

Do you struggle with trusting God? Do you wrestle with doubt? Doubt, now there's something we don't talk about in church very often, but we should. From time to time, nearly every believer grapples with doubt. *How can I be sure Christianity is true? What if I've put all my hope in Christ, but I'm wrong? What if there's no heaven or hell? What if the Bible isn't true?* Questions of this sort can nag at the heart of the sincerest believer.

Today we want to look at a hero of the faith, a man of great faith, someone most of us would doubt would ever have any doubts...but he did, John the Baptist. Luke 7:18-30 (p. 863).

Doubt is one of the dark secrets of the church. We all doubt from time to time. I know I have. Doubt itself is not sinful or wrong. In fact, doubt can often be a catalyst to new spiritual growth. Doubts typically fall into three categories.

There are intellectual doubts. These are doubts raised by those outside the Christian faith: *Is the Bible true? Did miracles happen? Is Jesus the Son of God? Did He really rise from the dead?*

There are spiritual doubts. These tend to be the doubts of those inside the Church: *Am I really a Christian? Have I truly believed? Why is it so hard to pray? Why do I still feel guilty? Why is it taking me so long to get better?*

There are circumstantial doubts. This is the largest category because it encompasses the "whys" of life: *Why did my child die? Why did my marriage break up? Why can't I find a spouse? Why did my friend betray me? Where was God when my uncle was abusing me? Why am I struggling with this illness?* These are the questions we meet at the intersection of biblical faith and the pain of living in a fallen world. They're often the toughest doubts. Sometimes we sweep them under the rug or worse, put down believers who struggle with these issues.

When we refuse to deal with **circumstantial doubts**, they can become spiritual doubts that fester, eventually becoming intellectual doubts. Some then abandon the faith and leave the Church. We must graciously and lovingly deal with doubters. And Jesus is our model as He so gently, yet truthfully dealt with the doubts of this wonderful man of God, John the Baptist. He gives John **The Benefit of the Doubt**.

In these verses Jesus deals with John's doubt, then He talks about God's messenger. Finally Jesus points out the message means there must be a decision. If you're taking notes...

1. Difficult circumstances increase our vulnerability to doubt. Some years back I was at Mayfair Mall and the wife of a man who pastored in the area saw me in the Mall, stopped me and asked, "Are you who I think you are?" What a loaded question. Yet, that's what John has sent his disciples to ask Jesus: *Are you Who we think you are?*

John the fiery prophet is in the dungeon of despair (**picture**). King Herod had thrown him into prison because John had dared to condemn Herod's incestuous marriage to his one-time sister-in-law, Herodias. He was incarcerated in the dungeon of Machaerus, the desert fortress-palace (**picture**) perched on a desolate high ridge by the Dead Sea. The remains of the castle's dungeons can still be seen today, complete with iron hooks. A more desolate, depressing place is hard to imagine. Remember, too, John was a man of the outdoors and wilderness. He preached clothed in camel's skin.

As he languished at Machaerus, he became increasingly perplexed by the reports he heard of Jesus ministry. They didn't jibe with what John expected and what he'd preached about what Jesus would do. He expected Jesus to call down fire and judgment, forcing out the Roman invaders. When that didn't happen, he became confused, discouraged and impatient.

Add to that, Jesus is preaching throughout the countryside but John is sitting in prison, getting no help from Jesus as far as he could see. Couldn't Jesus at least start a GoFundMe for him?

Jesus wasn't living up to John's expectations. He wasn't doing what John thought He should do. Isn't that when most of us doubt? When Jesus doesn't live up to our expectations?

Disappointed, disillusioned, doubting, John sends two of his disciples to Jesus, "*Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?*"

Please understand. There's a huge gap between doubt and unbelief. Doubt happens when we don't understand what God is doing. Unbelief comes when we refuse to believe God's Word and obey what He tells us to do. Oswald Chambers (**picture**) said, "*Doubt is not always a sign that a man is wrong; it may be a sign that he is thinking.*" That's John the Baptist...he has lots of time to think and he wants to make sure Jesus is the One.

I love how Jesus responds. "*In that hour [Jesus] healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And He answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me'*" (vss. 21-23). Have you ever wondered when you're in the Dungeon of Doubt what Jesus thinks of you? How He feels about your doubt? Here's your answer.

When someone questions you, your motives or your integrity – how do you respond? Not Jesus. Instead He gives John the cure for the disease of doubt, redirecting him back to the mission and encouraging him.

a. God's Word is the cure for doubt. When are we going to learn that God's Word is the cure for what ails us? So few of us crack our Bibles open on a regular basis. And then we wonder why we struggle with anxiety, depression, stress, anger, etc.? It's not just reading God's Word, it's trusting It...believing God's promises and applying His Word to daily life.

