

When Jesus is a Source of Doubt

Dealing with Doubt

By Van Morris

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Calvary Christian Center
11829 Highway 44 East
Mount Washington, KY 40047

Website: calvarychristiancenter.net
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/calvarychristian

I invite you to join me to take your Bible and let's turn to the Gospel of Matthew 11. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 11. I'm going to begin reading in verse 1 and I will read through the end of verse 6. Matthew 11, verse 1,

1 When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. 2 Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" 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. 6 And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

This is God's word. Let me pray.

Our Father, we must confess this morning that our vision is very limited. For now we see in a mirror dimly, is what Paul instructs us. We do not see the picture totally which means we will still have questions. There will be times that we will be perplexed but biblical faith assures us that though we do not see the picture totally, we nevertheless see it reliably so long as we keep our eyes on Jesus Christ. And when we do that, we will not be driven to despair nor will we ever be ashamed. So Holy Spirit, help us to see Christ this morning. In his name we pray. Amen.

I want to begin this morning with a picture of Machaerus. The picture that you are seeing is an archaeological site. At the top of that hill was the hilltop fortress of Herod Antipas during the first century A.D. These archaeological ruins were discovered in the 1800s and what's important about them is this: if you can imagine a fortress atop this hill, underneath this fortress would have been a series of dungeons and in one of those dungeons you would have found John the Baptist. John had been imprisoned for speaking truth to the sexual revolution of his day. Most of you are familiar with the term "sexual revolution." We who grew up in the sixties heard it a lot but it is recharged and

revitalized and exploding now in our world. And John spoke the truth to those involved in the sexual revolution of his day.

You see, Herod Antipas, who represented the pinnacle of Jewish power, had married a woman named Herodias, and there was a scandal involved. The scandal was that both Herod and Herodias had left previous marriages in order to enter into their marriage. Herodias had previously been married to Herod's half-brother, which of course, was a near blood relative which was forbidden by God's law. However like many today, Herod felt that matters of sexuality were fluid and were subjective and, therefore, he could do what he pleased, again, as many feel today. However, John the Baptist called Herod out concerning his morality and his evil practices and he served notice that God's holy standards are not fluid, they are not subjective, that they are the same for every generation. And what happens when you do that? What happens when you stand up in a culture that is going 100 miles an hour in a car with all the windows blacked out and you speak truth to them, what happens? Well in John the Baptist's case, he was imprisoned. He was thrown into prison for challenging Herod and in that dungeon, in that dungeon the rays of blessed assurance began to fade and in their place shadows of doubt began to move in.

The last Lord's day, we began what will be a brief series of messages on "Dealing with Doubt." Dealing with doubt. Last week we asked a simple question, "What is doubt? Why do we doubt?" We looked at some help for those who are experiencing doubt and how to help those who are experiencing doubt, but we also examined some of the occasions for doubt; in other words, what are the things that happen in our lives that cause us to have spiritual doubt? And we looked at some of those occasions but today I want to ask you this simple question: what happens when Jesus is our occasion for doubt? What happens when Jesus is our occasion for doubt? What happens when we expect Jesus to do something in a certain way and he doesn't do it? I think we've all been there before. We've prayed, we've expected, we've had certain expectations for Jesus to do certain things for us and to do them in a certain way and to do them in a certain time, only to find that Jesus is not on our agenda. So with that question in mind, what happens when we expect Jesus to do something in a certain way and he doesn't? With that question in mind, let's look at our text. I want to look at it in a few different ways. The first thing I want us to do is to establish this: I want us to establish John the Baptist's foundation. You see, if you're going to build, if you're going to build your life, you've got to have a good foundation. John the Baptist had a quality excellent foundation. Let's look at it for just a moment.

First, John the Baptist had been acquainted with Jesus his entire life. Think about that. John the Baptist had been acquainted with Jesus his entire life. You see, John's mother, named Elizabeth, and Jesus' mother, Mary, were cousins and they were pregnant at the same time 30 years prior. Jesus and John were well acquainted.

Also, John had a correct confession of Christ. In John 1:29, John was standing with his disciples and Jesus was coming their way and here's what he said, "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of

the world!" In other words, there were lambs that people brought into the temple to offer as sacrifices but John realized, "This is the Lamb of God. This is the one who is going to take away the sins of all the world, all those who will put their trust in him." John made an accurate confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Not a sound of doubt. Not a moment of doubt. It was complete assurance in who Christ was.

