

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Covenant Not Contract
Ephesians 5:25-27**

It was the last day of a murder trial and things were not going well for the defense. There was no body, but it was pretty clear who did it. The defense attorney gets the summary and he says, "Ladies and gentlemen, I've come into a surprising piece of information. I'd like to assure you of my client's innocence and tell you that in next 30 seconds, the person you think is a victim will walk right through that door." Everybody turns and looks at the door for 30 seconds, 45 seconds, then a minute but nobody shows up. Then the attorney says, "Okay, I'm sorry. I tried to trick you. I just wanted to leave you with the idea that if you can't find the body, there is a reasonable doubt that this person was not killed by my client, and if there is a reasonable doubt, you must acquit." So the jury goes back and deliberates and about 10 minutes later they come out and say, "We find the defendant guilty!" The defense attorney is stunned and he comes up to the chairperson of the jury and says, "How could you find him guilty so fast?" The chairperson says, "I just couldn't help noticing when you said that the victim was going to walk through the door, we all stared at the door but your client never even looked up. It was like he knew something we didn't."

How do we address issues of faith and doubt? As believers, how do we know what's true and what's not? We've spent the last month talking about faith and doubt. Let's take a real quick look back at what we've learned. Matt Moberg started the series off. He said for many people, faith becomes like a house of cards, stacked higher and higher and higher with all the things you need to believe. He said it is glued together by your insistence that all of this stuff has got to be true, but when any one of those cards gets pulled out, the whole thing falls down. He said, "That's not what faith should look like. Faith is not a house of cards, it is a dream where we find the path, and even when we get lost, God finds us."

Then three weeks ago, Carrie Gleeson in front of 120 kids from our confirmation class, told those kids and reminded us that doubt and faith go together and faith will wrestle with their doubts. Remember, she used the image of a wrestler to talk about how the faithful people in the Old Testament, like Jacob, wrestle with God. Jacob wrestles all night and at the dawn, God renames him as one who holds on, one who wrestles with God in his doubts but holds on, clinging to God.

Two weeks ago I talked about how the opposite of doubt is not belief. It is choosing to act on what you *do* know. I said, "God can't show us the stars unless we are willing to creep out of the darkness." That's faith. We creep forward in the darkness in a leap of faith. It is wholly dependent on our willingness to let go and even more dependent on whether we will be caught

when we let go. Faith and doubt become less about having answers given and more about the confidence of whether you will be caught when you let go.

I'd like to pull it together today by doing just two things. The first is sharing with you frankly my doubts, the places where I struggle with faith and doubt, and then by offering you a different view that may help you with faith and doubt. I think when you talk about faith and doubt (we have three or four great books at Pathway Bookstore addressing that) the most important word in the phrase faith and doubt is *and*. You really cannot have one without the other. I struggle with doubts personally. I struggle with lack of evidence. It would be so much easier to believe in God if there were 10,000-foot letters in the sky every morning saying, "John, get going. You're late already." If God would act in ways I could believe, and I know that I'm not alone in that. Faith is in what we do not see, which by its nature can't be proven and so some people chose not to believe at all. For them the lack of evidence makes it easier to doubt.

In the last century Bertrand Russell, a famous atheist, was asked one time at a dinner party, "What's going to happen if you die and you're wrong, if you die and you appear before God and God says, 'What do you have to say for yourself?'" Russell stopped for just a second and said, "I'd say to God, 'You should have offered me better proof.'" I think a lot of us feel that way. We'd like more proof. I got an email after one of the sermons on faith that said, "I loved your sermon on faith." I thought what he said next was really good. It's long but I thought I'd share a little bit of it with you. He said,

I am a physicist, with a Ph.D. and 30 years of experience in applied science. My professional life has been devoted to finding and applying evidence and data to discover new scientific truths. No fairy tales allowed! As you can imagine, the science curriculum in secular universities is pretty much against Christian faith the teaching is that there is no evidence for God or Jesus, that Science (capital "S") has removed all need for them and disproved all the "old" ideas about evidence for their existence. . . . Furthermore, I am personally committed to the notions of evidence and truth. It was important not to believe in something that I knew was really untrue. The whole "leap of faith" thing was not for me. That old Sunday School definition of faith as "believing something you know isn't true" gave me hives. It still does!

