

Escaping the Dungeon Doubt

Luke 7:18-35

(Discussion Guide on pg. 13)

Are you facing difficult challenges in your life today? Are these challenges causing you to feel discouraged or doubt God in some way? It's been said that every person is either going through a trial, coming out of a trial, or going into a trial.

Although we experience good times in life, we will also experience difficult times. And in these difficult seasons not only may we struggle with discouragement, but we may also deal with doubt. What do you do if you find yourself in a dungeon of doubt?

I call it a dungeon because, as we will see, John the Baptist was in a literal dungeon when he experienced a crisis of belief. Moreover, doubt itself can be like a prison, as John Bunyan described in his classic book, *Pilgrims Progress*.

Doubt, if we don't deal with it correctly, can enslave us and keep us from growing in faith through the trials of life.

I want to submit to you that finding ourselves in a place of doubt is not the major problem. Rather, what we do with our doubt or what we allow doubt to do to us is the more critical issue.

Main idea: When in a prison of doubt, go to Jesus and rest in His promises, which is the key that will set you free.

What John the Baptist did in a literal dungeon when he was dealing with doubt, and how Jesus responded to him contains lessons for us for dealing with our doubts and discouragement.

1. True disciples bring their doubts to Jesus

What makes us true disciples of Jesus? What makes us true disciples is not that we never have doubts, but what we do with our doubts. Here's the first lesson: True disciples bring their doubts to Jesus.

Having given an account of the healing of the Centurion's servant, which highlighted the centurion's faith and having also given an account of Jesus raising of the widow's son, we read beginning in verse 18:

"The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, 19 calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" 20 And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" Luke 7:18-20

We know from Matthew's parallel account that when John the Baptist sent two of his disciples to Jesus asking, "*Are you the one*, John was in prison (Matthew 11:2).

Because John had confronted King Herod about marrying his brother's wife Herodias, she apparently persuaded Herod to have John thrown in a Roman dungeon. She would later persuade him to have John beheaded. John was a courageous and bold prophet of God.

Additionally, he was the prophesied forerunner of Jesus who baptized Jesus before the start of his earthly ministry. As Jesus came to him to be baptized, John announced, "*Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" John 1:29b.

Now, because of who John was and his proven character, there's some debate about what was behind John's question to Jesus: "*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another,*" Luke 7:19b

One commentator suggests that "perhaps...John himself had no qualms but his followers did. So, he sent his disciples with a message

knowing that Jesus would give a satisfactory answer” (TNTC, Luke, Leon Morris).

But, as we will see, this explanation does not fit in with Jesus’ response to John’s doubting question.

Others suggest that John’s faith in Jesus was weakening. Being imprisoned in a Roman dungeon was no walk in the park. As General George Patton once said, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.”

Another suggestion is that it was not John’s faith but his patience that was failing. As Leon Morris elaborates, his question may be in the spirit of, ‘You are the One we are expecting, aren’t You? Then why not do something?’

Many people, especially when they’re going through a difficult time, don’t suddenly become atheists. That is, they don’t stop believing that God exists. Rather, they question his plan or his timing. Some doubt whether his plans for their lives are for their good or whether God’s timing is good.

Others who may be going through a challenging time, like a battle with cancer, may just be confused or perplexed. They have a hard time understanding why God allows certain things to happen.

Perhaps John was just perplexed. He had prophesied that the Coming One would separate the chaff from the wheat, the righteous from the unrighteous and execute Judgement (3:16). But Jesus was doing nothing remotely close. On the contrary, He was engrossed in works of mercy.

You know, when I was battling terminal cancer, I never stopped believing in Jesus. But there were times when I was really confused. I had retired early to serve the Lord in full time ministry. And six months later I was diagnosed with stage two cancer and just when I thought I beat it, two and a half years later the cancer was back, but this time it was much worse. “Lord, did I hear you wrong?” Or did I do something wrong?” “Lord, this doesn’t make sense to me.”

Although I knew God was good, I couldn't understand how his plan or his timing was good. Looking back five and a half years later, I don't understand it all, but I do understand some things better.

God was not only going to deliver me from the sentence of death "so that many will give thanks on [my] behalf for the blessing granted through the prayers of many," (2 Corinthians 1:11) but more importantly God was delivering me from me.

God was doing a deeper work in the heart of a very insecure Pastor to prepare me to be a more spiritually healthy minister. And of course, I'm still a work in progress.

Here's something even more important that I learned:

The greatest danger to our Christian walk is not questioning the Lord or having doubts about what He's up to, but to think that we can't bring those questions and doubts to our heavenly Father. Our heavenly Father loves when we come to Him with all our questions and doubts and He will never cast us off or reject us for doing so.

