Faith & Doubt: Week One
Beginning with the book by John Ortberg

“I do believe; help me with my unbelief!”
(Mark 9:24)

Getting Started:
This summer we are going to use John Ortberg’s book “Faith & Doubt” as we think about, talk about, and hopefully learn to welcome our own struggles with faith and the struggles of those around us.

Do you have doubts? In the quiet corners, shadowy nooks, and secret rooms of your own life of faith are there some things you sure hope you never have to “explain or defend”? What do you do with those things … what do they do for you or to you?

Do we have room in our lives, in our homes, and in our churches for people who doubt?

Have your own doubts and questions made you really uncomfortable before? How about the doubts and questions of someone else? When and why?

The man who said the words above in Mark 9:24 said them right to Jesus’ face … are we as willing to admit our own doubts and questions to God in prayer? How about to the people we sit next to in church… to our children… to new believers? If not, why not?

Is doubt always bad? That is, perhaps, the question that drove John Ortberg to write this book, and his answer is no! He seems to think it is healthy and perhaps even inevitable, if we are honest with ourselves and others. Could our doubts be the seeds which keep us growing, seeking, and “wrestling with God” as we journey?

Chapter 1: Faith, Doubt, and Being Born

The deepest, the only theme of human history, compared to which all others are of subordinate importance, is the conflict of skepticism with faith.
(Wolfgang von Goethe)

John Ortberg begins his book by talking about a year when 3 out of 4 of his close neighbors had heart attacks in their forties. He says this:

“Questions about God and heaven and meaning and death ceased to be academic. And it struck me, in that year, how deeply both faith and doubt are part of my life. We often think of them as opposites. Many books argue for one or the other. But while in some respects they are enemies, in other ways they are surprisingly alike: both are concerned with ultimate issues; both pop up unasked for at unexpected moments; both are necessary.
“I must have truth. Therefore I doubt.” If I did not doubt, I’d be just another one of those suckers P.T. Barnum was so grateful get born once a minute; I’d fall for every carnival sideshow delusion that comes along. And I scorn delusion.

“I must have hope. Therefore I believe.” If I did not believe, I would cave in to despair. And I dread despair.

“In addition to believing and doubting, there is choosing.” I must decide which road I will follow. I must place my bet.”

Why I Believe:
Here Ortberg tells what it was like to become a father for the first time. While he “knew” something about fatherhood and expected to feel something powerful, the actual experience exceeded anything he’d expected. For him, this was one of those experiences in life that insists on a greater meaning than simple biology or random chance.

Can you remember one or more moments, times, or seasons in your own life when you knew, not because of factual evidence but because you just had an inherent certainty that:

- The events of that moment, time or season could not be ‘just an accident’.
- The universe cannot simply be a random, chaotic machine.
- Love is more powerful and more significant than a biochemical reaction.
- There must be someone, something, someplace to which we can say “thank you”.
- There is a power greater than ourselves that is good, present, and awe-inspiring.
- You are driven to worship, to awe, and to humbleness, knowing no one else would understand the why even if you tried really hard to explain it.
- What else? What is your own answer to “Why I Believe”?

Why I Doubt:
Here again Ortberg tells the story of a baby, but this time it is of a baby who died – a horrible, unnecessary, inexplicable death. Doestoevsky, one of the greatest Russian authors and also a believer, said “the death of a single infant calls into question the existence of God.” Elie Wiesel, a Nobel prize winning author who wrote of his time in a German concentration camp said it this way, “Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul.” Martin Luther, Billy Graham, and Mother Teresa have all admitted to times of doubt.

This list is more difficult, but it is the other side of the same coin, so let’s be brave and give it its moment. Can you remember one or more moments, times or seasons in your own life when you had doubts about God – his existence, his goodness, his presence – because:

- The events of that moment, time or season, if NOT “just an accident” were too awful to accept.
- Creation shows itself to be so evil and broken that believing a benevolent presence is in charge or even paying any attention is too much for you.
- Evil wins and good people lose and nobody seems to care.
- Despite your desires to find (or be found by) God, he seems utterly unwilling to meet you or show himself.
Bertrand Russell, a famous atheist, once said that, if he died and found himself confronted by God who demanded to know why Russell had not believed in him, he would answer: “Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence.” George Bernard Shaw said: “The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one.”

What event or events in your life have been gifts of God’s abundance to your faith? What can you never forget when questions arise – when has God “made himself known to you” in ways powerful enough to steady you in the darker times?

If you had to be absolutely honest, have there been times where nothing but a decision of the will stood between you and a doubt that felt too large and dangerous to “survive”?

Wouldn’t it be nice if life were a series of proofs that made it easy to believe (and/or easy to understand) the plans and purposes of God? When in your own journey have you been utterly unable to figure out what God was doing? Do you know now? If not, how has carrying that question – that doubt – helped, hindered, deepened, or bruised your faith?

What about less “earth-shattering” doubts … do we have room for the things we just can’t quite bring ourselves to buy into? What about all the controversies in Christianity today? If you had to name one “tenet of the faith” that you struggle to really agree with, what would it be and how willing would you be to admit that struggle to another Christian? If you wouldn’t be willing, why not? What do your doubts teach you?

Doubt and Faith in Every Soul:
The truth is, there is doubt and faith in every soul. How we receive our doubts – how we allow them to instruct our prayers, how we pray with them and through them, what they drive us to do or consider – these are parts of the journey of faith that all of us must, at some point, face. We have faith and we have doubts. But we also have choice, and as is true in so many avenues of life, to decide not to choose, well, that IS a choice!

Ortberg closes chapter 1 with these words:

“So it goes for those of us who live in a cul-de-sac, where babies are brought home from the hospital and watched over, where hearts stop and feet slip, where we wonder if there is a hidden road that leads somewhere.

“We believe and we doubt. Believing and doubting share the same inevitability, but they are not equal. They cannot lay the same claim to our allegiance. They do not share the same power.

“If there are places beyond the cul-de-sac, doubt cannot take us there.”

As we begin our summer study, might you commit to think about your doubts?

Might you be willing to receive them, listen to them, and learn from them?
Might you be willing to carry them into your prayers and ask God to use them for his greater good in your life?

Might you be willing to believe that God knows you can’t understand everything but also to realize that you’re the only one who expects you too? What if you can “worship God with your whole mind, heart, soul, and spirit” even when your mind holds questions, reservations, and concerns – doubts?

Let’s be brave together and hold our doubts up to God and ask him to do a mighty work in us through these broken pieces... shall we?

A Closing Prayer, from another doubting paragon of the faith:

   God, today I resonate with the desperate cry in the Gospel, “I believe, help my unbelief.” Sometimes I think I operate my life out of more doubt than faith. And yet I want to believe… and I do believe…

   Increase faith within me, O Lord. I’m sure that for faith to grow you will put me in situations where I’ll need resources beyond myself. I submit to this process.

   Will this mean moving out on behalf of others, praying for them and trusting you to work in them? If so, then show me the who, what, when, and where, and I will seek to act at your bidding. Throughout I am trusting you to take me from faith to faith—from the faith I do not have to the faith that I am in the process of receiving.

   Thank you for hearing my prayer. Amen

(Richard Forster, from Prayers from the Heart)