Confronting Doubts

JESUS DEMANDS DECISION.

The list of doubters in the Bible is long. The serpent spread doubt to Adam and Eve: "Did God really say, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Gen. 3:1). Abraham doubted (chap. 15), and Sarah laughed when the Lord said Sarah would give birth to a son (18:10-15). Moses doubted whether he could become the spokesman God wanted him to be (Ex. 3:11). God gave Aaron to Moses as a spokesman.

In today's session, John the Baptist took his place in the list of doubters. John had been imprisoned by Herod and was waiting to be executed. He had heard about Jesus's activities and wanted to know whether Jesus was the one or was another to come. When we are faced with doubt in our lives, how should we handle it?



UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT





Matthew 11:1-30

The previous chapter concluded with Jesus's last command to His disciples before they departed on their preaching tour (10:40-42). Rather than follow the disciples on their preaching tour, Matthew kept his focus on Jesus, as He taught and preached "in their towns" (11:1).

John the Baptist had been in prison and but still heard reports of Jesus's activity. Through his disciples, John sent a message asking Jesus if He was the coming one or should they look for another. Jesus told the men to tell John what they had seen and heard (vv. 2-6).

When John's disciples left, Jesus began to explain to the crowd the significance of the ministry of John the Baptist. Jesus questioned the motive of the crowds in seeking out John. Jesus asked if they had come to see a prophet. John was more than a prophet (vv. 7-10). John not only was a prophet but he was the fulfillment of prophesy (Mal. 3:1). The law

itself as well as all the prophets prophesied until John (Matt. 11:13), who had been sent to prepare the way for the Messiah (Mal. 4:5-6). John was not the physical "Elijah" for whom some Jews were waiting but rather the one who had prepared the way for Jesus. Jesus ended this section with a challenge to listen to what He was saying.

Jesus focused on the fickleness of the Jewish leaders. According to them, John was too serious and the Son of Man was a glutton and drunkard. Then Jesus began to denounce the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. Most of His miracles were done in these three cities, yet the cities had not responded in repentance, belief, and obedience (Matt. 11:16-24).

The chapter ends with Matthew recording Jesus's prayer to His Father. First, Jesus thanked God that He had not revealed His message to those who thought that they were wise but rather to the spiritual infants. Second, God was pleased to reveal Himself through the Son to whomever the Son chose to reveal Him. Finally, Jesus issued an invitation to all who were burdened to come and find rest in Jesus (vv. 25-30).



Uncertainty (Matt. 11:1-6)

When John the Baptist heard in prison what Jesus was doing, he sent his disciples to ask if Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Jesus confirmed His identity as the Messiah. He reassured John by pointing to the evidence of His miraculous works.

VERSE 1

When Jesus had finished giving instructions to his twelve disciples, he moved on from there to teach and preach in their towns.

This verse can be seen as the conclusion to chapter 10 or as a transitional verse leading into chapter 11. Though Matthew did not explicitly say so, apparently **when Jesus had finished giving instructions to his twelve disciples,** He sent them on their way, while He embarked on a preaching tour of His own. Matthew did not record the results of the disciples' preaching tour. On the other hand, Mark recorded a brief

summary of the success of the disciples' work: "So they went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons, anointed many sick people with oil and healed them" (Mark 6:12-13).

VERSES 2-3

Now when John heard in prison what the Christ was doing, he sent a message through his disciples and asked him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Matthew immediately turned his attention to the situation with **John** the Baptist. When Jesus had completed His encounter with Satan (4:1-11), He traveled to Galilee because He had heard that John the Baptist had been arrested (v. 12). While in prison, John was able to keep track of **what the Christ was doing.** This is the first time in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is referred to simply as *the Christ*. John's uncertainty led him to send a **message** to Jesus for clarification: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

When Jesus came to John to be baptized by him, John recognized Jesus's superior position (3:14). What had happened to cause John to be uncertain about who Jesus was? Some Bible teachers have suggested that John had no doubts, but he asked the question for the sake of his followers. But nothing in the text suggests that John was asking for others rather than himself. Others have suggested that John's experience in Herod's prison had begun to wear on him. The Messiah was to provide freedom for those in prison, and yet John was still in prison (Isa. 61:1). Or perhaps John was beginning to become impatient. John had preached that judgment was imminent (Matt. 3:10-12). And yet nothing seemed to be happening that would indicate the in-breaking kingdom that most Jews expected. Jesus was walking among ordinary people teaching them. Was He the Messiah or were they to wait for another?

