



Christmas Faith, Pt. 2

Luke 7:18-22

¹⁸ s. ^tThe 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 ^uwho is to come, or ^vshall 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 ^uwho is to come, or ^vshall we look for another?’” ²¹ In that hour ^whe healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and ^xon many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²² And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: ^ythe blind receive their sight, the lame walk, ^zlepers⁵ are cleansed, and ^athe deaf hear, ^bthe dead are raised up, ^cthe poor have good news preached to them. ²³ And blessed is the one who is ^dnot offended by me.”

²⁴ When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus⁶ began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out ^einto the wilderness to see? ^fA 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? ^gA prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is he of whom it is written,

^h“ ‘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 the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

I am really excited thinking about leaving for Haiti in eight days but there are two things, besides half of my family, that I am going to miss. I won’t get to see the Badgers play in the Rose Bowl and I won’t get to watch the results of the Iowa primaries. The Rose Bowl will be more interesting but the primary election could be more life changing for the direction of our country. I realize that politics usually comes down to choosing the lesser of two evils, but this year I think I may be more jaded than ever. One of the reasons we all get like this to some degree or another is the fact that we can’t really trust any of the candidates. Their campaign managers work overtime to put a positive spin on everything. They do their best to whitewash the candidates and remove political scars and moral ambiguities.

This is one of the reasons I love the Bible because it does not gloss over the sins and failures of its characters. Interestingly, the author of Hebrews does not make mention of the sins of the men and women that he lists. He wrote about their great faith and commendation from the Lord but not about their failures. But the author would have expected that anyone reading this chapter would also have had access to the original stories. Hebrews 11 assumes that we know that Abraham not once, but called his wife his sister and exposed her to the possibility of rape, as well as the catastrophes of the rest. We know all about the lack of faith and the stumblings and bumbblings of the twelve disciples. In the same way, even John the Baptist has his flaws exposed in the Bible.

In this story from Luke 7, John sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask one question: *'Are you the one "who is to come, or "shall we look for another?'* This is one of the more shocking scenes in all the Bible. How could John the Baptist get to a point of doubting that Jesus was the true Messiah? As a side note, this is another reason you can trust the Bible since it does not try to whitewash its characters. The Bible shows everyone in their true colors—warts—and doubts and all. If you were fabricating these stories they certainly would not have allowed all of these character flaws to be exposed. If this is the true book about the true religion, then the heroes would all possess mythical powers and always do good. But the message of the Bible is that no one is good except God. Our faith is not about being “good” but having faith in a good and perfect Savior. Therefore we see that even John the Baptist, whom Jesus calls the greatest man born of a woman can also experience a crisis of faith. Can you relate to this?

Nevertheless, John's statement is meant to come as a shock to us. If you remember last week I said that the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth was set up in such a way that we would expect a statement of great faith to come from them but instead, Zechariah faltered in his faith at the key moment. If you would expect Zechariah not to stumble in his faith, then our expectations for his son, John, should be that much higher. Let me review part of his pedigree taken from other parts of Scripture.

- John had parents with roots to Aaron, the first high priest
- John was filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of conception. This is the only known case where God gave this kind of saving grace.
- John the Baptist (or more accurately, “John the baptizer”) was the greatest of all of the OT prophets. Jesus himself made this clear.
- John possessed a firm commitment that Jesus was the Messiah Luke 3:15-17

¹⁵ *As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ,* ¹⁶ *John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”* ¹⁷ *His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

He rejected the claim to be the Christ but instead pointed this title at Jesus.

Long before the twelve disciples understood Jesus' true identity, John made this amazing statement of faith.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, ^xthe Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:29-34)

John understood that his entire ministry was to prepare the way for the Lord—for Jesus. He was not only the greatest prophet ever but he was prophesied about by the earlier prophets—Isaiah and Malachi. He was the prophets’ prophet, the pinnacle of all prophets.

Because John was the greatest prophet, because he studied the prophets, because of his priestly pedigree and thorough instruction from his parents and because he was filled with the Holy Spirit and had this crystal clear calling as the forerunner to the promised Messiah, John seemed to know who Jesus really was before anyone else. From the moment of conception until he baptized Jesus in the Jordan, his entire life was built around announcing Jesus as the Messiah—the “coming one.”