But that's not all. John also knew that Jesus would gather the good and bring judgment against the evil. In Matthew 3, here's what John said about Jesus, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn," now listen to this, "but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Now what is he talking about there? He's talking about those who are Christ's, he is going to gather into the barn. It's using that imagery, that agricultural imagery. The saints, those who have looked to Christ, the Lamb of God, they are going to be safe. They are going to be fine. They are going to be with Christ. However, those outside of Christ are termed as the chaff and what happens to the chaff? It's burnt up. It's done away with. So John knew, he was well aware that when Jesus comes, he's going to straighten everything out. The evil is going to be taken care of, it is going to be dealt with.

But that's not all, John also would be the one who would baptize Jesus and perhaps, perhaps, he would hear the voice from heaven. Remember when Jesus was baptized, there was a voice from heaven that said, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." Perhaps John was able to hear that voice from heaven.

John also made it very clear that his calling in life, his purpose in life, was to prepare the way for Jesus. In other words he said, "Look, I'm here to make the way clear for Jesus. I'm here not to be exalted. I'm here to decrease, for him to increase."

So here's what I'm proposing to you this morning: it's reasonable to say that John's life was entirely wrapped up in Jesus. From before he came out of his mother's womb, the Bible says, "He leapt, he leaped in his mother's womb," because he was in the presence of Mary who was bearing Jesus in her womb. John's entire life was wrapped up in Jesus. John had a sure solid foundation and his life was built up on Jesus.

Now why do we stress that so importantly? It's because according to our text, something shook John's foundation. What was it? What shook John's solid foundation, his life that was built upon Christ? Well, let's think about it for a moment. The text says, "Now when John heard in prison," John was in prison. You see, you and I when we think about prison, what do we think about? We often complain about prisoners having it far too cushy and far too easy. Not the case for John. No pool tables for John. No snack bar for John. No basketball goals for John. I guarantee you it wasn't a prison like Bastoy Prison. You see a picture of it on the overhead. This is Bastoy Prison. You say, "Surely you've got the wrong picture, right? This looks like a resort area." This is Bastoy Prison in Norway. It is one of the most luxurious prisons in all of the world. Prisoners are housed in small cottages where they can be comfortable. They enjoy sunbathing, tennis, fishing

and horseback riding. These are all the favorite pastimes of the prisoners. All they have to do is work the farm. You see, but John the Baptist's experience is entirely different. John the Baptist is experiencing the isolation of a dark dungeon and his only pastime now is doubt.

His experience. How many of you know that the experiences that we have in life can have an effect upon us? The experiences that we have in life can have a serious, profound, deep effect upon us. You know, I didn't think about this during the 9 AM service but this just crossed my mind. I think about those here who are veterans in our church family, those who have been through the horror of war, conflict. Those kind of experiences can have a deep impact upon a person. But then I think about someone by the name of Ann. Ann had a very difficult relationship with her father in her youth as the result of her mother's death. Her mother died suddenly when she was young and she was left with her father and the memories of her father are dominated by his tyranny and his insensitivity. He was a horrible man and Ann says she couldn't recall her father ever doing anything to make her believe that he loved her so as a result, the word "father" had a negative impact upon her. I say that because when she began to hear about the Gospel and the Christian faith and she began to hear God referred to as our heavenly Father, she began to struggle with doubt, of thinking of God as a father, all because of her previous experience with her earthly father.

You see, John is in a bad set of circumstances and John who has been firm in his faith, now is facing the present experience of prison and it has caused him to question what he believed. Now, let me ask you this question and just think with me: is John's prison experience the only reason for his foundation to shake? Is it just because he's in a bad place? Is it just because he's in prison? Is it just because he's in a dungeon? Is that all? Is that the only reason? No, there is something else that is shaking the foundation of John. Do you see what it is? Do you see what it is? It's in verse 3. Look at verse 3, he has a question, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Now wait a minute. Earlier John viewed Jesus as the one. Earlier he was absolutely sure, absolutely persuaded, convinced that Jesus is the one. He's the Lamb of God. He's the one we've been looking for. But now he has a question, "Are you the one or should we just abandon you altogether and look for another?"

