

ENGAGE

- Here opening questions and thoughts to get the group engaged in the thrust of the lesson.
- When are you most likely to cast doubt on something or someone?
- Do you doubt yourself a lot?
- Or, how about doubting your spouse or children?
- Maybe you doubt the integrity of your boss or a co-worker.
- Share with the group times when you doubted that something was going to happen because you felt out of control.
- Another option is to ask if the group has played the trust fall game, where a person stands with his/her back to a group of people and falls with the hope that he or she will be caught by the group.
- Sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't! That game illustrates the importance trust vs. doubt when it comes your safety, and it plays right into today's passage.
- John the Baptist reaches out to Jesus to see if he truly is the Messiah, or if there is someone else.

EXAMINE

This week's story begins with a reminder of Jesus' miraculous acts up until this point: "John [the Baptist]'s disciples informed him about all these things" (Luke 7:18).

This functions as a reminder to the reader, as well -- a nudge on the part of the narrator to say, "Remember what you've just heard. Jesus raised a man from the dead." In light of what has gone on so far in the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist's question in the very next verse ("Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?") is more than a little strange.

After all, Luke's Gospel begins by establishing that John was Jesus' faithful forerunner -- one who apparently recognized Jesus' identity from inside his mother's womb (Luke 1:44). John had been the voice calling in the wilderness, the one proclaiming in no uncertain terms that the Messiah was coming (Luke 3:15-16). But by Luke 7, John seems to have lost his patience. Are you really the one who is to come? he asks.

What has happened to give rise to this question for John? I would suggest that we look to a detail from Luke 3:19-20: John has been imprisoned by Herod. Matthew's version of this story

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states explicitly that John is in prison when he sends his disciples to ask Jesus who he is; presumably, he cannot come to Jesus himself (Matthew 11:2).

Luke is ambiguous about where John is when he sends his disciples to Jesus. Still, the point is that Herod had imprisoned John, and this is significant because Jewish expectations were that the Messiah would “proclaim release to the captives and ... let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). John must have been wondering how his experience squared with what he had been proclaiming about the Messiah for years.

This is a complicated political situation: The Roman Empire occupies the region, and Herod Antipas serves as Rome’s chosen Jewish king (4 BCE-39 CE) over Galilee and Perea in northern Palestine. Along with “urbanizing” Galilee, he is well-known for serving his own interests above the Jews’, just as his father, Herod the Great, had done before him. This means that Israel is a Roman client state, with all the complicated political realities that imperial occupation creates.

As is always the case when Empire reigns, Israel is plagued by social inequity, by vast disparities between the few with wealth and stature and the many who are poor and destitute. In the grand expanse of the Roman Empire, the Jewish people are but a small and politically inconsequential group, trying to hold onto their unique culture and customs while avoiding the disapproving gaze of those who rule.

It is important to recognize that not all Jews responded to this complex political situation in the same way; biblical and extrabiblical literature attests to varying Jewish responses to Roman rule and to the Herodian dynasty within it. What it meant to be “Jewish” in the 1st century was much more dynamic and fluid than we often think, especially if the only sources we read are the New Testament Gospels (which tend to paint a fairly monolithic, negative picture of “the Jews,” especially Pharisees and Sadducees). Being “Jewish” in this time period encompassed a whole diversity of beliefs, practices, and political views.

Still, it is clear that John -- and many other Jews along with him -- expected a Jewish Messiah who would redeem Israel from Roman oppression and usher in a Messianic Era -- the kingdom of God on earth. What Jesus had been doing was miraculous, but it wasn’t enough. So, John asks the question: Should we be looking elsewhere? This doesn’t look like the kingdom of heaven. It still looks like the kingdom of Herod. And above Herod, of Rome.

