

# Can You Be Sure Where You Will Spend Eternity? – Part 7: For Doubters Only

Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. Erwin Lutzer

**Dr. John Ankerberg:** Have you ever doubted your Christian faith? If you have doubted, this program is for you. My guest today is my friend, Dr. Erwin Lutzer, the pastor of the great Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. Erwin, a lot of Christians have doubted. Can we say basically at some time maybe all Christians have doubted?

**Dr. Erwin Lutzer:** Have you doubted, John?

**Ankerberg:** I have doubted. I know you have. And you've got a great story, tragic story, of a believer, we think, that doubted. Tell us about him.

**Lutzer:** His name was William Cowper, and many of us know him because he was a friend of John Newton who wrote *Amazing Grace*. And the night that William Cowper wrote these words, "God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm," that night, he tried to commit suicide. As a matter of fact, Cowper tried to commit suicide four times, and he even wrote a poem, which I have listed in my book, *Lines Written During a Period of Insanity*. What happened is, he tried to kill himself. When he couldn't pull it off, he believed that he was damned more than Judas. Now, all of that won't be a surprise to people until they discover this. He's the man who wrote, "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains." Evangelicals around the world will remember that song.

And then there's that other stanza, "The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day, and there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away." That man doubted and died doubting. Was he saved? Well, if you talk to his friends and those who knew him, they'd say, "Absolutely! This man was a lover of God. This man was concerned about his salvation. This man wanted to do all that he possibly could to make sure that he was saved." But, for some reason, he simply could not accept God's love. He struggled with the whole business of the unpardonable sin, which we really ought to talk about because some people think they've committed the unpardonable sin. The good news is that anyone who thinks he has almost assuredly has not, because if you commit the unpardonable sin, you'll have no desire for God or for forgiveness. I receive letters all the time from people who think that they've commit-

ted the unpardonable sin.

But here's a man so mightily used of the Lord and whose poetry we love. I have all of his poems or almost all of them in my library. I remember he says, "Regarding all that God has done for us in Christ," it was Cowper who wrote those beautiful words, "How thou canst think so well of me and be the God thou art, is darkness to my intellect but sunshine to my heart." Now the question is, why did he doubt?

**Ankerberg:** Yes. Let's hold Cowper for a moment, but one thing that stands out that you said in your book, "There is no despair that goes so deep; there's no depression that is so dark as the belief that one cannot, for whatever reason, be saved."

**Lutzer:** Yes.

**Ankerberg:** And that's what we want to talk about. What are the reasons people doubt? One of the things you brought up in the book was this. People say, "I can't remember when I made the decision. I can't remember saying the prayer. So, am I saved?"

**Lutzer:** Right. Let's tick off some reasons for doubt and then we will have to get back to Cowper because we can't just simply leave him there, because we have to help people who are chronic doubters and he was a chronic doubter.

First of all, *the time of their conversion*. Absolutely. Most Christians can remember when they were saved. I remember there out in the farm where I knelt at a chair and received Christ. Many people don't remember that. But let me say to you, it isn't necessary to know the day or the hour or what dress you were wearing when you were saved. The question is, is your faith in Christ now, exclusively in Him?

Let's look at another one: *faulty teaching*. We covered that in previous programs. Here we only mention it – that you can lose your salvation whenever you sin or somewhere along the way.

**Ankerberg:** Yes, that's just wrong teaching. Let me throw another one to you: *We must accept Jesus into our hearts*.

**Lutzer:** Yes. Now many people have been saved by "accepting Jesus into their hearts," but that's bad terminology, too, John, because the real issue is whether or not we are accepting Christ as our sin-bearer by faith. So that's also faulty teaching.

*Guilt*. Now here's a Christian who comes to know Christ as Savior and yet he does something wrong, maybe even something immoral, and what does he think? You're a Christian?!

**Ankerberg:** Yes, the devil probably put the thought in his mind, "If you were a real Christian, you wouldn't have done that one."