Most of us miss what's going on here because we're so biblically illiterate. I did. I missed it. But Jesus knew John wouldn't miss it because John was a man of the Book. He knew God's Word.

In these miracles Jesus is fulfilling prophetic passages from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. He's living out at least five sections of Isaiah (8:14-15, 26:19, 29:18, 35:5 and 61:1). It should encourage John.

Both Jesus and John were saturated with the Word. They read it, studied, had it committed to memory, prayed it. So when it was needed, God's Spirit could bring it to remembrance and apply it as medicine to their souls.

The Old Testament book of Isaiah was written centuries before Jesus was born. It's referred to as the 5th Gospel because it has so many promises and prophecies about the coming of Jesus, like He'd be born of a virgin and how He'd die. By His miracles Jesus is saying, "Go tell John everything Isaiah promised would happen when Messiah came, when God is among us is happening because I'm the Messiah, I'm God among you."

Jesus had the fruits of Isaiah. John was looking for a political solution. Can we relate? Jesus' power is so much greater than a temporal political solution. This is the beginning of the restoration of depraved humanity and a fallen creation to a right relationship with God. It's the beginning of the defeat of our greatest enemies – Satan, sin and death.

Charles Wesley (**picture**) caught these rich truths in his hymn, *Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus*: "Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart."

Jesus is the One! And so Jesus sends John's messengers back with overwhelming empirical and Scriptural evidence that massive Messianic power was flowing through Him. It's an awesome validation.

b. The mission is to proclaim the Gospel. If you stood outside Walmart this afternoon and asked folk as they exited, "What's Christianity?" What kind of answers do you think you'd get? Some might say it's a system of thought or morality. Others might call it a religious organization. Even if you were to limit your question to those who make a claim to be some sort of Christian, you'd get a wide range of answers.

This is important! Healing diseases, restoring sight, casting out demons, even raising the dead is **nothing** without the Gospel. Jesus said "*the poor have good news preached to them.*" The word for "good news" is *gospel*.

The Church's mission is not food banks, or soup kitchens, or free clothes or sports leagues or even Bible studies. Our mission is the Gospel. The problem with the Church is we've forgotten the mission. We're often little more than a moral, religious country club of nice people. That's not the mission.

We're to be sharing the Gospel. We're to be making disciples. Are we? The world doesn't need another social program. It needs a rescue operation. If you're a believer, your mission, my mission is NOT to solve the political, educational, economic, social problems of this dying world. God doesn't want to change this world! He wants to change people, one at a time. There's nothing wrong with humanitarian services. But the end game is to bring lost sinners to the everlasting hope of the Gospel. Jesus didn't die to *repair* the world; He died to *rescue* it.

c. There is a blessing of trusting even in the darkness, "*And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.*" The Greek word for *offended* gives us our English word *scandalize*. Originally, it referred to bait in a trap. John was in danger of being trapped by doubt.

John is struggling with disappointment with Jesus. He's not the last one. There are lots of sour, cynical Christians. Their marriage or children didn't turn out like they thought. They feel God let them down. It may be financial. Maybe they had plans for a certain job or retirement. They struggle with emotional issues or thought they'd have an easier life.

There are pastors like this. They're disillusioned. They thought everyone would like them. They thought their church would explode with growth.

How about you? Be honest. Are you offended with Jesus? Possibly more than ever before in our selfie, narcissistic age, we need to hear and live out this beatitude: "*Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.*"

2. The message is essential, not the messenger. If you were asked who do you think is a really great person, who would you say? Would it be someone who just questioned your mission? Your integrity? That's exactly what Jesus does. He tells the crowds, "*I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John*" (vs. 28).

There's a warning here for us in this day when our world is so critical, particularly of those in leadership, even spiritual leadership. We must be very careful of speaking ill of those in spiritual leadership. If there's unrepentant sin or clear heresy, it's one thing. We have a national group of Pharisees who have virtually no ministry or impact for the Kingdom,

but continually take potshots at well-known Christian leaders. Too often we repeat something we hear or read on the Internet. More than half of it's not true. We need to give those serving the Lord the benefit of the doubt, just as we'd want someone to give us the benefit of the doubt. That's what Jesus does for John the Baptist. He's the model for us all.

a. John persevered in spite of opposition. Have you ever been to the *wilderness*? When you picture your dream home, do you picture moving to the *wilderness*? Would you go to church in Wisconsin in the middle of winter, if you knew there was no heat? What about mid-August, if you knew there was no air conditioning? Probably not. "*Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet'"* (vss. 24-26).

