



FAITH *Questions*

SESSION 1: WHY DO WE ASK QUESTIONS OF OUR FAITH?



Session Activities

Aim: To show that asking questions of our faith is as old as our faith, and showing that having questions doesn't mean we don't believe or can't follow.

Key ideas to communicate:

- Doubt and questions are good.
- People ask questions of God in the Bible.

INTRODUCING

Start by welcoming the group and explaining what you are here for; together to explore over the next few weeks, some of the common objections, criticisms, and questions around the Christian faith. As this is the first activity of the first session, it would be good to find out what the groups expectations of this are. Why are they here and what do they want to know? If you know the group well, or you have a small group, it might be worth doing this all together. If the group is larger or doesn't know each other well, then start in pairs of threes, and have them consider one or two of the following questions:

- **What place do questions have in our faith?**
- **What is the opposite of doubt?**
- **How comfortable are you when people ask questions about faith?**
- **Can you define doubt?**
- **How does it make you feel when you learn about something that seems to be opposed to faith?**

Note that the point of this is not to come up with a definitive answer, but to start to explore what the participants think and to get the group comfortable with one another.

EXPLORING

Video exploring the place that questions have in our faith development:

'Often in our minds we divide the world around us into opposites, light from dark, good from bad, faith from doubt. It is part of the way we make sense of what goes on around us, but in doing so we can create false choices for ourselves. We feel we have to make a choice between one of these two things, and if we are not entirely on board with faith, we conclude that we must be doubters and can't be part of what God is doing in the world.'

From the other point of view, if we are fully on board with faith, but have no space to explore questions around faith, we can shut these questions out of our minds, refuse to engage with them, and in doing so we stand still in our faith, afraid to ask questions because we are worried that if we do, we are on the slippery slope to unbelief.

However our Bibles don't put such a stark choice before us. In fact throughout the Bible, in some of the great heroes of the faith, we see questions, questioning, doubts and fears. But we can feel like we don't often see this. We see people who lived their lives faithfully for God, who followed Him as best they could, but this is often because of the way that the bible tells us about character. We are used to modern ways of storytelling, where the feelings, motivations, and thoughts of characters are often spelled out in detail. The bible doesn't tell us about character in this way, and we are often left to imagine the thought processes going on under the surface. When we do, we see moments of vulnerability, fear, doubt, and questioning.

Let's look at the story of Gideon, from the book of Judges in the Old Testament. Gideon lived in a time of chaos and confusion, when the people had started to forget about what God had done for their ancestors, and they did whatever they wanted with no thought for their impact on others. Gideon is preparing food in hiding, keeping what he doing secret so the food won't be taken by the occupying soldiers, when a messenger from God appears to him. The first thing he says to this messenger, in contrast to pretty much every other person who receives a messenger from God, is the question, 'If the Lord is with us, why has all this [evil] happened to us?'

Doubt and questioning are part of what makes us human, part of the uniqueness of what it means to be created in the image of God. By creating space for them, and for others to do the same, we can open ourselves to learning more, growing more, and walking more closely with God.'

EXPANDING

Have the following extract from the video printed out to be read by one of the participants:

'An area that can throw us with this is that we can feel like we don't often see doubt in the Bible. We see people who lived their lives faithfully for God, who followed Him as best they could, but this is often because of the way that the bible tells us about character. We are used to modern ways of storytelling, where the feelings, motivations, and thoughts of characters are often spelled out in detail. The bible doesn't tell us about character in this way, and we are often left to imagine the thought processes going on under the surface.'

- If you are working with a group who are comfortable and knowledgeable about the bible, start by asking them to name people from the Bible who display doubt, or stories from the bible about people questioning their faith. Make a note of these centrally so you can look at them together.
- If you are working with a group who may not be so confident in their knowledge of the bible, or group with mixed knowledge, it may be best to suggest some passages to look at. This will mean that the group can engage together without feeling uncomfortable about either not knowing enough or feeling that they are showing off about what they know. Split the group and either have them each look at one of the below, or choose one that you think they will be able to engage with best.

Some suggested passages are:

- » 1 Kings 19:1-14, Elijah and the still small voice.
 - » Exodus 33:12-23, Moses asking to see the Glory of God.
 - » Luke 7:18-23, John the Baptist asks if Jesus is really the Messiah.
- What is going on in the above?
 - » In all of them we see a key leader, who had done amazing things for God, and who had drawn others to God, suddenly felt that it was all too much. They began to doubt, Moses asked to see God, Elijah felt the weight of the responsibility was too much, and John began questioning the knowledge that he had been so certain of before.
 - Were there any common themes in what was shared in your group?
 - Was the result broadly positive, negative, or neutral for the person who expressed doubt in the reading? When we express doubt in our own faith, do we think the result will be positive, negative, or neutral?
 - » If the answer for the above two questions is different, it might be worth digging into why we think our doubting is different to the doubting we see in the Bible.

Going Deeper: What happens when we close down these conversations?

Using the Option printouts, explore with the group what they think the outcomes of the different scenarios will be and why.

Option 1:

A person hears the message that through faith in God they will live a life free from doubt and uncertainty. They start to follow Jesus but a while down the road they discover some of the conversations around interpreting the Bible, and the question of how reliable the historical narratives in the Bible are. Because they been taught the Bible is inerrant, and have no way to explore doubt as part of their faith, they feel they have to make a choice between faithfully following Jesus or rejecting their faith.

Option 2:

A person grows up in a Christian home, where the presence of God in everyday life is an accepted part of the world. As they grow they attend church pretty regularly, and are part of children's and youth groups. When they start at secondary school they come across some alternative ways of viewing the world, and are part of conversations where agnostic and atheist worldviews are explored. These conversations lead them to ask questions of their faith, and the things they had thought of as certain. Their youth worker has some fairly open conversations with them about the ways that these different worldviews collide, and let's them explore the ideas for themselves.

Prompt questions:

- What might happen if a different approach was taken to exploring questions around faith in the scenarios above?
- Are there some questions that it isn't ok for Christians to explore and think about?
- Would you have any advice for the people in the scenarios above?

Final thought:

Ask the group if they think doubting is something we can avoid? If not, then what is our best response to it?

PRAYER

Have each participant have a tealight, or similar, and something central to light them from. Using a table, mark out one side as being Faith, and the other as being Doubt. Explain that, as we have seen in this session, things are not as stark as seeing ourselves as believers or doubters, but we can spend time between these points. When they feel ready, ask the participants to take their candle, light it, and place it on the table in the middle between the points, as a sign that they want to acknowledge we live in a world where certainty can be hard, and doubt can be difficult, but God will help us walk through it all.

Once all those who want to participate have done so, pray and ask God to go with you all as you go out into the world, that you will see where He is active, and be aware of His presence with you this week.