

Advice for When You're Struggling with Faith

What do you do when the thing that is supposed to be your greatest source of comfort is what's keeping you up at night? Doubting God seems to throw everything off balance. When you're struggling with faith, it can feel like your life's purpose, friendships, family relationships, and understanding of the world are all under threat. So allowing yourself to ask hard questions about what you believe takes a lot of courage. And because we have a bad habit of shutting down conversation about doubt in the church, you might feel like you have to navigate a faith crisis on your own. (You don't; more on that later.) That's a scary and frustrating and heavy place to be. I know because I've been there.

Your story isn't my story. I realize that. But for what it's worth, here's what I wish someone had told me when I started questioning my faith.

1. Struggling with faith is normal; it's part of growing.

You don't need to cancel your church membership just because you're questioning some of your beliefs. It's normal to have questions about God. Sometimes taking faith and the questions it poses seriously means struggling with faith. And sometimes it causes you to have doubts. But as long as there's a kernel of belief left in you, you have not lost your faith. In fact, questioning your faith is often how you grow it.

A seed of faith buried deep in the ground has a shell of protection around it to shield it from the elements. When a sapling sheds the protection of the seed to poke its head above the ground, it is vulnerable to wind, rain, snow, and animals. But its roots keep it tethered to the ground. And the tugs of the wind and the rain actually help to strengthen the sapling into a tree that can withstand torrential storms without a shell. Your faith is the same.

If you've started asking the hard questions, you've already started to poke out of your protective shell. Pretending you haven't thought of questions that you are afraid to answer is like trying to force toothpaste back into its tube. It's not going to work. And that might be a good thing. Faith was never meant to be static or unchanging. Questioning your faith means you are taking seriously the task of pursuing truth and figuring out what it means to live according to it. This is what discipleship is all about!

2. Embrace curiosity like a child.

Kids ask a lot of questions. So when Jesus tells us to become like little children, I don't think he's saying we should tamp down our curiosity. Fairy tales often point out that children are more willing to believe in what they can't see than many adults. But the humility and openness that enable children to believe in the unseen also spark greater wonder and curiosity.

Childlike faith is open to learning something new, to changing shape, to being wrong, and to asking hard questions. It is curious and eager to explore without demanding five pages of proof to verify each discovery.

So let yourself wander back to preschool. Dare to pursue what you desperately want to know but are too afraid to ask. The worst thing that can happen: you find out you might be wrong about something. But wouldn't you rather discover the truth than believe a lie because you were too afraid to see beyond it?

3. Talk to someone you trust about how you're struggling with faith.

You don't have to wrestle with your doubts on your own. (Seriously: learn from my mistakes.) Now is not the time to distance yourself from the people who love and care about you. Struggling with faith can be hard, and they can help you.

Do you have someone in your life who you look to as a model for your faith in particular? Consider confiding in that person. You might be afraid of disappointing them or worried they won't get why you're struggling with faith. But try to give them the benefit of the doubt. And you might be surprised by how well they understand what you are going through. Sometimes the people who feel most strongly about their faith are the ones who have fought hardest with it.

As you think about who to ask for support, don't count out pastors. Many pastors get into ministry because they want to help people struggling with faith. They've dedicated their lives to this work. And if anyone in your life has experience supporting someone in a faith struggle, it's going to be them. Pastors are also more likely to have wrestled with the major questions about God themselves. So even if you don't agree with their conclusions, you might learn something from asking for their perspective.

4. Keep asking hard questions, even if you don't seem to be getting answers.

Are you hungry for a fast response to these questions that are weighing on you? Be honest with God about that. Be honest with yourself. It's okay to not be okay when you're struggling with faith. It's okay to be mad at God for putting you in this position. It's okay to be frustrated with yourself for not having everything figured out. You're allowed to push God for the clarity you're desperate to find. God can handle your honesty. (See the entire book of Job.)

