

What About Doubt?

by Steve Zeisler

Spiritual doubt is a dark, painful, anguish-- filled experience. Have you ever thought that the gospel is not true, or, perhaps, that you are not a Christian? Territory that seemed to be secure is now under attack. Those questions strike you with force. They are legitimate, genuine questions.

I want to distinguish doubt, the subject of our study this morning, from normal caution or inquiry, where you have not made up your mind about something, where you are going to be very careful to find out the facts first. Sometimes we speak of non-- Christians as "doubting the gospel" when they are still considering its claims. But what I want to ask you to consider today is a time when faith seemed to be in place, where it worked, and was depended upon, but then, suddenly. the reality disappeared.

Your experience may have taken the form of doubting the gospel itself, so that the Bible message seems ludicrous, and even crude-- God thundering away on a mountain, giving stone tablets to some obscure desert chieftain. It does not seem real or spiritual anymore. It does not sound like God. It seems very human and filled with error.

When I am subject to doubt, my experience is not to doubt that the gospel is true, but to doubt my place in it. Although I have known for a long time that Jesus loves me and that I love him, sometimes my conviction of those things disappears. I find myself wondering, "Am I really a Christian? Do I really have a place in the purpose of God? Do I really belong? Is my wretchedness really covered by the blood of his cross?" This is an important subject to discuss because we often try to fight doubt by using inadequate weapons. We either cover it up or get involved in some kind of Christian service, hoping that the doubt will go away.

Now in these studies we are looking at passages in the gospels which reveal the character of Christ. We want to be reminded of the person of Jesus, how he interacted with people, how he encouraged and taught others. Last week we studied a passage from the beginning of chapter 7 of Luke, a passage where we saw an example of outstanding faith. Today, however, we will look at a passage, just a few verses further on, describing what we might call outstanding doubt. I hope that our insight into the character of Christ here will reveal the sensitive, accepting way he acts as a counselor, as a shepherd, as a pastor to his friend John the Baptist, who was under a siege of doubt. Luke 7:18-23:

And the disciples of John reported to him about all these things. And summoning two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are You the One who is coming, or do we look for someone else?" 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 coming or do we look for someone else?' " At that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He granted sight to many who were blind. And He answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me."

Of all the characters in the Bible who suffered from doubt, John the Baptist would seem to be the least likely one to experience it. He more than anyone would seem to have had advantages that would protect him from going through periods of doubt.

Consider some of those advantages. From what we know of his family, his upbringing must have been a very positive experience for him. He was not the product of a broken home. His parents were godly people who loved the Lord. They loved each other, and they were humble in their service of the Lord. They were not filled with religious hypocrisy. They did not act one way on Sundays and another way the rest of the week. They

must have had a special freedom to share with him the things of God because they knew his destiny, they knew he would become a prophet. When we are under attack, when we seriously doubt our faith, many of us think that if we had come from a different family, if we had had the advantages of a supportive, loving, godly family we would not be plagued with this kind of gnawing uncertainty-- "If only my family had been different, I could be a different sort of person." But John had the advantage of a godly family, yet even he was subject to doubt.

John had another outstanding advantage. He knew, absolutely and for sure, what God's will for his life was. Wouldn't it be nice to know without any question precisely what God wanted you to do with yourself? John had two forms of communication directly from God to tell him the kind of person he ought to be. First, an angel appeared, announced his conception, and told his parents that John would be the forerunner of Messiah. As he grew up, therefore, John could have heard every day of the week (if he needed to) the reassuring words, "God sent an angel to tell us that you are going to be a prophet. You don't have to worry about what college to go to. You are going to be a prophet, there's no question." Then second, John could go to the Scriptures, to Isaiah and Malachi and other places, and read about himself. In a unique sense the Scriptures talked about him directly. The messenger sent before Messiah was predicted in detail. What a tremendous advantage it would be to know God's will for your life, to never feel that if you had done this or that differently that you would be a different sort of person, that you would not be subject to doubt if you clearly knew what God wanted you to do. But John had that advantage, yet it did not protect him. He still doubted.

Another advantage John had was that he was raised in the desert, away from the urban environment, away from the centers of fleshly indulgence and peer pressure. All of us at one time or another have wished we could move away from the Santa Clara Valley and go live in the Sierras, to raise our children in a small town where they did not have to meet drug pushers on every street corner and pornography in every book store, to get away from this kind of life so we can live in a purer and healthier environment. But John had that advantage too. He was raised in the wilderness, away from the corrupting neighborhood influences which could have lead him to sow his wild oats while still young and reap all the memories, the guilt feelings, the bitter recollections later. Once again, we see that John's advantageous upbringing did not protect him from doubt.

