

# When Doubt Creeps In

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     Have you ever struggled with doubt? I'm not talking about doubting yourself, whether you can do something, or whether you're right or wrong about something. Have you ever struggled with this kind of doubt?
- Maybe you're even feeling this right now, today. Sometimes, if we do have doubts, we feel that church is the last place that we can say it.
- Because this is supposed to be the place of faith, right? Maybe you've even been scolded or rebuked for expressing your honest doubts.
- Well, this morning as we look into the Word of God, we discover that one of the greatest men in the Bible wrestled with doubt. And here in the Gospel of Luke, where we've been reading, this is maybe the last place that we'd expect to read something like this.
- [ 1 : 1 9 ]     Three weeks ago, we heard about the jaw-dropping faith of the centurion. Just say the word Jesus, and my servant will be healed.
- Two weeks ago, we heard about how Jesus raised a widow's son from the dead in the middle of his funeral, right in front of everyone. What's next?
- Here's what's next in Luke 7, verse 18. John's disciples told John about all these things, the things Jesus has been doing.
- When calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, Are you the one who is to come? Or should we expect someone else? When the men came to Jesus, they said, John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, Are you the one who is to come?
- Or should we expect someone else? This is unexpected, isn't it? The first thing we see here is some of these disciples of John giving a report to him.
- [ 2 : 3 9 ]     It's John the Baptizer, the guy that we heard about in chapter 3. John had disciples, he had followers of his. And according to Luke, they tell John about all these things that Jesus has been doing.
- And we look, what are these things? The raising of the widow's son from the dead. The healing of the centurion's servant. Possibly even the preaching of this great sermon that we just spent weeks going through in Luke chapter 6.
- So they go and tell John about how Jesus has been doing all these things. And why do they do this? Because John can't go and see for himself. Luke's already told us that he's been locked up in prison by Herod, the ruler of the region.
- Matthew, in the parallel account of this, mentions it explicitly on this occasion. Matthew 11, verse 2. He says, When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him.
- And it's the same question. So John is in jail. And he hears this report of these miracles that Jesus is doing.
- [ 3 : 5 4 ]     Amazing things. And he calls two of his disciples and sends them to Jesus to ask, Are you the one? Or should we expect someone else? How could John be asking this?

If there was anyone who knew who Jesus was, that he was the Messiah, that he was the one that they'd been waiting for. If there was anyone who knew who Jesus was, beyond the shadow of a doubt, it was John, right?

Let's remember who John is. This isn't just any old guy. This is John, the son of Zachariah, the priest. The same Zachariah who was visited by the angel Gabriel at the temple in chapter 1 of Luke's Gospel.

And what did the angel tell Zachariah? The angel told Zachariah that his son would be a prophet, great in the sight of the Lord, and filled with the Holy Spirit of God, even from birth, before he is born.

John was to be the one to go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, a great prophet in Israel's history. John was to be the one to begin the work of turning the hearts of the people back to the Lord, to make them ready for the Lord.

[ 5 : 16 ] Not only this, but John's mother, Elizabeth, was a relative of Mary, Jesus' mother. They exchanged some pretty significant words about Jesus before either John or Jesus was born.

John's mother, Elizabeth, knew by the Holy Spirit of God that her Lord was in the womb of Mary. We looked at that when we were there.

So these were the parents who raised John. Zachariah and Elizabeth, his own father, his own father declared this prophetically on the day that John was named. He said, And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.

He was to grow up to be a great prophet of God, a man who would hear from God directly and speak on behalf of God to the people. And then we heard from Luke in chapter 3 that when John was a man grown, the word of God came to him while he was in the wilderness.

He heard the voice of God and he began to speak. He was going through all the wilderness country around the Jordan River, preaching that people should repent and declaring that God would forgive those who do.

[ 6 : 38 ] And the people were coming from all over the place to hear his preaching and to see him dunking, baptizing people in the water as a sign of their repentance. The people were wondering if John might be the Messiah.

And what did John tell them? He said, no. There is one coming after me and I'm not even worthy to bend down and untie his shoes for him.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit of God. He is far greater than me. Where did John get that message from? He got it from God.