What happened between that time and this scene in Luke 7 where John is uncertain that Jesus is the Messiah. Remember the one definition of faith that we have been using—true faith “deprives uncertainty of any basis”? At this point in his life, John was no longer certain.

We can identify two main challenges that caused John to stumble that you and share in common with John. John had an incomplete view of God and he was suffering extreme persecution. Therefore, if we understand what caused John to doubt we can be on guard against these ourselves.

For all of the things that John did have, he did not have a complete view of God’s plan. He knew that Jesus was the “coming one,” the anointed one and Messiah, but even he did not understand how this would play out. His preaching on repentance may have led him to think that God’s judgment and Jesus’ rule as Messiah would have come sooner than he anticipated.

⁷ *He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ^c“You brood of ^dvipers! Who warned you to flee from ^ethe wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits ^fin keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ^g‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from ^hthese stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. ⁱEvery tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:7-9)*

His ^vwinnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to ^wgather the wheat into his barn, ^xbut the chaff he will burn with ^yunquenchable fire.” (Luke 3:18)

What do those last two verses about the axe at the root of the tree and the winnowing fork in the hand of the Messiah lead one to believe about the timing of the Messiah’s judgment? One could think that judgment was imminent—that it could happen at any time. John knew that if the

messiah brought judgment to his enemies he would also set the captives free. So if John had believed that the Messiah would bring on the full kingdom of God right away, then it follows that he would have begun to doubt if Jesus was truly the Messiah.

He didn't have a wrong belief about as much as it was an incomplete view of God. He was locked in his own period of historical revelation. The Bible is a book of progressive revelation. God progressively reveals himself and his sovereign, redemptive plan throughout the centuries. Abraham had a piece of the plan but not a complete piece. When he died he was living by faith in what had been revealed to him. He had faith that God would make him into a great nation and that all nations would be blessed through him, but he could not have conceived the actual way God worked this out.

Peter described this progressive revelation in his first letter.

¹⁰ *Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.* These OT prophets knew something of God's plan. Isaiah knew that a son would be born to a virgin woman. He knew that the Messiah would be a suffering servant. They had a piece of the puzzle and they searched intently trying to understand even more, but they were locked into their position in history of revelation and redemption. Even though John was the forerunner of Christ, he was still locked in this progressive plan of revelation and redemption. He knew more than Isaiah did but he did not know enough to free him from all doubt.

Ryan recognized a potentially wrong view of God in a song on the radio this past week. The words to the song were something like, "God will not delay in helping you." Ryan said to me, "That's not exactly right, is it?" No, it is not, because God does delay.

This raises the other issue that John faced—severe persecution. Because he had questioned Herod's marriage to his brother's wife, Herod had locked him up in prison. Perhaps John expected that Jesus would get him released from prison. After all, Jesus described himself earlier in Luke using these words of freedom.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19) This was a quote from Isaiah 61 which prophesied the coming Messiah. If Jesus were the Messiah and if the Messiah came to set the captives free, why was John still locked up in prison?

The fact is that unlike the song we heard on the radio, God does delay his coming and often times delays in delivering us from trouble. He delayed so long in the case of John that he was beheaded in prison. Two thousand years later, God is still delaying his coming. This is part mercy and part mystery. He delays to allow people to turn to him in repentance and he delays for reasons we are not privy to and may never know. But he is coming. Do not mistake his delay for a broken promise. Do not mistake his delay for a lack of concern for you. But be careful lest your wrong view of God causes you to stumble in your faith.

The truly amazing thing about John's moment of doubt is that not only did Jesus reassure John that he is in fact the Messiah, but he did not chastise John for his lack of faith. We know that Zechariah was disciplined for his lack of faith. Jesus often rebuked his disciples saying, "O ye of little faith." But in his moment of great doubt, Jesus didn't rebuke John. Moreover, he took the opportunity to commend John.

