

In Defence of Doubters

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[0 : 0 0] well last Sunday was Easter and by biblical accounting this is eight days later and this would have been the evening when Jesus made himself known, showed himself to Thomas in his resurrected state with the wounds in his hands and in his side and so when I was considering what might be preached this evening, I saw that eight days and thought, huh but you know, the thing about this story is that we have done a disservice to some people that is that we have taken from this story and given the moniker to Thomas as the doubting Thomas but in fact, he's not doubting, he's disbelieving and he does a disservice to true doubters because unbelief and doubt are not the same thing they're different and we're going to talk some about that tonight let's pray for just a minute

Lord God, we need your help we need your help to understand your word aright and God to trust that as we consider your word together that you are at work because it is your word and your word is what renews our hearts and minds your word is what instructs us your word is our guide, our light, our lamp to our feet so we ask your blessing upon this time and God, give me grace in Jesus' name Amen Doubt Doubt is a serious thing there's no two ways about it I'm saying it's going to be we'll talk about how it's different from doubt it's different from unbelief but doubt is still serious stuff James says whoever is asking for wisdom to do so in faith with no doubting for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind for that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord he's a double-minded man unstable in all his ways that's pretty serious stuff but doubt is not unbelief even in that passage when he is like a wave that is tossed he's unstable it means that there is a place that he is rested in of uncertainty

Os Guinness who's written quite a bit about this subject and I commend it what his writing's about doubt to you he says contrary to widespread misunderstanding doubt is not the same as unbelief so it is not the opposite of faith rather it is a state of mind in suspension between faith and unbelief to believe is to be in one mind about accepting something as true to disbelieve is to be in one mind about rejecting it and to doubt is to waver somewhere in between the two and thus to be in two minds this important distinction uncovers a major misconception of doubt the idea that a believer betrays faith and surrenders to unbelief by doubting I'm hoping to use John the Baptist we're going to get back to Thomas later but I'm hoping to use

John the Baptist in the incident that we read to talk about just this matter this idea of doubt versus unbelief first though before we do let's remind ourselves a little bit about who John the Baptist is John the Baptist is the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth remember they were beyond the age of having children but God had purposed that there would come a one who was going to be a messenger who would come before the chosen one and John was going to be that one and so when he is born his father prophesies over him he says behold I send my messenger and will prepare the way before me that's referencing Malachi and he goes on to say and you child will be called the prophet of the most high for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people and to forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the way of peace and coming into his ministry we're told that he was out in the wilderness he wore camel hair he ate locusts and honeys he's not a man who's faint of heart he's living rough and then he goes into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and he's getting quite a hearing people are coming out to hear him and he self-identifies as the one the voice crying in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord make his path straight every valley shall be filled every mountain and the hill shall be made low and the crooked shall become straight and the rough places shall become level ways and the flesh all flesh shall see the salvation of God various parts of Isaiah put together that is who John the Baptist is and that's how he self-identifies that he's fulfilling prophecies of the one who is going to come and prepare the way of the Lord and he does this with zeal with courage with strength you know when some of the Pharisees come out what does he say to them great to see you guys so glad you made the effort out to come and hear what I had to say no he calls them a brood of vipers you brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the wrath to come bear fruits in keeping with repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father for I tell you

God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire that kind of preaching is labeled as good news he's preaching good news now we usually think of good news as Jesus loves you he wants you to come to him and forgive all of your sins because of all that he has accomplished well that is good news but John is preparatory right he's preparatory to the one who is coming he's preparing the ground and so he's calling them to repentance and when he speaks about the one who he's preparing for he says this I baptize you with water but he who is mightier than I is coming the strap of whose sandals I'm not worthy to untie he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire his winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor to gather the weed into his barn but the chaffy will burn with unquenchable fire yeah and then when Jesus comes to be baptized he's present he baptizes Jesus and as he's standing there he sees the spirit of God descending like a dove coming down and resting upon Jesus and he hears this voice from heaven and saying this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased and then we learn about

[7 : 04] John the Baptist in the opening chapter of John's gospel when he's standing there with some of his disciples Jesus walks by and what does he say behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world listen to this this is he whom I said after me comes the man who ranks before me because he was before me I myself did not know him but for this purpose I came baptizing with water that he might be revealed to Israel and John bore witness I saw the spirit descend from heaven like a dove it remained on him I myself did not know him but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me he on whom you see the spirit descend and remain this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and I have seen and have borne witness that this is the son of God and he says he must increase and I must decrease and John the Baptist he was a real prophet he spoke truth to power you know Herod the Tetrarch was reproved by John because because he had taken his brother's wife and Luke reports and for all the evil things that Herod had done and you know what did it landed him in prison

