

Doubting in Difficult Times

by Anton Bosch

This sermon delves into the interaction between Jesus and John the Baptist's disciples, focusing on John's doubts while in prison. It explores the reasons for John's uncertainty, such as unmet expectations and a misunderstanding of the timing of prophecies. The sermon emphasizes the importance of seeking answers, trusting in God's plan even when things go wrong, and not being offended when God's actions do not align with personal desires.

Scripture: Luke 7:18, Matthew 11:6, Hebrews 11:1, 1 Peter 4:12, John 3:17, Matthew 16:16, Job 13:15

Topics: "Doubt and Faith", "Trusting God's Timing"

Description

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Transcript

Luke chapter 7, Luke chapter 7, and I'm going to read 18 through 23. I'm going to break up this interchange between Jesus and John and John's disciples into at least two sections, and I'm going to just deal with the first part this morning, so I'm going to read just that that section. So Luke chapter 7 verse 18.

Then the disciples of John reported to him concerning all these things. And John calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus, saying, Are you the coming one, or do we look for another? When the men had come to him, they said, John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, Are you the coming one, or do we look for another? And that very hour he cured many of their infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits, and to many blind he gave sight. Jesus answered and said to them, Go and tell John the things that you have seen and heard, that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them.

And blessed is he who is not offended because of me. Now obviously John here is not John who wrote the gospel, John the beloved disciple or apostle, this is John the Baptist. John is in prison.

We saw that way back in Luke chapter 3, that Herod imprisoned John, because John pointed the finger at Herod and said, You cannot have your brother's wife. So Herod had married his sister-in-law, and John

rebuked him for that, and also for other injustices. And I'm not going to make a comment about the role of the church as far as a prophetic voice is concerned.

I think that that speaks for itself from that. So John has been in prison. Don't know how long it's been, been a couple of years, and we know that ultimately John would be executed by Herod.

For those who can't remember, what happened is that Herod throws this massive party, and all his influential friends are there, and they're getting a little bit drunk, and his wife's daughter, in other words it's not his own daughter, his wife's daughter comes in and she does a very, very sensual dance in front of all his drunk friends, and in the heat of the moment he says to her, Whatever you want, I'll give it to you, up to half of the kingdom. And she doesn't know what to do, what to say, so she runs to her mother, Herodias, and she obviously had a great hatred for John the Baptist, because he had condemned their relationship, and she says, Ask for John's head on a plate, on a charger, and so she goes back and she says to her stepfather, if you will, I want John's head on a plate, and so he is in front of all of his influential friends, he can't lose face, he has a soft spot for John actually, because the scripture says so, but he has John executed, and they bring his head on a plate, and a gory scene, you think modern movies are gory, this is terrible stuff, but John is executed, and so John is now in prison, and so while he's in prison, he's hearing about Jesus, now remember John was the one who had prepared the way for the Lord, he had announced the coming of the Messiah, and the coming of the Lord Jesus, in Luke chapter 3, and we're going to go and look at one of those verses in Luke 3 in a moment. And so John hears about the things that Jesus is doing, but John is losing face.

John is wondering, is this in fact Jesus, or is Jesus the Messiah? Is he the promised one? And I'm going to look at the reasons for that, or the reasons that I can understand for that. And so some of John's disciples, remember, also are following Jesus, some of them become part of the inner circle of the twelve, and so the disciples of John reported to him concerning these things, and verse 19, and John calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus saying, are you the coming one, or do we look for another? So that's the question, are you the coming one? This is a concept that comes from the Old Testament, and was a way of referring to the Messiah. The Messiah is the one who would come, and obviously in their understanding, because they didn't have a proper understanding, he was the one who would deliver them, who would be a political savior, and all of those kinds of things.

