



faithful questions

EXPLORING THE
WAY WITH JESUS

Scott Gunn &
Melody Wilson Shobe

Faithful Questions

Exploring the Way with Jesus

© 2015 by Forward Movement

ISBN 978-0-88028-420-2

Forward Movement
412 Sycamore Street
Cincinnati, Ohio USA 45202

Faithful Questions: Exploring the Way with Jesus is a companion to the *Transforming Questions* course, which has been supported by a generous grant from The Episcopal Church's Constable Fund.

Unless indicated, scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Faithful Questions

Exploring the Way with Jesus

Scott Gunn and Melody Wilson Shobe

Forward Movement

Cincinnati, Ohio

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. Can I question my faith?	5
2. Who is Jesus?	21
3. Why did Jesus have to die?	33
4. What do I have to do?	47
5. How should I read the Bible?	65
6. Does God answer prayer?	87
7. Why do bad things happen?	105
8. Where do I go when I die?	127
9. Why bother with church?	145
10. Where do I go from here?	161

Resources	177
About the authors	181
About Forward Movement	182

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, I met with parents and godparents on a Saturday as we prepared for their child's baptism the next morning. We went through the service, and I talked with them about baptism and what it means. It was a wonderful couple of hours as we discussed the joys and challenges of raising a child in the Christian faith.

That night, about 10:30, my phone rang. One of the godparents was on the other end. "We took the service leaflet home, and I was reading through it. I'm not sure I can go through with this tomorrow morning." I asked her to say more. "These promises seem impossible, and I'm not really sure I can say I believe every single word that I'm supposed to say."

What a gift to have this conversation as a priest! I explained to this worried godparent that no godparent or parent had called me with a similar question in all the baptisms I had ever celebrated as a priest, and I was especially glad she had called. I reassured her, saying that our task as Christians isn't to be theological experts but rather to commit to our life in Christ. Our job is to explore, to ask questions, to grow in faith. I told her that I thought she would be an exceptionally good godparent, because

she was doing the thing that I hope every Christian would do: go on a great journey of exploration and growth, even when we are unsure where that journey will take us.

As we ended our call, I explained that the questions and promises we make are not ours alone. We make extravagant promises, but we do so with a terrific answer. “I will, with God’s help.” God promises to be with us, and in that, we can find great strength.

Whether we are new Christians or longtime Christians, wrestling with our faith is part of the journey. Anyone who engages both brain and heart will sometimes be torn. Why doesn’t God answer all prayers? How can we profess faith in things that seem scientifically impossible? Do real Christians doubt?

It is our strong belief that doubt is the companion of faith. As you will read in the coming pages, the big names in the Bible almost all had questions for God at one time or another. Nearly every saint in Christian history struggled at times. Contrary to what might seem obvious, a lack of struggle is not a sign of a healthy faith journey. If we don’t have big questions, it’s usually because we are not taking our faith seriously. Or perhaps we are not taking our brain seriously.

To proclaim the idea that Jesus was raised from the dead, for example, is an astounding claim. Jesus’ own disciples—the people who had seen miracle after

miracle—had trouble accepting the glad news of Easter morning. We should be gentle with ourselves if we, too, grapple with our faith—and our questions.

This book is an effort to assure you that questions are part of the journey and to equip you with tools and courage to explore the Christian faith. We will discuss how to ask questions faithfully, in ways that provide opportunities for growth and transformation. We will see that asking deep questions can lead to deep faith. And we will look at some tools for our journey of exploration.

How to use this book

There are several ways to use this book. You might like to read it through and reflect on some of the suggestion questions at the end of each chapter. Or perhaps you will gather with a few others and read it together, using the questions as the basis for discussion and exploration.

Faithful Questions is a companion to a course offered by Forward Movement called *Transforming Questions*. That course is offered over ten sessions, with an instructor offering talks based on an outline. This book is very much like the outline an instructor for *Transforming Questions* might use. So you could read this book while you take the class, or if you are the instructor, it might help you prepare to lead the sessions.

We suggest you read the book with a Bible nearby, if you can. Chapter 5 will help you choose a Bible if you

don't have one you love. Throughout the book, there are scripture references to look up if you'd like to go deeper. You can always type the scripture references into Google and read them on the Internet, if you don't have a printed Bible handy.

