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Should We Expect to Struggle with the Christian Faith?

John . . . sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Luke 7:18–19)

SHOULD WE EXPECT to struggle with the Christian faith? The Bible’s answer to this question is yes. Doubts and difficulties are undesirable, but that does not mean they are abnormal, and in this chapter we will look at six reasons why this is true:

- Christians face difficult questions that can’t always be answered.
- Christians’ feelings don’t always keep pace with their faith.
- Christians are sinners.
- Christians live in non-Christian societies.
- Christians are affected by their temperament and circumstances.
- Christians often forget to count their blessings.

CHRISTIANS FACE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS THAT CAN'T ALWAYS BE ANSWERED

Difficult Questions Are Normal . . .

It's no surprise that Christians face difficult questions—Christianity deals with difficult subjects. It forces us to think about life and death, heaven and hell, morality and personal responsibility. These things are bound to unsettle us whether we've just started out or have been living the Christian life for a long time.

This fact is reflected in the many Bible passages that show believers facing up to intellectual challenges. In Psalm 73, for example, David's musical director, Asaph, wrestled with a very difficult question. His problem was that people who didn't have any time for God fared no worse than people who did and that, in many cases, devotion to God seemed like the fast route to a tough time. Asaph was confused. If the wicked were happy and enjoyed freedom from "burdens" and "human ills" (v. 5), he wondered whether his commitment to God was a wasted effort.

This was an important question in Asaph's time, and it still is today. But the question was not only important. It wasn't just interesting or puzzling. It was difficult. It was unsettling and disturbing—it threatened the foundation of his beliefs (v. 2).

Most of us already know from experience that belief cannot be separated from questions like this. As Christians we believe in a God who can't be seen. The question of his existence is therefore intrinsically difficult. As Christians we derive our beliefs from an ancient book written by people we have never met, who describe events beyond the reach of any living witness. The question of biblical reliability is therefore intrinsically difficult. As readers of the Bible we are faced with a picture of reality that is both wonderful and terrible, with grave implica-

tions for ourselves and for all mankind. The question of God's character is therefore intrinsically difficult. As Christians we are called to embrace Jesus as our Lord and Savior, renouncing self-reliance for reliance on him. This leaves us conscious of our vulnerability and vulnerable, as a result, to difficult questions about assurance.

It should not surprise us, then, that we experience difficult questions in the Christian life. Asaph was affected and so are we. And this should encourage us because if Asaph experienced the same kinds of struggles we do, we can learn from the way he responded. You see Asaph didn't see his difficult questions as a showstopping obstacle to trusting in God. He saw them as a reason to seek deeper understanding. He wasn't content to live with irrational belief—like a devotee of the horoscope columns who insists that life is governed by the stars despite all the evidence to the contrary. Neither was he content to live with irrational *disbelief*—like my great-great-grandfather who lived in London all his life and, I'm told, refused to believe in the existence of mountains! No, Asaph proceeded on the basis that neither belief nor disbelief should ever be irrational, and launched himself into a quest for answers, leaning on God for help (vv. 16–17).

. . . But We Won't Always Find the Answers We're Looking For

Psalm 73 teaches us that difficult questions are part and parcel of belief. Now let's give some thought to the type of answers we can expect to get.

In many cases, investigating difficult questions leads to satisfactory answers. In Psalm 73, for example—after a lengthy struggle—Asaph learned to see the prosperity of the wicked and the sufferings of the righteous from God's perspective, and to understand that present blessings and difficulties are relatively insignificant when we look at them in the light of

eternity. But we mustn't conclude from this that we'll get satisfying answers to every question we ask. Some questions involve answers that lie partly (or totally) beyond the bounds of human understanding, and this, of course, only intensifies the struggles they produce.

So where does that leave us? After stressing the importance of rational faith, can we really be expected to keep going with Christianity if we can't get answers to the questions it raises?

