

WHAT TO SAY
WHEN

*She's Not Sure
She Believes
in God
Anymore*

BRIANNA REEVES



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

So, she's said it. Maybe you suspected this was coming, or maybe it's a complete shock.

"I'm not sure if I believe in God anymore."

Walking with someone through doubt or deconstruction can be daunting. There's a lot at stake. What if you say the wrong thing? What if you can't answer her questions? What if her doubts cause you to doubt? But the truth is that doubt does not spell the end of Christian faith, and God can use this experience powerfully in both your friend's life and yours. This resource is designed to help you counsel a doubting friend with compassion, curiosity, and hope.

In my own seasons of doubt, wise women have held on to me gently and firmly. They have upheld me in prayer. They have held my fears and unspeakable questions. They have held my hand and walked with me through dark nights and valleys of shadow (Ps. 23). My hope is that you and I would learn to be companions like these.



Perhaps she is a dear friend—someone you have served with, prayed with, and laughed with for years. She might be someone you formally mentor—a member of your youth group or Bible study. Or maybe you don't

know her well at all. Whoever she is, for the purposes of this book, we're going to call her Jen.

It's possible that you've noticed that Jen has been acting strangely. She seems distant, resistant, or somehow sensitive. Perhaps she's found excuses to miss church recently or has stepped back from a ministry position. Or perhaps you haven't noticed anything awry. She seems like her usual self—in fact, just last week she was offering insightful answers at your Bible study.

Either way, Jen asks to speak to you. As your conversation unfurls, a knot forms in your stomach. You can tell she is nervous. She's been feeling like this for a long time, she says. She still wants to be friends. She thinks she'll take some time away from church, to figure things out. She blinks back tears.

Jen isn't sure she believes in God anymore.

This is a difficult confession to hear. You might feel shocked. You might feel anxious for Jen, worried about her spiritual well-being and future. You might even feel angry or betrayed, especially if she is a church leader or a close friend. Relationships in the church are unique: Jen is (or was?) your sister. You thought you were on the same page. Suddenly the rules of the game have changed, and you can't help but wonder,

- Is our friendship over?
- Can I help her, or is it too late?
- What is going to happen to her?

The Heart of the Struggle

- If I try to change her mind, will I push her further away?
- Was she ever a Christian at all?
- Do I need to tell someone else about this?

Before we go any further, however, I want you to take a step back and put yourself in Jen's shoes. Something has led her to this point. She is suffering; the turmoil of doubt is acutely painful . . . in fact, it's the most painful thing I myself have ever experienced. Jen likely feels disconnected from her friends, her community, and even herself. She may be disillusioned, confused, and completely alone. For months or years, she has been kept awake by unanswerable questions. She has lost something precious, and she's just been brave enough to tell you. She has let you into her suffering.

This is a privilege. Jen trusts you enough to share this burden with you. She is willing to be honest and vulnerable. Her confession is a small signal fire of hope . . . of faith, even. When a man confessed his doubt to Jesus and cried, "Help my unbelief," Jesus honored his request (Mark 9:24 ESV). The Lord holds doubters safe in his hands. Take courage, friend, and thank God for giving you the privilege of walking alongside your sister through her suffering.

The Heart of the Struggle

Doubt is not one-size-fits-all. When Jen says, "I'm not sure if I believe in God anymore," she could mean a few

different things. She may mean that she doubts God's existence, or she may mean that she no longer feels his presence. She may mean that she feels deeply disappointed in God and no longer trusts that he is good or sovereign. She may have made a firm decision not to believe in God, or she may feel herself to be slowly drifting toward unbelief.

Your priority is to keep open the lines of communication between you and Jen. James 1:19 counsels us to “be quick to listen, slow to speak.” So, before you say anything, start by listening. Don't interrupt Jen, and don't make assumptions. Before you are able to offer any counsel or insight, you need to listen to, and understand, what Jen herself is going through.

Doubt encompasses a very broad spectrum of experiences. So too does faith. The Bible's definition of faith is multifaceted—it is not a formula. Enriching your own definition of faith will help you make space to understand Jen's complex experiences. When the time comes for you to speak, your definition of faith will help her see that there is another path. The thing she fears she may have lost may be closer than she knows.

The Heart of Faith

Faith is a gift. In Ephesians 2:8, Paul describes faith as “the gift of God.” Only the Holy Spirit can give someone the ability to see Jesus for who he is, and only by the work of the Holy Spirit will anyone desire to surrender to him: “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit”

(1 Cor. 12:3). This truth is what sits behind the New Testament's rich metaphor of spiritual blindness (Mark 8:22–25; Luke 24:30–32; Acts 9:18). No one can muster up their own faith. It is given by God.

Faith is an allegiance. In his seminal book on the Christian faith, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes, “Faith . . . is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods.”* Feelings come and go, but faith is an act of the will. This is why God can “command” us to “believe in the name of his Son” (1 John 3:23). It does not make any sense to command someone to have a feeling. You can, however, command someone to make a decision. In keeping with the idea of faith as allegiance, the Bible uses military language to describe a Christian's determined commitment to Jesus, come what may:

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. (Eph. 6:14–15)

Faith is rational. Christianity has a long and rich history of intellectual rigor. Christians are thinking people and have been at the forefront of much academic and social progress. The Bible is a historical document that posits

* C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (repr., Macmillan, 1952), 109.

both theological and historical truths that are open to investigation. Luke's gospel begins with a clear statement of both intent and genre: "With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account" (Luke 1:3). Many, many people have followed in Luke's footsteps, investigating the claims of the Bible and finding them to be both compelling and trustworthy. For some, this kind of study will greatly encourage their faith.

Faith is childlike trust. While the Christian faith is rational, it requires more than head knowledge. In fact, Jesus says the people who know the least often know the most. In Matthew 18:3, he praises children's innocent trust as a model of faith. Children do not have all the answers. They are not composed or calculating—and they are not always brave either. Having the faith of a child means trusting God because of who you know him to be . . . in spite of everything you don't know.

Faith is action. Faith does not live in our heads alone—or even in our hearts. Christian faith expresses itself in a life lived in a particular direction: the direction of Christlikeness. James 2:14–26 says that faith without action is "dead" (v. 17). Action is not only evidence of faith; it is faith itself. Read through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 and count how many times Jesus commanded his followers to *do* something. Obeying those commands is not

separate from faith; it is a demonstration of faith. Faith means following Jesus. It is an activity.

Faith is clinging on to God. Sometimes faith is simply a desperate cry for help. It is lament. It is taking your anxieties somewhere—to someone. “Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD” (Ps. 130:1). King David, a man after God’s own heart, wrote dozens of psalms of lament. He was desperately confused at times. Scared. Angry. He wrote about feeling abandoned by God. Yet Jews and Christians alike praise him as a man of great faith. When things just don’t make sense, faith responds by simply clinging on.

As you listen to Jen, pay attention to whether her current definition of faith is broad or narrow. Does she resonate with any of the reflections above? Her understanding of faith may give you some helpful points for discussion.

Jen’s Heart

When you talk to Jen about her experience of doubt, gently use the questions below to deepen your understanding of her story and of what is going on in her heart. The paragraphs that follow provide guidance for responding to possible answers that she might give.

- What is it about God that you’re struggling to believe?