And so the question is, are you the coming one? Just again, we, by the way, we have this problem in the translations, because it's capitalized, and it's capitalized, that he didn't capitalize it in that sense, but clearly it is referring, are you the Messiah? Are you the Christ? Or are you, is there someone else? And the, well let's come get to the reasons in a moment. And when the men had come to him, they said, that's come to Jesus, John the Baptist has sent us to you saying, are you the coming one, or do we look for another? Now remember it was it was John who had said, behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. It was John who said that I am not worthy to undo his shoelaces.

So John clearly appoints to Jesus as the Messiah. But now he finds himself in a place where he is wondering, is Jesus indeed the Messiah? Is he indeed who John thought he was? And I think that that's the reason why the passages included in Scripture that we might understand that there are times that we have doubts. I think that there are some Christians who just never have any doubts about Jesus, about the faith, about the Bible, about whether Jesus is going to come again, all of these things.

But there are many of us who struggle with these things, who at times say, well I, you know, is it really true? Is it real? Did Jesus really come? Is the Bible really true? Now the problem is that we say, well, you know, I'm not going to tell anyone that I have doubts. You know, I'm just going to try and hide it, and I'm just going to try and power through it. The problem with that is that sometimes people lose faith, and they walk away from the faith because they didn't find sufficient answers.

And so they thought they could just deal with their doubts, and they bury those doubts instead of finding answers and finding solutions, and in the end their doubt gets them. And so John is not sitting in prison and saying, well, you know, I don't know, maybe he is, maybe he's not. You know, somehow I don't think he is it, and continues down that road until he gets to a point where he has lost faith.

But John does something about the problem, and that is that he establishes the facts. He goes to the source, and he says, what is the truth? You can understand, and this is one of the first reasons why John would lose faith, and that is that he finds himself in prison. He is cut off from access to Jesus.

Remember, Jesus's family of his, and certainly if he was still free, he would have direct access to Jesus. He would be able to attend Jesus's sermons, if you will. He could follow Jesus.

He could be there and talk with him, but he doesn't have access to that. He finds himself isolated. He finds himself in a bad place.

Things are rough for him. He is in the dungeon. In fact, the remains of the dungeon, it overlooks the Dead Sea, very close to the place where the Dead Sea Scrolls come from.

That is where Herod had one of his palaces, and he was imprisoned in the dungeons in that same palace. That's why the same night that Herodias asked for his head, they were able to go and cut his head off and bring him upstairs, as it were. In fact, the remains of the hooks, or the iron attachments to which prisoners were chained, are still there.

You can still see them today, and so John is in this dungeon. It seems he has access to some of these disciples. He can have visitors, but he is in a bad place.

Things have gone wrong for him, from being the anointed of God, in the sense of the greatest prophet. Remember, Jesus says he is the greatest of all the prophets in the Old Testament. Jesus also says that there was no other man born, no one born of a woman, Jesus says, that is greater than John.

So John is the pinnacle of all of the prophets in the Old Testament, and according to Jesus, he exceeds Moses. Remember, Moses was a great prophet. He exceeds Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel, all the prophets in the Old Testament, and yet now he finds himself in a place where everything has gone wrong, and he begins to question, is this in fact the truth? And so the first thing that causes us to doubt is when things go wrong for us personally.

It's amazing that we don't make many changes in our lives, from my experience, other than when we have a personal crisis. Generally people will continue in a cult or in some kind of false doctrine until they have a personal crisis with the cult leaders. Then they begin to ask questions, and they begin to say, well, is this the truth? Many people only come to faith when they have their backs to the wall, and suddenly their world is falling apart, and they begin to ask questions, and they come to faith.

But it also works in the other way around, that when we find ourselves like Job did, we're stripped of everything, that our faith is tested, and some come through with purifying colors, like Job. Job came through that experience purified and cleansed, and even greater than he was when he went into it, with greater faith and with greater confidence in God. But many fail in that process.