VERSE 4

Jesus replied to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see:"

Jesus did not answer John's question directly. Rather, He challenged John's followers to look and listen for evidence of the Christ's activities, then, "Go and report to John what you hear and see." Jesus's challenge did not mean that John's followers already had been with Jesus for an extended period of time and had seen these things take place personally. They were to find those who had heard Jesus's teaching and

witnessed Jesus's miracles and report back to John. Even though he was in prison, John could draw the correct conclusions for himself.

VERSE 5

"The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news,"

Jesus listed six diseases or conditions from which John's followers could draw material for their report to John. Most appear in Isaiah's discussion of the Messiah's work (Isa. 35:5-6; 61:1). **The blind** regained their sight (Isa. 35:5; 42:7; Matt. 9:27-31). **The lame** walk (Isa. 35:6; Matt. 8:5-13). **Those with leprosy** are cleansed (Matt. 8:1-4). **The deaf** hear (Isa. 35:5; Mark 7:31-35). **The dead** are raised (Isa. 26:19; Matt. 9:18,23-25). **The poor** are told the good news (Isa. 61:1; Matt. 9:35).

VERSE 6

"and blessed is the one who isn't offended by me."

Jesus pronounced a blessing on all of those who were not **offended** by Him. In many ways, Jesus's Messiahship did not conform with the common view among the ordinary Jewish people of a political and military messiah. The Greek words translated **isn't offended** can also be translated "does not stumble" (NIV). The word for *offended* means "to cause to be brought to a downfall" or "to cause to sin."

God's blessing rests on those who remain committed to Jesus, even when that commitment leads to different expectations than one may have. Jesus's call to John was to trust Jesus even when John's concept of Messiah clashed with what Jesus was saying and doing. "In beatitude form Jesus encourages John, and everyone else with similar doubts, to remain faithful to him no matter what may come." 1



Explore Further

Read the section entitled "John the Baptist" in the article "John" on pages 911–913 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does having a better understanding of John the Baptist help understand his uncertainty about Jesus's role as Son of Man?

Cynicism (Matt. 11:16-19)

Jesus's generation rejected John because he came neither eating nor drinking; they rejected Jesus because He came eating and drinking. They were like children who insisted that other children play their games. They played the flute for John, but he didn't dance; they sang a lament for Jesus, but He didn't mourn.

VERSE 16

"To what should I compare this generation? It's like children sitting in the marketplaces who call out to other children:"

After the messengers from John the Baptist had left, Jesus began to question the crowds about why they went to the wilderness to see John. Did they go to see a reed swaying in the wind or a man wearing soft clothes? Jesus said that the crowds went out to see a prophet. John was a prophet who came to prepare the way for the Messiah (vv. 7-14).

Jesus turned His attention to the crowds (**this generation**) who had assembled around Him, comparing these people to **children** playing games. In addition to being places where goods were bought and sold, the **marketplaces** were apparently places where children played. The point of Jesus's short parable was the children's inability to be appeased.

VERSE 17

"We played the flute for you, but you didn't dance; we sang a lament, but you didn't mourn!"

The **flute** was usually played by women, while men danced. These dances were often associated with the joy of a wedding. One group was interested in playing the wedding game and so played the flutes. The children did not respond by dancing, but rather, they refused to participate. Another group **sang a lament**, associated with a funeral. The Greek word translated *sang a lament* can also be translated "sang a dirge" (ESV, NIV). The word can mean to mourn for someone in a ritual way. The word also is used in connection with Jesus's march to the cross ("lamenting," Luke 23:27) and in Jesus's discussion of the disciples' mourning over His death ("mourn," John 16:20). The proper response to someone singing a dirge or a lament was to **mourn**. Again the children refused to play; it mattered not whether the game was happy or sad.

"For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon!"

Jesus summarized the two approaches in relation to Himself and John the Baptist. "John came neither eating nor drinking." John lived a very ascetic lifestyle. His diet consisted of locust and wild honey (3:4; see Luke 1:15). In addition, John's disciples had a reputation for fasting often, a reputation that they surely received from their leader (Matt. 9:14).

