

THE DUNGEON OF DOUBT
Matthew 11:1-15

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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We just finished our sermon series on Elijah, both a prophet of courage and of confusion. There was a time we joined Elijah on Mt. Carmel as he called forth fire from heaven. On another occasion (at Mt. Horeb), he hid in the cave of confusion, having a prophetic pity party.

Propping up the pouting prophet, God soothes Elijah's spirits and sends him back to work with the task of anointing kings, anointing Elisha, his successor, and, yes, even one last showdown with evil Ahab and his Baal worshiping wife, Jezebel. Elijah declared their demise and untimely death as a result of their murderous acquisition of Naboth's vineyard.

Elijah's story has a most mysterious ending, as the Lord took him up by a whirlwind to heaven – one of the few, privileged, Old Testament characters to never experience death. Abraham died. Even Moses died. David died. But not Elijah. A chariot of fire pulled by horses of fire carried the prophet up with a whirlwind.

Given his glorious departure, rumors of his return were rampant. The rumors were further prompted by the fact that the prophet Malachi said (4:5-6) the prophet Elijah would return before the day of the Lord. We know the Lord came in our Christ Jesus, so what about Elijah?

Remember when Jesus, a controversial rabbi, was dying on the cross? As he cries out, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani," bystanders misunderstood, thinking he was calling for Elijah (Matthew 27:47-49).

Even today, in the Orthodox Jewish home at Passover, one empty chair is left for Elijah, the anticipated predecessor of the Messiah. The empty space, the empty chair, reflects the hope of the final words of the final book of the Old Testament, "Look, I will send the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes" (Malachi 4:5-6).

In Matthew 11:14, Jesus says, "And if you're willing to accept it, John the Baptist is Elijah, the one who is to come." Jesus realized not everyone would be willing or able to accept it, but John the Baptizer is, somehow, the promised return of Elijah. In the next verse, verse 15, he declares, "Let the person who has ears to hear really listen."

Jesus is telling us that John is a prophet, even more than a prophet – even the preparer of the way of the Lord. Jesus goes so far as to say he is the greatest man ever born prior to the arrival of the kingdom, a kingdom now present in Jesus Himself. Elijah, therefore, is the terminus of all prophecy. He is the herald, declaring the arrival of God's anointed.

Jesus, of course, does not mean that John is the reincarnation of Elijah. That's not necessary. Rather, as Luke 1:17 says, John came "in the spirit and power of Elijah." The similarities of these two prophets are too many to miss.

1. Like Elijah in the desert, John wore his leather garb.
2. Just as Elijah convicted Ahab and Jezebel of their seriousness of their sin, John confronted Herod and his wife, Herodius, with their evil deeds.
3. And today we see that just as Elijah spent some time in the cave of confusion, having a prophetic pity party, John the Baptist sits in the dungeon of doubt, dazed that the very Messiah he has announced has not delivered him.

Having just looked at Elijah, today we focus on the one who comes in the likeness of his spirit. John is another courageous prophet who, sometimes, like Elijah, finds himself dazed by doubt and defeat.

Max Lucado says John the Baptist was a child of the desert – leathery face, tanned skin, clothing of animal skins. What he owned fit in a pouch. His walls were the mountains; his ceiling, the stars.

But not anymore. His frontier is walled out; his horizon, hidden. The stars are memories. The fresh air is all but forgotten. And the stench of the dungeon relentlessly reminds the child of the desert that he is now a captive of the evil king.

John the Baptist – the forerunner of the Christ, the Messiah – a relative of Jesus – the one who cries in the wilderness, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

But his voice is no longer crying in the wilderness. Now it's crying in the dungeon of doubt.

John got on the king's bad side when he called him on the carpet. King Herod succumbed to the enticements of his brother's wife, Herodius. He divorced his wife and brought his sister-in-law home from Rome. John the Baptist didn't care if he was the king. John pounced on Herod like a desert scorpion, denouncing the marriage for what it was – adultery.

Herod was ready enough to let it go, but not Herodius. This steamy seductress wasn't about to have her social climbing exposed. She told Herod to have John pulled off the speaking circuit and thrown into the dungeon. As Lucado puts it, Herod hemmed and hawed until she whispered and wooed, and Herod gave in.