In my case, as a young man my bacon was saved by learning that there are very solid objective evidences for God, Jesus, and even the Bible. This is called "apologetics," right? It doesn't have to be hyper-cerebral, but it gives objective reasons why Christian faith is true, that Jesus is real and lives today, that the Bible is from God and is true in an understandable way. Not mathematical proofs or absolute logic, but rational, reasonable evidence from history

He finishes this way.

So I encourage you to tell people that there are solid reasons why doubts can be satisfied and turned to faith Faith can be reasonable, rational; it's actually more sensible than continued extreme doubt. Faith won't be certainty till we meet Him in heaven—after all, it is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen"—but it needn't be considered stupid, ignorant or contrary to "Science." Moving from doubt to faith should be a small step assisted by evidence rather than a long, blind leap in defiance of evidence. Faith makes sense.

I agree! I don't think that there is enough evidence to prove but there is plenty to point *toward*. This year we are doing something a little different. I am going to teach each grade of our high school classes one evening during each semester. I'll go to the four different classes and for that evening, I'll just sit there and we're going to talk about questions the students have already handed in. What questions do you have about faith or God or life? More importantly, we are going to start a discussion that says their questions are important because we believe there are answers. Mark Olson here has been teaching a course on apologetics that we will probably need to repeat because so many of you want those answers. There are answers to my doubts, to my desire for belief, but the reality is that faith is not about being the smartest person in the world with all the answers.

In a flight on a private plane, going to see the President of the United States, the pilot is carrying an NBA all-star player, a Nobel scientist, an Eagle Scout who had just saved someone's life, and the Eagle Scout's grandpa. The plane hits heavy weather and starts to shudder and shake and all of a sudden the engine goes out. The pilot turns to them and says, "Okay, that's it." He grabs a parachute, opens the door and says, "Follow me" and he jumps out. The NBA player, even before he is at the door goes, "It's almost the playoffs. I'm the greatest basketball player in the world. They need me." He grabs a parachute and jumps out after him. The Nobel scientist sees that there are only two parachutes left, but three people still in the plane. He says, "I'm sorry. I'm the smartest man in the world. Our world needs what I have to offer," and he grabs a chute and jumps out. The grandpa turns to his beloved grandson and says, "I've lived a long life filled with love and, son" The Eagle Scout says, "Don't worry about it, Grandpa. The smartest man in the world just jumped out of the plane with my backpack." Sometimes the smartest people in the world are jumping out of planes with backpacks. I mean to say, we'll always have questions. In the end, doubt is more about what are you going to do with what you know, than getting one more answer. Sooner rather than later, you have to act on what you know, but still I struggle.

Probably the thing that I struggle with most, and you understand this I bet, is with the notion of pain, the problem of evil and pain in this beautiful world. Just this week I was trying to console a friend of mine. We have daughters the same age, and his little girl, who is married, was just set on fire, literally, by her husband and burned over 70 percent of her body. How do you explain that kind of pain? This is the difference between intellectual questions and real life. I think doubt is no big deal when it's all theoretical, but doubt comes into play when there are emotions involved. I struggle with the problem of pain! Blaise Pascal once said, "In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don't."

Elie Wiesel, the Jewish Holocaust survivor who had plenty of doubt sometimes, wrote that the reason so many babies keep getting born is that God loves stories. The one who survived the Holocaust believes that like the title of that film, *life is beautiful* even in the midst of pain.

But in the same way, the great Russian author, Fyodor Dostoevsky (he is not only a Christian but is also a profound person of faith) says, "The death of a single infant calls into question the existence of God." I struggle with those comments, but I want this to be a place that struggles with them. I don't want you to come here with your pain and get a glib answer. "Take two of these and it will be better in the morning" because it will not always be better in the morning. We need to avoid glib answers, but we also need to avoid despair.

