

# INVINCIBLE

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CONQUERING THE MOUNTAINS  
THAT SEPARATE YOU  
FROM THE BLESSED LIFE

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DR. ROBERT JEFFRESS

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MOUNTAIN CLIMBING requires teamwork. Mountaineers generally link together with a safety rope and help one another across challenging terrain. To summit a mountain, a team of climbers, logistics managers, and porters must all work together to achieve their goal. The success of any mountain climbing expedition depends entirely on the team.

The same is true when it comes to conquering the mountain of writing a book. Any book that completes the journey from an idea to the printed page is a result of the cooperation, support, and expertise of a successful team. That's why I'm eternally grateful for the exceptionally talented team God has given me:

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# PREPARING TO CONQUER YOUR MOUNTAINS

RISING TO 29,029 FEET, Mount Everest is the tallest mountain on earth. Located along a plateau popularly known as “the roof of the world,” this imposing peak has captivated mountain climbers for decades, beckoning them to stand on its summit.

On May 29, 1953, mountaineers Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first explorers to scale Mount Everest. But it wasn’t Hillary’s first attempt. After failing to reach the summit two years earlier, Hillary reportedly shook his fist at the mountain and said, “I will come again and conquer you because as a mountain you can’t grow, but as a human, I can.”<sup>1</sup>

Hillary had learned a valuable lesson. A mountain that seems insurmountable isn’t—as long as we’re willing to grow. And with growth comes a change in perspective and a renewed hope that, in the days to come, even Everest-like mountains can and will be conquered.

Chances are you and I will never climb a literal mountain like Everest, but we will come face-to-face with other tall

mountains in our lives. The mountain looming over us may be called doubt or discouragement. Perhaps we are blocked by a daunting mountain of bitterness or guilt. Or we may find ourselves in the shadow of a seemingly insurmountable mountain of loneliness or grief.

Like Everest, the mountains you and I face in life can seem overwhelming. But we're not meant to cower in fear and defeat. With God on our side, we're meant to be invincible! That's why Jesus said, "Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him" (Mark 11:22–23).

### **Move That Mountain**

The biblical writers often used the imagery of a mountain to refer to something that seemed impossible. In the Old Testament book of Zechariah, for example, an angel said to the prophet, "What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become a plain" (4:7).

Seventy years earlier, Nebuchadnezzar's army had marched into Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon's magnificent temple. When the Jews finally returned to their homeland, rebuilding the temple to its former glory seemed impossible. But the angel promised Zechariah that God would level that "great mountain" like "a plain." How? "'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts" (v. 6).

Just as the Israelites faced what seemed like a mountain in rebuilding God's temple, you and I also face mountains in life that threaten to defeat us. Not long ago, my family

faced our own mountain. My older daughter, Julia, and her husband, Ryan, suffered three devastating miscarriages in less than a year. My wife, Amy, and I joined them in continually asking the Lord for a viable pregnancy and a healthy baby. But God chose not to answer those prayers . . . until Julia got pregnant with our triplet grandchildren, who have brought us immeasurable joy. Why didn't God answer our earlier prayers? Was it because we didn't have enough faith? No! Though we sometimes doubted God's timing and His methods, we knew that God loved Julia and Ryan, and if it was His will for them to have natural-born children, then He would make a way through the mountain of infertility and keeping a pregnancy. When the triplets were born, we knew that, with God, we had been invincible over that mountain. This experience strengthened our faith and reminded us that from God's perspective, even the tallest mountain is but a speck in His hand.

In Matthew 17, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you" (v. 20). Jesus wasn't referring to physical mountains. He was using imagery to communicate a spiritual truth: all of us will encounter mountain-like difficulties in life that seem overwhelming. Bible scholar William Barclay explained this well: "What Jesus meant was: 'If you have faith enough, all difficulties can be solved, and even the hardest task can be accomplished.' Faith in God is the instrument which enables men and women to remove hills of difficulty which block their path."<sup>2</sup>

Notice Jesus didn't say it takes mountain-sized faith to move mountains; it takes only mustard seed-sized faith.

Mustard seeds are tiny. Jesus wanted His disciples (and us) to understand that God will honor even the smallest amount of faith. When we put our faith in God and rely on His power, praying according to His will, He will enable us to shake our fists at the mountains in our lives and say, “I will conquer you because I am growing in my faith—and by faith, God will help me be invincible!”

