

When Doubt Assaults Us

Luke 7:18-35

In your Bibles please turn to Luke 7:18-35.

Growing up I loved playing softball. My very first mitt was a first baseman's glove. Dad was head of Boy's Brigade at church and it was his desire that we get groomed to play on the boys softball team. Well, we moved to Camp when I was 11 and we never got to play on the Brigade team. But I did grow up playing a lot of softball at Camp as well as a year of summer baseball and a year in a fast-pitch softball league.

Since high school I've played on church leagues and city leagues and through those years I have played every position. When I was in high school I really liked playing the outfield because I loved to run after fly balls with blazing speed and snag flies that should have made the sports highlight reels. I also liked playing the outfield because if it was a grounder, usually by the time it rolled out to me it had slowed down. At the time I didn't like grounders.

Somewhere along the way I moved to the infield. Others were better and faster as my outfield speed wasn't as blazing or speedy. I platooned at second base and got to really like that position. But I had to learn a lot about the infield like where to stand, who had the bag, where to go with the ball. You had to make faster decisions and have quicker reactions. At times I played short stop, and did okay, but it was a different position. You were the quarterback of the infield. You had to cut off balls from the outfield, call out where relays were to be thrown, you had to cover a lot of ground behind third and second and short outfield.

The last position I played was third base which I played for about four years. Every position comes with its challenges. At first I wasn't sure about that position. It's the hot corner. Screaming liners and hot skipping grounders come faster than you can

blink. And if you are off by a fraction or a little late in fielding the ball it can leave a lasting impression. There it is right across your forehead – SPALDING or the mark of stitches impressed in your shin. At first I wasn't sure about third but over time I got a little swagger. Some games I was like a softball vacuum scooping up everything. But there were those times when I would miss a play I thought I should have made and then the swagger left and the doubts took over. I remember one time leaping high to catch a ball that wasn't hit as hard as I thought and I jumped higher than I needed. The ball hit me on the heel of my hand and bounced off hitting me in the head. I picked up the ball and called time. Our coach ran over from short stop and asked if I was hurt. I told him only my pride. He laughed and I allowed the seeds of doubt to enter. Maybe I'm not as good as I thought or I hope they don't hit it my way. In those moments you begin to second guess yourself. You even play the mental game of wondering if you should tell the coach to put you on the bench. Doubts can severely shake one's confidence.

It doesn't matter what you do or who you are. When confidence is shaken, doubt begins its mental assault. It happened to John the Baptist and if it could happen to him it can happen to anyone. We see John's doubt and how Jesus encouraged him. That encouragement is also for us.

John's doubt
Jesus's defense
The Jew's decision

I. JOHN'S DOUBT – v. 18-23

Before we go any further let's make sure we are clear on something that is important. I want us to make certain that we do not confuse doubt with disbelief.

Disbelief is simply defined as refusing to believe or to reject something as untrue. Disbelief is a matter of the will because we refuse to believe God's Word and obey what He tells us to do.

Doubt on the other hand is defined as wavering in opinion, being undecided or uncertain about something. Doubt is a matter of the mind because we don't know what God is doing.

It was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who said "Give me the benefit of your convictions, if you have any; but keep your doubts to yourself, for I have enough of my own."

Oswald Chambers said "doubt may not always mean a man is wrong, it may mean he is thinking." That is where we find John the Baptist.

Now, let's set the stage for this passage. We begin with a legitimate request because of doubt.

A. A Legitimate Request Because of Doubt – v. 18-20

We last saw Jesus in the little village of Nain about 24 miles southwest from Capernaum. He had traveled there with His disciples along with a large crowd after healing the deathly sick servant of the Centurion. Unbeknown to everyone else with Him Jesus was on a divine mission to raise from the dead the son of a grieving widow. Jesus is at the height of His popularity and crowds followed him everywhere. They got to hear amazing sermons, witness incredible healings, and occasionally get a free lunch. Among the group of followers in Jesus' presence were some of John's disciples.