The biggest Book in the Bible on faith and doubt is the Book of Job. Job has this terrible experience. He cannot understand why, as a good person, all these bad things keep happening to him. The best part of the Book of Job is at end. Battered and filled with sores on his body, Job sits down in the rain and the mud. He sits there and three of his best friends come and they just sit with him. That's where the Jews get the tradition of sitting *shiva*. They sit with the mourning one. For seven days, they all just sat together in silence. When Job would erupt with 'So why is this happening to me? How can God call Himself good? What is going on?' they just sat. That's the best part of the Book of Job. The worst part of the Book of Job is when the three guys start to talk. They start to say, "Job, this is only happening because God is mad at you." God is not mad at Job, but none of the four know that. When we try to speak for God, the words should stick in our mouths.

At the end of the Book of Job, the answer of God is like in that movie, *A Few Good Men*. Anybody remember that movie? The best scene in the movie, of course, is at the very end where Tom Cruise is yelling at Jack Nicholson, "I want the truth!" "Do you want the truth?" "I want the truth!" Jack Nicholson yells back, "You can't handle the truth." And that is what God says to Job. "You can't handle the truth. Where were you when I created the idea of making lightning bounce off of the mountains? Where were you when I created the human eyeball and caused it to blink? Where were you when I created the storms? You can't handle the truth because you cannot see the end of the story from the beginning. But Job, Job, I am here talking to you!"

When I struggle with this idea of doubt and faith in the middle of pain, I want to be part of a fellowship of bleeding hearts, of people who hurt, bleeding together and suffering together, offering each other our presence in the presence of a God who suffers along with us. You guys might remember that the very first week I said, "I can give you all kinds of answers on faith and doubt, but I want to use the answer of the apostle Paul. The apostle Paul turns to the church in Corinth and he says,

² For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified [1st Corinthians 2:2].

When you understand that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and suffered for you and was crucified and rose to bring you to life, that's the one thing that we need to sit together and believe and trust in, even in our pain. I do not know why there is so much pain in the world, but I do know that there is a God who has suffered and who cares and who is coming back. I struggle with not having enough answers to believe in, and I doubt sometimes because of the problem of pain, but I would not be honest if I did not tell you that one of the reasons I have grave doubts about faith is Christians themselves. One reason I doubt that a good God changes lives is because I see so many Christians whose lives are not changing, so many people who claim to speak for God. They turn to you and say, "If you just believed more, if you just prayed harder, if you just believed what I did" I struggle with faith because I am not certain I am living by faith and they keep saying, "If you doubt, you're bad."

I think many people come into places like this looking for religious answers and hoping we can give some, but more than that, much more than answers, we want you to have a sense of faith because only faith that trusts in God will allow your life to change. People don't believe in our God because they don't see us being changed. Somebody once asked Evelyn Waugh, a

famous Catholic Christian author, “Evelyn, how can you call yourself a Christian and be so badly behaved, so mean, such a jerk, so spiteful?” Waugh responded, “Just imagine what I would be like if I were not a Christian.”

Maybe we’re being changed in ways that are not visible. Maybe we obscure that change when we try to make ourselves look better than we are. People will only believe in our God if they see our God working in us, but not to make us superstars. We need to offer other people the gift of authenticity, of humility, and a commitment to follow Christ rather than just talk about it. “I don’t have all the answers, but I know that God wants me to do *this* and I won’t know any answer until I do that.”