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It seems like a fair question, one we can easily imagine is laced with disappointment, with (as the Proverb says) a heart-sickness caused by “hope deferred” (Proverbs 13:12). The status quo hasn’t changed; those in power continue to abuse their privilege, and the promise of change doesn’t appear to have materialized. Yet, Luke uses the language of sight to make the irony clear: “Should we look for someone else?” (Luke 7:19-20)

John’s question (repeated twice in two verses) reveals that his disappointment clouds his vision. He cannot see what is happening before him. John, the prophet in the wilderness, is blind to the one whom crowds have declared (just two verses before) to be “a great prophet” (Luke 7:16). Luke underscores that Jesus has, ironically, just “given sight to many who were blind” (Luke 7:21) Accordingly, Jesus tells John’s disciples, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight ...” (Luke 7:22)

After John’s disciples depart, Jesus turns to the crowds and turns John’s question (“Who are you?”) on its head: “Who was John?” Jesus asks. Picking up the language of sight, Jesus repeats the question and provides a definitive answer:

What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? ... What then did you go out to see? ...
What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. (Luke 7:24-26)

These provocative exchanges might provoke analogous questions for us: When do we miss the miraculous happening right before our eyes because our expectations limit our imaginations? What should we do when, despite our ardent efforts, the status quo isn’t changing -- when those with power and privilege serve themselves at the expense of the powerless, and when God seems to sit idly by while Rome wins?

How do our blind spots make us complicit in social inequity? In what ways do our convictions about how God should work in the world lead to disappointment -- with God, with others, and/or with ourselves? Perhaps, like John, we ought to remember that, as Voltaire wrote, though God created humans in the divine image, “We have more than returned the favor.”

The danger which faces us as we come to the account of the question which John the Baptist relayed to Jesus is that we won’t take it as seriously as we should. Several major factors could hinder our grasp of the gravity of this situation. First, we have a general problem with the

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PIOUS BIAS as I have come to call it. That is, we are inclined to think that because John the Baptist was a prophet, he must have always been pious. We must hold this erroneous viewpoint in spite of the fact that most of the heroes of the Bible are described as mere mortals, with the same sinful tendencies and temptations as the rest of us, and with unbecoming behavior at times. Second, we tend to think of John only in positive terms because of his past piety. He is the one who identified Jesus as the Messiah. He is the one who said that Jesus must increase, while he must decrease. He is the one who encouraged some of his disciples to become Jesus' disciples instead. Third, we tend to think of John positively because of the good things which our Lord had to say about him. Fourth, John died a hero's death, and thus we don't want to speak of him in any way which would tarnish his reputation.

While John the Baptist was a great man, he was not a perfect man. This was the worst moment of John's life, so far as the biblical record is concerned. We will not appreciate this passage of Scripture and its relevance to our lives unless we begin by understanding the seriousness of the error which is depicted here. Set aside your pre-conceived opinions of what happens here for a moment and consider exactly what is taking place when John sends two of his disciples to Jesus with this question, "Are You the One who is coming, or do we look for someone else?" (Luke 7:19, 20).¹³⁸

(1) The question John asked was John's question. Initially I wondered whether or not John's disciples might have embellished John's question, but Luke's account repeats the question. The first time the question is spoken by John to his two disciples. The second time the question is spoken by the disciples. The wording of the two questions is the same. The question John's disciples asked Jesus is precisely the question John instructed them to ask.

(2) John's question was the result of his unhappiness with what Jesus was saying and doing. The section begins with these words: "And the disciples of John reported to him about all these things" (Luke 7:18).

The two miracles recorded in the previous verses of chapter seven—the healing of the Centurion's servant and the raising of the widow's son from the dead—would surely have been included in the report which was given to John. Clearly, John was not altogether pleased with the reports he was receiving as to what Jesus had been saying and doing. The question John sent to Jesus via his two disciples reflected John's displeasure.

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(3) John is questioning Christ, the Messiah. John does not here openly question God, nor does He question himself or his ministry. John does not question the fact that Messiah will come. John questions that Jesus is the coming Messiah; and this is in light of his own words to the contrary in the past:

And John bore witness saying, "I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven; and He remained upon Him. And I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God. And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" (John 1:32-34).

(4) John's "question" is not really a question—it is a public challenge. The question, once again, is this: "Are You the One who is coming, or do we look for someone else?" (Luke 7:19, 20).

The "we," given the context of this account, would seem to include not only John and his followers, but the crowd which I believe was present at the time the question was put to Jesus. The "we" thus is nearly equivalent to "Israel." The response of Jesus to the crowd about John also suggests that the question was put to Jesus publicly. Given all the miracles which Jesus was doing at the time, he could hardly have been alone, so that this question could have been put to Jesus privately, even if the two had wanted to do so.