But there is a catch. You probably won't get answers that satisfy you if you are only willing to pursue the "quick fix." You can't microwave an answer to why bad things happen to good people. You might get a response you can swallow, but it probably won't taste quite right. And the texture might feel rubbery, a little overdone, and fake.

Grappling with the hardest questions about faith is like cooking tough cuts of meat. When you try to cook the tough cuts fast, they only get tougher and harder to digest. If you didn't know better, you might throw out or avoid these tough cuts of meat. But when you take the time to slowly break it down in a barbecue pit or crockpot, the toughest and most gristly meat can become the most tender, delicious, and flavorful meal.

You might end up with a totally different meal than the one you were trying to cook. There are some questions you might never be able to answer. But something amazing happens when you let questions stew low and slow. You find understanding and peace even when you don't find the specific answer you thought you needed. You might even discover that you were asking the

wrong question and end up changing recipes halfway through. That's okay. Trust the process. Be patient.

If the only thing that you get out of struggling with faith is comfort with not having answers, it will have been more than worth your while. You will never stop having questions. When you take responsibility for answering every question you ask, you burden yourself with more than you can hope to take on. You could answer every single one of the questions you have now to your satisfaction, and a new set of questions would just pop up to replace them. The good news is that it's okay to leave some of the answer fields blank. Your life isn't a high school math test. Trying to pursue the truth is more important than finding answers to every question.

Learning to be okay with unanswered questions might actually help you find more answers. Without the pressure to have everything figured out, you are free to dig deeper without fear. You don't have to be so afraid of uncovering something else that challenges your faith along the way. Your faith can handle questions if your faith doesn't demand certain answers. When you fear your questions, you let them control you and suck up all the space in the room. Burying them won't change that. You'll just drain more of your energy trying to pretend you aren't struggling with faith. That's why learning to coexist with your questions, to make their slow simmer part of your daily rhythm, is so helpful.

When you let your curiosity guide you without ruling you, you find that your faith does not depend on your ability to answer every single question you or anyone else poses about God. And you end up stronger for it.

5. You'll never prove God exists, and that's okay.

We like to know things for sure. In fact, many people are drawn to Christianity because they crave certainty; they want to know that there's more to life than meets the eye. They want to know that death isn't the end of their story, and they sleep better at night if they can feel sure someone with more power than them has control of the situation.

But here's the truth: God's existence is not something any of us know with certainty. We can't know. We can see God at work in situations and people and ideas and experiences. But there's always a chance that all we really see is a mirage in a desert.

If your brain needs a logical reason to buy into Christianity, you can find plenty of people and books that lay out rational reasons for believing in Christ. You might find temporary reassurance in these rational arguments. And they might be able to help you make sense of specific questions you have about God, offering potential reasons for why God allows bad things to happen or laying out historical proof that Jesus was a real person. But ultimately, you're going to come up against a limit.

It doesn't matter how smart you are. It doesn't matter how hard you work. Christian faith will require you to believe in something you can't prove. Logic and reason and science will fail you. And the only tool you'll have left in your arsenal at that point will be faith. It's not exactly the ironclad security system you might choose to protect yourself if given the choice. But it's a stronger tool than you think. And it's pretty much the only way to protect the purpose and

meaning and love and peace that flow out of a vibrant spiritual life, so you might as well embrace it. You probably already do embrace it more than you realize.

Religion and science are often placed at odds in the stories we tell ourselves about the world, but they actually have a lot in common. Both profess to offer you certainty. And both actually require you to have faith. The roundness of the earth is considered proven scientific fact. There's ample evidence to support it. But why do we trust that evidence? The ground we walk on doesn't feel much like a circle.

We believe the earth is round because we've put our faith in the scientists whose experiments and research led them to conclude that the world is spherically shaped. It might not feel like it requires as much faith from you to trust that the earth is round as it does to believe God is real, but in both cases, you are choosing to have faith. Your certainty about just about everything you know is, on some level, supported by a foundation of faith. The only difference with religion is that you're consciously aware of how dependent you are on your faith.