One of the books that changed my life most was a book I read at the beginning of graduate school. It was called *Shantung Compound* and it was written by the head of the religious department at the University of Chicago, Langdon Gilkey. *Shantung Compound* is not a theology book at all. It is Gilkey’s story about how he survived a prison camp in World War II in China, Shantung Compound. The only reason you might have heard of Shantung Compound is that it is where Eric Liddell, remember the missionary in *Chariots of Fire* in World War II, is sent along with most of the other missionaries in China. Liddell lives a life most people want for themselves, even in the prison camp, but he dies at the end the war. Gilkey, a brand new seminary graduate, is a progressive but filled with great ideas about God and the Kingdom and how we ought to live. He goes into the prison camp and says his faith died quickly. In less than a month he realized he had no answers for this kind of life. He says,

Although they tried to be friendly, the Protestants nevertheless typically huddled together in a compact “Christian remnant.” Not unlike the Pharisees in the New Testament, they kept to their own flock of saved souls, evidently because they feared to be contaminated in some way by this sinful world which they inwardly abhorred.

He said, in contrast, the Catholic priests in prison showed him the strength of faith without the weakness that so often accompanies piety, “I want to look good.”

They communicated to others not how holy they were, but their inexhaustible acceptance and warmth toward the worldly laymen. Nothing and no one seemed to offend them, or shock them A person could count on them accepting him The Fathers mixed amiably with anybody and everybody Yet they remained unchanged in their own character by this intimate, personal contact with ‘the world.’ Somehow they seemed able to accept and even to love the world as it was, and in this acceptance the presence of their own strength gave new strength to our ‘wayward world.’

He said the priests gave him back his faith in a good God. How do you get faith that is enough for you to keep creeping forward in spite of your doubts? I think for me it is recognizing that faith and doubt are not resolved by answers. It is by changing the contract. I think most of you have a contract with God, like buying a car or buying a house. You sign a contract. We live in a contractual society, improving the odds of success with people we don’t fully know or we don’t fully trust, by labeling everything. In contracts, parties place their trust in a legally binding document that holds each party to the terms of the deal.

We don’t need a contract with God. We need what’s called a covenant, because in a covenant

people place their trust in the character of the other person. Is your faith a contract or a covenant? If your faith is a contract, you are always looking to make sure you have enough of the right answers and few of the doubts, that you have enough of the right things and few of the bad things. You grade yourself on how few doubts you have. People in a covenant reach out their hands and say, "God, help me." A covenant is how God wants to relate to His people. In the Book of Genesis, God makes a covenant with Abram.

1 The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. **2** I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. **3** I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you [Genesis 12:1-3]."

18 So the Lord made a covenant with Abram that day and said, "I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt to the great Euphrates River[Genesis 15:18].

The Lord made a covenant with Abram that was not a contract. It was a promise between two people who were supposed to be getting to know each other. That's why when you get married, you do not sign a contract. You do not spell out all the details of what this person will do or that person will do. That is not in the contract. Thank the good Lord you don't have to have a contract to get married. My wife would have so many addendums to the contract that it would be pages and pages long! "He will finally turn on his cell phone." "He will finally put the clothes in the basket." He will do this or he will do that or he will do the other, and that would, frankly, be the longest part of the contract. My wife did not marry me with a contract, but she said, "I want to love you and commit myself to getting to know you."

God doesn't want to make a deal with you. God doesn't make deals with us, letting us in if we get enough answers. Instead God wants a marriage-like covenant with you. When Jesus died on the cross on our behalf, He was not trying to make a deal for you to sign on the line. Jesus was inviting us into a covenant that says, "If you will hold onto Me, I will never let go of you." Faith and doubt exist until our final breath and then we know.

It fascinates me that in the Book of Job, Job's doubts are never really answered to his satisfaction. In the midst of his questions and his pain and his grief and his doubt, he cries out, and when his friend says, "Get rid of this God. You've blown it already," Job says, "No, no. I know that my Redeemer lives and even if I die, at the end He will stand on the earth and my eyes will see my God." Faith doesn't so much overcome doubt as it drags it along behind.

Lord God, I believe by faith that You are here, that Your Spirit wants to enter every living heart here. Those of us who have fears and those of us who have doubts and those of us who are afraid are all before You, and You don't want to write a contract. You want to reach out to us. Jesus said, "Come! Come and follow Me and I will *show* you far better than the answers to your questions." Surround us with love that will not let us go. Give us reason to hope and show us Your love that will never stop. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.