Then consider John's ministry. I can't think of anyone to compare with John in terms of the success of his ministry. Many of us think of ourselves as useless Christians. Things we try to do for the Lord just peter out and don't accomplish much. The people we talk to don't listen; our prayers seem to hit the roof and come back. We're such ineffective nobodys for Christ. But if we were successful we wouldn't be so subject to these doubts, we feel. If we had a sense of accomplishment in the Lord's service, then we would be reassured about him and our place before him, we think. John had a phenomenally successful ministry. We are told that all of Judea went out into the desert to hear him preach. And not only were the numbers great, but the depth of his ministry was very great indeed. People fell to their knees in genuine repentance of their sins. They turned to God again, waded into the river and were baptized. A tremendous, deep-seated response to the love of God came about because of John's ministry, so much so that even his enemies grudgingly had to respect him. Nobody could deny that John was a prophet of God, even the people who hated him, yet John doubted.

If we were to list John's advantages over folks like us, most important of all, perhaps, was the special reassurance he had of the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. As he grew up, his mother could have reported to him time and time again that not only did they know his role in God's plan, but they had the word of angels to the effect that Jesus, his cousin, was the Messiah. But even more than that, John heard the voice of God making the same declaration. We are tempted to think, "Boy, if God would just speak from heaven and tell me who I'm supposed to be or how I am to resolve this problem, that would sure settle things!" But John had exactly that advantage. As he was baptizing the Lord, the Spirit descended as a dove onto Christ, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son." Now how is it possible that a man with all those advantages could find himself sending messengers to Jesus to ask the question, "Are you really the one or should we look for someone else?" If you ever have doubts about yourself or about the faith, I hope you will realize you are in good company. You are not alone, you are not some kind of pariah who does not belong with real Christians. If you sometimes battle with doubt it doesn't mean that you have some indelible flaw in your character. Jesus said that no man born of woman was greater than John, and yet John doubted.

Let us look more closely at his question. The first thing to notice is very obvious and simple, but for that reason it is easy to overlook, perhaps. When John realized that he was no longer certain that Jesus was the Messiah he did not try to cover that up. He did not redouble his efforts to act spiritual or seek some mystical experience so as to make the doubts go away. He did a very simple thing: he asked Jesus for help. It is amazing how hard it is for us to take that very simple step, to admit le. somebody, "Look, I'm really struggling with this whole thing

It's really hard for me now. I don't know where I fit anymore. I need some help." But John was courageous enough to not hesitate. He went directly to the Lord and said, "Help me Answer my question. Are you the one or not?"

The wording of his question is also important because it will help us see what his problem was. John was a first century Judean. He grew up attending temple service, listening to the rabbis teach about the coming Messiah, so his expectations about Messiah were formed from scripture, but also from what the people around him thought Messiah would be like. If we look at John's question in that light, therefore, it is clear that his problem was that he expected the Messiah to be quite a different figure than Jesus. John expected a popular, military figure who would galvanize the people to spiritual interest and to strength of purpose, who would throw off the yoke of Rome, who would give Israel her rightful place at the center of the nations again. Whether he meant to or not, that is what John imagined when he thought of Messiah. But then he sees that Jesus in no way resembles his mental picture of him so he is doubting, he is disappointed.

We can imagine him as he sits in Herod's dungeon wondering to himself, "If the Messiah were really here these arrogant Roman soldiers who march all over God's land would begin to be afraid they would sense that their day was over, but I see no evidence that these Romans are any less arrogant, any less violent than they were before Jesus came onto the scene. There is no indication that their rule is coming to an end. If Messiah were really here the phony, puffed-up hypocrites who run our religious system, the Sadducees, the Pharisees and men of the flesh like Herod, would sense that their thrones are tottering."

Even more personally and more deeply, perhaps, John was wondering, "If Messiah were really here, God's prophet wouldn't be rotting in this prison. God would honor his servant and I wouldn't be facing my death." Not long after this, as we know, Herod had him put to death. John expected God to act in a certain way, and because he did not do so he was subject to tremendous doubt.

Many of us labor under similar illusions. Many of us have led ourselves to believe that because we are Christians we will not have to suffer, perhaps. We need to recognize that somewhere deep inside is the notion that if we are Christians the Lord will protect our children so that they will not be subject to the same kinds of pressure as other children. But that expectation is not part of the biblical witness. It is a foolish, wrong, naive expectation. If we don't deal with this, if we don't correct our thinking that God will act this way or that, no amount of evidence can reassure us about the truth of the gospel. If we think that Christians are not supposed to suffer then there is nothing we hear, no voices from heaven about Jesus, no proof of the empty tomb, nothing will relieve our doubts about Christianity or our fears about our secure place in it until we are willing to turn loose those false expectations.

