

# The question of belief

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In Genesis 32, we find the story of a man named Jacob who wrestled with God. He wrestles with God throughout the night, and in the morning, when the wrestling is over, God changes his name from Jacob to Israel. Israel means “one who struggles with God”. Eventually his descendants are given the same name and are known as the nation of Israel, “The Ones Who Struggle With God”. It is interesting that out of all the names that God could have chosen for His people, He chose this one.

The Christian faith is a relationship with Jesus Christ that definitely has its struggles. We struggle between the temptations of the world and our desires for God. We struggle between our past habits of sin while learning to walk in the newness of the Christian life. We even struggle whether to believe God or not.

In Mark 9:24 we see a similar picture of a father pleading with Jesus to heal his son, who is possessed by an evil spirit. Jesus asks the man if he believes, and the father responds, *“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief.”*

Like we see in the story of this man, the Christian faith will always be lived somewhere between belief and unbelief. In this lifetime we *“walk by faith, not by sight.”*<sup>1</sup> Once we are in heaven, faith will no longer be necessary, because we will be in the presence of God. But for now, *“faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”*<sup>2</sup>

Growing in our faith is a struggle for all sincere believers. Not that we don’t believe, but situations come that challenge our faith and call us out to a greater belief and understanding of who God is. In Luke 7:18-23 we see John the Baptist facing a similar situation.

John the Baptist was a man sent by God to prepare the way for the promised Messiah, the One who would deliver the Jews. John was prophesied about in the Old Testament, and hundreds of years later he was born to fulfill those prophecies of calling the Jews to turn back to God. John 1:6-8 says that, *“There*

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<sup>1</sup> (2 Cor. 5:7)

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 11:1

*was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.”*

John told the people of the coming Messiah and that *“the Kingdom of God was at hand”*.

In John 1:29-34, we read of John’s testimony to the coming of Christ:

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

We would think that if anyone would have unshakeable faith, it would be John the Baptist. But even he had moments of “struggling with God.” This struggle will be the focus of our time together today.

Leading up to these verses, Luke had told us about Jesus raising a widow’s son from the dead, Jesus healing a Roman centurion’s servant, and Jesus preaching the sermon on the Mount to the crowds of people. In Luke 7:18-23 we find these words:

*The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, <sup>19</sup> 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?” <sup>20</sup> 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?’” <sup>21</sup> In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”*

How could John doubt? How could he ask, *“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”* Above all people, John should be the one who believes in Christ the most, and yet he doubts. What’s wrong with him?

Let’s wait a moment before we start judging John the Baptist unfairly. John’s moments of doubting don’t have to trouble us. Are they really that different from our doubts? To understand scripture correctly, we must always look at context to understand what is really happening. It is definitely true in this situation.

When we look at the context of these verses, we realize that John was in prison at this time. The ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas, had a brother named Philip. Herod decided he wanted Philip’s wife, so he took

her for himself. John the Baptist had spoken out against that and had been put in prison. At the time of this story in Luke 7:18-23, it was believed that John had now been in prison for almost one year.<sup>3</sup>

John knew that he had been called to preach to His people to prepare the way for the Messiah. He also knew he was being held in prison. At that moment, from his perspective in his prison cell, it didn't seem like the Messiah was doing His job. John was frustrated, and it was difficult to see a Savior anywhere in his situation. Didn't Jesus care? Wasn't Jesus strong enough to do something about it?

Another issue that might have lent itself to John's lapse of faith is the simple fact that the majority of the Israelites, including the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin, were rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. They had been waiting for centuries. The Jews were struggling under the brutal rule of the Romans and were longing for their Deliverer to finally come. Looking at the prophecies from the Old Testament, they were expecting someone who would be powerful in battle and would bring justice and would free them to be the powerful nation they had been during the time of King David.<sup>4</sup> We can see hints of this expectation of a mighty Messiah in John's own words, in Luke 3:16:

***“But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”***

This verse surely does not show all of John's understanding about what the Messiah would be like, but it begins to make his question clear in Luke 7:18-23. John was a committed believer of Jesus Christ. He was called of God. God had already worked powerfully in his life, but he was human, and so was his understanding. In this moment in his life the ways of God were not making sense to him. Where was God and did He even care?

