

Doubting, Rejecting, and Resting in Jesus

Isaiah 1:18-20; Matthew 11:1-30

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Dear Congregation of Christ, in all of human history, most people always had doubted and rejected God and his Word, the Bible. Abraham doubted God's promise that he would have a covenant son after 25 years of waiting on God. Gideon doubted God's promise of victory over Israel's enemies and asked for a sign from God twice. And we all know how the idiom "Doubting Thomas" was coined. Today, there are even more people who doubt and even reject God and Christ and the Scriptures. Let me quote a couple:

Jesus walking on water is an allegory, not fluid mechanics. God destroying the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is a warning, not a historical battle. Doubting Thomas is an example, not a person. The story of Noah, with all of its scientific and historical impossibilities, can be read the same way. ~ Kyle Hill, Scientific American blogger

Humanists also reject the Bible because it approves of outrageous cruelty and injustice. The biblical God is also guilty of inflicting punishment that are grossly disproportionate to the acts committed. He damned the whole human race and cursed the entire creation because of the acts of two people; he drowned pregnant women and innocent children and animals at the time of the Flood; and he killed Egyptian babies at the time of the Passover. In the New Testament, God became for worse in regard to imposing excessively severe punishment. It would be hard to imagine anything more cruel and disproportionate than punishing people with eternal torture for mere disbelief that Jesus was the son of God.¹

These are some of the most common arguments against Christianity that we hear. Is it a sin to doubt God? If a Christian doubts his faith, is he a real Christian? Our text today has three parts. First, while John the Baptizer was in prison, he had doubts if Jesus was really the Christ sent by God. Second, while John doubted, most Jews were even worse – they rejected Jesus. Finally, Jesus offers hope and comfort to weary doubters and rejecters: rest in him by faith.

Doubting Jesus

John the Baptizer was appointed by God as his messenger to "prepare the way" for the coming of Jesus to preach the gospel of repentance and salvation (verse 10). He was "Elijah who is to come" in Malachi 4:5 (Luke 1:17). He preached, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (3:2), and baptized all who came to him as a sign of their repentance. And he preached God's call freely and boldly against the sins of the people, including the adultery of King Herod, who married his brother's wife Herodias. For offending the king, John was sent to prison (14:3-5; Mark 6:17-20) and eventually beheaded.

¹ Joseph C. Sommer, "Some Reasons Why Humanists Reject the Bible." American Humanist Association. <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/reasons-humanists-reject-bible/>. Accessed 11-9-18.

From prison, John heard about “the deeds of the Christ,” so he sent messengers to Jesus to inquire, “*Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?*” (verse 3) The works that Jesus did were healing the blind, lame, lepers, deaf, raising the dead, and preaching the gospel. So Jesus tells the messengers to bring this news to John. With this information, John should be assured that Jesus is the Christ. He knew that the Isaiah 61:1 prophesied that the Messiah would perform such signs and wonders, and at the same time preach the good news. This is the same verse that Jesus read at the synagogue in his hometown Nazareth when he began preaching. Then he told the congregation, “*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” Because of this declaration of himself at the promised Messiah, the Jews wanted to kill him (Luke 4:16-21, 28-29).

John was also the one who heard the voice of the Father say at Jesus’ baptism, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*” (3:17). He must also have been taught by his mother Elizabeth that Jesus his cousin was the one of whom the angel prophesied to his Aunt Mary, “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God*” (Luke 1:35). If Jesus was this Holy Child whom he baptized, why then would John doubt that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God?

But John’s doubt could be expected. Believers like Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, and other prophets doubted God at some points in their lives. John also expected that Jesus would not only preach the gospel and heal the sick, but also bring quick judgment, when he said early in his ministry, “*Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*” (3:10). John also suffered unjustly in jail, and he might have been expecting a powerful Messiah that would destroy unrepentant evildoers, especially the Roman tyrants (14:3).

As human beings, it is natural for us believers to sometimes doubt God’s goodness when we suffer. Is our faith weak when we doubt? Is doubt an evidence of losing our salvation? The Christian philosopher Os Guinness once wrote, “Doubt is not the opposite of faith, nor is it the same as unbelief. Doubt is a state of mind in suspension between faith and unbelief...” But doubt is not healthy for the Christian. It is part of the devil’s deception, his “flaming darts” (Eph 6:16) thrown to us to make us despair and lose our faith, if that is even possible (24:24).

