OMETIMES I’M JEALOUS of other Christians.

Maybe you know the ones I’m thinking about: those who seem to have their “Christian act” together a lot better than I do. Their faith and confidence in God remain stable and strong. When they pray, they receive discernible, positive answers to their requests. They can clearly identify where and how God is at work in their lives. Maybe that’s why they always seem optimistic and cheerful.

My experience is very different from that. My faith goes up and down like a roller coaster. On a good day I feel pretty confident that God indeed is my compassionate and caring Father, that Jesus Christ has erased the record of my sin, and that the Holy Spirit is empowering me to live a new life.

But then there are the days when I am simply not sure. I feel like I’m praying to an empty space in the sky. I see no evidence of God actively at work in my life. I wonder whether Christianity is maybe just a myth after all. I try to keep believing, but it’s not easy. I cling to faith, but sometimes I don’t know how much longer I can hold on. I survive somehow, somewhere on the edge of faith.

As a young person my doubt centered on the question of assurance: How could I be sure that I was really a Christian? How could I know that God had really forgiven me?

As an adult my doubt has centered more on the question of truth: Does the gracious and loving God Christians profess actually exist? And, if God does exist, why does the course of my life seem so difficult and confusing? I have experienced repeated job failures, depression, and chronic pain. God’s presence amid these difficulties has been hard to discern. I’m always clinging to the edge of faith—sometimes, it seems, hanging on only by my fingertips.

Myth of Certainty

Several years ago I read The Myth of Certainty by Daniel Taylor (InterVarsity Press, 1986). Taylor addresses his book to “the reflective Christian.” He describes the reflective person as someone who is always asking questions, someone for whom reality is always ambiguous and confusing.

Reflective people struggle to achieve certainty in their lives. The absolute confidence of both the “cynical unbeliever” and the “fundamentalist Christian” eludes them. Taylor contends that the experience of reflective people is, in a sense, true to the nature of reality. Absolute certainty about truth does not exist: “My own experience is that for human beings certainty does not exist, has never existed, will—in our finite state—never exist, and, moreover, should not. It is not a gift God has chosen to give His creatures, doubtlessly wisely,” Taylor writes.

Reading Taylor’s book was a minor revelation for me. It affirmed that I am not the only Christian who struggles with uncertainty and doubt. And it suggested that my God-given personality might have something to do with it. This makes a lot of sense to me. After all, everyone recognizes that different personalities cause people to respond to the same situation in remarkably different ways. The optimist takes a cold, rainy day in stride, while the pessimist concludes that it confirms his suspicion that life is a miserable, frustrating affair.

So one Christian with a more confident attitude may find what she regards as positive certainty in her Christian faith, while another may agree with Taylor that no such certainty is possible.

But personality cannot explain all our differences. Do confident Christians, for
example, receive more answers to prayer than so-called reflective Christians, or is that simply how it appears to them? Someone might claim that the confident Christian has more faith than the reflective one, but I think that leads us to an unfair conclusion: that it may require more faith for me to keep believing in God in my difficult and confusing circumstances than it does for a confident Christian to receive what she perceives as concrete answers to her prayers.

Look at Job and his friends. Job struggled to maintain his faith, while his confident friends claimed to have all the answers. But who was closer to the truth?

**Necessity of Doubt**

More recently I read *Faith & Doubt* by John Ortberg (Zondervan, 2008). Ortberg admits that he continually struggles with doubt in his own life and claims that this is normal for all Christians. In fact, he explains that doubt is a necessary condition for faith to exist: If we possessed absolute certainty, faith would no longer be necessary. Doubt drives us to seek to know God better and is thus a necessary motivation for our faith.

The important thing is that we do not allow our doubt to keep us from making a commitment. Ortberg asserts that “trying to put off deciding what to do about God is like jumping off a diving board and trying to put off actually entering the water.” Living without faith and without making any commitments is impossible.

Ortberg’s book is encouraging in its affirmation that many Christians struggle with doubt and that such struggle is perfectly normal. Our Christian hope is that someday our faith will become sight, but until that happens we must learn to live with ambiguity and uncertainty.

There is certainly scriptural warrant for acknowledging and affirming believers in times of doubt. We need only turn to the psalms of lament to see Old Testament believers struggling with serious doubts about God. In Psalm 10:1 the author cries, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” And in Psalm 88:14 we read these troubled words: “Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?” Doubt and anxiety were obviously part of the Old Testament believers’ experience.

In the New Testament the followers of Jesus were thrown into absolute confusion and despair after his condemnation and crucifixion. It seemed to them that all their excited hopes that Jesus was the Messiah sent from God had been pulverized by the religious Sanhedrin and the Roman government. But when the risen Christ appeared to them, their doubt and despair instantaneously transformed into joy and new hope.

Our face-to-face encounter with the risen and glorified Savior will someday banish all our confusion and doubt too. But, until then, we live in faith and hope.

I still exist somewhere on the edge of faith—never quite certain yet never giving up either. Like Job, who clung to his faith in God even when it seemed that God had become his enemy and his persecutor, I hang on to the promises of God through my experiences of confusion and despair. I can’t wait until my own face-to-face meeting with Jesus transforms my doubt and fear into certainty and joy.

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