And so we live in such a time right now, when everything is going wrong around us, and I'm not going to recite all the stuff that has happened this far this year, and we're only six months into the year, and November is coming, as I warned you, I think, on Thursday. And I believe that we're going to see a lot more worse things happening in our community, in our society, in our country, in the next five months. And so we're in difficult, difficult times.

People have personal crises, because they're isolated from their friends, they're isolated from family, they can't travel, many people are stuck at home, they can't have the release of going to and fro from work, and those kinds of things. Many are sick, and I don't need to tell you the numbers. I can't remember the numbers, because every time I look, they increase by a couple hundred thousand.

Many are on their deathbeds, and the question is, can we remain faithful in those circumstances? Because that is where our faith is tested. It's easy to believe when things are great. It was easy for John to believe when he was preaching, and the crowds were following him, and people were repenting, and Jesus was there affirming him.

And that's not difficult. And folks, I'm not, to use a modern term, I'm not casting shade on John the Baptist. John is a man, just like any one of us.

And the times come when we question. The times come that we have doubts. It's how we deal with those doubts that is the issue.

Do we just bury them? Do we just run away from them? Do we give in to them? Or do we ask the right questions? And John is asking the right questions. Are you the coming one, or do we look for another? And of course he asks the right person. Now in John chapter 3 verse 17, here's the second reason why John doubted.

In John chapter 3 verse 17, he says, he was preaching, and he says, his winnowing fan, that's Jesus, is in his hand. And I'm not going to explain the passage we dealt with that in, when we dealt with John 3. His winnowing fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. In other words, he's coming in judgment.

He's coming in judgment. And he will gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Was this true? Yes, it was true.

John was speaking prophetically. But remember, here's the problem, that the prophets in the Old Testament, and John is an Old Testament prophet, do not understand the timescale of these prophecies. Many of the prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus's first coming, but many of the prophecies will only be fulfilled in his second coming.

In his first coming, he comes as the suffering servant. He comes to die and to pay the price for our sins. In his second coming, he does no longer, he will not come again as the suffering servant, but he will come as the conquering king.

And he will set up his kingdom, and he will judge the world in righteousness. Now the problem was for them, was that they could not see that there was a period of time, we believe 2,000 years, between those two mountain peaks. I've spoken to you before about the fact that when you walk in the mountains here, and you see a mountain peak, and then you see another one, and you think, oh well, it's just, you know, it's just, it's half an hour from here to there.

But when you get to the top of that one, you discover, no, there's a big valley in between. There's a long distance, many miles between here and there. From a distance, they all look packed together.

They all look close together. But when you get there, you find out, no, there are big gaps in between. This is the problem they had.

And John has the same problem. And so he understands the judgment of Jesus. He understands Jesus is coming, and he's going to judge.

The Winnowing Fan speaks about the sifting between the wheat and the chaff, and that he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. John does not understand that this is not now. This is not when Jesus came the first time.

This will be at the end of time. And so I believe that here is one of the reasons, the second reason, why John is doubting. Because he's expecting what everyone else is expecting.

He's expecting a Messiah who would come, and who would, who would get rid of the Romans, who would deliver Israel of the Roman oppression, who would bring about peace, who had set up Israel as the head and not the tail. And remember, that was a prophecy concerning Israel in the Old Testament. At this time when John is living, Israel is the tail and not the head.

It is a subjugated, it is a suppressed people under Roman domination. They have no influence in the world. They're not even able to rule themselves.

And Jesus, the Old Testament had promised that Israel would be the head of the nations, and would have all of this territory from Egypt all the way up to the to the Euphrates and so on. And so this is what John is looking for. This is what John thought Jesus was going to do.

But in fact this is not what he was going to do. And when Jesus doesn't preach hellfire and brimstone, but he's preaching the gospel, John doesn't understand. And so the second reason why we lose faith is when God or the Lord does not do for us what we want Him to do, what we expect Him to do.

