
QUESTIONING
Your
DOUBTS

Chapter by Chapter Study Guide

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The following questions are designed to help individuals and groups explore many of the intriguing themes in *Questioning Your Doubts* by Christina M. H. Powell. Each of the twelve sessions is designed for a forty-five-minute discussion.

Session 1

INTRODUCTION; CHAPTER I: CREATED TO THINK

1. Describe a time when you needed to adjust to a new environment. Did you experience doubts about whether you belonged in this new place?
2. Have you ever felt like you inhabited two different worlds, one based on secular reasoning and the other on spiritual truths? If so, were you able to resolve this dilemma? Did you compartmentalize your beliefs and secular knowledge or attempt to integrate them?
3. What role has thinking played in your journey of faith (quest for truth)?
4. Do you rely heavily on your own reasoning? Do you tend to accept information presented by an authority or accepted by your circle of friends? Are feelings and experiences more important to you than facts and logical arguments?
5. The book states, “People cluster on one of two riverbanks in their approach to relating human reasoning to faith.” One approach is mistrust of the intellect and the opposite is worshipping the life of the mind above all else. On which riverbank do you often find yourself? What steps would you need to take to build a bridge to the opposite riverbank?
6. The author quotes the response of Jesus to the expert in Jewish law who wanted to know which commandment was the greatest: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Mt 22:37). What does this verse mean to you?
7. Is the question of God within the domain of science? Erwin Schrödinger, recipient of the 1933 Nobel Prize in Physics and one of the fathers of quantum mechanics, and Peter Medawar, recipient of the 1960 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine and a British immunologist who paved the way for organ transplantation, both felt science had limited input on this matter. What are your thoughts?
8. What is the limit described by Lorenz? How do you feel about the idea that science may be unable to determine an exact cause for an event?
9. What is the most significant doubt you are experiencing right now? Is it a doubt that will help you solve a problem or a doubt that is destroying your confidence or your faith? What can you do this week to explore this doubt and move toward resolving it?

CHAPTER 2:
INTERPLAY OF INFLUENCES

1. Describe how your studies or your professional training has changed your perspective on a certain topic.
2. What do you rely on most when determining what is true—faith, facts or personal experience?
3. At the beginning of chapter two, the author quotes Hebrews 11:6, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” Does the faith described in this verse seem active or passive to you?
4. Powell writes, “In everyday life, facts filter through our subjective experience.” She names two common cognitive biases—the primacy effect, which causes a person to assume the first piece of evidence for a belief is the most important and worth remembering, and the confirmation bias, which recognizes the tendency for people to favor information that confirms their existing beliefs. Have you encountered a situation where a cognitive bias influenced your thinking or the thinking of someone you know? Did you or the person eventually recognize the bias?
5. Do you agree with Richard Dawkins that faith occurs in a void separate from facts and experience, or do you agree with Alister McGrath that faith completes the picture drawn by facts and experience? How would you describe the relationship between faith, facts and experience?
6. Powell describes how compassion changes the heart of the researcher without impacting the details of experimental design. Has your faith ever changed how you view an experience while leaving the facts of the situation unchanged?
7. The author raises the possibility that some prayers may reach beyond one lifetime, giving the personal example of her grandfather as well as the biblical examples of the heroes of faith described in Hebrews 11. Have you ever prayed a prayer for a goal that could take years to achieve, even more than one lifetime?
8. How has your background influenced your beliefs about Christianity? Have certain significant people in your life impacted your worldview? Are you open to reexamining your views in light of new information? Consider expressing gratitude this week to one person who has had a positive effect on your life.

CHAPTER 3:
DISCERNMENT REQUIRES DOUBTS

1. Share a story of a time your doubts prevented you from exercising poor judgment.
2. Discernment requires doubts. Think about a doubt you experienced that served as a red flag of caution. What made you recognize this doubt as potentially beneficial?
3. While some doubts can tear down your confidence or destroy your faith, beneficial doubts can correct your thinking and rescue you from error. Did you ever experience a doubt that ultimately strengthened your faith by correcting your thinking?
4. In 1 John 4:2-3 we find guidance in discerning the Spirit of truth from the spirit of falsehood. “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.” How can this verse guide you as you discern truth in the marketplace of ideas?
5. What are some of the ways that God speaks to us?
6. Powell writes, “Discernment is also not an excuse to rely on feelings and hunches in place of reason and good advice.” Have you ever struggled to find the right balance between feelings and reason when making a decision? What are some of the ways a person can honor both in the process of discernment?
7. The author describes the ability to make decisions as one of the gifts God gives us. Are you decisive or tentative when called upon to make a decision? If you tend to be decisive, would you benefit from being more thoughtful about your choices? If you tend to be tentative, what would help you make choices with more confidence? What steps can you take to improve your decision-making ability?
8. Is there an area of your life where you are presently seeking discernment, or do you know a friend who is facing a difficult decision? If so, what steps will you take this week to explore your beneficial doubts, or support your friend during the discernment process?

