

In the Dungeon of Doubt

Luke 7:18-35

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Summary: As Jesus continues His earthly ministry, He is visited by representatives from his cousin—John the Baptist—who is unsure if Jesus really is the Messiah. Even though John the Baptist was commissioned to prepare the way for Jesus as the Messiah, even he has doubts about Jesus. Watch as Jesus acknowledges his doubts, confirms His identity as Savior, and promises to be a help in time of trouble. He is still that help for us today.

John Bunyan was a pastor who lived in the mid-1600s in England. Because of his biblical convictions, he refused to align his church with the Church of England and was often thrown in jail for preaching as an unauthorized pastor.

While serving time—more than once—he ended up writing several books. The most famous one, published in 1678, was entitled, “The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to that Which is to Come;” now, simply known now as Pilgrim’s Progress. I have illustrated many times from this book, and if you haven’t read it, you should.

In this extensive allegory, Bunyan writes about the experiences of a young believer named Christian who is traveling from his home village to the Celestial City or Heaven. His experiences along the way

essentially represent the trials and temptations of every Christian. But John Bunyan included many of his own challenges, especially his recurring battle with doubt.

In one chapter, as Christian and his traveling companion Hopeful are traveling through a certain field, they stop to rest for the night but are then captured by a giant named Despair. The giant takes them to his castle, called, Doubting Castle, where he throws them into a dungeon cell. Over the course of several days, they are beaten by the Giant Despair who enjoys making their lives miserable.

Finally, one night, Christian and Hopeful are praying for help and suddenly Christian remembers that when he had come to the cross and his burden of sin

had fallen off his shoulders and into the abyss, he had been given a key, called Promise. He took it from his pocket and when he slipped it into the lock of their cell door, it opened. The key opened every locked door that stood in their way to freedom.

Finally, they reached the outer gate of the castle and it opened as well. Bunyan writes with realism that this final gate was stubborn and hard to open. But finally, it gave way, and they ran for their lives back to the King's Highway.

John Bunyan was revealing with transparency what every honest Christian I know acknowledges: a struggle at times with the Giant Despair and his Doubting Castle.

William Carey, the man we now call the Father of Modern Missions, was used wonderfully in India for decades, translating the Bible into numerous languages, planting churches, and founding schools for the poor. In 1794, he wrote in his journal: "I am defective in all my duties; in prayer I wander . . . I soon tire; my devotion languishes; my soul is a jungle, when it ought to be a garden; I am, perhaps, the most inconsistent [Christian]. I can scarcely tell if I have the grace of God or not."

Quotes taken from S. Pearce Carey, [William Carey](#) (The Watchman Trust, 1923), p. 126

That's what you call being incarcerated in Doubting Castle by a giant named Despair.

Warren Wiersbe writes, "It isn't unusual even for great spiritual leaders to have

their days of doubt and uncertainty. Moses wanted to quit, as did Elijah and Jeremiah" ... Thomas doubted the resurrection and most of the disciples quit.

Wiersbe adds this insightful comment: "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."

Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, [Be Compassionate: Luke 1-13](#) (Victor Books, 1989), p. 76

One more quote on the subject, this one from Oswald Chambers who wrote: "Doubt is not always a sign that someone is wrong—it might be a sign that they are thinking"—deeply.

Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 77

And what they need is encouragement and that key called Promise—the promise and truth of God's Word.



Describe a time when God's Word helped you overcome a period of doubt or despair. What did you learn about God and His promises when you look back on that ordeal?

I want to show you a great spiritual leader who is languishing in a literal dungeon of doubt and despair.

He happens to be the last Old Testament prophet; he's in prison because he courageously told King Herod that he sinned by taking his brother's wife for himself. And that wife, of course, will go on to hate John with a vengeance.

In a matter of months, she will succeed in having John the Baptist beheaded for doing nothing more than telling the truth.

Let's go to John's prison cell and learn something about overcoming Doubting Castle.

We're in Luke's Gospel, now at chapter 7, and let's back up to verse 14, where Jesus interrupted that boy's funeral:

Then [Jesus] came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.

Luke 7:14-17

Now let's pick it up at verse 18:

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, 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?" 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

Now let's understand a little background before we accuse John of faithlessness.

John had lived his entire life in the outdoors; his diet was locusts and wild honey; he wore a simple camel hair robe and a belt made of leather he more than likely tanned himself.

We aren't told of any instances where he preached indoors.

But now he's been in prison for a year and a half; he's in a prison cell located in the fortress of Machaerus, near the Dead Sea. The ruins of that castle dungeon remain to this day, complete with iron hooks. We can't imagine a more desolate, discouraging place than this castle dungeon.

