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*O Me of Little Faith*

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# The Doubter's Road

I am a Christian. I have been a Christian for most of my life. But there are times — a growing number of times, to be honest — when I'm not entirely sure I believe in God.

There. I said it.

So now you know, and we can both relax and talk about it. Confessing the presence of spiritual uncertainty in my life is a relief. I can breathe easier now because I don't have to pretend. I don't have to hide my conflicted feelings when we talk about Jesus and the Bible. I don't have to feel like a jerk if you, or anyone else, look to me as some kind of spiritual expert or teacher. I don't have to tiptoe around the word most of us hesitate to use in church or around Christian friends because it freaks us out so much.

Doubt.

Now that it's out in the open, I can strip off my happy Christian mask, climb down from whatever pedestal I've hoisted myself up on, and be who I really am: a committed follower of Jesus who occasionally finds himself wondering if maybe, just maybe, we've made this whole thing up.

Let's back up for a minute though, because there will be plenty of room in this book for me to talk about myself. What I want to discuss here, at the beginning, is you. Let's talk about what's going through your head right now. I have a feeling you might be thinking one of two things.

The first is this: *He's not sure he believes in God? The last thing I need to read is the navel gazing of some self-absorbed, relativistic, weak-minded writer who struggles with faith. If you have so much trouble believing in God, dude, why don't you quit writing books and start reading the Word? (You might start with James 1:6.<sup>1</sup>) Pray or something, but quit blabbing about it. It's bad enough that you're questioning your own faith. Don't pull us down with you!*

Is that your response? If so, that's fine. Don't worry about it, because it's not unexpected, and I totally forgive you for calling me "weak-minded." Also, I admit to being "a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind," as James so colorfully puts it. I'm not especially proud of being a doubter. Like treading water in the ocean during a tropical storm, it can be exhausting, uncomfortable, and fairly dangerous—but I'm not going to pretend that it doesn't have some redeeming qualities.

Nor am I going to get defensive. You're a little mean,

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1. "But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind" (James 1:6).

perhaps, but not entirely wrong in wanting me to shut up so I don't mess up the current quality of your belief. I don't want to do that. So if you are rock-steady in your faith and have no interest in reading a book about doubt, then by all means, put this one down. Put it back on the shelf. Walk away slowly and enjoy your blessings. Firm faith is a gift. I'm happy for you — I wish I could *be* you.

But I'm not. Which brings us to a second potential reaction to my doubter's confession. It's one of recognition and relief: *I completely understand about the doubt thing. What you're going through? Same here. I have doubts, too. Big ones. I try to ignore them, I try to fight against them, and I try to pray for more faith. But no matter what books I read or what sermons I hear, I can't get rid of these doubts.*

If you identify with me, keep reading. Maybe we're on the same road and we can walk together. It's not the straight, easy road to faith. It's no smooth interstate highway with well-lit rest stops and clean restrooms and lots of gas stations. It's not always purpose-driven. It's not the road where the driving comes with a great soundtrack — a crisp satellite radio connection to the Almighty.

Nope, ours is the doubter's road. It's a winding, weird back road that never seems to get anywhere fast. This road is poorly lit, cratered with potholes, and far from flat. Every once in awhile it steers up into the mountains, where the

air is fresh and the views are spectacular. But mostly it unwinds its graveled way through valleys, across deserts, and past sketchy small towns. The soundtrack of God's voice crackles on the A.M. band through speakers that have seen better days.

It's far from boring, of course, and eventually we may even reach the same destination as those on the faith superhighway. There's a lot to be gained by taking the road less traveled, but this is one scenic route that rarely gets recommended.

You know what it's like. You've doubted in the past. Maybe you're wracked with uncertainty right now. Or maybe you're preparing for the future. You realize that your faith—while active and vigorous today—is nevertheless fragile. At this point things are moving along nicely, but you can't guarantee they'll stay this way. If something terrible happens, will your faith survive? Will you cling to Jesus when your headlights barely brighten the road ahead and all you hear is static?

I've had the opportunity to speak about my journey of doubt at colleges and churches and in small groups, and I'm always surprised at the number of people for whom the topic is deeply resonant. "Thank you for being honest about this stuff," people say. They're usually whispering, and they lean in like they're about to tell me a secret.

“Actually, I feel the same way you do. Almost all the time. It’s good to know I’m not alone.”