Verse 18 begins by noting that some of John's disciples came back to report to him what was going on. They told Him what Jesus was up to. By this time in Jesus' ministry John is in prison, sentenced for speaking out against the marriage between Herod and his sister-in-law Herodias. Both divorced so they could marry each other, Herodias having divorced Herod's brother. She didn't like it so out of revenge she had John arrested and tossed in the palace pokey. Even though he was in prison His disciples still had contact with him.

John, sitting in prison, has nothing but time on his hands to think. It's a time of reflection and introspection. He had devoted his life and ministry years proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. Although it had been 400 years since God spoke through a prophet, John was the last of the Old Testament prophets. As he thought about his message, I believe he thought about the time Jesus came to the Jordan River. On that occasion he cried out speaking of Jesus "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

On another occasion when Jesus' ministry began to really take off and He was baptizing people, some of John's disciples came and complained about it. I think they were discouraged that some of their followers were leaving to follow Jesus. It can be discouraging when people leave to go to some other ministry. What was John's response? "He must increase, I must decrease."

Here he is sitting in a cold, dark dungeon all alone with nothing but time and his thoughts to keep him company. And the doubts begin to come. Is Jesus really the Messiah? Is He really the deliverer? If He is, why hasn't He made His move to set up His kingdom? If He is why am I still in prison? Perhaps like everyone else, John also thought that the Messiah would be a political deliverer. Even after His resurrection, Jesus's disciples asked if at that time He was going to set up His kingdom on earth. But right there in that cell, John is having some doubts, some uncertainty.

When was the last time you had some doubts? It doesn't matter who we are, we all have them from time to time. Some doubts are stronger than others and sometimes some circumstance we face today in which we stand like a rock on the promises of God are the same circumstances that tomorrow cause us to waver. It's not because God changed, or even the circumstance we are facing, but rather in some way we changed and the doubt seeps in like a leaky roof. If the doubt isn't taken care of it will be damaging.

So what brings doubts?

Is it the loss of a job where you can't find work matter how hard you look?

Is it the loss of health or the length of an illness?

Is it the choices of a wayward child or spouse?

Is it a tragic accident or difficult work environment?

It could be some person you looked up to who was caught in some scandal that has shaken your faith.

Read through the pages of Scripture and you quickly find that even the great patriarchs and people of faith had doubts.

Adam and Eve doubted God and His Word.

Abraham doubted God about an heir from Sarah.

Moses doubted God at the burning bush and in the wilderness.

At one time or another Gideon, David, Elijah, and the disciples all had their doubts.

If the heroes of faith had their moments of doubt, what makes us think that we won't either? It's not wrong to doubt, but it's wrong to stay there. Doubt is the breeding ground of discouragement.

Discouragement is the breeding ground of despair.

Despair is the breeding ground of disbelief. It is a fine line that separates them.

We can doubt when the commitment to following Christ becomes greater than we think we can bear, when the trials we endure are too heavy, or the endurance it takes to continue on seems too great. In those moments we can think it's time to toss in the towel and give up.

When it seems like the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, we can doubt.

When the cares of the world are overwhelming and God seems distant or even absent in our crisis, when it seems like He doesn't even care, we can doubt.

When an immediate resolution to some crisis doesn't seem to come right away, we can doubt.

Doubt comes when we trust ourselves more

than we trust God.

Doubt is a tool of Satan to discourage us and make us believe that God doesn't care about us, that God doesn't love us, or that God is too busy for us.

John asked a legitimate question and he sent his disciples on an errand to ask Jesus his question. Are you the one we have been waiting for, or should we expect someone else? Are you the Messiah or not?

I want you to notice something important. John sent his request to Jesus. He didn't go around taking a poll of people about their opinion of Jesus or even ask the priests for their thoughts on the matter. He went directly to the source. Are you the guy or should I be focusing on someone else?

John gives us a simple but important and effective method of coping with doubt, take it to the Lord.

John had a legitimate request because of doubt. Jesus gives a loving response for doubt.