But that wasn't enough to satisfy her. She had her daughter – beautiful – strut before the king and his generals at a stag party. Herod, who was as easily duped as he was aroused, promised to do anything for the pretty young thing. "Anything. You name it," he drooled. She conferred with her mother, who was waiting in the wings, and returned with her request. "I want John the Baptist's head on a platter."

Herod had promised anything. He knew he had to follow through. Besides, it was more important to save face than it was to save the neck of an eccentric prophet.

John dies because Herod lusts. The good is murdered while the bad smirks. A man of God is killed while a man of passion is winking at his niece.

Is this how God rewards His anointed? Is this how He honors His faithful? Is this how God crowns the chosen – with a dark dungeon and a shiny blade?

The inconsistency was more than John could take. Even before Herod reached his verdict, John was asking the questions. He had to get the question to Jesus. He had to know.

“Jesus, are you really the Messiah.”

Look at chapter 11, verse 3.

Then John said to Jesus, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?”

I think John has some honest doubts. Psychological reconstructions of a text are always conjectural. But there can be no doubt that John was confused by everything that was happening around him. This is the one who, on the banks of the Jordan, had fearlessly proclaimed the coming of the one who would baptize with fire and whose winnowing fork would separate the chaff to be burned with the unquenchable fire. But Jesus’ messianic ministry had not quite measured up – at least by Israel’s standard. Perhaps He wasn’t the Messiah after all. Would not a messiah secure the release of his courageous forerunner?

Luke tells us that John sent two of his disciples to inquire of Jesus. So they asked, “Are you the Coming One, or should we expect someone else?” This is a text that echoes the verses of Isaiah 59:20 – “And a Redeemer will come to Zion,” and Psalm 118:26 – “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.”

How could one who had the highest view of Jesus – seeing Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – now question Jesus?

Because he’s languishing in doubt. He’s languishing in prison.

How could Jesus, who had promised to free the prisoners (Luke 4:18) not even get John out of jail? Why were there no imminent signs of the judgment of the wicked that had been predicted by John in 3:10? In fact, Jesus’ messiahship so little resembled the political and military program of the liberation that Israel had anticipated that John begins to have his doubts.

John has some unmet expectations. John is in trouble, and Jesus is conducting business as usual. Is this what messiahs do when trouble comes? Is this what God does when His followers are in a bind?

Jesus’ silence was enough to chisel a leak in the dam of John’s belief. “Are you the one, or have I been following the wrong Lord?”

We've all been right there with John in the dungeon of doubt. If God is so good, then why do we hurt so badly? If God is really there, then why am I here? What did I ever do to deserve this? Did God forget me this time? Why, why are the righteous persecuted?

A dear widow woman in Cleveland feels that way.

I'm sitting alone tonight thinking that suicide would be easier than living, now that my husband has died. It has been 14 months since Ed's sudden death. He was 55.

We were married 37 years and did everything together. Ed's funeral was the biggest the town had ever seen. But where are all those people now? The couples we socialized with for years have dropped me like a hot potato. Don't they realize that I'm still the same person, only now I don't have Ed?

I joined a golf club. I volunteer one day a week at the hospital. But in the lonely hours I wonder what is the matter with me that no one invites me anywhere.

**I'm ready to give up.
(Ann Landers, Wednesday, October 18, 1989)**

We know that feeling – the feeling of John the Baptist, the feeling of the widow from Cleveland – the feeling that we discover in the dungeon of doubt.

If Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah – then why? Why are we confined? Why are we downtrodden? Why are we pressed from every side? Why does hardship mount upon hardship, sickness upon sickness, tragedy upon tragedy?

“Jesus, are you really the Messiah, or are we supposed to be looking for someone else?”

Notice Jesus' answer in verse 4. Jesus sends the inquirers back to John with instructions to tell him what they are hearing and seeing. It is up to John to grasp the appropriate messianic implications. Faith is always our own personal response and can never be the mere mechanical repetition of what has been said to us, what has been taught to us. Jesus' allusion comes from Isaiah 29, Isaiah 35, and Isaiah 61. It corresponds to the ministry of Jesus in Matthew 8 and 9 – curing the blind, the lame, the deaf – helping the poor, who are those who fully realize their spiritual poverty. Those who take no offense at Jesus' messianic activity and accept Him for who He is are said to be blessed.

Jesus knew His mission. He knew He had been sent by the Father. John's doubts do not make Jesus insecure. And He knew John would recognize the words of Scripture fulfilled.