Although the number of open skeptics in our culture is growing, doubt is verboten among most Christians. Nearly all of us struggle with doubt, but few of us are willing to own it—even though its indigo thread is woven throughout the biblical narrative. Abraham dealt with God’s absence. Sarah laughed at God’s slowness to fulfill his promises. Job struggled to understand God’s action. David expressed his doubt in poetry. “How long, O Lord?” he asks in Psalm 13. “Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”

And that’s just the Old Testament. In the New Testament, John the Baptist doubts whether Jesus really is the Messiah. Peter’s uncertainty causes him to sink beneath the waves. Nicodemus is clueless about what Jesus teaches him, and Thomas won’t believe what he can’t touch with his own hands.

If we’re honest, we identify with these biblical characters: sometimes God seems pretty distant. So why do we pretend otherwise? My tendency is to act as if God’s apparent vanishing act is something I should be ashamed of. It’s a weakness to overcome, I tell myself, a sin to avoid. So we wrestle, like Jacob, in the middle of nowhere. Isolated.

But I’m not alone, and neither are you.

That's comforting. In a church culture where we clean ourselves up on Sunday mornings and go to church decked out in smiles and wrinkle-free clothes, it's good to remember that life is messy. Some of us smell bad, and we're wearing the same jeans we spilled coffee on yesterday. Our prayers are not particularly "powerful and effective" (James 5:16). Our lives don't seem victorious. Our struggles are hard, and sometimes we're barely holding it together. Is this faith thing even worth it?

Those of us on the doubter's road are constantly good at one thing: asking questions. Whether we ever find the answers or not, the questions are always there—and not just questions about whether or not God exists. Have you ever asked any of these questions?

- What if religion and our longing for God is just the way our brains are wired? Could spirituality just be the product of chemistry or electrical impulses?
- What if the atheists are right, and faith is just a crutch we've developed to give life meaning and mitigate the specter of death?
- Is there any real difference between the ancient religious stories of Judeo-Christianity and the folklore of, say, Norse or Greek mythology? Or even the Flying Spaghetti Monster?<sup>2</sup>

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2. See [www.venganza.com](http://www.venganza.com) if the FSM parody is new to you.

- Are the New Testament stories about Jesus trustworthy? How do we know it's not some big *Da Vinci Code* hoax or cover-up by a power-hungry church?
- If the Bible is supposed to be completely inspired by God, why does it seem to have mistakes and factual contradictions in it?<sup>3</sup> And why do the typical Christian explanations of these contradictions always seem so lame?
- Stories like God instructing Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, or the destruction of the Canaanites, or the whole book of Job, seem so brutal and heartless. Am I really supposed to love and serve a deity who, frankly, comes across that unattractive?
- Do I have to believe in demons and angels and all that weird spiritual warfare stuff in order to be a Christian?
- Do I have to completely disregard scientific ideas like the theory of evolution or the incredible age of the universe in order to maintain my belief in the authority of the Bible?
- Why do Christians get so weird about the “end times”? Why do some Christians get so weird, period?

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3. I just lost a few of you with that statement, didn't I? If you're offended that I think there are some troublesome sections of the Bible, then this probably isn't the book for you.

- Why do Christians seem more interested in participating in a social club than living out the basic teachings of Jesus?
- Why do evangelical Christians emphasize making a “personal decision for Christ” and getting people to pray a “Sinner’s Prayer” when the Gospels don’t really show Jesus doing either of those things?
- When we go to other countries on evangelistic mission trips, are we really making a difference in people’s lives? Or are we just pushing our agendas and culture on someone else and making ourselves feel better?
- If Christians really believed their friends were bound for hell—the kind of hell where the unforgiven are tortured physically for ever and ever—wouldn’t Christians do everything they could to get them “saved”? Then why don’t I?
- Why do some Christians focus so much energy on policing the culture and so little on producing it?
- If some Christians really are able to heal people, why are they putting on big conferences—and making people come to *them*—rather than hanging out in cancer wards or visiting the sick?
- Are huge worship centers and gymnasiums and fancy youth buildings a natural extension of Jesus’

commission to the disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel? Would the early church even recognize the way we practice Christianity now?

- When people go around thinking God is speaking to them and giving them specific directions, couldn't that "voice" just be their own imagination?
- What does Christianity look like to outsiders such as people born into Islam, or Buddhism, or some other religious system?
- If God is loving and just and concerned with the suffering of the innocent, why does he allow children to die? Why does he allow little kids' parents to die? Why does he let terrible accidents happen? Why do Christians still get cancer like everyone else? Why does anyone get cancer?
- Why does evil exist? If God created the world and called it "good," then where did evil originate?
- What if I had been born into another culture and practiced another religion with complete devotion, would God still allow me to be tortured for eternity in hell? Even though I was pursuing him, but through the wrong religious system?
- If one definition of a *lie* is "something intended or serving to convey a false impression," then why do

so many pastors wear toupees, and why does no one seem bothered by this?<sup>4</sup>

I could go on and on. I haven't asked any questions about HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, politics, the church's response to the environment, or other hot-button issues. I haven't gotten into my questions about tithing, and how we view financial blessings, and the whole prosperity-gospel show. I haven't touched on the exclusivity of Christianity and why we sometimes have to explain away the verses that say Christ died to save everyone.

