Doubt

Matthew 11:1-24
Key Verse: Matthew 11:5
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.

Is it wrong to doubt God? What if we doubt our faith in God, or the existence of Jesus, the value of church or even if God created the world? What if we doubt that living by faith is worth it? And when things get difficult, and pressure is coming from every direction, we may doubt if we're doing the will of God and we ask ourselves, "Is this really what God wants me to do?" Or when we see all the evil in the world and the persecution of Christians, we may even doubt that Jesus cares about us. Even though God is clear, sometimes in life everything isn't always black and white to us and we doubt. Does God condemn those who doubt him? What do we do when we have these doubts about God? In this passage today, we're going to be comforted because we find out that we're not alone. In fact, one of the greatest men who ever lived even had doubts of his own about Jesus. And my prayer is that through this passage, all of us will know what to do when we experience doubts.

Our passage takes place after Jesus had sent his disciples out for some field work training. Let's take a look at verses 1-3. "After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. **2** When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples **3** to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"" If you remember, Matthew first introduced John back in chapter three. He was a popular figure living in the desert preaching the gospel and baptizing people in the Jordan river. He was so popular and baptized so many people that John got the nickname "the Baptist." This drew the attention of the religious leaders and by chapter four we find out that John had been thrown in prison. As John's ministry begins to wind down, Jesus' ministry begins to ramp up. Jesus calls his first disciples, and heads out healing the sick and preaching about the kingdom of God. All the while John sits in prison.

At first, it's surprising to see that John is the one asking Jesus the question, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Because it was not that long ago that John had spoken with such confidence about Jesus, hailing him as "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." And even as John baptized Jesus, he witnessed the dove that came down from heaven as God spoke out loud telling everyone how much he loved Jesus. At that time, John had no doubt about who Jesus was, so much so that he said Jesus' power and influence should increase and his should decrease (John 3:26–36). But now after spending time in prison, John's question doesn't sound so sure anymore. It true, John was a great prophet, but he is still a man, subject to disappointment and depression just like the rest of us.

John must have had great expectations of Jesus, and although the Lord didn't disappoint him still

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he wasn't quite fully satisfied either. As John sat there rotting in prison, arrested by Herod the Tetrarch, his only sources of information about Jesus was the rumors he overheard from the guards and maybe his brief interactions with his disciples. Who knows exactly what John heard about Jesus, maybe bits and pieces of his miracles, maybe the complaints of the rulers about Jesus. He had conflicting reports so he really didn't know what was going on beyond his bars. Maybe he wondered, "why would one who had promised to free the prisoners (Luke 4:18) not get John out of jail? Most likely John also wondered why there were no signs of the imminent judgment of the wicked that he had predicted back in chapter 3 (Mt 3:10). In fact, Jesus' messiahship didn't look like the political and military liberation so many Jews hoped for (cf. John 6:15). John had put all his hope in Jesus. And maybe now he was asking himself, "Was all my hope in vain?" Unrealized hopes are a frequent source of doubt. And here is something that happens a lot, we tell the Lord what we want him to do for us and then when he fails to meet our expectations, we start to wonder, "Is God out there? How can the Lord let me down like this? How can He let this happen? Why aren't my prayers answered?" Or, in John's case, "If Jesus is the Messiah, why hasn't got me out of prison and freed Israel from Rome?"

Genuine faith is not easy. No wonder Jesus said in verse 6, "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." No one is immune to this temptation. In Genesis we find Jacob who wrestled with God. And even one of Jesus' first disciples earned the nickname, "The Doubter." The story goes, when the disciples' told Thomas about Jesus' resurrection it seemed too incredible to believe. So, he refused to go along with them, saying, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." (Jn 20:24) A week later when Jesus appeared to the disciples again, he let Thomas have his way, the disciple immediately confessed his belief (John 20:28). Jesus spoke beyond him to everyone that would not have access to this physical proof, yet would trust Jesus anyway. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (Jn 20:29) Neither Jesus, nor do the Scriptures, condemn doubt. They realize that faith implies doubt. We needlessly criticize ourselves for our occasional doubts. Doubt itself is neutral; it can go either way. Doubt is like the proverbial fork in the road, it's the force that compels us to search for the evidence upon which faith is built. The choice is left up to you, like in the Matrix when Morpheus holds up the red pill and the blue pill. Neo still has to make his choice. Doubt is just the stimulus, it's what we do with it that really matters.

So, what did John do when he encountered doubt, verse 2 shows us that he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask the question that was in his heart, "Are you the one?" John's doubt caused him to seek the Lord. (Here I want to express that there are two views, that I know of, about why John sent his disciples to Jesus, one that he was doubting and the other is so that his disciples could find out who Jesus was for themselves because why are they still following John, he's in prison. And I can see it both ways, but I think my understanding has changed a little over the years and I hope I make it a little clearer as I go on.) When John doubted, he sought God with the very question he was struggling with. We shouldn't worry, "if we doubt does that make us weak? Will it affect our relationship with God?" God can handle our doubt, he understands us and addresses our needs. Jesus' response to John was not rebuking, but a specific answer to his question. Look

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at verses 4-5, “Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: **5** 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.” When Jesus gave this response to John, he was saying, look at the evidence don’t just take his word for it. Jesus also wanted to remind John that his healing miracles weren’t random, they had specific messianic significance. The miracles weren’t stand alone, they were supposed to connect to God’s promises. Jesus’ response was connecting to what the prophet Isaiah prophesied hundreds of years earlier (Isa 29:18–19; 35:5–6; 61:1) And we see in Luke chapter 4, at the beginning of his ministry Jesus reads this quote from Isaiah’s scroll chapter 61:1-2 and says, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” (Lk 4:20) and the people are amazed.