### **The Mountain Mover**

At first glance, mustard seed faith hardly seems enough to conquer the mountains that loom large in our lives. But to look at the mountains from merely a human viewpoint is to take our eyes off the Mountain Mover. The ancient Israelites did that when they looked across the river into the promised land.

In Numbers 13, God’s people were on the verge of receiving the blessing promised long ago. All they had to do was cross the river and conquer the people who lived there. But when the spies Moses sent in to survey the land returned, ten of the twelve were frightened by the mountain-sized people who occupied the land. They were so large, these spies said, “We became like grasshoppers in our own sight” (v. 33).

Can’t you picture the image? People as big as mountains compared to people as small as grasshoppers. From the spies’ perspective, the mountain-sized giants could (and would) squash them like bugs. What the spies failed to consider was that the God who made the mountains had already promised to move the mountains, if they would just have faith and trust His promise.

## **Moving the Mountains in Your Life**

Standing at the base of a mountain that blocks your path feels daunting. But instead of looking at the crevasses and rocks, you can choose to focus on what awaits you on the other side. When you learn to do that, your mountains won't seem intimidating anymore.

*Invincible* was written to help you do just that. This book describes ten of the most difficult mountains that can separate you from the blessed life God has for you. Each chapter will equip you with biblical insights and practical tools so that, when the mountain you face threatens to defeat you, you can conquer it and come out stronger on the other side.

### ***Moving from Doubt to Faith***

When we encounter the mountain of doubt, it blocks our view of God's grace, mercy, and love. Doubt can lead to uncertainty about the truth of Scripture and even our salvation. Conquering this mountain requires an act of faith. When we confront our doubts with the truth of God's Word, we can confidently climb the rocky and steep places in life with a renewed faith.

### ***Moving from Guilt to Repentance***

Past sins, unrepented sins, and secret sins lead us to the vast mountain of guilt. As a result, we avoid God, His Word, and His people. Overwhelmed by guilt and shame, we believe we are unworthy of God's love and think He can never use us again. But this isn't true. Carrying guilt is like carrying a heavy load of useless equipment on a mountain climb. The

minute we drop that weight by repenting of our sin, we feel lighter spiritually and mentally. We can then proceed to do all God has for us to do with a clear conscience.

### ***Moving from Anxiety to Peace***

When we come to the mountain of anxiety, we wonder why God isn't doing something about the wrongs in the world or the difficulties in our lives. We ask, "Why hasn't God made things right? Why hasn't He answered my prayers?" Like getting lost in the mountains, anxiety causes confusion and prevents us from moving forward with purpose. At times like these, we need to take a deep breath and reorient ourselves to focus on God. When we do, we will discover His lasting, supernatural peace.

### ***Moving from Discouragement to Hope***

With anxiety come discouragement, disappointment, and depression. The mountain of discouragement can drop us into a deep, dark crevasse that seems impossible to climb out of. But God's Word provides a lifeline for those caught in depression, lifting us out of the black hole we find ourselves in and placing us on the sunlit path of hope.

### ***Moving from Fear to Courage***

The fear of insignificance, rejection, failure, poverty, illness, and death can stop us in our tracks. But if we are to experience the blessed life Jesus promised (John 10:10), then, with His help, we must conquer the mountain of fear. When we're standing at its base the mountain may seem unnerving, but after we take the first step, we'll find renewed courage.

### ***Moving from Bitterness to Forgiveness***

Not all anger is sinful (Eph. 4:26). But bitterness, resentment, unforgiveness, and revenge are. These attitudes are like avalanches or rockslides; they will batter us heart and soul. The mountain of bitterness can make us as hard as granite, affecting those around us as well. This isn't the life God intends for us, so we must learn to surmount this mountain with forgiveness.

### ***Moving from Materialism to Contentment***

Somehow we've Christianized the mountain of materialism, which often starts with the subtle sin of greed and leads to the not-so-subtle problems of debt and financial instability. We can become consumed with the pursuit of *more*, which grinds and crushes our souls. It is then that we must learn one of the hardest lessons the Bible has to teach—contentment.

### ***Moving from Loneliness to Companionship***

Intimate, enduring relationships have always been complicated, but today they are even more challenging to maintain. In an age of social media, virtual friends are made and lost at the click of a button. And as we get older, we can become increasingly disconnected from friends, family members, and church, causing us to face the mountain of loneliness. In times like these, we must shore up our hearts by pursuing companionship.

