

Facing Giant Despair

Luke 7:18-23

Pastor John Miller

Luke 7:18-23 says, “Then the disciples of John...” referring to John the Baptist “...reported to him concerning all these things. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus, saying, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’” So the question is in two parts. They are asking Jesus, “Are You the Messiah, the One who should come, or should we look for someone else?”

Verse 20, “When the men had come to Him, they said, ‘John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’” And that very hour He cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight. Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.” So it closes with a Beatitude.

There is a book I encourage all Christians to read. Of course, it's the Bible. But I also encourage Christians to read *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. It is a spiritual allegory written over 100 years ago while he was in a Bedford prison. In this allegory, John Bunyan describes a man named Christian, who is fleeing the City of Destruction. On his journey to the Celestial City, which is a picture of the Christian life, one of his companions is a man named Hopeful. But at one point on their journey, they came near Doubting Castle. The owner of the castle was named Giant Despair. They laid down in a glen by the castle to sleep but were taken captive by Giant Despair and thrown in Doubting Castle's dungeon.

I wonder how many of you, like me, have ever been taken captive by Giant Despair and been locked up in Doubting Castle. If so, you're not alone. Clovis Chappell said, “The floors of this gloomy prison are damp with the tears of some of the choicest sons and daughters of God,” such as Paul the Apostle, Jeremiah, Elijah and Moses.

In our text today, the great man, John the Baptist, was taken by Giant Despair and locked in Doubting Castle. We have all been there.

The context of our passage takes us back to Luke 3:19-20. “Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done, also added this, above all, that he shut John up in prison.” So John the Baptist is in prison in our text in Luke 7:18-23 in a dungeon in the Doubting Castle of Giant Despair.

While John was in prison, he began to doubt. “Are You really the Messiah? Was I wrong about Jesus? Or do I look for someone else? What's going on here?!” John is held by Giant Despair.

Even children of the light often find themselves in the dungeon of darkness and doubt. And I

solemnly confess that I'm as human as anyone else. There have been times in my own life when I've been taken into the grips of Giant Despair, locked in Doubting Castle and it takes the promises of God and walking by faith and not by sight to be able to get victory over those times of defeat and discouragement.

There are only two main sections to our text. The first section is verses 18-20. We will call it John's confusion. The second section is in verses 21-23, and we'll call it the Lord's confirmation.

Let's look first at John's confusion, in verses 18-20. "Then the disciples of John reported to him concerning all these things." What's going on here? As I pointed out, this is John the Baptist and he's in prison. So John was being told in prison all the things that Jesus was doing. "All these things" takes us back to when Jesus healed the Centurion's servant and when He raised the widow of Nain's son. So they told John about these happenings.

No doubt it thrilled and excited John, but it's evident that John was having his doubts, because of his own circumstances and maybe because of false expectations. He might have wondered if the Messiah was going to do what he thought He would do. So maybe he thought he should question if Jesus is the Messiah, and if not, look for another.

Verse 19, "And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus, saying, 'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?' When the men had come to Him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"'"

You might read this section and say, "Well, what's there to talk about here? It's just John asking a couple of questions." But it's important that we understand why John is asking these questions. John is asking these questions not for the purpose of argument or speculation.

I sometimes have people ask me questions that they don't want to know the answer to. The older I get and the longer I'm a pastor, the less I know. I more often find myself telling people, "I don't know." They're shocked. "Pastor, aren't you omniscient? Don't you have a little red phone on your desk? Can't you call God directly and get the answer?!" No, I can't. There are a lot of questions that we don't know the answers to. What we need to know God has given us in the Bible. I rest there. What I don't need to know God has not revealed in His Word. So I don't need to go anywhere else to try to find the answer. I just need to trust and obey Him. The Lord knows what He's doing. And sometimes people ask me questions, because they just want to argue or debate.

And John did not ask these questions to satisfy his own wavering disciples. There are some who I believe, wrongfully interpret this that John wasn't doubting; he wanted his disciples to be assured, so John was sending his disciples, because they were questioning what was going on. I don't think that was the case. I think John asked these questions to satisfy himself.

In verse 28, Jesus said about John, "For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist." So John is the greatest of the prophets.

John was beginning to believe his doubts and doubting his beliefs. John was in the grip of Giant Despair and locked in Doubting Castle. We've all been there. Only a few months earlier, he had preached with such certainty and power, but now he finds himself perplexed and confused. He had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. When Jesus came to have John baptize Him, John pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" That was pretty powerful preaching! But now John is doubting. "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" What happened to John?

And when he baptized Jesus, the heavens opened, the Spirit descended as a dove and the audible voice of the Father said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). How about that voice? How about the vision? What's going on with John?! So John pointed to Jesus and he baptized Him. How can you have all that confirmation and yet still question whether or not Jesus is the Messiah?! But now, perplexed, confused and filled with doubt, John asks, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?"

But I believe that every one of us have been there. And there is nothing wrong with having doubts—if they are honest doubts. But doubt and unbelief are not the same. Someone defined doubt as "a matter of the mind. We can't understand what God is doing or why He's doing it."