John's not some reed rattling in the wind. He didn't vacillate, swaying here and there with the breezes of popular opinion. Nor was he a man in soft clothing. The word for "soft" in 1 Corinthians 6:9 is translated "*effeminate*." John's not some soft, pampered advisor on the court. He wasn't a wimp or one of the coddled nobility. No, John is a man's man. His clothes were made of camel's hair with a leather belt. He ate grasshoppers and wild honey.

Today he'd probably look like someone homeless. People laughed and pointed at John...until he began to preach. His message was so powerful that crowds left the comfort of the cities to go out to the wilderness to hear him.

Jesus' point is it wasn't the *messenger*, it was the *message*. John ticked people off with God's truth. He didn't buy into the "attractional church" model of ministry. He spoke strongly. He spoke and lived like a prophet.

Even based on their societal norms, John wasn't considered great. He was anti-social, abrasive and politically incorrect. He was an irritating nuisance. He wasn't pretty, had no wealth, social prominence or a formal education.

God's standard of greatness is always the antithesis of this world. When John was attacked, instead of shrinking away, he was emboldened to more passionately share the message.

What does the world really want from the Church today? From the preacher? What does the world want from the Christian today? Two words, and they're not polite ones – "*Shut up!*" But we can't. No, we shouldn't be unnecessarily abrasive or uncouth. God hasn't called us to that. But the message isn't our message, it's God's. We dare not shut-up, even if they lock us up or take off our heads. God hasn't called us to be popular, He's called us to be faithful and we must persevere! Though the world despises us, it's still attracted to the message because it is the only message of true hope!

b. John was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophesy. Jesus goes beyond merely identifying John as a prophet. He's the one prophesied to come and announce the Messiah. He's the fulfillment of Malachi 3:1, "*Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me...*" It was John's privilege to be the forerunner of the Messiah. That set him apart for unparalleled greatness. While other Old Testament prophets predicted the Messiah would come, John announced the Messiah had arrived. For them it was a matter of faith, for John it was sight.

c. John was blessed for his faithfulness. He's in a dungeon. He's faithfully fulfilled his mission. Now he'll die for it. For John faithfulness was more important and better than life!

Better than leisure life in retirement, better than leisure life in the middle years, better than leisure life in youth. Do you want to hear some of the definitions of "retire" from my Webster's Collegiate Dictionary? "To withdraw from action or danger." "To fall back." "To go to bed." "To march away from the enemy."

Retirement or retiring is the American dream. Did you know that it has no foundation in Scripture? That's because retirement for the believer is not in this life. So when your company or Uncle Sam tells you to retire (and they will), here's what you should say, "You may call it retirement; but I call it a change of station. A new front in the warfare. A new assignment from my King, the Counselor in Chief. I'm going to be faithful in my new position. There's work to be done for the cause of Jesus Christ, and I will do what I can do while I have breath."

John was given a new assignment. God moved him from preaching in the wilderness to preaching in Herod's dungeon. And he faithfully preached until they silenced him, so he could be welcomed Home to glory! Will you be faithful? Will you be blessed for your faithfulness...even in "retirement"? Faithfulness to the cause is better than even life.

d. We are more blessed than John.... What Jesus says next is shocking, "*Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.*" John is in the Who's Who of God's servants. How can we be greater than John the Baptist? Because of the Cross. John only announced the King and Kingdom; you and I are children of the Kingdom and friends of the King. We're not greater in character or ministry, we're greater in position, in that John was one of the last Old Testament saints. He lived and died before the Cross. We're New Testament saints.

John and Old Testament saints didn't understand the Cross. They didn't have immediate access to the Father. When they died, they didn't go to Heaven but to Paradise. Their sins hadn't been paid for. For us, "*absent from the body...present with the Lord*" (2 Cor. 5:8, KJV). We have immediate access to Jesus in prayer (Hebrews 4:14-16). We're indwelt, empowered and led by the Spirit. We have a complete Bible. We're the Church. Our inheritance is heavenly,

literally out of this world. They're Israel. They're inheritance is this world, earthly. You and I as New Testament saints are more blessed than John and Old Testament people of faith.

3. There must always be a response to the message. Verses 29-30 are a parenthesis related to Jesus' conclusion: "(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)"

What we have here is a difference of expectation of what we believe we deserve. The Pharisees believed because they obeyed the Law, did good works, were moral – they deserved Heaven and God's acceptance. They believed salvation was their *right*. They didn't believe they needed to repent, so they rejected John's baptism. They were offended someone would suggest they didn't deserve heaven. They thought heaven was a right.

