

## When Doubts Arise...

Matt. 11:1-6

**Intro.** Did you know that the Bible and Church history is replete with stories of believers who doubted God one way or another? In the first book of the Bible, Eve listened to the serpent and doubted God's goodness. Sarah and Abraham had doubts and a good laugh when God said Sarah would have a baby when they were too old for Beacon Class parties. Gideon doubted one man could turn the tide against Israel's enemies. Elijah and Jeremiah were confident of God's existence but both men wanted to die when troubles came. Mary and Martha believed Jesus could have healed their brother, but they doubted He could raise Lazarus after he'd been dead four days. When walking on water, Peter began to sink when he took his eyes off the Lord and doubted. Then with the resurrected Jesus standing right in front of them, the disciples doubted He had really been raised from the dead. Jesus said, **"Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? - Lk. 24:38** This AM we'll see there came a time when John the Baptist questioned whether Jesus really was the Messiah.

So the Bible is replete with stories of believers who doubted, but Church history tells the same story. Along with his legacy as a reformer and a father of Protestantism, **Martin Luther** is remembered for his doubts. Luther didn't question God's existence, but He questioned His character. He feared his own sinfulness would separate him from God. At one point, crushing doubt led to such an intense depression that he wrote, *"For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members. Christ was wholly lost. I was shaken by desperation and blasphemy of God."*

**John Calvin** was another father of Protestantism. His thoughts and writings about salvation still have a great influence on the Church. But for Calvin, doubt wasn't something Christians should fear — instead, he felt it was something we should expect and not be surprised by when it creeps into our lives: He wrote, *"Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety."* Calvin understood that doubt is part of the faith experience, because human nature finds the truth about God and His goodness so outside of what we can understand: *"For unbelief is so deeply rooted in our hearts, and we are so inclined to it, that not without hard struggle is each one able to persuade himself of what all confess with the mouth: namely, that God is faithful."*

Then one final example...One of history's great preachers, **Charles Haddon Spurgeon** was not only a master at communicating deep truths of Scriptures, but also of relating to the struggles of his audience. In his sermon "Desire of the Soul in Spiritual Darkness", he bluntly claimed, *"I think, when a man says, 'I never doubt,' it is quite time for us to doubt him, it is quite time for us to begin to say, 'Ah, poor soul, I am afraid you are not on the road at all, for if you were, you would see so many things in yourself, and so much glory in Christ more than you deserve, that you would be so much ashamed of yourself, as even to say, 'It is too good to be true.'"*

Think of the way Jesus commended John the Baptist. He said, **"Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater" - Matt. 11:11** What an epic compliment! Jesus said John was greater than any of the great names of the OT...yet there came a time when even John doubted. His story provides us with an opportunity to consider the subject of doubting. Before we finish I want you to understand that doubting is common among believers and doubting is not sin. Doubting may lead to sin, but doubting is like temptation. It comes at us from a variety of sources including the Devil. And we can be assured that God isn't intimidated or angered by our doubts. His patience with doubters is witnessed throughout history. God isn't up in heaven wringing His hands when his people struggle. He knows us through and through and He is well able to resolve our doubts. We can be sure that God requires faith and that unbelief is sin. In fact, Jesus told Thomas, **"Stop doubting and believe."** But doubting and faith are not polar opposites. The opposite of faith is unbelief.

The fact is...honest doubts are often the path to increasing and maturing our faith. But it can be unhealthy and dangerous for believers to deny our doubts. We may be tempted to do that because the Church has sometimes treated doubting like it's the unpardonable sin. Instead of bringing our doubts to the One who can resolve them, some try to stuff them or pretend them away. "*Just believe*" is the solution. "*Get over it.*" But like parking tickets, doubts don't go away magically...they tend to mature and they beg to be resolved. By stuffing doubts, we provide the Adversary with weapons he can use against us at a later more vulnerable moment.