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^h "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 the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."*

Why didn't Jesus rebuke John for his lack of faith? I believe it was because John was working within his limited historical framework. John acted on what he understood the ministry of the Messiah would look like but as I said before, he had an incomplete view of God. In one sense, this really wasn't John's fault. There was no way for him to have known that Jesus' judgment and corresponding freedom for the captives would be delayed. Perhaps this is why Jesus did not rebuke John. John was only held accountable to the knowledge that he had been given. Once Jesus affirmed that he was indeed the Messiah, any remaining doubts that John had would have melted away.

But John's story highlights the two reasons why you and I fall into doubts and uncertainty—we also have an incomplete view of God and when you couple this with trials and suffering, the doubts can surface. We all have an incomplete view of God and even lingering doubts, but when trials surface they are like a catalyst which exposes our doubts. A desert landscape is constantly changing because of the blowing winds. It is as if our doubts are buried beneath the sand and the winds of trials remove the covering of sand and expose the doubts that we weren't even aware were present.

So what should we do when these doubts surface—and they will! The answer is contained within John's story. What would have happened if John had just sat on his doubts and done nothing? Like a cancerous tumor, his doubts could have grown larger and taken John down a horrible path. But instead, John faced his doubts head on and asked all the right questions.

An interesting illustration of this is the Hitchens brothers. Christopher Hitchens was a journalist, author and one of the best known atheists in the world. His best-selling book is titled, *God is Not Great—How Religion Poisons Everything*. He acquired esophageal cancer due to a lifetime of alcohol and cigarettes. His hatred of Christianity ran so deep that he wanted to make sure everyone knew he would not make a deathbed conversion.

Even if my voice goes before I do, I shall continue to write polemics against religious delusions, at least until it's hello darkness my old friend. In which case, why not cancer of the brain? As a

terrified, half-aware imbecile, I might even scream for a priest at the close of business, though I hereby state while I am still lucid that the entity thus humiliating itself would not in fact be “me.” (Bear this in mind, in case of any later rumors or fabrications.)¹

Christopher Hitchens died last week and his life is a stark contrast to his lesser-known brother, Peter Hitchens. His book is titled, *The Rage Against God—How Atheism Led Me to Faith*. Peter Hitchens took his doubts seriously and it eventually led him to faith in Christ but Christopher Hitchens allowed his doubts to rule his life.

Doubts arise through an incomplete view of God and the trials of life, so everybody has them. What are you doing with your doubts?

Rich Maurer
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^s For ver. 18–35, see Matt. 11:2–19

^t See Matt. 9:14

^u John 4:25; 6:14; 11:27

^v [ch. 3:15]

^u [See ver. 19 above]

^v [See ver. 19 above]

^w Mark 1:34

^x ch. 18:42; Matt. 9:30; 12:22; 15:31; 20:34; 21:14; Mark 8:25; John 9:7

^y Isa. 29:18; 35:5, 6; Matt. 15:30

^z ch. 17:14

⁵ *Leprosy* was a term for several skin diseases; see Leviticus 13

^a Mark 7:35

^b See ver. 14

^c ch. 4:18; [Matt. 5:3; James 2:5]

^d Isa. 8:14, 15; John 6:61

⁶ Greek *he*

^e ch. 1:80; 3:2

^f [Eph. 4:14; James 1:6]

^g ch. 1:76; 20:6; Matt. 14:5

^h Mark 1:2; Cited from Mal. 3:1; [ch. 1:17, 76]

^u [See ver. 19 above]

^v [See ver. 19 above]

^x ver. 36; Ex. 12:3; Isa. 53:7; Acts 8:32; 1 Pet. 1:19; [Gen. 22:8; Rev. 5:6]

^c Matt. 12:34; 23:33

^d Ps. 140:3

^e Rom. 5:9; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 1:10

^f Acts 26:20

^g John 8:39

^h [ch. 4:3]

ⁱ ch. 13:7, 9; Matt. 7:19; John 15:2, 6

^v Isa. 30:24

^w Matt. 13:30

^x Mal. 4:1

^y Mark 9:43, 48

⁶ Greek *he*

^e ch. 1:80; 3:2

^f [Eph. 4:14; James 1:6]

^g ch. 1:76; 20:6; Matt. 14:5

^h Mark 1:2; Cited from Mal. 3:1; [ch. 1:17, 76]

¹ <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2010/10/hitchens-201010>