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# Christian Book Summaries

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# Faith & Doubt

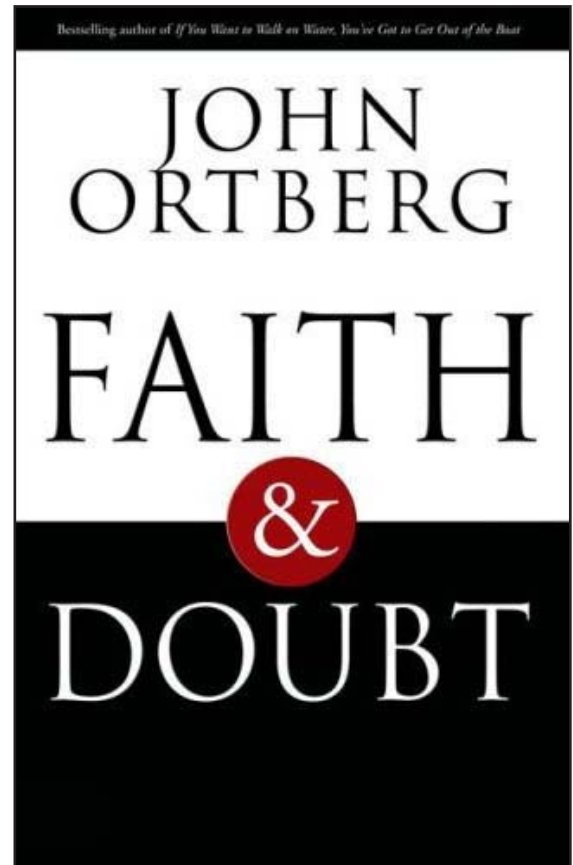
## A Quick Focus

### The Book's Purpose

- Help believers and seekers alike understand that the presence of doubt and uncertainty is an unavoidable component of the life of faith
- Grapple honestly with many of the profound questions and challenges that often lead to questioning and doubt
- Encourage those who struggle with doubt to trust more fully in a God who is big enough to handle their uncertainties.

### The Book's Message

Faith and doubt often go hand in hand with one another. Rather than viewing faith and doubt as diametrically opposed perspectives, we must realize that the very nature of faith requires that we have less than 100 percent certainty. Believers and unbelievers alike need to wrestle with the challenges, questions, and blessings that come when we acknowledge that our experience of God is much like that of the biblical character who said to Jesus: "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief."



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## Six Main Points

|  |   |
|--|---|
| ● The Inevitability of Faith and Doubt . . . . .     | 2 |
| ● The Necessity of Making a Choice . . . . .         | 2 |
| ● Longing for Home . . . . .                         | 3 |
| ● Third Day Stories and a Second Day World . . . . . | 4 |
| ● Doubt: Upsides and Downsides . . . . .             | 5 |
| ● Reasons to Believe . . . . .                       | 6 |

## The Inevitability of Faith and Doubt

Faith and doubt together are deeply embedded in all our lives. Just as the birth of a baby inspires the conviction that God is real and God is good, so the death of a baby prompts questions, confusion, and uncertainty. Both types of experiences are a part of our world; unspeakable joy and unimaginable tragedy have a way of coming into everyone's life. And so we struggle to live in the paradox and tension of a life experience that both points us toward God and simultaneously calls His existence into question.

How do we resolve these issues? We must not rush to the inappropriate and damaging responses, such as glibly telling people they have brought their suffering upon themselves or suggesting that their doubts make them somehow less spiritual or committed. ***"When people of faith are not willing to sit quietly sometimes and let doubt make its case, bad things can happen."*** Instead, we must acknowledge that many people have a deep desire to believe in God but for any number of valid reasons (personal tragedy, unanswered prayer, theological questions) find belief very difficult.

A number of current bestsellers are written by people who are confident and bold in their atheism and who suggest that any kind of faith perspective is fueled by delusion and naiveté. We must listen to these authors and not simply argue with them. Yet we must also understand that the question of God is a complex one. Books on either side of the discussion (written by believers or doubters) that simplify the issues and demonize the other side are not helpful. Faith and doubt live side by side in every person.

