For a variety of reasons I have been thinking for some time about a series of sermons devoted to the various Christian teachings and the nearly universal experiences of the Christian life that can undermine or shake a Christian’s faith. Many things may challenge a Christian’s faith at one time or another or, for that matter, through the entire course of his or her Christian life. The very things that have caused professing Christians to give up the faith through the years can shake the faith of real believers as well. And so it is that most Christians, at one time or another, have felt a shudder of doubt pass through them, provoked either by a particular teaching of the Word of God, the real force or implications of which they face for the first time, or by a particular experience of life that they find difficult to reconcile with what they thought they knew about God or the teaching of his Word. Different things challenge different Christians at different times. And, to be sure, some Christians are more troubled than others.

Doubt is a very personal thing. Some struggle in one way, some in many, and some hardly at all. Some never have any doubts about the faith, but struggle to know whether they have that true faith themselves. They don’t doubt that God is good, but they doubt very much that he is or will be good to them. Some never ask whether Christianity is true. They ask only whether they are Christians. As John Duncan, the famous “Rabbi” Duncan of 19th century Scottish Presbyterianism, who knew a lot about doubt from his own personal experience, confided this about himself.

“I am naturally of a skeptical turn of mind, and since I have been delivered from doubt about God and the great truths of redemption, my skepticism has taken the form of doubt about my own salvation.” [Just a Talker, 59]

And on another occasion,

“I am sure that Jesus is the Christ, but I am not sure that I am a Christian.” “I have never had any doubts about the truths of Christianity, about the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement: my doubts have been about my interest in him, whether I were truly united to him.” [60]

But others are deeply troubled by one aspect or another of the faith, one or another of the teachings of the Bible. Some never struggle intellectually unless and until some catastrophe ensues that they find difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with what they thought they knew about God. And so on. You have had your own experiences of such a shaken faith, if not in your very own experience, in that of loved ones and Christian friends. Indeed, this is the experience of even people of whom we would never think of having struggles with doubt. A brilliant man like C.S. Lewis, who, in a certain way, argued himself into the kingdom of God by overcoming one intellectual obstacle after another – a man, that is, who knew how powerful the arguments for the Christian faith actually are – nevertheless admitted his own struggle with doubt.
“The trouble with me is lack of faith. I have no rational ground for going back on the arguments that convinced me of God’s existence; but the irrational, deadweight of my old skeptical habits, and the spirit of this age, and the cares of the day, steal away all my lively feeling of the truth, and often when I pray I wonder if I am not posting letters to a non-existent address. Mind you, I don’t think so – the whole of my reasonable mind is convinced: but I often feel so.” [Letters to Arthur Greeves, 398-399]

The English word doubt, like the word for doubt in a number of languages, comes from the word for the number “two.” A person who doubts is a person who is, as we say, “in two minds.” The Chinese speak of a person having a foot in two boats.” If you are convinced believer, you are in a single mind. If you are a convinced unbeliever, you are of a single mind. But if you are a believer, but troubled or unsure about something, you are in two minds. You believe but you don’t believe, or, at least, you are not sure that you believe or ought to believe. That is what I want to talk about in this series of sermons, those things that put us into two minds.

In the Bible, the Christian life is the life of faith. It is a life based upon confidence that certain things are true, things that cannot be seen or touched or heard, things touching the existence and the character of God, the meaning of human life in the present and in the unfolding future. You remember the definitions given for faith in the Bible.

“…faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” [Heb. 11:1]

To have faith is to “believe that [God] exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” [Heb. 11:6]

And in a conversation about faith with a man in Capernaum, whose son lay sick at home,” we read that after speaking with the Lord Jesus “the man took Jesus at his word.” That too is a rough and ready definition of faith. Faith is taking God at his word, believing that what he has said is true.

And throughout the Bible this is the one great thing that is required of every human being: faith in God. The Old Testament, as much as the New Testament, is a summons to faith and to the life of faith. It is still widely thought in many Christian circles that the books of the Old Testament are more preoccupied with obedience than with faith, but it is not so. We find the same preoccupation with faith in the first 39 books of the Bible that we find in the last 27 (as we find the same demand for obedience in the latter books as in the former). As one theologian summarized the situation described in the Old Testament in both the law and the prophets:

“The Israelite finds himself placed, by birth and circumcision, in a circle-well pleasing to God. He has not to win for himself, by a sinlessness which the law nowhere requires of him, a relation to God void of reproach, or to merit salvation by earnest efforts of self-denial and deeds of high endeavor…. All that is required, and all that the ‘righteous’ among this people ever show, is in truth an active faith. To surrender himself wholly and unreservedly to the Redeemer of Israel as his God, to accept the salvation embodied in the covenant as his salvation, to acknowledge and love the ordinances of life revealed in
it as the ordinances of redemption...all this is what makes a true Israelite.” [H. Schultz, *OT Theology*, ii, 34]

And, of course, that is what we are taught in the New Testament as well: to respond to God’s gracious initiative by faith.