Now just imagine, he has called his disciples in and he says, "I want you to go to Jesus and take this question to him. I've got to have an answer." Imagine John's disciples, what they must be thinking. Just think for a moment, they've got to go back to Jesus and they've got to ask this question. Don't you imagine that they are wondering, "Look, the only reason that we have decided to follow you is because you said that Jesus is the one. What's going on here?" I mean, their whole world must have been turned upside down. So what's going on here? Why is John asking this question? Why is his solid foundation now shaking? Why is that happening? Well, this question suggests that Jesus himself has caused John to doubt. You see, earlier John had spoken using graphic imagery. Remember, he's going to bring in the wheat into the barn but all the unbelieving chaff is going to be burned up in an unquenchable fire. He even said this, he said, "The ax is now laid at the tree. I mean the blade, the blade is right on the root of the tree. God is getting

ready to bring judgment and when the one comes, it's going to happen." That's judgment talk. That's judgment talk. But you see, here's the problem: John is in prison and Herod is having a party. John who loves Jesus, who has been preparing the way for Christ and has been giving faithful service to Christ all of his days, he's in prison, Herod is having a party. In other words, John had to be sitting there thinking, "Look, when he comes, when the one comes, we can count on one thing, judgment. Evil is going to be dealt with. All the problems of this world are going to be straightened out. The ax is going to chop down the evil." And John must be thinking, "Jesus, this would be the perfect time for the ax to chop it down." However Jesus, who was John's foundation, has not met John's expectations.

Have you ever had that happen? Have you ever had that happen? Listen to me: have you ever had that happen where you were absolutely confident, "This is what Jesus will do. I asked him to do this. If I present this prayer, if I do this, I know he will do this for me." You may be facing that right now. You may have had certain expectations for Jesus to step in and to fix this and to do this and to bring this about, but he has not met your expectations in that regard. I want to suggest to you that's what's going on with John the Baptist. Jesus has become his occasion for doubt. "Prison, we can deal with that, but I can't deal with the fact if you're not the one."

So John has sent a question, "Are you the one or should we look for another?" So now we need to focus for just a moment on the answer. What do you suppose Jesus is going to say? We're going to look at his answer and we're also going to look at a warning that he gives not only to John but to every one of us in this room.

Now you think that this is a simple question, right? "Are you the one or should we look for another?" Now what do you think, I mean, I can't think of a more simple way to answer that than with a yes or no, right? "Are you the one?" "Yes." "Are you the one or should we look for another? Are you the one?" "Nope." How much easier could that get? But that's not the way Jesus answers. It's not a simple yes or a no and so we have to assume that his answer is much far more needed than just a simple yes or no.

How does he answer? Well, look at the question closely, "Are you the one who is to come?" Now what does that mean anyway? "Are you the one who is to come?" What does that mean? Well, John is referring to this, "Are you the promised one?" You see, if you were to take your Bible right now and you just began in the book of Genesis and you began to work your way through the Old Testament, you would find the Old Testament prophets promising, "The Messiah is coming. The Christ is coming. There is one coming. There is one coming. He's going to come." That is what John is asking about, "Are you that one? Are you the Messiah? Are you the anointed one? Are you the Christ? Are you the one that we've been told about and promised?"

So that's the question. So again, Jesus' answer could have been a yes or a no but what is his answer? Well, first his answer is not this, now listen very carefully, his answer is not this, "Go back and tell John I am shocked and disappointed in him. I thought that he loved me. I thought he was preparing the way for me. What is wrong with John? Go back

and tell him I'm absolutely disgusted with him and I'm not going to even answer his question until he gets out of this pit of doubt!" He doesn't do that. He doesn't do that. But nor does he answer in this way, "Tell John I'll be there at 4 o'clock tomorrow and I'll do some miracles for him and we'll straighten this whole thing out." He doesn't promise that either, does he? I mean, that's an option, right? "John, you're doubting. You're doubting who I am. Let me come by and whip up a few miracles for you. Meet your expectations. Everything will be fine." He doesn't do that.

No, strangely beginning in verse 4, he gives his answer, "And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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.'" This is a quote from Isaiah. It's a quote from the prophet Isaiah who said basically this, "You'll know when the one has shown up because these are the things that the one will do. You'll know that the Messiah has shown up. You'll know that the one has arrived. You'll know because he will be doing these things. The things that you are hearing now and seeing right now, these are the things that the Messiah will do. Go back and tell John that."

You see, can I just suggest to you, you may be saying this morning, "I think I could really follow Jesus if I could see a miracle or two." No, you see, Jesus knows better. Jesus knows better than me and you do. He knows. That's not what John needed. John didn't need him to stop by the dungeon door and do a few miracles for him, pull a rabbit out of his hat. He didn't need that stuff. No. Here's what John needs: he needs the sure word of God. "I'm the one who has been promised. I'm here."

But he left out something. He left out something. You see, Jesus said, "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed," he goes on, but the rest of that quote says this, "and bring the day of vengeance of our God." Jesus didn't mention that part. Jesus didn't mention that part. He said, "Go and tell John this," but he left off the latter part, the part about vengeance, the judgment of God. Now why is that? Did Jesus lose his memory? Is he not quoting the Bible accurately? What's going on here? It's as if Jesus was saying to John, "John, not now. Not now."