Jesus' ministry to John is right on the mark; it is most helpful. When these men came to him expressing John's doubts, Jesus was not embarrassed. He was not even particularly concerned. This question does not take him by surprise, it does not shock him. He does not even raise his voice. (That ought to suggest something to us about whether or not the Lord will raise his voice to us if we express our doubts to him.) Jesus calmly receives the word of these messengers, then he continues his ministry of healing. He sends the men back with a report.

"Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them."

The really exciting thing about that report is that Jesus deliberately quotes the Old Testament passage in Isaiah 61 which clearly refers to the ministry of the Messiah. He is reminding John to think in biblical terms about what the Messianic age will be like. He is deliberately saying, "John, think in terms of what scripture says to

expect about Messiah, not what your local rabbi or your friends taught you to expect." Isaiah 61 describes the Messianic ministry, so Jesus is not contradicting what the scripture teaches us, rather he is contradicting the wrong expectations we allow to creep into our thinking. His first word to John, therefore, could be summarized this way: "Go back and rearrange your thinking so that it conforms to what scripture teaches, and nothing else."

We will always be disappointed with Christianity if we have a misinformed notion of what the Christian life is supposed to be like. Christianity will never meet up to our specifications if our specifications are wrong. We have to go back to scripture and discover what ought to be happening. If you are a Christian and you are experiencing suffering you are right in line with God's plan. He promised that we would suffer, but that through suffering he would strengthen us. If you are a Christian who periodically finds yourself the center of a spiritual war, you are right on target. Scripture tells you that there will come evil days when spiritual warfare is going to make you the point of the battle, so you need to stand firm and protect yourself with the armor of God. There is nothing strange about that. It is not evidence that the Lord has failed you or that you are somehow not part of the program. If anything, it is evidence that you are part of the program.

If you are regularly misunderstood by the people around you, if you are not given credit for all the things you deserve, that is not evidence that the Lord has let you down or that he has stopped loving you. You ought to expect that you will be misunderstood and that people will take you for granted occasionally. In due course, when he is ready, Jesus will honor you, but not as soon as you might if you were in charge. If you experience dry spells in your Christian life, that is not evidence that there is anything wrong with your Christianity or anybody's Christianity. You ought to expect dry spells. The Scripture would teach us to expect them. When we are doubting is not the time to work harder or run faster so that we might have wrong expectations met. Rather, that is when we should step back and say, "What am I expecting anyway? Why am I surprised at this?" This is critical, and this is exactly what Jesus does for John. He goes back and quotes Isaiah, telling John's messengers that what they have seen is precisely what scripture said would happen when Messiah came.

Jesus concludes his message to John with these words, "Blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me." You stumble over something when you are looking in the wrong direction. If Jesus were a rock in the middle of a path and you were looking at the clouds you would stumble over him. If you were looking at the rock, however, you would not. Once I went to pick up a friend at the airport. The communication got garbled, so my friend was in one place expecting me to pick him up, while I was expecting him to be someplace else. Many hours and many phone calls later we were still searching for each other, although we probably walked right by each other half a dozen times. The problem was that my expectation was wrong. We were looking in the wrong direction, stumbling over one another, in effect, trying to make this contact. "Blessed is the one who doesn't stumble over me," Jesus says. "Blessed is the one who sees me the way I really am. Blessed is the one who expects Christianity to be the way God expects it to be, because if your expectations are correct you will not stumble."

I would like to mention two things in closing. First, if you are having trouble with doubt, if your Christian life does not click right along at 60 miles an hour with no bumps, if you are the kind of person who occasionally, or even frequently, desperately wonders, "Are these things that I am counting on true, and do I really belong?" then get help. Don't be embarrassed to admit that you need help. There is nothing unusual about you. The greatest man ever born of a woman doubted that way, yet he was wise enough to send to Christ and ask, "Help me. Answer my question." If you need help, ask for it. Let some of the Lord's servants who are doing all right that day help you.

The second thing I would advocate, based on this study, is for people like you and me to become more and more men and women of scripture, not of habit, not given to some sort of cultural version of Christianity that pertains to this day and age, but knowing what the Scriptures say about life and what it is supposed to be like. What should prayer be like according to God's Word? What should Christian fellowship be like? What is all the whole range of truth that the Bible teaches us about? We need to see this truth in its own terms and not allow ourselves to stumble over it because we are looking in the wrong direction. Get help if you need help, and be ruthless with the expectations that you have allowed to creep into your thinking. Tear them out if they are wrong and replace them with the Word of God, the truth of God. That is the greatest defense we can have

against the kind of doubts that John the Baptist experienced.

Lord God, thank you that you are committed to us, that you have given us your word. What a remarkable gift it is to us. We need to love you more, to be more excited about seeing the world as you see it, to see you clearly enough that we don't stumble over you. We ask that you'll create that kind of response in us. In Jesus name, Amen.

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