

When in Doubt

Introduction

The Text

¹⁸The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, ¹⁹calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ²⁰And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” ²¹In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²²And 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. ²³And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

²⁴When John’s messengers had gone, 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? ²⁵What 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. ²⁶What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

²⁷This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.” ^{28a}I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. (Luke 7:18–28a)

Let’s Talk about It

- A. This text foregrounds a subject all of us deal with but few of us like to talk about: namely, doubt.
 - 1. This is the Christian “faith”—we’re saved by faith, we’re justified by faith, we live by faith, we walk by faith—we don’t want to talk about doubt. And yet we all deal with it. So we probably ought to talk about it.
- B. As John interacts with Jesus in our text concerning his own personal doubts, there are four observations concerning this doubt that I want to bring out for us now: (1) Its Confusion (vv. 18-20); (2) Its Cause; (3) Its Cure (vv. 21-23); and (4) Its Conclusion (vv. 24-28a).

(1) Its Confusion (vv. 18-20)

A Startling Transition

- A. I think we are meant to be startled by the transition of things here in the narrative Luke is weaving together for us. In 7:1-10, He heals a Centurion’s dying servant with a word. In 7:11-15, He resurrects a widow’s dead son with a word.
 - 1. And in vv. 16-17 Luke highlights the response of the crowds looking on at all of this: “¹⁶Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and

“God has visited his people!”¹⁷ And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country” (Luke 7:16–17).

- a. People are amazed. Everyone is talking about Him. “Who is this Jesus? He must have come from God!”
- B. But then the camera pans to John the Baptist, the man who, to this point has been the boldest public promoter of Jesus, and we read this: “¹⁸The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John,¹⁹ calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’” (vv. 18-19).
1. What a startling transition! John’s disciples: “He’s healing the sick! He’s raising the dead!” John himself: “Is He really the One?” What is that?!
- C. We mustn’t forget that John’s relationship with Jesus goes back much further than even this moment here. It goes all the way back to the womb, really.
1. Do you remember when Mary comes to visit Elizabeth, both women are pregnant at this time, and we’re told in Luke 1:41: “[W]hen Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.” John was rejoicing in Jesus before he was even born!
 2. Or do you remember his bold declaration of faith after baptizing Him: “³²I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. . . .³⁴I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God” (John 1:32, 34).
 3. Or do you remember in John 3:26-30, how he happily turns his disciples over to Jesus, whom he knows to be the Christ, saying: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (v. 30).
- D. So, again we ask: What is that there in vv. 18-20 of our text?!
1. John, it seems, in spite of all he has experienced of Jesus to this point, is himself struggling with doubt: “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

How about You?

- A. I wonder if you’ve ever experienced something like this? Perhaps you’ve seen much good from God in your life. He was speaking. He was moving.
1. But, somewhere along the way, something shifted. And you began to doubt: “Is God really for me? Is Jesus really the answer? Can the Bible really be trusted?”
 - a. Questions that, in your brightest days, you couldn’t even imagine asking, now haunt your heart and mind in the shadows.

(2) Its Cause

- A. To this point I have only noted the dilemma, the tension between all that John has known of Jesus and the current doubt he is experiencing.

1. Now, for a moment we need to do our best to answer the question we've been asking: What is going on here? Why is this happening? What seems to be the cause of this doubt?

Pride

- A. Now, certainly, in general terms, we must say that all doubt has, at its root, an element of pride.
 1. The very fact that we question, that we the creature struggle to believe our Creator, is already a sign of malfunction, indicative of a heart gone wrong. To doubt God is really to subject Him to our reason, to make Him bow to our pitiful logic before we would be willing to trust Him.
- B. In the end, I suppose God could come against all of our doubts in the same way He came against Job's: "² Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. ⁴ Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:2-4).
 1. "So you are struggling with what I am doing and what I have said? Who are you? Where were you?"

Mistaken Interpretations and Expectations

- A. Now, while this pride is always at the deepest level beneath our doubts, there are other things that feed into it as well.
 1. In John's case, in particular, we see that doubt can result from a mistaken interpretation of Scripture that leads to a mistaken expectation of reality.
 - a. When, after time, we find that reality does not align with our expectations, in our pride, we begin to doubt the God we thought we understood: "I had You figured out. I did my Bible study. What's happening in my life isn't matching up with what I see in Your Word. Therefore, [not: I might be wrong, please correct me; but:] You might not be the One!"
- B. Let me flesh this out for you. It is quite clear that John, like so many in Israel, interpreted OT prophecy in such a way that he came to expect certain things from the coming Messiah: He would be a King, coming in judgment to crush Israel's enemies (at this point in history: Rome), whereby He would restore His people to their land, and set up His kingdom on the earth.
 1. And such things Jesus will ultimately do—in an even greater sense than John, or Israel, or anyone could have imagined—but the fulfillment will be more nuanced than this, and it will involve a timeline quite different than originally anticipated.
- C. So John, in his early days, expecting the imminent fulfillment of such things in Jesus, is fearless. When we look again at the snapshot of his ministry back in [Luke 3](#), this is unmistakable:
 1. As people were coming to him for baptism, he rebukes them: "⁷ You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? . . . ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the

trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (vv. 7, 9).

