

UNEDITED DRAFT

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do you ever have doubts about the Christian faith? I bring this up because I think sometimes we give the impression that doubts mean you're a bad Christian. We create an environment, perhaps accidentally, where we're not allowed to raise questions about what we believe in teach. We don't feel comfortable questioning what we were taught by our parents and our pastor. This is the truth! So believe it and be quiet!

Did you know that a recent study revealed the main reason young people leave the church? You're probably aware of that problem. After grade school, starting in high school and extending through college, many, many teens and young adults leave the church. I'm not talking specifically about our church, but rather Christian churches in general. Studies show that 59% of young Christians disconnect from their church either permanently or for an extended period of time. What a heart-wrenching statistic! 59% separate from the body of believes they grew up with. Don't you want to know why? What could we do to reduce that number?

Here is one big reason: Young adults with Christian experience say the church is not a place that allows them to express doubts. They do not feel safe admitting that sometimes Christianity does not make sense to them. 36% feel, "I am not able to ask my most pressing life questions in church." 23% report having "significant intellectual doubts about my faith."

When I heard this, it surprised me. And I immediately started to question whether Good Shepherd was such a church where you could feel safe expressing your doubts and asking questions. I think we can work at improving that. We need to.

So let this be a small start: Having doubts about your faith is perfectly normal. It's the sign of an active and questioning mind. I invite you to ask your questions and I promise I will not be judgmental. I will be honest and transparent. I will not put you down or think less of you.

Would it help if you knew that the Bible is absolutely packed with people who doubted? Far more than most people realize, there were people who doubted God's promises. Doubted God's Word. Doubted God's prophets. Nearly every great hero of faith in the Bible has a doubt story... a time or times in their life when they doubted God. "Why" is a doubt word. Why questions reasons, assumptions and motivations. Over 20 times in the book of Job, "Why" is asked. Almost as many times "why" occurs in the Psalms. Here are some examples, "Why O Lord do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1) "Why are you so downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Why have you (God) rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?" (Ps. 42). "Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" Ps. 44:23-24.

Now all of this is not to say that doubt is good. Nor would we say that something is wrong with your faith if you don't have doubt. Certainly, a strong, unwavering faith is what we're ultimately looking for. But doubt is typical. God can handle your doubt. God doesn't reject you if you have doubts. God desires to lead you through your doubt to faith.

The key, though, is what do we do with our doubt? What comes with your doubt? Here are some bad combos that greatly threaten faith: **doubt and anger** at God. (It's hard to get answers when you're angry at someone. Doubt with anger means you are assuming the worst about God). **Doubt and pride**. (This is the attitude: I suspect God is wrong and I am right. I

believe I know better than God. Pride keeps you from listening and understanding God.) **Doubt and isolation.** You isolate yourself from other believers. It's a failure to realize that God placed us in a family of believers who walk with us and can encourage us and teach us in our doubt.

Doubt and despair. This is doubting God and assuming there's no way there could be an answer to your doubt. No answer will be seriously considered, because you have already given up hope.

But God is okay with our doubt. He can handle that. He can handle your questions. But if we want doubt to be properly resolved, doubt needs to be mixed with the right catalyst: **doubt and seeking. Doubt and searching.** (No one said resolving doubt would be easy! It will take time in God's Word. It will take study and research and exploring and questioning and listening!)

Doubt and humility. (If we honestly consider God is bigger than us, then we must combine a measure of humility with our doubts, understanding that full understanding may simply be beyond our grasp. God is God and we are not.) **Doubt and community.** (God has given us fellow believers who have studied God's Word, who have wrestled with and resolved similar doubts, who are ready to help us with our doubts.) God has answers and we need to be willing to listen, to seek, to know.

The best season of the church year for those who have doubts? The season of Epiphany. The season we are in right now. It is this season when we especially look at the stories in Jesus' life when it was revealed that Jesus truly is God's own Son and the world's Savior. Do you doubt who Jesus is? Look at the story of the wisemen who came to worship this infant King. Look at Jesus' baptism where the Father declares and the Spirit descends. Look at his first miracle in Cana as he turns water into wine. These stories are meant to put our doubts to rest about who Jesus is and what he truly accomplished for us!

Today we'll look at another Epiphany text for those who doubt. It teaches us that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.

Ask most people when Christianity began, and they would say about 2,000 years ago. And of course, they're right in a sense. Before Christ there could not have been Christians. But if you ask the question, "How long have there been believers in this world who share the same faith that we have?" The answer is: since the beginning of time. When our first parents, Adam and Eve, fell into sin, God made a promise to them and all people. God promised that he would fix what they had broken. They broke their relationship with God and formed a close relationship with Satan. God said he would reverse that. He would send one who would crush the power of the devil. He would break the close relationship of many and Satan, and reestablish the close relationship between God and man. There were those who believed that promise of the Savior. There were many who did not.

Over the centuries, God renewed the promise again and again. God guided the very timeline of history again and again to make sure that this promise of the Savior was not lost in the annals of history. He added ever more detail to the rescue promise through prophets who spoke his Word. He gave so much detail that anyone who was paying attention could not possibly miss it when those prophecies were fulfilled. One Bible scholar counted 355 individual prophecies about the great Rescuer God had promised. Many of those prophecies include very specific detail, including where he would be born, what he would specifically do, and all of the circumstances about his death.

Then along came a man named Jesus a couple thousand years ago. And I want you to listen to what he boldly declared when he preached in a synagogue in Nazareth one fine Saturday.

