

Christian Doubts No. 16

Psalm 4

“The Culture of Desire”

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Text Comment

v.2 Now comes the complaint, the account of the problem. Some scholars have taken the problem to be a continuation of that faced in Psalm 3, viz. the rebellion of Absalom and the civil war that resulted, and take the actual statements of the psalm as simply metaphors for trouble. There is something to be said for this view, especially if the two psalms are linked as is now thought. The title does not indicate the historical circumstances of Psalm 4 as it does those of Psalm 3, but that could be because of the linking. However, it is also possible that the prayer of the psalm concerns a different set of circumstances altogether. As we learn later in v. 7 the problem seems not to be the king's enemies, as in the previous psalm, but drought, a lack of rain. The crops are not growing. In some OT texts “good” or “bounty”, such as people are looking for in v. 6, means “rain” (Deut. 28:12; Jer. 5:25). What is more, the king being responsible for the welfare of his people, people are calling into question his rule. The king and so his kingdom seems to be under a curse. In that part of the world the lack of rain is a curse indeed and rain is “bounty” or “good” *par excellence*. But here and now “Earth's realities seem detached from heaven's promises.” [Waltke] “How long will you love delusions...” suggests that these men, the king's advisors no doubt, were turning to other deities as the Lord, Yahweh, had not intervened to send rain. Baal, remember, was the storm God and sending rain was his specialty.

In other words, there were some typical reasons for doubting the faith in Yahweh and some typical reasons to be drawn to other gods.

Tonight we conclude this series of sermons on the doubts that sometimes rise in Christian minds. I'm sure I haven't covered every conceivable challenge to faith, but I hope I have addressed the primary *areas* of doubt, those *kinds* of problems that shake the faith of Christians and, alas, are raised as reasons why some give up the faith altogether. We have dealt with, in turn

1. Biblical teachings that cause us concern or, worse, cause us to doubt the goodness or wisdom of God, which is the same thing as doubting the very existence of the God of the Bible. We used the doctrine of hell as our chief example.
2. Facts of history that can have a similar effect on our confidence in God's justice and goodness. We considered the challenge posed by the fact that so many people have lived and died in the world without ever so much as hearing of the Lord Jesus Christ and without ever being invited to trust in him.
3. Then there are the hard facts of Christian experience that make us wonder if what we read in the Bible is true. We considered the universal Christian experience of the disappointment and confusion that result from unanswered prayer.

4. We next considered the challenge posed to our faith by so-called science, the naturalistic narrative of human origins, for example, that now prevails in American culture.
5. After that we turned to the age-old problem of human suffering and how and why we should believe in God when the world he made and now controls is so heartbreaking, painful, and sorrowful for so many people in so many ways.
6. That led us into a consideration of the mystery of God's way, how little we understand of what God is doing in the world and how much we are compelled to live our lives in the dark. If only God explained himself, but he does not! Some tire of having to believe that there is an explanation, when we have no idea what it is.
7. Then we considered the fact that a great many Christians, at one time or another in their lives, come to feel that the Christian life simply isn't working out for them in the way it is described in the Bible or in the way it seems to do so for other believers. They give it up as something they tried, but without success.
8. And, last time, we addressed the problem of living in a culture that has now come to accept as a matter of course certain views of the world and human life that are contradicted in the Bible. The fact that the faith taught in Holy Scripture seems to be out-of-date, that it hasn't kept up with what we modern folk supposedly now know to be true, is a serious cause of doubt in many Christian minds today.

Tonight, I want to conclude by considering a cause of doubt that is trans-temporal, trans-cultural, and endemic to the sinful human heart, but which each generation of Christians experiences in a way specific to its own circumstances. As we have said, many have begun to have doubts because of what Christians are required *to believe*. But many others have begun to have doubts either because of what Christians are required *to do* or what they are *forbidden to do*.