2. And down in vv. 16-17 he continues: “¹⁶ I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

D. It’s as if John thinks that in Jesus he has a lion charging with Him. He speaks with unflinching boldness because he knows the Lion of Judah has his back.

1. So he’s calling out the Pharisees. He’s calling out the Sadducees. He’s calling out the nominal Jews. And he even calls out Herod, the Tetrarch appointed by Rome over Galilee, for his fornication.

A Dungeon of Doubt

A. But now, in our text, there’s a little detail that hints at a major problem.

1. We’re told that all of John’s interactions with Jesus take place through mediation. His disciples come and report to him of what Jesus is up to. And when John has a follow-up question, he sends his disciples back to ask it on his behalf.

a. Why? Why not engage with Jesus yourself, John?!

B. Well, the answer was given to us back in [Luke 3:20](#). John is locked up in prison. It seems Herod didn’t appreciate John’s public rebuke of him, so he locked him up, Josephus tells us, in the dungeon of Machaerus—a restored fortress located east of the Jordan.

1. And, when the events of [Luke 7](#) roll around, John’s been in this dungeon for quite some time. And this, my friends, will do a number to a man’s heart. It can dissolve even the most unflinching boldness into trembling doubt.

C. You see John thought Jesus was charging like a Lion at his back, but it’s as if John’s now turned around and found Him to be nothing more than a little Lamb.

1. “You’re so soft. You’re so tender. You’re eating with tax collectors and sinners. You’re healing the sick and raising the dead. It’s all mercy, mercy, mercy. Where’s the judgment?! Where’s the axe? Where’s the winnowing fork? Where’s the release of the captives you talk about? I’m captive. I’ve been captive. And I’m still here. Left to rot. While Herod sits above me at ease, lounging on his couch. I thought You had my back!”

a. Beneath the doubt: pride, mistaken interpretation, and mistaken expectation. John could not conceive of a Lion who was also a Lamb, at least not in this way. So he thought he must have the wrong Messiah.

All Things for Good?!

- A. I wonder if you've ever experienced this sort of thing. Things in your life aren't working out according to plan, according to the way you thought God promised they would? And you're sitting in the dungeon with John.
 - 1. "This is what 'all things work together for my good' means? I lose my job? I miscarry my baby? I catch my spouse cheating on me with some younger woman? Don't tell me Jesus is working for my good in this! This is not what I signed on for!"

(3) Its Cure (vv. 21-23)

- A. Let's watch now how Jesus responds to this question from John. In this we will be directed to doubt's cure.

Of Works and Words

- A. First, Jesus responds, not with words, but with works: "In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight" (v. 21).
 - 1. Isn't that incredible?! You just get this picture of Jesus saying something like: "Not the Messiah? Are you kidding Me? Watch this . . . Heal that guy. Release that lady from a demon. What is that? Is that a plague? Okay, Ill take care of that."
 - a. The way Luke records this just nonchalantly makes it sound even more epic, right? Like this was nothing for Him!
- B. But what Jesus does next is perhaps the most important thing to notice. Because, really, in performing these miracles, He's not done anything here that He hasn't already done. John already knows He's doing these things. It's not been enough for John.
 - 1. But, then, Jesus helps John connect the dots from His works to the Word of God.
- C. The book of Isaiah is written, it seems, to God's people at a time when they are spiraling towards exile because of their sin. And yet the whole center of gravity in the book is weighted towards a coming redemption, the time after exile when God will restore His people and, ultimately, all of creation.
 - 1. And, throughout these prophetic utterances, one figure in particular is held out as the One through whom God will accomplish all of this: namely, the Servant, the Messiah, the Christ.
- D. Jesus, in v. 22, is essentially gathering up a whole host of these Messianic prophecies from Isaiah and saying: "John, we have a match. I am the One who is to come. I am the Christ."
 - 1. "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." (Behind these words: Isa 26:19; 29:18; 35:5-6; 42:18; 61:1.)

- a. “Relay these words to John and, if he knows his Bible at all, he will know what I am saying. And he’ll know: he shouldn’t go looking for anyone else.”

