

“John’s Moments of Doubt” – Luke 7:18-28

Wednesday 12/12/18 – Jeff Lyle

After John proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away sin, his own ministry began to immediately and visibly decrease. As his followers became followers of Israel’s Messiah, John retained his ministry of proclamation and calling people to repent. When wicked Herod was rebuked for immorality by John, the angry ruler imprisoned him. Alone and isolated in a filthy cell, John revealed that he was merely human as he began to wrestle with doubts about Jesus. This message reveals the tenderness of God toward all believers when we enter our own moments of weakness, limitation and doubts. Jesus will not forsake us in the hour of our troubled soul.

I. Faith’s Collision with Circumstance (18-20)

A. John in his decrease (18) - “The disciples of John reported all these things to him.”

John went from the fresh air in the wide-open wilderness to the putrid confines of a prison cell. Gone were the large audiences who once hung on his every word. His last message against sin had enraged Herod Antipas and had resulted in John’s imprisonment as a preacher of righteousness. John’s former followers were now following Jesus. John had already declared that he must decrease so that Jesus’ visibility could increase - but he was now experiencing it at a level that he had not likely foreseen. John suffered for preaching against Herod’s sin, and was now utterly alone. Jesus had not prevented the persecution against John. Jesus had not come to rescue John. The best we can tell, Jesus had not even visited the Forerunner in his cell. It was in these deep moments of isolation that John began to experience deep doubts about the identity and ministry of Jesus.

B. John in his doubt (19) - “And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?””

What can fuel our doubts? Prolonged challenges, incomplete understanding, popular misconceptions about God’s presumed obligation to prevent us from experiencing loss and pain, and the harsh reality of denied expectations. As John once proclaimed boldly that Jesus was the One, he now has his dogmatic

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declarations turned into anxious questions. Was Jesus who John really thought that He was? Did John miss something? If Jesus was the Messiah, why was He not rescuing John from trouble? Was it unreasonable to expect the Messiah to be loyal to the messenger sent before Him? These moments were expressed in John’s honest concern that, just perhaps, Jesus was not who John had thought that He was. Countless believers have faced a similar bewilderment in their own times of pain, heartbreak, loss and isolation. Where is God? Who is God? Could I have been wrong about Him?

C. John in his determination (20) - “And when the men had come to Him, they said, John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

To John’s credit, he did not draw his own conclusions without pressing in further for the truth. He may have struggled with doubts, but he enlisted aid from his Kingdom brothers. He did not want to process his doubts alone, so he reached out to Jesus again. It is amazing that John did not fake his faith here. He let Jesus know that he was struggling. He also let his own followers know that his doubts were real. How often believers miss the available help because they are too proud to confess the reality of their doubts to others. Even more dangerous is the possibility that we do not allow ourselves to be honest with God. John was humble and transparent and desperately in need of reassurance. If he could regain his confidence that Jesus was truly the Messiah, he could endure the suffering as being part of the plan of God for his unique ministry as the Forerunner. The key to victory in our own suffering is not always the avoidance or termination of whatever is causing our doubts and distress. Victory is experienced when the presence of Jesus in our suffering becomes more important to us than the escaping from the suffering.

II. The Shepherd’s Lavish Reassurance (21-23)

A. What Jesus does (21)

1. He gave mercy to the burdened - “In that hour He healed many people of diseases and plagues...”
2. He gave deliverance to the bound - “...He healed many people of...evil spirits...”
3. He gave vision to the blind - “...and on many who were blind He bestowed sight.”

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Jesus does not initially give a verbal answer to the question from John’s followers. He allows them to witness His power on display. He wanted to impact John’s disciples with something they would never forget. As Jesus healed people of afflictions, blindness and disease, John’s pupils would have been impacted beyond measure. As demons were evicted from the bodies of scores of people, confidence in the Messiah would have grown in the men’s hearts. Jesus answered with action, not merely with words.

B. What Jesus says (22) - "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them."

Noteworthy is that Jesus chose here to use others to help John in his greatest hour of need. Sometimes, when we are maturing in the faith, God will choose to take us through the humbling process of learning to receive from others instead of directly from Him. Jesus might have rushed to John’s side to personally communicate reassurance to him. But He didn’t. Jesus told the pupils of John to communicate what they had seen in order in order to bolster his faltering faith. Everyone would have recognized Jesus’ actions and words to be a fulfillment of Isaiah 29 and 35, which foretold the Messiah’s ministry to include these specific types of healings. Jesus was telling John that John had not missed it: Jesus was indeed the One.

C. What Jesus desires (23) - “And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

Jesus obviously had a high regard for the spiritual maturity of John. The King actually offers John a gentle rebuke wrapped in a beatitude. It is undeniable Jesus is here telling John not to allow his doubts to get the best of him. Jesus does not shy away from instructing us in difficult seasons of life. He will not waste a single trial or tribulation that finds us. Christians must remember that God “works all things together for good” on behalf of those who belong to Him. His ultimate aim is to purify us and strengthen our souls as He makes us into the likeness of His Son. When we are tempted to feel that He has left us or is not being fair to us, we do well to remember Jesus’s words to John. To be offended with God is to cut ourselves off from the reality of hope. We must relentlessly trust through the trial’s end.

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III. God’s Grace for Those Who Struggle (24-28)

A. The strongest believers can wrestle with doubt (24-25) - “When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts.”

All who were present during this scene would now know of the Baptizer’s struggle with doubts. Some might have judged John as weak or fickle. Perhaps unspiritual lips had already begun to gossip about him in the hour of his weakness. Beautifully, Jesus takes up the defense of the Forerunner. Jesus intentionally speaks affirmation over John in his hour of trial. John doubted, but he was not dismissed by his Messiah. John was the real deal in spite of his struggles. Are we bold enough to imagine that Jesus feels the same way about us when we find ourselves shaking? Is His grace so strong that He still sees the mustard seed of our faith, even when it is shadowed by the darkness of our doubting? John was defended by his King. We all should take great comfort from this.

B. Destiny and ministry do not prevent doubt (26-27) - “What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.”

We must remember that there was prophetic destiny on the entire scope of John’s life. Heaven dispatched an angel to proclaim his birth. Prophecy was spoken over John when he was just a few days old. He was separated unto the Lord for an unparalleled ministry calling. He had broken the prophetic silence in Israel with his sermons in the desert. Great crowds had flocked to John. He baptized the son of God and served to proclaim the beginning of the Messiah’s ministry. All of these amazing realities still did not serve to insulate John from his doubts. Doubts do not disqualify. If we respond properly to our doubts, we can continue to fulfill the plans of God for our own lives. Ministry is not a forcefield that immunizes us from the possibility of doubting God. Yet, true believers will continue to press in to the Lord, even when we are struggling to remain confident with what we have previously been sure of.

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C. Jesus does not walk away when we doubt (28) - “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John...”

Herein is stunning graced: this declaration from Jesus about John’s greatness came in the context of John’s deep struggle with doubt. We might understand better if Jesus had said this when John was at his peak. How amazing that Jesus reserved this undoubtable affirmation of John’s character, life and ministry for the moment when John was at his personal lowest. While others might have been disappointed with John in these moments, Jesus REMOVED ALL DOUBT when He declared John to be the greatest man born of woman up until this season when the Kingdom was being revealed. Take heart, saints. Jesus does not throw away the strugglers. May all strugglers never throw away their confidence in Jesus. Blessed are all who refuse to be offended with Him!