In more homely ways, faith is represented in the Bible as the *hand* by which the soul holds on to God, the *eye* by which the soul looks to him, the *mouth* by which the soul confesses him, and the *foot* by which the soul runs to him for help. To believe, or to have faith is variously represented in the Bible as *receiving* the Word of God and Christ as he is offered in that Word, as *coming* to the Lord, trusting in him, holding fast to him, and so on. Faith is, in all these ways, the credit we are placing in the person, work, and word of God and so our readiness to live our lives according to that confidence in God, in what he has done and promised to do.

The point, often made in the Bible, is that faith is the **distinctive principle of the Christian life**. As Augustine put it, a Christian is a person who thinks in believing and believes in thinking. That is, faith is in, under, around, and through everything he thinks and says and does as a Christian. He can’t see God, but he or she knows that he is there. He can’t see the future but knows that it will unfold as God has said it will. She wasn’t at the cross, but she knows her sins were laid on Jesus there. He was not at the tomb Easter morning, but he knows that Jesus rose from the dead to give new and eternal life to those who trust in him. He knows that he who honors the Lord will be honored in return because the God who cannot lie has made that promise to his children. And on and on. It is this conviction that what God has said in his Word is true, absolutely true, that what Christ has done for sinners is effective, and that the promises God has made to mankind and to his people in particular are certain of fulfillment. That is faith. To be unsure of any of that is to be in two minds, to doubt. And it is such doubts that I want to address in this series of sermons.

God gives his gifts to his children in different measure for reasons that no one can explain. Some believers are rarely troubled in mind or heart and live their lives in serene confidence that everything we read in the Bible is true and that even the most terrible events in life must betray the perfect will of God, since the Bible says they do and must. To be sure, in some cases, that serene confidence may result less from strength of faith and more from dullness of mind and heart. But, in any case, what deeply unsettles one Christian may never cause another to lose a single hour of sleep. But, whatever the measure, virtually any Christian will confess that at one time or another, for one reason or another, his faith was unsettled, her faith was shaken by something. And, more often than not, that something had unsettled the faith of many other Christians past and present. It is not, after all, as we will see, all that difficult to predict what things will unsettle our faith. The world is constantly telling us why it will not believe, why it cannot stomach this or that teaching of the Word of God, why it cannot believe God to be perfectly good or just or omnipotent and sovereign over all things.

Even were I to know nothing of your own spiritual experience or that of the multitudes about whose experience I have read, I would know that doubt is an almost universal feature of the Christian life. I would know that because the Bible itself prepares us to anticipate various challenges to our faith and struggles of our faith. In fact, it is not too much to say that the
difficulty and the troubled experiences of faith, the failures of our faith are, according to the Word of God, one of the principal features of true and living faith. The Bible not only addresses the fact that faith is sometimes weak, not only illustrates in many lives the struggle of faith, but it reflects on that struggle repeatedly.

When the father of the dying girl in the Gospel appealed to the Lord Jesus for help by saying, “Lord I believe; help my unbelief,” he uttered words that every serious Christian would have reason to repeat until the end of the world.

When Jesus chided his disciples saying, “O you of little faith,” he was certainly not addressing them as isolated and rare failures of faith. Throughout the Gospels the disciples are not only individuals whose personal history intersected with the ministry of the Lord Jesus, but, as their number “12” indicated, they were exemplars of every Christian in their experiences, in their spiritual strengths and weaknesses, in their triumphs and their failures. And most of the doubts and failure of faith that Christians have had to struggle with through the ages since are illustrated in the lives of the Lord’s disciples as we witness them in the Gospels.