James Smith, in several recent books, and especially his last, *You are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, has reminded us that what we worship more than anything else determines the shape of our hearts and the character of our lives, and that the worship we offer – whether to God or to anything else – forms the habitual thoughts and practices of our daily lives. It is these facts that make it so important for Christians to realize how profoundly we are shaped by the culture in which we live, sometimes for good, often for evil. Culture, in many ways, is a collection of liturgies, liturgies of worship; they draw us to devotion to certain things. In many ways this is what distinguishes a culture: the objects of its worship and how it leads people to worship them. It is this nature of culture and this danger that every culture poses that make it so imperative for Christians to form good habits of mind and heart, constantly to refresh their Christian convictions and give expression to them, as they do in a well-ordered worship service every Lord's Day. The culture – every human culture – is in its own way luring us away from God, from the truth, from the path of true goodness, and it does so every moment of every day. Every time we turn on the TV, every time we open the newspaper, every time we visit the mall, we are being enticed by other gods and tempted to worship them. To keep the living God always above and before us is demanding work and requires that we form habits that help us do that. That's James Smith's thesis; very true I think.

But, if all of that is true, then it must be uncontroversial that such devotions and loyalties as our culture constantly tempts us to develop must be a major reason for the weakness of any

Christian's faith and a temptation for any Christian to doubt. If we have learned to love, to worship other things than God and those things that those who worship God must also worship – the life of holiness, our neighbor for Christ's sake, our wife or husband, our children as the children of God, and so on – then we will be constantly pulled away from God and from the true purpose of our lives. And it is in that growing distance that doubt takes root.

Consider some biblical examples. We read in 2 Tim. 4:10: "Demas, in love with his present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." Now think of that. Demas had been Paul's assistant for at least several years. He was part of Paul's entourage when Paul was first in prison in Rome, several years before his writing 2 Timothy. We know that because he is mentioned among those known to the Colossian Christians in Paul's letter to them. Demas had heard Paul's sermons, he had seen the effect of Paul's ministry, and it is at least possible that he witnessed some of Paul's miracles. This was a man to whom had been given remarkable privileges. But at last he found the world more enticing than the kingdom of God. He could be someone and he could do things in the world that he could not in the kingdom of God. He could give himself to things he would not be allowed to worship in the Kingdom of God. He found Christian faith confining. Probably he had his doubts about remaining a Christian for some time before Paul knew that he was chafing against the limitations imposed upon him by a confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He wanted to be free. But freedom in his mind was the freedom to worship what his Greco-Roman world worshipped, to practice its liturgies, whether of sex or pleasure or acceptance or whatever. He probably – this has so often been the case – would have liked to remain a Christian *to some degree*, after all, he had firsthand experience of its spiritual reality, but he had to make a choice and he chose the gods of his culture.

Or think of Judas himself. He had not only heard all of Jesus' sermons and had seen his breathtaking miracles, he had performed works of supernatural power himself when sent with the other disciples through Galilee on a preaching tour. This man was a member of the Lord's inner circle, the witness of things we would give our right arm to have witnessed. Why did he desert the Lord at the last? Well, we skip over the reason too easily. The problem for Judas was that he loved money and Jesus wasn't into money and his followers weren't allowed to be lovers of money either. Jesus said things like, "You cannot serve both God and money." We sometimes forget that Judas' problem all along had been the love, the worship of money. He stole from the funds by which Jesus and his disciples financed their itinerant life and work. And, finally, he gave up Jesus to his enemies for thirty pieces of silver. There were other motivations for his betrayal, no doubt, but the Bible identifies this one: he loved money. And it is only an inevitable and necessary inference that he preferred money to Jesus. He was a worshipper of money and loyalty to Jesus would have interfered with that worship. I've been reading Adrian Goldsworthy's magnificent biography of Caesar Augustus. One thing made very clear in that history is that the Greco-Roman world had a money economy and that money was a god in that world. Forget all the statues; what really mattered was money! Money made all things possible in that world and people worshipped it. You could be a nobody, but if you could lay your hands on money, you could be somebody.

You remember the Lord's encounter with the rich young ruler who was attracted to Jesus and his teaching at some level, to his example, to the power of his personality, even perhaps to his

teaching, but, at last, would not exchange his money for the opportunity given him to follow Jesus to heaven.