And we have, just like those people, we have unrealistic expectations of the Lord. And those expectations come from a misunderstanding of Scripture, a misunderstanding of tradition, and what people are saying around us. And I'm going to give you another example of that in a moment.

And so we expect Him to make life easy for us. We expect Him to solve all of our problems. We expect Him to remove any kind of conflict and any kind of difficulty.

Many are expecting Him to make America a wonderful place. We have all sorts of unrealistic expectations, and they are based on our traditions, not on the Word of God. When we know the Word of God, and I'm not saying that John did not know the Word, but they did not understand, they did not have the Holy Spirit like we do, who was able to open their minds.

Because now we're able to go back to the Old Testament, and we're able to see, yes, it speaks about Him coming in peace, but it also speaks about Him coming in judgment. And it speaks about two comings, and not just one coming. And so when we have these unrealistic expectations, because we don't know the Scriptures, we don't know what it is that God has promised.

And that's why the book of Peter is so important. Remember, in the passage that we're in, Peter, right now, in 1 Peter chapter 4, he says, in fact, I think we're coming to this verse this coming week, this coming Thursday, don't don't think it's strange when things go hard for you. Don't think it's strange when you are persecuted, because this is common to those who are believers and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the problem is that the vast majority of Christians in the world today think it's a strange thing, when things go hard, when things go difficult, when things are difficult, when we get sick, when we lose our jobs, when the world becomes more and more corrupt, and every time we turn the television on, we just see more evil and corruption and all sorts of nonsense going on. And we say, well, you know, doesn't God care? No, we need to know the Scriptures, and the Scriptures tell us that things will get worse and worse right up to the coming of the Lord. It's not going to get any better.

Right now, many pastors are losing faith, and they're losing faith because they're not seeing a revival. They're not seeing the days that we saw, that I lived through, thirty years, forty years ago, when people were coming to Christ by their hundreds and by their thousands, when we were able to, when we had to turn people away, not because we had the virus, but we had to turn people away from the church because there was no room inside. The church that Ina and I got married in, we would pack, we didn't have fire, well, they didn't hassle us those days, but we would pack chairs down the aisles.

Once the pews were full, we would fill the aisles so that there was no room to walk out. Once the service was dismissed, we have to take the chairs out so people can get out. And then at a certain point, we would have to close the doors.

And pastors are saying, well, you know, I'm struggling to keep a handful of people together today. What's happening? And they're losing faith because things are not happening the way that they want them to happen, the way that they expect them to happen. Not understanding that we're in a time of the great falling away, in a time when few will be saved at the end of time.

Jesus, remember, says, when I come back will I even find faith on the earth. And so we need to understand the scriptures, and that helps us to deal with the disappointments when God doesn't do what we expect him to do, when he doesn't come through for us, and we say, well, maybe he doesn't even hear, maybe he doesn't care, maybe there is no God, because he's not helping me in my situation, in my time. Yes, he does care, he does love us, but remember that he is doing all things for the good of them that love him, and are called according to his purpose.

And so let me go to Matthew chapter 6, verse, oh, I've got the wrong verse, sorry, I typed the wrong the wrong verse in. The book of Matthew speaks about, sorry, when Peter, Jesus asks the disciples, who do men say that I am? And Peter, remember, makes that great confession, you are the Christ, and Jesus is on this rock, I will build my church. But Peter's answer in that process is, well, some say you're Jeremiah, or some say you're Elijah, or one of the prophets.

That was his answer. Now, why was Peter saying that? Because there was a tradition at the time that these prophets will rise again, and they will come. Now, this was not based on scripture.

There's no scripture about that, except that there will be those two prophets at the end of time. But there is no scripture that says that Jeremiah will rise from the dead. Remember, there are scriptures, particularly Malachi, that speaks about Elijah, but Elijah would not rise in the literal sense, but John would come in the spirit of Elijah.

So John is, in fact, in a sense, Elijah. And I trust you can hold that together. I'm quite happy to explain it to you afterwards.

