

*No One Like Jesus: A Prophet's Question*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Isaiah 35; Acts 13:22-26; Matthew 11:1-6*

Our final Scripture reading comes from Matthew 11:1-6. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. "After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.""

"Is what you said really true?" A friend recently asked Catha that after hearing her give a devotional. Now I've known Catha for twenty-four years, and she's an incredibly truthful person. But in matters of faith, we struggle. We wonder if people who have a relationship with Jesus are pulling one over on us, that we're told a story with a sales pitch that will come later.

Surveys show Macomb is identical to the rest of the country when it comes to belief. 2/3rds of the people you meet are not involved in a church, having either nothing to do with faith or only a passing acquaintance with it. And America is in a cycle of doubt – about our nation, our past, our future, our morality, and especially our faith. And even the most faithful follower of Jesus Christ can fall into the hole of doubt.

That's what we see in today's lesson from Matthew 11. John the Baptist comes back into our view, and he's hurting. The cracks in his faith armor are showing. But Jesus' response shows us that doubt need not be fatal. John's question to Jesus teaches us a lot about ourselves, our relationship with God, and how God can pull us out of the doubt pit.

We haven't talked about John the Baptist for a while, so let's do a quick review. John was Jesus' cousin, and even before he were born John's parents learned from an angel that he was destined to prepare the way for the Messiah. When he grew up, John went out into the wilderness to lead people back to God. He looked wild – he ate locusts and wild honey and wore a camel hair tunic. His crazy appearance, combined with his practice of baptizing Jews, got attention. Gentile converts were baptized to become Jews, washing away their old heritage away. When John baptized Jews, it showed that being born into the people of Abraham wasn't enough. There needed to be a change of heart, mind, and life.

John acknowledged Jesus was the one he expected to come. He knew Jesus was perfect; when Jesus came to him to be baptized, he didn't want to do it. Jesus was the only person in the world who didn't *need* to be baptized! He was only convinced when Jesus told him it would fulfill all righteousness. John saw the Spirit land on Jesus like a dove and the voice of the Father praising Jesus as he baptized him.

But then John has a run-in with King Herod. John didn't get the memo that preachers aren't supposed to talk about politics and morality, 'cause that's exactly what he did. Herod Antipas is ruler over Judea. His dad bought the title of king from Caesar, and he got to keep it. He thinks he is a law unto himself. He falls in love with his brother's wife and takes her for his own. John calls him out on it publically – it's against God's law! So Herod throws John in jail. And John sits in jail for around two years...a jail far worse than even the worst American prison.

He starts to doubt. He has proclaimed Jesus is the Messiah. What if he was wrong? Was John wondering if he himself was a false prophet? Then news of Jesus comes to him...and it's not what he expected. It's good news, sure; Jesus is healing and teaching and doing miracles. But John had been urging the people to flee the wrath to come.

John was convinced the Messiah would bring the great day of the Lord – the day of judgment promised in Scripture. He wasn't caught up in "Messiah fever" like many fellow Jews were, waiting for a king to lead them to victory over Rome. But Jesus didn't bring judgment. He didn't gather an army. He didn't do what John thought the Messiah would do. John gets confused and begins to doubt. He trusts Jesus. But has he put his hopes in the wrong person?

So he sends his disciples to Jesus to ask the question. "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" John wants a "yes" or "no," a sign of some sort, something to hang his hat on, something that will get him through this brutal imprisonment. He's still deeply faithful; he simply needs a lifeline.

Jesus doesn't give John's disciples a "yes" or "no." Instead, He tells them, report back what you've seen with your own eyes -- blind see, lame walk, lepers cured, deaf hear, dead raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. He lists items from Isaiah 35 and 61 that would occur when Messiah comes. Jesus doesn't simplify His answer because words aren't enough for John. Jesus wants John to feel the weight of these prophecies, these promises he's known since he was a boy, coming true. Anybody could say they were the Messiah; many people in that era did only to die at the edge of a Roman sword. Jesus *shows* He is the Messiah.

Then He sends John's disciples back with a final word: "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." Jesus knows John is faithful and righteous. Jesus may not be everything that John expected, but He is the Promised One. Jesus promises a blessing for John for his faithfulness through the harsh things he has suffered – just keep holding on to the truth. He wants John to persevere to the end and receive the reward for his faithful service to God.