Or think of the Lord's parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man isn't even given a name in the parable, though Lazarus is. His money defined him. He would have been quite happy for people to refer to him simply as "the rich man." Money was his god. He worshipped it.

Now, as you well know, similar stories could be told of people whose worship of power, or fame, or pleasure, or acceptance likewise prevented them from worshipping God or Christ. All such people, in effect, are saying that if they cannot have what they want, if they cannot live to satisfy these desires, they don't want to follow Christ. Usually they're quite uninterested in the larger questions. And so, when he says, that in order to be his disciples men and women must deny themselves, they must take up their cross, they must sacrifice the things the world counts so important, they choose the world because they love and they worship those things.

The constrained will, the demand for submission to the purposes of God in one's life, the choice between God and our own cultural loves and desires is one of the great engines of doubt in a Christian's life and a reason why so many people who might have become Christians or who might have remained Christians abandon the faith and either stay with or return to the world. Let's be frank about this. The reason Israel struggled so hard and so long with the gods of Canaan was precisely because *worshipping them was so much more fun!* Going to church in Canaan was not just like going to an orgy, it *was* going to an orgy. And to worship and serve those gods was not only a physical pleasure it was so much less demanding. No real sacrifices required. These gods didn't meddle in one's private life or require self-denial as Yahweh did.

And so it is today and in ways just as obvious. The gods of our modern culture, a culture of unrestrained desire, do not make the sort of demands that Yahweh does. If you want sexual excitement, by all means go for it. If you want to leave your marriage, why should anyone be required to remain in a relationship he or she no longer finds fulfilling. If you wish to accumulate things, why, the gods of American culture are all for that and will help you; will even lend you money so that you don't have to wait for that better house or better car or larger TV or whatever else it is that you would like to have.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, on the other hand, requires sexual purity, requires loyalty to one's commitments in marriage and in everything else, requires the denial of desires for anything one cannot afford or cannot buy without first meeting commitments to higher obligations, to the kingdom of God and to the needs of others. He requires us to live according to his purposes, not ours; his rules, not ours. Think of such statements as these:

1. "Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellow man...who keeps his oath even when it hurts." [Ps. 15:1-4]
2. "Put to death what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."

3. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these other things – food, clothing, shelter – will be added to you,” of course, as God decides, as God wills, and as God gives.

If enough people actually did that, the entire American economy would be turned upside down and so would American culture. That is not the theology and these are not the liturgies or the habits of modern American life. So much of what makes our economy tick is covetousness, which is, very obviously, idolatry, the worship of things! Divorce lawyers would be out of work by the tens of thousands because husbands and wives would be unalterably committed to their marriage vows. Ministers and counselors would have more work to do because people who remained committed to unhappy marriages would be anxious to fix their marital problems. Porn would disappear. Much of Madison Avenue would be turned over to other tenants because the advertising companies would be out of business. The liturgy of American life would be radically transformed because the gods will have been changed.

Today virtually everyone is commenting on what is now called the culture of *entitlement*. Young people especially, but, in fact, most Americans, think they are entitled to many things: a life without risk, an easy path, a comfortable existence, but also entitled to affirmation, to freedom from criticism, even entitled to define the meaning of one’s own life. Surely it must be obvious that the Christian faith lays the axe to the root of all of this thinking about life. Let me give you two illustrations of what I am talking about.

One of the problems encountered by the Church Planting Network to which this congregation belongs – a group of churches in our Presbytery that have banded together to fund and oversee church planting in our area – is that young men, even young Christian ministers, are more risk averse than the previous generation was. Church planting in the Pacific Northwest is a risky business. It is hardscrabble work to get a church up and going in our region and even hard and faithful effort is not always rewarded with success. They fear starting their career with a failure. At the same time our Presbyterian Church in America congregations are hiring more ministers per church than they used to. Churches of only 150 members may well have two ministers, which was virtually unheard of when I entered the ministry. But that has meant that there are safer positions for men to take than a church planting assignment in the Pacific Northwest. Finding men both able *and willing* to answer our call for church planters is likely to be a problem for years to come. One of our culture’s idols is security, another is ease, both to a degree quite unprecedented in American life. It’s having its effect even in the church.

