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What If I Doubt That I Am

REAL CHRISTIAN?

Thomas Boston

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Introduction:

Wrestling with the Heart's Deepest Questions

In the pilgrimage of faith, believers often grapple with doubt and uncertainty, questioning the very core of their identity as followers of Christ. Building upon the timeless work of Thomas Boston (1676-1732), this book, "What if I Doubt that I am a Real Christian?", aims to address these profound concerns and provide guidance and solace to the troubled soul.

Boston's wisdom and pastoral care, which have stood the test of time, serve as a foundation for our exploration of the most pressing questions faced by believers. It is essential for the believer to engage in theological contemplation, allowing Scripture and the wisdom of the saints who have gone before us to shape our understanding and strengthen our convictions. This book seeks to be a companion in that pursuit, offering authoritative and didactic insights to help readers navigate the complexities of the Christian journey.

As we delve into the heart of the matter, we will explore eight common cases of doubt that believers face. With reverence and introspection, the ensuing pages will dissect each case, examining the underlying issues and potential resolutions in a deeply pastoral and thought-provoking manner. By engaging with these questions honestly and humbly, and in conversation with Boston's own theological reflections, we hope to provide the reader with a renewed sense of hope, assurance, and confidence in their walk with Christ.

Our approach is rooted in the conviction that Scripture is the ultimate source of truth and the guide for our lives. Through careful exegesis and thoughtful analysis, we will endeavor to illuminate the

biblical principles that speak to each of these cases of doubt, offering an educated layman's understanding of the issues at hand.

As you journey through these pages, may you find comfort in the knowledge that countless believers, including Thomas Boston himself, have wrestled with similar questions and doubts throughout history. Our hope is that, by engaging with the wisdom of gleaned from the Bible, you will emerge from these reflections with a deeper understanding of your faith and a renewed assurance of your identity in Christ.

In times of doubt and uncertainty, let us remember the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:38-39: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." May this unwavering truth serve as a foundation for our faith, and may the pages that follow, inspired by the enduring insights of Thomas Boston, bring peace, clarity, and strength to your heart and mind.

I Don't Know the Precise Time of My Conversion

CASE 1: "I'm unsure if I'm truly reborn, because I cannot pinpoint the exact moment of my transformation, nor can I identify the specific steps that led to it."

Answer: While it's certainly valuable to be able to recount the beginning and gradual progress of the Lord's work on our souls, as some believers can clearly do, knowing the intricacies of the Spirit's work is not essential to validate the presence of grace. It's a blessing if you can say, in this situation, like the blind man in the Gospel,

"One thing I know for sure: I was blind, but now I see." Just as the presence of a flame indicates fire, even if we don't know how or when it started, the authenticity of grace can be discerned within us, even if we are unaware of how or when it entered our hearts. If you can recognize the positive transformation in your soul, if you find that your mind is now illuminated, and your will is aligned with God's in all aspects, particularly in embracing salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus, then there's no need to trouble yourself or reject comfort simply because you don't know the exact process that led to this change.

Struggling With Sin

CASE 2: "If I were truly transformed, sin wouldn't have such power over me."

Answer: While we shouldn't provide comfort for hypocrites who indulge in their sins and use God's grace to justify their desires, it must be acknowledged that even righteous people may falter multiple times a day, and sin can still have an influence on the lives of God's children. However, if you are struggling under the burden of your inherent sinfulness, despising yourself for the sins in your heart and actions, working to subdue your desires, seeking forgiveness through Christ's sacrifice daily, and relying on His spirit for purification, you can take solace in the fact that even when sin seems overwhelming, God will help you overcome it (Psalm 65:3). The new self doesn't have full control; it coexists with remnants of the old sinful nature. There's an ongoing struggle for dominance between the spiritual and sinful aspects of our being (Galatians 5:17). Sometimes, the sinful side prevails, temporarily enslaving God's children (Romans 7:23). Therefore, don't let the influence of sin convince you that you're not one of God's children; instead, let it humble you, make you more vigilant, and increase your longing for

Jesus Christ, His sacrifice, and His Spirit. This very attitude will demonstrate the presence of grace within you, which seeks to destroy the sin that so often plagues you.