The biggest difficulty with the question, however, is with the inference of the last statement, "... or do we look for someone else?" There is a clearly implied threat here. If you fail to answer our questions satisfactorily, we will look for someone else to be the Messiah.

(5) John is forcing, not following, Jesus. Rather than following Jesus, as John has done in the past, John is attempting to force Jesus into declaring Himself as Messiah, and acting as John has predicted. This is not as clearly stated in Luke's account here, as it is by Matthew:

"And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John" (Matt. 11:12-13, NASB).

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If the forcefulness began with time of John the Baptist and was present to the time of Jesus' words, it is not unlikely that John and/or some of his followers were trying to "push the program," to forcefully help things along. I believe that it is evident from our text that John is being pushy, overly forceful.

(6) John was challenging Jesus to do what He had purposed not to do. John was pressing Jesus for a public announcement, a public commitment to be the Messiah. He was demanding that Jesus proclaim Himself as Messiah or John and the others would reject Him and turn to another. It is obvious that Jesus did not intend to bear witness to Himself in this fashion. Jesus did not want men to accept Him as the Messiah because He claimed to be Messiah, but because the evidence was compelling that He was Messiah.

The so-called "great confession" of Peter will come later in the gospel accounts, but when Peter does finally conclude that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, it is not because Jesus has told him so:

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:15-17).

The reason why Jesus refused to publicly claim to be Israel's Messiah was so that flesh and blood would not reveal His identity, but that the Spirit of God would do so, based upon the Old Testament prophecies concerning Messiah, and the works and words which Jesus did, proving Him to be Messiah.

Luke's account of the "great confession" of Peter goes even further, showing the reader that even after Peter's recognition of Jesus as the Christ Jesus did not want His disciples to proclaim His messiahship:

And He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered and said, "The Christ of God." But He warned them, and instructed them not to tell this to anyone, ... (Luke 9:20-21).

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John's question, or rather John's challenge, was wrong for various reasons, but one of these was that it was Christ's purpose not to publicly identify Himself as Messiah, the very thing John demanded, or else he and others would find themselves another "messiah."

Put in its crassest form, John was saying to Jesus, "Put up or shut up! Enough of the way You have been functioning. Either you identify Yourself as Messiah (and get on with the program, of judgment and of arranging for my release) or else we'll find ourselves another Messiah."

Given this perspective of John's words here, conveyed by two of his disciples, we can see that John has fallen far from what he once was. He who gladly accepted his role at one time, is now threatening to change things. He who was given the great privilege of identifying Jesus as Messiah, now challenges Messiah to prove Himself, not altogether unlike the challenge of Satan during our Lord's temptation. He who once encouraged his disciples to follow after Jesus now sends two of his disciples after Jesus, not to follow Him wherever He would go, but to change His course.

The Approach of This Message

In this message, we will seek to understand some of the reasons for John's spiritual decline. We will then focus on Luke's emphasis in this section, which is to show how our Lord responded to the challenge. Finally, we shall seek to discover how John's failure is like our own, and how, given our Lord's teaching here, we can avoid falling into the same trap.

The Structure of the Text

The text can be outlined as follows:

(1) Verses 18-23 JOHN'S CHALLENGE and JESUS' RESPONSE

(2) Verses 24-28 JESUS' PUBLIC COMMENDATION OF JOHN

(3) Verses 29-35 WHAT THE MINISTRIES OF JESUS AND JOHN HAVE IN COMMON

(4) Verses 29-30 People's response to John and to Messiah

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(5) Verses 31-35 In spite of many differences between John and Jesus, both were rejected by the masses

Why Did John Go Wrong?

It is important to begin by pointing out that in neither Luke nor Matthew's account is there an emphasis on explaining why John went astray at this point in time. I believe there are inferences in the gospels, but no clear statements nor emphasis on the reasons for John's crankiness here. It may be of help to us to briefly consider some of the factors which contributed to John's attitudes and actions.