CHAPTER 4:
SOLVING PROBLEMS WITH QUESTIONS

1. If you could ask Jesus one question, what would you ask him?
2. The author discusses how questions help us learn and connect with others. Describe a time when a good question helped you advance in your education or profession, or describe a question that deepened your relationship with a friend, acquaintance or family member.
3. Jesus asked many questions in his ministry. Pick one of the questions Jesus asked from among those mentioned in the chapter or choose one from the Gospels. What insights can you gain from this question?
4. What are some of the ways you can test your assumptions to determine if they are valid?
5. Powell writes, "In our efforts to be helpful and minister to people, we must be willing to show them respect by asking questions instead of jumping to conclusions. Be careful not to project your needs onto someone else." Have you ever experienced a well-meaning person trying to help you in the wrong way? How did you feel?
6. The author states, "In life, commitments narrow choices." Describe a commitment you have made within the last year that has narrowed your current choices. Do you feel energized by a sense of focus or trapped by your decision? Why?
7. Focus can preserve your faith through times of testing. Powell writes, "The way to spiritual health through such storms of life starts with blocking out the distractions and concentrating on what matters most. 'Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things' (Col 3:2). Earthly difficulties, while real, must not divert our attention from eternal things." Explain how focus is not the same as denial.
8. Think of one question you can ask this week that will deepen an important relationship. Think of one assumption you have made recently that you should test with questions. Finally, think of one distraction you can eliminate this week in order to improve your focus on one of your current goals.

CHAPTER 5: LOCATING LIMITS

1. Name one limit you are currently facing in your life. Consider limits of resources, time and knowledge.
2. Powell writes, “Many times we need to learn patience and stay seated in the stalled incline cars of life. However, some moments call for courage and initiative, and we must leave our comfort zone and climb the mountain.” Is the limit you are currently facing one that calls for patience or for courage? Why?
3. Appreciating the limits of both science and theology is the key to finding the compatibility of faith and science. What happens to faith when science oversteps its boundaries? What happens to science when theology oversteps its boundaries?
4. What are some of the limits of science?
5. What factors limit theology?
6. The author states, “Cause and effect in life need time to play out.” Have you or someone you know ever experienced a closed door of opportunity that led to a positive new direction with the passage of time?
7. How have your limits directed your educational or career path? Has awareness of your limits helped you discover your strengths?
8. If you need to exercise patience for a certain limit you are experiencing right now, think of one thing you can do this week to make good use of the waiting time. If you feel that you need to exercise courage to push past a limit you are experiencing, what actions can you take this week to move forward?

CHAPTER 6: UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

1. How comfortable are you living with mystery? Do you approach life like a scientist, trying to define each variable and boundary, or like an artist, finding beauty in the smudged lines, blended colors and ambiguous meaning of a painting?
2. What truths about human life create unanswered questions? Hebrews 11:39 states, “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.” What promises in the Bible were answered after the death of the person who was given the promise?
3. Powell writes, “Mystery makes it possible for two people to look at the same painting and walk away with different impressions about the significance and meaning of the work. The continuing mysteries in the universe and in the explanation of events in our lives work the same way.” Even when we do not have answers, we seek to fit our experiences into a larger story. How does our choice of a positive or negative interpretation of an event affect us? Have you ever seen two people experience the same event in different ways?
4. Not all questions will be answered in our lifetimes. We will be left with mysteries that remain unsolved. What do we need to do when we face circumstances that make no sense? What happens when we move from the why questions to the what-now questions?
5. Consider the responses of Job’s friends. What lessons can we learn about comforting the grieving from their mistakes?
6. Those encountering closed doors often find comfort in the words from Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” Of course, those comforting words come right after “the LORD says, ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place’” (Jer 29:10). How does God’s timing connect the experience of closed doors and the promise of fulfilled dreams?
7. Describe a time when you experienced a closed door. Did you accept redirection quickly or struggle to pry open the door? Did you experience greater fruitfulness in new opportunities that came after this closed door?
8. Is there a why question in your life right now that you could turn into a what-now question? If so, what steps can you take this week to move in a positive direction in the aftermath of an unanswered question? Is there something you could do this week to comfort a friend experiencing unanswered questions? What actions do you plan to take?