**"Doubt is not so much a dividing line that separates people into different camps as it is a razor's edge that runs through every soul."**

It may be that great believers and great doubters have more in common with each other than we might expect. Both are consumed with knowing the truth. Both agree that the nature and meaning of life are the great questions of our existence. Both grapple with the same "contradictory information" about these matters that confronted us every day. And both know the discomfort of experiencing some uncertainty about the merits of their chosen position.

The question is not merely an issue of the intellect—that smart people choose one way and less gifted or educated people choose the other. Brilliant people and ordinary people can be found on both sides. And on both sides, we live with the shared experience of our beliefs and our doubts.

## The Necessity of Making A Choice

Human beings have developed an almost countless number of varying ideas about God, faith, and religion. In addition to a number of major world religions, we have myriad sects, cults, and personal belief systems. And of course, everyone thinks that his or her viewpoint is the correct one. We have a staggering level of difference of opinion on the most important questions of our existence. So ... how can we know the truth? Is there any way to move beyond trust and hope to the point of absolute certainty about what we believe?

Some have suggested that since we can't seem to know theological truth with certainty, we should be content with some form of agnosticism—simply saying "I don't know" in answer to these questions. But this suggestion ignores the reality that we must make choices about the way we will live our lives. Because we have a life to live, we do not have the option of suspending judgment until some point in eternity when we will know the answers for sure. ***"Once we have been born, trying to put off deciding what to do about God is like jumping off a diving board and trying to put off actually entering the water."***

Our convictions about God are not simply a theoretical exercise; they also form the guidelines by which we live our lives. And so while living in doubt is understandable and even useful for a season, it is less than ideal as a philosophy of life.

continued on page 3

**“I do not see how it would be possible to find a meaningful life in a meaningless universe. The only purpose that is worthy of life is something bigger than life itself.”**

Given the necessity of making a choice, which choice is more rational? If our decision is to side with those driven by doubt, we have very little hope of finding a grand purpose for our lives. We are left with merely trying to find the most pleasure and the least pain for our brief time on earth. To side with those who believe opens our lives to the possibility of a much larger vision~knowing God, being transformed by Him, and being a part of changing His world.

But evidence alone does not drive this decision; the evidence, as we have said, is contradictory. We will have to decide. As Blaise Pascal famously pointed out, we will have to place a wager~betting our lives either one way or the other. Like the trapeze artist who flies through the air, we must let go and place our trust in the One who will catch us. Not deciding is not an option.

What we choose to believe defines who we are. But we must be careful to define what kind of belief matters most. Two people might say they believe the same thing, yet live lives that are very different from one another. How does this happen? What kind of faith really determines the trajectory of our lives? When we talk about faith and belief, we must be sure to delineate between three different levels of personal convictions.

Public convictions are beliefs that we want other people to think we have, even though we may not actually embrace them. These are the convictions that we state because of the impression they make on others, not because they communicate truth about who we really are. They are more about rhetoric than reality. Private convictions are those beliefs that we genuinely think we believe, but ones we might abandon in certain circumstances.

Core convictions, on the other hand, are the beliefs by which we actually conduct our lives. They make up the mental map by which we decide how life really works. These three kinds of convictions can be summarized as **“what I say I believe, what I think I believe, and what I reveal I really do believe by my actions.”**

Jesus Christ demonstrated a life of congruence between what He said, what He thought, and what He did. And at its core, faith involves putting our trust in this Person. **“Interestingly, Jesus never said, “believe my arguments” He said, ‘follow me.’”** And we must decide whether or not we will.



## *Longing for Home*

When we are home, we are at peace. When we are not home, we often feel the pangs of homesickness. The question of God’s existence links directly to our sense of home: If there is a God, we can have hope that we will one day be home. If there is not a God, we are a homeless people.

The writer of Genesis was not attempting to write a contemporary science textbook. Rather, he was writing to make a much deeper point~that we are here by invitation, not by accident. The big questions of the first chapters of Genesis do not have to do with evolution and natural selection and the big bang. They have to do, instead, with the fact of our existence~the reality that God made this world out of nothing and made it to be our home.

