

DOUBTING CASTLE

Matthew 11:1-6

By Pastor John Paul Miller

***Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ,
he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he
that should come, or do we look for another?***

Matthew 11:2-3

'Art thou he that should come, or should we look for another?' This question was asked by John the Baptist. He didn't ask it in a classroom. He didn't ask it in the beautiful outdoors of the Jordan valley. He didn't ask it amidst the luxury of a palace. He asked it while he was occupying a prison cell in a dungeon where even the sunlight was a stranger. In prison, John sends his disciples to ask Jesus this fascinating question: 'Are you He that should come?'

'He that should come' being a term for the Messiah, John was actually asking, 'Are you the Messiah, the Mesheach, the Anointed of God or should we look for someone else?' Why did John ask this question? First of all, it wasn't for the purpose of argumentation or speculation. John wasn't into theological debate. Nor do I believe John asked this question to satisfy his disciples' curiosity, doubt or unbelief. John didn't say to his disciples, 'OK, you guys don't believe Jesus is the Messiah? Then go ask Him yourself. Go down and ask Him if He's the One that should come.' Some theologians believe John sent his disciples to question Jesus for their own sake. I don't believe that. I believe it's truer to the text to see that John was asking this question to satisfy himself. In reality, John himself was in the dungeon of doubt; this great man who only a few months earlier had preached with such certainty and power now found himself in perplexity and confusion.

John the Baptist had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, had seen the heavens open and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descend upon Him, and heard the Father speaking audibly from heaven, saying, 'This is My beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased.' Now, wouldn't you think that a fellow who had an experience like that would never, ever doubt that Jesus was the Messiah? Pointing to Jesus, John had said, 'Behold the Lamb of God Who carries away the sins of the world.' And now he's sending his disciples to say, 'Are You the Messiah, or should we look for Someone else?'

Why? Because of doubt. John is perplexed. He's confused. He's filled with doubts. And he asks the question: 'Are You He that should come? Are You the Messiah?' If you've never read John Bunyan's spiritual allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, you're missing a real blessing. It is a classic in the truest sense of the word. In a Bedford England prison for preaching the Gospel without a license, Bunyan began to write this masterpiece in which he portrayed the pilgrim, named

Christian, who was fleeing the City of Destruction and was on his way to the Celestial City. Christian had gone through the narrow gate pointed to him by Evangelist, had come to the cross, and had lost his burden. He then met a fellow pilgrim whose name was Hopeful. Christian and Hopeful journeyed down the road together until at one point they strayed off the path and ended up in a field near Doubting Castle which was owned by Giant Despair. Out for his morning walk, Giant Despair found Christian and Hopeful sleeping on his property. 'What are you doing in my field?' he said. 'Oh, dear sir,' they answered, 'we're on our way to the Celestial City, but we wandered off the path.' 'Now you are mine,' Giant Despair said, as he grabbed them and threw them in Doubting Castle. So there they were, sitting in Doubting Castle for days, until finally Hopeful reminded Christian he had a key in his pocket. The key was the Promises of God. Christian took the key out of his pocket, opened the door and they fled from Doubting Castle and Giant Despair.

In our text, we see John the Baptist locked in the dungeon of doubt, in the grips of Giant Despair. In reality, however, it's only because John believed that he had doubts in the first place. You see, only those who believe in God have a problem with the evil and the suffering and the sorrow in this world. If you don't believe in God, then there's no problem with evil or tragedy in the world. If you're an atheist, you don't need to wonder why a loving God would allow innocent people to suffer. If you're an atheist, these things just happen. It's only because we believe in God that we have doubts. The word 'doubt' actually contains the idea of believing and not believing at the same time. In other words, when I doubt, half of me believes, half of me doesn't. James described a doubter as a double-minded man who is tossed back and forth like the waves of the sea. It is doubt which pulls us in two directions. It is doubt which says, 'I believe in God, but I can't reconcile it with what I see going on in the world.'

John, this great man of God, was in Doubting Castle. God's greatest saints have all been there. If you find yourself filled with doubts, perplexities or confusion, don't be too hard on yourself. Abraham, Elijah, and Thomas all experienced doubts and confusion. Doubts don't mean you're not spiritual. I've had people come to me and they feel so guilty and ashamed. 'Pastor Miller,' they say, 'I don't know what to do. I love God, but I feel like a hypocrite because I'm confused, or I'm doubting God, or I'm somewhat angry with God, or upset with God. What's wrong with me?' 'You're normal!' I say. 'We all go through those struggles. Even John the Baptist.' Clovis Chappell said, 'The floors of this gloomy prison are damp with the tears of some of the choicest sons and daughters of God.'