Sinful Urges More Intense

CASE 3: "I've noticed that my sinful urges have become more intense since God started working on my soul. Can this be reconciled with a change in my nature?"

Answer: It's alarming when people, after a significant spiritual experience or reform, revert to immoral or profane behaviour, as if Satan has re-entered their hearts with even stronger evil forces. To those individuals, I caution that their situation is incredibly perilous, and they risk committing the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit; they must repent before it's too late. However, if you're not experiencing such a regression but still find that your sinful desires are more forceful than before, this could still be compatible with a change in your nature. When grace first restrains sinful tendencies, it's not surprising if they fight back more vigorously (Romans 7:23). Sinful urges may actually be most intense when a new, righteous principle is introduced to eradicate them. The light of grace can reveal previously hidden sinful thoughts and actions, even if they don't actually become more intense. Sin is not entirely dead in a transformed soul; it is merely weakened, slowly dying a drawn-out death. Therefore, it's no surprise that there is significant conflict during this process. Additionally, temptations may become more numerous and potent as Satan tries to reclaim those who have escaped his grasp (Hebrews 10:32). But don't lose your faith (Hebrews 10:35); remember that God's grace is sufficient, and He will eventually triumph over Satan. The Israelites faced their most daunting challenge from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, after they had already left Egypt, but it was also when their enemies were closest to

defeat (Exodus 14). So, in this situation, don't let doubt undermine your trust; instead, rely on the Lord's strength and power, and you will emerge victorious.

Comparing Spiritual Growth

CASE 4: "But when I compare my love for God with my love for some worldly pleasures, I find that my affections are stronger for the worldly things than for the Creator. How then can I call him Father? Moreover, those moments of passion for Him that I once had are now gone; so I fear that all the love I ever had for the Lord was just a temporary burst of emotion, like those experienced by hypocrites."

Answer: It's true that loving the world above all else is a sign of an unregenerate state (1 John 2:15). However, strong emotions aren't always an accurate measure of the depth of love. A person's emotions can be more stirred up by an object that is not particularly important than by one that is truly cherished, just as a small stream can sometimes make more noise than a large river. The strength of our affections should be measured by the depth and stability of their roots, not by the intensity of their expression.

For example, if someone is unexpectedly reunited with a long-lost friend and experiences a surge of emotion towards that friend, this doesn't mean that they love their friend more than their own spouse and children. Similarly, even though a Christian may feel more passionate love for a worldly pleasure than for God, this doesn't mean they love that pleasure more than God. A genuine love for God is always more deeply rooted in a person's heart than love for any worldly pleasure. This becomes evident when faced with a choice between keeping the worldly pleasure or maintaining their relationship with God.

To understand your own situation, honestly assess your priorities in the presence of God. If you had to choose between Christ and worldly pleasures, which would you let go of? If you're willing to part with what's dearest to you in the world for Christ when called upon, then you shouldn't conclude that you love the world more than God. On the contrary, your willingness to make that sacrifice demonstrates your love for God, even if your emotions are more intense for worldly pleasures (Matthew 10:37; Luke 14:26).

Furthermore, you should consider that there are two types of love for Christ: 1) Sensible love, which is felt as a passionate emotion, and 2) Rational love, which is based on a deep respect for God's authority and commands. Sensible love can be experienced as a longing for Christ, as seen in Song of Solomon 5:8 and 2:5. This type of love is common in new believers, who are often filled with joy and enthusiasm for their faith. As their initial fervor fades, they may become more humble, self-aware, and reliant on Christ for forgiveness and sanctification. Rational love, on the other hand, is demonstrated by obedience to God's commands and a desire to please Him (1 John 5:3). This type of love may not involve the same emotional intensity as sensible love, but it is no less genuine.