**“Home is the place where you're safe. Home is the place where your story begins. Other people can't bother you there. When you're home, you're free.”**

Yet we are not at home. We understand that something has gone wrong with us and with this world, and that sense of homesickness is a clue to our true condition and identity. Our homesickness indicates that we are made for God. **“Maybe there is no God. Then the universe is not home, just an accident. Maybe there is a God, but he lives in quiet habitations, untrou-**


**continued on page 4**

***bled by petty human problems. Or maybe God can make himself so small and vulnerable as to take up residence in a human heart~and break when it is broken. Maybe home is where God is. And maybe it will be awhile before we feel at home."***

Periodically we do have mountaintop moments when we sense the presence of Someone bigger than ourselves. These are moments when faith is born, when we know that God is real. But these moments don't last long. We all have to leave the mountain and return to the valley of uncertainty and ambiguity.

What this means is that our level of certainty about our convictions will ebb and flow. Sometimes we will believe strongly. Sometimes doubt will come. These doubts don't always mean that we have discovered new reasons to disbelieve; they simply reflect the reality that the circumstances and seasons of our lives often change.

What is required in these seasons of doubt is what Soren Kierkegaard referred to as a leap of faith. This idea does not mean believing something even when we must ignore the evidence to do so. It involves making a total commitment to something in spite of our fears and uncertainties. These types of decisions are common to our lives~the decision to marry, for example, is one that we must commit to fully even with no guarantees about how it will turn out. ***"If I leap, if I trust, I do not know for sure what will happen. What I do know is this: if I don't leap, if I don't trust, if I don't hope, if I don't ask, I will never soar."***

We would all prefer to stay on the mountaintop of God's presence all the time. Maybe we can't because God's greatest desire for us is not our happiness, but our goodness. Maybe we would begin to worship the feeling we have on the mountain rather than God Himself. Whatever the reason, we must always return to the valley of uncertainty. And in that valley, like the father who wanted Jesus to heal his son, we experience faith filled with "ifs". We believe and we doubt. We pray and we wonder. But thankfully, Jesus responded mercifully to the father with the iffy faith and the iffy prayer. The man's leap of faith brought him home. 

## *Third Day Stories and a Second Day World*

We all have two types of hopes~hopes *for* something, and hopes *in* someone. Hoping for something has to do with a particular outcome~a job, a house, a cure. But the sad reality of our lives is that at some point, everything we hope for will disappoint us. Every circumstance and situation will ultimately fade away. When that happens, we must have a deeper, more substantial hope to fall back on. The testimony of Scripture is that our ultimate hope is not in anything we hope for, but in Someone to place our hope in.

***"Hoping can break your heart. That is why we carry one big hope, the secret hope you don't even dare to breathe: that when you have lost the something you were hoping for, and it might have been really, really big, there is a Someone you can put your hope in."***

The Old Testament story of Ichabod is the story of lost hope. On the first day of the story, God is defeated, the glory has departed from Israel, and all hope is lost. The second day of the story is about mystery and ambiguity~we are not clear about what God is up to and how the story will resolve. But like so many other stories in Scripture, this is a third day story. And on the third day, God comes to His people, overturns their enemies, and restores hope.

Third day stories in Scripture are about the need for God to show up in power and rescue His people. There is nothing the people can do to save themselves; they are utterly dependent upon God to restore and renew their hope. The stories of Joseph, Esther, and Jonah are all third day stories, but the ultimate example, of course, is the story of Christ's passion. The first day was a day of darkness and defeat; the second day was filled with disappointment and confusion; the third day was God's day. We can put all of our hope in a third day God.

But we live in a second day world. We live in a world in which we often don't see God's deliverance. We live in a world in which we must often contend with God's silence and seeming absence. In this context, we try to follow a God we cannot see, touch, hear, or prove. It is no wonder that at times we are troubled by doubt. Three categories of doubt seem to emerge in our second day world.