John's story speaks to us because we know doubt. We never sense that John doubted the existence of God, as many do today. John doesn't question the goodness of God or why bad things happen to good people. But John questions Jesus – not His existence, but His role in salvation history. Our doubts are more basic because we are two thousand years and a technological revolution away from the first century AD. But we can understand the roots of John's doubts. And Jesus deals with our doubts now the same way He did for His cousin.

The very first thing this story teaches us is this: *everyone is subject to doubt*. John was one of the finest persons ever to walk the earth. If you doubt that, come next week; Jesus will talk about John more. John was born to do great things and he did them. He had the spirit and power of Elijah, the greatest Old Testament prophet. He passionately reached multitudes for God and courageously opposed kings. He is a man *par excellence*. And he doubted what God was doing.

This is not an excuse for us. We shouldn't think, "If John had doubts, then I am entitled to my doubts too." But recognize this: doubt is not insurmountable, and it's not something only lesser Christians face. We all go through times where we are pushed to the breaking point and we throw our hands up in the air and wonder why. But you aren't alone in doubting, and you shouldn't beat yourself up about it. Don't deny your doubt or let it rule you; determine that doubt will not overcome you.

Second helpful thought: *doubt is the handmaiden of disappointment*. If you have faith of any sort, in anything, doubt comes in from outside. Doubt requires a seed. That seed is often disappointment. In John's case, a lot of things were affecting his thinking. He was languishing in prison at the hand of an immoral king. His ministry was over and he probably wondered about his purpose. The one thing he's holding on to is Jesus coming as the Messiah. Jesus coming in judgment was his only hope of escaping the clutches of King Herod. So when Jesus' plan doesn't match his expectations, despite all that Jesus was doing, he fell prey to doubt.

Often we feel like our doubts suddenly spring up, but they really come from latent disappointments we've never fully understood or explored. Would we question if the universe was made by God if we thought it was perfect? I doubt it. But in our world, we struggle to make a living, resources are scarce, and people often cruel to one another. We doubt that God made the universe because we're disappointed with what we see. God has an answer for that – our sin brought imperfection into our world – but our disappointment leads to doubt.

It happens in marriages, in relationships, in partnerships. If things are always rosy, there's no reason to believe that you're not in love. If your business brings \$10,000,000 into your pocket every year, it's hard to doubt your business strategy. Nobody doubts their outreach plan when the pews fill up. But when disappointments come, watch out! Doubt seeps in once we become disappointed, when things don't go according to plan.

Disappointment doesn't always happen when things are terrible. It can come when everyone else seems to be blessed, or has their prayers answered, and we don't. We don't even have to be in a really bad place. We find ourselves disappointed with where we are. That disappointment, left unchecked, can lead to doubt.

Now disappointment isn't the only reason for doubt. Sometimes we doubt God because of a temptation to sin – we want to do something we know is against God's will, so we start doubting if God really meant what He said or if there isn't some kind of loophole. Sometimes we doubt because of ignorance – we just don't know enough to be convinced of the truth. Doubt often comes when we're under stress, exhausted, or haven't followed after God diligently. But disappointment is a leading cause of doubt.

Before we sink into doubt, it's good to be self-reflective. Is my disappointment self-centered – I didn't get what I wanted? Are my doubts real, or am I just disappointed because I would have liked another outcome better? Is this disappointment temporary or permanent, a setback or a crushing blow? Is God using this disappointment to lead me to greater things, or is this disappointment something I can only get over if I trust that God is still in control? Being self-aware enough to know the difference is important. A little self-reflection may help us see that our doubts are a symptom of disappointment, not the root problem.

What do we do when disappointment leads to deep, real doubt? *The first step God leads us to take out of doubt is not to despair but to ask honest questions.* What's the truth of the matter? Ask questions to find out. John doesn't let his imprisonment determine for him that Jesus isn't the Messiah. He sends his disciples to find out what's going on, to find out if Jesus is the promised One. He inquires of Jesus, "Should we expect someone else?"

