

Class #4: What if We Christians are Just Deluded?

Uptown Church Sunday School: Your Greatest Doubts and Fears

Jan 29, 2012

“You have the look of a man who accepts what he sees because he is expecting to wake up. ... The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth. Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?”

Introduction

- **Continuing our series in “Your Greatest Doubts and Fears”**
 - We've covered:
 - What is doubt? Is it sinful (or, when is it sinful)? How does it relate to fear?
 - Intellectual challenges to the faith: anti-supernaturalism, supposed conflict of faith and science, Darwinian macroevolution, pluralism and rejection of absolutes
 - Problem of evil and suffering: God has a morally sufficient reason to allow evil and suffering, even if we do not know what it is
 - Today's class is a tough one to articulate because most of us, if we've experienced it, have only done so at the deepest levels of our souls, and often just briefly

- **Our fickle, unstable minds:**
 - Q: Have you ever been walking down the hallway of your house to do something, only to show up in a random room and wonder, “What am I in here for? What was I getting ready to do?”
 - Q: Have you ever been driving somewhere and had a moment of sheer terror of wondering, “Where am I going?” or “Am I going the right way?”
 - Harris Blvd entrance ramp example
 - Q: Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night and been completely overwhelmed with terror about a dream you had that you would have sworn was completely real if someone asked you?
 - You see, our minds are not always so stable.

- **Our topic for today is tough to pin down.** The best way I can describe it is, to use an impolite term, the “Oh crap” moment of the Christian walk: “What if all I believe, what if all my church believes, what if all that Christians hold to be true and essential – what if all that is just *wrong*. What if we are deluding ourselves?” Note the *Matrix* quote.
 - It is an existential crisis, however brief or long. It strikes to the very core of our being, of our existence, of what we know, and what we think we know about what we know. ***It is systemic, totalizing doubt: what if all of this is false?***
 - Sometimes it is a fleeting moment: “Wow, what if Christianity is false. What if there is no God. Nah...can't be. I know it's true.”
 - Sometimes it is a prolonged, dark period where everything you took for granted is in the air as you struggle with these profound issues.
 - Important distinction: this is ***not the issue of lack of assurance*** or doubting your salvation. Doubting your salvation still assumes Christianity is an accurate

representation of reality, but that you are just on the wrong side of it. We'll deal with assurance in the last class.

- *Q: Has anyone ever experienced this type of crisis in their hearts?*
 - UNC Chapel Hill example

A. Describing the Existential Crisis: Psalm 88 and John's Doubt

- Not surprisingly, even the Bible itself provides us with a perspective on what this striking-to-the-core-of-your-soul crisis is like. Let us look at two powerful examples.

- *Read Psalm 88:13-18*

[13] But I, O LORD, cry to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.

[14] O LORD, why do you cast my soul away?
Why do you hide your face from me?

[15] Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am helpless.

[16] Your wrath has swept over me;
your dreadful assaults destroy me.

[17] They surround me like a flood all day long;
they close in on me together.

[18] You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
my companions have become darkness.

- This is a powerful Psalm that is easily the darkest in the Psalter. Most lament Psalms end positively. This Psalm starts in darkness and ends with, as the NIV puts it, “the darkness is my closest friend.”
- The Psalmist is rocked to the core of his being: where are you God? Are you even there? I am utterly undone.
- *Q: What angle does this give us on the existential crisis?*
 - Feeling abandoned by God, pressed down on all sides
 - Emotional despair that leads to systemic doubt

- *Read Luke 7:18-23*

[18] The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, [19] calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

[20] And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” [21] In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. [22] And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. [23] And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

- *Q: What is going on here? Where is John? Why is this such an amazing passage?*
- Consider John's past:
 - Prophecy to his mother of John's greatness
 - His role as the transitional prophet from OT to NT

- His own person was predicted in Isaiah → he was the chosen herald of Christ
 - He baptized Jesus and had witnessed his miracles. He had proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb of God.
 - He had declared that he would be come less in order to magnify Jesus.
 - But what happened: John is imprisoned, ready to be beheaded by Herod. The kingdom had not yet come. He experiences profound, existential doubt:
 - Is Jesus really the one? Did we get the wrong guy?
 - Why is Jesus not doing anything? Where is the kingdom?
 - Was I wrong? Am I a false prophet? Was I deluded?
 - Have I wasted everything? Do we have anything to hope for in this man?
 - Am I willing to die for someone that may not even be the right man?
 - This is a shocking amount of insight into what John was going through. As one commentator put it, “Doubts buzzed around his brain like the flies around his face.”
- These two passages paint a good picture of what we're dealing with: we thought we knew something about God, but what if we have blown it? “Oh crap!” indeed.