The tax collectors, on the other hand, are very aware of their sin. They believe they deserved God's judgement. They demonstrated *repentance* and faith and were baptized by John. Repentance always has evidence.

Maybe you're sitting here this morning, like the Pharisees, you believe heaven is a right. You believe you're moral, basically good... a nice person. You believe heaven is your right because you're basically a good person.

Heaven is not a right. The only way to heaven is repentance, the simple acknowledgement of "I'm a sinner." If you believe heaven is your right, you're rejecting God's plan of salvation. You won't claim God's grace because you believe you're good enough on your own. You're wrong! The Bible says none of us are good. All of us need God's grace.

It's why some haven't been baptized. Let's be honest, baptism is humbling. Who wants to be humbled in front of others? But if we were supremely biblical, it would be better, instead of letting folk when they're baptized wear old clothes, have them wear their best clothes – to symbolize our best will never get us into heaven. What keeps many, like the Pharisees, from being baptized – pride, smugness, complacency.

It's only by humble repentance, throwing ourselves on the mercy of God at the Cross that we're forgiven and have eternal life. It's all of grace! What a tragedy that Hell will be full of smug, self-righteous people like the Pharisees who believed they were good enough and did not need to repent.

4. If you reject Christ, you'll deceive yourself into believing the problem is Jesus. This last part has been dubbed "the parable of the brats." Look at verses 31-35. This was a common children's song back then. It represents those who are never happy. Spiritually, they're passive aggressive. The most significant events in Jewish life were funerals and weddings. Funerals are dark and sad. Weddings are light and happy. Because it was what children saw a lot of, when they got together to play, they'd play wedding or funeral. The emo kids, punk rocker types played funeral. The pop kids, party animals, played wedding.

This is the only record in Scripture of children playing a game. They'd play in the market place when it wasn't being used. It shows how in touch Jesus was with His world. He even knew the nursery rhymes of His day.

It seems there was always a group who wanted to play wedding and a group who wanted to play funeral. One group said, "We don't want to play wedding. It's too happy." The other, "We don't want to play funeral. It's too sad." Sounds like a kid. "Do you want a sandwich?" "No." How about pizza? "No." Cereal? "No." Well, what do you want to eat? "I don't care."

There were those who didn't like John the Baptist because he's too serious, too much of an ascetic. But they didn't like Jesus because He went to parties and celebrations. He's too frivolous for them. You can't have it both ways.

There are people who go to churches who are like that. They're from 2nd Power of Positive Thinking Cathedral. They'll visit a church like ours and say, "We're looking for something a little more cheerful, a little more positive. We're not into this sin thing. We're looking for something a little less gloomy and a bit brighter." Another group comes in from First Church of the Frigidaire. When they leave it's, "There was a little too much levity this morning. We're looking for something a bit more serious, more somber... more traditional."

Jesus asks, "What do you think this is? You play a party tune and I dance. You play in the minor key and I dirge. Is that you want me to do? Is that what you wanted John to do?"

They reject truth because it's not in a package they want. Jesus calls them out, tells them they're a bunch of spiritual brats. *The parable of the brats*. Criticism is often a cover for conviction. Those who want to reject the message will find fault or some excuse for not believing and receiving Jesus.

We must learn to faithfully share God's Word and not be jerked around like a puppet on a string. We'll never make critics happy and are foolish to try. The intolerant are so intolerant. They major on the minors. It wasn't the messenger, it was the message. There are always spiritual brats who reject the truth and blame the messenger, just as they did John and Jesus. Wonderfully, there are those who accept the message, usually a small yet magnificent minority.

“*Wisdom is justified by all her children*” is a Hebraism for those who are wise. Jesus’ masterful illustration points out there are two kinds of spiritual children in every generation: the brats of foolishness and wisdom’s children. The brats reject the message and are devoid of wisdom. The wise are the redeemed. They accept the message, repent of sin and are transformed by the grace of God. They are as 2 Timothy 3:15 refers to them, “*wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*” The vital question is: **Which one are you?**

Conclusion: Jesus gave John the Baptist **The Benefit of the Doubt**. He does the same for us. Sometimes, doubts arise. The most faithful Christians sometimes doubt, especially when we’re going through periods of adversity.