### ***Moving from Lust to Purity***

The mountain of lust isn't only about sex. Lust is burning after anything apart from God's will. It's a self-absorbed

desire to fulfill the appetites that tempt us, whether sexual or otherwise. The only sure way to move this mountain is through a recommitment to purity—doing God’s will in every aspect of our lives.

### ***Moving from Grief to Acceptance***

The mountain of grief can come with the passing of a loved one, the end of a marriage, infertility or miscarriage, a broken friendship, the death of a dream, or the termination of a career. Though grief is a natural process we go through after a loss, if we allow ourselves to set up camp instead of confronting this mountain, we can become paralyzed by depression and despair. We may not be able to eliminate grief, but we can keep it from controlling our lives as we come to the point of accepting what is lost and starting to move forward.

### **The Grandeur of Your Life**

My father was an amateur mountain climber. Though I didn’t inherit his interest in mountaineering, I can appreciate the majesty of mountains. Their snow-capped peaks loom large on the landscape, causing us to wonder at our all-powerful God.

Mountains humble us. But even the tallest mountain stands in humility before God, who helps us overcome the mountain-like difficulties in our lives. In the little book of Nahum, the prophet wrote, “Mountains quake because of Him and the hills dissolve; indeed the earth is upheaved by His presence” (1:5).

Every one of us has faced at least one of the ten mountains we’ll explore in this book, and if you haven’t, chances are you

know someone who has. If you and I ever hope to conquer these mountains and experience the blessed life God wants us to live, then we must step out in faith with our eyes fully fixed on the One whose presence causes mountains to melt like wax (Ps. 97:5). Mark Batterson has written beautifully about this: “It’s the mountains we overcome that make us who we are! The inclination is to curse the mountains in our path or try to avoid them altogether. . . . Don’t be too quick to curse the challenges you face, because God may be preparing you for something bigger, something better!”<sup>3</sup>

Your mountain looms before you. But fear not—though you will encounter many challenges in life that threaten to defeat you, God meant for you to be invincible! Every mountain you face is merely a molehill to the Mountain Mover, who has the blessed life waiting for you on the other side.

# ONE

## MOVING FROM DOUBT TO FAITH

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WHEN I WAS NINETEEN YEARS OLD, I was in college studying to be a pastor. But after listening to some of the professors in the classes I was taking, I began having doubts about the trustworthiness of the Bible. I remember thinking, *Is the Bible really the Word of God? How can I commit my life to preaching the Word if I'm not even sure the Bible is true? Should I even go into ministry?*

Then the respected evangelist Billy Graham came to preach at our church. I was excited about the opportunity to listen to his message. That evening, Dr. Graham spoke about his early years in the ministry and admitted to having similar doubts about the Bible when he was around my age. He described one night on a mountain trail when he set his Bible on a tree stump and cried out, “Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by faith! I’m going to allow faith

to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word!”<sup>1</sup> He said that decision transformed his life and his ministry.

When I heard Billy Graham talk about his struggle with doubt, I made that same commitment in my heart, and I could feel my faith growing stronger. I recommitted my life to believing and preaching the truth of God’s Word.

Later that evening, I ran into Dr. Graham and told him about my commitment. He congratulated me and wrote a note in my Bible that I’ll treasure forever. His genuine care for me at a time when I was wrestling with doubt impacted my life in a very meaningful way and affirmed to me that God’s Word is true. God is who He says He is.

## **We All Doubt**

Faith is like a day in the sunshine. But doubt is like a shadow that blocks the sun and sends a shiver through our souls. Unfortunately, on this side of heaven, doubts are inevitable. None of us is exempt. In fact, some of God’s choicest servants went through periods of deep doubt. Moses doubted his ability as a deliverer, David doubted God would rescue him from King Saul, Elijah doubted he would survive Queen Jezebel’s hit squad, and Jeremiah doubted his call as a prophet. And it would take many pages to detail the doubts of Solomon, John the Baptist, and the apostle Paul—to say nothing of Martin Luther, John Calvin, D. L. Moody, Amy Carmichael, Joni Eareckson Tada, and many other respected Christian men and women through the centuries.

