

Introduction

The experience of doubt in some way, shape, or form is not uncommon among followers of Christ. By doubt I am not referring to a determined unbelief like that of Thomas who would not believe without seeing and touching. But I am speaking of an experience pertaining to belief itself. I am speaking of nagging questions that sometimes assault the soul. Is it really reasonable to believe the Bible? Is the Bible indeed completely reliable? Is God really at work in my life? Is Jesus indeed the way, the truth, and the life? And is there verily no other way to the Father than through him? Does God really care for me? There are also perplexing questions some of which may remain unanswered as long as we live.

Sometimes even those who speak these truths most confidently experience in quiet moments alone the reverberation of these questions in the halls of our minds. It is not because we do not believe. Rather, it is because we do believe and we just long for more clarity. We desire to understand. We hunger for a better grasp.

The imminent pastor Charles Spurgeon himself experienced this unrest. He wrote: "Some of us who have preached the word for years, and have been the means of working faith in others and of establishing them in the knowledge of the fundamental doctrines of the Bible, have nevertheless been the subjects of the most fearful and violent doubts as to the truth of the very gospel we have preached." (Preaching on Psalm 69:14)

This morning as we turn to Matthew 11 we find one of the greatest men of all time in a season of questioning. He took his question straight to Jesus. He asked, "Are you really the Messiah or are we to look for someone else?"

[Read Text; Pray]

The intent of Matthew in writing the gospel according to his viewpoint is to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah, the King, promised in the Scriptures. Up to this point Matthew has shown how Jesus fulfills prophecy. He has

recounted the bold and confident declaration of John the Baptist that Jesus is the one who was to come. Matthew has told how Jesus endured an intense time of temptation in the wilderness without sin. Jesus' authority has been highlighted in his preaching and his miracles. And we have just worked our way through the tenth chapter of this gospel in which Jesus has called together and authorized his spokesmen to go out into the harvest as peacemakers offering to the multitudes peace with the king whose kingdom is at hand.

And yet at this point things become a little puzzling in certain aspects. For one thing Jesus tells his disciples they will not be warmly welcomed by their own people, even their own family. How can it be that Israel's king would come to his own and yet his own would not receive him? It seems in the course of Matthew's presentation that he realizes there may be readers of his account who at this point might doubt whether Jesus actually is the Messiah. As opposed to dancing around the matter, Matthew brings the question right to the center of the main stage. He does so by including this interchange between Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist. They come to Jesus with a question from the imprisoned John. Through the question of John and the subsequent commentary of Jesus, Matthew reassures us that in fact Jesus really is the Messiah. He also offers help for those who experience the questioning of soul and underscores the high privilege of greatness enjoyed by disciples in the kingdom of heaven.

The text opens with a spotlight on . . .

I. The Prophet Who Questions.

A. At this point it had been perhaps as long as a full year since John the Baptist had been rounded up by Herod and placed in a hot and remote prison in Judea. John had boldly denounced Herod's sin in taking the wife of his brother Philip. Herod did not take kindly to the rebuke and imprisoned John. So here was John languishing in a hot and uncomfortable prison.

He had much time to think back upon his life, his calling by God, and his ministry of preparing the way for the Messiah. His message was bold and resolute. He called upon the people to repent of their sins because the kingdom of heaven was near. He had graphically warned of Messiah's fiery

judgment. He declared that wrath was coming. He said of Messiah, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." John had also clearly identified Jesus as the lamb of God. He had pointed his own disciples to Jesus as the Messiah.

Now that John was off the scene, the ministry of Jesus was expanding. Multitudes were following him. John was keeping up with the ministry of Jesus by word of mouth. He heard in prison about what Jesus was doing. He was hearing about the healings, the exorcisms, the stilling of storms, and the cleansing of lepers. He was hearing about Jesus's preaching. He had learned that Jesus had also commissioned his own disciples to go through the towns doing mighty works and proclaiming the kingdom. All of this was well and good, but what about the wrath? What about the judgment which Messiah was to bring? As Don Carson points out, by this time Jesus had "brought healing to many but judgment to none—not even to those who immorally and unlawfully confined the Baptist in a cruel prison" (261).

B. When suffering and hardship strike, it is often a time for confidence to be shaken and for our souls to be filled with questions. Perhaps we actually fall deep into doubt about God's plan and God's promises. Elijah the prophetic forerunner to John the Baptist experienced significant depression in this kind of circumstances. There had been a great showdown on Mt . Carmel in which God answered Elijah's prayer and consumed water-drenched sacrifices, and the people cried out that the Lord is God. The prophets of Baal were seized and slaughtered. Then in response to the prayer of Elijah the Lord had sent rain to end the three year drought which Elijah himself had proclaimed. It was a glorious and climactic day for Elijah. Suddenly, however, he learned that Jezebel was not impressed but determined to kill him within 24 hours. His faith fell. He became afraid and fled away and asked that the Lord would take his life.

