

## Doubt and Assurance Module Overview

*Dates:* 3 weeks, Each Sunday, August 21st-Sept 11

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### Module Description:

This course is primarily a summary of the material found in the small booklet by the Puritan preacher Obadiah Sedgwick on doubt in the Christian life. The goal of these lessons is not to strengthen the Christian faith through the provision of evidence or arguments in an apologetic fashion, rather it is to provide an analysis and explanation of how one should biblically think about the presence of doubt in the Christian life.

### Module Outline:

*Week 1: The Nature and Types of Doubt*

*Week 2: Causes of Doubt*

*Week 3: Assurances for the Doubting*

### Reading Recommendations:

Help My Unbelief: Why Doubt is Not the Enemy of Faith - Barnabas Piper (Beginner)

The Doubting Believer - Obadiah Sedgwick (Beginner)

Poor Doubting Christian - Thomas Hooker (Intermediate)

Doubt, Faith, and Certainty - Anthony C. Thiselton (Intermediate)

Faith and Certitude - Thomas Dubay (Advanced)

## Week 1: The Nature and Types of Doubt

*Intro:*

### 1. *What is Doubting?*

- a. It is helpful to distinguish opinion, doubt, knowledge, and belief.<sup>1</sup> For example, “There is a lion in the backyard.”
  - i. Opinion - Affirm the statement but with a qualification “Its true, but possibly false”
  - ii. Doubt - Withhold judgment due to qualification, “It may be true or false, I don’t know”
  - iii. Knowledge - Affirm the statement without qualification due to certain self accessed reasons such as “I saw the lion!”
  - iv. Belief - Affirm the statement without qualification, but not due to self accessed reason rather due to the testimony of another. This is not a feeling, it is affirming what is true without being able to verify. This is *not* irrational and is part of everyday life! Accepting something as true based on the trustworthy testimony of another is a very reasonable thing to do.
- b. It must be distinguished from infidelity or despair.
  - i. Infidelity is positively rejecting the truth of the gospel. “But the Pharisees and the experts in the law *rejected God’s purpose for themselves*, because they had not been baptized by John” Luke 7:30
  - ii. Despair is less a positive rejection and more an absence of any hope. To fall under the weight of oneself.
- c. Doubting is neither of these. It isn’t a positive rejection nor an utter loss, *it is a wavering back and forth*. “The pausing of the mind” - Obadiah Sedgwick.
- d. Note, the Bible frequently approves of humility in recognizing the limits of one’s knowledge (1 Kings 10:1; 2 Chron 9:1) and encourages thinking upon questions of faith (Matt 17:25; 18:12)<sup>2</sup>

### 2. *Types of Doubt* - Much of belief is asking; for help, understanding..questions can be an indication of trust.<sup>3</sup> One can doubt and believe at the same time but in different ways.

Consider some different types of doubt:

- a. Some are from wonder/admiration. It isn’t skepticism *that* something will occur but is a curiosity over how. Luke 1:34 “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?”

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cekWa\\_YdauA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cekWa_YdauA)

<sup>2</sup> Thiselton, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Barnabas Piper, Help My Unbelief, 21.

- b. Some are seeking confirmation. There is still belief, but it desires more to secure it. Gideon's wool fleece Judges 6:36-40.
    - i. "Doubt is negative when it attacks character (in this case God's character) and leads to broken relationships. But doubt can save us from much trouble and lead to much knowledge. If you see a rickety ladder, you will not climb it. You doubt its ability to hold you and thus avoid unnecessary pain. If a man in a plaid suit, with greased-back hair and a wide grin, offers to sell you "a peach of a car," you will probably doubt him; you will likely suspect the car is more of a lemon. Refusing to take culture's promises at face value and instead questioning them is a good thing. It is doubt, but doubt that seeks truth and stems from the belief that God is the source of all truth"<sup>4</sup>
  - c. Some are sourced in critical skepticism. Luke 1:18 Zachariah was punished for questioning the angel.
    - i. Consider how Calvin explains the difference between Zachariah and Mary/Gideon: "I do acknowledge that, if the words only are considered, either all were equally to blame, or Zacharias did nothing wrong. But as the actions and words of men must be judged from the state of the heart, we ought rather to abide by the judgment of God, to whom the hidden secrets of the heart are naked and opened, (Hebrews 4:13.) "Unquestionably, the Lord beheld in Zacharias something worse than his words may bear, and therefore his anger was kindled against him for throwing back with distrust the promised favor."<sup>5</sup>
3. *The Presence of Doubt in the Believer*
- a. Matthew 14:31 (You of little faith, why did you doubt?) Mark 9:24 (Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!")
 

Faith and doubt are not opposites like life and death, where the presence of one requires the total absence of the other; but they differ like cold and heat which vary in degree.

"I believe; help my unbelief" is a request which stems from belief; albeit small.

*Application: A true believer may be a weak believer. Don't conclude you are not saved due to the presence of questions/wrestlings/doubt in your life.*

"Thus, it will sometimes happen, that one who trusts in God for the pardon of his sins, and for salvation, will waver on some point, -- will be too much alarmed by the dread of death, too solicitous about daily food, or too anxious about his plans. Such was the unbelief of Zacharias; for while he held the root and foundation of faith, he hesitated only on one point, whether God would give to him a son."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Barnabas Piper, *Help My Unbelief*, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Luke 1 Commentary*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*