**Lutzer:** Right. So, as a result of that, what happens is, doubts begin to come into people's minds.

*Confusion between faith and feelings*. You know, Luther was once asked, "Do you feel saved?" and he said, "No, I don't feel saved, but my confidence in God's Word is stronger than my feelings." And that was some good advice.

At the end of the day, what we need to do is to understand that we are based on fact and it has to do with the facts of God's Word and the promises of God's Word, and not our feelings. I think feelings are important and they usually follow the facts and the faith, but it isn't as if we always *feel* saved. It is a matter of faith.

Let me give you another one and that is, of course, the *chronic doubter*. Here we're talking about Cowper again before we begin to turn to helping him. But again, I quote Luther. You know, Luther said, "If I'm holding a purse full of money, I can hold it with a trembling hand or I can hold it with steady confidence. Either way, it does not change the contents of the purse." And the simple fact is, as we've emphasized before, it is much better to believe in Jesus, trembling with doubts, than it is to believe in something wrong with absolute confidence. Because at the end of the day, it isn't faith, it is the Object of faith that is important and we need to emphasize that for people.

**Ankerberg:** Go one step further. Contrast those who have chronic doubt with volitional doubt.

**Lutzer:** Well, the reason that it's important is that there are people who choose to disbelieve. And they will think of any excuse imaginable. Well, there's nothing you can do with people like that except to encourage them to read God's Word and to get into God's Word because they are predisposed to not believe, and nobody can be coerced or argued into belief. That's very different from someone who is a real truth seeker, who says, "I don't know the truth but I'm open to it and I'm open to its implications. If I read the Bible and am convinced that Jesus is the Word of God and the Son of God, I will accept that, even though it humbles me, even though I don't like the cross." That's a different kind of doubt. And the Christian who wants to believe in Christ and to trust Christ but wonders about his faith, that's very different from someone who says, "I will not believe."

**Ankerberg:** Go to the next one. *A weak faith versus a wrong faith.*

**Lutzer:** Again we're back at that very important point that needs to be made, that no matter how weak your faith is, you know, Jesus said, "If you have faith like the grain of mustard" a little mustard grain [Matt. 17:20], that's okay. As long as your faith is in the right person, it doesn't have to be great. But you can have all the confidence and the faith in the world in an object that cannot save you and therefore be lost forever. So we can't stress too often that it isn't the faith, it's the Object of the faith that is important.

**Ankerberg:** All right, switch hats and let's give help to those who are the doubters out there. What do you say to the person who has an over-sensitive conscience?

**Lutzer:** You know, we have people like that in our congregations. I remember counseling a man who, everybody knew he was a Christian because, you know, he had the fruits of faith. He loved Christ. And he had every reason to believe, and yet, you know, because of psychological reasons – he was another Cowper. A sense of distrust. A sense of saying, "I don't know whether or not I've believed enough. I believe in Christ but." And you know, I worked with him over a period of time and I tried to get him to see something. I don't think we help these people by trying to

minimize their sins. There are some people who say, "Oh, well, you know you're saved. It's true you sin, but, you know, your sins aren't that great." I don't do that. What we have to do, John, is to magnify grace.

You know, there's an interesting thing historically. A friend of Luther's wrote to Martin Luther and said, "Luther, I can't forgive myself for what I have done, (he had given some wrong counsel to somebody), so I'm led to despair." Luther didn't say, "Now, Spalatin, your sin isn't that big. Don't get too excited about it." But he said, "Spalatin, you have to get used to something. We have a real Savior for real sins." He said, "Jesus just didn't die for nominal, small sins. Oh, no, Spalatin! He died for damnable iniquities."

And when this man comes to me and he says, "You know, I'm a Christian but look at the sins I've committed," I don't say, "Well, those sins aren't too great." What I say to him is, "Well, you know what? God's grace when Jesus died was so complete that it includes all sins, even yours." And you keep helping them to look in the direction of Christ. You keep helping them take confidence in the promises and to grow in faith. That's the way in which you help people to overcome doubt.