Although John was hearing reports in prison about all the miracles Jesus was performing and may have been feeling personally forsaken, he did not rely on his feelings. He knew to take his questions and doubts to the Lord. And we must with confidence learn to do likewise.

Let me say a word to parents and grandparents. We must intentionally cultivate relationships with our children and grandchildren that encourage open communication.

For the past few years I've been asked to do a Q&A with the kids in our Awana ministry. Mom and dad, if you don't know this already, some of your children are wrestling with some really deep questions about life and faith. And that's not a bad thing, that's a good thing. It's

a good thing because our children are not going to come to a saving relationship with Jesus riding the coattails of our faith.

We surely must own our own faith if we desire to have a powerful influence on our children's spiritual lives. But owning our faith is not enough. They must own their own faith. And to do so we should be encouraging them to investigate for themselves why we believe what we believe, and we should be prepared to give a reason for the hope we have in Christ with gentleness and respect.

If they are struggling with doubts about the claims of Christianity or the reliability of the bible they should be confident enough to bring those doubts to the Lord and to you. They shouldn't be told that they're wrong for asking skeptical questions or expressing their doubts about things related to faith.

In a sit-down interview with Thriving Family magazine, apologist Josh McDowell and his son Sean discussed how parents should respond when their kids question faith. I'd like to share with you two of the questions they were asked and their responses.

The interviewer said to Sean: You're now a father and have a thriving apologetics ministry of your own. What advice would you give to parents whose kids express doubts about Christianity?

Sean: First, I'd tell them not to panic. I generally see kids doubting their faith as a good thing. As a teacher, I spend much of my time and energy trying to convince kids that their beliefs about God really matter. When young people say they doubt their faith, I know that they are at least thinking about important issues, and they want to know the truth. This is a good start!

The interviewer also asked:

So should parents talk through the sorts of challenges that their teens will face in high school and college?

Sean: Yes, help kids think through intellectual challenges before they face them elsewhere. I tell my son every night before I put him to bed that he can ask me anything. I want him to ask tough questions and to know that his dad desires to hear what he is thinking.

Josh: Parents should definitely anticipate some of the issues ahead of time, especially the main challenges to the truth of Christianity, the Bible, Creation and moral issues. We tackle these big questions in *The Unshakable Truth*, a resource that we think will really help parents discuss core issues with their kids, including the “knowability” of truth, the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible and the identity of Jesus.

A parent who researches these big questions will gain confidence to talk with their children. When we don’t do our research, we tend to belittle our kids’ doubts. It’s much better to parent from strength rather than weakness.”

Let me say a word to our youth: If you have doubts or questions about the Christian faith, it’s alright. Questioning why you believe what you believe is a good thing and if you sincerely search out answers to your questions, your faith will be strengthened.

Bring your doubts and questions to Jesus; He can handle them. And He promises in Jeremiah 29:13: *“You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.”*

2. True disciples in doubt cling to the certainty of Christ.

Secondly, True disciples in doubt cling to the certainty of Christ. How did Jesus respond to John’s question which appears to come from a place of discouragement rooted in unmet expectations? Luke records:

“In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²² And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached

to them.²³ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” Luke 7:21-23

What was Jesus communicating to John and what does it reveal about John’s heart? John was likely expecting that the messiah was going to execute judgement on those who rejected the gospel of the kingdom and save those who repented of their sin, received the good news of the kingdom, and surrendered to the Lordship of Christ. But instead, John is sitting in prison, facing execution for doing the right thing, for standing for truth and righteousness.

Often what leads to discouragement and doubt is that things don’t work out as we had planned or expected.

James Montgomery Boice put it this way, “We don’t necessarily doubt that God is love; we just doubt at times if God loves us. How can I believe He loves me when I have lost my job; when my spouse leaves me for someone else; when I am diagnosed with an incurable disease. These are the times when I do not feel that God loves me or that He even cares about me at all.”

So, John is having a momentary crisis of belief because in a time of unmet expectations, he’s focusing not on who he knew Jesus was, but on His circumstances. But although he’s doubting things, he doesn’t withdraw from the Lord, rather he gets a message out to Him.

And in the response to John’s question, Jesus doesn’t tell his disciples to go back and tell John what a disgrace he is for questioning him. Rather, Jesus tells John’s disciples to relay to him the things that He’s been doing, healing the sick, raising the dead, and preaching the good news to the poor, which all speaks to who He is and are a fulfillment of scripture.