(1) John had very little contact with Jesus. From what Luke tells us in his gospel, we would have to conclude that Jesus and John were virtual strangers. There was the contact between Mary and Elizabeth, at which time John leaped in his mother's womb (Luke 1:41), but early in his life, John began to live a secluded life in the wilderness. The only way that John recognized Jesus as the Messiah was by means of the Spirit's descent upon Him (John 1:29-34). Jesus avoided contact with John and his disciples to minimize competition and friction between them (John 4:1-3). It was not until John's arrest that Jesus' public ministry officially commenced (Matt. 4:12, 17). The point here is that John did not have a close relationship with Jesus which might have assured him of Jesus' identity and of His ultimate fulfillment of the messianic prophecies, especially those John had emphasized.

(2) Jesus had not publicly identified Himself as Messiah. It was not from the mouth of Jesus that John learned He was the Messiah, but from the revelation of God to John and the witness of the Holy Spirit, in the form of the dove, which descended upon Him at His baptism. John seems to be seeking from Jesus what he had never heard, our Lord's own testimony to the fact that He was Messiah.

(3) John had been Israel's great prophet, but it appeared that Jesus was taking his place. John did not seem to mind having an inferior role to that of our Lord, but it might have been an irritation for John to learn that Jesus was being received as a great prophet. This is what we see in the immediately preceding context, in the crowd's response to the raising of the widow's dead son:

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And fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us! and, God, has visited His people!" (v. 16).

(4) There were great differences between John's ministry and message and the ministry and message of our Lord. John and Jesus were very different men. Jesus was, it would seem, gentle and soft-spoken. John, it would appear, was rough-hewn and outspoken. Jesus was very much in contact with people, frequently found in the cities, and often in contact with sinners. John was a man who lived a very secluded life. He lived in the desert, so that the people had to come out to hear him preach, if they would hear him and be baptized. His seclusion was extended by his imprisonment. John did not eat many foods, but ate a kind of desert "C Rations." Jesus, on the contrary, drank wine and ate foods that John did not and would not (cf. Luke 7:33). John's disciples fasted, and Jesus' disciples didn't (Luke 5:33).

John's ministry, so far as the gospel record informs us, did not include miracles, healings and wonders. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that John may have performed wonders, but we are never told of any. Jesus, on the other hand, frequently worked miracles. The two which are mentioned in the immediate context (the healing of the Centurion's servant and the raising of the widow's son from the dead) are but a sampling. It would not be difficult to see why Jesus' healing ministry would trouble John if he had no healing ministry himself. Jesus' ministry was, at the moment, very popular, while John had little or no public ministry while in prison.

The major difference between John and Jesus, as I see it, and the one which best explains John's unhappiness with Jesus, is the difference in the emphasis of the message of each. John's emphasis was on sin, judgment, and condemnation, while Jesus' emphasis was on healing and salvation. Both emphases were biblical and important, but they were very different in tone and in their outworking. The Old Testament prophets contained an emphasis on both areas, but in practical outworking John focused on the judgment side of Messiah's coming and Jesus focused on the salvation side.

John's task was to condemn Israel's sins and to warn of the impending judgment of God. It was also to call on men and women to repent for their sin to avoid the wrath of God. John's problem was that he did not understand that there were two comings of Messiah, the second of which was for the purpose of judgment, the first of which was to become a provision for man's salvation by dying for the sins of the world. Jesus' first coming was to bear the judgment of God, not to bring it. John's message was true, and it served the purpose of preparing men for Christ's first coming by calling many to repentance. Those who acknowledged themselves to be

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sinner found grace and forgiveness. John was perplexed by our Lord's mercy and healing, for He expected Him to inaugurate the kingdom in a very different way.

John's challenge was thus his attempt to force the Lord's hand, to press Jesus to announce that He was the Messiah, and to cause Him to begin to bring judgment to the earth. John had warned men that Messiah would come with fire, and John thought it was high time for Jesus to get with it, and to do as he had warned Messiah would do. John's failure to fully grasp the prophecies of the Old Testament and thus the two-fold coming of Christ, led him to conclude that Jesus was in need of some straightening out. That is what John set out to do, but as we shall see, this is not what happened. Let us now move on to consider the way in which Jesus dealt with this crisis, which John precipitated.