A more dramatic example is provided by interviews being conducted on American college campuses. Young people today have been so indoctrinated in our culture’s worship of the self and so in the principle of self-affirmation, even self-identification, that they seem increasingly incapable of acknowledging the obvious for fear of failing to honor another’s right to be whatever he or she chooses to be. In a cheeky YouTube video Pastor Nicoletti recommended to me, students on the campus of the University of Washington were asked whether they would agree that the young, obviously male person conducting the interviews was a woman. Of course they knew the answer to that question. It wasn’t up to them but to him to decide; that if he felt that he was a woman he had a right to be a woman; that everyone should be free to decide such things for oneself. But, what if he believed himself to be a Chinese woman? They were a bit

taken aback by the question, but they found their way to the correct answer: if that is what he felt himself to be, then they would support his identification of himself as a Chinese woman. What, he then asked, if he felt that he was six foot five, not the five foot nine that the measuring tape says that he is. Again, they hesitated, but got to the right answer eventually: if he wasn't hurting anyone or hindering society, and if that is what he felt he was, then who were they are contradict him. The point of the piece, of course, was to ask what was to become of us as a country if college students could no longer recognize the difference between a five-nine white guy and a six five Chinese woman. The piece was, of course, designed by its makers, the Family Policy Institute of Washington, to point out the absurdity of the modern dogma of self-made identity. But the salient fact was that it wasn't particularly difficult to get college students to say, and sincerely, ludicrous things in answer to simple questions. Why? Because they worship as modern western culture has taught them to worship. Their gods are the gods of this culture and with that worship come its distinctive liturgies: such as the liturgy of non-judgment, of universal therapeutic affirmation, and of the sovereignty of the self.

Surely it shouldn't be difficult for anyone to understand how dramatically and radically all of this must change if, in fact, God is the Lord and the Bible is the revelation of his will. The culture of entitlement and of self-identification and self-affirmation cannot be found within its pages. What the Bible teaches us is that *the only thing we are entitled to is damnation!* And no one is entitled to create his or her own identity. God will identify us and that identity is the only one we have or can ever have. In God's world, in the moral universe he created, as his creatures made in his image, there are fixed realities that will not bend for us, will not be changed to suit our tastes, and certainly cannot be changed because many people vote for them to be changed. We live in a culture that denies all of this root and branch and so defiantly that now, on American college campuses, the most ridiculous things are being said routinely about how we are free to choose our identity, whether in terms of sex or race or nationality or even height. Whatever you feel you are you should be free to be. Such is the world in which man becomes his own god.

But the world is, of course, and everybody knows this, nothing like that. I would have liked to become a professor of astrophysics at MIT, but since I suck at math that possibility was not open to me. That is the hard edge of reality. I know I could make big bucks as a post-player in the NBA (of course, I wouldn't play on Sunday!), but unfortunately I'm under six feet and can't jump. For all of my self-affirmation, no team is going to ink me to a huge salary to play basketball. And, heretical as this must sound to many in our culture today, God made me a man and I can't become a woman, no matter how hard I try. I can, to be sure, become a more woman-like man, or some woman can become a more man-like woman, but no one can change his or her sex. You can pretend, but you cannot *be* a member of the opposite sex. "Can we return to our mother's womb and be born a second time?" The answer to Nicodemus' famous question remains as it has always been: "No! You can't. No one can."

Well, in the same way, this is the Christian message about human life. It is what God made it to be. Every human life will be judged according to the standards *he* has established. Our personal desires or feelings, in the final analysis don't mean a damn thing. We don't get to create our own reality because God has already determined what reality is and what it will remain. We may wish to leave our marriage, and, of course, in American today, you can do that if you wish. But you

cannot make marriage a disposable contract, because God has made its bonds sacred and permanent. If you violate his law, you will have to answer for that and he will be uninterested in hearing that you didn't want to remain your husband's wife or your wife's husband. We used to inculcate this principle in our children by saying to them, "I want doesn't get." You may want any number of things that you can't have. Saying that you want something puts no one under any obligation to give it to you. "I want doesn't get."