Perhaps you've now come to that place where your heart is filled with doubts and confusion. You're wondering, 'Does God really love me? Is there really a Jesus Who died for me and rose again? Is the Lord really going to come again? Why hasn't God done what I expected Him to do?' Many times, people have doubts about Jesus simply because they don't read the Bible, and they don't really know Jesus Christ in a personal way. But such was not the case with John. He knew Jesus very well. He had pointed to Jesus. He had baptized Jesus. He had

preached about Jesus. We, too, know Jesus. Yet, like John, we all have moments of depression, doubt, and discouragement and find ourselves down in the dumps. Sin is another frequent cause of doubt. You can sin against your deepest convictions until they cease to be convictions. And then you wonder, 'What do I believe? Who am I? Am I really a child of God?' But such was not the case with John. As far as the record goes, he had lived a righteous life. In fact, he was in prison not because he had sinned, but because he had preached against sin when he rebuked Herod for taking his brother's wife.

Why, then, did John doubt? Let me give you three reasons . . .

1. John doubted because he was a human being - John doubted simply because he was human. Isn't that profound? We get this idea that when we're saved, metamorphosis takes place and we're no longer human. We're saints. We glow in the dark. We float around speaking of eternal things. No. We're human beings. I love that verse of Scripture which says God knows our frame. He understands that we are but dust, that we are just piles of dirt! When I doubt, when I'm discouraged, when I'm perplexed, the Lord is so patient and kind and merciful. He knows my frame. He knows I get weary. He knows I get discouraged. He knows I still have a human nature even though I'm His child. John was a human being and we need to make sure we remember that God knows, God understands. As long as we are in these bodies, we're subject to human frailties and failures.

2. John doubted because of difficult circumstances - John was a man of the desert the wide open spaces and now he finds himself confined in a dungeon. It's a horrible thing to be locked in a little cell. It's a horrible thing when a human being is put in a cage, and he can't see outside. I heard of on an Indian chief who was put in a cell where there was only one little window high above his head. When he was finally released, deep indentations were found on the window sill where he had held himself up simply to look out the window at the mountains he once roamed. John was a man of the outdoors confined to a cell. And his circumstances were saying, 'Where is my God? I've been faithful to Him. Why doesn't He deliver me? Why has God allowed me to be in this situation?'

You may be in a hospital, trying to look out a window, trying to see the light of day, languishing on your bed of affliction, wondering, 'Where is my God? Why hasn't He delivered me? Why has God allowed this?' You may be wondering why God has taken a loved one or you've lost your job, or your marriage has failed. It's so easy to become confused and doubt God's love and care when our circumstances are difficult. We should remind ourselves that the

greatest saints of God suffered. Being a man or woman of God does not immunize you from the sorrows and sufferings of life. God has no fall-out shelters for his people. We suffer with the world.

3. John doubted because of unfulfilled expectations - I believe the primary reason for John's doubts were unfulfilled expectations. While he was in prison, John would be hearing about the works of Christ from his disciples. 'Oh, John' they would say, 'you should have seen Jesus today. He was healing blind people. There was a guy covered with leprosy and Jesus just reached out and touched him and his leprosy was gone. You should have been there. You should have seen it, a little boy came up who had just a few loaves and a few fish and Jesus prayed over them and multiplied them. Today Jesus fed over 5,000 people with just a few loaves of bread. Jesus raised a guy from the dead. Oh, John, it was just marvelous.' And as John listened to their reports, there was both the joy and excitement about what Jesus was doing -- but also perplexity and wonder about what Jesus was not doing.

Concerning Jesus, John had said,

And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Matthew 3:10-12

Fire speaks of judgment. So in his prison cell, John was probably thinking, 'Where is the judgment? Wickedness is prevailing. Yes, Jesus is healing a blind person here or there. And He raised a dead person, too. But Herod's still on the throne in his adulterous relationship, and I'm still in prison. Why hasn't God judged? Where is His baptism of fire?'