Our Lord's Response to John's Challenge

I cannot help but to wonder how we might diagnose John's problem today. Some would undoubtedly see this as a "self-image problem." It seems to me that nearly every problem today is related (by us) to low self-esteem. I wonder which of the plethora of books on the shelves of the Christian bookstores we would have sent to John. Jesus' actions and words would not have conformed to much of what we would say or do. Let us begin, then, by taking note of what Jesus didn't do, but what we might have been inclined to do in His place.

Jesus did not do what John demanded. Jesus did not make a declaration that He was (or that He was not) the Messiah. John may have given an ultimatum, but Jesus didn't take the bait. Jesus didn't give John His personal attention. Some would have felt that John was merely lonely and depressed and that he needed some "quality time" spent with him. Jesus didn't think so. Jesus did not tell John the answers to his problems, which would have put his mind at ease. John's grasp of the messianic prophecies was incomplete and distorted. Jesus could have straightened John out. He could have laid out the whole "plan of the ages," but He did not. And, Jesus, I might add, did not inform John that he was soon to die at the hand of Herod.

Jesus' response to John was very simple. He simply told John's emissaries to tell John what they had witnessed:

"Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: 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" (Luke 7:22).

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In effect, Jesus is suggesting to John the solution to his problem. He is simply telling to John to do what every saint must do, compare the prophecies of the Old Testament with the deeds and declarations of Jesus Christ. If Jesus fulfills these prophecies, then the Bible bears witness to the fact that He is the Messiah. Note how the words and works of Jesus do compare with these Old Testament

[Luke 7:22](#)

And He answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: *the* blind receive sight, *the* lame walk, *the* lepers are cleansed, and *the* deaf hear, *the* dead are raised up, *the* poor have the gospel preached to them.

[Isaiah 29:18](#)

And on that day the deaf shall hear words of a book, And out of *their* gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.

[Isaiah 35:5-6](#)

Then 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. For waters will break forth in the wilderness And streams in the Arabah.

John’s assurance that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah should come from the knowledge that the deeds and declarations of Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies which spoke of His healing ministry and of His preaching good news to the poor and the oppressed. John needed to get back to the Word, the Word which He had proclaimed. Unfortunately, John had tended to divide what God had joined together. John had filtered out the salvation and healing texts and focused only on the judgment texts. And yet, when we look at the Scriptures we find the two themes welded together. Look, for example, at the broader context of this text we just cited from the prophecy of Isaiah:

In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see. Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. The ruthless will vanish, the mockers will disappear, and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down — those who with a word make a man out to be guilty, who ensnare the defender in court and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice (Isa. 29:18-21).

Perhaps because of the tendency of men to compartmentalize truth, God has in this prophecy and others joined together the two themes of mercy and justice, of salvation and judgment.

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While it will take two comings for these promises to be fulfilled, God wants His people to understand that Messiah will achieve both. He will accomplish salvation for those who trust in Him; and He will accomplish divine justice on those who persist in their sin. John, like many of us, seems to have emphasized one aspect of prophecy to the exclusion of the other. Thus, when Jesus' first coming was characterized by mercy and grace, John was inclined to think he had designated the wrong Messiah, rather to question his thinking and theology. Jesus' words take John back to the Book, which is the only standard for our thinking and theology. Jesus' ministry was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and thus it is John who must stand corrected. It was not Jesus who needed to change, but John.

Jesus had become, as it were, a stumbling block to John. And so our Lord's final message to John is one which encourages him not to stumble over our Lord: "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (Luke 7:23).

Conclusion

There are many lessons for us to learn from John's failure and Jesus' words of encouragement and correction. Let me suggest a few.

First, this incident teaches us that the only valid test for determining whether or not Jesus is the promised Savior of the world is the test of truth. Does Jesus and Jesus only fulfill those promises and prophecies of the Bible which speak of the coming Savior of the world? If the deeds and words of Jesus, as reported by the gospel accounts, fulfill the Old Testament prophecies (which every gospel writer assures us that they do), then Jesus is the Messiah. The test of who is God's Savior is the test of the Scriptures themselves. Everyone who claims to be Messiah must measure up to the standards which God has set for Him. Only Jesus meets these standards. Jesus does not give John a direct claim for many other men have made the same claim. Jesus does not attempt to use His personal magnetism or charisma, but rather points to the deeds which He has done and to the Scriptures which speak of these deeds.