We’re not told what happened to John the Baptist when the messengers reported back to him. I suspect a smile peeked out from under his bushy beard. Later, I’m certain others reported to him, “*John, Jesus said you are the greatest man ever born of woman!*”

We do know he set aside his doubts and trusted. *Why?* Mark reports on the night of Herod’s birthday, there was a debauched party. Salome, the daughter of Herod’s stolen wife, Herodias, inflamed Herod with her sensual dance. When Herod told her, “Ask for anything, I’ll give it to you, up to half of my kingdom,” after consulting with her evil mother, she asked Herod to give her John’s head on a platter. Herod couldn’t break his word and lose face, so a soldier was dispatched to John’s cell.

What do you think was going through John’s mind at the last? Doubt? I doubt it. As the sword swished through the air, John’s earthly life ended—and so did his captivity. He was instantly escorted into Paradise. Abraham, Isaac, Moses, and Elijah were already there. Jesus said John was greater than all of them! I at that moment John must have thought, “Why did I ever doubt?” Doubt won’t keep you out of heaven but it can keep you from experiencing the joy of heaven now!

Are you struggling with doubt? What should you do? Doubt isn’t sinful but it can be dangerous. Yet, it can spur us on to greater spiritual growth. It’s what you do with your doubt that makes the difference. As we tie this up, let me close with **Five Suggestions** to help you handle doubt.

a. Admit your doubts and ask for help. That’s what John did. God isn’t fragile. He can handle our doubts and all our unanswered questions. He’s a big God. He runs the universe without any help. Your doubts won’t upset him. Tell Him your doubts, cry out for His help. And don’t fight the battle alone. Go to a spiritually mature friend with strong faith and godly insight. Ask them to walk with you as you face your doubts honestly. Maybe this morning, at the end of the service, come to the front so someone can pray with you and encourage you.

b. Be consistently in God’s Word. Romans 10:17, “*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*” Do you know why some of you have such weak faith? You’re hardly read your Bible. For a Christian, that’s stupid. You’re a sitting duck for Satan’s darts of doubt. Don’t eat, don’t bathe, don’t brush your teeth but read your Bible. Because all of those will only help you for this temporal world. Reading God’s love letter every day is a powerful protection against doubt. You’re unarmed in Satan’s ghetto if you’re not in the Book consistently.

c. Act on your faith, not your doubts. It’s what Noah did when he built the ark. It’s what David did as he faced Goliath. It’s what Daniel did when he was thrown into the lion’s den. Don’t you think all these heroes of the faith had their doubts? Of course. They didn’t know how everything was going to turn out. But they took a deep breath, chose to trust God and acted on their faith and not on their doubts. Do the same and your faith will grow stronger.

d. Doubt your doubts, not your faith. Cling to your faith even if you’re in the deep valley of darkness. All of us walk in that valley from time to time. Some spend a great deal of time there. When you find yourself in that valley where all is uncertain and you’re tempted to give in to your doubts, remember these two words – *Keep walking*. Nothing is gained by camping out in the valley. The only way out is to keep walking. Every step forward is a way to “doubt your doubts.” Soon the light will shine again.

e. Keep going back to what you know to be true. After considering the sufferings of this life, and the perils and tribulations of following Christ, Paul concludes Romans 8 triumphantly by declaring, “*For I am persuaded.*” Then, he declares that nothing in all the universe can separate us from the love of God. 2 Timothy 1:12 says, “*I know whom I have believed.*” In times of trouble, keep going back to what you know to be true.

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer (**picture**), 1st President of Dallas Seminary said believing in Jesus means trusting Him so much that if He can’t take you to heaven, you aren’t going to go there. If Jesus can’t take me to heaven, I’ll never make it because I’m going “all in” on Him. I don’t have a Plan B.

God is bigger than our doubts. He never turns an honest doubter away. Like John the Baptist, Jesus gives us **the benefit of the doubt**. So come to Him with your doubts, your skepticism, unbelief, hard questions and your uncertainties. He welcomes your hardest questions.

Doubt is not a sin. It’s what you do with your doubt that makes all the difference. Please don’t let Satan win. Don’t let your doubts keep you from Jesus. Come to Him just as you are and bring your doubts with you. He’ll never turn you away. He loves you and will cure you of doubt. Like John the Baptist, you must trust Him and take Him at His Word. Will you?

Is your need to trust Him for salvation? Do you need to take Him at His Word and trust Him as your Savior? Will you? Maybe you're doubting and not even reading His Word? You can't trust God because you hardly know Him. Please start reading His Word today.

Doubt is a miserable dungeon. Let Jesus throw the door back and set you free. John trusted Him, will you? You can be free from the misery of doubt but you must trust Him. Will you trust Him today?