Be honest with yourself. You say, "God, I don't know what you're doing! I don't understand!" That is pretty common, because God is smarter than we are. What makes us think that we should understand everything He does? I don't know how my phone works. My phone just does bizarre things on its own when nothing is happening, and I don't know how to fix it. There are many things I don't understand in life. What makes us think we're going to understand everything God does and every purpose He has? So we need to live by faith and not by sight.

But unbelief is a matter of the will. "I refuse to believe God's Word and obey what He tells me to do."

So we all have our doubts. We all have our fears and worries. But we should not be filled with unbelief. Charles Swindoll said, "Doubting may temporarily disrupt, but it does not permanently destroy a relationship with Christ." I like that. All of God's servants have had these periods of doubt, but we must trust Him and obey Him.

And it's because we do believe in God that we have our questions. "If God loves me, if God is in control of my life, why is this happening?"

What is the cause of John's doubt? It's not because he wasn't acquainted with Jesus; he knew who He was. It's not because he had fallen into sin. He had faithfully preached the truth, and Herod had put him in prison. So why then was John doubting? Let me give you four reasons.

Number one, because he was human. The Bible says that "He remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:14). We're all dirt clods, clay pots. But some of us are crackpots. Yet He fills us with His glory and gives us His promises. All God's servants have feet of clay. We see it in verse 28: John was "born of a woman"; he's a human being. James 5:17 says, "Elijah was a

man with a nature like ours.” One translation says, “Elijah puts his pants on one leg at a time.” I like that. So he is a human being just like us, and part of our human frailty is that we will sometimes doubt. God knows our frame and understands our weaknesses.

In 1 Kings 19, Elijah got so discouraged, because his expectations weren’t fulfilled. There was no revival in Israel at that time. So he crawled under a Juniper tree and asked God to kill him. “Lord, I come to you right now and ask You to kill me!” Then he waited but nothing happened. God told Elijah that he needed a nap. This is one of my favorite Bible verses. Praise God for that verse! Needing a nap is Biblical. He needed a nap.

Sometimes when I get grumpy my wife will say, “You need a nap right now. Go to bed, thou man of God!”

So Elijah went to bed, and when he woke up, an angel baked him a cake. It was an angel food cake. So Elijah ate it. He took a nap and ate some cake; I can dig this! Sometimes you just need sleep and some food; you’re just tired and hungry. When you get tired and hungry, you begin to doubt and freak out. So Elijah was human and so are we.

Number two, John asked the questions because of his circumstances. John was a man of the outdoors, of the desert. But now he’s in a dungeon. If you’re used to being outside and now you’re being confined to a dungeon, you’re going to have doubts and despair. He had been out preaching, but now he was idle.

And John had been down to the Jordan River. Alfred Edersheim, in his book, *The Life and Times of Jesus, the Messiah*, paints this beautiful picture of when they took Jesus to the prison. He would have passed over the Jordan River. That would have flooded his mind with all the baptisms he had performed. He could smell the outdoors, but they put him in a dungeon. He was now confined to the narrow limits of his cell, and his heart sank. So the circumstances of his life began to speak to him, and he began to doubt.

He’s living by sight and not by faith. The same is true of us. If you’re in a hospital, confined to a bed you may think, “I’ve lost my health.” Maybe you think, “I’m losing my wealth, my marriage is falling apart, my loved one recently died, I’ve been diagnosed with cancer” or whatever your circumstances are. If you let that dictate to you, you become discouraged and begin to doubt. It’s not easy to resist those thoughts. It’s easy to become confused and doubt God’s love, care, wisdom and plan and purpose for your life. We must learn to live by faith and not by sight.

Number three, John asked these questions because of unfulfilled expectations. Sometimes we have expectations that aren’t fulfilled, so we get discouraged and begin to doubt. Verse 18 says that “The disciples of John reported to him concerning all these things.” John’s in a dungeon in prison, and he’s hearing about all these great things that Jesus did for others. It would have been easy for him to say, “What about me?! Why doesn’t He set me, a captive, free?! Why doesn’t He come and deliver me with the power of His words?! He’s doing all this other stuff. Why doesn’t He deliver me?!”

John would also think, "Is that all?! What about the judgment? What about His use of the winnowing fork? What about separating the wheat from the chaff? What about the fire unquenchable? What about the axe to the root of the tree? Where's the judgment? Where's the wrath of God? Why doesn't He deliver me?! So John was expecting the Messiah to bring a baptism of fire.

he misunderstood the two comings of Christ, so he had false expectations. Jesus would come the first time to be put on a cross and die; He will come the second time wearing a crown.

Many times people misunderstand the Bible, so they get false expectations. "I thought God would heal me. I thought God would prosper me. I thought God would save my marriage. I thought God would watch over my children. I thought Jesus Christ would come back."

I remember thinking that certainly Jesus would be back before 1980. Certainly Jesus would be back before 1990. In Y2K, in the year 2000, everyone was freaking out; selling their homes and moving to Colorado, living off the land and eating carrots. But it all didn't happen. I can't tell you how many people left my church to run for safety. They didn't trust in the Lord. They looked at the circumstances. They were disillusioned.