Let me ask you very candidly, my friend, Have you looked carefully at the evidence? Are you seeking God's salvation? Do you wish to have the forgiveness of your sins? Do you wish to experience the grace of God, rather than His judgment? Then you can only do so by trusting in God's provision, God's Messiah. Who Jesus Christ is, is the most important question in the world to you. Have you read the Old Testament prophecies? Have you studied the words and deeds of Jesus? If you conclude that Jesus was an impostor than you cannot look to Him for salvation, but if you conclude that He alone fulfills the Scriptures, then you must turn to Him, trusting in His death, burial, and resurrection for your salvation.

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Second, for Christians there are a number of principles which are relevant to our own experience. Let me conclude by mentioning just a few:

(1) Prophets are not perfect. John was a prophet, in fact the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, but John was not perfect, as our text makes clear. Many of the great Christian leaders of present and past times have been known (at least by those close to them) to be men with some strange ideas or practices. Great Christians have not necessarily been good husbands or fathers. They may not have been able to get along well with others. Men who are great in one area, might not be great in another.

More than this, men who are great in one area may have major problems in that very area of their greatness. John was a prophet, and thus we must say that his specialty was prophecy, but this was precisely where his great error arose, too. John failed to grasp the fact that Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. John was trying to straighten Jesus out, when John needed to straighten out his grasp of prophecy.

John was not alone in this, for Peter tells us that all of the Old Testament prophets struggled to grasp the meaning of biblical prophecy. Indeed, they even struggled to grasp the meaning of their own prophecies:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things (1 Peter 1:10-12).

Our difficulties in understanding the Bible can be found in several areas. First, there is the limitation of the "natural man," unsaved, and unaided by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:f6-16). Then, there is the limitation of our finiteness. Even saved persons have limits as to what they can grasp now. Third, there is the limitation of our sinfulness, our waywardness, and of our warped past. An abused child (by its father) will find it difficult to read those passages which speak of God as Father, without reading into the text those ideas which are rooted in their experience, but are not true to the Word.

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Finally, we have difficulties in fully grasping God's truth because of our limitations in the area of our spiritual gifts and ministry. Each Christian has a particular form of "giftedness," which God has given to equip them for a certain kind of ministry. Since we do not possess all of the gifts, we approach the Scriptures only through the gifts which we have. For example, when Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed about taking Mark on their next missionary journey (cf. Acts 15:36-41), each had a perspective based on his own gifts and calling. As a front line apostle, Paul refused to take along a man who had failed under pressure, and rightly so. As an encourager, Barnabas refused to give up on a man who had failed, and rightly so. Each viewed Mark through the grid of his own gifts and calling. I am suggesting that we approach the Scriptures in the same way, with our own strengths and corresponding weaknesses.

If the Old Testament prophets—those through whom the Scriptures were given—did not fully understand the Scriptures, how can we suppose that we understand them completely, either? The apostle Paul tells us that the Scriptures do not tell us all we would like to know. The Scriptures enable us to "see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12), only to know fully in eternity.

Our limitations in understanding the Scriptures suggest a couple of areas of application. First, we should be very careful not to become overly dogmatic about those things which are not crystal clear in the Scriptures. I notice, for example, that some Christians tend to be very dogmatic about certain views about prophecy (eschatology). Whether you are "pre or post trib," for example, is something about which one can be absolutely convinced. If John could be so wrong about Messiah, let us be very cautious about eschatology, and any other area of biblical truth, too, if it is not emphatically and clearly taught in the Bible.

Knowing our own limitations in understanding the Scriptures, let us learn the dangers of isolationism and autonomy in Bible study and Christian living. Part of John's problem, in my opinion, was his isolation from other believers. He had no one to challenge his thinking, and even his biblical interpretation. You and I need one another for many reasons, but one good reason we need others is to balance off our own limitations and distortions. Any Bible teacher who does not listen to and learn from other Bible teachers, is suspect, in my opinion. Any Christian who thinks they need only their Bible and the Holy Spirit is likely to become extreme in some view of what the Bible teaches. Let us learn to lean on one another to help balance out our grasp of biblical truth.