So let's read **Matt. 11:1-6**. **After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."** In Matthew's orderly presentation of Jesus as the Messiah, **11:1** is a **transition**. Having sent out the Twelve, Jesus now ministered alone. The setting for His teaching may have been the synagogues while His preaching took place in the open air of the marketplace or town center. Once again, the verb **He went**...demonstrates the meaning of the Great Commission which begins with the word, "go." Jesus **went** and we are to **go**. This isn't complicated...it's elementary!

Let's consider first...***Why doubts arise... – vs. 2, 3 - When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"***

The narrative begins with a question that arose in John's mind while he was in prison. John was arrested and put into prison by Herod Antipas who was outraged when he boldly preached against the king's sins of divorce and incest. Herod had divorced his wife and then taken his brother's wife for himself. John's ministry and his message was confirmed when he baptized Jesus and witnessed divine approval from heaven. Yet those events, as compelling as they were, may have lost some impact during his time in prison.

Now some who are zealous to protect John, say he asked the question for the benefit of his disciples. They reason this way... "*John is a hero. He was a champion of faith and faithfulness. Surely he didn't struggle with doubts the way ordinary believers do!*" While this notion is comforting to some, it's artificial. It's not supported by Scripture. It's interesting to note the connection between Elijah and John the Baptist. But there was a time when Elijah was so weak and his circumstances so desperate, he doubted God and wanted to die. I have a hunch that OT prophets and NT preachers are often wired with similar temperaments. They tend to preach with choleric boldness and retreat into melancholic despair. I'm no great preacher, but I know something about this. A preacher's Mondays can be brutal! Even the preacher's dog backs away from him on Mondays! One guy said preaching is like standing naked for an hour in front of 500 people knowing you have to do it again next Sunday. A verse that brings prophets down to earth is **Jas. 5:17**. It says, **Elijah was a man just like us**. Though they were men serving a great God, the prophets themselves were not the superheroes we sometimes make them out to be. Now since we can't read John's mind, we have to resort to a little sanctified guesswork. I want to suggest three factors that may have provoked his question. Beyond guesswork, I believe these three factors can be the cause of doubt for believers in every age.

- The first factor that may cause doubt is **perplexing circumstances**. Scholars say John had been in prison now for at least a year and perhaps as long as two years.

Though we can't read John's mind, the revelation that came when he baptized Jesus had been overwhelming. With pounding heart and trembling hands, he baptized the Son of God! Think about that. He saw the Spirit descend and remain on Jesus and he heard the voice from heaven. But now John sits in Herod's filthy prison called Machaerus in the wilderness east of the Dead Sea. The queen won't be satisfied until she has his head. His arrest may not have come as a total surprise because everybody knows what happens to those who rebuke sinful kings. But hours had turned to weeks and weeks to months. What John may not have expected was the way he was tormented by doubts and fears. Since that day at the Jordan, he was sure Jesus was the Christ. But confined in this putrid cell he was assaulted by horrible thoughts. What if he was wrong? Israel had seen its share of false prophets. What made him so sure he wasn't one of them? What if he led people astray? Messianic types come and go. What if Jesus was just another? Up till now, the ministry of Jesus wasn't exactly what John had imagined Messiah's ministry would look like. Could this imprisonment be God's punishment? He could bear the thought of being martyred for the sake of righteousness and justice. But he couldn't bear the thought that he might have been wrong about Jesus. What believer hasn't been assaulted by doubt when their world turned upside down?

But despite his doubts, John retained a deep unshakable trust in Jesus. He knew Jesus would tell him the truth...he just needed to hear from Jesus again. So he sent two of his closest disciples to ask the question, **"Are you the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"** This wasn't such a surprising question for an Israelite to ask. Every king who came to Jerusalem's throne was "anointed." Each one knew God had promised an anointed one would bring in the golden age and each king wondered if it might happen in his reign—that is...until there was a war, or until he sinned and was denounced by a prophet. And so the people would look for another. Maybe it would be the next king. John was convinced Jesus was the Messiah...but things hadn't been going as he thought they would if Jesus was in fact, the coming one.

