John effectively says that whenever the believer deals with the issues of conscience and recognizes they are already known by God through Christ and

already on forgiven ground, uncertainty is exchanged for confidence.

Notice, John writes in *verse 21. Beloved, if our heart [then] does not condemn us (in other words, it's been dealt with), we have confidence before God.*

Literally, we have confidence in the face of God – in the presence of God.

You can come boldly to the throne of God (*Hebrews 4:16*).

You don't run from God because you're underserving, you run *to* God because He has accepted you in the beloved by means of Christ's atoning sacrifice.

Satan will say – God is certainly not interested in you – and the counterattack is, God has already invited me.

It might help to be reminded of the meaning of this word translated confidence – *you will have confidence before God.*

This word translated “confidence” showed up already in *chapter 2 and verse 28 where John wrote that we can have confidence when Jesus appears.*

We spent time defining this Greek word – this word for confidence which means open speech . . . transparency . . . full disclosure.

This confidence to approach God isn't some kind of bold bravado based on consistent Sunday school attendance or a perfect driving record or a really good week where you didn't skip devotions.

The idea of confidence here is open transparency before God.

John is effectively saying – you deal with the issues of conscience and instead of hiding from God you open your heart and life to God for His inspection and purification – then you will find your confidence growing as honesty before God grows; and as transparency before God grows, doubts about God diminish.

Our confidence to approach God isn't because we've had a great day – or a victorious week . . . our confidence – our open transparency is based on the forgiving, atoning, mediating work of Christ and an invitation from God our Father to approach Him whenever we want.

The attack of Satan that breeds doubt is that you don't deserve to talk to God. The counterattack is – God knows everything about me and He's made Himself accessible to me.

I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse that fits perfectly with a correct understanding

of John's intention. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves. And friends, once that's taken care of and we're no longer accusing or condemning ourselves, we're bold and free before God.

Now, with this flaming arrow of doubt that feeds spiritual uncertainties, the devil often adds another twist – and it's this: “Okay, you're all confessed up and in fellowship with God . . . your conscience isn't condemning you at the moment – well then, go ahead and pray to God but you'll never get what you want . . . He'll never answer your prayers . . . in fact, He's probably not even listening.”

Notice verse 22. And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.

At first glance this looks like prayer is a religious bargain we make with God – we do what He wants and He gives us whatever we want.^{xi}

If that's true, our motive for living for Christ become self-serving – if not downright greedy – and God becomes a sort-of cosmic candy store clerk who gives out sweet things to all the Christians who keep the rules and bad things to those who don't.

If you compare this text with other passages on prayer, you discover that in a growing relationship with Christ our dreams, our desires and our prayer requests, as one author put it, begin to take on a God-shape – that is, they begin to conform to the image of His nature and His will and not our own.^{xii}

In other words, our praying becomes less about what we want in our lives and more about what He wants in our lives.^{xiii}

That's exactly what John is saying here.

In fact, if you turn the verse around, you get closer to an English understanding of John's intention – so that it reads, “if we desire to keep His commandments and do the things that please Him, whatever we ask will be given to us.”

In other words, whenever we ask for something that matches up with His commandments and His good pleasure, it will be granted.

Praying then for the believer in the battle, isn't a matter of knowing how to get our will done, it's a matter of coming to know God well enough to get His will done.^{xiv}

And so you pray every day and at the end of every request – “Not my will, but Thine be done.” We literally want whatever He wills.

Wonderfully illustrated in a Puritan prayer prayed some 200 years ago that went like this, “May the matter of my prayer be always wise, humble, submissive, obedient, scriptural, Christ-like; and give me unwavering faith that supplications are never in vain, for though I do not obtain my petitions, I shall have larger, richer answers, surpassing all that I could ask or think.”^{xv}

The truth is, our vision is limited; we are creatures of comfort; we are bound to time with limited memory and easily frightened about the future. And then things happen and events occur that we would never have prayed for from God come and we discover they are exactly what we truly needed – even suffering or hardship – to be conformed to the image of His Son.

We discover the truth of Spurgeon’s comment – that we really are at our spiritual best when shipwrecked on the island of God’s sovereignty.

Doubt says God doesn’t care. Doubt says God isn’t listening. Doubt says God isn’t interested.

- We counter that God knows every sparrow that falls (*Matthew 10*)
- He even knows the numbers of the hair on our heads (*Luke 12*)
- That we are His own special possession (*I Peter 2*)
- And He has invited us to cast all our care upon Him because He cares for us (*I Peter 5*).

