

# OpenTheo

## S1E3 - Dealing with Doubt

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### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Mike is a second-guesser. Doubt is a part of his story. How does he overcome it? Listen to our third episode. Be sure to subscribe to catch every episode of the podcast.

## Transcript

[MUSIC PLAYING] Hello, and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Mike Lacona. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University, and he is a frequent speaker on university campuses, churches, retreats, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs. Mike is the president of Risen Jesus, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host. On today's episode, we're talking about dealing with doubt. Mike, in the first episode, you talked about how you're sort of the eternal or second-guesser.

You're not an eternal skeptic, but a second-guesser of sorts. And there have been a number of seasons in your life where you've dealt with doubt. So tell us a little bit more about those seasons.

Yeah, I guess the first season of doubt that I had was my last semester in grad school. So we're talking about the fall of 1985. And at that point, I just started to ask myself, how do I really know that this stuff is true? I believe that I've had an intimate relationship with the Lord over the last several years.

I mean, gosh, I was praying, on an average, about two hours a day. I was reading scriptures at least an hour a day. In fact, when I was in grad school, probably two or more hours a day, because I was studying it in its original language, Greek.

So I believed I was grown, but then I just started to say, you know what? If this really isn't God's word, then I don't care what it says, whether it's in English or in Greek. And then I got thinking about people of other faiths, other religions. They have just as strong belief as I do.

Maybe if I'd been born in Afghanistan, I'd be a Muslim or an India. I'd be a Hindu or a Japan, an atheist. Maybe the reason I believe isn't because I have a relationship with the Lord.

It's because I just was brought up this way. And I've convinced myself. And I'm just wasting my time in prayer and Bible study.

So that's what started to give me doubts. And then later on, I discovered I am a second guesser. You know, I second guess a lot of things.

So it's not just my faith that I second guessed. It's everything. It's just that's just the way I'm wired.

It's the way I'm built. So when you were going through that season of doubt, what were some questions that you would ask yourself? And how would you come out of that season, if you will? What sort of constructive thoughts would you have? What foundation did you discover? Well, in terms of the questions that I was asking is if Christianity is true, then why do so many people who are smarter than me? Why don't they believe it? Or the matter of those who never heard, what happens to them? Or people who have-- they've sought truth. Maybe they're pious Muslims or pious Jews or pious Hindus or Buddhists.

Is God going to send them to hell just because they didn't believe the Christian worldview? Maybe they didn't have adequate exposure to it. Maybe it's the way that they were raised that made it very difficult to overcome the biases that they had. Must I actually believe the same truth in order to have eternal life? Is that really God's requirement? And I know that these are just-- they're not directly related to doubt in terms of the truth of Christianity, but they are emotional issues that caused doubt.

It's like, well, if God is so good in loving, why would He allow all the evil in the world today, even evil that just seems to have no benefit to it whatsoever? If He knew that all this was going to happen ahead of time, why did He allow it to happen anyway? Couldn't He have just changed things, knowing what the future would be so that we didn't have this mess in the world that we have today? These are all questions that just raised doubts in my mind. But it was mainly-- if it had been born somewhere else, maybe I'd believe something differently. Now, still, that doesn't mean that what I believe is wrong.

Even if I believed what I believe for all the wrong reasons, it wouldn't mean that what I believe was wrong. I could believe because I was totally biased, and this was the only thing I was exposed to. But it wouldn't mean that what I believed is wrong.

So that's what got me really thinking about this stuff. And it's like, well, you can't prove this any worldview of 100% certainty. So-- and that is something I wanted.

I had that what's called Cartesian anxiety, I had that anxiety because I couldn't get to

100% certainty. So that's what kind of led me into it, the questions that I would ask. Why do you think many people seek that Cartesian certainty, that 100% confidence? Well, it's-- I mean, we're talking about something that's very important here, right? If our eternal destiny, if indeed it is contingent on what we do with Jesus, or believing the right thing as even Islam, Muslims would say, if it is contingent on that, well, we would want to get it right, correct? I mean, a lot is on the line here.

It's not like if I just bought a watch and it turned out not being the best use of my money, all right, I've just wasted some money, or if I make a bad investment or something like that. You know, that's one thing. But I might have to live with my decision pertaining to my worldview forever.

And so the consequences here are potentially-- how could the importance of the consequences be greater than when it comes to which worldview we choose? It seems that for many, they want that 100% certainty. But when we talk about confidence, we're talking about confidence and reliability. So we could have a strong confidence in that percentage of certainty, if that makes sense.

Maybe that's where people get that impression. Yeah, I mean, I don't know. You can have-- look, I've looked at the resurrection of Jesus, spent a lot of time with that.

I'm convinced that the evidence is certainly sufficient. It's more than sufficient to show that the resurrection of Jesus probably occurred. And if Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity's true period.