CHAPTER 7:
DOUBTS BORN FROM PAIN

1. Describe which part of the “bucket brigade” you fulfill in your profession or area of studies.
2. Name a Bible character who went through a painful circumstance. How did he or she respond? Did the circumstance draw the person closer to God or further from God?
3. Powell writes, “The danger to faith when things seem to go wrong in a believer’s life comes from the wrong view of God. If you view God as a protective parent who will keep you from falling and scraping your spiritual knees, you will feel unloved and abandoned when life brings injury. If you view prayer as a magic formula to make your desires come true, your faith will hit a brick wall when things don’t turn out according to your plans.” Can suffering enlarge our view of God? In what ways?
4. How do painful circumstances prepare us to minister to others?
5. Is faith different from wishful thinking? Explain.
6. What are some healthy approaches to processing doubts arising from difficult experiences?
7. For the author, forgiveness played an important role in moving past resentment to resolution. She found a symbolic way to process her feelings and release her grief. What value do you see in creating such a moment to symbolize an emotional and spiritual choice?
8. Is there a painful experience in your past that serves as a source of ongoing doubts? If so, what actions could you take this week to symbolize your choice to move beyond the pain?

CHAPTER 8:
DISILLUSIONMENT MASQUERADING AS DOUBT

1. Name a comforting illusion people commonly hold about church, education, work or relationships.
2. To the degree that disillusionment means being set free from illusions, an experience that strips away comforting but false perceptions can provide an impetus for spiritual growth. Of course, such experiences also can lead to cynicism. In your life, what helps you choose spiritual growth over the stagnation of cynicism?
3. What does the gospel tell us about humanity? Why does human failure not disprove the existence of God?
4. Have you ever felt that God was guiding you to make a certain decision only to realize later that your perceptions were wrong?
5. Do you think that sometimes the only way to see the truth is to go through a disillusioning experience?
6. What are some historical examples of positive change in the church or in society?
7. What one change would you most like to see in your church, workplace or educational institution?
8. What can you do this week to make a positive contribution to the one change you would most like to see in your church, workplace or educational institution?

CHAPTER 9:
AN AUTHENTIC JOURNEY

1. Do you have a favorite place to go to unwind? What makes this place special for you?
2. How does the following quote relate to being authentic in our faith?

This above all; to thine own self be true,

And it must follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man. (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 3)

3. What are some of the challenges that keep us from being authentic in our faith?
4. Powell writes, “Authentic faith relates to real life like a conversation between two friends. It is at home in the locker room as well as in the cathedral.” Describe two different places where you live out your faith. What does your faith look like in each setting?
5. Are you cautious or adventurous by nature? What might you learn by doing an activity that goes against your nature?
6. “Life is a gift we will miss if we are too careful. Planning for the future, shouldering our responsibilities and working toward goals are prudent actions. However, living authentically also means staying in touch with the present.” How can we balance being in the moment with being responsible for our future? How does living our faith in the moment reduce anxiety and increase our joy?
7. What stages described by the author have you experienced in the development of your faith over time?
8. Is there an area where you can grow in the authenticity of your faith this week? For example, how can you make your faith a greater part of your everyday life? How can you live more in the present, worrying less about the past and the future?