Knowing that our grasp of the Scriptures is imperfect, we need to learn to live by holding truth in tension. John, like the other prophets, could not harmonize the seemingly contradictory

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truths of Christ's suffering and His triumph, of Messiah's judgment and His salvation. And yet what John could not reconcile, God does. No prophet could reconcile these truths in tension until they had been fulfilled. Jesus did not solve John's problem by informing of how all of the Messianic prophecies would be fulfilled in the future, by one Messiah and by two comings. Jesus encouraged John study the Scriptures and the believe them, even though certain truths seem to be in tension.

I believe that we need to do likewise. We must, for example, hold the doctrine of the sovereignty of God in tension with the equally true doctrine of man's responsibility. We do not do justice to the Word of God by holding to one truth and excluding the other, only for the sake of clarity or simplicity. Let us learn, like John, to hold seemingly opposing truths in tension, until God reveals their unity and harmony in the future.

(2) There is a great danger posed by unrealistic expectations. The bottom line is that John had unrealistic, inaccurate expectations of God. His expectations with regard to Messiah and His ministry were wrong, and thus they came into conflict with the ministry and message of Christ. John tried to change Christ to conform to his expectations, rather than to change his expectations.

We put ourselves in a very vulnerable position when we allow ourselves to hold unrealistic expectations, either of God, or of our mate, or of our children, or of our church, or of our ministry. Let us be on guard to keep from having expectations which surpass the Scriptures.

138 This is the rendering of the NASB, which I prefer to that of the NIV, which reads, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" The NIV is too polite, taking the sting and the threat out of the question.

139 Luke chooses not to record this statement in his gospel until chapter 16 (v. 16).

Questions

What were the things John's disciples told John about? (18) Why were the disciples telling John about all these things? (Mt 11:2)

With what question and for what reason did John send his disciples to Jesus? (19-20) What was Jesus doing? 21) What report did Jesus send back to John? (22)

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What does his answer reveal about him and the work of the Messiah? (18; 4:18; Isa 35:5-6)
Why was it important for John to know what God was doing in his time? (23)

What did Jesus tell the crowd about John? (24-25) Why had these people gone out into the desert? (26) According to Jesus, what did Isaiah say about John? (27)

How did Jesus connect John's ministry to his own? (27)

Why is John great? (28)

Why did ordinary people who heard Jesus' words say, "God's way is right?" (29)

What is "God's way?"

How did the Pharisees respond? Why? (30)

What was their sin before God? How did Jesus describe these religious leaders? (31-32)

How did they show childish indifference in their attitudes toward John and Jesus? (33-34)

Why is indifference a sin?

Who are the children of wisdom? (35)

Is it possible to be a believer and have doubts?

Is there a danger in not facing our doubts?

What are some reasons that we have doubts about things spiritually?

Did John doubt Jesus' authenticity?

How much of John's confusion do you think had to do with him sitting in prison?

How did the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus differ?

What had Jesus said would be part of his ministry? How might this have affected John's faith?
Luke 4:16-18

Was John's question really a "question," or was a public challenge?

Sources

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Is this how Jesus intended to proclaim His messiahship? Matthew 16:13-17; Luke 9:18-21

Why did John doubt? Did Jesus reject him because of his doubts? What does this say about us when we doubt?

Verse 23 says, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me (Jesus)." In today's world, how are people offended by Jesus?

Did any other spiritual leaders ever have struggles in their faith? Numbers 11:10-15; 1 Kings 19:1; Jeremiah 20:7-9; 2 Corinthians 1:8-9

How did Jesus "answer" their question Luke 7:21-23? Why did he do this? Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:4-6; 42:1-7

What did Jesus say about John's greatness? (Verses 24-28) How are believers greater than John the Baptist? What does this say about even the weakest, most struggling Christian?

What are we to do for those who are struggling or are questioning our faith? 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Galatians 6:1

Why do you suppose Jesus felt compelled to speak on John's behalf in verses 24-28?

Sources

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