I would expect that John was perplexed because he couldn't reconcile his expectations of what Messiah would do with what Jesus was doing. John was expecting Jesus to establish a political Kingdom, to kill the Romans, to eliminate evil, to establish a righteous Kingdom. Jesus, on the other hand, came to establish a spiritual Kingdom in the hearts of men and women. The common view was that Messiah would come and overthrow the Romans, and establish a political, physical Kingdom. But Jesus came much more gently and in a different way than that. As a result, John began to doubt. His concept of Christ's work was

physical rather than spiritual and he thought the Kingdom of God was to come with an outward observation or conquest rather than an inward spiritual rule. John had false expectations because he misunderstood the Scripture.

Many times, we say if there really is a God and He's really all-powerful and He really loves us, then why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there evil in the world? Why doesn't God get rid of all evil and set up His Kingdom. Why doesn't He do what we expect Him to do? We pray, 'Thy Kingdom come,' but ask, 'Where is His Kingdom? Why am I in the hospital if God loves me? Why am I sick? Why didn't God do what I wanted Him to do?' We become perplexed when God doesn't do what we expect He should do, when He doesn't rid the world of evil. But for God to get rid of evil in the world, He would have to take man's free will away from him, make him like a little robot, and program him to do only good things. And that wouldn't be loving of God to do. God has a purpose and a plan. Rather than not allow evil to exist, God has chosen to bring good out of evil. And in His infinite wisdom, He's righteous in all of His ways. Presently, we don't understand. Presently, we only see through a glass darkly. But when we get to heaven, we'll see Jesus face to face. We'll know things we don't know or understand now. And I'm content to wait. But John is in the prison of his circumstances, saying, 'I thought Jesus was going to judge evil. Why hasn't He laid the axe to the root of the tree? Why hasn't He just cut these wicked sinners down?' That's why John asked the question 'Art thou He that should come or should we look for another'. Why hasn't He set up His Kingdom?

There have been a lot of Christians over the years who are disillusioned because they expected Jesus to come back at least by the 1970's. 'Surely, by 1975, Jesus is going to come back,' they said. But then there were 88 reasons why Jesus would come in '88 which only created 88,000 disillusioned Christians. I believe the Lord could come before you finish reading this sermon. I believe the Lord could come at any time. But some have actually named dates, based on what I believe is a misunderstanding of Matthew 24. In the 28 years I've been a Christian, there were times I felt the Lord's coming was very near. 'I don't see how we can possibly reach 1980,' I thought. And yet the Lord didn't come.

John had lived a righteous life, yet he was suffering. Not only was he suffering. He was suffering unjustly. Can you imagine what it would have been like to be in prison and have your disciples come every day and tell you all the neat things Jesus was doing? 'Great!' you would have thought. 'But what does that do for me? I'm still in prison. Do you think you could get Jesus to ride His donkey down here, throw a rope through the bars, pull out the wall of this prison, and spring me?' Maybe John was disillusioned because the Bible said Messiah would open the prison doors and set the captives free. No doubt, John thought, 'Hmm. He hasn't opened mine yet. I'm still here.'

Today, many wonder why the righteous suffer when so often the wicked seem to prosper. In Psalm 73, Asaph had the same problem. 'My feet almost slipped,' he said. 'I almost wiped out when I began to be envious of the prosperity of the

wicked and I began to feel like I've cleansed my hands in vain, like it doesn't do any good to live right.' Ever felt that way? The guys that lie and cheat and steal get the promotion. They drive the nice cars. They don't have any weeds in their front yard. I tithe. And I pray. And I read my Bible. And I go to church. And I teach Sunday School yet my car won't start, my wife is having a difficult pregnancy, my children are suffering, a family member has cancer, or my parents just died. Where is God? I've lived a good life.

You see, we have false expectations and we begin to believe that God should reward us for righteous living. While there is indeed a built-in blessedness for living a holy life, living a righteous life does not immunize you from sorrow and sufferings and difficulties. We get this idea that God owes us. How many dear precious saints of God have been told that God owes them perfect health, that God's promised them abundant wealth and they pray and they don't get what they think they're supposed to get and they get disillusioned because of difficult circumstances and false expectations? They prayed for the job and God didn't give it to them. Or they prayed for that new fancy car and God didn't give it to them. They prayed to be healed and they got sicker. They prayed for a loved one they wanted God to heal and the person died. And all of a sudden they find themselves in the grips of Giant Despair in Doubting Castle wondering why God didn't do what they expected Him to do.