But you know what the good news is? Well, first of all the bad news. The bad news is that Cowper apparently died with lack of faith. The good news is, it's okay, if his confidence was in Christ alone. He shall be saved despite his doubts. So, let me simply say that faith does not necessarily exclude doubt. Maybe later I can give some examples of that even from the Scriptures.

**Ankerberg:** I think that what you've said is good news. You've got folks that have listened to you preach on the radio while they're in jail. We've got people that tune in and write us letters that are listening right now and they are the child molesters, the rapists, the murderers, people that in our society... or there's many people today that have just divorced, had a messy divorce. They're just feeling in the pits. Okay? Listen, they can know that God loves them and really has forgiven their sin, placed it all on Christ. Say a word to those people before we go to the break.

**Lutzer:** John, if Hitler had received Christ before he died, he could have been saved. I told that to someone once, and he was absolutely angry. He said, "What kind of a God is that who would save a man like that, who was that wicked?" Do you know what the answer to that is? God thinks so much of what Jesus did when He died on the cross that He could forgive a Hitler or a child molester who would receive Christ as his sin-bearer. That's how wonderful and complete the work of Jesus Christ was. But God cannot forgive a good, tax-paying, decent person who rejects His Son. It all has to do with Jesus and the completeness of His work.

**Ankerberg:** Well, you got my attention on that one, Erwin. That's fabulous and it's true. You've got a great story about what Christ has done for us. Illustrate it.

**Lutzer:** Yes. I hope I can tell it well, John, because it's really a long story but I'm going to summarize it. The story is, a man went into a room and he saw all of these card files and he realized that they were really the story of his life. For example, there was a file cabinet filled with "people I've known" or "people I've prayed with." But there were other file cabinets such as "lustful thoughts that I have had" – a huge

file on that; “various sexual sins I have committed.” Maybe there was another file cabinet entitled, “Internet sites I have visited.” So the man was so overcome by shame, he had only one desire and that is, to lock the door of the room, throw away the key.

Suddenly, as he’s weeping, somebody is standing there. He can’t believe it. He looks up. “Oh! Not Him. Anyone but Jesus.” Jesus comes and puts his arm around him as the man is burning with shame. Jesus is sad also, but then Jesus begins to go through all of these card files – and there were hundreds of them – very, very quickly. As Jesus is going through these cards, the man is just overcome by that sense of guilt and shame because Jesus is looking at all of the details of his life. When Jesus is finished, He shows the man some of the cards. On each of the cards under the sin Jesus had written His own name, signed with His own blood. And then Jesus came over, put His arm around the man and said, “It is finished.”

That is the Gospel. There are people today who are so overcome by shame, overcome by their sin, they have to know that when Jesus died and said, “It is finished,” that they can participate in the forgiveness of Christ if they are willing to come to Him.

**Ankerberg:** That’s tremendous. Let’s talk to people and encourage them that some of the great men in the Bible had doubts. Talk about John the Baptist.

**Lutzer:** John the Baptist. Here he is. He’s a cousin to Christ, basically. He’s in prison. He expects Jesus to get him out of prison. Just like people expect miracles today, he was expecting one. And he sends a delegation to Christ and politely asks, “Are you the One that we should look for or should we look for another?” [Matt. 11:3ff] What he was saying is, “Jesus, I thought that you were the Messiah. So, are you or aren’t you?” And Jesus sends back and says, “Tell John the dead are being raised, the blind are seeing” and so forth and then Jesus said this, “Blessed is he who is not offended because of me.”

I like to give it my own Lutzerian paraphrase: “Blessed is he who does not stumble over the way in which I run my business. Blessed is the person who does not doubt simply because I don’t do what they think a good God should. Blessed is the person who does not doubt because I don’t answer prayer or do a miracle that they are expecting. Blessed is the person who goes on believing no matter what.”

