

One Woman's Journey *into a* Thinking Faith



PERMISSION TO DOUBT
Study Guide



Ann C. Sullivan

GETTING STARTED

Life has a way of sneaking up on us.

Just about the time we think we have it all together, *BAM!* Everything shifts. Family. Finances. Health. We're left wondering if there's anything we can *really* count on.

Our troubling thoughts make us feel lonely. But we're not alone. Everyone wonders about life and God. We all want to know why we're here and where we're going.

This *Permission to Doubt* study guide is designed to encourage safe and honest discussion about our deepest thoughts. It sees life as a journey best taken in the company of others.

So, let's break the ice together.

1. Why did you decide to join this small group?
2. What have your experiences with small groups been in the past?
3. What makes a small group work or not work?
4. What do you hope to get out of this study?
5. What do you hope to contribute?

DOUBTS, DRY SPELLS, AND THE REDISCOVERY OF FAITH

Pursuing Truth and Defining Faith Chapters 1–2

Guide me in your truth and teach me. (Ps. 25:5)

Some people can point to the exact moment they became a follower of Christ. Others can identify deep moments of doubt. Either way, life is a learning process, especially when it comes to matters of faith.

But sometimes we're afraid to ask the big questions. We don't want to look foolish or offend anyone. We don't want our faith to collapse under pressure.

Asking questions, though, is how we learn. And remember, genuine truth is never threatened by examination.

Scripture Lesson

After his resurrection, Jesus was walking along the road to Emmaus and came upon two of his followers (Luke 24). Seeing that they were still visibly shaken by the crucifixion, Jesus asked them what they were upset about.

Not recognizing him, one of them answered, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

Then they began telling Jesus about the prophet from Nazareth who was powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. He was sentenced to death, crucified, and buried. Now his body was missing from the tomb, and they were deeply troubled.

Jesus responded by offering them comfort through insight. He used their own Scriptures to highlight truth that had been there all along.

Scripture

[Jesus] said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (Luke 24:25–27)

1. How would you define truth?
2. Who has had the greatest impact on your ability to trust?
3. What did William Penn mean when he said, "Truth never lost ground by inquiry?"
4. What is your definition of faith?
5. Why do you think faith is important to God?

THE THREE SIDES OF DOUBT PART ONE: SPIRITUAL DOUBT

Communicating with God Chapters 3–5

“Call to me and I will answer you.” (Jer. 33:3)

Atheists claim there is no God and that creation simply exists.

Deists say there is a God, but all we can know about Him is through creation.

Theists see God as creator and recognize His desire to connect with us through nature, Christ, and His Word.

We’ve been given the freedom to seek God or resist Him. The choice is ours. But like all the choices we make in life, each one ultimately impacts our intimacy with Him.

Scripture Lesson

In 2 Samuel 11, we read the account of King David and his epic fall from grace. When the king should have been leading his men in battle, he was instead at home beginning an affair with Bathsheba, the wife of his military leader Uriah.

When Bathsheba became pregnant, David tried to cover his tracks. He offered Uriah leave from the battle, hoping he would return home and sleep with his wife. But the trusty Uriah stayed with his troops, and David panicked. He ordered Uriah to the front lines where he was killed.

In the Scriptures that follow, we see the fallout of David’s bad choices. They impacted his family, his health, and his kingdom. But we also see him restored after he is confronted by the prophet Nathan and confesses his sin to God (2 Sam. 12).

David learned a painful lesson about communicating with God and how unconfessed sin can threaten our intimacy with Him. When the barriers were brought down, intimacy was restored (Ps. 51).

Scripture

Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me. I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me! (Ps. 66:16–20)

1. What is sin?
2. Why is it difficult to identify sin in our own lives and in the lives of others?
3. How does God speak to you?
4. How can you be sure He listens?
5. In what ways can you strengthen your intimacy with God?