So we still have those. It's like, I wasn't there. You know, I wasn't there.

I didn't see it. And then you could even get to a point where you say, OK, even if I'd seen the resurrection, how do I know that Jesus wasn't an alien doing a PhD project from a parallel universe? And he had to convince people that he was divine in order to get his PhD. How do I know that it wasn't just a big cosmic joke played on people? So there's just no way that we can verify the truth of Christianity or any other worldview period.

Verify it with 100%. But we don't look for 100% certainty on anything. I mean, we might want it.

But there's only rare instances of any that we would require 100% certainty before moving. I mean, they were only 50% certain when they sent Apollo 11, the first spacecraft to land on the moon. The astronauts got into the command module and blasted off the Earth in that rocket with only a 50% chance of returning alive.

And we leave our houses. When we leave our houses, whether it's to go to the grocery store or to go to school or work, whatever, we leave our houses. We're pretty confident we're going to make it to our destination safely.

But we don't have 100% certainty. I mean, because we could get in a car accident and be killed. A bomb.

There could be a terrorist bomb that goes off and explodes somewhere near us and kills us. Anything could happen. So it's not that it's probably going to happen, but it could be.

And that means we are not justified in having 100%. So put it in a different way. If we required all the lights, the traffic lights, to be green before we headed into town, we would spend the rest of our lives at home.

We make decisions based on probabilities. What we think is probable, not what is absolutely certain. And even for people who think something is probable, they still have to act upon their belief.

I know some people might say, oh, yeah, I think there's a god out there. But are they really acting as if there's a god out there? Even though they say they think it's probable or very likely that god exists? It seems-- Yeah. I think that's what faith kind of amounts to on times.

I mean, it's not a blind faith. It's a reasonable faith when we come to things like Jesus. I mean, you had Peter.

Now, Peter, according to the gospel of Matthew, he had seen Jesus do all sorts of miracles. And when it came down to it, he sees Jesus walking on water. And Jesus says, hey, come on.

And he starts walking on water. And he's saying, this is pretty cool. But then he has some second thoughts.

And he says, yeah, but if I were to sink, I'm going to drown here. And he doubts he has these two things going on. In fact, the Greek word that Matthew uses there is *distadzo*, which means to think differently when Jesus says, why did you doubt? It's to think two different things.

He believes. He sees Jesus. He has the confidence he can walk on water.

And yet then he says, but how can this be? And it begins to doubt. They have those two thoughts. What doubting is-- or what faith is is-- he's still out there on the water.

And so what faith is for us, we can look and we say, there's good evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. We see some other evidence that Christianity is true for God's existence, things like this. And then we start to live the Christian life.

And then temptations get in the way, hard times get in the way. And it's like, OK, I do believe this stuff. Well, am I going to act out on it? Am I going to live with this as though it's true? I can believe it's true.

But when the rubber meets the road, and I start to have some doubts, some questions, because to live as a Christian then is to bring on persecution or to have some consequences that are unpleasant. Am I going to still live as though Christianity's true? I believe it in my head. But am I going to still live as a Christian? If it came to, I'm going to lose my job if I maintain Christian convictions.

Say, if you think same-sex marriage is wrong. What if 10 years from now you're at a place of business and they say, we don't care if you're out-- we don't want you telling the public that you think same-sex marriage is sinful. It's the law of the land.

But we don't even want you to have that opinion that it's sinful. So they pull you in the office and they say, well, is this your opinion? We know you're not telling others this, but is it your opinion, your moral conviction that same-sex marriage is sin? You know if you say yes, you lose your job. If you lose your job, you might lose your house.

You might lose all your savings. You might-- how are you going to get a job somewhere else, especially if other-- so if other businesses are having the same kind of thing going on. So faith is-- it's going to make you question your faith at that point.

Am I willing to pay the price for it? And they're really going to be looking and saying, well, I don't want to play games with this anymore. It's Christianity really true. And if you believe it's true, faith is walking according to those convictions.

That's how I see it. So you can doubt, but when you make the choice to continue to live your life as though it is true, that's faith. It's an act.

Mm. For some people, they might be going through a season of doubt or maybe there's just a question that they have doubts about. At what point in that intellectual analytical process should someone say, OK, that's enough doubting.

I have good reason to believe x, y, or z. How does someone get out of that way of thinking, that mode of processing information? Well, I think there's a couple of steps. And one thing Gary Habermas taught me about-- and he's written, I think, a couple of books on doubt. One that I really liked is called *The Thomas Factor*.

And I think it's out of print. You can go to [Gary Habermas.com](http://GaryHabermas.com), and you can download it for free. But one thing Gary talks about is there are two types of doubt.

There's emotional doubt, and there's intellectual doubt. Intellectual doubt is when you have doubts about the truth of Christianity because you don't think there's any evidence for it, or you just haven't seen any evidence for it. And these are people typically who just have not become exposed to Christian apologetics.