Keep Coming to Jesus

- A. Now, I said that this whole exchange points us towards the cure for our doubt. Well, what is it? To put it simply: Keep coming to Jesus.
 1. What do you do when you are doubting Jesus and struggling with what He’s up to in your life? Perhaps a bit ironically, you come to Him anyways.
 - a. You let Him teach you. You let Him correct you. You let Him connect the dots for you from the Scriptures to your life. You let Him locate you in God’s story, in God’s world.
- B. You see, John does right here. Though he is doubting Jesus, He doesn't run from Jesus. He, rather, runs to Him, and talks honestly with Him about it all.
- C. Alfred Edersheim speaks of doubt on analogy with the twilight hours of a day. Twilight can either lead into night and a deeper darkness, or it can lead into dawn and the light of day.
 1. He says, in essence: “Your doubt is kind of like that. It can either lead to greater darkness or greater light, depending on what you do with it. Will you take your doubt and, with it, walk away from Christ? Then it is darkness for you. But if you will take your doubt and, with it, run towards Christ, get ready for the morning light—for greater revelation, for greater understanding!”

Construction → Deconstruction → Reconstruction

- A. Let me put a few key words on the process I think God takes us all through here: Construction, Deconstruction, Reconstruction—and in that order.
 1. We begin with Construction, and by this I mean that we all get our initial ideas about God, Jesus, ourselves, etc. We have these preliminary constructs in our mind that we think are accurate.
 2. But then Jesus comes along in love and has to deconstruct some of this. Because we’re off. We’re mistaken. We’re misaligned. We don’t see God, Jesus, or ourselves rightly.
 - a. Here is the dungeon moment. Here is the place of doubt.
 3. But if we go to Christ with our doubts, we find that He is ready to reconstruct us, to help us get a clearer sense of reality, of who He is and what He’s come to do, of who we really are and what we really need. He takes us deeper into the Scriptures and helps us put more of the pieces together.
 - a. Construction, Deconstruction, Reconstruction. And the process continues on like this as He reshapes and reforms us more and more.

B. In the Scriptures, we see this process working out in the lives of all His disciples:

1. We might think of Peter and his misplaced confidence. “Though these all fall away, I will never fall away from You Lord!” He would have to be utterly humbled, deconstructed of self-reliance, so that he could be reconstructed with a newfound confidence in Jesus.
2. We might think of those two on the road to Emmaus. They had no category for a crucified Messiah. “[W]e had hoped that he was the one . . .” (Luke 24:21). But Jesus meets them there and He opens the Scriptures to them, and their hearts come alive with faith.
3. We might also think of Paul, a man who considered himself blameless according to the law. He needed to have his own self-righteousness utterly deconstructed before he could be reconstructed with the righteousness of Christ! “[W]hatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ” (Phil 3:7).

C. I wonder what it might be for you? Where is Jesus deconstructing and reconstructing in your life?

1. The critical piece in all of this is that we are willing to let Him do it. We’ve seen enough of His works, we trust His words, we put ourselves into His hands.
 - a. The bigger issue is not that we have it all perfect but that we have a disciple’s heart—we are open to what He will say, we receive Him as our authority and follow Him as our Lord.
 - i. We might misunderstand and misapply His words, but the true heart of a disciple will always open to God’s leading and guidance and so we will always come out okay, even better, stronger, in the end.

(4) Its Conclusion (vv. 24-28a)

A. I read earlier through the first part of v. 28. This is because, I think we see in vv. 24-28a, a surprising conclusion to the doubting of John.

1. When John’s messengers had gone and Jesus turns to speak to the crowds about him, wouldn’t we expect there to be something of bitterness, or frustration, or some sort of rebuke of John for all of this?
 - a. But that is not what we see at all is it. No. Instead we see Jesus reaffirming John’s identity as His forerunner, even going so far as to say: “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John” (v. 28a).

B. You see Jesus is not thrown off by our doubts. He’s not surprised by them. He’s not embittered by them. He knows what He’s getting into with us.

1. Everyone's going to leave Him alone in the end. Not just John. Everyone. For goodness sake, Matthew tells us that even after the resurrection, even while watching Him ascend into heaven, some of these disciples "doubted" (Matt 28:17).
 - a. But this is why He's come. This is why He goes to the cross. He's going to remake us from the inside out, over the long haul—construction, deconstruction, reconstruction.
- C. So He invites us, even this morning, to come to Him with our doubts. Stop pretending. Get real. Let's talk about it. He offers a safe place to struggle.
 1. That's why Jude calls the church not to condemn, or judge, or rebuke those who doubt. No! It's rather: "[H]ave mercy on those who doubt" (Jude 22).
 - a. Because that's what Jesus does: "Though we are faithless, he remains faithful (2 Tim 2:13) . . . and merciful.
- D. Look at how Jude ends his letter just a few verses later (and it's here that I will end my time with you as well): "²⁴ Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, ²⁵ to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen" (Jude 1:24–25).
 1. Even when in doubt, Jesus is able to keep you from stumbling and will get you to glory!