THE THREE SIDES OF DOUBT PART TWO: INTELLECTUAL DOUBT

Is there a God? Is Jesus God? Is the Bible God's Word? Chapters 6–9

“Come now, and let us reason together.” (Isa. 1:18 NKJV)

Faith was never meant to exist through self-deception. It was meant to be strengthened through reason. We were created to think, question, and explore.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul looked for ways to connect with people intellectually even as he addressed their faith. The apostle Peter instructed believers to be ready to give a reason for the hope they have.

God has ordained our search for answers, and He provides us with just the right balance. He gives us enough answers to remind us He's worth trusting, but He also retains mystery, reminding us that He is God and we are not.

Questions are a part of His plan. As John A. Hutchinson put it, “An unthinking faith is a curious offering to be made to the creator of the human mind.”

Scripture Lesson

In the book of Acts, we read about the founding of the early church and how the message of Christ spread throughout the Roman Empire. We see the apostle Paul discussing weighty issues with the religious and political leaders of his day.

He took advantage of every opportunity to spread clarity and truth, often going against the grain. Some resisted the truth and accused Paul of contradicting the Law of Moses. But having been a high-ranking Jewish leader himself, Paul understood that Jesus didn't come to abolish the law but rather to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17).

The apostle remained committed to preaching the good news. He even made use of his time in prison to write letters to the churches. These epistles make up large portions of the New Testament.

Scripture

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. (Acts 19: 8–10)

1. What makes you question your faith the most?
2. What is the best argument for the existence of God?
3. What sets Jesus apart from other prophets and spiritual leaders?
4. What makes the Bible reliable?
5. How can you strengthen your faith through reason?

THE THREE SIDES OF DOUBT PART THREE: EMOTIONAL DOUBT

Dealing with Disillusionment Chapters 10–13

“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24 NKJV)

Wounded emotions are responsible for the majority of our doubt. We may have our facts straight, but if it doesn't feel like God is good or present in our lives, the facts don't really matter.

Anxiety and depression can fuel the flames of doubt and impact the way we process information. Until we get a handle on our emotions—our anger, our fear, our sadness—we'll struggle to see things as they really are.

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis wrote, “Faith . . . is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods.”

Scripture Lesson

The account of John the Baptist is a picture of the paradox between faith and doubt.

As a prophet, John was called to communicate God's truth, and He spoke with conviction. Most notably, he spoke against King Herod's adulterous relationship with his brother's wife. King Herod was intrigued by John and liked listening to him. But rather than receiving the truth, Herod buckled under pressure and had John thrown into prison (Matt. 14:3–5).

While in prison, exhausted and disillusioned, John's faith was tested, and he struggled with doubt. From his miserable cell, he sent his messengers to Jesus and asked, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matt. 11:3).

John had boldly proclaimed the coming of Christ just days earlier. Now in chains, he barely recognized him. Pain will do that.

But Jesus didn't condemn John for his doubt. Instead, He sent his disciples to John with words of comfort and assurance.

Scripture

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. (Matt. 11:2–6)

1. How have your emotions impacted your faith and your ability to process life?
2. What does disillusionment look like?
3. What does it take to calm your emotions and allow truth to take over?
4. When do anxiety and depression require professional care?
5. How can you train your emotions to work for you rather than against you?

MAKING DOUBT USEFUL

Rethinking Doubt Chapters 14–15

“When I was a child, I talked like a child . . .” (1 Cor. 13:11)

Everyone’s faith-story is unique. We’re all the product of the personalities we were born with and the environments we grew up in. Our faith was influenced by things we couldn’t control.

But God brings all of us to a place where our knowledge of Him can become deliberate, rather than merely a passive product of our environment. He provides plenty of opportunities for our faith to be personalized, stretched, and strengthened.

In every circumstance, we’re given the choice to either turn toward God or turn away. Life is full of pleasure and pain, and we decide how to embrace it.

Scripture Lesson

In the same way our bodies experience growing pains, our spirits have moments of discomfort as they develop too.

Scripture often describes faith in very simplistic terms. A mustard seed. A grain of wheat. And on many levels, faith is simple. The apostle Peter commends a childlike faith that craves pure spiritual milk (1 Peter 2:2).

