

I Admit It: I have Doubts

Series: It's Somewhere: Looking For Answers

Luke 7:18-23

May 7, 2017

Welcome again to worship today.

Once there was a man who was hiking in the woods one day when he fell off a cliff, but he managed to grab a tree limb on the way down. Being all alone and seeing no other solution, he looked up and cried out, "Is anyone up there?"

Suddenly, he heard a deep and booming voice from above, "I am here. I am the Lord. Do you believe me?"

The man replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe. I really believe, but I can't hang on much longer."

"That's all right, if you really believe you have nothing to worry about. I will save you. Just let go of the branch."

The man paused for a moment, then asked, "Is anyone else up there?"

Have you ever felt like that? Holding on to a branch with your feet dangling over the precipice? Sure, all of us have. We have faced difficult times, and when we've had a moment to take a breath, we wondered not only "why", but also "why not" – "why not, God?" And yes, we can admit it, we have had doubts.

In our series "It's Somewhere: Looking For Answers", we have been searching for answers to "Why Do Bad Things Happen" and "What about Our Future?" And we have been looking through the boxes of our lives to find answers.

WALMART BOXES

Doubt is an experience common to all people. Even those with faith in God struggle with doubt on occasion and say with the man in Mark 9, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"¹ Some people are hindered greatly by doubt; some see it as a springboard to life; and others see it as an obstacle to be overcome.

A working definition of doubt is "to lack confidence, to consider unlikely." The very first expression of doubt in the Bible is in Genesis 3, when Satan tempted Eve. God had given a clear command regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and had specified the consequence of disobedience. Satan introduced doubt into Eve's mind when he asked, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" He wanted her to lack confidence in God's command. When she affirmed God's command, including the consequences, Satan replied with a denial, which is a stronger statement of doubt: "You will not surely die." Doubt is a tool of Satan to make us lack confidence in God's Word and consider His judgment unlikely.

Classical humanism says that doubt, while uncomfortable, is absolutely essential for life. René Descartes said, "If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things." This is similar to what the founder of Buddhism said: "Doubt everything. Find your own light." If we take their advice, we would have to doubt what they said, which seems rather contradictory. Instead of taking the advice of skeptics and false teachers, we're going to see what the Bible has to say, for it definitely has something to say about the cause of doubt and provides examples of people who struggled with it.

¹ See Mark 9:24

I want to ask you to turn to page 5 in your bulletin as we consider Luke 7:18-23. Let me give you some background. After an incredibly successful preaching tour down by the riverside, John the Baptist was arrested by Herod Antipas, the ruler in Galilee. And why was John arrested and thrown in jail? For speaking the truth. Unfortunately, it was a truth that was unwelcome by Herod. You see, Herod had a half-brother by the name of Philip, who, like Herod, was a ruler of a territory. Philip's wife, Herodias, left Philip to live with Herod. John the Baptist condemned the two for living immorally.² So Herod nabbed John and tossed him into prison to rot.

Meanwhile, John's cousin Jesus was now the popular traveling preacher, and this is where we pick up the story from Luke 7. Follow along in your bulletin as I read:
READ LUKE 7:18-23

Did you notice it? What was the reason for this exchange? John the Baptist doubted. That's right – John doubt. Now, isn't this the wild guy who wore odd clothes and ate strange food and preached an unusual message to the people who went out to the wastelands to see him? Isn't this the guy that called out the hypocritical religious leaders, calling them snakes? Isn't this the wild-looking man who had no power or position in the Jewish political system, yet spoke with almost irresistible authority? The people were moved by his words because he spoke the truth, challenging them to turn from their sins, and baptizing them as a symbol of their repentance. They responded by the hundreds. All of us might say, "I wish I had the power and courage of John the Baptist."

But in our passage today, we find something totally unexpected: he doubts. As he wallows in prison, he questions if it was all worth it, and he wonders if the Guy he had baptized in the River Jordan and who started to take over his ministry was really the One he had based his life and future on.

As I look at this passage, I see 4 reasons why you and I have doubt:

First, I'm not hearing the Good News.

Look at verse 22.

READ LUKE 7:22

The proofs listed here for Jesus being the Messiah are significant. They consist of observable deeds, not theories – actions that Jesus' contemporaries saw. The prophets had said that the Messiah would do these very acts.

Isaiah prophesied in chapter 35, verses 5-6:

*And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf... and those who cannot speak will sing for joy...*³

And in chapter 61, one that Jesus read to the people in His home synagogue at the beginning of His ministry:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, for the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed.*⁴

My friends, we can easily find ourselves doubting because we are not hearing the Good News, when we cut ourselves off from faithful Bible teaching or stop getting into the Word each and every day.

² See Mark 6:17,18

³ Isaiah 35:5-6 (NLT)

⁴ Isaiah 61:1 (NLT)

9-11 FOR ME

Paul wrote in Romans:

*So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.*⁵

COMMENT

Jesus told John's disciples:

*Go back to John and tell him what you have seen and heard—the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor.*⁶

Hearing these physical proofs would help John – and will help all of us – to recognize who Jesus is and put away doubt.

The second reason I have doubt is that I don't believe the things I hear.

Look closely at verse 18.

READ LUKE 7:18.

We find that John had heard about Jesus' ministry, but he seemed confused by those reports. Maybe they were unexpected or incomplete. So John sent a couple of his disciples to find out the truth because he didn't believe what he was hearing.