B. A Loving Response For Doubt – v. 21-23

There wasn't any theological dialogue. He didn't walk them through the Old Testament beginning with Genesis 3:15 explaining all the prophecies about the Messiah and how the Old Testament sacrificial system was a picture of who He was and what He would do ending with the passages from Micah and Isaiah that tie His birthplace to Him and that He would become the lamb to take on the iniquities of the world. He did that with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus to show them that everything had to happen that way. Instead He gave them some object lessons. Notice what He did. He went into the crowd around Him and cured diseases and sickness and those with evil spirits and gave some their sight. And then He told the two disciples of John that when they reported back to John tell him what you have seen All these

miracles should serve as an answer to his question. “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” That’s His answer to John.

In essence He was telling them not to give John a lesson in the Old Testament Scriptures which he already knew, but tell him the proof is in the pudding. The miracles affirm Jesus’ identity.

Verse 23 is the key to what Jesus tells them to tell John and it’s the key for us. “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of Me.” The Phillips translation reads “happy is the man who never loses his faith in Me.” You should underline that verse.

The Greek word is skandalidzomai and in the KJV the translation is “offend” and means to trip up or entrap. It speaks about falling away. Jesus is saying that we need to have faith in His message and works, that we need to believe He is who He claims to be from both the Old Testament prophecies, the Gospel accounts of His life and the rest of the New Testament that affirms the evidence through the changed lives of those who are in Christ. We are blessed when we keep faith in Him, even when we don’t understand why things happen to us.

John was in prison. John thought that if Jesus was the Messiah, things should be moving along a bit faster. John perhaps thought that since he was the forerunner of the Messiah and a faithful witness proclaiming the Messiah was here that he should somehow expect to be delivered from prison, but there he sat until the day of his execution.

When my Mom was diagnosed with cancer that ultimately led to the amputation of her leg one of their faithful supporters came to visit her in the hospital. He walked in just shook his head. He couldn’t believe that God would allow something

like that to happen to someone who had served Him faithfully for 30 years as a missionary.

We must learn that when trials come, even in God’s silence, never to doubt His sovereignty, never to doubt His love, never to doubt His Word.

But Jesus continues to explain further, not to John’s disciples, but to the crowd. He gives a defense.

II. JESUS’S DEFENSE – v. 24-28

Please don’t miss this point. Jesus never condemns John’s doubt. He never criticizes him for asking. Notice the defense of John by Jesus. He does so first by defending John’s character.

A. Jesus Defended John’s Character – v. 24-25

John’s disciples were headed down the road back to the prison to give an answer from Jesus to John. What Jesus is about to say wasn’t for those two disciples or for John, it was for the crowd. Jesus asks three rhetorical questions. The first two have to do with John’s character. “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?”

Question number two. “If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces.”

What do you know about reeds? They are very thin and long. They are quite pliable, and can easily be bent in two and broken in half. There are some spots on the lake at camp that have reeds. While rowing a boat through them it is pretty easy to snap a reed with the oar.

What did they go out to the desert to find? Jesus’ illustration depicts John’s character. He was not a man who would easily bend in the wind. He was a man of strong convictions. The convictions he held to were not something he would change.

Think for a moment about the ministry and message of John the Baptist.

In the beginning of his ministry he called people to a life of righteousness. “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

He preached that the Messiah would “baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

He declared that the Messiah’s hand wielded the winnowing fork, that He would clear His threshing floor and gather the wheat into the barn, but burn up the chaff in unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:11-12)

And then the capstone of his message “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.”

Out of conviction John held nothing back when he preached about the Messiah calling people to repentance. And even though here he had some doubts, Jesus commended him, He affirmed his strong convictions and character. He was not spineless, moving with every wind of doctrine that blew. He was not a weak messenger swayed by popular opinion. When it comes to your declaration of Jesus how strong is your convictions about Him?

Another aspect of character is in appearance. Jesus spoke about John’s clothing. He didn’t live a luxurious lifestyle. He could have though. Remember he was part of the priestly line and if he wanted he could have stayed in that opulent setting and perhaps even become High Priest. Instead of the fine clothes worn by priests in high positions, his garments were made of camel skins and leather.