You see, if you were listening closely this morning and you heard Brother Josh reading the call to worship, it was Psalm 73 and it was Asaph and he was saying, "You know, I almost slipped." He said, "I began to see the wicked prospering. I have seen the wicked prospering and God's people not doing so well, struggling, hardships, but the wicked are doing just fine. They are fat and sassy. Everything is great for them. God, what's going on here?" Do you see? The same thing that John is going through here and Jesus saying, "Go and tell John, here's what you are hearing and here's what you're seeing and the Messiah has arrived," but he leaves off the part about vengeance and judgment as if to say, "John, not now. John, I'm doing what I promised but not in the way and in the time that you expected." Have you ever been so mad you could just spit fire? "I'll be so glad when God brings judgment! Bring it now! Bring it now!" Not on our time, folks. It's not on our time. "John, I'm doing what I promised but not in the way and the time that you expect it."

Then in verse 6, look at verse 6. Here's the warning for John, for you, for me, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." You see, John is already having a problem saying, "Look, I expected the Messiah, I expected it to be this way. I expected Jesus to do this," and Jesus said, "It's not according to your expectation. I'm doing what I promised but not in the way and the time that you expect it. So John, watch out. Don't be offended by me."

Now, what in the world does he mean by that? Well, the word "offended" is also translated "fall away." Fall away and that gives us a little hint of what Jesus is saying. "John, when you have your doubts, when you experience your doubts, don't let that be the cause of falling away. When I don't meet your expectations, when I don't do things when and how you think I ought to do them, don't let that be the cause of falling away from me." Or to say it in another way, the word "offended" there is the Greek word "skandalon" and you know that little part of a mousetrap or a trap in general, the little lever that you click it and it slams over? That's the offense. Basically Jesus is saying, "John, look, don't get trapped by your doubt. Don't get ensnared by your doubt. Watch out. John, don't let the way I'm working in your life cause you to fall away." That's it. How about for us right now, how the Lord is working in your life? You know, you say, "I don't understand this. I don't know why this is happening. I don't know why he has allowed this to happen." Don't let the way God is working in your life cause you to be offended and fall away from Jesus.

You see, perhaps the thing that would help us the most is if we would draw a distinction between the things that God has promised and the things we are trying to make him promise us. I've never really been a big fan of "God's Little Promise Book." I've never been helped on that because I think our sinful fleshly tendency is to just go in, dive right in and say, "It's all for me. It's all for me. Today, this is it." So we just start claiming everything, all the promises, and we need to make a distinction between the things that God has actually promised and the things that we are trying to press upon him, to make him promise us, and if we do that, friends, we're going to be, we're going to face disappointment. We all are. John did.

And I want to warn you, I want to warn you, I know that our President said a few weeks ago in his inaugural speech, he made the bold statement that we will be protected by God. I wasn't so impressed when I heard that because you see, if we read our Bibles – and listen – if we read our Bibles, the people in the most unprotected place were those who were close to Jesus. You know, I can imagine certain people standing there and hearing our President say, "We will be protected by God." I can just imagine John the Baptist standing there going, "Oh, really? Oh, really? Does that mean I won't have my head chopped off?" Or Stephen. Stephen who was stoned, stoned to death because he was close to Jesus. Or James, the brother of Jesus, or I should say James the apostle, again, slain by the sword because he was close to Jesus. Friends, we really in this day and age, we must make a distinction between the things that God has actually promised and the things that we are trying to press upon him and make him promise us.

So let's make a turn for home here. John has a solid foundation. John knows Jesus. John knows Jesus but Jesus had not performed in the way he expected and now he was riddled with doubt, "Are you the one or not?" And so the last thing I want us to focus on very quickly is what John did right. What John did right. You see, let's make no mistake about it, John struggled with doubt about Jesus. You may have a hard time believing that but I think this passage is very clear. John struggled with doubt about Jesus but he does some things right.

The first one would be this: his doubt was inquiring doubt. Inquiring doubt. In other words, he's not the person that has all of these doubts inside and never expresses them, never inquires, never says, "Well, I don't know about this but I'm going to see. I don't know about this but I'm going to ask. I don't understand this but I'm going to find out." No, John was, "I've got to know! I've got to know if you're the one because if you're not, we need to find the one." You see, John's was an inquiring doubt. It was looking for this reliable person to put their trust in. You see, John realized, "We've got to have the one. Are you it?"