I haven't listed everything because it seems like the list is already too long. It makes me nervous to ask these questions so publicly. Maybe you've asked some of these questions too. Maybe some of them bother you. You might be scandalized or angry enough to quit reading this book.

My purpose isn't to answer these questions. I'm not a scholar or a theologian or a pastor, so I'll leave the apologetics to someone else. And to be honest, to me these aren't questions that can be satisfactorily answered by, for instance, reading a book of "answers to hard questions." I hate expressing my doubts only to be told, "Well, you should just read John Piper," or "Here, listen to these sermons by Tim Keller" (or R. C. Sproul, Rob Bell, or Mark

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4. Sort of a silly question, I guess, but it's something I've always wondered.

Driscoll). I've heard all the arguments and seen all the flow-charts. I've been to the Josh McDowell conferences and heard Lee Strobel speak, but still somehow I keep missing the on-ramp to the faith superhighway.

So this won't be "Five Easy Steps to Get Rid of Your Doubt." No quick fixes. What I can promise you is companionship and conversation. You're not alone in this journey.

On the doubter's road, I need a friend to spell me at the wheel—and maybe you do too.

# The Weakling in the Weight Room

When I was in seventh grade, there was one room on campus that I approached with dread: the weight room. I played on the basketball team — actually, *played* might be a bit of a stretch. I was *on* the basketball team. But as a five-foot, seventy-pound stick of a twelve-year-old, my primary position was holding down the end of the bench. On the “B” team.

Anyway, during the off-season, our coach decided we needed to start lifting weights. The first part of our weight training would be something he called “maxing out,” which sounded awesome until I found out what it really meant. “Maxing out” means finding the heaviest amount of weight a person can lift in one single, clean, complete movement. It is, to a considerable degree, *not that awesome*.

I am a skinny, skinny person. Other than a few months of infant obesity, I have been skinny all of my life. My

mom's side of the family is populated by healthy—and very thin—people, so I come by my slenderness naturally. I can't wear a regular men's wristwatch because the size of most watch faces make me look like I've strapped a wall clock to my arm. I was scrawny in junior high, and I am scrawny now.

Coach's plan was for us to max out on the bench press, and he let the big guys go first. They were intimidating enough already. Their deep voices and hairy legs indicated they were already members of the Puberty Club. (Alas, I had not yet received my invitation, and I was beginning to wonder whether I was even on the mailing list.) One by one, while the rest of us watched, the big guys methodically added weight to the bar—*clank . . . clank*. Some of them were getting up into the triple digits, pressing 110, 120, even 130 pounds.

I thought about hiding under a wrestling mat.

I went last. Coach turned to me and asked, "Boyett, what do you weigh?"

"Sev—seventy pounds," I squeaked. (My voice hadn't changed yet.)

"We'll start with forty-five and work up to seventy," Coach said. "You ought to be able to bench at least seventy."

Let me pause here to reveal two important facts. The first is that Coach was under the mistaken assumption

that a person should be able to bench at least his own body weight, because a bench press is like an inverted upside-down push-up. I dispute this idea even to this day. It just seems wrong.

You should also know that Coach didn't just choose the beginning forty-five-pound weight at random. Forty-five pounds was the weight of the empty bar.

That's right: I would start the process of maxing out with just the weight bar. No clanking weights. Just the bar. And, yes, it looked as wildly heroic as it sounds.

I lay down on the bench. My shirtsleeves slid back to reveal bony arms and nearly hairless armpits. A couple of spotters effortlessly lifted the bar from the rack. I lowered it down, said a quick prayer — *please please please let me push this back up* — and contracted every pectoral muscle fiber I had. And slowly, steadily, keeping my eyes closed so they didn't pop out of my head with the strain, I pressed that forty-five-pound bar until my quivering arms extended fully. I'd made it. Flush with relief, I breathed again.

"Nice job, Boyett," Coach said. "Add ten."

*Clank. Clank.*

The spotters loaded a five-pound weight onto each end of the bar. Total: fifty-five pounds. They waited until I steadied my small-boned jelly arms, and let go as I lowered the bar to my chest.