In fact, the words that Jesus uses in His response to John are a combination of quotations from the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 26:19; Isaiah 29:18; Isaiah 35:5; Isaiah 61:1). More specifically “in His response to John, Jesus delivers four different texts from Isaiah that

refer to the power of God, which is now visible in Him—the one who is God incarnate.” Ken Puls

What Jesus is doing here is helping John reflect not on his unmet expectations, but on the things that Jesus is doing that reveal who He is and fulfill the promises of God’s word.

Warren Wiersbe shares this helpful insight: “There is a difference between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is a matter of the mind and emotions when we cannot understand what God is doing or why He’s doing it; but unbelief is a matter of the will—the will that refuses to believe God’s word, no matter what He says or does.”

John wasn’t willfully blind to what Jesus was doing or refusing to trust His word. He lost sight of who Jesus was by focusing more on His circumstances than on the person, power, and promises of Jesus.

Now, in addition to reminding John through his disciples about the works He was doing in fulfillment of scripture which speaks to who He is, Jesus adds this promise:

“And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” Luke 7:23

Now it’s one thing to have questions and doubts about what God may be allowing in your life, but it’s another thing to be angry, bitter, and offended at God. If we don’t deal with our doubts correctly, which are often connected with painful circumstances, they can cause us to become bitter at God.

Although we are never justified if we are bitter or offended with God, we should also be honest and real with God about where we are. And if we are looking for help to overcome bitterness, He will help us.

Although John was discouraged about his circumstances, which created some doubts, it doesn’t appear that he was offended or bitter against the Lord. He was just letting the Lord know where he was and trusted that the Lord would give him what he needed.

And in Jesus' response in verse 23, Jesus promises: If you keep trusting in me despite your doubts and not allow your heart to become bitter you will be blessed—you will receive the grace and courage to continue to stand for me, you will be blessed not only in this life, but great will be your reward in heaven.

“Evidently [this promise and the quotations from Isaiah were the key that set John free]. While they did not set him physically free, it set his mind and his heart free; the [reminder of who Jesus was and His promises] were good enough for John.” Ken Plus

3. True disciples don't live by explanations but by God's word and promises

Lastly, True disciples don't live by explanations but by God's word and promises. Having given His response to John's question, Luke records:

*“When John's messengers had gone, 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? **25** What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. **26** What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. **27** This is he of whom it is written, ‘behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you.’ **28** I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet he one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”*

So that no one wrongly interprets Jesus' response to John's doubts to mean that he was rejecting him or his prophetic ministry, Jesus gives John an amazing tribute. The preacher that the people went into the wilderness to hear was not like a reed shaken in the wind, meaning that he wasn't like a politician who was swayed by popular opinion. Nor was he like a man who found his identity or security in living luxuriously.

John, who camped out in the wilderness, and dressed in camel's hair was not living for the things of this life, but for the blessings of the kingdom to come. And he was more than a prophet who delivered God's message to the people. He was the final prophet who had the privilege of baptizing Jesus and introducing Him as the Savior of the world. And if that wasn't clear enough, Jesus added:

"I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John."
Luke 7:28a

John had a moment of doubt; but as Adrian Rogers would say, "I'm so glad that Jesus didn't mistake the moment for the man."

How many of you would agree, we are so quick to write people off when they don't meet our expectations or when they fail us in some way. Rather than thinking the best of people; we often think the worst of people. We don't see the good, we only see the flaws. And sadly, the ones who are constantly judging others and pointing out the speck in their brothers' eye, often have a log protruding from their own eye. They want lots of grace but they don't give a lot of grace.

O may we be more like Jesus and not mistake the moment for the man. May we instead help people when they're having a moment to get their eyes back on Jesus, to lift them up, and not tear them down.

Now after pointing out that among people born of women there's none greater than John the Baptist, Jesus added: *"Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."* Luke 7:28b

It's important to clarify here that Jesus is not diminishing what He just said about the greatness of John and His ministry. As Kent Hughes elaborates:

"The kingdom must be superior to its announcement. The people of the kingdom must be superior to its announcer. A position in the kingdom must be greater than that of its herald (though, of course, John was also a member of the kingdom). So, kingdom membership aside, John and his ministry were the greatest—greater than that of

Abraham, Moses, or Elijah. This divine validation set the stage for the ultimate revelation of the human condition, which would be seen in the people's response."