He was a prophet who heard the word of God speaking to him. And then one day Jesus showed up where John was preaching and baptizing and John baptized Jesus and Luke tells us that everyone there saw the Holy Spirit come down in the form of a dove and rest on Jesus.

Not only that, but they heard audible voice of God speaking from heaven saying, this, you are my son whom I love. With you I am well pleased.

[ 7 : 51 ] John was there in the water. When this happened, he saw it. He heard it with his own eyes and ears.

Heard and saw it with his own eyes and ears. In the apostle John's gospel, we read that from then on, John the baptizer began pointing people to Jesus and saying this about Jesus. Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This is the one I meant when I said, a man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me. I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.

Then John gave this testimony. He said, I saw the spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, the man on whom you see the spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

These are the words of John. I have seen and I testify that this is God's chosen one. And from then on, many who heard John began to follow Jesus.

[ 9 : 17 ] John knew better than anyone that Jesus was the one, that he was the Messiah, that he was the very son of God. And now he's receiving word from others about the great miracles that Jesus has been doing.

How could it be that John is now sending these guys to Jesus to ask the question, are you the one who is to come? Or should we expect someone else?

Somehow, surprisingly, despite all John had seen and heard, evidently things are not unfolding with Jesus in the way that John expected.

He was a prophet of God. The spirit of God was in him. He saw the spirit of God and heard the voice of God at Jesus' baptism. And yet John was still a man like us.

And as I mentioned already, where is he right now? He's in prison. Which back then was not a comfortable correctional facility where you're fed and treated well and you're just waiting to get out on parole.

[ 10 : 36 ] It was probably a dark and dirty cell where he was cut off from relationship with people most of the time, alone, perhaps mocked by the guards and laughed at, treated inhumanely, with no end in sight.

Even prophets are not immune to dark nights of the soul, to depression, yes, and even to doubt.

If we look back in time, even the great prophets of old, like Elijah and Jeremiah, were at times greatly troubled, distressed, discouraged, depressed, lonely.

And in those times, sometimes all we can see is the darkness around us, the troubles. All we can feel is the heaviness. We don't know exactly the thoughts of John as he sat there in his prison cell, but maybe it was something like, I know he's the one.

I saw the spirit come down upon him. I heard the voice. I see the miracles. But here I am in a jail cell. And the things Jesus is doing and saying are not looking to me like the great kingdom of the Messiah that we've all been waiting for.

[ 12 : 05 ] What would be true of the Messiah when he comes? We could look back in Luke's Gospel just a couple pages to what Jesus was reading in the synagogues.

What he read in the synagogue in Nazareth. What he read in the synagogue in Nazareth. Chapter 4, verse 18 and 19. The spirit of the Lord is on me, read Jesus, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And you can almost imagine John sitting there in prison wondering, where's the freedom for the prisoners like me? Where's the setting of the captives free?

This doesn't feel like the year of the Lord's favor to me. I believe that doubt had taken hold in John's heart.

[ 13 : 15 ] Some will have a hard time agreeing with that, but it's so hard. I mean, is it hard to believe that the prophet in his current circumstances, even with all that he has seen, is it hard to believe that he could experience doubt?

Didn't Jesus chide his disciples frequently with these words, ye of little faith? Were they not truly worried and panicked and anxious about all sorts of things, though they had Jesus with them all the time?

The one they believed was the Christ. I believe that doubt took hold in John's heart. That there was a mixture of faith and doubt and powerful feelings and confused thoughts.

As John looked at how things were going with Jesus, and it wasn't going as he expected. Where's the kingdom of this king? When does the rule of this son of David begin?

Are you the one who is to come? Or should we expect someone else? Some will say that it's possible to be 100% sure of your salvation in Jesus, to have complete assurance beyond the shadow of a doubt, and actually I agree with that and I believe that, but I also believe that it's possible to have true faith in Jesus and really struggle with doubt, and really struggle with unmet expectations.

[ 14 : 55 ] Maybe it's prayers that you've been praying for a long time, and it just seems like they're going unanswered. Maybe it's a way that you are expecting God to intervene and do something, and you've been asking him to do it, and it's been years.