That is not something unique when it came to Jesus. On Easter Sunday, we learn from Mark 16:

*Still later He appeared to the eleven disciples as they were eating together. He rebuked them for their stubborn unbelief because they refused to believe those who had seen Him after he had been raised from the dead.*⁷

We're talking about the disciples here, who had been told by Jesus himself that He would rise from the dead. And now they hear from their own friends and fellow disciples that Jesus has raised, and they don't believe them.

You know, you can sit here every Sunday and hear the Word of God preached. You can go to Sunday School, study and discuss what the Bible has to say for life. You can do these and many others, but if you don't believe what you hear, if you say, "The Bible is just a storybook for children, and not a guidebook, an owner's manual for my life written by the One who created me," then you will have doubts.

Folks, I have been studying this Bible for over 45 years now, and I believe it to be the inerrant and authoritative Word of God. This book leads me and guides my daily life. This book gives me the hope for today and for an eternity of tomorrows.

But if we do not believe the things we hear from the Bible, then our lives will be full of doubt because we will never find any real answers to life outside these pages.

The third reason I have doubt is I'm not seeing the change.

Look at verses 20-21.

READ LUKE 7:20-21.

Many things were happening in Jesus' ministry. Within 40 days or so of the last time John and Jesus met, Jesus was teaching to the multitudes and healing many people.

The problem for John was that he was not seeing these things; he was stuck in prison. He could not see the lives that were being changed; instead, he only saw prison walls. He could not hear the voices of the people bursting forth with joy; instead, he only

⁵ Romans 10:17, NLT

⁶ Luke 7:22 (NLT)

⁷ Mark 16:14, NLT

heard his chains and the echo of other prisoners in anguish. He could not feel the movement of God in the hearts and minds of those people who were freed from all matter of disease and ailment; instead, he only felt the cold and the loneliness of one still held captive. All for voicing the truth.

My friends, we are in very troubling times. People wonder, even theologians, if the church will be here in 30 years or so. Mainline denominations are declining. Our own United Methodist Church may split. Christians as persons and their values are being not only questioned and disregarded, but even criticized and considered ridiculous. The Apostle Peter predicted this:

*Most importantly, I want to remind you that in the last days scoffers will come, mocking the truth and following their own desires. They will say, "What happened to the promise that Jesus is coming again?"*⁸

Even we can begin to have doubts when we are not seeing the change. We can have doubts when we are not seeing the Good News of God working in peoples' lives.

ADAM AT THE MATTRESS STORE AND THE CONVERSION OF HIS FAMILY

That's why I love to be part of the Walk to Emmaus or the Christian Ashram, because when I can see God working in other peoples' lives, I will believe that God is working in my life as well.

When we see lives changed, when we hear of prayers answered, when we encounter the Good News in our own lives, we are less likely to doubt because we know Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Finally, I have doubt because I'm in a dungeon.

Where was John in this story? In prison. He's stuck there.

One commentator suggested that John's doubts about the identity of Christ were inspired by the fact that he was in prison and that Christ had done nothing to get him out. John had been the forerunner for Christ and had baptized Christ, yet John languished in prison while Jesus went around doing wonderful works. This may not have seemed right to John who, in his discouragement through his imprisonment, began to doubt the identity of Christ.⁹

We see this often in the Psalms, for example, Psalm 69:3:

*My eyes are swollen with weeping, waiting for my God to help me.*¹⁰

Often when we find ourselves in some kind of prison – physical, medical, emotional, relational – we can begin to have doubts.

Remember the story of John's parents Zechariah and Elizabeth? Even though they were upright people, they were childless, and anyone who has struggled with infertility knows how difficult it can be. So when Zechariah was visited by the angel of the Lord and told that he would have a son, he doubted the word given to him.¹¹ He logically assumed that he and his wife were too old to have children. In response to his doubt, the angel said Zechariah would be mute until the day God's promise was fulfilled.

Zechariah doubted God's ability to overcome natural obstacles – many people today share the same doubt. Any time we allow human reason to overshadow faith in God, doubt is the result. No matter how logical our reasons may seem, God has made

⁸ 2 Peter 3:3-4a, NLT

⁹ Analytical Bible Expositor - Analytical Bible Expositor – Luke.

¹⁰ Psalm 69:3, NLT

¹¹ See Luke 1:11-17

foolish the wisdom of the world, and His seemingly foolish plans are far wiser than ours.¹² Faith is trusting God even when His plan goes against human reason or experience.

Folks, doubt is not a sin, but it is a disappointment for the God who says, “Trust me. Do not be afraid.”

The remedy for doubt is faith, and faith comes by hearing the Word of God. God gave us the Bible as a testimony of His works in the past, so we can have a reason to trust Him in the present.

The Psalmist writes:

*I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.*¹³

In order for us to have faith in God, we must study to know what He has said. Once we have an understanding of what God has done in the past, what He has promised us for the present, and what we can expect from Him in the future, we are able to act in faith instead of doubt.

John’s doubts were natural, and Jesus didn’t rebuke him for them. Instead, He responded in a way that John would understand: Jesus explained that He had accomplished what the Messiah was supposed to accomplish. God can handle our doubts, and He welcomes our questions.

Do you have questions about Jesus – about who He is or what He expects of you? Admit them to yourself and to God, and begin looking for answers. Only as you face your doubts honestly can you begin to resolve them.¹⁴

¹² See 1 Corinthians 1:20

¹³ Psalm 77:11 (NIV)

¹⁴ Life Application Study Bible, Luke 7:18-23