William Hendriksen writes “Those who wear ‘soft’ garments are the people without backbone, sycophants (those who flatter) who readily kowtow to those in authority and are rewarded with a high office in the King’s palace, a position that enables them to be gorgeously appareled and to live luxuriously in harmony with the high station in life to which they have attained.”

That was not John.

I want to say this before we move on. Our enemy the devil wants to accuse us and cast doubts at us that God surely doesn’t love us after what we just did, but God through His Spirit defends us by reminding us that we are the children of God. He defends our character because He sees us in Christ.

John had strong convictions and Jesus defended John’s character.

Jesus defended John’s calling.

B. Jesus Defended John’s Calling – v. 26-27

Here’s the third rhetorical question. “But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way before You.’”

Jesus affirmed to the crowd that John was the forerunner of the Messiah, the one who would announce His coming like a herald who announces that the king is coming. John had the unique responsibility and privilege not only to herald the gospel message and challenge people to repent; he was also called on to be the prophet who would actually introduce the Messiah. All the other prophets before John who spoke about the Messiah only spoke in terms of His coming someday. John was an eyewitness of the Messiah who got to make the announcement. “Hey folks, you’ve been looking for the Messiah. Guess what? He’s here, today.” What a privilege.

There is a section of Herod’s Temple that still stands today in Jerusalem. Today it’s known as the Wailing Wall. Each day hundreds of Jews gather to pray and wail to God. Among the many things they pray for there are three basic requests. The first is a prayer for Jerusalem to be at peace. As nations bear down hard on Jerusalem and the destruction of Israel, they pray for God’s intervention and peace to ensue.

The second thing they pray for is the rebuilding of the Temple. Since the Temple was destroyed in 70A.D. Jews have not been able to practice their religion with respect to animal sacrifices. It can only be done in the Temple and so they want the Temple rebuilt.

The third thing they pray for is that the Messiah would come. Since they don't acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, they still hope the Messiah will show up someday. Paul said the cross is a stumbling block to the Jews and since Jesus was crucified on something that brings with it a curse in the mind of the Jews, Jesus couldn't conceivably be the Messiah, so they pray. As a prophet John proclaimed that the Messiah had come, He was present, in the flesh and Jesus defended that calling.

The third thing Jesus defended was John's class.

C. Jesus Defended John's Class – v. 28

Jesus describes John as the greatest person born. How would you like that distinction coming from the Lord? But what does He mean that the least in the Kingdom is greater than John? Remember that as a prophet, the last of the Old Testament prophets he belonged to the old covenant, which was the time that prepared for the coming Messiah. "The least New Testament saint has a higher privilege in Christ as a part of his bride (the Church) than John the Baptist, who was only a friend of the bridegroom." Being a great prophet on earth is not as great as being part of the Kingdom of God.

On this verse John MacArthur notes "Believers on this side of the resurrection are greater than John the Baptist not in terms of personal character or influence, but because they have the privilege of proclaiming the fullness of the gospel. John preached that sinners needed to repent and be reconciled to God to prepare themselves for Messiah's coming...Our message is to proclaim the full truth of the Savior's death and resurrection."

In spite of that difference Jesus still defended John's class as the greatest person born among women.

We have considered John's doubt and pondered the fact that we each have them from time to time. We have pondered Jesus's defense and as part of His eternal Kingdom he defends us as well. In the remainder of the passage we see the Jew's decision.

III. THE JEW'S DECISION – v. 29-35

A. The People Rejoiced – v. 29

Those who had been baptized by John, those who had agreed with his assessment that they were sinners in need of repentance were joyful at what Jesus had to say. As the text says they "acknowledged that God's way was right." The sincerity of their repentance was evidenced in their baptism. Baptism doesn't save but is that outward act of obedience that demonstrates a changed heart brought about by salvation.

B. The Pharisees Rejected – v. 30-35

The Pharisees didn't see any reason for repentance or baptism. Their self-righteous opinion put such actions beneath them. Jesus had some strong words to say about them to close out this section. He refers to them as "the people of this generation" and likened them to children playing in the market place. They didn't have city parks or school yard play grounds to run around in. Instead children played where everyone else hung out – in the square at the center of town. That's where all the social events happened. You bought and sold their. Business transactions took place there. Political decisions transpired there. Kids played there. Jesus mentions two games they played, events that were important in Jewish culture – weddings and funerals. At a wedding there is a lot excitement and joy. It's a very festive time with lots of singing and dancing. On the other hand, a funeral is filled with

sadness and heartache. These were two games that Jewish children played in the market.