Maybe it's a hardship or trial in your life that you never thought you would face, simply because you're a Christian. Some will say that if you don't have 100% certainty of your salvation in Jesus, then there's something wrong with you, and you might not believe at all, or even get the gospel, or even know Jesus.

Are you truly born again? If the Spirit lives in you, do you not hear his assuring voice in your heart? Stop doubting. Stop doubting. Just put your trust in him and in his word.

It's simple, isn't it? It sure seems that simple when you have that 100% certainty, and you're not wrestling with doubt, when things are going well enough.

But trials like John is going through right here in the story often have a way of exposing where our faith still needs to grow. And so John sends these two guys to Jesus to ask him the question, are you the one, or should we expect someone else?

[ 16 : 22 ] Let's carry on. We read in verse 21. John. At that very time, Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses, and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind.

So he replied to the messengers, go back and report to John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. It seems, according to what Luke says here, that on this very occasion, that they're seeking an audience with Jesus to ask John's question for him, Jesus is doing great miracles, left, right, and center, healings.

It says, at that very time, or quite literally, at that hour, Jesus cured many diseases, sicknesses, evil spirits, and he gave sight to many who were blind.

And so these two guys arrived to Jesus in the midst of a great miracle session, maybe similar to the one that was described earlier at Peter's house in Capernaum, back in chapter four. And, you know, I imagine Jesus surrounded by all these people, pressing in on him, or perhaps lining up to be healed.

[ 18 : 05 ] And one by one, Jesus is doing, as we've read in some of these miracle accounts, laying his hands on them, be clean, be healed, get up and walk, be cleansed.

And we notice that Jesus, when they finally get to asking the question, doesn't give them a straight answer, a simple answer to these, to this question.

He doesn't say, yes, I'm the one. He says, go back and report what you have seen and heard, and then describes what they've seen and heard.

He lays it all out. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised. What is Jesus saying by all this?

All of these people are having their trouble, their ailments, their problems reversed and cured. And these are not small things. These are things that only God can do.

[ 19 : 10 ] But I think there's even a deeper message here. I think Jesus is encouraging John to think about what he expects from the Messiah.

To go back and to remember what God has already declared about how things will be about the Messiah, expectations. Years ago, this is what God said through the prophet Isaiah.

I'm just going to read this little longer portion here from Isaiah 35, the first seven verses. The desert and the parched land will be glad. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom. The desert will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it. The splendor of Carmel and Sharon.

They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God. Strengthen the feeble hands. Steady the knees that give way. Say to those with fearful hearts, Be strong.

[ 20 : 14 ] Do not fear. Your God will come. He will come with vengeance, with divine retribution. He will come to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. And it just keeps going on.

This was a message of hope and deliverance spoken through Isaiah to Israel long ago about how God would come to save them and bring about the great reversal for them.

And how is that reversal described? The eyes of the blind will be opened. The ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame will leap like the deer.

The mute tongue will shout for joy. It's like Jesus is saying, these are the very things that I've been doing, John. Do you see it? God has come to save you.

[ 21 : 22 ] I have come to save you. The things Isaiah and the prophets told you to look for are happening. I'm doing them.

I am the one. Look at the signs and believe. And then there's the last thing in this list of reversals that Jesus tells them to report.

Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard. Report to him that the good news is proclaimed to the poor. The good news is proclaimed to the poor.

Isn't that what Jesus has been doing? Proclaiming good news everywhere he's going. In fact, Mark's gospel kicks it off in this way.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come, he said. The kingdom of God has come near.

[ 22 : 22 ] Repent and believe the good news. That's what Jesus has been doing. So much of the message of Jesus is good news. In fact, the whole story of Jesus has come to be called the gospel, which means the good news.

The angel declared to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth, I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. The Savior has been born.

He is Christ the Lord. And since then, since Jesus began preaching, he has been preaching the good news of the kingdom, the good news of salvation, of forgiveness.

And we notice, Jesus says, Report to John what you have seen and heard. The good news is proclaimed to who? To the poor.

What is Jesus just finished saying to the crowds before this? Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

[ 23 : 26 ] Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. We looked at that weeks ago.