A lot of people, even in their study of eschatology or future prophecy, misinterpret Scripture and get disillusioned. Or they get taught a health-wealth-and-prosperity gospel, which is no gospel at all. Then they are disillusioned when God doesn't heal or when God doesn't deliver or when God doesn't work for them. So they interpret God by their circumstances rather than by His Word. Instead of walking by faith, they walk by sight. That's so dangerous.

Number four, John asked these questions, because he was most perplexed by Christ dealing with himself. John had lived righteously, yet he was suffering unjustly. That is so difficult to endure. "Wasn't the Messiah to open the prison doors to those who are bound? Why doesn't He open mine?! He's helping others; why doesn't He help me?!"

Later Jesus would say, in verse 28, "Among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist." But John didn't hear that. When John's disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" He didn't say, "Sit down; I'm going to give you a Bible study. I need to theologically train you, and then go tell John." No; He didn't do that. He just did the miracles, and told them to tell John what they had seen Him do.

So God doesn't always answer our questions. And many times we wonder why the righteous suffer. In Psalm 73, a psalm of Asaph, he asks, "Why do I get trouble all day long when the wicked have no trouble at all? It doesn't make sense." Even Paul the Apostle was in prison at the end of his life awaiting execution.

Now notice the Lord's confirmation in the second section. This is how the story unfolds. Verse 21, "And that very hour He cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight." It was prophesied in the Old Testament that He would do that, but it would culminate in the Second Coming and in the millennial reign of Christ. The first time that Jesus

came, He came to forgive our sins.

Verse 22, "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them.'" Then He gave a Beatitude: "And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

Jesus didn't give John's disciples a lecture in theology or prophecy. He just pointed out two things. The first was "watch this"; He healed the blind, raised the dead, cleansed the leper and preached the Gospel. In Isaiah 26, 29, 35 and 61, they all prophesied that this is what the Messiah would do. Then He said, "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard." Then the second thing was, "And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

So Jesus offered no explanation as to why fiery judgment had not yet come. Nor did He explain why John was in prison or offer any hope that he would be freed. God does not always answer our questions. What I need to know is in the Bible. If it's not in the Bible, I don't need to know it. I "trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey."

But Jesus does promise that all those who trust Him and obey Him and don't stumble will be blessed. "And blessed is he..." or "she" "...who is not offended because of Me." From the word "offended," we get our English word "scandal" or "scandalized." It was a trip stick in a fowler's trap.

When I was a little boy, we used to take a cardboard box into the backyard and tie a string on a stick, prop the box up with it and put bread under the box. Then we waited back behind the house holding the string. When a bird would come to eat the bread, we would yank the string, the box would come down and we captured a bird. But I never knew what to do with the bird once I caught it.

That little stick was called a "skandalon" or "trip-stick." So the word came to mean "stumble" or "fall." So Jesus is saying "blessed are those who don't stumble, fall or are not offended because of Me." In other words, they trust Jesus; they put their faith in Him. It's very important.

"Blessed is he..." But it's also a gentle reprove: "...whoever doesn't stumble or be offended by Me." Many today are offended by Jesus because of His Cross; the Cross is an offense to them. "I'm not a sinner! I don't need a Savior. The idea that God would give His Son to die on the Cross for me is an offense!" It's a skandalon, a stumbling at the Cross.

Or they are offended that they have to humbly repent and come as a child and put their faith in Jesus Christ. "I'm a good person; I can work my way to heaven." They are so proud, they don't want to admit their need for Christ. They are scandalized; they stumble. So "Blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

Or they are offended that Jesus is the only way. That really stumbles people. Why I don't know. But there is only one way to heaven. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). That means you can't get to heaven apart from Jesus Christ. And you get to heaven not by good deeds but by His finished work when you receive Him by faith. That's how you are saved. You get to heaven not by works you have done but according to His mercy by which He saved us. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). But this is a scandal, an offense to some. Their pride makes them stumble over it.

And believers also stumble by God's dealing with them; they don't trust Him. "God didn't heal me! He didn't save my marriage! God let my child die! God let me get cancer! Where is God?!" So they are scandalized and stumble. But Job said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). That's so good.

In John Bunyan's story of Christian and Hopeful in Pilgrim's Progress, how did the story end? Christian and Hopeful languished in Doubting Castle in the grips of Giant Despair for a long time. Then hopeful remembered that he had a key in his pocket and reached in and pulled it out. The key was the promises of God. He put the key in the dungeon door, turned the key and the door opened. They were free.

When you are in Doubting Castle, put there by Giant Despair, take out the key, the promises of God in the Bible. It says in Deuteronomy 31:6, "He will not leave nor forsake you." "As your days, so shall your strength be" (Deuteronomy 33:25). Romans 8:28 says, "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." And John 14:1-3 says, "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." Those are God's promises to us.

This world is not my home. God doesn't answer all our questions. He doesn't always meet all our expectations. "I expected to have a good marriage. I expected to have children spaced perfectly. Instead, mine are just spaced out. What did I do to deserve this?!"

Trust Him. Hope in Him. Don't go by sight. Don't go by feelings. Stand on the promises of God.