Jesus says about John the Baptist I tell you among those born of women no one is greater than John now given who John the Baptist is how that we have read about him isn't it remarkable that we learn of a question that he has for Jesus are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another why would he ask that question he declared that Jesus is the son of God he's the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world he's the one the voice crying in the wilderness it's Jesus why would he ask are you the one or should we be looking for another well possible reasons that are given is that one is that he wanted his disciples to hear it first hand from Jesus that they might believe and follow him right

I mean John would say but he wants to send the disciples you know come on whose reputation are we trying to protect here that John was secure in his in his faith and he just sends these guys off you've got to hear it from his mouth don't just take my word for it go listen to Jesus himself that's a little too contrived for my money some argue that it was a kind of dawning of faith for John the Baptist that is that he knew Jesus was important he knew that indeed he could be the one that was the one who had been prophesied would come that he was going to prepare the way for and that what he's really wanted to ask is say I'm right I'm right right you are the one but I agree with those who think the question represents John's state of mind doubt had crept into his head doubt had crept into the head of John the Baptist and what are the possible reasons for that doubt well one is that perhaps

Jesus wasn't what he expected him to be if we go back and look at some of that language what does he say he'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit with fire his winnowing fork is in his hand he's going to clear the threshing floor to gather the wheat into his barn the chaff he'll burn with unquenchable fire see it's possible that because John's particular expectation that he had for the one who would come after him that expectation that there would be there would be someone who comes in this kind of strength this mighty figure who would come and just clear the threshing floor get rid of the false teachers get rid of the oppressors and establish once again the glory of Israel but Jesus didn't really seem to be moving in that kind of ministry it's evident that Jesus is extending mercy and demonstrating more akin to Isaiah's vision of restoration that he speaks of for instance in Isaiah 35 so perhaps Jesus wasn't what John expected and that caused him to have some doubt perhaps it's because

John felt like he didn't fulfill his mission see it might be that John was concerned that he had not fulfilled his mission he knew that he was the voice crying in the wilderness that he had been chosen to prepare the way for the Messiah but what if he had gotten it wrong what if he had led the people astray what about those disciples that he said behold the Lamb of God and were told that they immediately began to follow Jesus what if he was wrong and here he was in prison if he had gotten it wrong there's no way to correct the problem and he had failed so it could be that there would be a deep grief to John if the one that he said was the Messiah was indeed not the Messiah and perhaps that caused doubt to creep in but for the need for certainty to be sure to not doubt it's only heightened when a price has to be paid for believing the story of Jesus and perhaps that's what's going on here

[12 : 29] John was in prison he's being held by an authoritarian ruler who was in the league with the occupying army and the likelihood of death awaited him he knew this and that isolation and the impotence of that existence could cause him to waver in his conviction whatever the provocation John the Baptist sent those disciples to Jesus because doubt had crept into his thinking are you the one are you the one or should we be waiting for another if it's another I have blown it completely you know doubt is no stranger to Christians come on let's be honest let's be honest do you ever doubt the claims of Christianity even as a believing Christian if we were to read the incident that took place just before this encounter with John's disciples and Jesus you know what happens Jesus is entering a town called

Nain and he's entering the city gate and out of the city gate comes a bear carrying a dead man and so Jesus goes over he says a few words touches him and the man is suddenly brought back to life I mean if we were walking on Dumbarton Road and we're going by the Methodist church the door opens up out comes the coffin and somebody walks up to it and goes knocks on it rise and the thing pops open the guys up that's street theater that's street theater for us and when we look at such accounts like that don't you ever wonder you go wow really I mean I've never seen anything like that and then there are those tough passages in the Bible about how Israel is told to go into the promised land and just wipe everybody out and then there's the exclusivity of Christianity right Jesus says I am the way the truth and the life no one comes to the father except through me now I had a neighbor one of my neighbors who

I had a conversation with her about Jesus and I brought up that very idea and she goes she looked at me kind of smiled and said I can't believe that my pious Muslim mother-in-law is going to go to hell when we look at really the exclusivity the demands of the gospel the demands of scripture about who it is who God is and what it is that we are to believe we live in a pluralistic society you know sometimes you feel like can all those people be wrong will all of those people just go to hell see I think these kinds of things can cause us to question to have that I'm not saying you don't believe I'm saying you creep to a place where you go hmm and I tell you suffering does it the most doesn't it suffering can cause all questions to arise if God is good why this why is it that my you know my loved one has to go through this pain why is it that that child was born with the condition that he had what is it in suffering that causes us to doubt because we have ideas about God that we get from the