Our readings from the Belgic Confession of Faith are helpful. Article 23 Paragraph 2 says that we are saved only by God’s grace in Christ. Therefore, we cling only to this foundation of our faith, not claiming any merit for ourselves, and “leaning and resting only on the obedience of Christ crucified.” Christ’s death is enough to “make us confident” so that we do not fear God’s judgment. Article 24 Paragraphs 7 and 8 add that although good works are evidences of our faith, “we cannot do any work that is not defiled by our flesh and also worthy of punishment... So we would always be in doubt... without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be tormented constantly if they do not rest on the merit of the suffering and death of our Savior.”

Telling believers to always examine their lives and their works, whether they are good or bad, fosters doubts. Some pastors even ask their congregations often, “Are you truly saved?” Preaching and teaching should encourage assurance of salvation, not doubt.

So when in doubt, remember that all believers struggle with doubts all their lives, especially when they fall into sin and suffer from affliction, broken relationships, financial hardship, or even persecution. Don't look inward on your sins or feelings. Look to Jesus, *"the founder and perfecter of our faith"* (Heb 12:2), who merited our salvation by his perfect obedience and cruel death on the cross. Read the Bible, for it is the word of life *"to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life"* (1 John 5:11). And always pray, *"Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!"* (Mark 9:24). Hebrews 10:22 encourages us, *"Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith."* If you have faith in Christ as your Savior, then you are one of God's elect (John 6:47).

Look to Jesus who will complete our faith. Read the Bible, the words of life. Pray to God in assurance of faith. And be involved regularly in the life of the church: worship, Bible studies, Sunday schools, and fellowship. Without these, we easily forget our doctrines and the Bible's assuring words.

Rejecting Jesus

Jesus did not rebuke John when he doubted. Rather, he reassured John that he is the promised Messiah who was to come, even if he was rotting in prison. In verse 11, Jesus then praised John as the last of the Old Testament prophets. He was the greatest prophet because he prepared the way for The Prophet, Jesus, who was the Son of God, the Lord himself. However, John was beheaded before Christ finished his work of salvation on the cross (Mark 6:27). So, we on this side of the cross are "greater than he," because we are privileged to see the finished work of Christ in history.

Our Lord also praised John in three ways. John was not "a reed shaken by the wind" (verse 7). His preaching was fiery, and he was not hindered by the danger of offending the authorities. He was not dressed in "soft clothing," but in camel hair, and even ate locusts and wild honey. He was tough. And John was "more than a prophet," because he would be the messenger of the coming Messiah.

But those unbelieving Jews? They were hard to please. They had no satisfaction. Jesus compares them to stubborn children who throw tantrums for the most senseless reasons. A candy or toy or playground can please them only for a moment, and then it's on to something else. The Pharisees were like these children. John did not join their feasting, but ate locusts and honey, and they said he has a demon. Jesus joined the feasting, and they called him a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of despised sinners. But Jesus justified himself with his wisdom and works. And those of us who believe – and are not offended – by his signs, preaching and death on the cross are blessed.

John had doubts, but Jesus' gentle and respectful response was enough for him to erase his doubts about Jesus the Messiah (verse 20). Jesus gave him evidences and did not rebuke him for doubting him. He understood the reasons why John doubted. Even great men of old doubted God when they were in dire situations like John. So if someone doubts that Jesus is Christ the Savior, give him words of encouragement. Do not drive them away with unwise words.

With Jesus' wise words, John was easily reassured of Jesus as the Christ. But the Pharisees, scribes and elders were hard to please. Repeatedly, they would ask Jesus for another sign after he had just done many. They heard his preaching of the coming of the kingdom. But none of these were enough for them to believe. They had stony hearts. They were not teachable. So they rejected Jesus.