John was struggling to recognize what God truly had in mind when He said He would send a Messiah to be the Savior of the world. Jesus was blessing children, teaching how to love your neighbor, and healing lepers. He was reaching out to tax collectors, Samaritans, and women who had been prostitutes. He had even healed the servant of a Roman Centurion. That's all good, but that was not going to conquer the Romans and bring the kingdom of God into the world.

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<sup>3</sup> In Luke 3:18-20, we see that John the Baptist preached against the sins of Herod the tetrarch. This Herod was the son of Herod the great who had met with the wise men and slaughtered the infant boys in search of Jesus, right after Jesus' birth. Herod the great, the father, had divided his kingdom into four parts before he died and gave one to each of his sons. The word tetrarch signifies one who governs over a fourth part of the kingdom. One was given to this son, Herod Antipas. He was ruler over the part of the kingdom known as Galilee. This is the same Herod that Jesus would stand before during part of His trial right before His crucifixion (Luke 23:6-12). Herod the tetrarch was guilty of many sins, one of which was taking his brother's wife to be his own. Herod was angry because John the Baptist had preached against his sinfulness, so he had John thrown into prison.

<sup>4</sup> The Messiah would *“be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.”* (Isaiah 9:6b-7)

We might be tempted to judge John the Baptist for his doubts, but we must remember that the cross had not happened yet. Sin had not yet been defeated. Christ had not yet risen from the dead. No one would ever have imagined that the Messiah's plan of salvation would include crucifixion on a Roman cross.

Yes, Christ would come to be the Almighty King, but He would also have the character of God. Humility. Compassion. Servanthood. Love. Peace. Joy. Comforter. John could not see God's plan in the midst of his situation. We know he knew the scriptures, but his understanding of God and God's ways were limited, because they weren't taking all of God's Word into account. John's perspective of the Messiah was true, but not complete. It needed to be balanced by passages like Isaiah 61:1-2, and Isaiah 53:

***“The LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.” (Isaiah 61:1-2)***

Isaiah 53:2-5 prophesizes about the Messiah who would come:

***“Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?  
2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely, he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”***

So back to the problem. How could John, the one preparing the way for Jesus, be asking this question of doubt? Probably the same way that we do when our Christian life is not working out the way we think it should. Like the father in Mark 9:24, we still believe, but we just need God to help us with our unbelief. Does that mean He is not our Savior? No, it just means we need to take the time to draw near to Him and learn what kind of Savior He truly is. Then we begin to understand more fully His ways and the purposes He has for our lives.

At times our doubts can be traced back to the beginning of our faith. Today many churches are presenting a “man-centered” gospel. It is a gospel that promises peace, hope, love, and joy. “If you believe in Jesus Christ then He will be what you need in every situation.” There is truth in that. Jesus Christ is all sufficient and salvation does require believing in Jesus Christ. But, if we are not careful, we present it in a way that allows the individual to remain as self-centered as they were before. This reduces Christ to a role of waiter or servant, who is here to help us get whatever our self-centered hearts want. If this is how we understand faith in Jesus Christ, then we will have a hard time believing when He chooses to use pain to refine us, delay to grow our faith, or failure to build our humility.

Jesus does promise an abundant life, but He defines what abundant is. When we see ourselves in the center, then Jesus's job is to give us the good life. Good job. Good health. Good mate. Perfect children. When things don't work out like we want, we begin to doubt who Jesus is. Is He really the Savior and Deliverer that the Bible talks about? We must not see our relationship with God from that self-centered perspective. There is a whole other side that we are not seeing. Belief in Jesus Christ demands a move from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. There is discipline, sacrifice, service, suffering, denying ourselves, loving our enemies, confessing our sins, forgiving those who have sinned against us, and dying daily to our worldly desires. This abundant life is rich, profound, meaningful and totally worth it, and only possible as we trust Christ and obey.