Now, as far as we know, John the Baptist probably died with his doubts and yet Jesus said that “among those who were born of women, there is none greater than John the Baptist.” So I would say to people today that, if you’re having doubts, that’s not so bad, as long as your faith, however small it is, however wavering it is, as long as your faith is in Christ alone, that’s the important thing. And if your faith is in Christ alone, your faith will take you all the way from this earth, all the way to Heaven.

Do we have time for another story, John?

**Ankerberg:** Yes. Please.

**Lutzer:** A few years ago I was in Washington, D.C., giving a seminar in a church and a secret service agent was there. He said, “Would you like to go into the White

House?” Now, this was many years ago. He said, “The President is at Camp David over the Memorial Day weekend. I’ll get you into the Oval Office.” Oh! Would I say “No” to that, John?!

So I showed up with two of my daughters and there’s guards there. My daughter begins to open her purse. And the guard said, “Aren’t you with him?”

She said, “Yes.”

“Oh, just go on in.” We get to the door of the White House. More guards. They looked at him and then they looked at us and they said, “You’re with him? Just go on in.”

Inside the hallway more guards. They do the same thing. Then I look around the corner and I could already see the Oval Office through the corner of the eye and along the hallway and there’s just one guard standing there and he sees the agent and he sees us. And he said, in effect, “Go on in.” We couldn’t go to the President’s desk but we could step into the Oval Office.

Now let’s pretend – let’s use our imagination – that we all die together. Jesus meets us on the other side of the curtain to take us all the way to the Heavenly City. And along the way there are sentries, angels, stationed. We get to the first group of angels. They look at Jesus and they look at us and they say, “You’re with Him? Go on in.”

We get to more angels along the way and they look at Jesus and they say, “Oh, you’re with Him? Go on in.” And then suddenly we see God in unapproachable light, the Bible says, and we see the holiness of God and the beauty of God and He is more beautiful and more holy than we ever imagined on this earth. And we say, as we look into our hearts, we have a flashback – “I can’t go in!” I mean, we are one messy bunch of sinners! And we say, “We can’t go in.” But the angel says, “You’re with Him? Go on in.”

And after we are gathered together, the Father says to the Son, “Thank you so much for bringing my children home because I love them very, very much and I want to be with them. And I want you to know that I have inspected them very carefully, and I find no fault in them.”

That’s why we sing, “Clothed in His righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.” And among us are some doubters, John, but their faith was in Christ alone and they joined the rest of us in the Heavenly Kingdom.

**Ankerberg:** Charlotte Elliott.

**Lutzer:** I believe that when Charlotte Elliott wrote a poem that has become so famous, I believe her brother was right who said, “I, as a minister, have not had an impact that that poem has had.” This is the way it is: “Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidst me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.” And this is the most important thing now, John, everybody’s listening: “Just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt. Fightings within and fears without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.” John, I say to every doubter, don’t wait until your doubts are resolved to come to Christ! You come

with your doubts, but you come, to the only one qualified to save you.

**Ankerberg:** There's one verse that meant a lot to you in resolving this issue. What was the promise in God's Word?

**Lutzer:** I think it was the promise in John 10 where Jesus was so clear in saying that "My sheep are held in my hand." In fact, "My sheep also are in my Father's hand." When I was a new Christian, it was that promise that assured me that I was in the hands of a Shepherd qualified to take me to the Father.

**Ankerberg:** Yeah. The one that helped me was, "Whosoever" – that meant me the day I called – "shall call upon the name of the Lord" – that's what I did – that last three words is what God says He will do: "shall be saved." Not hope so, not if He gets around to it. "Shall be saved" when you call. And the day that I trusted Christ, that promise made sense to me.

I hope that you think about these things and you have joy in your heart realizing that God loves you. He's not trying to have a legal loophole to lose you. It's the other way around. He's got His hand on you. He's got His hand around you to protect you and take you all the way to Heaven. Trust Him and have joy in your heart.