Bible that he is good and that he promises blessing but when suffering comes along it can feel like God is absent Simone Vey French philosopher later becomes a Christian says affliction causes God to be absent for a time more absent than a dead man more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell a kind of horror submerges the soul just read Psalm 44 Psalm 44 and Psalm 88 they don't end happy the guy has questions what is going on here doubt creeps in you know I wonder one of the reasons that Luke wrote his account his gospel was because he had reasons to believe that the one he was writing to was beginning to doubt see at the beginning of the gospel of Luke what does he say now remember he's writing to someone named Theophilus which by the way means God lover lover of God a friend of God and he

Luke says I've gone out I know other people have written things but I'm writing to you for this purpose he says so you may have certainty concerning the things that you have been taught you may have certainty of the things that you have been taught why would you need certainty unless there's doubt or the possibility of doubt so either Theophilus might have he might not win that Theophilus was doubting or he's just giving a little preventive message because he's about to unfold something that's incredible to read the gospel of Luke is incredible to read it's where this guy rises from the dead right on the beard I want you to know this so you might have certainty of what you believe so if we take that name Theophilus and we apply it to anybody who has placed their faith in Christ who's a lover of God we can accept the reality that we need at times certainty certainty again I want to repeat doubt is not unbelief that's one thing to understand doubt is not that excuse me doubt is not the same thing as unbelief unbelief is certainty belief is certainty but to have doubt is something else it's a slipping into a place where one is not certain now doubt doubt can become full blown unbelief but it's not yet in a place where unbelief has displaced belief it's a place where one is in as

[18 : 35] Osginas says is in two minds it might be it might not be I think it is I think it isn't now I noticed I said earlier right the doubt is serious it's serious stuff and it's not a happy place to be indeed it can be a perilous place but considered biblically it can be a very fruitful place George MacDonald says this a man may be haunted with doubts and only grow thereby in faith listen doubts are the messengers of the living one to the honest they are the first knock at our door of things that are not yet but have to be understood yeah not yet but have to be understood the truth that we read about in scripture about Jesus that has to be understood there is no other name given among men under heaven by which we must be saved as the apostle says if Jesus didn't rise from the dead we've got nothing to talk about these are things that we have to believe in these are things to be believed and to be believed in with certainty but if there's doubt then you're not believing with certainty but you're also not an unbeliever you just have a question so how can we deal with doubt how can we deal with it in others and how can we deal with it in ourselves well if we go back to Jesus treatment of John

I think we will get some encouragement the disciples of John ask Jesus a question and what does he do I'm going to suggest he listens well and he answers appropriately he listens well and he answers appropriately what do I mean by listening well that he's active in his listening that's another way it gets described active listening and what that means is you are really listening to what the other person has to say and not what you'd like them to say or what you think they're going to say but actually what they have to say you're not filling in the blanks you're not over talking them even if you open your mouth you know in your own head you're listening to what they have to say Jesus listens actively and he listens compassionately and he listens without fear see sometimes when people express doubt to us and they're Christians we're already formulating answers we just want to brush it to the side we say oh no you shouldn't think like that you have to have faith you believe in God I know you believe in God but doubt is present so we need to really listen to what's going on in their hearts and minds and we need to listen compassionately for the other is in a travail of their soul you've heard that expression right the dark night of the soul as someone wrestles with

Francis Schaeffer had a famous dark night of the soul and that's why it requires compassion and Jesus is compassionate towards John he doesn't send back a rebuke he doesn't say are you kidding me you saw the things that I did I heard you say that I'm the Lamb of God you know that you were chosen before the foundation of the world to be the one who would come before what's your problem bucket up be a man but he listens and he listens with compassion and he listens without fear that is that John's doubt does not feed his doubt now I don't think that it ever would for Jesus but it does for us someone else's doubt can really feed our doubt somebody stands back and goes I mean really Jesus just spoke to that guy and he came up and he goes yeah absolutely and we go home for a while and you go wow that is a tough one other people's doubt can feed our doubt but we need to look listen actively compassionately and without fear if we are there to assure them to bring them to a place of certainty then we do that without fear because we are standing in the place of strength at that moment while they're in the place of weakness so we listen actively compassionately and without fear but we also want to answer appropriately see after we have heard after we've understood we want to answer appropriately that is we want to answer with an answer that meets or directs or addresses the doubt and that's what Jesus does see how does he answer he wants