In the back of the book, there are some suggested resources to use in further exploration. You might also visit the website www.transformingquestions.org for additional resources.

A note from the authors

You will read lots of first-person stories in *Faithful Questions*. Sometimes the "I" is Melody, and sometimes it is Scott. Don't worry too much about who is speaking. Just savor the story!

Many of the ideas in this book come from our time of working, worshiping, and teaching together as priests on the staff of an Episcopal congregation in Rhode Island. There, we saw lives transformed through the pages of scripture and the journey of thoughtful exploration. We hope this will happen for you as well. May God bless you with curiosity, wonder, joy, courage, strength, and faith.

Scott Gunn
Cincinnati, Ohio

Melody Wilson Shobe
Dallas, Texas

The Feast of Julian of Norwich, 2015

1

CAN I QUESTION MY FAITH?

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 832)

Many Christians and seekers operate under the mistaken assumption that doubt is the opposite of faith. Sometimes we hear people say that to have faith means accepting things without questioning them. Others say that you can't be a "good Christian" if you have a lot of doubt. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, questions are an essential part of faith.

Almost every single person in scripture who encounters God does so with a lot of questions—and more than a little doubt. Let's look at an example from the story of Abraham and Sarah, a faithful couple who were the forebearers of our faith. As this story begins, Abraham and Sarah have already had extraordinary encounters with God. Still, when God tells Abraham that he and Sarah will have a son, Sarah laughs at the very idea. She laughs—because it seems utterly impossible to become pregnant at her advanced age—and then she goes on to deny her doubt and her laughter. God knows about her doubt and still God blesses Sarah and Abraham with a child. The point is that even these people—who had known God through conversation, encounter, and miracle—had doubts.

Abraham and Sarah

Genesis 18:1-15

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran

from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a

child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Sarah and Abraham are not the only faithful people who doubt God; there are lots of other examples. Moses has many questions for God (Exodus 3:4-15; 4:1-17) as he is called to be a leader of God's people. In fact, the whole story of Moses is one long series of episodes of doubt and faith among God, Moses, and God's people. Despite their doubts, God remains faithful to the people.

QUESTIONS IN THE PSALMS

- Psalm 22:1
- Psalm 13:1-2
- Psalm 44:23-26
- Psalm 121:1
- Psalm 139:7

The psalms are full of doubts and questions. Perhaps the most famous question in the psalter is one that Jesus quoted as he was hanging on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" (Psalm 22:1). This psalm begins as a lament, asking why God seems so far from human suffering but then eventually moves to a place of confident faith. Again and again in the psalms, we hear voices of faithful people crying out to God with their questions, confronting God with their doubts.

In the New Testament, there are even more questions; many of them come from the people closest to Jesus: his disciples and followers. But the most famous story of doubt in the New Testament must surely be that of Thomas encountering Jesus in the Upper Room, the episode that earned him the nickname “Doubting Thomas.”

QUESTIONING DISCIPLES

Mary
(Luke 1:26-38)

Nicodemus
(John 3:1-12 and
John 19:38-42)

Paul
(Acts 22:6-16)

Thomas Doubts

John 20:24-29

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to

Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Thomas was away when Jesus had appeared to the disciples the first time, and so he quite naturally had questions about whether the Jesus the others claimed to have seen was

real. If someone told you a dead person had appeared, would you believe it?! So Thomas expresses his doubt, and when Jesus appears later, he invites Thomas to touch his wounds and verify that he has, indeed, been raised from the dead. Thomas immediately believes, crying out, "My Lord and my God!"—an inspiring example of faith overcoming doubt. This is, for us, a fitting example. We have doubts; they are only natural. We should ask our questions, probing deeper into our faith. But we should also be ready to believe, to be transformed. Poor Thomas gets a bad rap when he is called "Doubting Thomas." For his courage in asking the questions, I wish Thomas were instead called "Good Question Thomas." Perhaps

Thomas immediately believes, an inspiring example of faith overcoming doubt.

then we would all be more ready faithfully to ask our questions, and through asking them, be transformed.

