

John the Baptist Questions Jesus

Matthew 11:1-15

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Charles grew up in Toronto. He started drawing cartoons at the age of 17. Through the 1930's, he lived off his ability to draw. But in 1936 he met Christ. He converted to Christianity and became an evangelist. He started a church. In 1945, he and Torrey Johnston of Chicago met with a number of youth leaders from around the U.S. They wanted to reach young people for Christ. Out of these meetings came an organization known as Youth for Christ. Torrey Johnston was the first president and they hired a young man named Billy Graham as their first evangelist. Shortly afterward, Graham and Templeton made an evangelistic tour of Western Europe. They roomed together and held crusades in England, Scotland, Ireland, Sweden and other countries.

But in 1948, Templeton began attending Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. Though he hosted a weekly religious television show he began to doubt the faith. Finally, in 1957, after a long struggle with doubt, he declared himself an agnostic, which means no knowledge of God. He completely rejected the Christian faith. In 1995, he wrote a book about his rejection of the faith entitled "Farewell to God."

How can a person who was sold out to Christ at one point in their life doubt him to the point of denial later? Templeton persevered in his rejection of the faith to the very end of his life. Yet it has happened to many. Doubt can happen to you and me. There can be times in our lives where we are white hot in belief about Christ. But there might be others where we struggle with doubts. Or you might know someone who once believed but now doubts.

If you've ever experienced doubt towards God or doubts about your faith, you are not alone. The twists and turns of life can shake our faith until we doubt God. But when that happens, how will we respond? We get an opportunity today to ponder this as we return to the Gospel of Matthew.

We started going through Matthew last Christmas as part of our overall discipleship vision. We believe God calls us to be disciples and disciple makers of Jesus Christ. A disciple lives like Christ and obeys Christ's teaching. If we are going to know and obey Christ, we have to know Him and His teachings. The Gospel of Matthew provides us insight into both.

Matthew 1 and 2 started with the infancy narratives. He points out how many details surrounding Jesus' birth fulfilled the expectations of the prophets. Then Jesus comes to John the Baptist for baptism in Matthew 3. This was followed by Jesus journey into the desert to be tempted by the devil in Matthew 4. Chapters 5-7 contained the first

great section of Jesus’s teaching now known as the Sermon on the Mount. It concluded with the crowds marveling at Jesus’ teaching because it was with authority not like their teachers.

Through chapters 8 and 9, Jesus demonstrates His authority over demons, stormy seas, death, blindness and muteness. He feels compassion for the crowds because they are like sheep without a shepherd. So he calls his disciples to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into the harvest field. This past summer we spent time in the second major section of Jesus teaching in Matthew 10. He sends out the disciples to announce the arrival of the kingdom of heaven. He warns them of persecution and opposition. But he encouraged them to have no fear and to continue to spread this message of Good News to those who would receive it. Now we enter chapter 11.

Through the first third of this Gospel, the crowds have shown great enthusiasm towards Jesus. But things begin to change. Crowds still follow, but the mood changes. Dissatisfaction with Jesus and the way He goes about things happens more frequently. This will ultimately lead to the massive rejection of Jesus as Messiah and death on the cross. Matthew introduces us to the beginning of this opposition from an unexpected source. As we examine this today, my prayer is God will make us more aware of obstacles that hinder our trust in His continuing work in our lives. But then we will have opportunity to turn to Christ to help us overcome these obstacles or at least begin the journey to overcome them by His strength.

Please find Matthew 11 in your Bibles or on your devices.

Matthew 11:1-15 (ESV)

11 When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.

²Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ⁴And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

⁷As they went away, 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?⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear let him hear.

As the 12 disciples go on their missionary assignment, Jesus Himself preaches and teaches in the cities. While He does this, messengers from John the Baptist arrive. Now John was somehow related to Jesus. In the Christmas story, Mary, Jesus' mother, goes to visit her relative Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist before both babies are born. John is born, he grows up and becomes the forerunner to Jesus. He goes into the desert adopting the posture of a prophet and begins preaching. He creates quite a stir to the point that people travel out of the cities to hear him. He openly criticizes the religious establishment of the day. Back in Matthew 3:7, he calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers who needed to repent. I knew the "brood of vipers" is not a common insult today. But I think it was quite an insult. He prophesies that one will follow him bringing judgment upon the nation. Many are baptized by John symbolizing their repentance and readiness for God's coming. John prophesies about Jesus. John even baptizes Jesus.