Even if you no longer experience the passionate emotions of sensible love, you shouldn't assume that your love for God is hypocritical as long as you maintain rational love. A loving and faithful spouse doesn't need to question their love for their partner simply because their initial infatuation has subsided.

Discerning Hypocrites and Apostates

CASE 5: "The achievements of hypocrites and those who abandon their faith terrify me and shake me to the core when I'm about to

determine, based on the signs of grace that I seem to find in myself, whether I'm in a state of grace."

Answer: These things should indeed prompt us to examine ourselves seriously and impartially, but they shouldn't keep us in a constant state of uncertainty about our spiritual condition. You see the external aspects of hypocrites: their actions, their abilities, their tears, and so on, but you don't see their inner selves, the direction of their hearts. You base a judgment of charity on what you observe of them, which is appropriate since you cannot know the hidden motivations behind their actions. However, you're seeking, and should aim for, certainty about your own spiritual state, which requires examining the aspects of your faith that only you can discern.

A hypocrite's outward display of faith may appear greater than that of a sincere believer, but what impresses others may not be as valuable in the eyes of God. I'd prefer to experience one of the groans mentioned by the apostle in Romans 8:26 than to shed Esau's tears, possess Balaam's prophetic abilities, or have the joy of a shallow believer. "The fire that shall test everyone's work" will determine its quality, not its size (1 Corinthians 3:13). Although you can see the size of another person's faith, and it might be larger than your own, God doesn't judge faith by its size. So why should you be concerned about it? You can't be certain of the quality of someone else's faith without divine revelation, but you can be sure of the quality of your own faith without it. Otherwise, the apostle wouldn't have encouraged believers to "give diligence to make their calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10). Therefore, the achievements of hypocrites and apostates shouldn't trouble you during your sincere inquiry into your own spiritual state.

I'll tell you two things that distinguish even the humblest saints from the most sophisticated hypocrites: 1) Self-denial, which involves renouncing self-confidence and reliance on one's own works, accepting and trusting God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ

(Matthew 5:3; 11:6; Philippians 3:3); and 2) Genuine hatred for all sin, being willing to abandon every sinful desire without exception and to follow every command that the Lord reveals (Psalm 119:6). Test yourself by these criteria.

Falling Short of Biblical Saints

CASE 6: "I see myself falling so far short of the saints mentioned in the Scriptures and of several exceptional people I know personally that, when I look at them, I can hardly consider myself as belonging to the same family as them."

Answer: It is indeed humbling to recognize that we don't measure up to the level of grace and holiness that we know is possible in this life. This realization should motivate us to strive more diligently towards our goals. However, it's wrong for weaker Christians to torment themselves by comparing their progress to that of stronger believers. Giving in to this temptation is as unreasonable as a child doubting their relationship to their parents because they aren't as tall as their older siblings. There are believers of various levels of maturity in Christ's family: some are spiritual parents, some are young adults, and some are little children (1 John 2:13-14).

Unprecedented Temptations

CASE 7: "I've never read in the Word of God, nor have I ever known a child of God, as tempted and abandoned by God as I am; and since no saint's situation is like mine, I can't help but conclude that I don't belong to their group."

Answer: This objection arises for some due to their lack of knowledge of the Scriptures and the experiences of other Christians. In this case, it is helpful to discuss the issue with an experienced Christian friend or a spiritual leader. This has brought peace to some individuals when they've discovered that their seemingly unique situation has actually been experienced by other believers. The Scriptures provide examples of severe temptations faced by the saints. Job was tempted to blaspheme; Asaph was tempted to believe that being religious was pointless, which would have led him to abandon his faith (Psalm 73:13). Even Jesus himself was tempted to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple and worship the devil (Matthew 4:6-9). Moreover, many children of God have not only faced, but have also succumbed to very serious temptations for a time. Peter denied Christ (Mark 14:71), and Paul forced even the saints to blaspheme when he was a persecutor (Acts 26:10-11).

