

“When Doubts Arise”

Matthew 11:1-19

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Well as your little children are heading off to my left to go to their children's worship, I invite you to take your Bibles. Turn with me this morning to Matthew 11. If you want to use one of the Pew Bibles there in front of you, you'll find the text on page 816. And by the way, if you're a visitor with us this morning and maybe you've come and you don't even have a Bible of your own, we'd like to encourage you to take a copy of that Pew Bible with you and accept that as our gift to you as you've joined us here this morning.

You know, over the past few months, we've been considering incredible encounters with Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew. And throughout our study, it has become fairly obvious that whenever someone encounters Jesus and comes to him by faith, everything is going to change. Jesus has been meeting the physical, material and the spiritual needs of those lives that he deliberately intersects. And nothing from that moment on, as it appears, will ever be the same, or will it? You see, even as Christians who have followed the Lord, maybe for multiple decades, even as those who have experienced tremendous moments alone with God and seeing a demonstration of deep faith in the most challenging of circumstances, even we still face times when what's going around on around us just doesn't seem to make sense. Something happens which rocks our faith so intently, so that the profound biblical truths that we once clung to, like we know God is in control, or the promises like I will never leave, you know, forsake you. They just sound hollow in the face of that moment. What are we supposed to do and where are we supposed to turn when what we understand about who God is and what he is doing doesn't match the circumstances we're facing in our lives?

Well, this morning in Matthew 11, we see none other than John the Baptist confronted with one of those situations. Please follow along as I read aloud. Matthew 11, beginning in verse one.

When Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples, he went on from there to teach and to preach in their cities. And when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and he said to him, Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another? And Jesus answered them, Go and tell John what you hear and what you see. 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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me. As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. What did you go out into the wilderness to see a reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing. Behold those who wears off clothing are in Kings houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you. And more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written. Behold, I send by a messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you 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. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force for all the prophets in the law prophesied until John. And if you're willing to accept it, he is Elijah, who is to come. He who has ears to hear. Let him here. To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates. We played the flute for you and you did not dance. We sang a dirge and you did not mourn for John came, neither eating or drinking. And

they say he has a demon. The son of man came eating and drinking and they say, Look at him. A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.

This is God's holy and inspired Word by His grace and mercy may now be preached for you. Please be seated.

This Matthew 11 opens and our attention is drawn immediately to John the Baptist. In the opening 6 verses, John rages. This reassures John as he struggles with doubt. In verses 7 to 15, Jesus validates John and praises him for his faith. Then finally, in verses 16 to 19, Jesus confronts the crowd exposing their deepest need. So we're going to consider these points one by one so that we might gain important truths for our lives today.

First, let's look at how Jesus reassures John as he is facing doubt. The way Matthew Chapter 11 begins. We know the movement is happening. Jesus has just finished commissioning the 12 giving them both His message and his power and his authority, telling them what to expect even as they went out on their own for the first time, sharing the good news of redemption through Jesus Christ the Son. But while they're going out? Jesus continues his ministry. He's not just taking a break or going on vacation. We're told that Jesus himself continued, and he went out into their cities, into their towns throughout Galilee and Judea, teaching and preaching on his own. So this is the setting that Matthew gives us as the backdrop for what we read again, beginning in verse two.

Listen again to what he says... *When John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another?* I think it's important for us to know a little bit about what's going on through John and in John's life so that we understand fully what this is showing us this morning. See, John as a prophet has been bold. He's been even, you might say, revolutionary in the way that he communicates as a prophet. He's come off as something even as a mad man. Here he is. He's eating locusts and eating wild honey. He's dressed in a camel hair robe and he's preaching in the desert. *Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* And for the most part, by any human measure, we would say he's being successful. People from all over Israel have gone to hear him preach. Many have demonstrated even belief in what they have heard as they took this step and did deeds in keeping with repentance by being baptized by John. This was their way of signifying that we're no longer going to rest on our identity with Abraham and being his descendants as the way that we are right with God. We realize there is something more. We identify with the coming Messiah instead.

But now here's John languishing in prison. Herod imprisoned him because of what he has said to both Herod Antipas and his wife, Herodias. You see, John was unafraid, even with the ruler of the day, to confront sin as sin. So when Herod Antipas took his brother, Philip's wife, Herodias, to become his own wife, John was bold. Repeatedly. He called them out and exposed their sin to them that they might repent and that they might turn away from their sinful ways. Well, Herod was a little too afraid of the populace. He was afraid of what people would think and what people would do. And actually, in some ways, I think he rather enjoyed having John the Baptist in prison because he could then pull John out any time he wanted to have more conversation with him and kind of just do a mental gymnastics number with him as he tried to learn a little bit more without putting John to death.

