

## INTRODUCTION

As many of you know, our television broadcast goes all over East Texas. So it is very common for me to have a total stranger approach me and tell me they receive a blessing from our television ministry. A few years ago I was at Broadway Square Mall on a Saturday afternoon. I was dressed in my usual Saturday jeans and running shoes. A sweet little lady stared at me and finally said, "You look familiar to me, are you on TV somewhere?" I said, "Yes, ma'am I'm David Dykes, the pastor of Green Acres Baptist Church. She said, "Are you sure? I watch that show, and you don't look much like that preacher." I finally convinced her that I was me and she said, "Okay, I'm sorry I didn't recognize you but I guess you just look better on TV than you do in person!" I don't go to the mall very often any more.

Those are pretty discouraging words for an aging pastor! Today, we are going to look at a discouraged prophet, John the Baptist. Did you know this prophet came to a place in his spiritual life where he doubted Jesus was really the Messiah? Like the woman at the mall, he looked at Jesus' ministry and said, "You don't look much like the Messiah I expected."

Come on, let's be honest with each other. Have you ever doubted like John the Baptist? Have you ever wondered if we are all keenly intent on believing and proclaiming some ancient myth? Have you ever thought it possible we are all wrong? I have. Sometimes thoughts of doubt will sneak through my mind, whispering such questions as, "Is there really a God? Is the Bible true? Is there really an afterlife?" A wise man once said, "No person can be truly right unless he has seriously considered the possibility that he may be wrong." I believe what the Bible teaches about God and truth will stand up to any scrutiny and investigation. Healthy doubts always lead us to seek truth.

But you may be the kind of person who says, "Oh, no! Don't even say those words. I'm afraid God wouldn't like it if I doubted." Don't worry, if you have doubts, God isn't going to strike you with a lightning bolt. Let's see how Jesus reacted to John's doubt. In this passage we are going to trace four movements: a question, an answer, a compliment, and an observation.

### I. QUESTION: ARE YOU REALLY THE ONE? (18-21)

John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?'"

The last time we heard from John before this passage was in Luke 3:19 where we read, "but when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison." Herod had seduced his sister-in-law, Herodias, and had kicked his wife and children out. This was such blatant immorality that John thundered against it. Herod's attitude was, "my personal morality has nothing to do with my ability to govern, so if you don't shut up, it's the jail for you, preacher!" John wouldn't back down, so he is wasting away in Herod's prison. It's during this imprisonment when these doubts arise.

## **1. WHO? Even the most faithful doubt at times**

Who is that is expressing doubt? This is the man of God who was the forerunner of the Messiah. We read about his miraculous birth to elderly parents in Luke 1. We are told that he was "filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb." John was so certain at one time that he pointed to Jesus and shouted, "Look! Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" He was the one who baptized Jesus and heard a voice from heaven proclaim, "This is my Son, whom I love, listen to Him!" Surely this man would never? But he is the very one who said, "Are you really the one?"

If you ever have doubts, you are in pretty good company. Sometimes those closest to Jesus expressed doubts. You can hear the doubt in the voice of Martha when Jesus arrives four days after Lazarus had died. Martha had sent for Jesus and asked Him to come help Lazarus days before. It's as if she is saying, "Jesus you say that you love us, well, if you had been here my brother would not have died!" (See John 11:21)

The great prophet, Elijah got so discouraged that he doubted God's plan for his life. Elijah sits under a tree and says, "Lord, I don't like the way things are happening to me, just let me die." We have even given the title "doubting" to one of Jesus' disciples. We call him "Doubting Thomas" because he wanted to see some proof that Jesus was indeed alive after the crucifixion.

I believe that we have a lot of honest doubters among us today ... some are just closet doubters. It's okay, Jesus can handle your doubts. The next question is:

## **2. Why? Our doubts get louder in the middle of adversity**

Why do faithful servants of the Lord sometimes go through periods of doubt? Adversity can promote doubt ... or it can promote faith—it's our choice. John found it harder to ignore his doubts because he was sitting in a prison cell all day. If ever there was a free spirit who longed to be in the wide-open spaces, it was John the Baptizer. His life hadn't turned out the way he expected; He wanted to travel the desert and preach, instead he was an inmate, wasting away—that's a perfect scenario for doubts to arise.