Verses 7-15 are another reason that I think that John had a little doubt. “As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John:” Jesus realized there was a danger that the crowd would begin to look down upon John because of his doubt. He wants to reinforce John’s reputation as a prophet and great man. The crowd shouldn’t misunderstand him just because he had a couple questions. So, Jesus asks the crowd a question, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind?” Was John a person without any conviction that was swayed by every new thing that he heard? No, quite the opposite, John was locked into his convictions, so much so that he was willing to go to prison over it. John wasn’t a “reed swayed by the wind,” he is a prophet, and not just any prophet, but one that had the spirit of Elijah who according to the prophecy (Malachi 3:1; 4:5) would prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

Even though Jesus said that John was the greatest man to ever live, yet, when compared with the citizens of the kingdom of God, he is the least among them. John could only point to the one who would baptize with fire and the Spirit; yet the citizens of the kingdom would live with Jesus forever. John was a lone voice crying in the wilderness but in the kingdom of God there would be a great host of people in fellowship with each other. Jesus said that those who believe will go on to do even greater things than him (Jn 14:12).

Verse 12 has a very different feel to me in this new translation of the NIV than the previous one. The old version said, “**12** From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful people lay hold of it.” While the new translation says, “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.” My older study Bible had notes that suggest something similar to the new translation, so I guess the original Greek words can go either way when you translate to English. But again, I am leaning toward the newer translation because I think it connects better to the way the passage flows. Throughout history those who proclaim the truth about God have always come under attack.

In verses 16-19 Jesus shows how this happens. “**16** “To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: **17** “‘We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ **18** For John came neither

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eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’[19] The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.”” The critics condemned John for his strict, ascetic life, because he didn’t eat or drink, and they criticize Jesus because he did eat and drink. Therefore, Jesus says the religious leaders are like children in the marketplace who amuse themselves with games. First, they play Wedding, which requires dancing and singing; then they play Funeral, with mourning and weeping. They decide the game, they make up the rules, then they urge others to play what they have decided in the way they dictate. When others don’t dance to their tune or weep to their beat, they complain loudly. Is Jesus suggesting that their critics are making a game of their religion, probably not. Instead, Jesus, says that we should not be immature like a spoiled child but rather childlike in their relation to God, humble and willing to learn. The religious leaders disapproved of John’s stern self-denial and his unyielding call for repentance. While great crowds responded to his ministry at the Jordan, they were the ones who couldn’t or wouldn’t accept John’s message to repent and be baptized. They covered their hardness of heart with mockery. “He has a demon,” They even said charged Jesus similarly (Mt 12:24) except they used gluttony and drunkenness. But just as John preached repentance; so, did Jesus, thus both must expect condemnation. There was some truth in their charge. According to their way of thinking Jesus wasn’t a “saint.” John would probably qualify better than Jesus would because at least John did hang out with the wrong crowd. Not only that, Jesus spoke the truth even if it offends the religious leaders, and he didn’t define righteousness in terms of what he eats or drinks, but in terms of service and relationship to God.

Because of their rejection, Jesus had a special message for them. Take a look at verses 20-24. “Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. [21] “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. [22] But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. [23] And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. [24] But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”” Jesus denounced Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, which were some of the towns that he served the most. He had healed the sick, cast out demons, and proclaimed the kingdom of heaven in these towns, but the people ignored him. They wouldn’t repent. Jesus compared them with Tyre, Sidon and even Sodom, which were some of the most godless Gentile cities. These godless cities would have sincerely repented in sackcloth and ashes if they had heard the Messiah’s words and seen his powerful miracles of grace. One time, Jesus went to the region of Tyre and Sidon where he met a Canaanite woman. She begged him to heal her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus told her that he couldn’t help her because he couldn't give the children’s bread to Gentile dogs. This would have been a huge insult anyone, but especially to a woman. Instead of getting mad, she humbled herself and asked for the leftovers, even if they were just the crumbs that fell onto the floor. Jesus saw her faith and answered her plea and healed her daughter. Then he left that region because it wasn’t the time for the ministry to the Gentiles. (Mt 15:21-28) But Jesus says that the days of final judgment is coming. His words are meant as a

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warning, spoken in love and sorrow, not as an angry threat. It's almost a lament, "Woe to you unrepentant towns!" We shouldn't be so quick to judge, because all of us will one day stand before the judgment seat of Christ. (2Cor 5:10) The King and his kingdom should not be ignored.

So, when it comes to our doubts, we shouldn't beat ourselves up if we have them. Doubt is like that fork in the road, it's the force that compels us to search for the evidence upon which to build our faith. Doubt is just the stimulus, it's what we do with it that really matters. Therefore, when we encounter doubt, it should turn our hearts to seek God, pour out our hearts to him with our questions and seek the answer he gives. At the end of verse 19 is a golden nugget and you can almost miss it. It says, "But wisdom is proved right by her deeds." Our actions will reveal if we are wise or a fool. Therefore, we need all the wisdom we can get, especially if we are doubting. This reminds me of James 1:5-8 it says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do." I pray for you, that the next time you encounter doubt, that God may give you the wisdom you need to make the right choice. May God richly bless you.

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