You can, in our modern age, get a sex-reassignment operation which will change you a little bit. You can in that way mutilate your body. But it will not turn you into a man if you are a woman or a woman if you are a man. But the fact that you think you are now a woman when you were born a man, or vice versa, hardly obliges the Almighty to think the same thing. Painful as your situation may be – and – hear me! – no one is doubting how painful bad marriages can be or sexual confusion can be; indeed we understand such pain very much better in the church of God than it is understood anywhere else – you cannot escape the confines of God's law or his judgment. Your only recourse is the grace and mercy of this same God. And, to be sure, that is a far happier and more permanent solution to your problem, to your confusion, to your sense of alienation, than some desperate measure that usually does more harm than good in the short term and exposes you to God's judgment in the long.

Judas almost immediately realized his mistake, but by then it was too late. He died, as so many who have sex-change operations do, a suicide. The rich young man may have, so far as we know, lived for years in peace and comfort, perhaps only from time to time, haunted by the conversation he once had with the rabbi from Galilee. But, then, like the rich man in the Lord's parables, he soon died and found himself confronted by a reality that he could neither escape nor any longer deny.

I think we all understand how profoundly and how powerfully our loves, the objects of our worship shape and control our lives. We see it in our own hearts to be true and we observe it in the lives of others. We see people chasing after things everywhere we look and, as Christians, know very well that they are looking for happiness, for fulfillment, for security, for satisfaction, for pleasure in all the wrong places. They can find a certain temporary fulfillment, usually a pale shadow of the real thing, but what becomes of them when they must answer to the living God for what they did or didn't do.

This, after all, is the issue, is it not? All along the way in thinking about our doubts, this is the issue. Everything changes if in fact God is as he is revealed to be in Holy Scripture, reality is what it is revealed to be, divine judgment is what it is revealed to be, and divine grace and God's gift of salvation are what they are revealed to be: viz. both the forgiveness of sins and the transformation of life after the image of Christ and in conformity to God's universal law.

The ironic thing – and the thing you need to be pointing out to your friends who speak according to the liturgies of modern culture – is that all of us face this hard edge of reality every day in real life. It is passing strange that we ignore the culture's theology so much of the time and admit we cannot actually define reality for ourselves. We don't want many things that come to us or happen to us nevertheless. None of us wants to die but all of us are going to. None of us wants to be less intelligent, less beautiful, less athletic, less popular, less successful than others, but

virtually all of us find that we are. In a thousand ways we bump up against an unchanging and unchangeable reality every day. Why should we then suppose that we can carve out dimensions of life in which we can define reality for ourselves?

But, more to the point, the Bible forces us to reckon with that hard-edged reality in ways human beings in sin are strongly inclined to find highly distasteful and unwelcome. This is true most particularly of the judgment of God, the accountability of every human being for obedience to the law of God, either written upon the heart or published in his Word. But if that promised judgment is, in fact, awaiting us all, who can deny that our culture of desire, of entitlement, and of self is a deadly temptation to ignore the most important fact of all: that our lives will be judged according to God's standards, not our own.

It is this fact that makes Jesus Christ and his cross so supremely important to every human being. But it is also the fact that should make us extraordinarily wary of the appeal of the gods of our culture and the liturgies of life that incline people to worship those gods. To doubt the Christian faith because it constrains our freedom to be and do whatever we please is exceedingly foolish. It is the kind of argument that, on its face, is utterly unlikely to be sound. When has it ever been true that human beings do best when they do whatever they feel like doing? We see people all the time foolishly ignoring reality and paying a steep price for that foolishness. It is what idolaters do and it is their fate to become like their gods: who cannot see, cannot hear, cannot speak, and cannot act. We know this to be true because it is what we Christians do when we are overcome by idolatry, as we far too often are.

If the reason you are doubting the faith is because you can no longer believe that

“it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,”

take a hard look at what you are preparing to do and why; put the question to yourself: who is fooling whom here?