But Herodias would have nothing of it. Herodias couldn't wait to find a way, so she busied herself to find that way to get the job done. She looked for a way as you said, up the way so that John would lose his life because John's words were hitting too close to home.

Right now, in our Chapter 11, things are looking quite bleak for our brother John. Yet in the meantime, John is worried about what's going on the outside. And he hears a Jesus is having great success. And for that, John's actually grateful. John understood what his role was to be. He understood that he was the forerunner preparing the way for a one much greater to follow him. John understood that he was only to play second fiddle behind the first chair, and he'd been doing this faithfully and he'd been doing it well. But now John learns that there are others, others who are out there preaching and teaching and doing great miracles. There are others out there doing many great deeds in Jesus name. And yet here he still is imprisoned, rotting away in a dungeon. Here he is. He's forgotten and alone. And when his present circumstances failed to match up with what he expected the Messiah to do, discouragement set in and doubts began to arise. Something deep within John began to stir. And John, I'm sure, like many of us here, began to doubt what was going on. He might have said, How in the world could this be? I've done everything I know to do. I've done everything -I've stayed in my lane. I've done it the right way. Why are things so different than what I expected as the Messiah came up on the scene?

I announced him as the Son of God, the one who takes away the sins of the world. He's the one who make everything right. Right. Well, maybe not. So John, not being able because he's in prison to actually ask Jesus for himself since some of his disciples to Jesus with his one main burning question. *Are you the one who is to come? Or should we look for another?* And Jesus, hearing this question from John's disciples immediately sends back a scathing rebuke. John, how could you remember when you baptized me and you saw the spirit descend and rest upon me as a sign to you that I truly am the Messiah? And John, have you forgotten that even in your mother's womb, you were filled with a Holy Spirit? So much to the point that when Mary, my mother, came to visit your mother, Elizabeth, and she let Elizabeth know that she was going to bear the Messiah, John, you jumped in her womb. John. You heard my father speak from heaven. This is my beloved son and whom I'm well pleased. How could you doubt me now? John, I'm so disappointed.

Is this what Jesus does? Hardly. So Jesus always is patient with us in our doubts. Jesus is patient with doubters, and He shows mercy on us, even as we doubt. So far from reprimanding John or heaping guilt upon his doubt, Jesus in verse four, reassures him, Look again at what he does. Jesus answer John's disciples saying, *Go and tell John what you hear and see*, literally translating that would be in the ongoing tense. Go tell John what you are seeing and hearing for yourselves. So while they are with Jesus, they're seeing these miracles take place. Then Jesus continues. Let John know. *the blind receive their sight. The lame walk. Lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and they're dead, are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.* What the Jesus just said, according to Luke, are the very things, the very miracles that Jesus was performing. When John's followers arrived. He was healing many of their diseases, and their plagues. He was delivering them from their evil spirits. He was restoring sight to the blind. So in answer to John's question, Jesus reminds him of the facts he already knows.

Jesus actually just pointed to six different miracles prophesied in six different passages in the Book of Isaiah. These miracles were actually given as indicators of the one who was to come. The one who is the

true Messiah, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the dead and the poor. All of these were signposts of the coming Messiah, and John would have learned these from his youth.

So Jesus answers John simply by saying, John, *remember the truths you already know*. You know who I am. Just don't lose heart. I think that's what Jesus means by his mild rebuke of John given to us in verse six. Jesus says, *Blessed is the one who is not offended by me*. In other words, happy or content in every situation, no matter how different things may be from what you expected. Blessed is the one who is not scandalized. That's the literal word in the Greek language skandalizō --Scandalized or offended the point of losing faith because I'm doing something you didn't first see. Can we just press pause here for a moment and let the rubber meets the road of our lives as we're studying John? I think if we were willing to be vulnerable and if we were willing to admit just how familiar this all sounds, we'd have to say there have been times or maybe there are times right now where we have felt a lot like John. We've done everything right. Well, at least we've done it to the very best of our ability and to our understanding. The life has caught us off guard, and then we find ourselves unable to understand, how do we get into this mess? We've questioned our understanding of God and we long for God to break through. To make it all makes sense - to give us something that helps us regain our equilibrium and get firmly back on our feet. We look for someone to vindicate us. Vindication doesn't seem to come. Jesus reminds us, just as he reminds John with his answer, Look to what I've already done. It's as if Jesus is saying to us, You have enough already. Just keep from falling away from me. Keep believing. Even when I'm working in your life in a way you didn't expect. Trust in me. And we know something, I believe, of what John was going through. Even as his disciples returned with the answer Jesus gave. There have been those times where we've needed that fresh wind in our sails. Just something to lift our spirits to bolster us up, to help us carry through that very moment. We have wanted to hear from God directly. Something fresh and something new. And what does he do? He reminds us of what we already know. You see, God's Word is never changing because God cannot change. So when He drives us back to his word and answers us from his word, he is giving us the very thing we need, even if it's not what we actually want. He's giving us the truth. We need to stand. So we've learned a couple of things, I believe, even as we've looked at John.