So Elijah does not rise again, but John comes, and John is a continuation of the ministry of Elijah. He has the same anointing as Elijah does, and we'll speak more about John next week. But will Jeremiah rise? Will any of the other prophets rise? No, there is nothing.

But there was a tradition, and it seems to me that John held to some of that tradition. Now, I've touched on that. So many of our misconceptions, many of our disappointments are not based on the scriptures, but are based on our traditions, based on what we think it says.

And so they say, well, you know, it's unlikely that he is the Messiah, because he's just walking with us. We know him. He's our friend.

He's our teacher, and we eat together. We sleep together. We travel together.

He's just a man like us. He can't be the Messiah. So he's got to be one of the prophets who's been raised from the dead.

And so this comes into John's thinking now, I believe. It doesn't tell us clearly, but we have to make some assumptions. And so we need to be careful that our expectations of what God is going to do for us, and in us, and in the world, are not based on extra-biblical ideas, on traditions of men, on teachings of men, and of churches, but are based on the Word of God.

So we can go on, and there are all sorts of speculations about other ideas why John has doubts, and I shouldn't say he's not losing faith, but he has doubts, and he's concerned. Is this, in fact, the reality? And so what can we do? Well, I believe that we can make sure that we have our lives built upon the Word of God, and not upon our own traditions or our own expectations. I believe that we can make sure that when we go through trials and difficulties and dark times, that our faith is founded upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and not founded on our situation and our circumstances.

Because many times we translate our circumstances, and we say, well, you know, it's God's blessing. Things are going well. Oh, God's good.

God's great. God's with me. He loves me.

He cares for me. He's providing for me. If that is the basis of my relationship with him, then I'm in a very dangerous place.

Because when things go wrong, well, then the basis of my faith is wrong. My faith needs to be based—and let me move on, otherwise we're going to run out of time—it needs to be based on the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus answered and said to them, go and tell John the things that you've seen and heard, that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them.

So does Jesus answer the question? Well, not directly. He gives him the evidence, and it's up to John to interpret the evidence. So here's the thing.

Sometimes we say, well, you know, I don't know if I can still believe. You know, I wish God would speak to me. There would be some voice from heaven, some kind of sign, but he's not going to give us those things.

But he gives us evidence, and we need to look at the evidence. Remember Hebrews chapter 11 says that faith is the evidence of things not seen. Remember that evidence is used in two senses.

It is used in a scientific sense, and it's used in a legal sense. And in both cases the evidence leads to a conclusion without having seen the reality. What I mean by that is that the judge or the jury or the magistrate who judges in a legal matter did not see the crime being committed.

I guess these days there may be video, but he in most cases did not physically see this crime committed. On what basis does he make his judgment? On the evidence. The same with science.

If science is properly conducted, you have not seen many things in science, but you are able to see the evidence. And so we look at creation. We have the testimony of Scripture, but we have evidence in creation.

Unfortunately we misinterpret the evidence and come to the wrong conclusion. We know that that happens in science, and it happens in law as well. But for us as Christians the important thing is for us to look at the evidence, and to come to the right conclusion, because that's all he's going to give us.

He's not going to give us a voice from heaven, because remember he has given us a voice from heaven in the form of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the form of the Word of God. And so here is the conclusion of this passage, or of this section, and then we'll move on to the next rest next week. And blessed is he who is not offended because of me.

So Jesus says go and tell John two things. Tell him the signs, or the evidence, and tell him blessed is he who is not offended because of me. This is a beatitude, just like the other beatitudes in a sense, and he is speaking this directly to John, but he is speaking this in a general sense, and so he is speaking this to us as well.

And so blessed is he who is not stumbled. The word offended there is, yeah, the way we use the word today tends to have to do with a personal insult, or you know, you do something and that offends me. The Greek word deals with stumbling.

Blessed is he who is not stumbled because of me. Now that's interesting. When I looked at this passage again this week, I was struck by the word because.