Have you ever been there? Weary? Perplexed? Questioning?

C. I do not think John was quite as low as Elijah had been, but he was questioning. "Why no judgment? If Jesus is Messiah who will baptize the enemies of God with fire, where is it? And why am I stuck in this prison? It is coming up on a year. And time passes so slowly here." So he sent disciples to Jesus to inquire, "Are you the coming one or shall we look for another?" John did the wise thing. He brought his perplexity to Jesus.

God knows we are going to experience weak moments. He knows we ourselves do not have all the answers. He knows we are going to sometimes wonder. It is at times like this when I am thankful to be able to call to mind Psalm 103:8. "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Psalm 103:13-14. "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." At times like these it is good to call to mind the counsel of King David to his own soul in Psalm 42. He writes, "I say to God, my rock: 'Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?' As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?' Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

Whenever you are racked with affliction, with perplexity, with unbelief in the midst of your belief, go to Jesus; go to the Lord. He is big enough for your questions! He may not tell you everything you would like to know, but he will give what you need to know.

From the prophet who questions, we turn to . . .

II. The Messiah Who Instructs. (4-6)

A. It is notable that there were occasions on which the opponents of Jesus asked questions. On several of these occasions he responded with a rebuke like, "Have you not read?". But here, with the questioning prophet, the tone and the response reflect a desire to help one who truly wants to understand. Jesus is the good shepherd. He leads his flock with care and tenderness. You can be sure that if your desire is to know what you need to know, his desire will be to provide for you what He knows you need.

B. Jesus directs John's disciples to go tell him what they saw and heard. But he gives them the phrases to use: "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."

What you most need to know about these phrases is that the wording Jesus used would point John to Messianic prophecy in Isaiah. He wasn't telling John and these disciples anything they did not already know about. But he was telling it to them in such a way as to direct them to the word of God so as to have their confidence grounded in that word.

Isaiah 35:5-6 says, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy."

Isaiah 61:1 says, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor;"

Then there is Isaiah 26:19, which says, "your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise."

Finally, here is Isaiah 29:18-19: "In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel."

Jesus is giving John a Bible lesson and thoroughly grounding him in it. And there is more. What have we pointed out that was a hallmark of John's preaching but that appeared to be absent from the ministry of Jesus? Judgment. Right? Strikingly, however, each of these four texts in Isaiah have a close connection with words of . . . Can you guess? With words of judgement!

35:4 says, "Behold your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God."

61:2 points out that the one who is anointed to proclaim good news to the poor will also proclaim "the day of vengeance of our God."

26:21 states that "the LORD is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity."

In 29:20 the prophet foretells that in the day when the deaf shall hear and the blind see, "the ruthless will come to nothing and the scoffer cease, and all who watch to do evil shall be cut off."

So it seems that Jesus was assuring John that the vengeance of the Lord, the judgment, the wrath, the punishment and overturning of the wicked is completely on his radar. Just because John does not see it at the moment does not mean that it is not coming. But everything according to the time table of the Lord.

C. The key for John is not letting what he does not understand get in the way of what he does understand. Jesus delivers a gentle encouragement to this effect. He says, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." The Greek word here sounds just like the English scandalize, and the idea here is closely entwined with scandal. Jesus is saying that there are things about him that are not going to fit with people's pre-conceived and mistaken notions. He will therefore be seen as scandalous by some and they will stumble over him. So Jesus is gently telling John to rest in the plain things of which he can be sure because of God's word. But don't be tripped up by what he does not understand.

The beatitude is of great help to you and me too, when we are perplexed and when we come to things we just don't understand. Go to the word. Trust the God who is faithful to his word. Embrace what is plain. But do not be undone by what is not plain. Do not judge God in light of your own preconceptions. Rather judge them by his word.

The prophet questioned; the Messiah instructed; and now see . . .

III. The Man Who Is Among the Greatest of Men.

A. I really like what happens at this point. John the Baptist had introduced Jesus to the watching world and lauded him as the Lamb of God as the one

coming after him whose sandals he was not worthy to carry. Now Jesus confirms the role and the greatness of John.

B. The fact that John has been willing to be open about his uncertainties could've caused onlookers and those who heard to have a diminished impression of him. Or perhaps they might think him fickle or weak. Jesus will have none of that. Jesus addresses the crowds, "Who did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed blown about by the wind?" Are you kidding me? Of course not! John's back bone was a steel beam.

