

**Ultimate Questions. "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"  
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**1. Introduction:**

Have you ever been tempted to doubt God? If I asked for a show of hands, I suspect that many of us, if we are honest with ourselves, would raise our hands. I am not talking about a passing thought, where perhaps you failed an organic chemistry test that you had prayed about, and you doubted God's knowledge of organic chemistry, or perhaps you did not get that raise you wanted at work and you doubted God's knowledge of economics. No, I am talking deep, painful, searching doubts about God's love for you and even about His very existence. It is not hard to imagine scenarios where that could happen. Perhaps your boss comes to you and tells you that you will be fired from your job, and the prospects of another job are slim to none. Or perhaps your spouse tells you that he or she does not love you any more, and wants a divorce. Or perhaps the doctor tells you that you have a deadly variety of cancer, and you have only a few months to live. Or perhaps someone close to you; a close friend, a spouse, a parent, a child, dies suddenly and unexpectedly in a tragic accident. In such circumstances, and in many others, it is easy to see how the pain and loss of such a situation could cause us to doubt God's love for us, to doubt our salvation, or even to doubt God's very existence.

We are like Christian and Hopeful in Bunyan's classic Pilgrim's Progress, imprisoned by Giant Despair in Doubting Castle

I suspect that many of us are struggling with doubt, and if we are not now we may do so in the future. But I have some news for all of us; we are in good company! Many of the great saints of the Bible also struggled with doubt. The classic example is of course Job, who asked the question "Why?" in anguished tones after Satan had stripped him of his children, his wealth, and his health. But many other OT saints also struggled:

- Abraham: his faith wavered when he went into Egypt
- Jacob: wrestled with God
- Moses: argued with God and wanted to give up his job
- Jeremiah: complained that God had let him down
- Peter denied that he knew Jesus
- Thomas who would not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead

One of the most profound moments of doubt in the Bible, however, appears "off camera", and it comes as a question to Jesus: Matt 11:3 "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" The question comes from John the Baptist, who at that time was imprisoned in Herod's fortress at Machaerus. Let's read about it in God's word:

Matt 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed

in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then 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.'  
I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Let us get some background before we look at this passage. John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin, and just a few months older than Jesus himself. He had been born in a miraculous answer to prayer, and he had been set apart by God from his birth to be the forerunner of Jesus, the Messiah. He had begun his ministry in the desert of Judea, and it had been wildly successful.

Matt 3:1-6

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the desert,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.'"

..... People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

So John was leading a spiritual revival; people were coming to him and repenting of their sins and being baptized, and some even wondered if he was the coming Messiah. To get an idea of his influence, when Paul traveled to Ephesus about 20 years later, long after John was dead, he found a group of a dozen men there who were still following John's teaching, so he had an influence well beyond Judea itself. But John knew that he was simply the one who was called to prepare the way for Jesus, and so when he says:

Matt 3:11-12

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

But after Jesus begins his ministry John fades into the background, and soon he is arrested and imprisoned by King Herod

Luke 3:19-20

But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that John was imprisoned at Herod's fortress castle at Machaerus. Machaerus was an isolated place, on the East of the Dead Sea.

The place was thought to be impregnable, and even if John had been able to escape from his prison cell there is no way that he could have escaped from the fortress or avoid being captured in the desert around it. So for John this must have seemed, as indeed it was, the end of the road for him.

And so we come to John's question of Jesus: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" After having proclaimed that Jesus was the one who was coming to fulfill God's ancient promise to Israel, after telling the people

"But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." (Matt 3:11-12)

and then saying to Jesus "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matt 3:14) after these prophetic words of faith and truth, John then begins to have doubts. Was Jesus really the Christ, the coming Messiah?

Let us look at several aspects of this question, and the doubt that lay behind it:

### **1. The Person Struggling with Doubt.**

As we have discussed together, the person struggling with doubt was John the Baptist. This is very significant, because John was a really special person, with a special place in God's plan.

- He was born in a miraculous way (and you can be sure his parents told him all about that as he was growing up)
- He was an evangelist who had seen great blessing on his ministry, with crowds turning out to hear him and to be baptized by him.
- He still had disciples 20 and more years after his death.
- He was a fearless truth teller; he told King Herod where to get off.
- Jesus paid him the greatest compliment of all "What did you go out into the desert to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ...I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." Matt 11:7-11 (part)

And why is this significant? For this very simple reason; if this great man of faith; this man who had told the king that he was living in sin; this man who was more than just a prophet; if this man could struggle with doubt, then it is hardly surprising that you and I might be called on to struggle with doubt at some point in our lives. *And honest doubt is not sin.* When John sends his disciple to Jesus with their question, Jesus does not blame John for his doubts; instead he invites them to see for themselves.

