

Lesson: Dealing with Doubt: Questions from John the Baptist

Biblical Passage

Matthew 11:1-19

Supporting Passage

Matthew 14:1-12, Luke 7:18-35

Memory Verse

Matthew 11:5

Biblical Truth

By looking to Jesus and the evidence of His identity as God's Son, we can be encouraged even during difficult times.

Context

While imprisoned by Herod because of his preaching, John the Baptist sent some of his followers to verify if Jesus was in fact Messiah. Jesus responded by pointing to the evidence of His actions. He then publicly praised John and acknowledged his prophetic ministry in preparing the way for Messiah even though some people rejected his message.

Investigation

John the Baptist sent his followers to see Jesus as John languished in prison in the fortress of Machaerus, located east of the Dead Sea. His imprisonment had lasted possibly as long as a year, during which Jesus had traveled extensively throughout Galilee teaching and healing. Ironically, in the course of his journey Jesus' ministry caused questions for John and for others. For example, Matthew 11:20-23 records that the citizens of the three cities in which Jesus spent the most time and performed the most miracles had not accepted Him as Messiah.

With this confusion growing about who Jesus was, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask if He truly was Messiah. Jesus affirmed the truth by pointing them to the miraculous things He was doing as evidence.

Importance

This passage teaches that Jesus is God and Savior. It is important for learners because it points them to Jesus as the rock of their faith in difficult times. When doubts come, learners can rest in the knowledge that the Savior they have placed their faith in will remain with them throughout eternity.

This passage also teaches that The Holy Spirit is God and Empowerer.

Interpretation

Matthew 11:1 After instructing and sending out His 12 disciples on a mission (Matthew 10:1-42), Jesus continued to teach and preach in "the towns of Galilee." These towns may have included Magdala, a small fishing village; Tiberias; Korazin; Capernaum; Bethsaida; and Gadara.

Matthew 11:2-3 The region of Galilee was ruled by Herod Antipas, who actually served under the authority of Rome. He was an evil man who governed both Galilee and Perea, which made an extensive territory on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Herod maintained two fortresses in this Perea region, one of which was at Machaerus, east of the Dead Sea. Herod had imprisoned John in the fortress at Machaerus. Matthew had earlier mentioned John's imprisonment (4:12), but he did not explain the reason for it until later in his Gospel: John had incensed Herod when he condemned the marriage of Herod to Herodias, Herod's sister-in-law (14:3-5). John was used to open spaces and crowds interested in his message from God. But he was now confined to a dark and restrictive dungeon.

Prior to his imprisonment, John had been faithful in preparing the way for Jesus, proclaiming that He would baptize with "the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:11). John had publicly acknowledged Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). He had baptized Jesus, had seen the Spirit of God come down and remain on Jesus, and had encouraged his disciples to follow Jesus.

While in prison, John heard about "what Christ was doing," which probably included Jesus' teachings, His miracles, and His popularity with the people. John likely expected Messiah to bring an end to injustice in the world, perhaps including his own wrongful imprisonment. Yet Jesus had done nothing to set up the earthly kingdom most Jews were expecting from Messiah. Thus John may have been confused about Jesus, wondering if He really was Messiah. John used the phrase, "the one who was to come," which was commonly used by the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament to speak of the One who would enact God's judgment on a wicked and disobedient world. From looking at John's message of repentance, it seems that John was most anticipating this aspect of judgment from Jesus. On the contrary, most people had seen Jesus as a tender teacher up to this time; He taught about God's Kingdom and showed great care for people. This was more in line with the Minor Prophets'

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emphasis in the Old Testament, in which they typically spoke of Messiah's humility: He who was to come would willingly suffer in obedience to God's plan for redemption.

Matthew 11:4-6 Rather than answering John's question directly, Jesus told John's disciples to return and tell John what they had seen and heard so John could interpret the evidence for himself. Jesus had performed miracles: sight for the blind, mobility for the lame, cleansing for the leprosy, hearing for the deaf, and life for the dead. These miracles were foretold in Isaiah 35:5-6, which spoke of Messiah's work. Jesus mentioned the "good news" that was being "preached to the poor," messianic words that were also foretold in Isaiah 61:1-3. Certainly John would have been familiar with both of these prophecies. Jesus knew that John would understand them in light of His ministry. Christ's teaching, healing, and suffering were essential to God's plan of bringing about reconciliation for a lost world. While He condemned people in the towns that rejected Him (Matthew 11:20-24), Jesus' judgment would come later when He returned in power and glory in the end times.

Jesus then added a personal word to John, perhaps as a gentle rebuke either to John or his disciples: "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." Jesus emphasized that those who did not stumble because of their expectations of what Messiah would be like would be "blessed," experiencing a lasting joy independent of external situations.

Matthew 11:7-10 Jesus did not criticize John because of his question. Instead, He praised John. Jesus emphasized that John was not an indecisive, double-minded man who wavered in his opinions (like a "reed swayed by the wind"). Nor was John a comfort-loving individual who pursued the finer things in life and became upset when he did not get what he wanted.