I finish this series on that somber note to remind us all that there are reasons aplenty to hold fast to our faith as Christians, as believers in the truth of the Word of God. There are a lot of clever, smart people out there arguing against our faith all the time, but they haven't said a thing that ought to be persuasive to you. Almost every argument in favor of abandoning this faith requires us either to deny the obvious or crucify our intellect, to grasp illusions while denying the convictions every human being knows to be true and has proved to be true every single day, convictions that he or she operates by in life even if he denies them when standing on his feet talking to an interviewer on the campus mall. Convictions such as that human life has eternal meaning, that right and wrong are real things, that we are inescapably moral creatures which is to say that we are subject to judgment, that we are sinful and foolish much of the time, and that our only hope of either life after death or a life that is truly good is the grace and mercy of God, a grace and a mercy we know are real because every human being has the testimony of them in his or her heart and because the Christian message explains them in the only truly convincing way.

We are far from believing that good, even great Christians don't struggle with doubt. They most certainly do. Robert Bruce, one of the commanding figures of the Scottish Reformation, had a

long struggle *as a Christian* with unbelief. He was speaking from his own experience when he said, as he often did, “It is a great thing to believe in God.” In one of his famous sermons on the Lord’s Supper, preached in 1589, he says,

“...however sure and certain it is that the faith of the best children of God is subject to doubt, it is just as sure and certain that doubt is never wholly extinct.” [189]

Out of his own experience he even says,

“As there is a great difference between a drunk man and a dead man, so there is a great difference between the faith that lies hid for a while, but does not express itself, and the light that is utterly put out.” [192]

That was a man who struggled with doubt speaking! No one had a more intimate relationship with Jesus Christ than Samuel Rutherford, but “in speaking of the atheistic doubts with which good men are sometimes assailed, [he added in a kind of] sympathetic parenthesis, “*Expertus loquor.*” [“I speak as an expert.”] [James Walker, *Theology and Theologians of Scotland*, 44]

Doubt is not all bad, of course. As Augustine once put it, “I doubt, therefore truth exists.” [*De Vera Religione*; cited in Os Guinness, *In Two Minds*, 48] Think about it. Doubt makes no sense if truth does not exist. Doubt implies that there is something to know! Doubt often helps clarify and confirm the truth. It is certainly so with me. When doubts rise in my mind of one kind or another, it sets me to thinking and the thinking usually pretty quickly sets me straight.

Absolutely we must be gentle and understanding and sympathetic with those who doubt. But we need also to be firm and confident. We doubt because we are weak, not strong; we doubt because we are proud, not humble; we doubt because we are foolish, not intelligent; we doubt because we are willful, not submissive; and we doubt not because we think so carefully, but because far too much of the time we hardly *think* at all.

So let me finish with the text we read at the outset. As an antidote to doubt, we are given seven instructions in Psalm 4:3-5. They are these:

1. Know: devote yourself to careful and thoughtful engagement with the Bible and reality. You cannot consider reality often enough with the Bible in your hand.
2. Tremble: a different translation of the first word of v. 4 and the way it is cited from the LXX in Ephesian 4:25. That is, consider and then fear the tragedy of unbelief throughout human history; what it has cost and how it has benighted human life.
3. Do not sin: No one is ever the worse off for keeping the commandments of God. No one comes closer to the meaning of life or the secret of living it happily and well by ignoring God’s commandments.
4. Ponder in your hearts: don’t be superficial, consider the real issues of life with sin, judgment, and death on the table.
5. Be silent: don’t allow the constant noise all around you to distract you from seeing God as he is, the world as it is, and your own heart as it is.

6. Offer right sacrifices: worship God faithfully on the Lord's Day especially; put your heart into it. Many things become clear in the sanctuary that have become muddy in your mind throughout the week.

7. Trust the Lord: put his word to the test; multitudes have before you and have found it and him trustworthy even in the mystery and darkness of life.

Someone who seeks to lay doubt to rest will be well served by this divine counsel: know, tremble, do not sin, ponder, be silent, offer right sacrifices, and trust the Lord.