



DOUBT

Matthew 11:2-6 *Now when John, while imprisoned, heard the works of Christ, he sent word to his disciples and said to Him, "Are you the Expected One, or should we look for someone else?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who does not take offense at me."*

1. JESUS SETS AN EXAMPLE FOR HIS DISCIPLES

The theme of the passage before us is not John or his disciples, but rather it is Jesus. The passage opens with John in prison. Certainly he is going through a tough time and so are his disciples. If you were to look in verse one, you would see that Jesus is out preaching and teaching. Some of us have a tough time with that. WHY? We think that Gospel matters should be put on hold when there is trouble around – especially if the trouble involves US!

I'm certain that John's disciples must have been asking, "Doesn't Jesus care that John is in prison? How can the Kingdom continue to advance while he is locked up? ONE OF THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS WE HAVE IS THAT WE THINK WAY TOO MUCH OF OURSELVES! John is in prison. His job had been to prepare the way for the Lord. Now, in God's providence, mysterious as it was, John had been taken off the scene. BUT JESUS HAD RAISED UP 12 TO TAKE JOHN'S PLACE.

We must never think that we are indispensable in God's work. When we don't understand what God is doing, we tend to doubt. The Lord was preparing the disciples to be on their own to teach and preach.

2. EVEN MATURE DISCIPLES CAN EXPERIENCE DOUBT

Verses two and three show us that even a mature believer can struggle with questions and doubts. John has proclaimed the truth, prepared the way for the Messiah, but now he is behind bars. He is in a gloomy prison fortress about five miles east of the Dead Sea, in one of the palaces of Herod Antipas, and his ministry has been shut down. John is most comfortable roaming free preaching and prophesying, and now he is not able to do either. All of a sudden His heart is quivering with doubt.

John is in prison. That perplexes him. John is alone. That puzzles him. John has preached a message emphasizing the passages of the Old Testament which says that when the Messiah comes He will set things right in Israel. He will bring judgment on the wicked. He will release those who are oppressed. He will restore order in the land. He will draw all people back to God.

BUT THERE IS A PROBLEM. John is in jail! He is imprisoned by the grossest, most immoral adulterer possible. John is wondering, "WHAT GIVES?"

If you go back to Matthew 3:7 and notice what John says when the Pharisees and the Sadducees approach: YOU BROOD OF VIPERS. WHO WARNED YOU TO FLEE FROM THE WRATH TO COME? John's emphasis is on the fact that when Messiah comes He will bring wrath against self-righteousness and wickedness. He goes on to say, "THEREFORE, BEAR FRUIT IN KEEPING WITH REPENTANCE, AND DO NOT SUPPOSE THAT YOU CAN SAY TO YOURSELVES, 'WE HAVE ABRAHAM FOR OUR FATHER' FOR I SAY TO YOU FROM THESE STONES GOD IS ABLE TO RAISE UP CHILDREN TO ABRAHAM. THE AX IS ALREADY LAID TO THE ROOT OF THE TREES. THEREFORE, EVERY TREE THAT DOES NOT BEAR GOOD FRUIT IS CUT DOWN AND THROWN INTO THE FIRE. AS FOR ME, I BAPTIZE YOU WITH WATER FOR REPENTANCE, BUT HE WHO IS COMING AFTER ME IS GREATER THAN I, AND I AM NOT FIT TO REMOVE HIS SANDALS. HE WILL BAPTIZE YOU WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT AND WITH FIRE. HIS WINNOWING FORK IS IN HIS HAND AND HE WILL THOROUGHLY CLEAR HIS THRESHING FLOOR, AND HE WILL GATHER HIS WHEAT INTO THE BARN, AND HE WILL BURN UP THE CHAFF WITH UNQUENCHABLE FIRE."

Hell. Fire. Brimstone. Just you wait for the Messiah! He will set things straight! He will judge iniquity! You better run! You better hide! You can almost hear the wheels in John's mind turning with the question: **Did I miss something here?**

John was expecting the Kingdom to burst on Israel with outward power. He had never anticipated that the Messiah might be a servant-King. In response to John's question, Jesus is going to take John right back to the Scripture and remind him of a truth that he has overlooked.

There are so many applications of this passage we cannot enumerate them all, but one thing is certain. **We must not be surprised when even mature believers struggle with doubt.** Doubt is the enemy of faith.

If you have ever read the letters of Samuel Rutherford, you know how the man felt when he was exiled to Aberdeen. He wanted to be preaching the gospel to his people, but he was put under house arrest. That was not unlike John. He wanted to be preaching. Instead, he is in a jail and those circumstances cause doubt. **Disappointment follows doubt.** He has been waiting for the Messiah to come and clean house. He was tired of what the Pharisees and Sadducees were doing to his people. He wanted to see the Messiah set them straight.

Now I want to say this about John. John knows the right question to ask. He is in prison, and He sends his disciples to Him to ask Him, "Are you the Messiah, or are we to look for someone else?" John puts his finger right on the ultimate question. The most important question that any man or woman in this world can ask is: "IS JESUS THE MESSIAH OR ARE WE TO LOOK FOR SOMEONE ELSE?" He is either the Messiah or He is not. It is that simple.

3. SAVING FAITH IS GROUNDED IN THE WORD OF GOD AND THE WORK OF JESUS

Jesus' reply is telling. "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Go and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who does not take offense at me.'"

Jesus takes John's disciples directly to the Scriptures. In particular, He takes them to two passages in Isaiah. It is important to know that Jesus is not only giving John assurance here, He is also giving him a lesson in Biblical interpretation. We have already said that John wanted to stress the judgment that the Messiah was going to bring. So Jesus takes him straight to the passages where the judgment of the Messiah is stressed, but he points him to the parts of those passages which stress the servant hood of the Messiah.

First, in Isaiah 35:4-6. Says to those with anxious heart, take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come, but He will save you. When the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy."

In Matthew 11:5, Jesus said: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the leper is cleansed, the deaf hear." Then he asked John's disciples, "What have you seen me do?"

The other passage is Isaiah 61:1-2. *"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn."*

The source of John's doubt was his misunderstanding of the Scripture and the Messiah it portrays. The Messiah was different than John expected – he was better. And it is in precisely our struggle with doubt that the Lord Jesus teaches us that He is better. He has majesty that we cannot imagine.

If John can struggle, you can struggle. You will struggle. If you are not there now, you will be. You need to know that in your weakness and doubt, you have a Savior who is so strong that He can help you; so gentle that He can embrace you, and so majestic that He can engulf any doubts and fears that pursue you!