Martin Luther had a term for such foundation shattering experiences and intellectual doubts. He called them Anfectungen. He realized, in a way that medieval theologians had not, that the Christian life, in the nature of the case, would be marked by a peculiar existential struggle between faith and doubt, between hope and despair. That he, among so many other men, came to this insight may well have resulted from Luther’s own experience of what we would call today depression. These Anfectungen – call them attacks or temptations or vexations – are the fears, terrors, or moments of despair that result from our encounter with the Word of God in the midst of life in this fallen, confusing, and terribly disappointing world, or from the dissonance we often experience between the Word of God and our own experience as Christians. [Trueman, Luther on the Christian Life, 122-123] According to Luther, the cultivation of doubt and despair is the principal strategy of the Devil, but the same doubt and despair are one of the principal ways the Lord establishes the faith of his people, a point made frequently in the Bible itself. By testing their faith, he strengthens it. By putting it under pressure, he hardens it. As we might expect of Luther, the theologian of the cross, it is the troubles we face in our lives, the doubts we must overcome that shape us into Christians who live in the confidence of God’s word. I think one of the reasons why I have wanted to preach such a series of sermons is because I have in more recent years come more and more to believe that this is so: that it is in the trial of faith that the certainty and assurance of faith is finally found. Life comes through death, strength from weakness, hope is borne out of despair. Such has been the experience of God’s people from the beginning. For this reason faith and doubt are in perpetual conflict in the Christian heart. Sometimes the truth is luminously clear to us and carries utter conviction. Sometimes not so much. Though A.E. Housman was describing a very different kind of divided self in his poem The Welsh Marches, we might describe the Christian similarly.

They cease not fighting, east and west,
On the marches of my breast.

Here truceless armies yet
Trample, rolled in blood and sweat,
They kill and kill and never die;
And I think that each is I.
[Cited in Trueman, 130]

Is it not so with you? Is it not so to some degree every day? Faith and doubt, or faith and little or no faith struggle for the mastery of your soul every day and every moment of every day. As Duncan put it in his own case – and he was a man others took to be a Christian beyond doubts – “There is a fighting within me between faith and unbelief.” [Just a Talker, 59]

Now think about the supreme challenges that can threaten to destroy our faith, or, if not destroy, at least trouble it, weaken it, or distract it. It is striking how much of this there is in the Bible, a believer wrestling with whether or not he can be sure that what the Lord has said is really true. We might have thought that faith, being as central to the Christian life as it is, would be presented in the Bible as a sure thing, something that once one had it it would govern the heart and life without rival. But the Bible assures us that it is not so and will not be so for any believer.

The Psalms, as you know, are full of this experience of Christian doubt, or at least the Christian’s struggle firmly to believe. The Bible’s own prayer book is a record of the struggles that God’s people have had to be sure that what God has told them is really true, that God will keep the promises he has made, that the future will unfold as he has assured us it will — in our own lives and in that of the world —, that his character is genuinely as spotless as it is everywhere described to be in the Word of God, and that his power is as unlimited as we are told it is.

Think of the man who wrote the immortal 73rd Psalm. With a true insight, Martyn Lloyd Jones entitled his study of that great psalm, Faith on Trial. For that is what that Psalm is all about. The author was a believer – indeed, he was a substantial man of the church – but he was beset by and, eventually, virtually overcome by doubt. In his case, like so many others who would come after him he was troubled by the fact that the world, as he observed it, did not appear to him as it ought to be if the Word of God were true and if God were faithful to that Word. As he looked about him it seemed rather obvious to him that the wicked were better off than the righteous, that trusting in God or that having God for one’s redeemer had proved no advantage to him. In an age like ours, when so much emphasis falls in Christian teaching and preaching falls on the present advantages to be reaped through Christian faith, this observation — that the wicked seem to be better off than the righteous — is frequently the cause of acute doubts, especially among teenaged Christians and young adults. They imagine that being a Christian is going to lift them up and when they discover that it can just as well cast them down, a crisis of confidence ensues.

John Duncan, whom I mentioned earlier, was a man of uncanny theological and spiritual insight. And Duncan loved Psalm 73! Why? Because he was a man who had once struggled with the same doubts that had almost undone Asaph many centuries before. As he once said, in regard to the famous first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “What is man’s chief end?” “I pass over the first part mainly with an intellectual approbation of its moral rectitude as a requirement, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God’; while every fibre [sic] of my soul winds itself round the latter part, ‘to enjoy him forever,’ with unutterable, sickening fainting desire.” [Just a Talker, 83] And is it not so with you and with me? Of course, God deserves that
we glorify him in heart, speech, and behavior. We understand that and agree with that. It is only sensible for the creature to pay his or her debt to the creator. But what we long for, hunger and thirst for is to enjoy God. God is love; alright, then let us feel that love! That is what we want and what we expect: to be overwhelmed and overjoyed with that divine love! We want to be loved in a way that we can feel ourselves loved. Do we not have a right to expect that if God is love and we know God and God loves us we will feel the strength of his love? God is just; alright, then let us see that justice being played out before our eyes in the world day by day! Do we not have a right to see that justice if God is for us because we are his children?