Many believers today find themselves face-to-face with the imposing mountain of doubt, which can block their view of

God. Countless Christian students go to college and return home, as I did, with doubts about what they were taught concerning the Bible, creation, God, and the resurrection. Many Christian parents pray fervently for their prodigal children to return to the Lord but instead encounter additional rebellion, leading these parents to wonder whether God really exists or if He's really good and loving. And believers face illnesses that take the lives of loved ones and think, *Is this how God deals with those who love and follow Him?* Sometimes, yes.

I'm convinced that those who don't doubt much are those who don't think much or experience much. Airtight conclusions usually come from people who haven't known the sting of disappointment or the confusion of unanswered prayers. The truth is, life is too big for us to have it all worked out. There are many things we simply don't understand.

Nevertheless, some Christians think we should have the mysteries of life and faith neatly wrapped up in a box with a tag that reads "Off-limits for doubts and questions." Those who think this way are either cutting themselves off from the real world or setting themselves up for a serious dose of reality. At the heart of such thinking is fear; they are afraid to be vulnerable and honest, even with themselves. No one has life all figured out. All of us have questions, and when our questions go unanswered or the answers elude our grasp, we face the mountain of doubt.

## **Doubt versus Unbelief**

Most of us have gone through times when what God is doing in our lives confounds us. The plans we have for our lives don't square with what's actually happening in our lives, and

our faith flounders. It seems like God is ignoring our prayers or telling us just to deal with it. Either way, God is taking us places we'd just as soon not go. At times like these, we think, *Why doesn't God consult me? Why doesn't He show me the big picture?*

In Isaiah 55:8, the Lord said, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways." In fact, the distance between His thoughts and ways and our thoughts and ways is so great that the Lord declared, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts" (v. 9). God doesn't surrender His sovereignty to what we think He should do. He's the potter and we are the clay; He can mold us into anything He desires (64:8). And because He is God (and we're not), He exercises His will to accomplish whatever He chooses in our lives. It may not be what we wanted or hoped for, but it will be exactly what we need.

"That sounds very spiritual, Pastor," you may be saying, "but telling me that God's ways are greater than my ways doesn't get rid of my doubts. In fact, that's the whole reason for my doubts. God's ways are sometimes so doggone confusing."

I agree—they are. If your doubts cause you to run to God with sincere questions about what He is doing (or not doing), then asking is an act of faith. If you're not demanding answers but crying out to God for answers that only He can provide, then you're experiencing a normal, healthy relationship with God.

You see, faith and doubt can coexist. We see an example of this in the Gospel of Mark. The father of a demon-possessed boy came to Jesus and begged Him to spare his son's life.

Yet the father's request revealed both faith and doubt. In Mark 9:22, the desperate father said to Jesus, "If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!" Jesus responded, "If You can?" All things are possible to him who believes" (v. 23). Then the father confessed his struggle with doubt: "I do believe; help my unbelief" (v. 24). That was good enough. The fact that the father came to Jesus was an act of faith. Jesus healed his boy (vv. 25–27).

The apostle Peter knew that when life doesn't work out the way we want, we become susceptible to the enemy's lies. That's why he said in 1 Peter 5:8–9, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world."

When we go through times of suffering, Satan taunts us with questions and accusations against God:

- "Where is God now that you need Him?"
- "Why has God singled you out for pain and heartbreak?"
- "Why isn't God listening to your prayers? He must have forgotten about you."
- "Why does God bless others and not you?"
- "Maybe God really doesn't love you."

During difficult times, these types of questions often sow seeds of doubt. If we're not careful, we will water these seeds and come to believe that God is neither good nor loving.

Satan knows that if our doubts grow, then we'll begin to question the character and power of God, and we'll no longer go to Him for help.

One of my favorite hymns of the faith is "It Is Well with My Soul." You may be familiar with the song, but you may not know the story behind it. The lyrics were penned by Horatio Spafford, a successful Chicago lawyer and real estate investor. In 1871, Horatio's business went up in flames during the Great Chicago Fire, and he spent the next two years rebuilding it. In 1873, he and his wife, Anna, decided a trip to Europe would be a welcome respite for them and their four girls. However, a last-minute business emergency prevented him from accompanying his family across the Atlantic. He decided to take a later ship and meet them in England.

Four days into the Atlantic crossing, the ship Anna and their girls were on collided with another ship and sank. All four of their daughters were lost at sea. When Anna reached Wales she telegraphed Horatio: "Saved alone. What shall I do . . ." <sup>2</sup>

Such terrible loss could have hardened Horatio's and Anna's hearts toward God. But it didn't. Instead, Anna told a minister who survived the shipwreck, "God gave me four daughters. Now they have been taken from me. Someday I will understand why." <sup>3</sup> That's faith in action.

