

LIVES THAT REMIND US ABOUT GOD - Meeting Yourself In The Sacred Text Part fifteen - Sunday, May 19th, 2024
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JOHN THE BAPTIST - DOUBTS ARE NATURAL, FAITH IS LEARNED

Matthew 11:1-6 - "When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.[2] Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples [3] and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" [4] And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: [5] the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. [6] And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

- 1) **SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION - *Why* John is in prison isn't explained until 14:3-5 - "For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, [4] because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." [5] And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet."**

John's problems come from his faithfulness to righteousness. He found it is never popular to expose the sins of the king. Before this time John had been very faithful and fearless in his proclamations about Jesus. He had already ***announced Jesus as the Coming Messiah*** (Matt. 3:11, John 1:26-27), ***proclaimed Him as the Lamb of God*** (John 1:29), ***baptised Him in the Jordan River*** (Matt. 3:13-17), and humbly proclaimed ***"He must increase, but I must decrease"*** (John 3:28-30).

So we learn that even resolute and passionate expressions of confidence in Jesus aren't automatically bullet-proof. They are not automatically self-sustaining. The life lesson is we are **all** - even the strongest of us - in deeper need of constant feeding and reinforcement than we're probably aware. You must feed faith while it is still **strong** -while you don't think it **requires** maintenance. If you wait until it's in decline, you won't have the desire to nourish it at all.

John commitment to Christ shines brightly. He seems to do everything right. And now he's in a mess and full of questions. All of this teaches me it can be a dangerous thing to assess whether or not one is in the will of God by pleasantness of circumstances.

Pleasantness of life is no indicator of standing in the will of God.

John is in prison precisely because he has been so faithful in doing exactly what God wanted him to do. In fact Jesus' assessment of John sparkles:

Matthew 11:11 - "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." John still had to look **forward** to the Lamb of God's sacrifice for mankind's sin. We can rest in it. Still, John shines a great in his prophetic role.

Equally important, Jesus didn't think **less** of John because of John's doubts and questions.

- 2) **WHAT CAUSED JOHN'S DOUBTS?** - Look at him earlier - **Matthew 3:11-12** - "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. [12] His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

This is how we usually picture John. What a blisteringly counter-cultural, uncompromising voice! It would be difficult to imagine a bolder, more confident prophet. What happened inside the spirit of John? Knowing this can help us when trials change the inward spiritual temperature of our souls:

- a) ***First, there was the difficulty of his circumstances.*** Prison is hard for anybody. It's especially so for a man like John. Look at **Luke 1:80** - "And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel."

If ever there was a wild, free spirit, it was John. He was the world's first survivor man. He was a man who had lived outdoors virtually all his adult life. The confines of a dark cell would have been unbearable.

- b) ***Second, perhaps John had an incomplete picture of what Jesus had come to do.*** Or, at the very least he had a misunderstanding of the ***timing*** of God's complete plan. It's important to notice the passages from ***Isaiah*** which Jesus quoted when sending His message to John - **Isaiah 29:18, 35:4-6, 61:1-2** - ***“In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see....35:4-6....Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.’[5] Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; [6] then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;61:1-2....The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; [2] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn....”***

I quoted these verses in full because they illuminate a clue about a frequent source of discouragement when it comes to trying to trace the will of God in our circumstances. In addition to the works of ***blessing*** Jesus would do, all of the passages also point to the ***reign of justice and judgement*** the Messiah would usher in.

Bear in mind, John had **seen** the works of grace and healing and miracles. But he had also read the prophets carefully. He had **preached** that Jesus would come with both **judgment** as well as **blessing** - **Matthew. 3:11-12** - "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. [12] His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

So far John had seen a great deal of **blessing**, but very little **deliverance** and **judgment**. Jesus had not turned the tables on the sinners as John had probably expected. Jesus hadn't even freed John from the oppressors' prison. And all the while, the ruler living with his brother's wife is partying upstairs.

This is nothing new. Look around you. Evil wins. Sin wins. God is mocked. Christians need to have an answer to all of this.

It is **one** thing to know the promised work of the Lord. It is another to base your faith on God working according to your **agenda**. This has relevance for us today. Peter points out that right up until the last days, people will still mock the Coming of Jesus because it hasn't happened according to their sense of proper timing. Life goes on pretty much the way it always has - **2 Peter 3:4** - **"They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."**

Study Peter's text carefully. People haven't changed. They still say, "Look at all the wickedness and injustice in the world. How can you tell me there is a God who is loving and just?" This is the very same problem John was wrestling with.

- 3) **THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF JESUS** - It's interesting to note that Jesus ***does not specifically answer all of John's questions***. God rarely does. He knows if He did faith would no longer be necessary or even possible. There are, however, two important things to notice:
 - a) ***Jesus continues to think highly of John*** - **Matthew 11:11** - **"Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."**

There is not a word of judgement or condemnation. John's doubts do not in any way detract from his true greatness in the eyes of Jesus. ***Doubts handled honestly and properly never do.*** Jesus could see that, in John, the doubts had ***a source other than his heart,*** which wanted desperately to keep trusting in Jesus.

See also **James 1:2-4** - **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [4] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”**

- b) ***Jesus pronounces the forgotten Beatitude*** - It's found in **verse 6**- **“And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”** Offended doesn't mean ***denying***. It doesn't even mean ***rejecting***. Think more of being miffed or slighted. Think of assigning blame. Or losing confidence.

Jesus is saying ***there is more than starting well*** in the life of faith. Everyone will bump into times when friends and circumstances will make continued trust in Jesus frustrating. This is a very important point. ***Faith is not automatically self-sustaining.*** It must be ***exercised regularly.*** Above all, the Christian must take great care to ***feed his mind and spirit,*** especially during times of trial, doubt, and confusion.