**First, why not more proof?** If God exists, why doesn't He give us more evidence of His existence? Why doesn't He part the clouds and unmistakably show Himself to us once and for all? Why is He seemingly so silent, so shy, and so reticent to overpower us with His presence? ***"Having a powerful mystical encounter would settle all faith issues once and for all. But for people who have them, it doesn't seem to work that way. Maybe God has reasons for his silence."***

Maybe God is silent because He desires that we do not stop at sim-

## THIRD DAY STORIES AND A SECOND DAY WORLD

continued from page 4

ply admitting His existence. Could it be that His goal for us is the transformation of our heart and the transformation of His world? If people were “forced” to admit that God exists by some overpowering show of His power, the core problem of the condition of the human heart would not be solved. People can believe in God and still have lives that do not reflect His intentions or His design.

God comes to us in a way that allows us to respond to Him or choose not to. We can accept Him or dismiss Him. As Blaise Pascal said, “*there is enough light for those who want to see and enough darkness for those of a different persuasion.*”

**Second, why not a better product?** If Christianity is true, why don’t we Christians do a better job of living it out? “*An atheist named Steven Weinberg puts it like this: Good people do good things, and bad people do bad things, but to get good people to do bad things, that takes religion.*” Two questions can help settle our doubts on this front: 1) Are the horrible atrocities that are sometimes committed in the name of Christ the result of Jesus’ teaching or the result of violations of His teaching? 2) Have human societies tended to do better when faith is eliminated? Although the troubling misbehavior of Christians clearly reflects a failure to follow Jesus’ teaching, and societies that eliminate faith tend to be even worse, still the lack of spiritual progress is a troubling question for those of us who claim to follow Christ. And the lack of progress that should trouble us the most is our own.

**Third, why not end the pain?** “*If there really is an all-loving, all-powerful, all-good, and competent God overseeing the universe, why is there so much evil and so much suffering and so much pain?*” In some religions, the presence of evil in the world does not constitute much of a problem. For Hindus, suffering is the result of bad karma left over from a previous existence. For Buddhists, suffering is illusory. But for Christians, the problem is real, and the best answer may be that Jesus shows us a suffering God.

In light of the silence of God on these matters, once again we will have to choose what we will believe and how we will live our lives. The fundamental choice is this: there is no God and our lives have no meaning whatsoever—or we are the deeply-loved creation of an unspeakably good and powerful God, although we live in a world that is not as it is supposed to be.



## Doubt: Upsides and Downsides

Like milk, doubt can go bad. Doubt can be destructive in three primary ways:

**First, doubt can lead to skepticism.** The skeptic is the person who habitually refuses to commit himself to a viewpoint or course of action. In the skeptic’s view, since the need for sufficient evidence has not been met, the only viable option is to suspend judgment or remain in a holding pattern. The underlying dynamic for the skeptic is the fear of being wrong or hurt. So instead of being like the gullible ones who choose to trust or commit, the skeptic would rather remain on the sidelines and be an intelligent observer. The biblical character who best exemplifies the skeptic is the disciple Thomas, “Doubting Thomas.” When doubt morphs

into skepticism, it creates what the book of James calls “double-mindedness.” This person is torn in two directions at once—unable to decide, unable to commit, forever waffling among alternatives.

**A second form of destructive doubt is cynicism.** Whereas the skeptic is always looking for answers, the cynic has already found the answers—and those answers are always negative. Life is not fair. People don’t mean what they say. Things will get worse. Thoughts of God are only a pipe dream. Beneath the surface, the cynic is usually a deeply wounded person—someone whose idealistic dreams have been shattered by some profound disappointment. Like Pontius Pilate, when confronted with questions of truth, they wonder aloud, “What is truth anyway?” Like so many people in the 21st century, their personal mantra is “whatever.” “*The danger of cynicism is that this isn’t an answer. It’s no answer at all. It’s just a way to avoid the question. Cynicism is the opposite of a trumpet call; it is the call to inaction.*” Interestingly (and sadly), houses of worship are a common breeding ground for cynicism. The disappointment that people often feel with various aspects of the organized church can prompt many to become cynical about the claims of the Christian faith.