Many believers can testify to severe temptations that have shocked their spirits, made their bodies tremble, and weakened them physically. Satan's fiery darts can cause great damage and require a determined effort to extinguish them by actively using the shield of faith (Ephesians 6:16). Sometimes Satan's attacks are so relentless that a person must continuously resist the devil's onslaught, just as someone would struggle to put out fires continuously set by an enemy intent on burning their house down. However, these dreadful temptations aren't sins of the person being tempted unless they give in and consent to them. If they don't consent, the blame will be placed solely on the tempter and won't be attributed to the person being tempted, just as a chaste man isn't held responsible for a child left at his doorstep.

Even if neither a spiritual leader nor a fellow believer can relate to your situation, you shouldn't assume that your case is unique or lose hope. It's unreasonable to expect that every spiritual leader or believer has experienced all possible situations that a child of God may face. Some people's struggles may be known only to God and their own conscience, remaining hidden from others. Although the

Scriptures provide suitable guidance for every situation a child of God may encounter, complete with a sufficient number of examples, it's unrealistic to expect the Scriptures to contain perfect examples of every specific situation that saints may experience. Therefore, even if you can't find a case like yours in the Scriptures, bring your situation to the Word, and you'll find appropriate remedies prescribed for it. Focus on using Christ to address your situation, who has a remedy for all ailments, rather than searching for a precedent. Even if someone were to show you an example of your situation in an undeniable saint, it wouldn't guarantee you relief. A troubled conscience might still find differences between your situation and that of the example, and if you demand a perfect match to be satisfied, it may be impossible to reassure you. People's situations, like their physical appearances, can have similarities but also subtle differences that set them apart.

In conclusion, if you find in yourself the signs of regeneration from the Word, you should believe that you're in a state of grace, even if your situation seems unique, which is unlikely.

Unusual Afflictions

CASE 8: "The afflictions I encounter are strange and unusual. I doubt if any child of God has ever been tested by such events as I am."

Answer: Much of what was mentioned in the previous case may be helpful in this one. Holy Job faced this temptation, Job 5:1, "To which of the saints will you turn?" But he rejected it and held onto his integrity. The apostle Peter suggests that Christians might be tempted to "think it strange concerning the fiery trial" (1 Peter 4:12). However, one would need more experience than even Solomon to say, "Look, this is new" (Ecclesiastes 1:10). Even if, regarding the

external events, it seems like "it happens to you according to the work of the wicked", you can still be righteous; as Solomon observed in Ecclesiastes 8:14.

Sometimes we travel along paths where we can't see any signs of others having been there before, but we can't conclude that we're the first to travel that way. Similarly, even if you can't see any evidence of others having faced the same afflictions as you, you shouldn't assume that you're the first to experience them. But even if that were the case, someone must be the first to endure each difficult experience that others have faced. What reason do you or I have to limit God's actions towards us? "Your way is in the sea, your path in the great waters, and your footprints are not known," Psalm 77:19. If the Lord chooses to lead you to heaven through a more secluded route, you have no reason to complain.

Allow for divine sovereignty; focus on your duty and don't let any affliction obscure any evidence you might otherwise have for being in a state of grace, for "no one knows either love or hatred by all that is before them" (Ecclesiastes 9:1).

Afterword:

Resting in the Assurance of Christ's Love

As we come to the conclusion of Boston's book, "What if I Doubt that I am a Real Christian?", we have explored the various cases of doubt and the ways in which believers can find assurance amidst these trials. Boston has aimed to provide both clarity and comfort to Christians who may be grappling with doubts and uncertainties. Let us further reflect upon the critical concept that our faith, albeit imperfect and weak, should not distance us from Christ but instead remind us of our need for Him.

Throughout the Christian life, believers inevitably face moments of weakness and failure. These instances can often give rise to doubt and anxiety, leaving us to question our place in God's family. Yet, it is vital to remember that the very essence of the Gospel lies in our dependence on Christ and His work on the cross. The Scripture emphasizes that our righteousness is not our own, but solely Christ's, imputed to us by grace, through faith alone (2 Corinthians 5:21). Therefore, we must never allow our personal inadequacies or shortcomings to separate us from the loving embrace of our Savior.