Horatio immediately booked passage from New York to be with his wife. When the ship reached the area of the tragedy, the captain notified Horatio that they were passing over the spot where his daughters had perished. Horatio returned to his cabin and penned the words that have comforted many grieving hearts:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrow like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.<sup>4</sup>

Horatio and Anna Spafford had times of deep doubt, but they never surrendered to unbelief. Doubt is a process we all go through to strengthen our faith. Doubters honestly search for truth; unbelievers actively run from truth. Doubters look for reasons to believe; unbelievers look for reasons not to believe. Doubters ask questions; unbelievers refuse answers. God accepts doubters; He rejects unbelievers.

## **Reasons for Doubt**

Christian writer Frederick Buechner had a humorous perspective on the relationship between doubt and faith. He wrote, “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”<sup>5</sup> Let’s consider four of these “ants” that can cause us to doubt.

### ***Unlived Truth***

My friend and mentor Howard Hendricks used to say, “Nothing will create more doubt in your lives than traffick-ing in unlived truth.” When there is a disconnect between what we believe and what we do, it doesn’t take long for doubt to creep into our thinking. The dissonance between belief and behavior, especially if it persists, always brings doubt. You cannot talk like the pious and walk like the pagan for long. Let me tell you what’s going to happen; I’ve seen it too many times. You’re eventually going to give up that

behavior, or you're going to give up your belief in Christ. A Christian cannot hold on to both of those things for a long period of time.

### ***Unexamined Faith***

A lot of Christians live by the adage “The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it.” But this isn’t a wise way to live. Eventually, your beliefs will come under attack, perhaps from a movie you watch, an interview you listen to, a class you take, a book you read, or a child you raise. If you have never examined the faith for yourself—to understand why you believe what you believe—you run the risk of wrestling with doubts. It is not enough to believe; you must know *why* you believe.

### ***Unanswered Prayer***

Nothing causes us to doubt God’s goodness, wisdom, and existence more than when we ask for His help only to hear silence from heaven. Perhaps you have a legitimate need and have begged God to intervene, yet you’re convinced your prayers never go beyond the ceiling.

The prophet Daniel knew something of that kind of doubt. God chose to reveal mysteries about the future of Israel to Daniel. One of those mysteries involved “great conflict” (Dan. 10:1). Troubled by the revelation, Daniel prayed for twenty-one days but received no answer . . . until an unexpected visitor arrived (vv. 4–9). The angel who came to him said, “Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding this and on humbling yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to your words” (v. 12). Why did it take

three weeks for the angel to get from God's throne room to Daniel's bedroom? The angel explained, "I was waylaid by the angel-prince of the kingdom of Persia and was delayed for a good three weeks. But then Michael, one of the chief angel-princes, intervened to help me" (v. 13 MSG). While it's hard to say how common a scenario like this is, sometimes demonic forces can delay our answers to prayer.

But this is only one of the reasons our prayers may be delayed. Another possibility for unanswered prayer is unconfessed sin. In Isaiah 59:2, the Lord said, "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear."

Other times, God does not answer our prayers because of idolatry. In Ezekiel 14:3, God told Ezekiel, "These men have set up their idols in their hearts and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all?"

Another possibility for unanswered prayer is a lack of generosity. Malachi 3:8 is clear that if we don't give God the offering that belongs to Him, then we're robbing God. The Lord says those who rob Him are cursed, but those who give open themselves to His blessings (vv. 9–10).

Sometimes unanswered prayers are the sovereign will of God. For example, in Romans 1:13, the apostle Paul wanted to go to Rome, but God had a different plan. He wanted Paul to preach the gospel where it had never been preached before.

If you're struggling with doubts because of unanswered prayer, I encourage you to examine your heart and motives, then trust that God will answer in His perfect time.

### ***Undeserved Suffering***

If you ask the average person, “What question would you like to ask God?” he or she will likely respond with this: “Why does God allow evil and suffering?” If we’re honest, most of us have wondered about that. And of course, often what we’re really asking is, “Why does God allow bad things to happen to *me*?”