I pushed. I pushed some more. I squeezed my eyes even tighter. *Dear God*, I may have prayed, *please let there be some sort of Spirit-of-the-Lord Samson strength stored in my blond mullet*. I kept pushing. I came dangerously close, I think, to rupturing a disc. My back lifted off the bench, which is not recommended. But the bar wouldn't move.

"Help him," Coach finally said, and the spotters—I'm certain of this—rolled their eyes at each other as they used their pinkie fingers to lift the bar from my chest. I couldn't move.

"Boyett: forty-five pounds," Coach called out as he wrote it on his clipboard. His voice echoed against the brick walls and wood floors of the weight room, punctuated by my still-pounding heartbeat.

I don't blame him for what he said next, because who could resist?

"On the bench press, Boyett maxes out with . . ." (*dramatic pause*) ". . . the bar. Just the bar."

I learned a lot during that season of seventh-grade basketball. I learned the Lord's Prayer, because Coach—a U.S.-born Hispanic Catholic—would have us kneel and say it prior to every game, in the King James Version.

I also learned (but never practiced) a variety of creative ways to curse, because Coach would typically follow

the pre-game Lord's Prayer with a halftime litany of less-appropriate uses of God's name and certain other syllables. Our team wasn't very good, and his way of dealing with our constant failure was to string together as many expletives as he could fit between breaths.<sup>1</sup> I'm convinced the guy was a savant of vulgarity.

Back then, I learned something about myself that remains true to this day: I am weak. In seventh grade, that weakness was primarily physical. I became aware of it in the weight room, on the basketball court, and in the hallways when various members of the athletic staff kept suggesting that I would make a great equipment manager for the football team.

Now, a couple of decades later, I wonder if that weakness transferred from the outside to the inside. Some days, when it comes to faith, I can't bench press much more than the bar. I'm spiritually scrawny. I don't measure up to the power-lifters in the weight room.

When you live and work within the American Christian subculture—especially the less liturgical, more conservative, evangelical, megachurch *sub*-subculture—you hear a lot of people talking casually about the intimacy of

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1. The cursing was typically followed by his slumping against the wall and saying, "I promised my wife I wouldn't swear today." I always felt kind of bad for him, because he broke a lot of promises—and clipboards, for that matter.

their relationship with God. The way they tell it, they get frequent, distinct impressions from the Holy Spirit. They get personal promptings from Jesus. They get very specific answers to prayer and detailed directions about even the most trivial aspects of their lives.

I've heard someone tell a friend, "I woke up in the middle of the night and thought of you, and it was definitely the Holy Spirit wanting me to pray for you right then and there." I've overheard a middle-aged woman say, "It was totally a God thing that my flight got cancelled, because I got to share my faith with the lady next to me. Talk about a divine appointment!"

I've heard musicians credit God with having written their song lyrics. I've heard businessmen give God credit for finally coming through with the promotions for which they'd been praying. I know a few people who don't hesitate to reveal that God told them to quit their jobs and go into full-time ministry.

One Sunday I overheard someone give this breathless recap of a worship service: "The Lord totally showed up in church this morning. When we got to that key change in 'Breathe,' you just knew God was moving."

You've heard this kind of talk too, maybe coming out of your own mouth. Please understand me: I'm not telling you—or them—to stop. I'm pretty sure most of those

kinds of statements express a sincere and real faith in a personal God who is intimately involved in our lives. That people talk this way is not what bothers me.

The problem is that I can't describe my own faith that way. It doesn't feel right. It makes me uncomfortable. When I'm around people who do talk that way, it's seventh grade all over again.

Maybe I'm just a cynical grump. Maybe these Christians aren't spiritualizing chance, or common sense, or feelings, or inner desires by wrapping them in church talk. Maybe they're truly hearing from God. Maybe that's the experience of most Christians today, and I'm just missing out.

But the God-whispering-in-my-ear thing doesn't seem to happen for me. If I hear my conscience, I'm pretty sure that's because I'm familiar enough with the teachings of Jesus that I feel guilty when I've failed in some way. If I wake up in the night, I'm more likely to believe it's because my dog made a noise than to assume God wants me to pray for someone. (And why does God need me to pray for something so badly that he has to wake me up, anyway? Can't he just wait until morning? Or, you know, answer the prayer without me? Am I a soulless twit to even ask?)

If my flight gets canceled, perhaps it's just the result of a backlog of delayed flights thanks to a major storm somewhere. I'm seriously hesitant to assume a master evangelistic

plan behind flight delays, but many well-meaning Christians really do place so much value on a single soul that they have no problem believing that God whipped up a thunderstorm over the Dallas/Fort Worth airport, piled stress on airline employees, and inconvenienced hundreds of travelers for the purpose of engineering a conversation of eternal significance. My honest assessment of most “divine appointment” language is that it is self-centered. Especially if your divinely appointed evangelism is at the expense of a bunch of other people who just want to get home in time to tuck in their kids. (Right: I’m a soulless twit.)