So my dear friends and fellow believers, do not allow the devil to make you believe His lie that if you have doubts then you cannot be a Christian believer. The Swiss Christian physician Paul Tournier wrote:

"We all know of Christians who say that they have never doubted. Their lives seem so pale, so far off from the heroic adventure that is faith. The most fruitful believers tell us shamedly of the inner battles that have torn them between doubt and faith. And the great Bible characters from Abraham or Moses right through Jacob, Jeremiah, Peter, and Paul all show us their conflict-filled lives, their revolts against heaven, their refusals to adapt to a God who was too demanding of them. They show us as well their reconciliation to that God. God loves those who don't give in without a fight!" Paul Tournier (1898-1986)

### **2. The Cause of John's Doubt.**

There are at least three reasons why John had doubts about Jesus. The first was very simply his

***a. Discouraging Circumstances.***

Very simply, John was in prison, and not just any prison, but in Herod's fortress prison of Macaerus. Humanly speaking, his ministry had ended in disaster. Here he was, far from the limelight that had been his, far from the crowds who hung on his every word, locked away in a lonely prison cell. William Barclay may have captured some of the significance when he wrote, "John was the child of the desert. All his life, he had lived in the wide open spaces, with the clean wind on his face and the spacious vault of the sky for his roof. Now, he was confined within the four narrow walls of an underground dungeon. For a man like John, who had probably never lived in a house, this must have been an agony.

"In Carlisle Castle there is a little cell. Once long ago, they put a border chieftain in that cell and left him there for years. In that cell there is one little window, which is placed too high for a man to look out of when he is standing on the floor. On the ledge of the window there are two depressions worn away in the stone. They are the marks of the hands of that border chieftain, the places where, day after day, he lifted himself up by his hands to look out on the green dales across which he would never ride again. John must have been just like that, and there is nothing to wonder at and still less to criticize in the fact that questions began to form themselves in John's mind."

So discouraging circumstances can be the cause of doubt for any of us. We lose a loved one to death, and ask "does God still love me?", or our job disappears and we doubt God's ability to care for us. And the danger is, that once we start doubting God's power and His love, Satan can get behind our doubts and give them an extra shove.

***b. False Expectations.***

John had a second reason to doubt, and this was connected with his ministry. He had proclaimed Jesus as the coming Messiah in some pretty dramatic words:

Matt 3:11-12

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

John, prophet that he was, did not have a full understanding of Jesus' ministry and purpose. He probably expected Jesus to begin His reign on earth by getting rid of the Romans, and he was waiting for word that Jesus had begun to do this. He was also perhaps wondering why Jesus had not come to the prison and blasted the prison doors and set him free. John did not understand that Jesus had to die on the cross and rise from the dead to establish his kingdom on earth, and that the "gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" would not happen until He returns to earth to deal once and for all with sin and the devil.

Are you struggling with disappointment with God? Life just has not turned out the way you hoped it would? Doubt comes from our inability to deal with negative circumstances; trials. "If You're the God of all comfort, and the Christ that cares, why am I going through this? It doesn't square; I've been faithful." And yet God never promised us a rose garden; rather the contrary:

Luke 9:23-26

Then (Jesus) said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”

“Clouds of doubt are created when the warm, moist air of our expectations meets the cold air of God's silence. The problem is not as much in God's silence as it is in your ability to hear.”

Max L. Lucado (1955- )

***c. A lack of reliable evidence.***

John was in prison, so news was hard to come by. He was apparently allowed visits by his disciples, but their reports were second hand; they heard about Jesus’ activities and they probably were part of the crowds that followed Jesus, but they were not part of the inner circle of disciples who witnessed some of the most spectacular miracles, such as Jesus stilling the storm on the Sea of Galilee, or Jesus casting out legions of demons from the man in Gadara. So John had some tantalizing pieces of information, but not the whole story.

Are you doubting because you just don’t think you have enough evidence to believe? I am speaking now to those of you who have not put your faith in Jesus as your Saviour. You are sitting on the fence, coming to church because you think this is a good thing to do, and you are saying “I am not going to believe because I have not been convinced that the gospel is true.” You are a bit like the English atheist Bertrand Russell, who was asked 'Lord Russell, what will you say when you die and are brought face to face with your Maker?' He replied without hesitation: 'I shall say, 'God, why did you make the evidence for your existence so insufficient?' But God has made his existence known to us in many ways, and supremely in the person of his son Jesus, who died for our sins and was raised for our justification.

**3. The Nature of John’s Doubt.**

This is easy to state; he was doubting the truth of the message he had preached, that Jesus was in fact the “the one who was to come”. The phrase the coming one is one that goes back to the Old Testament, and was associated with the Messiah.

Ps 40:7-8

Then I said, "Here I am, I have come--  
it is written about me in the scroll.  
I desire to do your will, O my God;  
your law is within my heart."

Ps 118:26

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.  
From the house of the LORD we bless you.

So John had proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah, he Coming One, but he did not see any evidence that this was true. Jesus had not swept into power as the King of Israel; he had not raised an army against the Romans; he had not winnowed out the unrighteous. So was he indeed the Messiah? Could John have been mistaken in his testimony about Jesus?