"Did he wear soft clothes?" Was he a softie, unwilling to take a stand? No, says Jesus, those are the kind of men who serve in the palace of the king. People who say yes to whatever the king says. Clearly that is not John. His very confrontation of the king is what has landed him in prison.

You went out to see a prophet—not a man who asked in which direction the wind was blowing before he spoke, not a man who spoke to please people, but a man who spoke uncompromisingly the message given him by God.

But he is more than a prophet. He is the prophet who fulfills prophecy. And more than a prophet he is messenger of the king. He is the one whose role was to announce the arrival of the king. No greater role has been filled by a human being than this one. And this question did not arise out of weakness or faithlessness or some failure on the part of John the Baptist. The way in which Jesus declares John's greatness, with that familiar phrase, "Truly, I say to you," makes it apparent that Jesus is stating more than simply that John had a great role as a prophecy-fulfilling prophet. He is also asserting that he filled the role in a great way.

And he did. John boldly preached repentance as the proper way to prepare for the king's arrival. And when the king arrived, he greeted him with awe and reverence, saying, "I am not worthy." He announced his arrival to the masses by pointing away from himself and toward the majesty of the Lamb who had come to take away the sin of the world. And when Jesus's ministry began to succeed his own, he was not jealous. He took his proper place instructing his own followers: "he must increase and I must decrease." And now that he came to an hour of questioning, it was to Jesus that he

brought his question: Was I right? You tell me. The greatness of John is evident in his humility. Any human being of true greatness is a human being who is humble. He submits to the authority of God. He acknowledges that Christ belongs at the center. Christ is the one who must be lifted up. Christ must increase and I must decrease. True greatness is seen in the willingness not to seek a place of greatness but to serve in whatever place God puts us—certainly pointing away from ourselves to Jesus—to be willing to do everything we do so that others are directed to him. In the way of position and in the way of fulfilling that position, John is a portrait of true greatness as anyone born of woman because he was humble. Not weak, humble. Strong because he was humble. Bold and yet humble.

So we have seen the prophet who questioned, the messiah who instructed and the man who is among the greatest of men. Finally, I want you to see...

IV. The People Who Are Even Greater than John.

Closing out this section, Jesus makes a stunning declaration. "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." There is no way in the world that Jesus means to say by virtue of "being in the kingdom" a person is a greater (more godly) person than John. Nor is he saying that John is not a saved man.

First of all, being in the kingdom at this point refers to people who belong to Christ who are living after the crucial events of Christ's personal teaching, crucifixion, and resurrection, and imparting of the Spirit. By virtue of this position there is a greater ability, certainty, and clarity in pointing others to Jesus than was the case even for John the Baptist.

John's question stemmed not from an inferiority inherent to him but because of his place in the course of the God's working out of redemption in Christ. In Matthew 13, Jesus tells his disciples that they are seeing more clearly than even the prophets who longed to understand what they are now understanding. They possessed greater clarity because they were part of the kingdom-of-heaven on earth time frame.

The greatness continuum Jesus is explaining from lesser to greater greatness is a greatness of the disciple's clarity in pointing the world to

Jesus. John pointed to Jesus far more explicitly than any of the prophets before him. And yet even the least of the disciples of Jesus who experience and who look back to his teaching, his death and resurrection, and the experience of his giving of the Spirit, will be able to point more explicitly to Christ than did John.

This understanding speaks to the entire context. Things that John did not understand, we now do understand and grasp. John could not grasp why Jesus was not yet bringing judgment. From our perspective we understand that the judgment he will bring will come when he returns. We understand in much clearer terms than John did the many things Jesus accomplished on the cross. We have the blessing of the entire New Testament. We have an incredible accumulation of data to demonstrate that Jesus is indeed the one and we are not to look for another. We are able to see and to preach Jesus with greater clarity than he was.

One evidence is right here in the text. Did you notice Matthew's language in verse 2. He writes, "When John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ . . ." Those are not John's words but Matthew's. As he writes, he is now looking back from the time decades after Jesus' resurrection, and he is complete in his confidence of who Jesus is. He can then say unequivocally what John doubted even if for a moment—that Jesus really is the Messiah.

Conclusion

Every Christ follower today can speak with the same clarity and certainty. And at the end of this text for you and me, the message is less about dealing with doubt and how we should be proclaiming Jesus as king with the certainty and clarity that God has provided us through the unfolding of his revelation of Christ.

On the basis of what Jesus says here, every disciple of Jesus living today possesses a greater position than John the Baptist. We have a far clearer understanding of Christ than did he. As Carson writes, "clear witness to Christ before men is not only a requirement of the kingdom and a command of the resurrected Lord but the true greatness of the disciple." (265) These facts should drive us joyfully into the masses to proclaim Jesus Christ. If we can speak more clearly, let us then speak no less boldly.