Perplexing circumstances often trigger doubts and fear. Troubles come. Though we may have served the Lord faithfully for years...things aren't turning out as planned. Something unexpected and painful happens that tests the depth of our faith. It happened to King David. **Psa.13** was composed in the darkest hours of David's life. He wrote, **How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? – Psa. 13:1, 2** Like David, John the Baptist may have felt abandoned...even punished by God. Like believers in every age, he may have wrestled to understand why bad things happen to faithful people.

- The second factor that contributes to doubting is **Incomplete Scriptural understanding**. Though John heard about the miracles Jesus was performing, his information was secondhand. He hadn't witnessed the miracle working power of Jesus or heard His teachings. As far as we know, John had no direct contact with Jesus since the time of His baptism at the Jordan.

**Rom. 10:17** explains that...**faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ**. The flip side or corollary to this verse is equally true. *Faith is not produced when the message is ignored or unheard*. Sometimes doubts arise simply because believers have inadequate knowledge and understanding of Bible truth. We think we know, but we don't. Like my experience with electricity, we know just enough to be dangerous. As a result, our view of God is inadequate. As JB Phillips entitled his book, Your God is Too Small. When storms arise and faith is tested, many lack the anchor God provides through the knowledge of His Word. As an example to us, three times Jesus answered the devil's-faith denying temptations with the words...**"It is written."** So what did John do with his doubts? **He sent his disciples to ask (Jesus...)** He submitted his question to the One whose name is the Word of God. He asked the One in whom is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. **(Col. 2:3)**

**Jas. 1:5** says, **If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.** When doubts arise...don't phone a friend...don't check out a library book. Don't retreat into your own little data base of instincts and understanding. Take your doubts directly to the Lord. Ask Him just as John did.

In **Lk. 24**, the resurrected Jesus met two disciples on the Road to Emmaus. These men were perplexed and discouraged and for good reason. When Jesus asked what they were talking about they said, **The chief priests and our rulers handed him (Jesus) over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.** From a strictly human point of view these disciples had every reason to be discouraged. Their hopes were demolished by Jewish unbelief and injustice and Roman cruelty. The lifeless body of the Messiah they believed in lay buried in a tomb. Then Jesus **said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.** These men had incomplete Scriptural understanding. So Jesus said, *The solution to your doubts and fears is written in the Torah. You didn't read your Bibles well enough. Because of that, some of your conceptions and expectations were inaccurate. The answers your soul hungers for have been there all along...but you have to open the book.* Like Paul Harvey would say at the end of a program, I think Jesus said, *"Men listen...that's the rest of the story.*

Many of us have Bibles lying around gathering dust. Some of us even carry a version on our phones or i-pads. But when struggling with doubt, we don't want a scripture. We want something tangible ...something emotional we can feel. We'd rather have an angel or mystical Jesus put His arm around us and say, *"everything will be all right."* That would make us feel better. But overcoming doubt isn't about "feeling better...it's about rekindling our faith...and faith is produced by the Word of God.

- The third factor that may cause believers to doubt is **unfulfilled expectations.**

Maybe you sense the overlap and relation that exists between these three factors. Perplexing circumstances sometimes take us by surprise when our understanding of Scripture is incomplete. And the fact that our understanding of Scripture is incomplete can result in unfulfilled expectations. May I say it again...The Bible has the answers we need. To suffering believers Peter wrote, **His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. – II Pet. 1:3**

Take a look at **Lk. 3:15 - The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. The Christ**, is a Greek term that means *"the anointed one"* the ultimate religious and political leader. Its equivalent to the Hebrew word **Messiah**. In no uncertain terms John said, *"No, I'm not the Christ; the Christ is still to come."* So John believed Jesus was the **Messiah, the Christ, the Coming One**...but Jesus hadn't done what he expected the Messiah to do. John's message was turn or burn. He called people to repent of sin or else. He expected the Messiah would have the same kind of message, but even stronger. We see this in his prophecy. **Matt. 3:11-12 - "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**

So it's not hard for us to imagine John thinking to himself, *"Where's the Hell-fire, Jesus? I thought you came to wipe out sinners by the mighty power of God! Why haven't you done that?"* I mean, Jesus hadn't spoken a word against Rome or overthrown the wicked king who arrested John / He hadn't even lifted a finger to free John from prison!