Clark Tanner wrote:

John was a rugged individual of the wilderness, whose home and hearth were the hillsides and grasses of the Valley Jordan. His fountain was the river and his meat was the creature of the foliage. Suddenly his world was shrunken to cold, stone walls, all within arm's reach; his only light was probably a small window near the ceiling which may have given only a glimpse of a gloomy corridor, and not the sunshine at all. His life in its entirety had been spent to prepare himself and then prepare others for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, and as soon as the fulfillment came he was dragged off to spend his last days in an imposed seclusion rather than one of his choosing. Rather than being allowed to enjoy the fruits of his labors, by watching the progress of the Redeemer in His ministry, he was seemingly cast off like an old garment; discarded like a pawn

who had only served to make way for the forward movement of the King and then taken off the board.

I often sign a letter using the scripture, John 3:30 which are actually the words of John the Baptist. In his relationship with Jesus, John said, "He must increase and I must decrease." John said those words with a pure heart, but when it came to the actual "decreasing" of his life and ministry it still hurt. Maybe he thought, "I never suspected I would 'decrease' this much!"

It's almost as if John is saying, "Come on, Lord, you are supposed to be the powerful Lord of glory. If you are, what am I doing in this jail? I've heard you perform miracles, why don't you try one on getting me out of here? If you are the Deliverer, I'd sure like some deliverance about now!"

We face the same kinds of adversity when a child dies, violence strikes, a mate is slowly killed by cancer or a husband walks out. Satan begins to whisper lies in our ears, "God doesn't care... He doesn't love you. He wouldn't treat His children this way." Maybe you have come to a place of difficulty in your life. It's easy to doubt God and ask, "God are you *really* there? Do you *really* care? Why don't you get me out of this mess?" Or we don't even pray, we just think, "I don't believe a God of love would allow all this to happen to me."

There really ought to be one more question on the outline: What do you do when doubts arise? Don't deny them. Do what John did: He went straight to the source. He asked Jesus. He would have asked Him directly but he was stuck in jail. Unlike John, we can approach Jesus with our doubts and ask Him directly.

## **II. ANSWER: CONSIDER THE EVIDENCE (v. 19-23)**

At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

I'm glad Jesus didn't criticize John for doubting. He could have said, "Who does John think he is, asking a lame-brained question like that? Of course, I'm the One. Go back and tell him." Instead, Jesus honored John's question with a sincere answer.

Basically, Jesus told the two messengers to go back and present the evidence they found:

### **1. Scripture is being fulfilled!**

Jesus' statement about the blind seeing, the lame walking, the lepers being cured and preaching the good news to the poor was a direct reference to the prophecy about the Messiah found in Isaiah 35 and 61. Jesus was asking John to compare what Jesus was doing with what the scriptures had predicted.

John was frustrated because the Messiah scenario wasn't playing out the way he expected. John was a fiery prophet who preached the fire of God's judgement was going to fall on wicked people. Go back and re-study his fearless message of judgement in Luke 3:7-9. He called the Jews a bunch of poisonous snakes (you brood of vipers). He said God's axe was already at the root of the trees and every tree not bearing good fruit was going to be cut down and thrown into the fire.

John was a fireball. He expected Jesus to be a powerful Messiah who would thunder against sin and pronounce God's final judgement against wickedness and wicked people. John got the message right; he just misunderstood the timing. Jesus came as the Lamb of God the first time. He will return as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah bringing God's final judgement against sin. But John had heard reports that instead of raising a mighty army of righteous warriors to battle sin, Jesus was spending time with sinners and was demonstrating grace, mercy, and forgiveness. He was confused. Jesus gently reminded John to refer back to what the scriptures had to say about the Messiah.