This is why in verses 20-24, Jesus pronounced a “woe” of both lamentation and anger against three cities of Israel. These were the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum where he preached and performed most of his signs and miracles. Capernaum was Jesus’ ministry base in Galilee. Still, these cities remained unrepentant. It’s astonishing that he has judgment stored for these cities worse than that of pagan cities outside of Israel like Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon (in present-day Lebanon) were under God’s wrath in Isaiah 23. In fact, the punishment of Sodom, a city known for its sexual immorality and cruelty, would be more tolerable than that of unbelieving Jews! But the “woe” also includes a reprieve if they repented of their sins and believed in him.

Does this mean that Tyre and Sidon would have repented if they heard the gospel and saw the signs that Jesus did? Jesus seems to be saying so. Remember Nineveh? It was a great but wicked pagan city, but after Jonah preached the gospel to them, they and their king repented of their sins and believed (Jon 3:6-10). So God pardoned them and gave them a reprieve. What’s even more astounding is that on Judgment Day, Jesus says that the people of Nineveh who repented and believed will judge the unrepentant and unbelieving people of Israel! (Matt 12:41)

This also means that there are degrees of punishment in hell. Those who have heard the gospel and rejected Jesus would be judged more severely than those who have never heard. The more knowledge of Christ a person has, the more accountable he is on Judgment Day. There are degrees of punishment in hell. In Luke 12:41-48, Jesus tells of the parable of the servants to whom the master entrusted his household so he could go to a wedding feast. The servant who knew the day of his master’s return, but who did not do his assigned task, will be beaten severely. But the servant who did not do his task, but did not know about his master’s return, will be beaten lightly. Again, judgment is commensurate with knowledge.

Resting in Jesus

But to doubters and rejecters, Jesus offers an invitation that no one should refuse. It is the promise of rest in him in verses 25-30. Those who hear the gospel and see the works that he had done – and then repent and believe – will be given rest for their souls. They will be like little children who do not have the pride and arrogance of adults who think they are wise but are actually fools. They do not repent because God does not send the Holy Spirit to change their stony hearts into believing hearts. Only a handful of Pharisees and rulers of the Jews, such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, were given new hearts and new minds by the Spirit (John 19:39; Mark 15:43). They were chosen to repent and believe before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4). It is the sovereign God who chooses those to whom the gospel will be revealed and accepted (1 Cor 1:18). And God also chooses those to whom the gospel will be hidden and meaningless (1 Cor 2:14).

Jesus invites all who are weary to rest in him. But he also invites them to take his “yoke” and “burden.” In ancient agriculture, a yoke is placed on the shoulder of an animal to work the field. So a yoke is often associated with hard labor as slaves, as when the LORD promised Israel that he will lift the yoke and the burden of Assyria from their shoulder (Isa 14:25).

In the same way, Jesus condemned the Pharisees because they placed heavy burdens on the shoulders of the Jews with so many additions to the Law of Moses (Matt 23:4). The burden of guilt was too much for them. Peter says that the law of circumcision was a yoke not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles (Acts 15:10). Paul says that the law is both a curse and a prison (Gal 3:10, 23). And we can only escape from this curse and prison by faith in Christ, because no one can be justified by obeying the law (Gal 3:11).

But “yoke” can also be a service to a good master. When we rest through faith alone in Christ alone, our yokes and burdens are lifted. Our hard labor ceases and actually changes into joyful work for our Master. Also, his commands free us from our slavery to burdensome laws and sins. He tells us, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”* (John 8:31-32). When we learn about him and his gospel, and obey his commands, we are truly freed from our yoke of doubts and sins. We have a yoke to bear, but they are not burdensome. They are easy, light, comforting and reassuring.

Dear friends, we all feel the burden of guilt and remorse when we sin. We doubt when afflictions, failures and problems overwhelm us. When these burdens are too great for us to bear, we often doubt that Jesus is the Christ who came to save us from sin and preserve us through the end of our days.

But Jesus offers us rest for our burdened souls. We rest in the assurance of faith in him. We rest in our labors for him and his Church. In Jeremiah 6:16, we read, *“Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.”* We learn from the ancient paths that we walk through from the Old to the New Testaments. We learn from him when we hear the Word read and preached, sing the Word, pray the Word, and study the Word together in the church. Then we will find rest for our souls when we regularly attend the Lord’s Day worship services on our day of rest.