Jesus said the Pharisees were like spoiled brats who wanted to sit in the corner and sulk because they didn't want to play either. John was like the funeral dirge and they didn't like him because of his way of life and the things he spoke about. On the other hand, Jesus was like a wedding, always seeming to have a good time. They didn't like how He lived either. So instead they rejected the message of both John and Jesus. They didn't fit in with the religious establishment. If they claimed that John was the forerunner of the Messiah, they would have to accept that Jesus was in fact the Messiah and their pride wouldn't allow them to do that.

In what Jesus is saying here, any person in any generation who rejects the gospel is like a childish brat, just like the Pharisees.

In every crowd there are always two groups of people. There are those that rejoice, and those who reject what Jesus said. Which group are you in?

Let me sum up with some thoughts. John had some reservations about Jesus and the Pharisees rejected Him. With conviction John had proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah, but Jesus was moving a little too slow for him so he began to have some doubts. Jesus needed to respond to John and his doubts and in so doing defended him and his message. We all have doubts. Where do your doubts come from?

Doubts - we all have them.

Doubts come from personal tragedy that may happen to us, even those who walk close to God, even the ones who are filled with the Spirit as John was. We can believe in some way that God has let us down. We are never more vulnerable to doubt than when we experience trying circumstances.

Doubts come from popular opinion or worldly influence, whether it's from a text book in a class,

documentaries on TV, the local newspaper even friends. People can say things that can cast doubt. When we listen to others instead of the Lord we can begin to doubt. We need to stay grounded in the Word to overcome doubt.

Doubts come from incorrect or incomplete information. Lack of information or the wrong information can cause us to doubt. Sometimes it's not the difficulties that bring the doubt but the lack of understanding why we are going through them. We might ask why me or why now or why this?

When we lack trust we want to doubt, remember Proverbs 3:5 to trust in the Lord with all our heart and not lean on our own understanding. When our focus is off trusting God and on ourselves, we begin to doubt.

If we lack understanding, go to Scripture. Joshua 1 speaks about having courage as we meditate on Scripture.

Another place where doubt can come from is in unfulfilled expectations. John had them about the Messiah. You might have expectations about a job based on what others have told you or even about a relationship like marriage from novels or magazines or TV only to find that yours doesn't match up. When those expectations aren't met we can wonder what happened, what went wrong. John was probably wondering when Jesus was going to make His move. What was He waiting for? The Jews all hailed Him as the Messiah as He rode into Jerusalem at the beginning of the Passover week, but quickly doubted Him as Messiah and then turned on Him to the point of crucifying Him.

When those doubts come from unmet expectations, be like John and go to the source. Go to the Lord for direction and answers. Let me give a simple acrostic I hope will help you overcome doubt.

D- Draw close to God. Doubt isn't the time to move away, it's the time to move closer. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." (James 4:8)

Remember the words of Hebrews 13:5 that He will never leave or forsake you.

While you're at it, don't forget Psalm 23:4 that He walks with us in the shadow of death.

O – Observe carefully what God has done. Think about the times in the past when you saw God's mighty hand at work and remember that God is faithful.

Lamentations 3:22-23 "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed because His compassions fail not, they are new every morning, great is Thy faithfulness."

Joshua 1:7-9 "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

U – Understand God's creative work in you.

Romans 8:28 "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."

The passage continues to remind us that nothing can separate us from God's love.

D – Devote yourselves to communication with God. It simply means to pray.

Colossians 4:2 "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful."

Philippians 4:6-7 "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

T – Testing culminates in spiritual growth.

James 1:2-7 "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do."

What doubts are you facing today? Will you allow God and His Word to give you peace?

I trust that the example of John along with the response of Jesus will encourage you stand strong when doubts assault you.