But there's something else is going on. Even as Jesus has dealt with John's disciples and they've seen miracles and sin being sent back on the way, we're told as the chapter continues, that there's a crowd that has gathered around and this crowd is actually filled with skeptics, those who might even masquerade as those who have doubts when they're just trying to hide their refusal to embrace the truth that stands before them. So beginning in verse seven, Jesus, now validates John the Baptist and praises him for his faith. We're told Jesus, who always knows what's going on in the hearts of men, even when they're too cowardly to say it out loud. Jesus calls out John's detractors. How? Simply by initiating a conversation with them. In verse seven, he asks, what did you expect to see when you went out into the wilderness to find John? A reed shaken by the wind? To paraphrase one author that I recently read. This imagery would call to mind the cane grass growing along the Jordan River, where John had baptized so many Israelites. Those plants stems are thin and weak. They're also extremely common. Watching reeds blow in the wind would have been akin to asking him in modern English. Did you go out just to watch the grass grow? See, Jesus, let them know you didn't go out because John was just ordinary. You didn't go out just to see something common? No, You went out to see something more. So he asked the second question to drill down a little deeper. The second question he asks, What did you grow out to see? A man dressed in a \$3,000 Armani suit? Not hardly. Behold those who wear soft clothing are found in the king's houses, or perhaps in the context of the day, they might have even thought right there in

Herod's house. You find them in the plush places of life, not out in the desert. Then Jesus asks, yet a third time. What exactly did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you. That is precisely what you went out hoping to see. You see, Israel had not seen the likes of one of those in 400 years. You ever opened your Bible between the old and the New Testament? You see that blank page? That's the 400 years that has just transpired before John arrives on the scene. So here we have John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets. He's out there in the wilderness and he truly is prophesying in such a way that even the most shall we say, thick headed of the Jews couldn't miss the fact that suddenly a prophet is back on the scene. But Jesus says he's even far more than just an ordinary prophet. Of all the Old Testament prophets who ever lived John's one of a kind. Verse ten. *This is he of whom it is written. Behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you.* You see, this was the one. John is the one of whom Malachi had spoken, saying, *Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. Behold he is coming, says the Lord of Hosts.* Isaiah also spoke of John the Baptist. *This way a voice cries in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight a desert in the desert a highway for our God.*

John is no mere prophet. He is the one unique forerunner of the Messiah sent by God to prepare the way and the hearts of men so they might receive Jesus for who He is. If they will only see Him by faith. Now, Jesus, having validated John as a prophet, moves on to vindicate Him in his faith. Listen to Jesus personal assessment of John in verse 11.

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women, there is arisen No One greater than John the Baptist. Jesus has just use a bit of a Hebrew idiomatic statement to let us know. John's just an ordinary common guy born the natural way. And yet among all those who are born in this natural way, born among women, there is no one greater than John the Baptist. No prophet has ever shown brighter. No priest has ever stood out greater. No king, not even David himself was greater than John in Jesus estimation. But then Jesus goes on and he adds this Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. I don't know about you all, but to me that's confusing. If John is the very best, the greatest among all women, and yet the very least in the Kingdom of Heaven, the most overlooked, the most insignificant person you could possibly think of in the New Covenant is now greater than John from the Old Covenant. How does that work? Well, I think this somewhat confusing statement will fall into place when we realize this is not a statement about character. It's not even a statement about calling, nor is it even one about capacity. Rather, this is a statement about perspective. So Jesus is actually making a comparison here between the old and the new. John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets indeed was great, even greater than Moses. Yet the most unskilled of Christians ever used of God to share the truth of the gospel to someone who needs to be saved is greater in the New Covenant than John was in the old.

Why? Because ours is the privilege of having seen the cross from the side of completion. John was in the old and he could only look ahead to the cross. John was in the old, and even as a prophet, he longed to see what the Messiah would do. But while he's in prison, John lost his head literally. And as he lost his head, he never got to see the completion of what Jesus was doing. He didn't get to see the Jesus himself or die, be crucified, put in the tomb, be raised again to life, would have sent to the throne of God, the Father Almighty. John never got to experience what we in the New Covenant, looking back, know by faith. You see, in the New Covenant, we have the totality of Scripture. John had only the Old Testament. So truly, we hear the least of us here ever in any gathering of God's people in the New Covenant. We are greater in our perspective than that of John.

