

## *2CH Sunday at 7.30*

# Doubting faith

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There's an episode of the nineties' television sitcom Seinfeld where George is complaining that nothing good ever happens to him. He says, "God wouldn't let it happen."

His friend Jerry says, "I thought you didn't believe in God."

"I do for the bad things," says George.

If we're honest we can all relate to that. When things are going well, we don't necessarily attribute that to God. We might even take the credit ourselves for the fact they're going well. We might think it's only right they should go well - it's what we deserve.

But when things are going badly we can be quick to think we don't deserve it, and easily tempted to doubt God's love and power - to think that surely he'd put things right if he really cared. So our faith in God becomes a doubting faith, and the hope and joy the Bible speaks of get eaten away. We understand well the man with the son who was very ill who cried out to Jesus, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."

About 75% of Australians say they believe God exists. We might believe he's there, but we can still doubt whether he cares, or more specifically, whether he cares about what's happening to us.

The Bible relates how doubts about God were planted long ago in the minds of our first ancestors. The evil one suggested that God had lied when he'd said they'd die if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "You won't die," said Satan. "It's just that God doesn't want you to know everything he knows." They chose to believe Satan and the rest, as they say, is history. Their disposition to doubt God became part-and-parcel of human nature.

Those of us who believe God's restored our relationship with him through Christ can still be tempted to doubt his power to be at work in our lives. The Holy Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts and minds to remind us, but our human nature is firmly in place as well, and doubt creeps in to destroy our new-found trust.

The truth is that contrary to Satan's insinuation, we can't know all God knows and there are many things we cannot understand. But our inability to understand doesn't make God untrustworthy. If God's not doing what we want, that doesn't prove he doesn't care, just as our inability to see God doesn't prove that he's not there.

We once lived on a ridge overlooking the eastern border of Rwanda. About half a dozen times a year the conditions were just right for seeing where we normally couldn't see - right across Rwanda to a group of volcanoes on its western border. When the air was clear after rain and the sun lit up the western sky, there they stood like sentinels - 150 kilometers away. The fact that for most of the time we couldn't see them didn't mean they weren't there.

The fact that we can't see God's power at work doesn't mean he's not at work. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts and his ways past finding out. We might ask, "Why is this happening? Why doesn't God fix this problem? Why doesn't he meet that need?", but it's simply not in our power to know.

And that is where faith comes in. God calls on us to trust him that he is in charge and that he's working everything together for the good of those who love him.

A difficult time in our lives was when our children were hundreds of miles away from us in boarding school. We hated them being away, and found it very hard to trust that God could use that circumstance for his glory.

Years later after we returned to Australia our son was asked to share with people at church how he had become a Christian. He said that although he'd always known what Christians believe, it wasn't until he went to boarding school that he had learned to rely on God for himself, and his parents' faith became his own faith. Being a teenage boy, he'd never shared that with us. But we were certainly very glad to hear that God had used, for his glory and for our son's good, a chapter in our lives that had been painful.

On the one hand doubting God comes naturally because of the disposition to it which all humankind has inherited. On the other hand doubting God is an unnatural thing to do, because a trusting relationship with God is what we were originally made to enjoy. As Augustine of Hippo said, "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

The prophet Amos rebuked God's ancient people for trusting in their own strength rather than in God's. He asked, "Do horses run on rocks?" Of course they don't. No horse would risk breaking a leg by running on rocks. Instinctively they'd shy away from venturing on to rocks at all. Amos asked again, "Do people plough the sea with oxen?" and of course the answer is no.

Amos' point is that when you think about God - who he is and what's he's done - it's as unnatural and unthinkable not to trust him, as it would be for a horse to run on rocks or a farmer to try to plough the sea with oxen.

Throughout human history the invisible God has made himself known. He demonstrated his power and mercy when he delivered Abraham's descendants from slavery. Through the centuries that followed, he spoke through his servants the prophets. Finally, to draw us back to himself, he appeared in the person of Jesus, full of grace and truth and power. He died in our place, then rose from the dead. Why should we not trust him?

People down the ages have struggled to keep trusting God. Abraham is considered the father of all who believe, but he went through times of doubt - doubting that God could protect him - doubting God's promise that he'd have many descendants.

And with good reason. In his nineties he and his wife had no children and she was well past child-bearing age. Doubting God's ability to keep his promise, he followed his wife's suggestion that he solve the problem by having a child with her servant-girl, with unhappy consequences for all of them.

Much later his descendants were as numerous as the stars in the sky, to use the picturesque phrase of God's promise. But even though they'd seen what God did to deliver them from bondage in Egypt, they immediately fell back into doubting his good intentions. They doubted his power to keep them alive in the desert.

When he provided what they needed to survive, they doubted they'd ever gain a foothold in the land God had promised Abraham.

Much later on when their descendants were well-settled in that land, they continued to see-saw between trust and doubt, as we know from the songs they wrote.

For example, the anguished question in Psalm 10:

*O Lord, why do you stand far off?  
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*

*Then the songwriter answered his own question:*

*But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief,  
That you may take it into your hands.  
O Lord, you will hear the desire of the humble.  
You will strengthen their hearts and incline your ear.*

We're hardly in a position to judge them for being so double-minded. We have all the evidence of what God has done for the world through Christ, but we can still doubt that he cares.