The problem of undeserved suffering threw theologian Bart Ehrman’s faith into doubt. Unable to find answers that satisfied him, Ehrman allowed his doubt to turn to unbelief. In his book *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*, Ehrman wrote, “Suffering is not only senseless, it is also random, capricious, and unevenly distributed.”<sup>6</sup>

After the death of his wife, theologian C. S. Lewis also wrestled with doubt. In his book *A Grief Observed*, Lewis wrote, “The conclusion I dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’”<sup>7</sup> This is what suffering can do to our faith.

### **Dissecting a Doubter**

What causes a person to doubt? To see what makes a frog jump, you dissect it. The same could be said for what makes a doubter doubt, and the perfect specimen for such an experiment is the disciple Thomas.

Thomas is presented in the Gospels as a champion doubter. Because Thomas admitted his doubts, we tend to look down on him. But I like Thomas. He was honest and forthright. He didn’t pretend to accept things just so he could fit in with the crowd. Thomas was an independent thinker. He wasn’t

afraid to raise his hand and press for answers he hadn't quite grasped.

I find that refreshing because Thomas was brave enough to voice what the rest of us think but are too afraid to admit. He's a spiritual everyman—a stand-in for our own confusion. There are times in all our lives when we wrestle with doubt. How much better would we be if we were more like Thomas, openly asking our questions and admitting our doubts rather than denying them? When we're willing to put our doubts to the test, especially about life, the future, and God, we can grow in our faith.

### ***Doubts about Life***

John 11 is the first record in the Bible of Thomas saying anything. Most of us are familiar with this passage because of what Jesus did later in the chapter: He raised Lazarus from the dead and declared, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die" (vv. 25–26). What Thomas said a few verses earlier is easily forgotten, which is unfortunate because, though it expresses doubt, it was nonetheless courageous and loyal to Christ.

Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, lived in the village of Bethany, about two miles east of Jerusalem. They were Jesus's friends. And because they were His friends, Mary and Martha thought Jesus would come as soon as He heard about Lazarus's life-threatening illness. But Jesus didn't come immediately. In fact, though Jesus loved this family, He waited two days before making the trek to Bethany (vv. 5–7). He explained why in verse 4: "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of

God may be glorified by it.” What Jesus meant, of course, was that He would demonstrate His power over death by bringing Lazarus back to life—as a result, God and the Son would receive glory as sovereign over life and death.

The disciples weren’t sure about Jesus’s plan to travel so close to Jerusalem. After all, the last time Jesus was in Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders tried to stone Him (v. 8). The disciples didn’t understand that Jesus was under the protection of the Father until His appointed hour (vv. 9–10).

The disciples also misunderstood what Jesus said about Lazarus being “asleep” (v. 11). Thinking Jesus was talking about Lazarus catching a nap—and not being dead—the disciples reminded Jesus that Lazarus would recover (v. 12). Jesus must have shaken His head and thought, *Knuckleheads!* He clarified, “Lazarus is dead . . . let us go to him” (vv. 14–15).

Thomas had serious doubts that a journey to Jerusalem, or anywhere near there, would end well. He was convinced it would probably mean Jesus’s death. But Jesus had laid down the gauntlet: anyone who wished to be His disciple “must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow” Him—even if that meant to certain death (Luke 9:23). Thomas may have had doubts, but he also had a stout heart. He said to the other disciples, “Let us also go, so that we may die with Him” (John 11:16).

### ***Doubts about the Future***

I’m sure Thomas was just as surprised that he walked out of the village of Bethany without a scratch as he was seeing Lazarus walk out of his tomb. Thomas’s doubts about traveling safely to Bethany were past, but that didn’t ease his doubts about the future.

In John's next portrait of Thomas, he was in the upper room at the Last Supper, listening to Jesus say things during the Passover meal that indicated His final hours were at hand. Jesus talked about going to the Father's house to prepare a place for them and then returning someday to take them to paradise—and they shouldn't be troubled about this. "You know the way where I am going," Jesus said (John 14:4).

He had barely gotten the words out of His mouth when Thomas blurted out, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" (v. 5). Thomas wasn't arguing with Jesus. He was voicing his sincere doubts. Thomas didn't have a clue where Jesus was going, and neither did the other disciples. Where exactly was "the Father's house"? Without a clear understanding of the destination, how could they be sure of the route? That's why Thomas asked, "How do we know the way?"

Let's be honest with ourselves for a moment. All of us have thought at one time or another, *Following Jesus would be a lot easier if I just knew for sure how things would turn out!* Unfortunately, God doesn't operate that way, which is why we're commanded to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7).