**The third category of destructive doubt is the most dangerous of all—rebellion.** Sometimes called “unbelief” in the Bible, this is not the honest expression of uncertainty. It is the settled decision of the person who does not believe and does not want to believe. Rebels simply defy God, often because they are afraid of what would be required if they surrendered themselves to God. As C.S. Lewis comments about his pre-faith days, atheism is not only the rebel’s belief, it is his strongest desire. Like King Saul, the rebel would rather die in despair than bend the knee to God.

continued on page 6

**“Skeptics abstain because they don’t know who to vote for. Cynics abstain because they are suspicious of everybody. Rebels don’t just abstain; they secede to set up their own little dictatorship. Skeptics question, cynics suspect, rebels defy.”**

Doubt can also bring some unique and important gifts to our lives:

- First, doubt is what makes trusting possible. Some people think that they cannot become Christians because they still have doubts. To the contrary, it is only when some doubts are present that faith is still a possibility. When we no longer have any doubts, knowledge has come and faith is no more. Doubt is the indispensable requirement for trust.
- Second, doubt helps us stay humble. The uncertainties of doubt remind us of the most fundamental truth about ourselves~that we are not God.
- Third, doubt prompts us to continue learning. As Frederick Buechner says, ***“Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith; they keep it awake and moving.”*** Doubt can prod us to look more deeply not only at our belief system, but also at ourselves.
- Fourth, uncertainty can push us to pursue the truth, wherever it is found and wherever it leads us.
- Fifth, uncertainty produces growth. Even when faced with doubts and questions, we can still be faithful~and that faithfulness is what changes us as people and propels us to new levels of maturity.



## *Reasons to Believe*

Many of the best and brightest minds throughout all of history have come to the conclusion that there is good reason to believe in God. Here are some of the most compelling reasons that belief in God is a most reasonable perspective:

1. We all believe in a great many things for which we do not have iron-clad certainty. We believe them not because we can prove them with full certainty, but because we have good reason to believe them. To demand doubt-free proof, therefore, as the only reasonable basis for belief in God is completely unreasonable.
2. Human beings operate with the core conviction that some things are right and some things are wrong~that there is a way we ought to live and that we often don’t live that way. This universal perspective implies that this world and our lives are not meaningless accidents, but that instead there is some kind of moral order built into the fabric of the universe.
3. The beauty of creation argues for the existence of a Creator who is good.

**“What is convincing to me is not so much the complexity of creation as the goodness of creation. Even the ugliness we see~cancer and pollution and slums~are painful precisely because creation is so good when it is right.”**

4. We all have a desire for justice, a conviction that in the end, justice and right must prevail. This demand for justice tells us that there must be a Judge who will one day set things right.

5. The perceived wickedness of much human behavior makes sense only if we believe that humans were originally intended to act in a certain way. Our moral distinctions about behavior that is good and evil make sense only if the universe is governed by moral principles of right and wrong.

6. The fact that we hold human beings accountable for their actions only makes sense if we believe human beings to be unique moral agents. If we are just collections of atoms, we are no more responsible for our behavior than animals.

7. The value we place on human life (even one person!) speaks to the wonder of our divine creation. ***“One of the problems of doubt is that once you deny the existence of God and the existence of spiritual truth, once reality is reduced to atoms and quarks, it’s not just God who disappears; the whole idea of persons begins to fade.”***

continued on page 7

**REASONS TO BELIEVE**  
continued from page 6

8. The existence of joy points to the existence of God. Happiness can be found in our circumstances, but genuine joy always points to something or someone bigger than we are.
9. The best reason for believing in God is the simple fact that Jesus did. For 2,000 years now, Jesus Christ has been transforming lives, and at the center of his mental map is a profound conviction of the presence and reality of God.

**“There is simply no one more worth trusting than Jesus. There is no one whose understanding of life has come close to His. There is no one who has affected history like Him. There is simply no other source~no book, no guru, no hunch, no personal experience~worth betting the farm on.”**

Like the trapeze artist, our leap of faith comes in three distinct phases: letting go, waiting, and being caught. Christians are not people who never doubt. They are simply people who are willing to let go of anything that keeps them from God, who wait for their doubt to one day be transformed into knowing, and who trust that they will ultimately be caught by God. If we do not believe in, wait for, and trust in Jesus, who or what will we be waiting for and trusting in?



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