John to think through what's causing him to doubt and I think it's in that spirit that he sends John's disciples back to him with the answer that he gives listen to this answer again it says in that hour the same time that these guys showed up to ask this question in that hour he healed many people of diseases excuse me and plagues and evil spirits and on many who were blind he bestowed sight and he answered them go and tell John what you have seen and heard the blind received their sight the lame walk lepers are cleansed the deaf hear the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them and blessed is the one who is not offended by me see these are all signs that comport with Jesus' announcement in the synagogue in Nazareth from Isaiah 61 and they're signs that comport with God's promise of restoration that we read about again in Isaiah 35 they're all signs of the fact that the kingdom has been ushered in with Jesus' arrival the kingdom of God has been ushered in and people who have suffered because of the corruption that's unleashed upon the world through the fall of Adam

Jesus comes as that promised one who would overcome that failing and anticipates with his actions the final victory by doing these deliverances now and so when he's sending the disciples back with this answer it's appropriate to the question that John is asking are you the one are you the one that's going to bring restoration and Jesus answers essentially saying this might not be what you expected John but if you think about the restoration that God promised you'll see that the first signs of it are being accomplished even now don't take offense don't stumble or doubt you fulfilled your mission well done good and faithful servant so if we're going to help others who are doubting I'm suggesting we need to really listen to what the nature of their doubt is and we have to have compassion because we know ourselves we can fall into that same place and then we want to answer and we want to think about what we're going to answer that it really addresses what they're doubting how do we help ourselves when we doubt what do we do when we have doubt

[25 : 32] I'm going to suggest we look it square in the face just look at it for what it is consider it not as unbelief but as uncertainty and then go after the things that cause that doubt see John did something to alleviate his doubt didn't he he asked a question related to his doubt he gave voice to his doubt you know how powerful that is to actually say I don't know I don't know I want to believe but help my unbelief he gave voice to his doubt and so when doubt comes in it's appropriate to not try to push it to the side to act as though it doesn't exist uncertainty brings a level of unsettledness into your soul you have to give voice to it then he went and he sought out help one needs to have those questions answered and that was just what

John did he had a question he gave voice to it and he wanted an answer and then that answer can bring a level of settledness and what he also did is he went to the source and he went to the source in faith and I'll explain see what's latent in his action of setting out his disciples to Jesus to ask this question there's a bottom level of trust that God has an answer to his doubt there's a certainty his faith is being challenged it's been weakened at this moment perhaps for the reasons that I suggested but the mere fact that he sends his disciples means that he hasn't slipped into unbelief he's not sitting in a cell and going I've had it Yahweh is a joke Jesus is a joke what a loser that's not who he does that's not who he is he trusts that God will have an answer for him his baseline trust that

God is still God that God can provide an answer he's the one who should have the answer and will have the answer and so in faith he sends his disciples to the source he needs to hear from Jesus the answer that he's looking for and if we look at ourselves if we're trying to understand how it is that we might deal with our own doubt well give voice to it ask the question go ahead and seek out help for that but also go to the source see Luke's created his account so that God lovers can have certainty and so a good place to start it would seem is to the very source book that might be the source that's causing you to doubt the Bible but look at it afresh look at it afresh with new eyes that you're coming to it now asking the questions that you need to ask it and let me tell you the Bible stands up to scrutiny

I've had more than one student going to university and they go to those first few classes that first few weeks and they come back and they're like they're shaken because there's a whole lot of other presuppositions going on in the classroom than they've grown up with I had to assure them listen the Bible stands up to the deepest scrutiny you can give it it's trustworthy it's faithful it is indeed the word of God and when we have doubt even though we look at something in the scripture and we scratch our head it's going to be the very place that we go to we go to the source and we do so in faith believing that God wants to give us an answer he wants us to walk in certainty he wants us to walk in faith now when we do that we might need some help and that's why God has put people in the body of Christ who have knowledge of what's in the scripture who can answer some of the tough questions not all of them believe me but he can answer some of the tough questions and help that process of bringing about certainty settling the soul into a place of real belief and faith and comfort that's why you have a pastor that's why teaching elders in the church because they're there to help you and help all of us himself included to deal with the reality that we live in a fallen world and we ourselves are trying to overcome all of our fallenness by the grace of God through the power of the