CHAPTER 10:
RETRACING THE PATH

1. Name an experience in your life that could serve as a “memorial stone” to remind you of God’s faithfulness.
2. Have you ever found that the questions that were once so important to you just don’t seem to matter so much now? If so, how can reflecting on past questions help you with present questions?
3. Sometimes the difficult choice at the present moment may well be the choice that leads to the greatest blessing in years to come. Can you recall a time when the past helped you gain the perspective you needed to make a difficult decision?
4. Think of the significance of the memorial stones taken from the middle of the Jordan River. Why would these stones be important in the years to come?
5. “Jacob had promised that the Lord would be his God, but Jacob’s household contains idols, proof of a compromised commitment. Jacob is ready to fulfill his vow completely now. No longer will he tolerate an undone job.” Do you think reflecting on the past can help us complete jobs we have left undone or goals that went unfulfilled? How important is it to you to finish what you start?
6. Powell writes, “Only the chess master views the chessboard from the proper perspective, knows the purpose behind each move and sees the entire board clearly from one side to the other.” What does this illustration tell us about our need for faith in the midst of circumstances we do not understand?
7. “Difficult experiences not only alter the course of a person’s life, but they change the person. Joseph became a better leader because of his difficult journey.” Would you rather follow a leader whose character has been refined through difficulties or a leader who has known only prosperity and success? Explain your choice.
8. Are you willing to spend some time this week reflecting on a past experience that may be able to give you valuable insights or encouragement for your current challenges?

CHAPTER II:
THINKING IN COMMUNITY

1. Name at least one place where you experience community (small group, neighborhood, professional association, etc.).
2. If you attend both a small group and a weekly worship service, what are the different benefits you derive from each setting? How is community the same in each setting? How is it different?
3. Why is fellowship with other believers so important? What happens when we share our faith struggles with trusted friends?
4. The author writes, “In the body of Christ, mutual respect produces spiritual growth and effective ministries. There are no unimportant people in a local church. ‘Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it’ (1 Cor 12:27).” What are some of the benefits of a diversity of talents within the body of Christ? Do you agree that there are no unimportant people in a local church? Why or why not?
5. Like academic researchers who learn from the great minds of the past, what can you learn from the insights of Christians in previous generations? What historical person or Bible character has inspired you? What did you learn from his or her life that impacted your Christian walk?
6. Michael Faraday approached both religion and science as a search for truth, respecting each discipline on its own terms. How did he verify truth in his walk of faith? How did he verify truth in science? Do you think he was consistent in his approach to truth in both religion and science?
7. “Both the scientific and Christian communities include the company of scholars and the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. Like Elisha who asked for a double portion of the blessing that had been bestowed on his mentor Elijah’s life, each generation should seek to have a greater impact than the previous one.” What do these two sentences tell us about the importance of mentoring? Are you presently mentoring someone or being mentored by someone? How should we view those who mentor us? What should we expect of those we mentor?
8. What can you do this week to strengthen your experience of community? Possibilities include reaching out to a friend, seeking a mentor, reading a good book written by a respected Christian leader from the past or present, volunteering within your church or campus group, or increasing your level of involvement in the communities in which you currently participate.

CHAPTER 12:
AN INCOMPLETE PROCESS

1. Describe a time you were able to reconnect with a friend or colleague after you had gone your separate ways.
2. How can thinking about our faith journey as an ongoing process rather than a one-time decision change the way we view our struggles in life? What safeguards do you have in place in your life to ensure your continued Christian growth?
3. Look at 2 Peter 1:5-8. Describe the role of goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection and love in keeping you effective and productive for Christ.
4. “When Hezekiah was a young king, he needed the courage to bring spiritual reform to his own nation. Fourteen years later, he needed the courage to face an external enemy.” What does the story of Hezekiah tell us about the ongoing process of spiritual growth? How was Hezekiah’s faith tested each time?
5. Powell writes, “Not all scientists welcome a dialogue with religion, and many ministers become suspicious of anything related to science. In trying to build a bridge between these two camps, I have learned to be careful not to fall into the water.” Have you ever tried to build a bridge between two different groups? What was your experience? What lessons did you learn?
6. “We see a universe where we are insignificant inhabitants, yet one finely tuned for our existence. These discoveries force a certain humility upon us as we learn that neither the stars nor the sun revolves around us. However, our ideal distance from the sun and the presence of water in liquid form on our planet remind us we are fortunate. You could conclude that the physical constants in the universe in general and our world in particular hint that this place was prepared for us. Perhaps we are special after all, even if we are not at the center.” What are the spiritual implications of recognizing that humans are special but not at the center? Does this realization make a statement about how we should live our lives and approach our relationships with others?
7. The author looks back on how teaching a children’s Sunday school class contributed to the formation of current church leaders. Have you ever made a seemingly insignificant contribution only to find that the ripple effect enlarged your impact?
8. Spend some time this week reflecting on your current journey to this point. What are the next steps you need to take to resolve your doubts or strengthen your faith? What are you doing right now that could have a significant impact in the future?