But in Matthew 4:12, Matthew gives quickly comment on John's fate. "Now when he (Jesus) heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee." Matthew does not tell us anymore at this point. He will explain everything in Matthew 14. There we will discover that John was arrested because he had the gall to confront Herod Antipas the Jewish ruler of the southern region of Palestine. Herod took his brother's wife as his own wife while his brother was still alive. Can you imagine that? A brother takes his brother's wife? That would be awkward at Christmas. John confronts, Herod does not take the feedback well. So Herod arrested him and kept him in one of his prisons about 160 kilometers south of where Jesus was preaching.

The text tells us in verse 2 and 3, "Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?" What? John – aren't you the one who preached with such boldness in the wilderness? Aren't you the prophet who delighted the crowds by publicly confronting those religious rulers that so many knew were corrupt and legalistic? John, you told them about the coming one. And you have heard of the deeds of Christ – raising the dead, healing many, quieting storms and exorcising demons. Yet you wonder if Jesus is in fact the Promised One – the Messiah? What's wrong with you John? Why would you send your disciples on a journey that would take them maybe 5 days one way to ask Jesus if he's the messiah?

Well, if we've never been in prison, it's pretty easy to judge those who have been there and suffered the despair that often accompanies it. In this case, the prisoner was innocent. He did right yet suffered for it. Wasn't this Messiah supposed to come and baptize with the fires of judgment? Surely someone who could raise the dead had the power to overcome John's imprisonment. John is in difficult circumstances but they may not have been his greatest struggle. John may have experienced disappointment with the way Jesus carried out His ministry. Where was the judgment? Don Carson puts it like this. "Had the corruptions and cruelty of Caesar been abruptly shut down? Had hypocritical temple leaders been banished? Had the disgusting corruptions of Herod Antipas been confronted? Why was he, John the Baptist, languishing in the stifling heat of the prison at Machaerus fortress for challenging the morals of Herod while Jesus the alleged Messiah did nothing about this injustice? John had doubts about the continuing saving activity of Jesus. He's not alone in doubting, Charles Templeton certainly went there. You and I have likely been there or currently are there. But what is the source of our doubts? With a message I listened to years ago from Don Carson about doubt and my own reflection on this passage, I want to give you eight sources that can lead to us doubting the continuing saving activity of Jesus in our lives.

Reasons people doubt Christ and His saving activity

1 – Not enough information about Jesus and the Bible - Some doubt Jesus as a Savior because they just don't know anything about him. They may never have read the Bible. They may never have been exposed to solid teaching about Christ. They may only know Jesus as a curse word. They may never have met a true Christian. If you don't have any information about someone or something and you've asked to commit your life to it you will likely doubt.

2 – A Chosen Philosophical Position – Some people have concluded there is no God. You can only know truth through what can be scientifically proven. Or they have adopted a particular framework that is not Christian. So they would have doubts about their need for any saving activity in their lives by this Jesus the Christians worship.

3 – 10000 little decisions moving away from belief – Some people were once passionate followers of Christ in their young adult years. Then they got married and had to begin the journey of buying a home, advancing in career, having kids and dealing with aging parents. It's hard to get to church when the kids are young and sick so they chose to go only when it was convenient. Then the job demanded more and the parents got sicker and the business trips involved really interesting people who had no time for Christianity. And it became something that the wife should look

after if it was good for the kids and would fit in the schedule. But eventually she got tired with the lack of support and tension and found it easier to not do church except on special occasions.

And one day they wake up and something about Christ is on the news and they find themselves saying, “I never believed that stuff anyway.” Did they go from passionate follower to unbelief overnight? No. It was 10,000 little decisions that created this creeping separateness that has now grown into a grand canyon of separation.

4 –Not enough sleep – One bad sleep or short sleep and you hear things like “I hate my job” or “I hate school. I’m not going anymore.” But a good night’s sleep and we’re thankful for our jobs and the opportunities to learn at school. A bad sleep or a season of not sleeping and is ripe ground for doubt. The devil loves those opportunities to seed doubts in our minds when we’re tired. Sometimes a simple choice of get some sleep helps immeasurably with our faith.

5 Abusive background that challenges our ability to trust – I don’t have an abusive background so I can’t relate to those of you who have. But as I understand it, those who have experienced abuse can face challenges trusting others in general because a sacred trust in their own lives has been broken. The trauma from that broken trust goes deep. So, one can adopt a cynical attitude towards anyone asking for trust including God Himself.