R. Kent Hughes, [Luke: Volume 1](#) (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 267

John has evidently grown disillusioned during this year and a half in prison. And think of all he had expected.

He had preached that the golden age of God's kingdom was just around the corner.

He had introduced Jesus by announcing back in Luke chapter 3 that the Messiah was going to come with a baptism of fire, separating the wheat from the chaff; he had announced the wrath of God was on its way and it would burn the chaff in unquenchable fire (Luke 3:17).

So where was that fire? Where was God's wrath? Where was the conquering King and the dawning of the kingdom age?

Herod was still on his throne. The religious hypocrites were still running the Temple. The Roman government was still in charge.

What's going on?

So, let's not be too hard on John. We happen to know more about God's prophetic timeline with our completed Bibles than John could have imagined.

And remember as well that even the disciples of Jesus didn't grasp His full identity until later. Peter's great confession about the identity of Jesus as the Son of God didn't take place until after John the Baptist was dead.

So, if you have ever been at a place in your life when you've wondered what in the world God was doing, remember John! None of this made sense.

We're told here that he finally sends two of his disciples to go find Jesus and basically ask Him a question that I believe is loaded with confusion and sorrow and

doubt. Your translation might read, "Are you the one we were expecting?"

And what they mean is, "If you are the one we were expecting, why isn't anything happening that we expected?"

Isn't that what creates the iron bars in Doubting Castle? God is doing something we weren't expecting; God is *not* doing something we expected Him to do; God doesn't seem to be doing anything we expected.

None of this makes any sense!

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."

I happen to be grateful that God is transparent enough about the life of His greatest Old Testament prophet to include this conversation.

Because we would assume that somebody like John would have the answers; that that he would never do anything out of emotion or doubt or disappointment. He would certainly not question Jesus.



Have you ever questioned Jesus? What did you learn about Him? How did He answer your question?

How can you question God without falling into unbelief?

And think about this: with what John believed about Jesus, he also knew that all Jesus would have to do is speak one word and Herod would be deposed, the Roman government crushed, and don't forget this: his own cell door would swing open. "Why isn't my cell door swinging open?"

Just one word from Jesus is all it would take. But Jesus never speaks that one word.

Instead, Jesus says here in verse 22:

"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."

Luke 7:22b

Don't miss the point: Jesus does not say, "Go back and tell John I can't believe he's questioning who I am. What do you mean, **'should we look for someone else?'**"

"After he baptized me, introduced me as the Lamb of God, heard the voice of my Father from Heaven, after all that, he still has doubts?"

What Jesus does here in this response is deliver quotations from God's Word in the Book of Isaiah.

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.

Isaiah 26:19, your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise; Isaiah 29:18, in that day the deaf shall hear; Isaiah 35:5, the eyes of the blind shall be opened; Isaiah 61:1, [God's anointed] will bring good news to the poor.

Jesus says, "John, remember; this is who I am. Here, grab onto this key called Promise."

Jesus then says here in verse 23:

"And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Luke 7:23

You could expand and paraphrase this to mean, "John, you will sense my blessing when you're not resentful or annoyed, or tripped up, or embittered by what might happen when following Me."

And evidently these quotations from Isaiah were good enough for John. While it did not set him physically free, it set his mind and his heart free; the key of promise was good enough for John.

Now, just in case someone in the crowd might get the wrong impression about John or conclude that Jesus is rebuking him, Jesus sets the record straight here with an amazing tribute to the prophet.

Adapted from Bruce B. Barton, *Life Application Bible Commentary: Luke* (Tyndale, 1997), p. 182

Jesus reminds the crowd that when they went out to hear John preach, he wasn't **a reed** shaking in the wind (**verse 24**), that is, "a man yielding to popular opinion without any conviction".

R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), p. 409

In **verse 25**, Jesus says that John wasn't bending to the pressure of powers in high places, he wasn't bribed or swayed or softened by the luxuries of life.

Lewis Foster, *Unlocking the Scriptures for You: Luke* (Standard Publishing, 1986), p. 125

Jesus says to the crowd here in **verse 26** that John was the prophet of God, and not just any prophet.

Jesus goes on here in **verse 27** to quote **Malachi 3 and verse 1** about the prophetic ministry that John fulfilled by introducing the coming King.

So, John wasn't just any prophet; he was the *final* prophet who had the privilege of introducing the Savior.

Jesus adds an encouragement in verse 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."

Luke 7:28

Just as Thomas was blessed by believing in the resurrected Savior after he saw the Lord, the Lord said that we are more blessed by believing in Him whom we have not seen (John 20:29).