Well, in some situations, certainly, a lack of answers really would undermine the rationality of faith. If we discovered that our beliefs were based on logical impossibilities or could be conclusively disproved, continued faith would be ridiculous. But this isn't quite the situation we're up against here. The reason why our search for answers in Christianity is sometimes frustrated isn't due so much to a lack of proof, as it is to our own limitations in grasping—and then drawing conclusions from—the things that the Bible says. As Christians, we are interested in God—a being who, according to the Bible, is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, who exists outside the constraints of time, who is sovereign over creation, and who sustains all that is. It's self-evident that many of the things we would like to know about him lie beyond the capacity of human understanding; if they didn't, we would have to question whether we were dealing with God at all. And in situations like this, rationality involves recognizing the fact that there are certain things we cannot know, and in drawing conclusions only on the strength of the things we can.

The same thing applies to many other fields of knowledge. In physics we're used to the idea that questions lead to comprehensible answers. If we ask why it is that people living on the other side of the world don't fall off, we have comprehensible answers in the theory of gravity. If we ask why fast moving aircraft climb and slow moving aircraft fall, we have

comprehensible answers in the theory of aerodynamics. But physics also brings us up against questions with answers that straddle the boundaries of comprehension. Questions like, “What happened *before* the creation of the universe?” or “What would the world look like if we could perceive *more* than three spatial dimensions?” are legitimate in just the same way as our questions about gravity and aerodynamics. But they are questions we just can’t answer.

What does this say, then, for the rationality of physics? Do questions like this threaten its logical foundations? By no means! The fact that physicists recognize the limitations of their knowledge is one of the main things that makes their work rational! They don’t resort to irrational belief—ignoring evidence that contradicts existing theories. Neither do they resort to irrational *disbelief*—asserting that they know all there is to know and that nothing beyond their intelligence actually exists. The path of rationality, both in physics and in Christianity, lies in accepting the fact that certain things cannot be known, and in restricting our conclusions to the things that can.

And this, of course, is the big lesson of the book of Job. Job, like Asaph, was a man facing difficult questions. After experiencing a series of dreadful personal losses, he cried out for answers about God’s justice (Job 10:3, 19:7, 27:2), about his place in God’s plans (Job 3:3–19), and about the futility and difficulty of enduring apparently pointless suffering day after day (Job 30:16–19). Job wrestled and strove with his worries, and longed to “have it out” with God face to face. But unlike Asaph, he didn’t get a comprehensible answer. He faced terrible suffering and he wasn’t able to work out why.

In the midst of this situation, Job was tempted to resort to irrational belief. Three friends came to visit him and, closing their eyes to their own limitations, they manufactured an answer to his questions based on the assumption that everything that

had happened to him was really comprehensible. They told him his experiences were God's response to the sin in his life and, despite Job's denials and the fact that according to their own logic they ought to have been suffering themselves, they pursued this line of reasoning remorselessly.

Now Job, of course, could have easily run to the opposite extreme of irrational *disbelief*—concluding that if *he* couldn't answer his questions then no answers existed, that he lived in a world that was random, and that God, if he was really there, neither knew nor cared about him. But that wasn't what Job did! Despite the pain of knowing that many important matters lay beyond his knowledge, he wasn't prepared to sacrifice his confidence in things he had reason to believe were true. Whether or not he could understand his sufferings, he knew that God had made him and had a right to do with him as he chose (Job 1:20–22; 2:10), that God's words were reliable and shouldn't be denied (Job 6:8–10), and that God was essentially kind (Job 16:19–21) and would redeem him in the end (Job 19:25–27).¹ Job simply wasn't prepared to let go of what he could understand about God merely because there were confusing things he could not understand. Knowing that he was only able to see the outer fringe of God's works (Job 26:14) and that he lacked the ability to grasp everything God could grasp, he resolutely chose to believe the things that God had made plain.

So when we face unanswerable questions, it isn't necessarily irrational to keep believing. To disbelieve simply because there are things about God we can't grasp is the really irrational option. Rationality involves accepting the fact that there are certain things we cannot know and restricting our conclusions to things that we can. The problem is just that this leaves us with questions—and questions with belief often lead to struggles.

1. Exactly why Job felt he could rely on *these* things will be discussed in later chapters.