I've always enjoyed working with electronics. I'm not an expert, but I have always been able to set up a VCR or other equipment like that. In other words, if your VCR is blinking 12:00, I can probably fix it if I'm ever in your home—or just ask your grandchild to fix it. Several years ago, one of my friends, who is electronically challenged, bought a new piece of equipment to hook into his TV. After a frustrating afternoon of trying to get it work right, he called me (since I had the same piece of equipment). I had a little trouble on my first attempt, so I said, "Let's look at the operating instructions." He looked at me and said, "Operating instructions?" We finally found the operating instructions stuffed in the box out in his garage. After reading the instructions, we got the equipment working.

When life doesn't seem to work right, it's a smart thing to read the instructions—the Bible. I've told you before I think the letters B.I.B.L.E. could stand for: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. If you are entertaining honest doubts, don't just sit around and brood. Open the Bible and start studying the scriptures. When you are stumbling around in a dark fog of doubt and confusion, remember the words of the psalmist, "your word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." (Psalm 119:105) Jesus suggested John consider the scriptures and that's good advice for us.

## **2. Lives are being changed! Jesus also told the disciples of John to report that people's lives were being transformed**

Notice the specific examples Jesus mentions: the blind, lame, lepers, deaf and even dead people. People with needs were being helped. You really can't argue with a person whose life has been changed.

If you are struggling with doubts about the Christian life, I want to challenge you to do what Jesus suggested. Take some time and conscientiously study the Bible. One of my intellectual heroes is C.S. Lewis. He was one of the world's foremost intellectuals, a renowned expert in literature. He was an honest agnostic, and he set out on a diligent study to determine whether or not the Bible and Christianity were real and authentic. As a result of studying the scriptures, he

became one of the most notable Christians and Christian thinkers in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His book *Mere Christianity* still ranks as one of best books for doubters to read. So consider the scriptures, but also look around and see the thousands of peoples whose lives have been changed because of Jesus.

Years ago, Robert Ingersoll, a noted atheist, was quite wealthy and used his wealth to travel around and publicly discredit the Bible and Christianity. Once in London he stood in a large hall before an audience and said, "There is no God. If there is a God may He strike me dead in the next five minutes!" Then he would take out his pocket watch and count down the minutes. Men sweated and ladies fainted, expecting a lightning bolt to incinerate this man. Nothing would happen, then he would make his lecture scoffing at the Bible and God. Someone told Pastor Joseph Parker about Ingersoll's five-minute challenge of God. Parker's response was, "And so, the gentleman from America thinks he can exhaust God's patience in only five minutes?"

Upon hearing this statement, Ingersoll invited the Pastor Joseph Parker to a public debate about the claims of the Bible and Christianity. Dr. Parker accepted the debate on certain conditions. He told Ingersoll he would bring ten men from his church that had been delivered from alcoholism by their faith in Jesus and all Ingersoll had to do was bring one man whose life had been saved from drunkenness by atheism. Dr. Parker offered to bring ten married couples whose marriages had been saved and renewed by Christ; all Ingersoll had to do was produce one couple who could say the same about atheism. Ingersoll declined. Why? You cannot refute a changed life. Jesus was changing lives 2,000 years ago, and He is still changing lives.

If you find yourself doubting like, John, examine the evidence Jesus presents.

### **III. COMPLIMENT: YOU ARE THE GREATEST! (v. 24-30)**

After John's messengers left, 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 expensive clothes and indulge in luxuries are in palaces. But 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.' (Malachi 3:1) I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he." (All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.)

Notice John's questions were more than just an expression of personal doubt. It actually amounted to a public challenge to Jesus' identity. Notice John supposes to be speaking for others when he says, "Should WE look for another?" It was an expression of doubt but it was also a question that would have embarrassed lesser men.

It would be like someone standing up right now in this church saying, "Brother David, are you really God's man to lead Green Acres Baptist Church? Maybe we should be looking for someone

else.” That would be an unsettling statement that would almost be considered a threat. The way Jesus responded reveals a great deal about His loving character. He first asked a couple of questions and then he made two amazing statements, one about John and one about us.

### **1. Among humanity: John was the greatest**

On the very day John said the worst thing he ever said about Jesus, Jesus said the finest thing He ever said about John!