So also here, how much greater is your faith than the prophet John, who saw Jesus; who heard the voice of God? But you believe in Jesus, and you have yet to hear Him or see Him face to face.

Now with that, this crowd is buzzing, and they are immediately polarized.

On one hand you have all the sinners. You know, all those tax collectors and common people who weren't running around trying to deny they were sinners, **in fact, we're told here in verse 29** they had been immersed by John in the Jordan river demonstrating their repentance—admitting their sin.

But on the other hand, you have all these religious leaders who refused to believe John and essentially refused to repent; they weren't sinners in need of saving.

So, Jesus now turns to the crowd of unbelievers and delivers a rather pointed message—verse 31:

"To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? 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.'"

Luke 7:31-32

What Jesus is doing is comparing the unbeliever to children playing games. Like girls playing house or boys playing cowboys and Indians—at a time when that game wasn't politically incorrect.

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.

Well Jesus refers here to children either pretending to be at a funeral or at a wedding celebration; these religious leaders just won't play.

Nothing makes them happy. Nothing cheers them up. Nothing is any good ever. Just like a baby who's not getting their way.

Verse 33 seems to analogize John as the funeral director; there's no party in his ministry, he's demanding death to self by immersion as a sign of repentance. So,

the religious babies say **John is demon possessed**.

What about Jesus? He began His ministry at a wedding, He seems to go from one feast to the next, and it's mostly joyful and happy but the religious babies are stomping their feet and now crying, **He's a glutton and a drunkard**.

Either way, they won't play; they won't admit that John or Jesus—or both—are right!

"Yet wisdom is justified by all her children."

Luke 7:35

So, Jesus concludes here in **verse 35** by effectively saying that all we need to do is wait, be patient; wisdom will be justified in the end, the gospel will be proven right, the truth will be vindicated by the generations of children who grow up to follow the Savior.

I think even now, millions of people around the world know the name of Jesus, but you would be hard pressed to meet someone here in town who knows even one name of one of these religious leaders here.

All because their problem wasn't doubt, it was unbelief.



What is the difference between doubt and unbelief?

Doubters have trouble understanding what God is doing; unbelievers don't care what God is doing.

In 1887 Henry Drummond wrote with great insight, "Jesus never failed to distinguish doubt from unbelief. Doubt is honest; unbelief is obstinate. Doubt is looking for the light it knows exists; unbelief denies the light and is content to stay in the darkness."

Adapted from [Illustrations and Quotes](#) by Robert J. Morgan (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 2000), p. 245

While most people are familiar with *Doubting Castle* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, the first book ever written by John Bunyan was entitled, [Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners](#). This little volume is Bunyan's spiritual autobiography.

Again, one of the recurring themes in this little book is his struggle with doubt and discouragement. But he repeatedly leads us to this same key of Promise that answers his doubts and returns joy to his spirit. He writes of one occasion, and I quote:

"I had no sooner begun to recall my experiences of the goodness of God, then there came flooding into my mind the remembrance of a number of sins, especially my coldness of heart, my

weariness in doing good, my lack of love for God, His ways, and His people. And along with these sins, came this question. Are these the fruits of a true Christian? I became sick in my inward man and my experiences of God's goodness were taken from my mind as though they had never existed. As I was walking up and down in my house, in the most dreadful state of mind, the word of God came to my heart: ***"You are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (repeat) Romans 3:24.*** [What a promise] And what a turn this made upon me! Oh, what a change it made."

John Bunyan, [Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners: A Spiritual Autobiography](#) (1666, reprint 1959, Moody Press), p. 88

Have you ever thought about the fact that John's disciples never came back to Jesus with another question? After delivering these verses to John from the Book of Isaiah, that was enough.

You and I escape *Doubting Castle* time after time the same way; not by some mighty heroic act of faith where we kill the giant; or by some inner determination to be better. No, we escape by reaching once again—utterly helpless and weak—for the key called Promise, the promises of the Word of God.

Don't forget to use your key:

- Are you learning this key?
- Are you memorizing this key?
- Are you quoting this key to the Giant Despair?

- Are you a close friend of this key?
- Are you keeping it close at hand as you walk through life?

One author, after reading John Bunyan's writings, wrote this prayer, and I have already prayed this for you today. With this I close:

*Lord, we pray for every
believer
Caught by despair, who
struggles in grief;
Locked in Doubting*

*Castle's dungeon,
Stripped of hope and its
relief.
Father help them to
remember
That Your promise is the
key;
That unlocks the cell that
holds them,
And by Your truth, sets
them free.*

(Adapted from "[A Prayer for Pilgrims](#)" by Ken Puls; the text for *The Pilgrim's Progress* and images used are public domain Notes and Commentary ©2018 Ken Puls)

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