6. Keep seeking God out (even if you're not totally sure you believe there's a God out there listening).

When you're not sure if God is listening to you, it can feel a little silly to talk to him. And especially if you're trying to avoid thinking about your doubts, the last thing you want to do is remind yourself of the question that just might scare you most: What if there is no God? What if prayer is just me talking to myself?

But cutting off contact with God will not help you to figure out if God exists. And it will definitely not help you find the comfort and spiritual life you're so worried about losing to doubt. Give God a chance to show you a path through the rough patches in your faith. Ask God for what you need, and keep your mind open to what God could be trying to say to you. When your needs are met, consider the possibility that God is behind it.

It might even help to pretend your life is a movie. Suspend your disbelief for a moment—just like you would in a musical when a character bursts into song—and experience life as if you feel sure that God is supporting you and guiding you. How does that change the way you see the world? You might be surprised to find that some of your disbelief stays away.

This is an especially useful exercise to engage in as you participate in church. You need to be able to bring your whole self to church, doubts included. But if you're too focused on bringing your doubts with you, you might actually forget to bring your faith along. Suspending your disbelief is a way that you can name that you do have doubt, but give yourself permission to experience worship wholeheartedly in the moment. You can unpack the questions you might have around your worship experience later.

You can't be fully present in the quality time you need with God and your church if your mind is stuck on whether God's in the room with you or not. And feeling God in the room with you, loving you and guiding you, might be the very answer your restless brain is seeking. Give God a chance to respond to that need.

7. Take your time and let yourself work through this at your own pace.

Pace yourself. Faith is a lifelong journey, and sprinting won't change that; it will just make you tired. You don't have all the answers right now, and that's okay. Nobody has faith completely figured out, even (maybe especially) the people who are convinced they do. Why expect something of yourself that not even the most famous theologians and preachers have managed to do?

Thankfully, experiencing and extending the love of Jesus Christ doesn't require you to know everything about him. It is okay not to have all the answers. It is okay to take your time with the questions. And it is okay to take a break if you need one.

The faith journey rarely follows a linear path. The fact that you're struggling with faith now doesn't mean you'll be struggling forever. Many people who feel far from God find their way back. And even the people who seem closest to God don't feel close to him all the time. If you continue in your faith, there will be times when you are at peace with God again. There will be times when you feel close to God again. And yes, there will also be times when you find yourself in tumult again.

Remember that you don't have to take on all the tumult at once. If you're full of unanswered questions for God but feel too weary to take them on, pay attention to that feeling. It's probably a sign that your soul needs to rest. Consider taking a breather. Watch a show, read a book, spend time with the people you love, try a meditation exercise, or take a walk.

Taking a break doesn't mean you're giving up. You're giving yourself what you need to keep going. You can't wrestle without rest. And resting in God can be clarifying in ways that theological wrestling never will be. But even when you set aside your faith questions for awhile, make sure you keep listening. Sometimes God speaks in a whisper.

Faith is our strength

Hebrews 10:39. But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

Mark 11:22-23. "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. ...

Philippians 4:13. ...

Mark 10:27. ...

2 Timothy 2:7-8. ...

1 Corinthians 16:13. ...

1 Corinthians 13:13.

Here are some other ways to strengthen your faith:

Pray and meditate: These are powerful ways to connect with God and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart.

- Study and apply God's Word
- Engage in Christian community
- Seek to serve others
- Trust God in all things
- Apply verses from the Bible to different areas of your life
- Be still and let God take the lead
- Wait patiently for God's guidance
- Embrace humility
- Meditate on His Word
- Seek relationship
- Practice obedience
- Keep up "spiritual disciplines"
- You can also:
 - Read the Bible daily
 - Speak the Bible
 - Read the Bible aloud
 - Memorize the Bible
 - Write down scriptures that speak to your heart while reading
 - Find prayers in the scripture and pray those on your own behalf