Luke 4:14-21 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit [So Luke skips over a number of things. John's Gospel fills in a lot of the gaps. Jesus went to a wedding in Cana and turned water into wine – last week's Gospel lesson. He traveled down to Judea, to Jerusalem. Then he goes back north to Galilee which is where Luke picks up his story. Jesus would go around Galilee preaching and teaching over a period of about a year and half. Luke records this, and it goes through Luke 9:50.], **and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.** [So Jesus is growing in popularity. News about him is starting to spread far and wide. Jesus taught in the synagogues. They were kind of like the local churches. To form one, there had to be at least 10 men as founders. Larger towns could have more than one synagogue. It was the place where people could gather and hear God's word and respond in worship and praise. Jesus traveled around teaching at these places of worship.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not far from Jerusalem. He escaped to Egypt for a time when Herod was trying to kill Jesus as a baby. When Herod died, he returned to Nazareth where Jesus was raised. We have no record of any miracles for the first 30 years of his life. He grew up in obscurity, the son of a carpenter named Joseph. One thing to note was that going to the synagogue *every Sabbath day* was Jesus' custom. Just a side note: if it was important for God's Son to gather with believers weekly to hear the word of God and worship, how important do you think it is for you and me? Something to think about.

So Jesus is the home town boy made good. He's growing in fame and popularity. Now he returns to his home town to preach. Nearly everyone would have known Jesus and his family. This was small town. There must have been an air of excitement that day in the synagogue.

And [Jesus] stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: [It may have been that this was the prescribed reading for that Sabbath. Or maybe Jesus specifically looked for the text. It's from the beginning of what we heard in today's Old Testament reading:] **“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”** [So Jesus reads the Scripture. Then, as was their custom, Jesus prepared to expound upon the Scripture he just read.] **Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.** [People would stand during the reading of Scripture. It was the word of God. Afterwards they would sit. What followed was man's explanation. Except this time, Jesus, the son of God, was able to explain the meaning.] **The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him,** [imagine the anticipation and tension in the room!] **and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”**

As I play this scene in my mind, I hear the crowd gasp at these words. I see jaws drop. I hear murmuring as people begin to talk to each other as to what he meant by this. Never in their life had they ever heard a rabbi claim that a prophecy of Scripture was fulfilled at that very

moment. Now, we don't have Jesus' whole sermon from that day. It would have been fascinating to hear it. What a rich text to preach on.

There are four metaphors here for the relief Jesus brings to sinners.

1) Jesus was saying that he, Jesus, was anointed to **preach good news to the poor**. That anointing for this task took place at his baptism. The poor does not refer to those who were financially poor, but spiritually poor. (Although it's not unusual for the financially poor to also be spiritually poor. Jesus himself said it harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.) But spiritual poverty means that a person approaches God recognizing they have absolutely nothing to offer God. Nothing that God needs. That not always easy for us to comprehend. Maybe you've done this or know someone who has: in your prayers you bargain with God. "God, if you will just give me this one thing, then I promise that I will..." Go to church every single week. Give a bigger offering. Change your life in some way. The very premise in the prayer bargain is flawed. The person assumes they have something God needs. So if God would give what you need, you promise to give what God needs. God wants me to be in church. So I'll give that to him if he'll give me. Ridiculous! God doesn't need you to be in church! You need it, not him! God doesn't need your money... he owns everything. God doesn't need your changed life... it won't complete anything in him that he is lacking because he lacks nothing.

The poor Jesus came to preach to are those who recognize their utter spiritual bankruptcy. The good news is that God makes you rich! Not with lottery winnings, but with forgiveness and eternal life! All of this through Christ Jesus.

2) proclaim freedom for the prisoners. The sinner can also be viewed as a prisoner. (Prisoner of war.) The sinner is not free. He is bound to sin. Sin is the will of Satan, which means you are held captive by Satan as well. And we are also bound by the consequences of sin: death. We cannot set ourselves free from death... we are bound to die for eternity.

But good news is proclaimed by Jesus! Release! Freedom! The word is also translated as: "Forgiveness." When a prisoner is forgiven, he is declared not guilty and is released. Jesus proclaims our forgiveness, release, our freedom.

3) recovery of sight for the blind. The scriptures are packed with references of blindness and darkness referring to an inability to see our spiritual reality. We don't see our own sinfulness. We don't see its consequences. We don't see our inability. We don't see God's solution in Christ. But God give sight to the blind. He enables us to see all of these things!

4) to release the oppressed, Different than prisoners. An oppressed person is someone overwhelmed by the pain of life, overwhelmed by relationships that are abusive, overwhelmed by illness, overwhelmed by whatever kind of troubles life can bring to bear. There's certainly an almost endless list. This is the person who is overwhelmed by life. Jesus grants release. He lifts the burden pressing you down. "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Jesus takes the burden of your sin, the burden of all the consequences of living in a broken world, and he gives you rest and release. Now in part. Then in full when we pass from this world of sorrows.

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The Lord's favor is upon us. It is given through Jesus.

Do you have doubts? Bring them to God and look for his answers. Today our doubts are answered with one word: FULFILLED. God promised. He sent prophets. He said what he would do. He repeated and repeated. And then he did it. All the prophecies fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

So if you have some doubts, here's one thing I recommend. Study the Old Testament prophecies about God's rescuer. Then see how every one of them is perfectly fulfilled in the Christ Jesus. He is our rescuer. He is the one foretold! He fulfills every prophecy! He is your Savior. I tell you the truth, today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing!
Amen.