Jesus was constantly challenging people to change, to be transformed.

I could offer many examples of faithful people in the scriptures who had moments of doubt. In fact, it would be hard to find people who didn't experience doubts and questions in their encounters with God. Do you see a pattern though? Faithful people have extraordinary encounters. They raise their questions, and then they proceed in faith and in confidence.

Asking and wrestling with questions is how we stay in relationship. We bring our thoughts, our concerns, our questions, and our struggles to God, believing that what God has to say about them is important. It is precisely in asking questions that it becomes possible for us to grow and to develop in our faith.

Jesus never encountered people and told them to “stay just as you are.” He was constantly challenging people to change, to be transformed. We Christians are disciples—that word comes from Greek and means “students”—of Jesus. We disciples, like all students, are meant to ask questions, knowing that through questions, we learn. The process of asking these questions and exploring

the answers is how we learn about ourselves, about one another, and most especially about God.

This shouldn't come as a surprise to Episcopalians. Our *Book of Common Prayer* has a Catechism—a teaching tool for our faith—in a question and answer format. You can see the Catechism on page 845 of the prayer book, and it's an excellent example of how we ask questions and then hear answers that lead to further questions—questions that can lead us on a path to a deeper faith.

Yet sometimes we move to the opposite extreme. Rather than being afraid to ask questions, we ask them in a way that undermines our faith. We ask questions in ways that are not faithful but combative. We ask questions not to encounter God or other Christians but to trip up God or others. Sometimes people say that anything goes, that Christians don't believe any specific things. They say that we ask an endless series of questions, but we're not interested in answers or in exploration. That's not what faithful questioning looks like.

Perhaps the best example of faithful questioning in the Bible is the story of Jacob in Genesis 32.

Jacob Wrestles at Peniel Genesis 32:22-31

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them

and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Jacob had left the house of his father-in-law, and he was headed back to face his brother, whom he had tricked and deceived the last time they met. That night, he stayed alone by the river Jabbok "and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Jewish tradition has long held that Jacob was wrestling an angel rather than a mere mortal. Jacob himself seemed to think he had wrestled with God; he said after the encounter that he had seen God face to face.

All night long, Jacob wrestled with this representative of God. And as he wrestled, he asked questions. Jacob asked God for his name. Jacob asked for a blessing. All night long, Jacob wrestled God, holding God close, in spite of exhaustion and frustration. He didn't let go.

Faithful questioning is wrestling.

That kind of wrestling is exactly what faithful questioning of God looks like. It isn't lobbing questions like missiles from a distance, seeing if they hit the mark and never looking for a response. It isn't letting go, walking away, and saying none of it matters. It's not a hands-off, no-contact, long-distance activity.

Faithful questioning is wrestling. It's sweat and breath and blood—up close and personal. It's clinging tightly, as though your life depends on it, as though it really matters. It's not letting go, in spite of exhaustion and frustration and pain.

Jacob wrestles all night long, and in the end, he doesn't even get his answers. Instead he gets a new name, a new identity: Israel, which means “one who strives with God.” Jacob's willingness to cling to God in the midst of unanswered questions, to hold on and not to let go, becomes his central, defining identity. And from Jacob—from Israel—comes the people Israel, the people understood as belonging to God in a special way. The

pattern for faithfulness, for being people of God, starts with a wrestling match! God's people are called to be God's wrestlers. We are called to be willing to ask questions, to encounter God, and never to let go, no matter what.

So as Christians, the dilemma is not whether or not we should or can ask questions. We should, we can, we must! Our dilemma is exploring how we ask questions about our faith. How do we ask questions of God? And what sources help us to wrestle with these questions and create the possibility of finding answers, of further exploration?

There are three important principles for asking questions faithfully as Christians.

We ask questions **in community**.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *David and Goliath*, tells about a series of studies on ideal class size in schools. In those studies, they learned that while a class that was too large was detrimental, so also was a class that was too small. This is partly because, in a class, students learn not only from the teacher but also from each other.