Thomas struggled to make the transition from sight to faith—as we all do—so Jesus helped him out. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). It's possible that without Thomas's question, Jesus may not have uttered these words, which have brought hope and comfort to believers for millennia. So let's not be too hard on Thomas. He asked a good question, and it elicited an even better answer.

Of course, Jesus's answer didn't resolve all of Thomas's questions and doubts. How could Jesus be "the way" when

they had come to the end of their journey with Him? How could Jesus be “the truth” when there was so much they didn’t understand? How could Jesus be “the life” when His death was only hours away? More questions, more doubts—and more opportunities for faith.

### ***Doubts about God***

For three days after Jesus’s crucifixion, the disciples went into hiding, afraid that the Jewish authorities would come for them next. For three days, holed up in their hiding place, they were plagued by grief and doubt about Jesus. Then the risen Lord appeared to them, turning their sorrow into joy, their fear into courage, and their doubts into conviction.

The disciples were gathered in the same upper room when Jesus suddenly stood in their midst and greeted them (John 20:19). He showed them the scars in His hands, in His side, and in His feet, and He empowered them with the Holy Spirit. Then He commissioned them to be His witnesses to the world (vv. 20–23). As you could imagine, the disciples were overjoyed to see Jesus alive!

Then John offered this ominous note: “But Thomas, one of the twelve, . . . was not with them when Jesus came” (v. 24). In John’s third picture of the doubting disciple, Thomas was AWOL. Where was Thomas? Why wasn’t he with the other disciples in the upper room? We don’t know, but apparently the other disciples tracked him down and “were saying to him”—the imperfect tense means they kept at Thomas—“We have seen the Lord!” (v. 25). The disciples told Thomas that Jesus appeared to them not as a ghost but alive and in the flesh. But Thomas would have none of it. He knew all about Roman crucifixion. He had seen Jesus die with his own

eyes. He insisted, “Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (v. 25).

Consumed by sorrow and doubt, Thomas made the mistake of isolating himself from other believers. When it comes to moving the mountain of doubt, there’s an important lesson here: *distance from others is dangerous for doubters*. Lone Rangers are easily ambushed. In our society, it’s easy to isolate ourselves behind our smartphones and tablets. But it can be risky for our faith, especially if we’re wrestling with unresolved questions. Faith is strengthened in community; doubt is strengthened in isolation. When we struggle with doubts, it is tempting to pull away from other believers. Don’t. That is just the time when we need to lean into the fellowship of faith.

Of course, we can’t leave Thomas wallowing in his doubts about faith. And fortunately for Thomas, neither could Jesus.

Thomas asked for proof, which the disciples couldn’t give. But instead of leaving them again, this time Thomas stayed with the other disciples, who were confident in their faith because they had seen the resurrected Lord. Thomas had to endure an entire week of distressing doubts, but at least he wasn’t alone. Notice that the disciples welcomed Thomas, even though he was a doubter. The church should be a place where doubters can find fellowship among those who don’t doubt.

Eight days later, the disciples, including Thomas, were in their hideout when “Jesus . . . stood in their midst and said, ‘Peace be with you’” (v. 26). Turning to Thomas, Jesus stretched out His hands and said, “Put your finger here.” Then He said, “Reach out your hand and put it into my

side.” The Lord said to Thomas, “Stop doubting and believe” (v. 27 NIV). Isn’t that just like Jesus? He didn’t treat Thomas with scorn and judgment but with gentleness and grace. Can you imagine what we could achieve for Christ if we—the church—followed in His footsteps when it came to dealing with doubters?

There is a second lesson for us to learn here: *dependable evidence is distributed to doubters*. This is especially true for those who doubt the deity and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Agnostic Josh McDowell and investigative journalist Lee Strobel both set out to debunk the notion of Jesus’s resurrection, but after investigating the evidence, both came to believe in the biblical and historical account of the resurrection.<sup>8</sup> If you need answers to your questions and assurance to relieve your doubts, Jesus has what you need.

In the presence of the living Lord, all Thomas’s question marks were suddenly straightened into exclamation marks. “My Lord and my God!” he cried (v. 28). No one had addressed Jesus like this before. Thomas’s doubts took a sudden leap forward into faith. His doubts weren’t irrational, and his questions weren’t skeptical. He was honestly searching for the truth.