Instead, Jesus affirmed that John was a "prophet." Like the true prophets of old, John was a man who did not falter in his moral standards. He maintained the highest integrity. He fearlessly carried out his ministry despite opposition. And he remained a champion of truth and righteousness in every situation. Yet unlike the former prophets who only foretold of Messiah's coming, John was "more than a prophet"—he was the Messiah's personal "messenger," the one who had prepared the way for Jesus the Messiah (Malachi 3:1).

Matthew 11:11 Jesus emphasized John's greatness. He even said that none was greater than him up to that point. But Jesus anticipated a time when the Kingdom of heaven would come in power (after His death, burial, and resurrection). Then even the "least" person who experienced the fullness of God's Kingdom would be greater than the great man of God, John the Baptist.

The people of the old covenant and those of the new covenant are in contrast here. The people of Israel (those of the old covenant) were focused on God's earthly kingdom with its promises and blessings. They were concerned about earthly justice, influence, and domination. They expected Messiah to bring about their hopes and dreams. They had a lesser focus on heaven and the unseen aspects of God's reign. By contrast, followers of Christ (those of the new covenant, or of the "kingdom of heaven") would be focused on God's spiritual Kingdom with its promises and blessings. While we have a concern for earthly justice and influence, our greater concern is on the eternal aspects of God's Kingdom and the intangible elements of God's reign like love, joy, and peace.

Matthew 11:12-15 Verse 12 is difficult to understand and has been the subject of many different interpretations. The most likely explanation is that it was a rebuke to the Pharisees and other religious leaders in the crowd. From the time when John appeared on the scene in Jerusalem proclaiming the coming Kingdom of heaven, the Jewish leaders had largely rejected him and his message, which meant rejecting the Kingdom as well. Many other people, however, accepted his message and prepared themselves for Christ and His spiritual Kingdom. This Kingdom was "forcefully advancing," first through John's preaching, then through Jesus' teaching. But the Jewish religious leaders were "forceful" in their opposition to Christ's Kingdom, for it was not like the Kingdom they wanted or expected. The Greek word translated as "forcefully advancing" can also be understood as receiving violent or forceful treatment.

John was the end of those who prophesied about the Kingdom of heaven and the coming Messiah. As the last prophet and the forerunner of Messiah, John witnessed the inauguration of the Kingdom he had foretold along with earlier prophets and the Law. Though John had earlier denied that he was Elijah (John 1:21), Jesus affirmed that John was "the Elijah" whom God had promised would come before the appearance of Messiah (see Malachi 4:5). Yet the Jews, especially the religious leaders, by and large rejected John.

Matthew 11:16-19 Jesus further rebuked "this generation," which consisted of the Jewish people in general and their leaders in particular. They had dishonored both John and Jesus as they rejected them, their ministry, and their message. Like fickle children watching other children play a game and refusing to join in, the Jews did not want to "dance" to happy music or "mourn" at the sound of sad music. They were stubborn and seemingly impossible to please. They refused any appeal to join the Kingdom of heaven despite the contrast in the messengers.

John's style was one of strict simplicity, from his clothing and diet to his message. The Jews rejected him, claiming he was

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demon-possessed. Jesus' style was relational and joyous, yet the Jews rejected Him as well, claiming He was a "glutton and drunkard."

God in His wisdom planned these contrasting styles for His messengers. Though the Jews presented false characterizations of both Jesus and John and refused to accept their message, God's purposes were accomplished

Implications

John the Baptist was chosen by God to be the forerunner of Jesus Christ. As such, he was the only New Testament prophet and was given the privilege and responsibility of proclaiming to that generation that *Jesus is God and Savior*. John paved the way for Christ's earthly ministry, but even he came to the point of having doubts about whether Jesus was really the One he was prophesying about. Consequently, John went from being a faithful witness to a confused bystander after being imprisoned by Herod.

If the very forerunner of Jesus can have doubts, we also can become confused and have times of doubt as well. The circumstances we face, the trying times we go through, and even the simple mysteries of God can all leave us wondering if we really have it all figured out. It would not be an exaggeration to say that all Christians have struggled about some aspect of the Christian life at one time or another. Yet it is during the trying, confusing, frustrating—even doubting—times that we really grow as Christians. God has the ability to take seemingly negative situations such as doubt and turn them into learning and faith-strengthening lessons. What is necessary for that to happen is for Christians to admit to God that we are struggling with doubts, seek Him desperately for His answers in His way and in His time, and then respond in faith.

- Are spiritual doubts always a negative thing?
- Where do doubts come from? Satan? A lack of faith? A search for deeper spiritual truth?
- Describe a time when you had doubts about God, but came away from the experience with a greater faith in and understanding of God.
- Do you think that Jesus' actions can strengthen the faith of some people while causing others more doubts? Why?

FREE THOUGHT

"I show you doubt, to prove that faith exists."—Robert Browning