As we allow God to move us towards the "God-centered life", our way of seeing life begins to take on a whole new perspective. Every situation becomes an opportunity to know Him more. An opportunity to experience His faithfulness. An opportunity to experience some expression of His love. Whether it be making us more like Christ, or using our lives to point others towards Himself, **"God works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose"** (Romans 8:28).

But why doesn't God just call us and make everything clear for us beforehand? Wouldn't it be easier? Easier maybe, but we would never be drawn near to God on a daily basis. Our faith would not be grown. We would not come to know Christ in a personal manner.

We are ones who struggle with God. In your life today what doubts remain? Is it about your future, your finances, your health, your children, or your mate? There will be many doubts and many fears in this life. They can be used for good if we allow them to usher us into a deeper dependence on Jesus Christ. Will we surrender our struggles and doubts to God and begin to move towards Him one step at a time? As we obey, God will open new doors of faith to us that were never accessible before. In this we will gain a fuller understanding of who He is and a new perspective of the situations around us.

So how do we get more faith? We don't get it, God gives it. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus is the author and perfecter of faith. Rom. 12:3 says, **"... God has allotted to each a measure of faith."** Rom. 10:17 says, **"... faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ."** Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us that faith is a gift of God that we can take no credit for. So . . .

- Pray for faith like the disciples did in Luke 17:5.
- Familiarize yourself with Christ's character and His ways as you read the Bible. Especially the Gospels.
- Make right anything in your life that may be hindering you from intimacy with Christ in this moment.
- Remember the past ways God has worked in your life and the life of others (journal, biographies, share God stories).
- Organize your life in such a way that you can better hear, know, and respond to God.

For some of you here today this “life of faith” is not yet an option for you. This is because you have never trusted in Jesus Christ. You have trusted so many other things, but never in Jesus. Today would you be willing to finally believe in Jesus and receive Him as your personal Lord and savior?

I would like to close with this. There was no rebuke for John’s struggle with unbelief. Jesus likely knew John, loved John, and had grown up together with John. Remember they were cousins, almost the same age. He knew what John was having to endure. He also knew that deep down, at the heart level, John was a believer. Jesus’ response to John was an example of Isaiah’s description of what the Messiah would be like: *“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench.”* Jesus did not seek to break John’s spirit or shame him into belief. He merely sought to restore him and lend him faith.

For me one of the most powerful points of this story is what Jesus says in the verses that follow the story that we have just read. After John’s disciples leave to return to John, Jesus turns to the crowd and begins speaking to them about John:

*“This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’*

*I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.” (Luke 7:27-28)*

Do you hear what Jesus is saying about John, the one who is struggling with his belief? The one who sounds like he is about to start looking for another Messiah? The one whose belief is barely hanging on by a thread? Jesus isn’t speaking in low tones trying to avoid any embarrassment. Jesus is not speaking negatively about John under His breath, indignant with John’s lack of faith. Jesus is proclaiming to the crowd that John is greater than all others who have ever been born. Greater than all the prophets. Greater than Abraham, David, Moses, Noah, Esther, Elijah, Isaiah and all the rest of God’s mighty men and women. His temporary unbelief has not disqualified John or any of us from the family of God and the service of our King. In some ways our doubt is merely sign of an authentic faith. We all struggle with unbelief at times, in different ways, but if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, be encouraged you are His, and nothing and no one can ever take you out of His hand (John 10:28). God has and will grant the faith necessary for His children to move more into Christlikeness. Trust and obey, and experience the greatness of God.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. In your opinion, what are some of the things that people have the hardest time believing about God?

2. What emotions did you feel or what thoughts came to mind as you listened to this story of John the Baptist?
3. At the end of Jesus' message to John's messengers He said this, "*And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.*" How would you say this last phrase in your own words?
4. Can you remember a time in your life that you really "struggled" with your faith in God? What was the reason?
5. What do you think God wants you to remember from this sermon?
6. What do you think He wants you to do about it?
7. Is there anything that we can do to help?
8. How can we pray for you about this?