The phrase **they say** indicates that the speakers were part of the "generation" Jesus mentioned in Matthew 11:16. This group's conclusion was that John's actions indicated that he had **a demon.**

VERSE 19

"The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Jesus referred to Himself as **the Son of Man** (see the divine figure in Dan. 7:13-14 who receives authority and an everlasting kingdom), and unlike John's ascetic lifestyle, Jesus came **eating and drinking**. Jesus was involved socially with the people He came across. Those of that generation observed the lifestyle of the Son of Man and concluded that he was a **glutton** and a **drunkard**. Jesus and His disciples attended a wedding together (John 2:1-2). Jesus was a **friend of tax collectors and sinners** (Matt. 9:10-11). John was too holy, and Jesus wasn't holy enough.

Jesus ended this section with a brief statement about **wisdom**. The background for this statement on *wisdom* may go back to the Old Testament: "Happy is a man who finds wisdom and who acquires understanding" (Prov. 3:13; see also 1:7). The word may also go back to the wisdom that Jesus was imparting to His disciples. The Greek word translated **vindicated** ("justified," ESV, KJV; "proved right," NIV) means to render a favorable verdict. In a parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke, *wisdom* will be vindicated "by all her children" (Luke 7:35). There is no real difference between the two statements. "The wisdom Jesus taught was not meant as a topic for debate in religious or philosophical schools—it was something to be lived out and it is *proved right* in the works his followers do." Jesus's statement is very similar to His words in the Sermon on the Mount: "So you'll recognize them by their fruit" (Matt. 7:20).



Explore Further

Read the articles entitled "Dancing" on pages 384–385 and "Grief and Mourning" on page 681 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does a better understanding of dancing and mourning help in understanding the games the children played?

Denial (Matt. 11:20-24)

Jesus pronounced a series of woes on unrepentant cities. Though they had seen Jesus's miracles, they denied the evidence and refused to believe.

VERSE 20

Then he proceeded to denounce the towns where most of his miracles were done, because they did not repent:

Jesus turned His attention to three cites (Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum) where He had done **most of His miracles**. These three towns are relatively close to each other north of the Sea of Galilee. The Greek word translated **denounce** in this context means to find justifiable fault with someone, to reproach or reprimand. The mighty works done in their presence should have been enough for the towns to see that God was working in their midst. From the beginning of Jesus's ministry, His call had been, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near" (4:17). Jesus's goal with *His miracles* was not that the people would be amazed but rather that they would **repent**. The Greek word translated *repent* can mean to change one's mind about a person or an opinion. However, in the New Testament the word *repent* usually includes a call for a new direction in one's life in addition to the change of mind. The citizens of these towns were not willing to act on Jesus's call to repentance.

VERSE 21

"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago."

Jesus compared **Chorazin** and **Bethsaida** with two cities known for their sinful ways—**Tyre** and **Sidon**. The Greek word translated **woe** was a call to judgment. Jesus pronounced judgement on these two cities. The word also appears in Matthew 23, where "woe to you" is supplemented with "scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites." Some suggest that the New Testament use of the word carries with it a combination of warning and compassion. Jesus's miracles "were works of power, manifestations of the presence of God, and accordingly, invitations to people to reflect on how they stood before God and to repent of the evil they had done"³

Chorazin is mentioned only in the New Testament here and in Luke 10:13. It was located in Galilee about two miles north of Capernaum and was probably the smaller of the two towns. Chorazin was known for its wheat production. Bethsaida, meaning "house of fish," indicates the most common occupation of the town's residents. Bethsaida was located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee on the western side of where the Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee, but the exact location is uncertain. Bethsaida was the hometown of at least three of Jesus's disciples: Philip, Andrew, and Peter (John 1:44; 12:21), though by this time Peter had a home in Capernaum (Matt. 8:14). When Jesus arrived in Bethsaida, He was asked to heal a blind man, which He did (Mark 8:22-26). Luke recorded that after the disciples had completed their preaching tour, Jesus and the disciples withdrew to a town called Bethsaida where Jesus "healed those who needed healing" (Luke 9:10).

The two towns known for their sinful ways were *Tyre* and *Sidon*. These two cities were both located on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea west of the Lebanon mountains. Tyre was about twenty-five miles south of Sidon. The two cities had a reputation for an opulent lifestyle that resulted in judgment from God (Isa. 23; Ezek. 26–28).