He was talking about the great reversal that's coming for the people of God. And I think there's an even deeper message than that for John here too.

Tell him what you have seen and heard. The good news is proclaimed to the poor. I think that was meant to trigger something in John's mind. The words of Isaiah 61 verse 1, which we looked at earlier, where it says, The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

In other words, I am that one. Look at what I am doing. I am the one whom the Lord has anointed, specially chosen.

Look at what I've been doing. I've been proclaiming the good news of God to the poor. John, Jesus basically encourages John to do what we all must do.

[ 24 : 54 ] In his moment of despair and doubt, he encourages John to look at the signs that he has been doing and follow them to the unseen truth that they point to.

That Jesus is the one. Isn't it something though, that in this reminder, which he sends back with these two guys, look at the next line words after proclaim the good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners. Isn't that something?

Jesus encourages John, this prophet in prison, to believe in him as the spirit and dwelt anointed one of God, by pointing him back to the promise that the Messiah will set the prisoners free.

It's as though Jesus is saying, John, look at all I have been doing for people. I've been turning things upside down for them.

[ 25 : 59 ] The blind are now seeing, the deaf are now hearing, the lame are now walking, the dead are raised. The poor are hearing the good news proclaimed to them, that they will inherit the kingdom of God, though right now they have nothing.

And your time will come, John. Your reversal is coming too. I will set you free from that jail cell in time.

From the darkness in time. Have faith in me. See the signs. Believe in me. At the center of the Christian life, and at the center of our experience as followers of Jesus, is faith.

And faith is trusting in what we cannot see. We walk by faith in Jesus, and not by sight.

Not by what we perceive. Not by what we feel. John couldn't see in the darkness of his prison cell, how this was going to turn into the glorious kingdom of God.

[ 27 : 16 ] This wasn't, it seems, the path to the throne that he was expecting, the Messiah. And sometimes we feel that same way, don't we?

Our experience, what we see, what we feel, as we go through life, doesn't always seem to fit with what we expect from God, according to what we read in his word.

And that's where faith comes in. It's not blind faith. It's not that God hasn't revealed anything to us, or that he hasn't given us any signs which point to those unseen truths, and that unseen reality.

He has. We might even think sometimes, if God would just speak to me with an audible voice, or let me see him with my own two eyes, well, guess what?

John actually experienced that at Jesus' baptism, and yet he still came to wrestle deeply with doubt. Listen to how Jesus finishes off the message for John.

[ 28 : 26 ] Verse 23 says, Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. Some other translations say, Blessed is he who does not take offense at me.

One commentator said, Literally, the word used here means to trip up, or to be entrapped. But here it's used figuratively, of someone who refuses to accept Jesus' claims, or to draw near to him.

Now, I'm not sure, really, what Jesus meant by this, but I wonder if he's saying something like this, Are you willing to trust me, John, even if I haven't yet measured up to your expectations?

Don't let what this all looks like on the surface cause you to stumble and fall. Look at the signs. Look at the word of God spoken long ago.

Look at what I'm doing. Have faith in me. It will, in the end, turn out to exceed everything you thought and imagined.

[ 29 : 34 ] Wait. You will see it. One day I will set you and many others free from the prison cell. And you will see.

May these words of Jesus encourage you today, if you're wrestling with doubt. Or despair. Or loneliness.

Others have felt this too. Don't let go of the faith that you have in Jesus. He will not, in the end, disappoint.

The great reversal is yet to come. It awaits the end when Jesus returns. At Jesus' word, the blind have seen.

The deaf have heard. The lame have walked. Lepers have been cleansed. The dead have been raised. And if you have faith in him, your time, your great reversal, is coming too.

[ 30 : 44 ] Let's pray. Father in heaven, we thank you for this little snippet of what happened long ago.

And not what we expected, but precious to us, because we, most of us, have all experienced a struggle similar to this at one time or another.

And we want to pray, especially for those who are going through that right now, that you would be present with them, that you would speak to their hearts, and that you would strengthen their faith in you, and that you would lead them and help them through whatever difficulties they may be facing.

Be with our brothers and sisters around the world, who right now are sitting in a jail cell, because of their love for you. We commit them to your care.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.