Holy Spirit now when we go and we begin to ask questions of God in order to find out what the answers are to the things that cause us to doubt I'm not going to suggest that God is going to pull back the veil so we can know all the secret things of God but we will through a work of grace by the Holy Spirit it will be a process by which God will bring peace to our hearts and to our minds and I think we can press toward that we can say to God I have this uncertainty I'm bringing that uncertainty before you I'm praying about it before you I'm seeking out answers to it from you what I'm asking you is to give me confidence that even if I don't get an answer that satisfies my fallen human rational mind I can rest in confidence of who you are see James is right a double minded man is indeed unstable the one who has doubts is like the wave of the seas driven and tossed about by the wind and God wants us to have absolute confidence in him no matter what the circumstances are listen to this lovely verse and I use the term lovely because it is just so lovely this is from Jude after he's warning against false teachers who come in stirring up trouble causing people to drift to doubt he says this but you beloved building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the holy spirit keep yourselves in the love of

[31 : 43] God waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life and have mercy on those who doubt isn't that giving you assurance if you're someone in a place where if you ever slipped into doubt God understands it he doesn't chastise you for it he says you need to know that I am God you need to believe I see that you're doubting that's not good you don't want to stay there you want to look square in the face and do the kinds of things that perhaps I've suggested but to know that God through his word has said to the body of Christ to each other have mercy on those who doubt do you remember when the disciples are out on the water and Jesus is walking on the water and they think they see a ghost and Jesus says to them immediately Jesus says take heart it is I do not be afraid and Peter answered him

Lord if it is you command me to come to you on the water and he said come so Peter got out of the boat walked on the water and came to Jesus but when he saw the wind he was afraid and beginning to sink he cried out Lord save me and Jesus said sorry I hope you know how to swim you didn't believe why didn't you believe see you Peter now Jesus immediately reached out his hand took hold of him saying to him oh you of little faith why did you doubt when they got into the boat the wind ceased and those in the boat worshipped him saying truly you are the son of God see for a brief moment Peter's faith was fully resting in Christ he experienced what it's like to be utterly persuaded in the reality of God made flesh but then the waves and doubt crept in but what does Jesus do he takes him by the hand and he saves him so let's go back to disbelieving

Thomas not doubting Thomas disbelieving Thomas he received even greater mercy remember what he said unless I put my finger in his hand now I know I'm reading into that what the tone of voice was he might have said unless I put my finger in his hand and his hand and his side I don't think I'm going to believe I don't think that's what it is you know before with Thomas do you remember when Jesus said he's going to Jerusalem he says well let's all go with him so we can all die Thomas is a real pragmatist you know he's a reader he's a glass half empty kind of guy and he just says you've got to give me the deal you've got to give me the facts or I'm not going to believe it and so Jesus shows up and what does he do he says here Thomas put your hand here put your hand here don't be disbelieving but believe and what's Thomas' response we know my Lord and my God and Jesus says have you believed because you've seen me blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed that's true the fact that we will never have Jesus standing before us until we're in the new heavens and the new earth is a reality we have to deal with and we do come to our faith we come to Jesus in faith and it is a blessing to believe but I think there's enough evidence to suggest that God understands when those beliefs get a little wonky and a little wavery but he responds he responds to our cry for help for our desire to want to be certain and that's a work of grace a work of the

Holy Spirit and I think we can trust God for it so not doubting Thomas it's disbelieving Thomas he is certain there's no such thing as a resurrection and now he is certain that there is he didn't believe now he believes but when you're caught in the middle that's doubt it can move either way but out of faith out of love for Jesus we pursue certainty and God will bring it God will bring it let's pray Lord God we we're also in so many ways we're confronted by our just our fallenness and one of the ways I will confess anyway is is sometimes yeah doubt and yet God you always prove yourself faithful you do you prove yourself faithful we're so grateful so grateful out of your love that you understand who we are that we're from dust that we're we're just we're not there yet we're not all that we are in

Christ we see in a glass darkly as Paul says then then then face to face so Lord we pray that you would sustain us meet us in our doubts help us to give voice to them and when we're helping our brothers and sisters to listen listen carefully listen compassionately and then answer with a question that begins to meet the need and Lord you are good to us so we trust that even as John did even when he was in that place of doubt uncertain whether he had done the job he was supposed to do whether Jesus really was the one he was supposed to be preparing the way for he still reached out he sought the source and Lord may we come in faith always in you even when we have trouble believing all this I pray in Jesus name amen

[37 : 51] According to our instant