Jesus asked a couple of questions himself. He asked the people why they flocked into the desert to hear John’s preaching. John wasn’t like a reed shaken by the wind; that is, he didn’t change his message according to the crowd. John was more like an oak tree than a shaken reed. He stood firm on the Word of God. Jesus asked if the crowd flocked to John because of his fine clothing—tongue in cheek. We know John never cut his hair and wore leather and camel’s hair clothing. The only designer label John wore was Camel Klein!

Then Jesus points out John was more than a prophet. John the Baptist was a transitional character between the Old and New Testaments. He was the last in a long line of great Old Testament prophets. But he was more because he was the “Elijah” who was to come before the Messiah. Of all the people ever born of woman (that’s most of us), John was the greatest. What a compliment! Jesus was saying John was greater than Abraham, Moses, Elijah, King David and all the rest. In other words, humanly speaking, John is the very best mankind can do. But is that enough? No really.

### **2. The Kingdom of God: Greater than humanity’s best**

Jesus said the least in the Kingdom of God was greater than humanity’s best. What does He mean? The phrase “born of woman” is important. That speaks of our human identity. We have all been born of a woman but Jesus told a fine, religious man there is another birth more important than being born in the flesh. Jesus told Nicodemus a person must be born again or they will never see or enter the Kingdom of God. When you experience this second birth you become a part of God’s kingdom. All you need to have a kingdom is a King and Jesus becomes the personal Lord or Ruler of your life.

John was the servant in the kingdom; we are heirs of the King! John was the friend of the bridegroom, we are actually the bride!

Today, the youngest believer has spiritual riches John the Baptist could never imagine. We have Jesus residing in our hearts, we have the scripture describing the *new* Covenant, we have the fellowship of other believers. You can rejoice today that in the eyes of Jesus, the least in God’s kingdom are greater than humanity’s best.

## **IV. OBSERVATION: THIS GENERATION IS SPOILED (31-35)**

“To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other: ‘We played the

flute for you and , and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.’ For John the Baptist came neither eating bread, nor drinking wine, and you say, ‘he has a demon.’ The son of man came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners,’ But wisdom is proved right by all her children.”

Jesus makes an astute observation about the generation in existence when He visited earth. When I read His words, I believe He could say the same thing about our 21<sup>st</sup> century generation.

### **1. Like children: We want God to dance to our music**

Can’t you just picture children in the marketplace at Capernaum? They would gather around as a group to play games while their parents shopped. There were often be artisans and musicians who played in the marketplaces for a few coins people tossed their way. When the minstrel played a wedding song, the children danced around joyously and they called out to the other children and passers-by to join them in the dance. When people refused to join them, they pouted in petulant silence. Or when they pretended to be a funeral procession, the musician would play a dirge, but still people wouldn’t join them. So, as most children do, they sat down, stuck out their lips, crossed their arms and refused to play because others refused to dance to their music.

Like these children, we sometimes try to make God fit into our box of expectations. We want Him to respond to our tune and when He doesn’t we pout.

### **2. Jesus won’t fit your religious mold—He is a friend of sinners**

John was a very stern, severe, austere character. Do you know what the religious leaders said about him? They said, “He is demon possessed.” He won’t dance to our music! Then Jesus came along; He wasn’t stern and ascetic. Instead, Jesus spent time with sinners and loved to eat and drink with them and the same people who criticized John criticized Jesus! Like children, they can’t be pleased!

Today, people hold up all kinds of preconceived expectations about God and how Christians ought to behave and when it doesn’t fit their opinion (dance to their tune), they childishly reject it.

## **CONCLUSION**

As we finish this message, I hope this one thought will sink down deeply into your soul. Jesus is a friend of sinners—that’s us. Jesus came to show us what God is like. God is not some hardhearted, unconcerned deity who observes our lives from a safe distance. God came to live among us to show us He loves us. He came to show us you don’t have to wander in the wilderness and eat a diet of locusts and wild honey; you can enjoy life! Jesus enjoyed hanging out with people, eating and drinking and laughing. Some people try to ignore that aspect of the life of Jesus, but you can’t.