Because. So what is the potential offense? What is the potential cause of stumbling? Jesus. Now remember Peter says that he is a rock of offense and a stone of stumbling.

So many are offended. Many unbelievers are offended or stumbled by Jesus Christ. Remember the Greeks, Paul says, are offended or stumbled because of the shame of who Jesus claimed to be, and the cross, and all of those things.

The same with the Jews. So he's speaking to John now. He's not speaking to unbelievers.

We know the world is offended by Christ, and particularly the cross. But how can a believer, because he's writing, he's speaking to John, a believer. How can a believer be offended because of Jesus? Surely Jesus is an offense to the world, but how can he be an offense to us? Well this is just the conclusion of everything I've said so far this morning.

He becomes an offense when he does not do what we want him to do. When he does not do what we want him to do. He becomes a source of stumbling because we say, well he needs to do this for me, and he should be doing this for me.

He's not doing it for me, so he can't be real. I think parents have a similar struggle with children, that as long as they give the kids candy, the kids are quite happy, and they love the parents. But when they have to discipline them, well, and I know they don't necessarily mean it, but we've often heard, and I'm sure you may have heard, kids say, I hate you.

Well they've been offended. Why are they offended? Because you're doing what you need to do. Because you're not doing what they want you to do.

And of course here's the problem in discipline, is that many times parents won't discipline the kids because they're afraid that the kids will be offended, that the kids won't like them. But that comes with being a parent, and that comes with being God. God is not beholden to us, and here's the bottom line.

Jesus was not there to fulfill John's fantasies. He was there to do the will of God, and even today God is not our messenger boy who does what we want him to do. He does what he chooses to do, and what he chooses to do is right and just.

And so here's the problem. We're easily offended when someone doesn't do what we expect of them, when they don't do what we want them to do. There's the bottom line.

Jesus is saying, John, if you want to keep the faith, you better trust me, and don't be offended by my words when I don't say what you want me to say. Because remember John was a hellfire and brimstone preacher. Jesus didn't preach that way.

When I don't say what you want me to say, when I don't do what you want me to do, and in fact when everything goes wrong in your life because of me, because of the truth, don't stumble, but hold on. And of course the good news is that John did hold on, and to the very end. And so God help us that we might be those who in times of trouble ask the right questions in the right places, and that we understand that it's not always going to be the answers are not going to be what we want them to be, but that we will continue to trust him, even in the midst of doubts, in the midst of trials, and in the midst of times when things don't seem to go the way we want them to go.

Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that you're true and faithful Lord, and that you will fulfill every word that not one jot or one tittle will pass away until all is fulfilled. Lord, help us to know and understand your word.

Lord, keep us from the traditions of men, and the traditions of churches, and of our own made-up ideas of who you are, and what you do, and what your plan is, and what the scheme of things is. Lord, help us to know your will, and Lord, help us to trust you, even in the times of great difficulty. Lord, that we may be like Job, who said those famous words, even if he slays me, I will still trust him.

And Lord, we thank you for John, who just served for a short while, and then was thrown into prison, and then executed. But Lord, that he is still a great prophet. Lord, it's not about how much we've achieved.

It's not about how much we can do. It's about you, and your faithfulness, and your mission for us. And so Lord, we pray that you'd help us understand.

And Lord, we pray that you'd help us in these times of difficulty. Lord, I pray for Christians all over the world. I pray for pastors who are doubting, and questioning, who maybe have known times of great blessing on their ministry, just like John did, and now find themselves almost in prison, because everything has gone against the church.

I pray Lord, that you would strengthen them, and give them the evidence that they need to continue to trust in you. I pray in Jesus name. I say, pray Lord, that you'd go with us now, keep us, protect us, and bring us together again safely on Thursday, Lord.

We do pray that you would cause the government to allow churches to continue, and Lord, that we would not be closed down, but that we'd be able to gather here again on Thursday. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

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