If anyone has a really good exposure, decent exposure to Christian apologetics, those kind of things can be addressed pretty well. The other kind of doubt, which Habermas

says is by far the most common type of doubt, is emotional doubt. And that can be as a result of a number of things, such as they had a poor father figure, or someone, a parent, a spouse, a child, was sick, a deathly ill, and they prayed for a miracle, and God did not heal a person.

They died. And so disappointment with God. Or maybe the person thought that they were going to be far, much further ahead in life than they actually are, but life has turned out to be disappointing to them.

They can doubt God at that point. So disappointment with God, poor fatherly figure, peer pressure. There was a girl that I met a student at Washburn University when I debated Richard Carrier there back in, I think it was 2010, somewhere around that time.

And she came up to me after the debate, and she said when she started going there, she was a Christian, but the first year, she gave up her faith because of all the animosity toward Christians that was coming from the professors and the students. So she'd given up her faith because of the peer pressure. And then she said she came to the debate because she just interested in the topic on the resurrection to see what a Christian versus an atheist would say.

And she came up and she said, I'm really glad I came because I was very much encouraged by the evidence and I'm coming back to Christianity. So the peer pressure can be really, really strong. Another girl came up to me her freshman year.

It was a freshman year at Appalachian State University, and she said that she was taking a course on the New Testament and they were using Bart Erman's New Testament intro and it was really rocking her faith. And so I had just debated Bart for the first time. So I guess this would have been 2008.

And I had just gotten in DVDs of that debate and I said, you have them doubts? Here, watch these, take two of these and call me in the morning. So she told me later on, I never saw her again, but I saw her campus ministry leader, about the student ministry leader a few years later and I asked him about her and says, oh yeah, she was so encouraged by those DVDs. She's thriving in her faith and she's actually one of my leaders now.

So the peer pressure of just the professors and the students and the anti-Christian environment can really drive someone to doubt. But these are emotional reasons for doubt, not intellectual reasons, and you have to deal with emotional doubt in a manner that's different from intellectual doubt. - With regard to that category that you've described, emotional doubt, and some of my experience, that can come from maybe inaccurate or false perceptions or expectations.

So one popular example I see is the belief of the inerrancy of scripture. And when all of a

sudden someone discovers differences in the gospels, alarm bells go off that they were misled by the church in thinking that the scripture is an errant because oh no, there are these differences and it seems like there's a contradiction in this scripture. So that I think comes from an inaccurate misunderstanding of an errancy and an inaccurate view of the gospels, but those false expectations have led to that emotional doubt all of a sudden that's taken hold in someone.

- Yep, and I'd say it's not only things like, seeing gospel discrepancies in view of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. It's also things like if you brought up in a fundamentalist church and where you were taught that a six day creation, you take the six days as 24 hour days and so the creation of the universe in the earth occurred only six to 15,000 years ago. And then any of this stuff from science that would suggest that the earth and the universe are billions of years old would cause doubt.

Any Christians who are saying, well, there are different ways to interpret Genesis that the six days of Genesis aren't 24 hour days, but they're metaphors for geological epochs of time and that it had been interpreted by that all the way back to the times of Augustine in the fourth century or theistic evolution. You hear about J.I. Packer who says that Genesis 1 says nothing one way or the other about evolution, whether God could have done it through evolutionary processes. This is J.I. Packer, one of the three framers of the Chicago statement of biblical inerrancy.

So, but maybe some folks are brought up in a fundamentalist church and say, no, young earth creation is the only way, it has to be this way. And if the earth is older than 15,000 years, then the Bible is wrong, we can't trust any of it. It's that kind of very rigid thinking that can cause a lot of doubts, just with the inerrancy thing, like you mentioned, if there's one error in the Bible, then we can't trust any of it.

Well, what kind of thinking is that? Well, it's fallacious thinking, right? Yeah. So, yeah, you're right, that kind of rigid thinking is it can certainly instill doubts in the person in a believer and they just need to expand their thinking. I know in some circles where you get that rigid thinking, there can be a disincentive to doubt or ask questions because some people think that doubting is sinful.

Why do you believe that doubting is not a sinful mentality or approach? Well, I think of some of the doubters in the Bible. For example, you have Abraham. Now, if we are to believe Genesis, then we have Abraham being approached by God who tells him that promises that he is going to give him a son and this son is going to produce a nation, eventually the Jews, Israel.

Okay, so Abraham is very, very old. He's like 100 years old at this point, right? And Sarah's 90. So, it's like, well, this is going to be physically impossible.

But he promises Abraham and then years go by and still nothing happens. She doesn't

get pregnant. And then he goes into Egypt because there is a famine that's going on and he tells Sarah to lie because they're going to see she's beautiful and they will take her to be, they'll kill him and take her into the king's harem.