Instead, Jesus travelled around with the good news that the kingdom of heaven was near. He led a band of twelve no-name Galileans from the working class. Yes, He demonstrated miracle working power, but He went around doing good. He used His power only to forgive and to heal. So where is the justice, the judgment and the Hell-fire in that? Maybe Jesus was some kind of second forerunner to the real Messiah. Maybe the real Messiah was yet to come. So John was having second thoughts. Because he was in prison, he couldn't go and ask Jesus, so he sent word through some of his disciples who asked the question for him.

The point is this...John struggled with **unfulfilled expectations**. The OT promised the Messiah would **free captives from prison and release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. - Isa. 42:7.** But there he sat in Herod's dungeon. Execution seemed certain and imminent. Still today, unfulfilled expectations can trigger doubting. As we see evil advancing in our world...as we witness moral decay / the threat of terrorism / injustice and corruption at every level...believers may question where God is in all of this. World conditions are particularly troublesome for Post-Millennialists to process. They expect the world to get better and better before Jesus returns. Sorry, it's not happenin!

When Bob Liddell, one of our elders, died of spinal cancer at age 47, some believers in our community seemed almost angry at God. They felt Bob's illness was unfair. They questioned why God would allow this cancer to happen and why He didn't intervene to heal Bob. Their expectation was that good men like Bob should be exempt from life-threatening diseases. I mean, godly men like Bob Liddell should be given a pass from things like terminal cancer. Right? But is that expectation realistic? Is it true to life or true to what the Bible teaches about life in this fallen world? Is it our idea or what God says? Faithful or unfaithful, are any of us exempt from life's troubles?

Then too, Christians can become hyper-sensitized by prophecy and the promise of the Lord's return. World conditions convince us things can't get any worse than they are right now / the nations are aligned / we hear of wars and rumors of wars / earthquakes / pestilences / and blood moons have appeared. We're sure these are "two minute warning signs." But discouragement and doubts can settle in when months pass and Jesus doesn't come as expected. Believers don't give up faith in His promised return, but we may stop thinking about it and looking for it the way we once did. The promise of His coming no longer has the purifying effect Jesus said it should have. So these are three factors which may have triggered the question that arose in John's heart and mind...perplexing circumstances / incomplete Scriptural understanding / and unfulfilled expectations. In his mind he wondered... Jesus, **Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"**

**2. How doubts are resolved... – vs. 4, 5** – The point I see here is that Jesus patiently responded to John's question. Jesus didn't rebuke John. He didn't say, "*You, of all people, should know who I am.*" Instead v.4 says...**Jesus replied.** John's men asked the question...**Jesus replied.** He replied by sending John's disciples back with eyewitness-testimony to some miracles Jesus seems to have performed just for John's benefit. He didn't answer John's question directly with a "*Yes I am*" or "*No I'm not.*" Instead He said, "**Go back and report to John what you hear and see**" In effect, Jesus said, "*Listen cousin, you've heard that blind men are seeing again / lame men are walking around / lepers are being cleansed / deaf men are hearing / and dead men are being resurrected. Your disciples have witnessed this with their own eyes. Isn't that confirmation that I am the One?*" The fact that Jesus was performing marvelous miracles was solid grounds to rekindle John's faith.