Counter the flaming missiles of doubts deceptions with the flaming truths of Christ’s promises.

One more dangerous characteristic of doubt:

3. Doubt forgets the gospel’s simplicity

John writes in *verse 23*. ***This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ and [then] love one another, just as He commanded us.***

This is the simplicity of the gospel. Believe in the name of God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

The word *believe* is in the aorist tense, referring to a once-for-all transaction of faith where you understood the gospel of Christ’s death on your behalf and you placed your trust in His life, death and resurrection.

You don’t become a Christian every day – it’s an event in the past when you trusted in Christ alone.

But the command to *love one another* here in *verse 23* is in the present tense – a continuing demonstration of new life in Christ.

John isn’t telling you to love people so you can become a Christian, he’s telling you to love people because you want to act like a Christian.

In other words, you can’t do things to become a Christian; but you can certainly do things that are becoming to a Christian.

John writes,

- Believe in the name – that’s a belief in His words and works – all that He represents
- Believe in the name of His Son – God’s Son – that’s a belief in His deity
- Believe in the name of His Son, Jesus – the counterpart to the Hebrew name, Joshua – Redeemer/ Savior – so believing in Jesus is believing in Him as you Savior;
- Believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ – Christos, the anointed and final prophet, the final High Priest, the final and soon coming King.^{xvi}

More than likely, this phrase represents one of the earliest Christian confessions of faith.^{xvii}

It’s loaded with meaning and at the same time remarkably simple.

Salvation is bowing and embracing all that Jesus is.^{xviii}

Doubt wants to add works, merits, favors, prayers, rituals, pilgrimages, ceremonies, penance, and more.

Doubt formulates a cost and a complexity to salvation and then informs you that you’ll never be able to make it.

But think about it. Imagine you’ve been invited to a banquet in the White House by the president of the United States. You are seated at a table that is filled with the choicest foods. Every effort and substantial cost has been made to make this banquet an extravagant and enjoyable evening. At the end of your visit, the president stands at the front door to personally bid you good-bye. What do you do? As you leave, you press a dime into his hand and whisper in his ear, “Thank you so much, Mr. President; I just wanted to help out with the cost.”

You’d probably be arrested.

You have been offered forgiveness, salvation, a residence in the Father’s house . . . doubt says, press

everything you can think of into the hand of God . . . and the more difficult and the more complicated the more likely it is to impress God.

Listen, anything you do to try to add to salvation is like pressing a dime into the nail pierced hand of Jesus.

You got to be kidding!

The counterattack to doubting the simplicity of salvation is this – God has already been satisfied.

The justice of God has already been satisfied in the sacrifice of the Son of God.

God the Father is eternally satisfied in Jesus.

*Doubt says, “Can it be true?”
Unbelief says, “It isn’t true!”*

*Doubt struggles with the light of truth;
Unbelief is satisfied to remain in the dark.*

These things are so wonderful . . . are they true indeed? And faith answers, “Yes – forever true.”

Doubt fixates on personal deficiencies

- Counterattack it with the truth that God already knows!

Doubt feeds spiritual uncertainties

- Counterattack it with the truth that God is always accessible!

Doubt forgets the gospel’s simplicity

- Counterattack it with the truth that God is already satisfied with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/9/2013 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2013 Stephen Davey
All rights reserved.

i William Manchester & Paul Reid, The Last Lion: Volume 3 (Little, Brown and Company, 2012), p. 55

ii Adapted from Sinclair Ferguson, By Grace Alone (Reformation Trust, 2010), p. 68

iii Joel Beeke, The Epistles of John (Evangelical Press, 2006), p. 142

iv Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 792

v Ibid

vi Ibid

vii Herschel H. Hobbs, The Epistles of John (Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 93

viii David Walls and Max Anders, Holman New Testament Commentary: I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude (Holman, 1999), p. 200

ix Hobbs, p. 93

x Jerry Vines, Exploring 1, 2, 3 John (Loizeaux Brothers, 1989), p. 144

xi Roy L. Laurin, First John: Life at its Best (Kregel, 1987), 138

xii Adapted from Sam Gordon, 1, 2, 3 John: Living in the Light (Ambassador, 2001), p. 140

xiii Ibid

xiv Ibid

xv Arthur Bennett, ed; The Valley of Vision (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), p. 271

xvi Adapted from D. Edmond Hiebert, The Epistles of John (BJU Press, 1991), p. 172

xvii Ibid

xviii Beeke, p. 147