So that's how those who have followed John are actually placed above him, showing us something I think of the exceptional majesty of the Gospel above the law. To borrow from John Calvin as he applied this passage to preachers, Calvin said, **All ministers of the gospel are included. Many of them undoubtedly have received a small portion of faith and therefore are greatly inferior to John. But this does not prevent their preaching from being superior to his because they hold out Christ as having rendered complete and eternal satisfaction by his one sacrifice. They present Jesus as the conqueror of death and the Lord of life.**

So now that we've cleared up that puzzling statement, we can move on to something a little easier to understand.

Right? Well, look, again versus 12 to 15 from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence and the violence taken by force. For all the prophets in the law prophesied until John. And if you're willing to accept it, he is Elijah. Who is to come. Well, what on earth is this supposed to mean?

As knowledgeable as R.C. Sproul have studied these verses, only to conclude that he doesn't believe that any New Testament commentator has actually gotten the understanding of this passage right. So we might be in good company and encouraged by that. Some say that Jesus in verse 12 is just pointing to the persecution which came from the established religious elite of the day, from the leaders who were rubbing shoulders with John could also point to the very persecution that John himself personally faced, in particular as he waited execution in Herod's dungeon. But I think in the context of the moment in which Jesus speaks, it seems more sensible to say that from the moment John began his ministry as the Herald of the Messiah, many rushed violently forward as if they could seize the Kingdom of Heaven and take it by force aroused by one man's voice crying out in the wilderness. What did they do? They swarmed to him in droves, and as though they could somehow compel the Kingdom of Heaven to come on their timetable and on their terms. They tried to seize by force what they didn't understand at all. They wanted to twist the gospel to fit their own agenda, that the Messiah was theirs, and he was there to do their bidding. But when Jesus proved to be someone who wouldn't fit their plan, they turned in violence against him and against many who followed him.

I think this was the moment in which every word of the law and all the prophets of the Old Testament up to and including John, had been pointing out a moment of crisis, a moment which called for a decision of faith, one that would walk by faith, not by sight. Jesus knew that many, if not most, of the Jews, would fail to recognize him as the Messiah. In fact, they were even finding it hard to see John for who he truly was. So Jesus challenges them openly in verse 14, He says, If you're willing to see the truth. Rather insist, rather than insisting on trying to put the truth through your own personal grid. If you're willing to see the truth for what it is, John is Elijah. You see, in the day they were expecting Elijah. Literally, he comes to the mount of Transfiguration, but they're expecting that he will come and he will minister and he will be the one that prepares the way of the Messiah. Well, when Jesus says John is Elijah, Jesus is referring to the one that was predicted to come before the great and terrible day. Malachi tells us, *Behold, I will soon Elijah, the Prophet, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes and He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.* So now, some 400 years after the prophets have fallen silent, John comes as had been predicted before his birth. He comes as the one who would go before the Messiah and the Spirit and the power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the

wisdom of the just to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. He was the Elijah that the Jews should have recognized, but they were looking for him to come in a different way. And Jesus was the Messiah that the Jews should have recognized, but He came in a way that was different from what they expected. So Jesus concludes his confrontation, saying in verse 15, *He who has ears to hear, let him hear* the truth about John being alive and about Jesus being the Messiah can only be received by faith. So now Jesus, knowing the inner condition of the hearts of those in the crowd, He switches gears from John the Baptist to the crowd itself. He's already reassured, John, as he struggled with doubt. He has already validated John and actually vindicated him in his faith. But now Jesus confronts the crowd and exposes their deepest need in verse 16.

Jesus starts with a question, *How can I show you what you're really like?* And then he uses this wonderful illustration, simple illustrations, sometimes of the best. He says, You know, here's what I think you're like. You're a lot like little children who go to the marketplace with mommy and daddy. And while mommy and daddy are doing business in the marketplace, here you are and you say, let's play some games and you play this game of get out your flute and play a happy song so we can all laugh and cut up and have a good time. Then you're upset because no one's smiling and no one's laughing. But then the flip side is when that didn't work, you say, okay, well, we'll play sad songs instead. Let's play the funeral dirge. But you're still upset because no one cries and no one weeps. So again, you're frustrated and mad. But then Jesus gets to the point of this great illustration in verse 18. He lets us understand that when John came to Israel as something of a social nightmare, eating bugs and refusing to drink with them, he was too austere for their liking. Well, at first they thought asceticism was kind of cool. They went out to figure him out. They wanted to see what he was about. But soon his message began to sound old. They didn't like what they're hearing, so they shuffled him off in a corner and dismissed him. They even slandered him, saying he was demon possessed. And Jesus lets them know they're just like spoiled little children who didn't get their way. But then the son of man, came and he was fitting in with the crowd. Jesus came eating rather than fasting like the disciples of the Pharisees. He came drinking wine with those who hosted parties in their homes in his honor so that others might be able to be introduced to him. But the result was just the same. The crowd didn't like the ways that Jesus offended their religious sensibilities. So, they ridiculed Jesus. They called him a glutton and a drunkard. A friend of tax collectors and sinners. Seems this crowd would not be satisfied either way.