That was the problem the author of Psalm 73 was facing. He was ready to be a servant of God; he wanted to love God; but he didn’t feel as if he was being loved by God in return. He wanted to believe God’s word, but the world he was observing every day didn’t seem to be what it ought to be, God being God, his promises being what they are. And so his doubts. It seemed to him, looking out over the world, that the wicked and the unbelieving were better off than he. They were enjoying their lives more than he was enjoying his. As Augustine and Pascal remind us, happiness is the aim of every human being and every Christian believer. We would never embrace the gospel of Christ if we did not believe that our lives would be the better for it, that we would be happier. The Lord himself often appeals to our desire for happiness when he urges us to trust him and follow him. “Happy is the man….” “Great is his reward…” “All these things shall be added to you…” and on and on.

But this man couldn’t see that it was so in the world he was living in. And so his faith was shaken to its foundations. This was his anfechtung and, he admits, he came very close to giving up his faith entirely.

“But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.” [73:2]

We don’t know how long this man lived in the agony of his doubts, but we do know that the Lord recovered him. You remember how it happened. Being a substantial Christian man, as was his habit he went to church – a good place to be when you are struggling with doubts – and the Lord met him in the service. We are not told how, precisely. Perhaps it was in the singing of a psalm, or hearing the choir sing a psalm, for Asaph was a man of music. Perhaps it was through a stirring sermon preached by the priest that day in the temple service. Perhaps it was when he was confessing his sins or watching the animals being prepared for sacrifice or at the moment the blood was sprinkled on the altar. We cannot say. But the Lord met the man in the secret places of his heart and into that heart came flooding the reality of God and of God’s salvation. He realized in a moment of startling clarity that he had been evaluating things from an entirely temporal and temporary perspective.

“When I tried to understand all this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” [16-17]

The unbelieving rich may have a more comfortable life for a short while, but then they must face the judgment of God. What then? As a pastor friend of mine summed up the lesson of this psalm:

“It isn’t the class you’re traveling by, it is your destination that matters.”
He imagines the psalmist describing his situation in modern terms:

“I was blinded by their headlights as they rushed to outer darkness.” [Ian Tait]

Asaph remembered that the Lord holds his right hand. “There will be no one to hold their hand, and I was envious of them!”

At any rate, he came out of church that day, his doubts erased, and his feet six inches off the ground!

“Yet I am always with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” [23-26]

As Jonathan Edwards put it:

“God sometimes is pleased to remove the veil, to draw the curtain, and to give the saints sweet visions. Sometimes there is, as it were, a window opened in heaven, and Christ shows himself through the lattice; they have sometimes a beam of sweet light breaking forth from above into the soul; and God and the Redeemer sometimes come to them, and make friendly visits to them, and manifest themselves to them.” [Works, ii, 889-890]

Such was the case with the author of Psalm 73. He had severe doubts and they were overcome by a powerful experience of the nearness and the majesty and the love of God. Would that God would overcome all our doubts in that most happy and definitive way. After all, what doubts would remain if we saw the Lord Jesus in his glory walking toward us with a smile on his face? What questions would trouble us if we could peer into heaven and see the Lord Christ sitting at the Right Hand ruling over all things for the church? Alas it is not the case. I doubt it is usually the case. I have had but one experience in my life as powerful and profound as I expect Asaph’s to have been, but only one. And it was not given to me to resolve doubts that were afflicting my mind at the time. Would that I had been given more, many more such experiences, but I was not granted that favor and, so far as I can tell, most Christians are rarely granted moments, as it were, to see behind the veil. And there are folk who have struggled with doubts, the same as Asaph and others, who have never been granted that kind of glorious deliverance from them. This is a great mystery. But, then, it is also true that we have Psalm 73 and Asaph’s experience to help us, when he did not.