B. Identifying Causes of “Existential” Doubt

- *Q: In what sense is this type of doubt to be expected in the Christian life?*
 - The claims of Christ are significant
 - Our minds, though regenerate, still battle with the old man
 - The attacks of the world on our faith are sometimes very very powerful
- *Q: What are some causes of this type of doubt in your life?*
 - Mismatch between expectations of Christian life and reality (John's issue) → often we expect things to be one way, and when they're not, we think, “Maybe I was wrong at the outset”
 - Periods of spiritual darkness (Psalm 88)
 - Life events / tragedy / loss that makes you feel like maybe God isn't there after all
 - Attacks of the world / Satan → what you watch on television, what you read, personal interactions
 - Sometimes you'll read something that undercuts Christianity and for a moment think, “Man, that's really compelling. What if they're right?”
 - Forsaking the worship of God and the study of his Word
 - Sin. Probably the number one issue. It clouds our judgment.
- This analysis has shown that (as with the problem of evil), there are two dimensions of this “existential” crisis: ***intellectual and emotional***.
 - Some causes are mental and some are emotional; some experiences are more mental (John's) and or emotional (Psalm 88).
 - We'll develop some responses along both dimensions.

C. Developing a Response

- **Addressing the intellectual dimension**
 - On the intellectual side, we can summarize the issue in this way: on what grounds should I continue to hold that Christianity is the true, accurate view of reality (God, man's problem, Christ, redemption, etc.)? Why should I believe in it as a system?
 - *Q: Any ideas? How can you deal with your own systemic intellectual doubt?*
 - We'll look at four
 - ***Consider the alternative way of living: Pascal's wager***
 - This is not a slam dunk answer; it has probably not fully convinced anyone on its own. However, it provides some insight that can comfort you in those moments of intellectual crisis.
 - Blaise Pascal: French mathematician, physicist, and Christian philosopher (Jansenist – basically a Protestant in Roman Catholic clothing).
 - The Wager (my version)
 - P1: One should always act in accord with the option with highest payoff.
 - P2: Let's say you dedicate your life to the Christian God. If Christianity is ultimately true, then the payoff for you is infinite glory and happiness. If Christianity is false, then all you have lost is some time (in church) and maybe some sensual pleasures.
 - P3: Alternatively, let's say you do not dedicate your life to God and reject Christianity. If Christianity is ultimately false, then your payoff is paltry: basically, “I was right!” But if Christianity is ultimately true, then your loss is infinite misery and torment.
 - P4: Infinite glory and happiness is a far higher payoff than infinite misery and torment (and the mere “being right”).
 - C: It is entirely rational for one to dedicate his life to the Christian God.
 - *Q: Reactions? What are some insights and limitations here?*
 - Somewhat pragmatic, but there is arguably some biblical basis here: 1 Cor 15 (if Christ did not raise from the dead, we are most to be pitied) and all the passages offering future eternal inheritance.
 - Likely no one has ever been converted by this, but it does at least force you to deal with what is at stake.
 - For the Christian, this can help you reaffirm the cogency of your beliefs.
 - ***Consider the magnificence of God's self-revelation***
 - One of the best things you can do to resolve your doubts about whether Christianity is indeed true is to read the Scriptures!
 - *Q: In what ways does Scripture itself evince intellectual credibility?*
 - We know that it is ultimately the Holy Spirit that produces conviction in the heart of man that the Bible is indeed the inspired word of God. But, as WCF Chapter 1 states, we may be “moved and induced ... to an high and reverent esteem” for the Bible through the following “divine indicia” (internal elements that bear witness that the Bible is true):
 - *Heavenliness of the matter*: Does it not FAR surpass anything else out there?