After 400 years of silence, Israel finally gets a prophet and the Messiah is on the scene and they reject them because the way they went about things didn't suit their fancy. They maligned both the message and the messengers who came in Jesus' name. Rest assured, though, Jesus continues -- no matter what you do, no matter how selfish and childish you are, wisdom is, and by the way, always will be justified by her deeds.

Jesus simply sums it up with this pithy statement saying, The Ministry of John the Baptist and my ministry is Jesus the Messiah will self-justify by the lives that are changed.

Well, maybe right now would be a good time, as we've concluded, looking through our passage, just to see how does it help us personally today. You know, this issue of doubt is really quite complex, yet it's one that we all face. Actually, we could go as far as to say the doubts actually to be expected in our Christian walk as we follow Jesus today. So, what are some practical principles which might help us as we deal with doubts?

The first principle that I would give you is that doubt and faith coexist. They're not mutually exclusive or even necessarily contradictory when doubts arise rather than letting them throw us into a panic, we should welcome them as an opportunity to grow in our faith.

A second principle would be that questioning and doubting are not the same. See questions help us seek answers to something we don't know, or questions at least help us seek to find clear fixation for something we want to understand. Doubting, however, challenges what we already know to be true. It calls into question what God previously has made clear to us through His Word. And when that happens, doubt can actually lead us astray.

The third principle is doubt is not necessarily the antithesis to faith. In fact, it might be used of God as a catalyst to deepen our faith. See doubts, not inherently sinful. We can prove that we are double minded by our doubting. I get that. And yet Jesus, time after time has shown himself gentle with those who doubt, even as he did with John. Doubt can lead even to apostasy when left unchallenged or unanswered by God's Word. But doubt, which drives us to God's Word and to God's people so that we might hear them speak God's Word into our lives can be used by God to deepen our faith.

Last principle this morning is by taking our doubts to Jesus and listening to His Word in response. We do get to bolster our faith, but that does not necessarily mean that our circumstances will change.

Doubts will cause John the Baptist to go to Jesus. He was languishing in prison and he got word back from Jesus straight from God's Word. He applied it to his life. His faith was indeed bolstered, but still he was there in the dungeon and soon he would lose his life.

Maybe for us today, it's a recent diagnosis of cancer. This left some of us wondering, is God really good? Perhaps it's the tragic loss of a loved one or the loss of a job, the lack of recognition for what you do, or broken relationships at home or struggles you're facing at school as peers have gone to social media, maligned you maliciously over and over again. And that can cause us to waver in our belief that God really cares. This list could go on and on if we were to try to name all the circumstances of our life, which might cause us to doubt whether Jesus really is the one to whom we should look for. Or shall we look for someone else?

This morning, whatever doubts arise, regardless of the circumstances that bring them to the forefront, whenever doubts arise, let's go to the Lord, to His Word and to prayer. And by the way, you need to know that for yourself. But you also need to know that for each other. Because you know what? The doubts that come into my life sometime could be so overwhelming that I'm still having a hard time, even though I know what I'm supposed to do. I know I'm supposed to pick up God's word. I know I'm supposed to believe that he's with me always to the very end of the age. But you know what? Sometimes I just can't hear it on my own. But I might hear it if you remind me. If you come alongside me and you say, Brother Jim, I'm here for you. And God has not changed. Your doubts are answered by God's Word, even if your circumstances never change.

Father, would you help us to understand these precious truths? Because they are precious indeed. Lord Jesus, I ask that by your mercy and by your grace, that we might repeatedly, any and every time that we have any doubt whatsoever about what you're doing and how you're doing it in our lives, we will come rapidly to your Word. And Holy Spirit when we come your Word, open our eyes and open our years so we might hear and that we might see, and that we might understand just how the Word of God anchors

us in every situation. And even those situations that are long standing and seemingly are never going to change. Or if we do ask that you would deepen our faith even by using our doubts to drive us to you. We will praise you. In Jesus' name. Amen.