**4. John’s Response to the Doubt.**

So how did John respond to his doubts? He did not just sit and mope about it; he did the right thing; he went to the ultimate source, to Jesus himself. And this is the model for us too; if we are mired in doubts of God’s love for us, or of God’s power on our behalf, then we need to do what John did, which

is go to the source. And I find it encouraging that John could not go in person; he was after all in prison. So he sends two of his disciples to Jesus, as Luke tells us, and he receives a secondhand report from these two people. And I like this, because we cannot go to meet Jesus in person either, but we can receive secondhand reports. Unlike John, however, we have the secondhand reports of at least six people who knew Jesus personally; Matthew, Peter (the source of Mark’s gospel), and John, as well as the careful research of Dr. Luke and the writings of Paul, who met Jesus on the Damascus road, and Jesus’ brother James.

So our response to doubt must be the same as John’s response; go to the source, to Jesus himself, and ask him to help you sort out your questions.

## 5. Jesus’ Answer to John’s Doubt.

### *a. He does not blame John for his doubts*

The first thing to notice about Jesus’ response is that he does not blame John for doubting him. He does not say “O what poor faith John has” or words to that effect. No: Jesus recognizes the difference between honest doubt and disbelief. Henry Drummond, an English pastor highly regarded by D. L. Moody among others, wrote

“Christ never failed to distinguish between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is can't believe; unbelief is won't believe. Doubt is honesty; unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light; unbelief is content with darkness.” Henry Drummond (1851-1897)

### *b. He graciously provides John with the evidence he needs.*

In Luke’s version of the story there is an interesting addition.

Luke 7:18-21

John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

*At that very time* Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind

It is as if Jesus said to the messengers “so John wants proof that I am the Messiah? Then just come along and watch” and he went on to give a massive display of his miraculous powers. “There” he might have said “these are for John. Go back and tell him what you have seen and heard.” And Jesus did several miracles that John would recognize as being prophesied for the Messiah in Isaiah 35 and 61:

Isa 35:5-6	Matthew Go back and report to John what you hear and see:
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.	The blind receive sight, the deaf hear,
Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.	the lame walk,
	those who have leprosy are cured, the dead are raised,
Isa 61:1	
the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.	the good news is preached to the poor.

So the answer to our doubts is to look at Jesus, to read about him in the Bible, and to realize that He is Lord and He is God. Thomas doubted the resurrection of Jesus, but when he finally met the risen Christ he could only say "My Lord and my God". We do not have the same opportunity to meet Jesus in the flesh, but we are promised a greater blessing as a result:

John 20:29

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

And John Stott reminds us that our faint rests securely on what Jesus has done for us:

The first and foremost ground of our assurance, because it is the sole ground of our salvation, is the 'finished work of Christ'. Whenever our conscience accuses us, and we feel burdened with guilt, we need to look away from ourselves to Christ crucified. Then again we will have peace. For our acceptance with God depends not on ourselves and what we could ever do, but entirely on Christ and what he has done for all on the cross. John Stott, "Christian Basics" Baker, 1991

John MacArthur has this to say:

Mark this, the words of our Lord answer the problems of doubt. If you doubt because of difficult circumstances, look at His works; they prove He cares for a people in difficulty. If you doubt because of worldly influence, look at His works; He is in control, and will show it fully one day. If you doubt because of incomplete revelation, then look at His works, study them, read them, and see who He is. If you doubt because of unfulfilled expectation, look again, for these are the previews of what He will do in the Kingdom. If He could do them then, He proves Himself to be the one who can do them in the Kingdom.

## **Conclusion**

1. If you are struggling with doubt, take heart! You are not alone; many great saints have struggled, including John the Baptist. And doubt is not sin.
2. If you are struggling with doubt, bring your struggles to Jesus. Read his word; meditate on his promises, and remember that you have the precious promise that he cares for you and will never let you go. Whatever happens, he loves you and will welcome you into his kingdom at the end of the day.
3. If you are not currently struggling with doubt, recognize that you may be tempted in the future. That is why it is important for all of us to walk in the light and to stay in touch with God through his word and through the means of grace that we are given, such as fellowship with his people, remembrance of our Lord's death in the fellowship of the Lord's Supper, and so on.
4. Never doubt in the darkness what God has shown you in the light.

Dr. V. Raymond Edman, former Chancellor of Wheaton College, said "Never doubt in the darkness what God has shown you in the light," Those currently walking "in full light" should stay constantly in touch with God and learn to know Him well, lest when the darkness strikes we are caught unarmed and unprepared. Katharine Swarts wrote a poem a few years ago to encourage us not to doubt:

When the world grows dark around you,  
When your faith is besieged from each side,  
When your life drowns in trouble and sorrow  
And there's no place on earth you can hide,  
You may weep till your eyes are empty,  
You may feel true despair for the right:

But you must not doubt in the darkness  
What God told you when it was light.

When your soul grows dark inside you,  
When the sunshine seems blacker than death,  
When your joy flees without any reason  
And you see no point taking a breath,  
You may not feel God beside you,  
You may mourn for the days that were bright:  
But you must not doubt in the darkness  
What God told you when it was light.

For we all have times of trouble,  
We all have our dark nights of the soul,  
The saintliest life knows keen sorrow,  
And the joys of earth never are whole.  
But stand firm till your days are ended,  
Till your soul to the heavens takes flight,  
To a place ever free from darkness,  
To the place of eternal Light!

Katherine Swarts, 2007