Again, the problem is with our understanding. We have false expectations. God's never promised to do those things. You can live a righteous life and still suffer. Look at the life of Joseph. Many times God's righteous saints have suffered. Sadly, many have falsely expected that God owed them prosperity, health or healing and they become disillusioned when God didn't answer the way they wanted. Have you learned to thank God for unanswered prayer? What a blessed place that is to come to. What a blessed place it is to be able to come to the Lord and say, 'Lord, this is my request. But I know that You love me more than I could ever fathom or understand. I know You're wise. I know that You know the beginning from the end. And I know that You want what's best for me. So, Lord, not my will but Thine be done.' What a blessed place to be able to go into a hospital and see someone you love more than life itself and to say Lord, not my will but Thine be done. You do with them what You want to do because, Lord, You know what's best.'

So many times our doubt and confusion come because of false expectations. You expect God to get you a job, to save your marriage, to heal you. And He doesn't. And you become disillusioned. What do you do with your doubts? Notice what John did. He carried his doubts to Jesus. He didn't allow his doubts to deter him from the path of faithfulness. How many people I have seen over the years as a pastor who turned away from God when He didn't do what they wanted Him to do. They gave up on God. Not John. He says, 'Would you guys go to Jesus and ask Him something? There's something really bothering me. There's

something really confusing me and I need you to talk to Jesus for me.' The best place to take your doubts is to Jesus Christ. Take them to the Lord. Jesus is the One Who can heal us and help us and encourage us.

Notice how Jesus responded. He didn't get angry and say, 'What? That flake! What do you mean he wants to know if I'm the One that should come? I should have never picked that guy to begin with. You go back and tell John he's fired'. Can you imagine? You know Jesus better than that. Jesus is patient. Jesus is gentle. Jesus is kind. And you can come to Him with any doubts, any of your confusion, any of your perplexity, and you can pour out your heart to Him and say, 'Lord, I believe. But help thou mine unbelief.' Jesus was so gentle and kind. He said, 'Just go back and tell John the things you've seen and heard. The blind receive sight. The lame are walking. The lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. The poor have the Gospel preached to them.' Why did He say that? Because that's what Scripture said the Messiah would do. In other words, Jesus said, 'John, go back to the Word. Read your Bible and you'll see I'm doing just what I'm supposed to do.'

There are two things we are to do with our doubts: Take them to Jesus in prayer, and go to the Word of God. We are to say, 'Lord, have I misunderstood something in Your Word? Help me with my doubts. Help me with my confusion. And as I read this passage over again by Your Holy Spirit give me illumination and understanding. Your Word says if any lack wisdom, let him ask of God and He will give it to you. So, Lord, I'm asking. Why am I in this situation? What does Your Word say?'

Now, notice how Jesus closes . . .

And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

Matthew 11:6

Although I've preached on this passage for years, this week it really jumped off the page. You see, I just finished preaching on the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 in Australia and New Zealand, and I found this '9th Beatitude' here in Matthew 11: 'Blessed', or, 'Oh, how happy', or, 'Oh, to be envied is the person who is not offended, who does not stumble in Me.' In other words, Jesus is subtly saying to John, 'Trust Me. If you live on the miraculous you're going to be disillusioned sooner or later. If your faith is built on some outward demonstration or display, expecting God to do something that He must do for you to believe, then that's a tenuous faith. God doesn't always do what we want Him to do. But oh, how blessed, oh how blessed are those who are not stumbled by Me and My ways, though they're mysterious, though they may not be understood, though they're seen through a glass dimly. Oh, how happy are those who trust in Me.'

Job would have loved to have had a miracle. He could have said, 'Lord, would you heal my kids, raise them from the dead, bring them back? Would You restore my wealth? Would You touch my body? I got these boils all over me, and I'm just really sick. Lord, would You touch me and heal me?' But instead he said, 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.' Isn't that great?

'Oh, how blessed are those who do not stumble in Me.' Do you find yourself about ready to stumble because you don't understand what God is doing, because you prayed, and He didn't do what you asked Him to do? Jesus said, 'Blessed are they that put their trust in Me.'

The old chorus is still true:

*Trust and obey,
For there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus
Than to trust and obey.*