In other words, Jesus is doing more than just commending John, and exalting the greatness of being part of his kingdom, He's also appealing to the crowd who also must see their spiritual need and respond in faith to Jesus to enter into the kingdom. Luke continues in verse 29:

29 *(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, 30 but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)* Luke 7:29-30

In this parenthetical statement, Luke points out that there were two groups of people in the crowd who heard His commendation of John, and the greatness of being in His kingdom. There were those who did see their need to repent of their sin, and trust in the coming messiah as savior and lord, which they publicly confessed by being baptized by John, like the tax collectors. But there was another group, the self-righteous religious leaders who rejected John's message of repentance and demonstrated it by not submitting to John's baptism, who was the forerunner of Jesus.

Now when Jesus turned to this polarized crowd, He says:

"To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? 32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep. 33' For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' 34 The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' 35 Yet wisdom is justified by all her children." Luke 7:29-35

“What Jesus is doing is comparing the unbeliever to children playing games. No matter what game the kids are playing, you just don’t want to play! One author said this text reminded him of the time when he was growing up, one of the boys in his neighborhood always made the rest of the kids play his special brand of baseball with his rules, because he owned the bat. (Swindoll, p. 180)

If you didn’t play the way he wanted, he took his bat and went home. Nothing makes them happy. Nothing cheers them up. Nothing is any good ever. Just like a baby who’s not getting their way.” Ken Puls

Because John had a strict diet in the wilderness and cared little about his outward appearance, they said he had a demon. On the other hand, because Jesus ate and drank with the common people, they called him a glutton and a drunkard.

How many of you know, you just can’t win with some people, and you can never please them? Because the problem is not without; it’s within. The religious leaders in Jesus day didn’t have an intellectual issue, but a heart issue. Their problem wasn’t doubt; it was a settled unbelief.

But those who know and fear God, although they might doubt at times, are open to being corrected and justify the truth in their application of it.

Beloved, as followers of Jesus, and pilgrims passing through a fallen world, we will go through some heavy stuff. In these seasons of difficulty, we can sink into moments of deep discouragement and even doubt. You may not stop believing that God is good, but you may feel like he’s forgotten to be good to you. Life can be very perplexing.

But in these moments, we must bring all our questions, and all our doubts to Jesus. Remember, the greatest danger to our lives is not questioning the Lord or having doubts about what He’s up to, but to think that we can’t bring those questions and doubts to our heavenly Father. Our heavenly Father loves when we come to Him with all our

questions and doubts and He will never cast us off or reject us for doing so.

We may not get all our questions answered this side of heaven, but He will reveal to us the certainty of who He is and make known to us the promises of His word. Again, the Lord promises: *“You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.”*

Conclusion

When we know Jesus intimately and stand on his promises, we won't need an explanation for all that we go through in this life. True and intimate disciples of Jesus don't live by explanation, but by God's sure word and promises. The Christian life is not a road map, but a relationship rooted in the love of Christ.

Don't allow your circumstances to determine your view of God. Look at your circumstances from behind the cross of Jesus and his resurrection power and know that He loves you and has promised to work all things for your good and His glory.

Discussion Guide

Read Luke 7:18-20.

- What lead John to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (v. 19)
- Where was John when he asked this question?
- What was John experiencing or feeling at the time?

Look at vs. 24-28.

John experiences some doubt about Jesus. Jesus affirmed John as a faithful follower of the Lord, and yet John still struggled with doubt and confusion at times. This is perfectly normal in the Christian life. We are all humans—filled with weakness, struggles, and doubts.

- Why is it important that we acknowledge our doubts and struggles?

- What are the doubts that you struggle with?
- What doubts do you carry in your heart from time to time?
- In what ways do you experience confusion in the Christian life?

Read Luke 7:22-23.

Doubt is not necessarily unhealthy. It is what we do with our doubts that is important. John moved towards Jesus in the midst of his doubt (v. 20), whereas the Pharisees moved away from Jesus in the midst of their doubts and rejected him (v. 30).

- How do you deal with your doubts and confusion typically? Hide from them, deny them, run from them, or process them with God and safe friends?
- How was Jesus helping John by his response to John's question?

Look at vs. 31-35.

The Pharisees were stubborn in their unbelief. Regardless of what someone said or did, they seemed closed off to God's true path. They put God in a tight box and couldn't understand the different ways of God's dealings with people. This is a reminder that God's ways are not always our ways. His expectations, plans, and ways, don't always align with our own understanding.

- How does acknowledging complexity and mystery on the spiritual journey with Jesus help us in the Christian life?
- How should we respond to our children when they have doubts about God and the Bible?

Scripture-fed, Spirit-led, worship-based prayer. Spend some time in prayer talking to God about your doubts, confusion, struggles, and fears. Receive His love, grace, and care for you as you process these things.