But God never intended for us to stay children, physically or spiritually. There’s something disturbing about an adult who won’t grow up.

The apostle Paul shared his own concerns about those who were resisting solid spiritual food. They preferred to stay bottle-fed (1 Cor. 3:1–2).

Growing in our faith is an ongoing process, as Paul points out in his letter to the Philippians. It ebbs and flows throughout our lives. But rest assured, God has begun the process in us and is committed to carrying it on to completion (Phil. 1:6).

Scripture

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph. 4:15–16)

1. Why do we fear doubt?
2. When is doubt destructive and when is it beneficial?
3. How has doubt impacted you or someone you know?
4. In what ways do you turn toward God or away from Him during difficulty?
5. Where do you sense your faith is leading you?

ANSWERING THE SKEPTICS

Ten Reasons Not to Be a Christian Appendix

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy. (Col. 2:8)

Now more than ever, the world is our neighborhood. Social media connects us and allows us to see into each other lives, cultures, and belief systems.

Technology keeps us informed, but it's not without its dangers. Fake news and misinformation can muddy the waters very quickly. This can lead to a false sense of security or a complete loss of confidence.

But God is not the author of confusion. The prophet Jeremiah pointed out God's desire for us to pursue Him and His truth. Those who seek Him will find Him when they seek Him with all their heart (Jer. 29:13).

Scripture Lesson

While in Athens, the apostle Paul stood among the intellectual and cultural elite of his day.

As he toured the city and admired the sights, he looked for ways to connect with people who didn't share his beliefs. Instead of pointing out all the ways they were wrong, Paul looked for common ground and built his connections around that (Acts 17).

Then, having earned the right to be heard, the apostle Paul was able to share truths that extend beyond cultural divides.

There are at least two sides to every argument. Different perspectives. Different points of view.

If we want to earn the right to be heard by people who disagree with us, we need to learn how to listen. Like Paul, we validate others when we try to understand where they're coming from and how they got to where they are. We connect when we learn how to speak their language.

Scripture

I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Col. 2:1–3)

Objections and Solutions

1. Faith in God Is Required for Happiness

Sometimes believers are careless with their words and needlessly annoy unbelievers.

- How can we avoid misconceptions about Christ and Christian doctrine?
- How has your faith been impacted by misconceptions?

2. Christian Mind-Reading

Christians are often criticized for being judgmental.

- In what ways is our appearance and behavior important to God?
- In light of good hermeneutics, defined on page 91, how do the principles of Scripture speak to us today?

3. Fear of the Afterlife

Christians have been accused of conjuring up the concept of heaven to soften their fear of death.

- How is the idea of nothing after death preferable to something, and vice versa?
- How does the manic pace of modern life keep us from facing unpleasant realities?

4. A Faith of Convenience

Skeptics think Christians delude themselves and believe things simply because their parents did.

- In what ways does our “conversion experience” impact our faith?
- How does God level the playing field so all have a chance to believe?

5. Sadistic God

A major source of doubt is our inability to reconcile a good God with bad things that happen.

- Why does the concept of a holy God trouble the twenty-first-century mind?
- How do skeptics blur the lines between Osama bin Laden and Mother Teresa?

6. Faith and Science

Historically, the church has both paved the way for scientific discovery and stood in its way.

- Why does science make some believers nervous and bolster the faith of others?
- How do we reconcile conflicts between science and faith?

7. Alternative Lifestyle

Hot topics, such as LGBTQ issues and abortion rights, are among the most divisive in our culture today.

- What are some of the best ways to deal with contentious issues?
- What part do these issues play in our faith?

8. The Problem with Miracles

The word *miracle* is one of the most misused words in all of Christianity.

- What is a miracle?
- How can we avoid further confusion when it comes to Christian semantics?

9. One Way to God

Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

- What do Romans 1 and 2 tell us about the nature of salvation and revelation?
- How would you explain the phrase, “To whom much is given, much is required”?

10. Closed-Mindedness

There’s a fine line between being confident in our convictions and closed-minded.

- How can we engage in conversation about things we see differently?
- What’s the difference between assurance and arrogance?