6 Opposition to the Faith - When people oppose something that you’re part of it can have quite an impact. Think about how opposition to the faith affected the disciple Thomas. He had seen Jesus do miracles. He had witnessed Jesus demonstrate power that no one else could come close to. So he was likely convinced that Herod, the Romans or the Pharisees who opposed Jesus would be no problem. Yet the majority reject Jesus, Thomas witnesses Jesus’s arrest. Thomas may have seen or certainly heard about the crucifixion. He, along with the rest of the disciples went into hiding. On resurrection Sunday when some of them claimed to have seen Jesus alive, he would not believe unless he actually touched Jesus.

We may generally like to be part of something successful or popular. But when few approve or a large majority of people oppose something we believe in, we may begin to doubt its validity or the value of continuing to believe.

7 – Tough Life Circumstances – When you receive a jolt in life that turns your world upside down, it can be tempting to doubt God and His faithfulness. If you lose a child or there’s an accident or a devastating diagnosis or something unjust at work or in life – it’s tempting to conclude God has stopped loving. Or God has failed to come through and can’t be trusted.

I believe this last reason or source of doubt is what troubled John the Baptist. **8-Religious Disappointment** – John and his disciples adopted a strict approach to faith. They fasted and spent time in the desert. They expected the Messiah to bring judgment quickly and preached a message of warning. But then they see and hear about Jesus and the disciples attending banquets with sinners.

Jesus preaches a message of hope. He spends most of his time with the poor and marginalized and does not appear to confront those in need of judgment. Things were not moving in the direction or at the pace of John's expectations. So he sends these disciples to directly ask Jesus the question he may have been wondering about for a while. "Are you the one who is to come or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus does not just answer "Yes, I am the one." Verse 4 - 4 And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." Each one of these works can be found in the O.T. prophecy of the Messiahs works. Matthew has just presented us with evidence of these works. Jesus directs John's disciples to consider the mission of the Messiah more broadly than they have. Yes, judgment would eventually come from this Messiah. It would first come in the form of preaching and exhorting. Then came the cross. Then Jesus would ascend and will one day return to render judgment. But at this time the kingdom of heaven's advance happened through the healing and saving of individual lives.

Then Jesus adds a mild rebuke. Verse 6 – Blessed is the one who is not offended by me. Or some of your versions may say "Blessed is he who does not fall away on account of me. This is a beatitude or blessing not found in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus proclaims that anyone who can take Jesus as He is and as He carries out His ministry is blessed. The person who continues to trust in Jesus saving work even though things are not happening according to our expectations or timetable will be blessed. You know that situation that you've prayed about for years; you know that loved one who has not yet come to Christ; you know that rebellious son or daughter who has not yet turned to Christ. Blessed is he or she who does not stumble in continuing to trust Christ even facing these circumstances. Jesus saving activity continues according to God's purpose and timetable.

We might think "well, I became a Christian years ago. I was saved back then. So I don't need any more of God's saving activity." But if we've adopted that viewpoint, we have an incomplete view of salvation. You see, salvation

doesn't only happen at the moment we come to Christ. Certainly that is a huge moment. When we put our trust in Christ, God sees that and regenerates us or raises us from spiritual death to life. He forgives our sin and justifies us. So we have been saved from the penalty of sin and no longer live under the righteous condemnation of God and His holy law. That part of salvation is past tense. Some Christians think that's all they need. They've done with God's saving work until I die. But we all need continual ongoing salvation now from the power of sin. That's called sanctification. The work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in our lives empower us to overcome sins. We need this power of the Spirit every day to be saved from the power of these sins in our lives. So we need to continually be saved by God through the power of Spirit from the power of sin.

We also need future salvation which involves coming through death into heaven and then one day being resurrected with our new resurrection bodies. That will be the ultimate salvation called glorification. That will be the day we are saved from the presence of sin. So Justification is salvation at some past moment from the penalty of sin. Sanctification is salvation in the present from the power of sin. Glorification is salvation in the future from the presence of sin.

We need to continue to trust Christ and his saving activity in our lives through whatever doubts and obstacles we face today. **To persevere in trusting Christ through times of doubt, turn to Christ with the doubts.** That's where John the Baptist really got things right. He didn't just keep on doubting and spreading confusion with his disciples. He went right to Jesus with these doubts so that Jesus could help him.

After John's disciples leave, it's like Jesus helps the crowds with doubts they might have. We don't know if the crowds heard this exchange between Jesus and John's disciples. But the crowds certainly knew of John and the impact of his ministry. Yet now he's in prison. Was he a fraud or a failure? Was the one he pointed to the same? Jesus helps the crowds through their doubts in the next verses.