This is fundamentally true in the life of faith as well. From the beginning, Jewish rabbis gathered in groups for teaching and debate. There were twelve disciples. The earliest Christians gathered to worship, to pray, and to learn as a community. As people of faith, we learn by asking questions together. It reminds us that we are not

alone, that all faithful Christians in all times and in all places have questions and doubts. It helps us to seek and to find support in the process of discovering God and growing in our faith. We learn from one another. At times we inspire one another, at times we share insights with one another, and at times we share our doubts with one another.

We ask questions **of God**, believing that God is big enough for our questions.

If we aren't asking our questions of God, then we are turning only to other sources (culture, our own brains, and so on). While those sources aren't necessarily bad, they are limited, and they're not the corresponding sources for our questions. You wouldn't consult a math textbook for an answer to a history question or observe the stars to learn how to knit. Our questions about faith and about God are rightly addressed to God.

We ask questions, consulting **a variety of sources**.

In our tradition as Anglican Christians, we don't believe that there's one-stop shopping for the answers to our questions (if answers are to be found). It's not enough to quote one isolated verse of the Bible. It's not enough to say, "the church has always done it that way." It's not enough to say, "I feel like this is the right thing."

As Episcopalians, as Anglicans, we believe that we are called to consult at least three sources, together, as we explore questions: scripture, tradition, and reason. This is the famous three-legged stool of Anglicanism, and you know what happens if one leg is weak: the stool collapses. Both our questions and our answers are likely to be nuanced and complex; so too the sources we explore may be rich. It is how our sources are in conversation with one another that help us discover what God is saying, how God is calling us. We do this so that our answers—and our very questions—are balanced and rich.

Throughout this book, we will ask a lot of questions. This process is not the opposite of faith, but rather it is part and parcel of what it means to be faithful. As you continue reading this book, bring along your questions and doubts, knowing you are not alone in them. Be prepared to wrestle with the questions in ways that will be both enlivening and difficult. Be ready to discover surprising things. Sometimes an answer will be more difficult and demanding than you had hoped. Sometimes an answer might be simpler and more surprising than you thought possible. Sometimes answers lead to more questions, raising a rock and finding beneath it a teeming mass of wormy questions demanding deeper engagement. Most importantly, know that you always have company in your questions. You have God's abiding presence, and you have the company of other Christians who stand ready to explore with you. God is ready to hear your questions,

even the ones offered only in the silence of our hearts. Christians are ready to walk with you, to challenge you in your questions and in your thoughts.

So perhaps we ought not to be asking if we can ask questions of our faith but rather how we can question faithfully.

In the Gospel of Mark, we hear this story of a father who brings his son to Jesus to seek healing.

The Healing of a Boy with a Spirit Mark 9:22-25

Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!"

In the depths of despair, a father cries out to Jesus, "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help

us.” That “if” is the difficult part. It is the tinge of doubt in the midst of faith; though the father has brought his son to Jesus in desperation, he isn’t really certain that it will be effective. If we are honest, it is the same “if” that we often feel when we approach God: believing, but doubting; knowing, yet questioning; convicted, but not convinced. As we explore our faith and wrestle with our questions, perhaps we can do no better than the prayer of this father, our fellow doubter: “Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24, King James Version).

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray you, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

(*The Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 832-3)

Reflection questions

The Bible is full of stories of faithful people who question God. Read the story of Nicodemus (John 3:1-12; 19:38-42). Explore the following questions:

- ❖ What kinds of questions is Nicodemus asking?
- ❖ Does he receive answers to his questions?
- ❖ How does asking questions impact his faith and actions?
- ❖ What in Nicodemus's story do you identify with?
- ❖ How does his story challenge you?
- ❖ What questions do you have?
- ❖ Have you ever been reluctant to ask your questions of faith? Why or why not?

Asking questions is an essential part of our faith. Nearly every person in the Bible who encountered God did so with serious questions. *Faithful Questions* is an invitation to engage our curiosity and our wonder as we seek to follow Jesus. Does God answer our prayers? Why did Jesus die? Written by Episcopal priests Scott Gunn and Melody Wilson Shobe, *Faithful Questions* explores these and many other questions of our faith.

Faithful Questions is a companion to the *Transforming Questions* course, also published by Forward Movement.

2397

ISBN 978-0-88028-420-2



9 780880 284202