In our moments of weakness and failure, we must remember that Christ is the bread of life (John 6:35), given to us precisely because of our inherent frailty and need for redemption. He did not come to save the righteous, but sinners (Mark 2:17). This understanding should lead us not to despair in our imperfections but to cling even more closely to Christ, who alone can sustain us and make us whole. We must trust that His grace is sufficient for us, for His power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Moreover, the Scriptures offer the comforting assurance that our growth in holiness, is an ongoing process throughout our lives, rather than a one-time achievement. As we journey with Christ, we are continually being conformed to His image (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18), and it is in this transformative process that our faith is strengthened and our assurance deepened. The Holy Spirit's work in conforming us to Christ should serve as a reminder that our failures and weaknesses are not indicators of an absent or inadequate faith but rather opportunities for the Lord to shape us more into His likeness.

When we wake up each morning feeling depleted or with an "empty tank," it serves as a reminder that we are not meant to face the world relying solely on our own strength or abilities. Instead, we are called to approach God in prayer, seeking His guidance, wisdom, and grace to sustain us through the day's challenges.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread (Matthew 6:11), emphasizing our dependence on God for all our needs, both physical and spiritual. As we seek God's provision and guidance each day, we can trust that He will supply us with sufficient grace to navigate whatever obstacles we may face (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Therefore, let us begin each day by humbly coming before God in prayer, recognizing our need for His presence and grace in our lives. In doing so, we can find strength and assurance that He will be with us throughout the day, empowering us to face whatever challenges may come our way.

Those who are in Christ can have a deep-seated assurance for several reasons that are grounded in the foundational teachings of the Christian faith and the promises of God:

1. **Salvation through Christ:** The central message of Christianity is that Jesus Christ, through His death and resurrection, has atoned for our sins, providing salvation for all who believe in Him (John 3:16). This belief in Christ grants us assurance because it is the basis for our reconciliation with God and our eternal life with Him (Romans 5:1). We can know that in the covenant of His blood, He will no longer treat us as our sins justly deserve, but has transformed an enemy into a friend and granted us a seat at His table.
2. **God's promises:** Believing in Christ means trusting in the promises God has made in the Bible. These promises, such as forgiveness of sins (1 John 1:9), eternal life (John 10:28), and the Holy Spirit's guidance (John 14:26), give us assurance because they are rooted in the unchanging character of God, who is faithful and trustworthy (Hebrews 10:23).
3. **The indwelling Holy Spirit:** When we believe in Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us (Ephesians 1:13-14). The Holy

Spirit serves as a "seal" and a "guarantee" of our inheritance, providing a constant source of comfort, guidance, and assurance of our salvation (2 Corinthians 1:22).

4. Christ's intercession: As believers, we have the assurance that Jesus Christ intercedes on our behalf before the Father (Romans 8:34). Knowing that Christ is advocating for us, despite our weaknesses and shortcomings, gives us confidence in our standing with God that our faith will never fail.
5. The transforming power of faith: Believing in Christ leads to a transformation of our lives, as we become "new creations" (2 Corinthians 5:17). This change in our hearts and actions serves as evidence of our faith and provides assurance that we belong to Christ (1 John 3:18-19).

As you continue your journey of faith, we hope that this book has provided you with a sense of renewed confidence and assurance in the face of doubt. Let us remember the words of the Apostle John, who urged believers to rest in the assurance that they have eternal life: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13).

In closing, let us never forget the central message of this book: that true assurance is found not in our own strength or accomplishments but in Christ alone. As we press forward in our walk with the Lord, may we remain ever mindful of our need for His grace and forgiveness, and be encouraged by the knowledge that it is in our weakness that He is most glorified. No matter the depth of our doubt or the extent of our failures, let us continually draw near to Christ, the bread of life, who has been given to us for the very purpose of sustaining and nourishing our souls in this journey of faith.

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ePub, .mobi & .pdf Editions April 2023 Requests for information should be addressed to: Monergism Books, PO Box 491, West Linn, OR 97068