In verses 7-9, Jesus reminds them who they went out to see in the wilderness. They didn't go out to see a reed swayed by the wind. The tall reed grasses that grew along the Jordan river easily bent and were broken off. John was not a weak person who changed his message according to the desires of the crowd. He was in fact in prison because of his strength of resolve to confront challenges and speak the truth.

They didn't go out to see a man dressed in fine or soft clothes. That was for princes who lived in palaces. John lived a strict lifestyle with his continual call for repentance. Jesus reminds the crowds that they went to the desert to hear

the first prophet sent from God in four centuries. He was the promised messenger who would go ahead of the Messiah. Jesus quotes the last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, who prophesied about 400 years earlier.

If you have a Bible, just turn back one book from Matthew to the last book of the Old Testament. In chapter 3, verse 1, Malachi declares for God “Behold I will send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me.” Jesus quotes this in Matthew 11:10. Then look at the end of Malachi 4:5-6 – Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

What does Jesus say in Matthew 11:13-14 – “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come?” John was not literally the Elijah of the Old Testament. But he was a type of Elijah who announced the coming of the promised one. This makes John the greatest person up to that time. He was the greatest prophet not because he performed better than Isaiah or his message was better than Jeremiah. He was the greatest because of the great one who followed him. John was the final prophet of the Old Testament. He was the last prophet of that era announcing the coming of Messiah bringing in the kingdom of heaven and the New Covenant.

So Jesus helps these crowds with their doubts. John was no flash in the pan preacher whose message amounted to nothing. He was in fact the promised forerunner; the greatest prophet; the greatest among those born of women meaning all humanity up to that point.

But how can Jesus help us with our doubts today?

In affirming John, by extension Jesus strengthens His own claim as Messiah. If John is the Elijah, then the one he to points is the Christ. Jesus helps John and the crowds with their doubts.

Well, if you don't trust in Christ and his saving activity because you don't have the information, then dive into the information. You can access the Bible online or take one home today from the back table if you don't have one. Pray a simple prayer – Jesus – I don't know you and want to learn about you. Will you reveal yourself to me through the Bible?

If you've adopted a philosophical stance that rejects Christianity – does it have the ability to see you through death and into the afterlife or might Jesus have a better answer than your system?

Have you made 10,000 little decisions that progressively moved you away from God so that now you find yourself doubting everything? Then turn back and say Lord, I want to return to you.

If you're exhausted get some sleep. Ask others to help with your burdens. Go to bed earlier and see how things look after a few nights of better sleep.

If you were abused, pray for strength to guard against projecting your cynicism or struggle with trusting onto Christ.

If you're facing difficult circumstances now, like John was then, ask God to help you broaden your perspective to Him doing something different than what you may have expected.

If you doubt because of opposition to the faith, well we're all going to have to deal with this more and more. Jesus even alerts us to this in verse 12 "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force. *There is resistance to the advance of the kingdom of heaven by people, rulers and authorities both human and otherwise.* John was in prison at this moment He would soon suffer a violent death. Jesus would suffer the violent arrest, crucifying, of Jesus. It has continued since Jesus' death time with the killing of Christians just because they are Christians through the centuries. It continues today in regions controlled by ISIS and radical Islam groups. It continues verbally and emotionally in our culture with violent rejection of Christian principles and beliefs but the majority is not always right. But Jesus can empower us to persevere through such opposition.

Maybe you are disappointed, ask God to reveal if you're disappointment is with Him or God's people. If it is with God, likely you need to see the bigger picture. John likely looked only at the judgment piece of Christ's coming. But he and his disciples needed to broaden their perspective to include the good news piece.

If your disappointment is with God's people, welcome to the club. We are all sinners. God's people will disappoint one another. But if we expect a perfect people of God, we're placing our expectations in the wrong era. That era will come. But right now, we live in the already, not yet era where we already have the kingdom but not yet the fullness of the kingdom; we already have the Spirit but not the fullness of perfectly walking by the Spirit; we already have eternal life but are not yet living in our resurrected sin free bodies. So we already fellowship in a Christian community of saved sinners but one day we will experience the Christ like community of God's glorified people. So ask Jesus to give you this strength to love.

Whatever it is, I invite you to come to Christ now as we prepare to meet Him at His table. Come with your doubts. Come to talk with Him. After a time of prayer, we will meet at His table to remember what He did through the cross.