John follows the pattern of the psalms in asking hard questions of God in the midst of doubt and disappointment. When faced with serious illness, Psalm 6 asks, "How long, Lord? How long?" Psalm 22, which Jesus quoted on the cross, asks, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" Psalm 42 boldly states, "I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"" Psalm 88 ponders: "Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?" These aren't just questions; they are accusations. Yet in each one, the Psalmist continues to worship God, counting on Him for deliverance.

We don't ask questions of God because we are afraid of two things: we're afraid that we won't hear an answer, that somehow God can't or won't or isn't there to answer, or we won't like the answer. But if we don't ask, then we'll never hear an answer! And frankly, if we've read our Bibles thoroughly and know who God is, the answers we receive will rarely surprise us. They won't contradict Scripture or what Scripture tells us about the person of God.

Bible college president Sumner Wemp told about a vacation he took to Florida. One day, a lifeguard accomplished several rescues. The undertow was strong and several people got caught in it. Wemp was moved seeing the lifeguard crew save several lives, and he went to the guardhouse to offer his thanks for their work. "When I walked into the station," Wemp wrote, "I was struck by a sign on the wall in large red letters which read, IF IN DOUBT, GO!"

A lifeguard with doubts about a person's safety isn't doing his job if he stays in his chair. He could think about it, ruminate on it, and contemplate it. But unless he does something about it and dives into the water, someone's going to drown. If we have doubts about what's happening in our lives or how or if God's involved and our initial self-reflection doesn't cure it, swimming in our doubt won't solve anything. Go to the source. Go to God. Pursue Him in prayer and in the Scripture. That's what God shows us is the first step to overcoming doubt.

*The second step God takes to lead us out of doubt is to remind us of the accomplished acts of our Lord Jesus in history.* Jesus doesn't ask John to take His word for it that He is the Messiah. Instead, He tells John's disciples, go tell what you've seen and heard. Tell what I'm doing. Tell what I've done. Let John know that I'm not just claiming a title, I am fulfilling the prophecies – I am accomplishing them.

When we doubt, emotion often clouds our judgment. Feelings get in the way. We know God loves us in our heads, but we don't feel it in our hearts. If we rely on those emotions, we may move from doubt into despair, believing that God isn't there. Jesus doesn't tell John, "Know that I love you." He doesn't say, "If you had more faith or felt more love for God, you would overcome your doubts." He doesn't tell John to rely on emotion to know that He is the Messiah. He doesn't ask John to believe on blind faith.

What does He do? He presents John with facts. Not lofty thoughts, feelings, sentiments, or opinions – hard evidence. Of all world religions, only Judaism and Christianity are based not on the thoughts and ideas of a single person claiming to have a vision or revelation, but on the actual work of God happening in real, observable history. Jesus tells John's disciples to use the scientific method – observe and report. Test your hypothesis against real data. You ask if Jesus is the Christ? Jesus shows it to be true by what He does.

Jesus fulfilled over 60 major prophecies of Old Testament Scripture and over 270 ramifications of being the Messiah. A book called *Science Speaks* analyzed the data and found that a single person fulfilling only eight of the major prophecies in the Old Testament was a 10 quadrillion to one shot. No other belief system has more reliable proof. Judaism and Christianity provide hard evidence for their truthfulness, from archeology to fulfilled prophecy.

What we count on in our doubt is the accomplished works of Jesus. Because of the ones we can verify, we can know what He has taught us is true: His work in atoning for our salvation is finished. His work is done, and He sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. He has sent the Holy Spirit to us so that we can be made righteous by His blood, led in His ways, and made perfect in God's sight. We might be disappointed by our current circumstances, but we know they will change because of the clear facts – Jesus has finished His task. Because of His trustworthiness in the past, we can count on Him to bring about a new and perfect future.

You know what? Doubt is tough! It's hard to overcome. Sometimes we aren't sure where it comes from or how to get rid of it. Sometimes we go through the motions a long time never having any real resolution to our doubts. But it doesn't have to be that way. God has provided answers for us, answers to the questions that really matter. He will never leave us or forsake us. Count on that.

When you're doubting, talk about it with God. Use me as a sounding board and a resource. And if you've never really given your life over to God, do it today, and you will know that He can overcome every doubt and bring you into His Kingdom a new and glorious creation perfected for His glory.