If I feel an optimistic swell of “the Spirit” during a specific song at church, maybe it’s just that music has a powerful pull on my emotions—a well-timed minor 7<sup>th</sup> tends to have that effect. Or maybe it’s the sound of hundreds of voices singing in unison that gives me chills. Is there any chance that I’ve been conditioned, in the subtle Pavlovian anticipation of what happens at church, to view this feeling as the presence of God—as God “showing up”? (Anyway, isn’t God omnipresent? Can an omnipresent deity ever really “show up” anywhere?)

Am I too skeptical? Too worldly? Not spiritual enough? Yes. Probably. Almost certainly. At church, in my home group, and in random conversations with fellow Christians, I often feel like my scrawny twelve-year-old self, barely able

to lift the bar when everyone else is maxing out in the triple digits. I'm a spiritual lightweight.

Do I lack the eyes to see and the ears to hear? Is God really trying to speak to me through my canceled flight or my recent insomnia — only I'm just missing it? Sometimes I wonder. I'm full of uncertainty, but I know this for sure: these doubts aren't fun. It's a drag to feel so spiritually weak when everyone else seems strong, to feel so full of doubt when everyone else oozes faith. At church and around Christians, I'm sitting at the end of the bench while the game goes on without me.

But I love the Bible. I love the Jesus revealed in the Bible. On most days, I'm convinced that he rose from the dead and that he is who he claimed to be. I try to follow him. I try to keep his commandments. I think the life he models is the best way to live. I think the kingdom he invites me into is as revolutionary as they come. But I'd be lying if I said Jesus talked to me all the time, or that he always felt as real to me as my wife and kids do. Because he doesn't.

“Doubt” is my middle name.

Not literally, but close enough: I'm Jason Thomas Boyett.

I'm named after my dad, but we share a name with history's most famous doubter, the disciple Thomas. He didn't fit in either. Thomas's story is found in John 20.

After Jesus has died, been buried, and is resurrected, he appears to Mary Magdalene outside the tomb. Later, along the road to Emmaus, Jesus spends time with a couple of followers who don't recognize him at first. Then Jesus surprises his disciples when he suddenly appears in a room with locked doors.<sup>2</sup> He shows them his crucifixion wounds. The disciples believe, and Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon them (John 20:19–23). To risk making the biggest understatement in Christian history, I suspect this was an amazing spiritual experience, holy and unexpected. The room must have been saturated with “the power and the glory,” to quote the prayer I learned in seventh-grade basketball.

But Thomas missed the party somehow. According to John 20:24–25, he wasn't there. All his friends leave the locked room rejoicing and saying, “We have seen the Lord!” and eventually they meet up with Thomas. They tell him all about their risen Savior, his still-visible wounds, the locked-room trick, and how wonderful it was.

Thomas can't rejoice with them, though. He feels confused about the whole thing. And left out. He simply can't relate to what they're saying because he hasn't experienced

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2. I love this detail, because it's one of the few New Testament examples of Jesus using his power to do something closer to a magic trick — appearing as if out of nowhere! — as opposed to healing the sick or feeding the hungry. It feels like personal magic instead of an others-oriented miracle.

it. Are his friends drunk? Are they delusional? Are James and John trying to “punk” him or something? Thomas needs proof. He needs to see Jesus for himself and stick his finger in the wounds. He just can’t *force* himself to believe something unbelievable.

I feel for Thomas. I feel *like* Thomas.

I *am* Thomas.

One of the earliest and most important deities in Roman mythology is Janus, the two-faced god of doors, gates, beginnings, and endings. He’s typically shown with the two faces looking in opposite directions, which is why the month of January takes its first-of-the-year position and name from him. You wouldn’t want to meet Janus in person, though—which face would you talk to? Where do you look? A conversation with Janus would be awkward.

Like Janus, my doubt is an awkward, two-faced freak. One face surveys the many ways I do and do not experience God. It’s as suspicious as Thomas. It needs evidence. It wants something rational to hold onto—and sometimes rational proof isn’t even convincing enough. It asks questions, but they’re the kinds of honest questions that maybe all Christians ask at some point in their lives.

But there’s another face, too. It’s rougher, wilder, and more primitive, with a touch of the crazy eyes. It stares down a dangerous, dark path. It’s not concerned with

biblical contradictions, the silly ways Christians talk, or the trivia of faith. With fear and trembling, it dares to ask a more basic question.

*Does God even exist?*