So they say, well, let's lie and say, you're my sister and that way they'll spare me. And sure enough, they spare him and they take her into the harem and God comes through and rescues Sarah and she's returned to Abraham. So you have this doubt, all these doubts, in spite of the fact that God had promised this to Abraham right before his face.

But Abraham grows in his faith and later on in Hebrews, chapter 11, which is often referred to as the faith, the Hall of Fame, if there's an MVP, it's Abraham. And then you come to John the Baptist in the New Testament. I like that one even better.

You have John the Baptist thrown into prison. He's the one that has seen Jesus, know about his miracles, seen the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus and the voice from heaven saying, this is my son, my beloved son in whom I'm well pleased. So he's thrown in prison, he's feeling abandoned by God and he sends two of his disciples to Jesus and he says, are you the one or are we to expect someone else? Now let's profound because we have Jesus's wingman here expressing doubt publicly.

And what does Jesus say in return? Well, he points out the miracles that he has performed and that they are in accord with what was predicted of the Messiah coming from the book of Isaiah as well as the dead, he scrolls 4, Q5, 21. And so Jesus has done these things. He's given sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf.

He has healed paralytics, he's cleansed the lepers, he's raised the dead and now the gospels be impeached to the poor. And he says, blessed are those who do not stumble on account of me. And then when his disciples go back to tell this to John the Baptist, now we find out what Jesus is thinking.

And he turns to the crowd and he says, when you came out to see John, what did you come out to see? Did you come out to see a man dressed in fine clothes? No, you got to go to King's Palace for that. Did you come out to see a wind blown back and forth by the wind? He knew he was doubting. He said, no, let me tell you who you came out to see.

A prophet, a great prophet and no greater prophet, no greater person has been born than John the Baptist. So in the midst of John's doubt, Jesus provided evidence through his miracles and he encouraged him and he complimented him. And if that's what he can do with John the Baptist, who knew they knew each other personally, then I've got to think that Jesus' response to us is the same.

He does not condemn us for doubting. He understands our human weaknesses. He provides evidence and he encourages us.

- Mike, final question today. How do you personally handle doubt when you experience



it? - Yeah, and it still comes up. Even though I've done all this evidence for the resurrection, I second guess myself at times and it's like, can this stuff really be true? I recognize though that it is an emotional doubt and the way I can put it is this.

If I've done this way in lectures, if you take something on stage a plank and let's say it is six feet wide and you extend it from one end of the stage to the other and you say, "Mike, for lighting purposes, "I'd never want you to step off this plank. "You've got to stay on it the whole time." I could do it. I could do cartwheels and stay on that plank.

I could walk backward, run backward, it wouldn't matter. I had no problem staying on it. It's six feet wide.

I'll take that same plank that's six feet wide and extend it between two skyscrapers and say, "Mike, I want you to walk from one skyscraper to the other. "Now I'm going to worry. "I'm going to get down not on my hands and knees "but on my belly if I'm forced to.

"And I'm going to, I mean, it's going to be difficult." Well, why? I know I can do it, but it's going to be difficult because I'm thinking of, but what if? What if I were to stumble and fall? What if I were to, a gust of wind would come and blow me off of here? What if I fall? Well, the consequences are so terrible that I don't even want to think about it. That's the kind of things that caused me doubt. So I recognize, first of all, doubting as normal and that I am experiencing emotional doubt.

And it's normal because greats like Abraham and John DeBaptist experienced it, Thomas experienced it, the Apostle Thomas. And so it's normal. I also then go and I recognize that there is good evidence supporting the truth of Christianity, arguments for God's existence, evidence for a spiritual dimension of reality, the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

I also then recognize that absolute certainty is an unreasonable expectation. And that's where faith comes in. And then I also recognize that faith is more than a feeling or being without doubt, its commitment.

And when I keep those things in mind, it definitely helps my doubts. It puts them in perspective when I understand where they're coming from and then that's how I deal with them. Will I doubt ever again? Yes, I will probably doubt all the way up to I take my last breath.

But that's because it's the way I'm wired. But going through these steps that I just articulated certainly has helped me. - I'm not sure what would gain more of my interest in seeing a man on a six foot wide plank above the skyscrapers or a cartwheeling Michael O'Kona on stage.

(laughing) - Well, but if it were you that had to walk across that plank, you would prefer to do cartwheels on the stage, wouldn't you? - Oh yeah, that's for sure, that's for sure.

Mike, what a blessing to hear your thoughts and your experience in dealing with doubt. I hope that they can be a blessing for others to hear as well.

- Yeah, well, thanks for having me on to talk about this. - Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike O'Kona, you can visit his website, [risenjesus.com](http://risenjesus.com), where you can find authentic answers to questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the Gospels. There you can also check out free resources like eBooks, videos such as debates or lectures or simply read some articles.

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