Some of you this morning are in that dungeon of doubt. You're right there with John the Baptist. You're right there with the widow from Cleveland. If the Gospel is really true, then why do I hurt so badly, and why is life so empty, null and void?

Our doubts, just like John's doubts, do not change who Jesus is. He is the Son of God, the Holy One of Israel, the only Begotten of the Father. And, like John the Baptist, we want to place our own expectations on when and how Jesus ought to act in our lives. And when, by our own reed of measure, He doesn't rescue us as we think He ought, we begin to ponder – to wonder. "Is He really the Messiah?"

It's okay to be there in the dungeon of doubt. John was there. Most of us, at some time in our life, will be there. In fact, I think it's incredibly interesting how Jesus responds to John.

Look at verse 7.

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John. "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare Your way before You.'"

John's followers returned to their rabbi to report Jesus' words. But their question had been posed in a public gathering. If doubts occurred about Jesus then, naturally, there would be questions about John's role as well, especially now if he could be thought to have changed his views of Jesus. Jesus assures the crowd of the legitimacy of John's prophetic ministry. John was not just a prophet, but the last in a series of prophets who prepared the way for Messiah and brought the old Covenant area to its culmination. John, himself, was still the threshold of the coming Kingdom of God.

Rather than disparaging John the Baptist, Jesus says in verse 11, "To tell you the truth, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force."

Ever since the days of John the Baptist, the kingdom of heaven has been under assault by violent men who were trying to overcome it by force. Despite all the blessings that we might expect with the presence of the Messiah, even in John's day there is opposition, there is battle, there is suffering, there is pain. John is arrested by Herod. The Jewish teachers are increasingly opposing Jesus, and people are growing more and more discontented with Jesus' refusal to promote their political revolution.

Yes, Jesus is the Messiah. But until the complete fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, even the Messiah suffers.

No – especially the Messiah suffers.

It is not God who brings the suffering. It is the enemies themselves – the powers of darkness, chief among them Satan.

God never promises that His people will not suffer. If we are going to follow the chief one who suffered – the Messiah – we, too, must expect to continue to live in the harsh and broken world ripped apart by the power of sin. God’s perfect creation gone awry because of man’s disobedience.

There is a reason that the great hymns of the church have endured – in some cases for hundreds of years. They are not based on joyful jingles that tickle our ears. Rather, they are based on solid theological truth.

There is one written in 1824. “Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken.” The music was arranged from Mozart. Absorb, if you dare, the truth of these incredible words. John might well want to sing this hymn while he’s in the dungeon of doubt, awaiting execution by Herod.

**Jesus, I my cross have taken,
All to leave, and follow Thee;
Naked, poor, despised, forsaken,
Thou, from hence, my all shalt be;
Perish every fond ambition,
All I’ve sought and hoped and known;
Yet how rich is my condition:
God and heaven are still my own!**

**Go, then, earthly fame and treasure!
Come disaster, scorn and pain!
In Thy service, pain is pleasure;
With Thy favor, loss is gain;
I have called Thee “Abba, Father”;
I have stayed my heart on Thee.
Storms may howl and clouds may gather;
All must work for good to me.**

This message is different from the “something good is going to happen to you” that we hear so often in modern music. It may even be unpalatable to our modern world. But it’s biblically accurate. And you can build a rock-solid foundation of faith on it. With it, you can cope with whatever life throws at you – even when God makes absolutely no sense. As the Psalmist would say, it will hold you when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, because you don’t even have to fear evil. Life can never take us by surprise again, as James Dobson says. Everything is committed to Him, whether we understand the circumstances or not, whether we’re confused, like John, or whether it’s crystal-clear. With a well-fortified faith, the “awesome why” loses its scary significance. It’s not our responsibility to explain what God is allowing to happen in our lives. He has not yet provided enough information for us to figure it out. We’re in the dungeon of doubt. Instead, we’re simply asked to turn loose and to let God be God. Therein lies the secret to the “peace that transcends all understanding.”

Some of you here are in the throes of divorce. To you I say, “He is the Messiah.” Some of you have just received news of cancer. To you I say, “He’s still the Messiah.” Some of you have experienced the tragedy, the loss of death. I say to you, “He is still the Messiah.” Some of you

have been laid off from your place and position of employment. I say to you, “He is still the Messiah.”

Some of you are in the dungeon of doubt. I say to you, “He is still the Messiah.”

Go and tell John....