- *Efficacy of the doctrine*: Has it not produced comfort and conviction in you in the past? Does it not seem to abundantly show itself to be logical?
 - *Majesty of the style*: does any other book strike the mind and emotions like the Bible? Does anything else more accurately describe what you experience?
 - *Consent of all the parts*: Is it not amazing that a book written over so many hundreds of years by multiple authors could be so self-referentially consistent, coherent, and robust? E.g., covenant of grace, predictions of Christ, fulfillment of types, common themes, etc.
 - *Scope of the whole*: Could any mere humans craft such an amazing work? Would they have written it this way? Do mythology or fictional works or ancient poetry even remotely compare to the richness of Scripture?
 - In other words, return to the Scriptures afresh when you face doubts about the entire system of Christianity. Test it to see if it holds up!
- **Consider the very idea of doubt itself: the presuppositional angle**
- *Q: What is doubt? Is it a mental or physical entity? Where does it live?*
 - *Q: If doubt is an intellectual function, then what is happening when we doubt?*
 - *Q: What is required for these things to happen?*
 - *Q: Can these requirements (presuppositions) be supported if Christianity is not true? Put differently, how does Christianity provide a basis for doubt itself, and how does non-Christianity (in whatever form) fail?*
 - Evaluate the very presence of doubt itself. To do this, we must step outside our own doubt and look at what is required for me even to be able to doubt in the first place (“transcendental argument”)
 - Doubt is a mental entity, not a physical entity. It is an operation of the mind.
 - Doubt is a reasoned approach to calling into question whether something is true or false based on evidences.
 - Doubt, then, requires several things to function as doubt:
 - *Working minds* – do we have minds? What is the mind?
 - *Standards of truth* – is there such a thing as “true” and “false”? Can we even say that Christianity is “true” or “false” – and on what basis?
 - *Existence of logic* – to evaluate something at all requires rules of logic
 - *Standards of reason* – to doubt something, we must be able to demonstrate where it falls apart, which requires reason
 - Other worldviews do not provide these things:
 - If all is just matter / atoms / chemistry, there are not reliable transcendent realities (mind, truth, logic, reason) to begin with. All is just random neurons. So we can't doubt (or even think) on those presuppositions.
 - If all is god (pantheism) or if there are multiple gods (polytheism) or man is his own god (rationalism), then there are no absolutes for truth, logic, and reason. Who would decide them? They have to be external.
 - Christianity, however, does provide these things: God is personal and has a mind; he created man with a mind and reason; God is the norm of truth; God created an orderly universe in which logic and reason can actually function.
 - Thus, Christianity must be presumed to be true in order to doubt at all!

- This is profound: to doubt Christianity in the first place, you have to assume it is true.
 - Consider Psalm 88: the psalmist needs moral norms to judge how he has been mistreated; he must have a mind so he can identify light and dark; etc.
 - Consider John the Baptist: he needed the faculty of reason and logic to even make the following claim: “We thought X would happen when the messiah came; you have not done X; therefore, are you the Messiah?”
 - ***Consider the resurrection: the hinge of human history***
 - *Q: Evaluate this statement:* “If the resurrection really happened, then it's game over: Christianity is the only option.” Why?
 - Uniqueness in all human history
 - Fulfilled prophecy
 - Vindicated Jesus Christ as the Son of God in power
 - Demonstrated that God's wrath has been exhausted and his justice vindicated
 - Provided the only means of salvation
 - Unique to Christianity as the only viable worldview if it is true
 - *Q: What are some of the reasons we believe the resurrection to be true?*
 - Inspiration of Scripture → scripture proclaims it to be true
 - Empty tomb
 - Post-resurrection appearances (apostles, 500 witnesses)
 - Changes lives and testimony of the apostles
 - External evidence that the earliest Christians worshipped Jesus as God, which would be astounding for Jews
 - Shift from Saturday to Sunday Sabbath worship, also astounding for Jews
 - Growth of the early church amid persecution
 - Only Christianity makes coherent sense of these evidences
- **Addressing the emotional dimension**
 - On the emotional side, we can summarize the issue in this way: how do I deal with the “can't sleep at night” aspect of systemic doubt? How do I handle the emotional / heart-level ups and downs of my unbelief?
 - ***Turn to the church for comfort in your doubt***
 - Seek counsel and encouragement from others: 1 Thess 4:18 and other passages that deal with how Christians are to edify one another with our words, with our worship, and with our presence
 - Ask the Spirit for help in reinvigorating your corporate worship such that you are weekly worshipping God in spirit and truth – the means of grace can soften hardened hearts and minds
 - Look at the changed lives of those around you and remember that Christ has power to transform hearts, and recall how he has changed yours
 - Look to the heroes of the church who have valiantly defended the faith and overcome their own doubts

- ***Turn to God to heal the brokenness of doubt***
 - The Psalmist, while doubting all things and lamenting the darkness, nevertheless turned to God with his petition
 - John the Baptist, from the squalor of prison and existential crisis, nevertheless turned to the one, Jesus, who he was beginning to doubt
 - God wants us to bring our doubts to him: “Lord, I believe, but help me in my unbelief” (Mark 9:24)

D. Conclusion and Comfort

- In a world in which our faith is constantly under attack, it should not surprise us that we undergo periods, however brief, of “existential doubt”
- God can actually strengthen our faith by bringing us back from this intellectual or emotional crisis with renewed confidence in the coherence of Christianity and the truth of God's word