But listen closely...these specific miracles had been prophesied hundreds of years earlier. They were signs by which the people of Israel could recognize their Messiah. **Isa. 35:5-6 - "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert."**

This comes alive when we compare this prophecy to the way Jesus answered John's question. In **Matt.11:4-6** - Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. In other words, Jesus said, Go back and tell John how Jesus fulfilled the promises of **Isa. 35:5, 6**. Do the blind see? Check. Do the lame walk? Check. Do the deaf hear? Check again. Jesus did precisely what Isaiah prophesied the Messiah would do. Added to these miracles, Jesus healed a leper and raised somebody from the dead... miracles Jesus tossed in for good measure. What Jesus did perfectly fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy. So ultimately...Jesus referred John to the Word that is more reliable than any experience. To resolve his doubts, He took John to the prophetic Scriptures. That's God's way of dealing with our doubts.

In this age, even the greatest, strongest saints may experience deep darkness. None of us are exempt from sorrows or satanic oppression. Most of us will suffer disappointing troubles at some point in our lives. Most of us will experience seasons when we feel abandoned. Most of us will suffer late life illness when death is delayed. But our Savior doesn't break the bruised reed. (**Matt. 12:20**). He hears our pleas for help and He is patient with our doubts. He doesn't condemn us. He understands. And remember this...He has paid completely for any doubt or sin exposed in our pain.

**3. When doubts are overcome... – v. 6 - Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.**" The Lord may not answer with the speed we desire, nor is his answer always the one we hope for. But He will *always* send the help that is needed. His grace will always be sufficient for those who trust him. The hope generated by His promises will often be the sweetest thing we experience in those dark moments when faith is tested. And the reward Christ has in store for believers will be worth it all and beyond our wildest imagination. In John's darkness and pain Jesus sent a promise of blessing to sustain John's faith. He will do the same for you and me.

The Greek word translated **fall away** is like "scandalize" in English. Its original meaning was a "tripping hazard." To **fall away** is to back off from a relationship...to create some distance...to back away from something we once trusted and held to be true. That's what John struggled with. Now most of us don't struggle to believe in God or Jesus...instead, we struggle with just how much He can be trusted when life turns sour. Jesus said, Blessed or happy is person who is not tripped up by perplexing circumstances / incomplete Scriptural knowledge / or unfulfilled expectations. Blessed is the One who doesn't fall away because God hasn't yet fulfilled everything He promised to do.

Let me finish with several suggestions for any doubts that may arise from here to heaven:

1. Be patient during this age when God withholds judgment and reaches out to forgive and to save. It can be perplexing and discouraging to see conditions deteriorate all around us. When so many seem to be getting away with sin we can begin to wonder if God really cares. The Bible has an answer.

**II Pet. 3:9 - The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**

2. Don't even for a moment imagine that anybody is greater or better than Jesus! Jesus is the anointed One sent from heaven. All the prophecies converge and are fulfilled in Him. My Savior and King conquered death and is alive today...tell me about yours.

3. Then finally, do what John did. Take your questions and doubts directly to the Lord. In the process of waiting on God, take a lesson from the Psalmist Asaph. In **Psa. 73** this man of God testified of his struggle with doubt. In **v.15** he said, **If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children.**

In other words, Asaph refused to blab his doubts all around town because he understood the power of words. He knew his doubts could have a negative impact on God's children.

4. The most common doubt among believers is to doubt our salvation. And it's entirely possible that the one who doubts is unsaved. God has given us a book that tells us how to be saved. It's the Gospel of John. **Jn. 20:30, 31 - Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.** So the Gospel of John tells the unsaved how to be saved...we are saved by faith...by believing in Jesus. But John's first letter has a different purpose. It's written to those who are saved but doubt they are. **I Jn.5:12, 13 - He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.** This entire letter was given to assure the saved that they are saved.

So where does faith come from? How are doubts overcome? God's answers for the doubting unsaved as well as the doubting saved are found in the Word of God. That's what we preach and teach and urge you to dig into.