So he runs to Jesus with his doubts. "Guys, go to Jesus and ask him is he the one or not?" He did something right there. That's inquiring doubt. No surprise, we're going to have doubts, we're going to have them, we're going to have questions but what do we do with them? They need to be the kind that are inquiring doubts where we doubt toward faith, we doubt toward trusting. And John did that very thing. He did it right.

The second thing that he did right was he did not remain in isolation. You see, John could have remained there in his dungeon drowning in his doubts but he said, "Look, guys, go ask Jesus. Go to Jesus." You see, he reached out to his community. You see, sometimes doubt can be a symptom of a failure to avail yourself of encouragement from other believers. You see, as long as you are determined to say, "I'm going to come to church and I'm going to come and like my little piece of it, I'm going to enjoy my little piece of it, and I'm going to go away, you know, hopefully satisfied or whatever, and I'm going to go for my little thing," when the storms of doubt begin raging in your life, it could be because you have not availed yourself of the Christian community. No, you wanted to ride it out on your own and sometimes we can be riddled with doubt because we're not talking to anybody, we're not saying, "Would you pray with me? Would you help me?" You see, John reached out to others. He availed himself of the Christian community of which every one of us in this room need. So John did not stay in isolation. Don't stay in isolation, saints.

But thirdly he did this right and this is probably the most important of all: John has a laser focus on the one. John has a laser focus on the one. Let me talk about this just for a minute. Don't you see this? John is saying, "Look, folks, I am not going to settle for anyone less than the one. I don't want someone who is partially the one. I don't even want somebody who is 99% the one. I want the one and I'm not going to settle for anything less than the one."

You see it goes like this: John is not looking for a system, John is not looking for an organization, John is not looking for the right church. "Come and be baptized in this church. Come and do the special things in this church. Come and be a part of this church. And if you'll do that, then you're going to be okay. You'll be fine." John's not looking for that. John is not looking for a mere spiritual experience to feel spiritual, to tap into his inner spirituality. No, he's not looking for that. John will not settle for a mere sinner's prayer.

I was reading an article this week. I agree 100% with the author. A sinner's prayer never saved anyone. A sinner's prayer never saved anyone. I agree with that. Now, you look a little shocked right at the moment. You look like you just got caught in the proverbial headlights. Not trying to be provocative, I just want you to think about something with me. There are people that will say, "Pray this prayer and you're saved. Pray this prayer, pray the sinner's prayer and you're saved." But have you ever thought about this? Prayer in and of itself has no saving power. If it did, think about it, Buddhists pray, Muslims pray. I mean, the average unbelievers pray when in trouble. Prayer in and of itself has no saving power. Now we're told in Scripture you were saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. "So, preacher, what's wrong with a sinner's prayer?" Well, the prayer of a sinner is an expression of faith, otherwise you have no hope. If you just went through the motion of praying some verbiage, somebody told you, "Just pray this and you're okay then." Prayer from the sinner is an expression of faith, of trust, of longing for the one, the one name that has been given under heaven whereby men must be saved.

You see, John would not settle for anything less, anything less than the one. How about you? How about you? Would you settle for mere church membership? Is that good enough? Is that good enough to get you there? Just being a good moral person? Everybody knowing you as a good business person, honest and all that kind of stuff? Is that good enough? Would you settle for that? Would you settle for joining the right church, the right group, and going through and jumping all through the hoops and all that kind of stuff? Is that good? Will you settle for that? John won't. John will not settle for anything less than the one so why should you? Why should we settle for anything less than the one because he happens to be the only one who can save us. He happens to be the only one who died for us. He happens to be the only one who rose from the dead. He happens to be the only one that is coming back for his church.

So, friend, if you built your life, if you built your life on being a good person, you built your life on being a good business person and trying to be honest and trying to show everybody that you're above board and all this kind of stuff, well, that's fine but that will not carry you on the day of judgment. You've got to know the one. You've got to be clothed in the righteousness of the one. And if you're going to pray a sinner's prayer, it needs to sound more like this. First, it needs to be addressed to the heavenly Father. It needs to be addressed to the Father in heaven and I'm going to give you a feel for what your heart should be saying. It should sound something like this, "Father, I have not responded to you as I should have. I have been a rebel. I have not responded to you. I have rebelled against you. I am unworthy of what you have to offer, however, I desperately need what you have to offer." And then we could say, "God, please, take all

that Jesus has accomplished for sinners and apply it to my account that I might be forgiven, that I might be reconciled, and that I might be freed for the first time in my life to actually live for your glory." That prayer from a sinner that is an expression of looking to God's provision for the sinner, that, that is the way to connect with the one for the prayer can't save you, but he can. Don't settle for less than the one.

Let's bow our heads.