The severity of the sins of Chorazin and Bethsaida was demonstrated by a comparison with Tyre and Sidon, who had not received the kinds of mighty works that Jesus had performed in Galilee. If they had seen what those in Galilee had seen, "they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago." As we saw earlier, repentance involves not simply a change of mind, that is, an intellectual acknowledgement or feeling badly for something the person has done. Rather, it also involves a new direction in life. But such miracles had not been performed in Tyre and Sidon, and the people had not believed.

Dressing in *sackcloth and ashes* was a way to demonstrate the depth of one's desire for a new direction in life. *Sackcloth* was a rough cloth of camel hair worn in times of mourning. The *ashes* were sprinkled on the head or poured out of the floor for the mourners to sit in.

"But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you."

Jesus pointed out that on the coming day of judgment the pagan cities of **Tyre** and **Sidon** would fare better than Chorazin and Bethsaida. The **judgment** to which Jesus referred was the final judgment when Jew and non-Jew would give an account for how they had lived their lives. The Greek word translated **tolerable** ("bearable," ESV, NIV) brings to mind the statement to whom much has been given, much will be required (Luke 12:48). The cities of Galilee had seen most of Jesus's mighty works but had not responded in repentance. Much had been given the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida ("towns where most of his miracles were done," Matt. 11:20), and much would be required of them. Jesus was aware of what the citizens of Tyre and Sidon would have done if they had witnessed all the miracles Jesus had done in Chorazin and Bethsaida.

Jesus did not say that the people of Tyre and Sidon would not be punished at all, just that their situation in the final judgment would be more *tolerable*. This would seem to indicate that there are levels of torment in hell. Otherwise, it is difficult to see how the punishment of one group would be more tolerable than the punishment of another.

VERSE 23

"And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until today."

The conversation shifted from Chorazin and Bethsaida to **Capernaum**. Jesus began with a question that received a negative answer, followed by a reason for the negative answer. The pattern and language of this section is similar to Isaiah's rebuke of the king of Babylon. Isaiah spoke of the king of Babylon, "You said to yourself, 'I will ascend to the heavens; I will set up my throne above the stars of God. I will sit on the mount of the gods' assembly in the remotest parts of the North. I will ascend above the highest clouds; I will make myself like the Most High'" (Isa. 14:13-14). God answered, "But you will be brought down to Sheol into the deepest regions of the Pit" (v. 15). Like the king of Babylon, the people of Capernaum expected to be **exalted to heaven**, but instead they would **go down into Hades**. The Greek word translated *Hades* occurs in the Greek New Testament only ten times. The word originally referred to the Greek

god of the underworld and later to the place itself, specifically the place of the dead (Acts 2:31). The phrase $go\ down\ to\ Hades$ did not refer to the physical destruction of the city but the eternal judgment the inhabitants of Capernaum would face.

Capernaum was the leading town on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee. It had a population of about 1500 people and was economically prosperous. Early in His ministry Jesus moved His base of operation from Nazareth to Capernaum (Matt. 4:13). Later Matthew would refer to Capernaum as Jesus's "own town" (9:1).

Capernaum was compared with the city of **Sodom**, which was proverbial along with Gomorrah for its wickedness and God's judgment of the city (Gen. 18:20; Matt. 10:15; Luke 10:12; Rom. 9:29; 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 7). The destruction of the city and its sister city Gomorrah is recorded in Genesis 18:16–19:29. Had Sodom experienced the mighty works of Jesus done in Capernaum, the city would have **remained until** Jesus's day. Once again, Matthew presents Jesus as having special insight into how the people of Sodom would have responded to His **miracles**.

VERSE 24

"But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

Once again, Jesus opened the final phrase with the statement, "But I tell you," indicating the seriousness of what Jesus was about to say. Just as with Chorazin and Bethsaida, Capernaum was headed down the wrong road. In the final judgment, Sodom would find things more tolerable ("more bearable," NIV) than Capernaum. Notorious pagans would have it better than self-satisfied religionists on the day of judgment.



Explore Further

Read the article "Repentance" on pages 1344–1345 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What are the different aspects of repentance, and why is each important?

^{1.} Craig L. Blomberg, Matthew, The New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 185.

Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 286.

^{3.} Ibid., 289.