My point is not that our doubts will be resolved as suddenly and definitively and happily as were Asaph’s. My point is simply that doubts are part of the believer’s experience in the Bible, as they have been throughout church history. And not simply because Christians have observed unbelievers living what seem to be happier and more fulfilling lives than their own. Doubts come in all shapes and sizes and can appear in our minds unexpectedly.
We will consider in this series, for example, doubts that rise when we consider the biblical teaching of divine judgment and the existence of hell. Surely that teaching has sent a shudder down the spine at one time or another. For some Christians it is uniquely unsettling. In a similar way is Christian exclusivism. Is it really the case that multitudes of men and women, boys and girls, who never heard so much as the name of Jesus Christ and certainly never had the gospel presented and explained to them must be lost forever? If you don’t understand why biblical teaching such as that has shaken the faith of even serious and devout Christians, you haven’t seriously considered what is actually being taught.

But it is not only biblical doctrines that cause doubts. What of scientific discoveries. A substantial number of erstwhile Christians have lost their faith because it seemed to them that science had contradicted the Bible and proved that the Bible contains little more than the primitive cosmology of people who didn’t know nearly as much as we do about the universe we live in. Or what of the unrelenting and appalling measure of suffering in the world. Would a good God, a gracious God, a merciful God allow babies to die in such numbers, young people – both believers and unbelievers alike – to succumb to disease before their lives were well and truly begun – or allow whole populations to be swept away by catastrophe, disease, war, or genocide? Even Alvin Plantinga, perhaps the most influential American Christian philosopher, admits that this is the principal objection of the Christian faith from a philosophical viewpoint. And so on.

Now, you understand, of course, that there are answers to be given to such questions, that our doubts are hardly sufficient to overturn teaching that is not only plainly biblical, but rooted in realities that we encounter every day in the experience of life. Not a one of these considerations, not one that we will consider – and we will consider all the principal justifications of Christian doubt – is not satisfactorily addressed in Holy Scripture. We will also point out that those who doubt must be on their mettle to prove that the views they must embrace if they forsake a biblical worldview are not only even more justly susceptible to criticism but more depressing, hopeless, and despairing than they sometimes might have imagined the biblical teaching to be.

As we are reminded by this great Psalm 73, nothing looks the same when viewed without regard to the future promised in God’s Word. The Bible is candid about this. If there is no resurrection at the end of history, if there is no heaven or hell, if there is no vindication of Christian faith at the end of time then our faith is futile. The Christian faith will never carry conviction over time unless we are confident of this future. Otherwise, the entire structure of our faith is exposed as a lie. But, if that future is certain, guaranteed by the word and the work of Jesus Christ, no doubts that we may entertain from time to time about this or that aspect of our faith can be anything but failures on our part to reckon with the truth, hard as that truth may sometimes be.

This is from Richard Cecil, the Great Awakening preacher. But I can easily imagine Asaph doing the same thing to impress upon his child the lesson the Lord had taught him.

“Children are very early capable of impression. I imprinted on my daughter the idea of faith, at a very early age. She was playing one day with a few beads, which seemed to delight her wonderfully. Her whole soul was absorbed in her beads. I said – ‘My dear, you have some pretty beads there.’ ‘Yes, Papa!’ ‘And you seem to be vastly pleased with
them. ‘Yes, Papa!’ ‘Well, now, throw them [into] the fire.’ The tears streamed into her eyes. She looked earnestly at me, as though she ought to have a reason for such a cruel sacrifice. ‘Well, my dear, do as you please. But you know I never told you to do anything which I did not think would be good for you.’ She looked at me for a few moments longer, and then (summoning up all her fortitude, her breast heaving with the effort) she dashed them into the fire. ‘Well,’ said I, ‘there let them lie: you shall hear more about them another time; but say no more about them now.’ Some days [later] I bought her a box full of larger beads and toys of the same kind. When I returned home, I opened the treasure and set it before her: she burst into tears [of] ecstasy. ‘Those, my child,’ said I, ‘are yours; because you believed me, when I told you it would be better for you to throw those two or three paltry beads [into] the fire. Now that has brought you this treasure. But now, my dear, remember, as long as you live, what faith is. I did all this to teach you the meaning of faith. You threw your beads away when I bid you, because you had faith in me that I never advised you but for your good. Put the same confidence in God. Believe everything that he says in his Word. Whether you understand it or not, have faith in him that he means your good.’” [Cited in The Thought of the Evangelical Leaders, 8]

It is because, as one Puritan put it, “Faith is the master-wheel; it sets all the other graces running,” [Thomas Watson, in Packer, Quest..., 181] that the overcoming of doubt and the strengthening of faith is such important work. That and the fact that faith is so regularly beset by doubt. Christians need to know how to put their doubts to rest! And they can know that!