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"John the Baptist: When in Doubt"

John 1

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When we think of John the Baptist, we can easily think of him as a larger-than-life hero of the faith: He was foretold by the prophets, had an angelic birth announcement, and walked out his calling in humility, boldness, and truth. But even a man of God is still a man. Though he was strong in the Lord, he had frailties like the rest of us. The Bible records one such moment of frailty when John, imprisoned for his bold faith, began to doubt whether Jesus was truly the Messiah. In this study, we will see that while doubts may trouble us as Believers, we can encourage ourselves in the Lord by remembering God's past wonders and choosing to cling to faith and trust in God.

1. **John 1:19–28** – *"Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the Prophet?' And he answered, 'No.' Then they said to him, 'Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?' He said: 'I am "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the LORD," as the prophet Isaiah said.' Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. And they asked him, saying, 'Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?' John answered them, saying, 'I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.' These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing."*
 - a. "Bethabara" is also called Bethany.
2. The prophecies about John the Baptist
 - a. The angel Gabriel prophesied to Zacharias about the birth of John.
 - i. **Luke 1:13–17** – *"But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children," and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'"*
 1. John may have been under the Nazarite vow because he would "drink neither wine nor strong drink."

- b. John's ministry was prophesied by the prophets Isaiah and Malachi centuries prior.
 - i. **Isaiah 40:3** – *"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"*
 - ii. **Malachi 3:1a** – *"Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me."*
 1. From Malachi to Matthew are 400 years.
 2. Scholars call these years "the silent years" because there was no prophetic word given during that time.
3. The ministry of John the Baptist
 - a. John grew up strong in the Holy Spirit and lived in the wilderness.
 - i. **Luke 1:80** – *"So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel."*
 - ii. Scholars think John probably lived in the wilderness of Judea.
 1. The wilderness of Judea was west of the Dead Sea.
 2. This wilderness was also where Jesus fasted for 40 days before entering ministry.
 3. **DISCUSS**: How has God used places that were significant to you to bring your focus back onto Him?
 - b. John was a preacher of repentance and baptized people in the Jordan River.
 - i. **Mark 1:4–5** – *"John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins."*
 - ii. The Jordan River extends north to the Sea of Galilee.
 - c. John's ministry lasted about a year.
 - d. John is considered the last of the Old Testament prophets.
 - i. In a sense, the Old Testament was complete after John's ministry introduced Christ.
 - e. John may have been an Essene.
 - i. The Essenes were an ancient Jewish group that began around 200 B.C.
 - ii. The Essenes lived in the Caves of Qumran, north of the Dead Sea.
 - iii. The Essenes wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls.
 - iv. The Essenes wore camel's hair, lived in the wilderness, ate honey and locusts, and baptized people.
 1. John's clothes were made from camel hair, and he wore a leather belt (**Mark 1:6**).
 2. John ate locusts and wild honey (**Mark 1:6**).

4. The character of John the Baptist

a. John was humble.

- i. John knew he was not the Messiah but was there to testify of the Messiah (**John 1:20–23**).

1. **John 1:30** – *“This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’”*

- ii. **John 3:29** – *“He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.”*

1. Jesus is the Bridegroom of the church, and John was happy to be the best man at the wedding.

2. **DISCUSS**: Do you promote yourself, or Christ? Are you giving glory to God?

b. John was bold.

- i. In **Matthew 3:7–12**, John preached against the Pharisees for their hypocrisy.

- ii. In **Matthew 14:3–4**, John preached against Herod Antipas for sleeping with his brother’s wife, Herodias.

1. Herod was intrigued by John, but Herodias wanted John dead because she was offended.

2. Herodias was Herod’s wife, his brother’s wife, and Herod’s niece.

3. **DISCUSS**: Do you pray for boldness? How has the Lord given you the boldness to obey His Word?

- iii. John confronted the government and was imprisoned and martyred for his bold faith.

1. **DISCUSS**: How do you respond to correction?

c. John was truthful.

- i. **John 1:29** – *“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’”*

- ii. **John 3:36** – *“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”*

- iii. **DISCUSS**: How has the truth of God’s Word spoken to you? Have you shared that truth with others?

5. A moment of doubt

a. John’s questions

- i. While John was in prison, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the Christ.

1. **Matthew 11:3** – “Are you the Messiah we’ve been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?” (NLT)
- ii. When John was baptizing people, he did not doubt; John even called Jesus the Son of God.
- iii. John doubted later because of his circumstances.
 1. John likely pictured the Messiah as a conquering hero, as did most of the Jews.
 2. John had known he was to be the forerunner to the Messiah and did not understand how his time in prison fit into that.
- b. Jesus’ answer
 - i. Jesus gave a gentle answer to affirm His identity as the prophesied Messiah.
 1. Jesus sent John’s disciples to tell John about the miracles they had seen.
 2. **Matthew 11:4–6** – “Jesus told them, ‘Go back to John and tell him what you have heard and seen—the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor. And tell him, ‘God blesses those who do not turn away because of me.’”
 3. **DISCUSS:** Have life’s challenges led you to doubt and discouragement? How did the Lord answer you in that season?
- c. The measure of a man
 - i. John was not defined by his doubts. He would end up giving his life for his faith.
 1. Believers who love the Lord can still go through seasons of doubt.
 2. Doubt and disbelief are not the same.
 - a. Doubt is a state of mind where you wonder and struggle to comprehend what God is doing.
 - b. Disbelief is a state of the will where you refuse to believe in God.
- d. Doubts amid challenging times
 - i. Sometimes life can lead us to question and even doubt what God is doing.
 1. Men of God like Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Paul, and Peter went through seasons of doubt and discouragement, too.
 2. God still met them where they were and helped them get up again.
 - ii. Even someone of great faith can have moments of doubt.

1. We must encourage ourselves in the Lord so that seasons of doubt do not lead us down a slippery slope.
 2. **DISCUSS**: How do we avoid dwelling on our doubts? Who or what should we dwell on instead?
- iii. God calls us to believe.
1. When Jesus appeared to His disciples after His resurrection, He told them to stop doubting and believe (**Luke 24:38**).
- iv. Belief and unbelief can coexist.
1. When a man brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus for healing, the Lord told him to believe. The father responded, “*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*” and God healed the boy (**Mark 9:24**).
 2. **DISCUSS**: When you are between belief and unbelief, how do you lean into belief? How has the Lord raised you up out of your fears and doubts?
- e. Defining doubt
- i. “*Doubt*” in the Greek is **distazo**, meaning “to waver in opinion, to lack confidence, or to consider unlikely.”
 1. Eve lacked confidence in God’s Word (**Genesis 3**).
 2. Zechariah lacked trust in God’s ability to work (**Luke 1**).
 - ii. If you dwell on your doubts, they will destroy your life (**James 1:5–8**).
- f. Resolving doubt
- i. Remember the Lord’s past wonders (**Psalms 77:11**).
 1. Trust that God will be good to you in the present and future like He was in the past.
 2. Trust that God can shape you into His image through your present and future trials, like He did in the past.
 3. **DISCUSS**: What do you go back to so that you may remember the goodness and trustworthiness of our God?
 - ii. Cling to your faith in Jesus in the present.
 1. **1 Timothy 1:19** – Paul told Timothy to hold onto “*faith and good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck.*”
 2. **DISCUSS**: Are you anchoring yourself by holding onto your faith in Jesus and living in good conscience toward God? What does that look like practically?
 - iii. Trust in the LORD for the future.
 1. Trust in Christ, your “*source of hope,*” to hold your future (**Romans 15:13**, NLT).

* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New King James (NKJV)