Then Jesus said, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed” (v. 29). That brings us to the third lesson from this passage: *dearly treasured are those who are doubtless*. To those of us who set aside our doubts and follow Christ in faith, though we’ve never physically seen His face or heard His voice, Jesus pronounces us blessed—favored by God. This is the reward for declaring Jesus as our Lord and our God.

## The Path from Doubt to Faith

There's no greater reward for believers than to hear Jesus say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21, 23 NIV). If we want to receive this praise from Christ, we must learn to deal with our doubts. I believe there are at least three practical things we should do if we're to be more like Thomas, transforming our doubts into faith.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Don't Deny Your Doubts; Acknowledge Them***

When it comes to dealing with your doubts, honesty is the best policy—and it starts with being honest with yourself. The first thing to do when you experience doubt is this: *don't deny your doubts; acknowledge them.*

Many people are afraid to admit they don't have all the answers. Why don't we want to admit our doubts? Deep down, we're afraid that our questions are greater than God's answers. We think the truth of Christianity may be weaker than the lies of atheism—that somehow, someday Christianity will be exposed as fraudulent. Can I tell you something? God can take all comers.

Late in the nineteenth century, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously declared, "God is dead." Today, God declares, "Nietzsche is dead." Philosophers come and go, but Jesus Christ remains. Trendy theories come and go, but biblical truth remains. As Isaiah 40:8 says, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever."

God is never disappointed or threatened by candid questions. He's big enough to handle our doubts. Years ago, I was talking with a Christian who was questioning her faith. With tears in her eyes, she said, "I'm not sure I believe in God

anymore.” I said, “That’s okay. Even when you don’t believe in Him, He still believes in you.”

***Don’t Dread Your Doubts; Analyze Them***

We tend to dread our doubts because we fear what our doubts will mean to our faith if we acknowledge them, and we also fear what others would think if our doubts were known. The problem with cowering in fear and refusing to acknowledge your doubts is that they’ll catch up with you in the end. When days grow difficult, you won’t have the faith to sustain you. This brings us to the second practical application: *don’t dread your doubts; analyze them.*

What caused you to doubt? Was it something someone said, maybe a so-called expert you saw on television, or an article you read? Maybe you’re the type of person who wants to have all the answers, with no mysteries in the universe. Is that the reason? Were you hurt by a spiritual leader? Did your supposedly godly spouse have an affair? Did God disappoint you in some way? Did He not answer a prayer or come through when you thought He should have?

Whatever the reason for your doubts, face them squarely and name them clearly. There’s nothing to dread. There’s no question or concern that God hasn’t heard or dealt with before. And if it helps, there’s a good chance that the doubt you’re struggling with is the same doubt others are struggling with too. Remember, Thomas had the courage to say what the other disciples were thinking but were too afraid to say.

***Don’t Disguise Your Doubts; Articulate Them***

Refusing to talk about your doubts is also rooted in fear. But if you can acknowledge them and analyze them, then

you can share them. That brings us to the third practical step in this process: *don't disguise your doubts; articulate them.*

When doubts begin to grow, we can nip them in the bud if we expose them to the light by sharing them with a mature believer. My mentor and seminary professor Howard Hendricks often told his students that everyone needs a Paul as a mentor and a Barnabas as a friend. As Solomon pointed out in Ecclesiastes 4:9–12, “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor; for if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up! Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.”

Don't talk about your doubts only with other believers; talk about them with the Lord too. I like author Mark Littleton's simple formula for dealing with doubt: “Turn your doubts to questions. Turn your questions to prayers. Turn your prayers to God.”<sup>10</sup>

When we turn to God and ask Him our questions, He shows up and encourages us, as He did with Thomas: “Do not be unbelieving, but believing” (John 20:27).

## **A Steadfast Heart Full of Faith**

Thomas never forgot those words. According to tradition, he went to India and then to China, where he established a church in Peking. Returning to India, Thomas converted thousands to Christ and established churches throughout the land. As an old man, Thomas was in a cave praying when

Brahman priests, fearing Christianity would overtake Hinduism, thrust him through with a spear. The apostle dragged himself to a nearby chapel, held on to a stone cross, and prayed, “Lord, I thank Thee for all Thy mercies. Into Thy hands I commend my spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

Those are not the dying words of a doubter but of a person with a steadfast heart full of faith. And one day, when you’ve conquered the mountain of doubt, they can be your dying words as well.