If Jesus visited Tyler in the flesh today, do you think He would show up here at Green Acres wearing a three-piece suit and carrying a big Bible in His hand? I can’t answer that question but I

do know the people who gave Him the greatest trouble were the religious people of His day. We need to be careful we don't make the same mistake. When we try to force Jesus into our mold of religious respectability, He doesn't fit.

What does it mean for Jesus to be your friend? Sometimes we mistakenly think a true friend just accepts us as we are and never asks us to change. That's only half right. A friend accepts as we are, faults and all, but a true friend loves us enough to help us deal with our faults. If you were addicted to cocaine, a true friend wouldn't be someone who said, "I know you're a cocaine addict and I'm cool with that. If that's your thing, go for it." No. A true friend says, "I know you're addicted to cocaine, and I love you too much to let you destroy your life." A true friend always wants the best for us and is willing to help us deal with and overcome our sins and shortcomings.

Jesus wants to be your best friend. He does accept you just the way you are. Jesus never says, "When you clean up your life, then I'll be your friend." He says, "Accept my friendship. Allow me to love you and we can do something about your sins." And Jesus has already done everything necessary for your sins to be fixed.

Is Jesus your friend? In John 15:13 He said, "Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Chuck Colson told the story of a group of World War II American Prisoners of War who were made to do hard labor in a prison camp. Each had a shovel and dug all day, then was made to come in and give an account of his tool in the evening. One evening, twenty prisoners lined up by the guard and the shovels were counted. The guard counted nineteen shovels and turned in rage on the twenty prisoners demanding to know which one did not bring his shovel back. No one responded. The guard took out his gun and said he would shoot five men if the guilty prisoner did not step forward. After a moment of tense silence, a nineteen-year-old soldier stepped forward with his head bowed down. The guard grabbed him, took him to the side and shot him in the head and then turned to warn the others they'd better be more careful than he was. When he left the men counted the shovels and there were twenty. The guard had miscounted. And the boy had given his life for his friends.

If you had been one of those prisoners, what would you think about that young man as you lovingly buried his body? Here was a young man, full of hope and promise but in that split second, he chose death so the others could live.

Would you like to have a friend like that? You have one. His name is Jesus. It was not some split-second decision. Jesus planned to die for you from the foundation of the world. He laid down His life for you, His friend.

Sometimes, doubts arise. Even the most faithful Christians sometimes doubt, especially when we are going through periods of adversity. We're not told what happened to John the Baptist when the messengers reported back to him. I suspect a smile peeked out from his busy beard. Later, I'm certain others reported to him, "John, Jesus said you are the greatest man ever born of woman!"

Mark reports on the night of Herod's birthday, there was a lot of drinking and dancing. Salome, the daughter of his stolen wife, Herodias, inflamed Herod with her movements. When Herod said, "Ask for anything, I'll give it to you, up to one half of my kingdom." (He was just boasting, because he didn't even have a kingdom. He was like a county judge over four provinces.) After consulting with her mother, she asked Herod to give her John's head on a platter. Herod couldn't break his word so a soldier was dispatched to John's cell. What do you think was going through John's mind at the last? Doubt? I doubt it. As the sword swished through the air, John's earthly life ended—and so did his captivity. He was instantly escorted into the presence of God. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Elijah were already there. Jesus said John was greater than all of them! I would suspect in heaven John must have thought, "Why did I ever doubt?"

You see folks, doubt can't keep you out of heaven; it just keeps you from experiencing the JOY of heaven now!

## OUTLINE

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1. WHO? Even the most faithful doubt at times
2. WHY? Our doubts get louder in the middle of adversity

### II. ANSWER: CONSIDER THE EVIDENCE (19-23)

1. Scripture is being fulfilled!
2. Lives are being changed!

### III. COMPLIMENT: YOU ARE THE GREATEST! (24-30)

1. Among humanity: John was the greatest
2. The kingdom of God: Greater than humanity's best

### IV. OBSERVATION: THIS GENERATION IS SPOILED (31-35)

1. Like children: We want God to dance to our music
2. Jesus won't fit your religious mold—He is a friend of sinners



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes