



Confronting Doubts

JESUS DEMANDS DECISION.

MATTHEW 11:1-6,16-24

Skepticism abounds! It has been almost fifty-seven years since Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, yet there are still people who believe it was a hoax. Nearly every news story today will elicit skepticism concerning the facts. Doubt and skepticism are good if they force us to investigate the truth. They can be disastrous when they lead to denial of truth. Such was the case with Jesus. Skepticism led many to miss the life He offered.



What are some things you encounter that lead to doubt and skepticism?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 11:1-30

After sending out the disciples in chapter 10, Jesus apparently undertook a solo preaching tour in the surrounding towns of Galilee. During this period of preaching and teaching, Matthew introduced the element of doubt concerning Jesus. There was no doubt among the people that Jesus was a mighty miracle worker and teacher. The issue lay in the evidence that He was the Messiah. They understood the coming Messiah would overthrow the Romans and usher in peace and prosperity. But Jesus didn't fit the anticipated pattern. Even John the Baptist was puzzled and sent his disciples to question Jesus (Matt. 11:1-6).

After Jesus answered the question sent from John, He asked the crowds about their views of John. What might they have thought about John, whose role was that of the forerunner to the Messiah? Jesus assured the crowd of the legitimacy of John's baptism and ministry. He affirmed that John was the forerunner to the Messiah. In addition, Jesus referred to John as the greatest among all who lived under the old covenant. With the coming of Jesus, a new covenant era began. Under the new covenant, anyone who was part of the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus would be greater than John (vv. 7-15).

Jesus directly confronted the doubters and skeptics (vv. 16-19). He condemned their unbelief and specifically called out the unbelief He found in Galilee (vv. 20-24).

The closing section in Matthew 11 may not fit chronologically with the preceding verses. Rather, it set up a contrast to doubt and skepticism. Those who come to Jesus in faith will find their deepest hunger and greatest thirst satisfied (vv. 25-30).



Read Matthew 11:1-6,16-24 in your Bible. In what ways were doubt and skepticism expressed? How did Jesus respond to the doubters and skeptics?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

UNCERTAINTY (MATT. 11:1-6)

¹ When Jesus had finished giving instructions to his twelve disciples, he moved on from there to teach and preach in their towns. ² Now when John heard in prison what the Christ was doing, he sent a message through his disciples ³ and asked him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” ⁴ Jesus replied to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: 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, ⁶ and blessed is the one who isn’t offended by me.”

VERSE 1

After Jesus sent out the disciples on their mission (chap. 10), He moved on to the area surrounding Capernaum. Capernaum lay on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee and was the headquarters of much of Jesus’s ministry. Matthew referred to it as Jesus’s “own town” (Matt. 9:1). On this solo mission, Jesus would **teach and preach** in the towns of that region.

VERSES 2-3

Matthew gave us the story of John the Baptist in bits and pieces. John and his ministry were introduced in chapter 3. Matthew 4:12 tells us that he had been arrested. The disciples of John questioned Jesus’s disciples in 9:14. We see a glimpse of John in prison in 11:1-6. Finally, we learn of his death at the hand of Herod Antipas in 14:1-12.

While in prison, John heard news of **what the Christ was doing**. Most scholars think John had been in prison for over a year and had heard only sketchy reports of Jesus’s ministry. What he heard didn’t necessarily answer his questions about Jesus. He may have been asking himself, “Why hasn’t Jesus started the revolution? Why hasn’t He used His powers to get me out of prison?”

In response to these creeping doubts, John sent his disciples to Jesus. Their question to Him was simply, **Are you the one who is to come?** The phrase *the one who is to come* was a frequent way of speaking of the coming Messiah. It appears in the psalms, “He who comes in the name of the LORD is blessed” (Ps. 118:26).

Other references to *the one who is to come* are sprinkled throughout the Gospel records (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16; 13:35).

Although John had declared that Jesus was God's Messiah (John 1:29-34), his circumstances and perhaps an inadequate understanding of the role of the Messiah opened the door for doubt. Even today, focusing on our circumstances can cause us to doubt what God is doing.

John likely shared the expectations of most Jews who believed the Messiah was to be a conquering military leader like King David. This Messiah would remove the Roman government from Israel and reestablish David's kingdom. But this wasn't happening with Jesus. John might have wondered, "Did I misunderstand who Jesus is?" To allay this confusion, John dispatched his disciples to ask Jesus, ***should we expect someone else?***

Focusing on our circumstances can cause us to doubt what God is doing.

VERSES 4-5

To answer John's question, Jesus pointed to the evidence. He gave John's disciples a list of miracles He had performed. In doing this, Jesus was alluding to the Old Testament prophecies concerning the types of miracles the Messiah would perform. Jesus was saying to John, "Identify me through the miracles that I do."

Luke's account of this question from the disciples of John is followed by this statement: "At that time Jesus healed many people of diseases, afflictions, and evil spirits, and he granted sight to many blind people" (Luke 7:21). Then, Jesus told John's disciples to "go and report to John what you have seen and heard" (7:22). These were the messianic miracles prophesied in Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; and 61:1-2a.

Note that Jesus mentioned first the giving of sight to ***the blind***. Nowhere in the Old Testament is there any mention of a miracle of restoring sight to the blind. This had not occurred until the coming of Jesus. The man born blind that Jesus healed in John 9 responded to Jesus's critics: "Throughout history no one has ever heard of someone opening the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he wouldn't be able to do anything" (John 9:32-33).



How would John have understood Jesus's reply in verses 4-5 based on his knowledge of the Old Testament?

VERSE 6

This short blessing is spoken in the third person singular. Jesus likely was addressing John personally. You are **blessed**, John, if you aren't **offended by me**. The word *offended* is a Greek word from which we get the term "scandal." Blessed is the person who is not "scandalized" because of Me, Jesus said. In other words, John was warned not to be tripped up by doubt.



How should we respond to our honest doubts about Jesus?

CYNICISM (MATT. 11:16-19)

¹⁶ “To what should I compare this generation? It’s like children sitting in the marketplaces who call out to other children:

¹⁷ We played the flute for you, but you didn’t dance; we sang a lament, but you didn’t mourn! ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ 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.”

VERSE 16

Many people in the crowds who followed Jesus were cynical. He responded to their unbelief with a common Jewish phrase, **to what should I compare this generation?** Jesus compared them to **children** at play in the **marketplaces**. The marketplace would be a central location in most villages where people gathered to buy, sell, and trade. Children accompanied their parents and used the center of the marketplace as a playground.

VERSE 17

In Jesus's comparison, He most likely was referring to two popular games that children played, weddings and funerals. The *flute* was typically used at weddings, while a *lament* was sung at funerals. In these activities children would act out two important events in the life of the community. Play-acting weddings would involve joyful singing and dancing. Acting out funerals would require somber wailing and mourning as was typical in that day.

Inevitably there would be a child or two who refused to play, perhaps wanting to play funeral when the other children wanted to play wedding, or vice versa. With this comparison, Jesus set up the hearers for the condemnation He was about to bring.

VERSES 18-19

Just like a disagreeable child who refused to join in the wedding game's dance of joy, so some criticized Jesus for the joyful way He interacted with those sinners who followed Him. And just like children who refused to mourn at a pretend funeral, there were those who criticized the strict lifestyle of John.

John and Jesus lived contrasting lifestyles. Yet neither approach was acceptable to those who were skeptical of both men. They resented John's austerity and call for repentance. John, as it were, "sang a lament," but the people refused his call. He was too strict for them. They said he had a *demon*. They enjoyed their wicked lifestyle which ran contrary to the righteous lifestyle John lived and promoted. Their initial curiosity about John's ministry ended quickly.

For the critics, Jesus wasn't strict enough in following the traditions of Judaism. Not only that, but He associated with those who also didn't follow the ways of the Pharisees. He was *a friend of tax collectors and sinners*. This had been seen a short while earlier during the banquet at Matthew's house: "While he was reclining at the table in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came to eat with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'" (Matt. 9:10-11).

In His comparison, Jesus metaphorically "played the flute" for the people, but they refused to dance. Gradually, over the weeks and months, the people rejected Jesus. Their doubts turned to disbelief and rejection.

When Jesus said that *wisdom is vindicated by her deeds*, He was saying that both the ascetic lifestyle of John and the joyful

lifestyle of Jesus were correct in God's grand scheme of things. Each of these has a place in God's kingdom.



How do people's preconceived notions about God cause them to miss what He is doing?

DENIAL (MATT. 11:20-24)

²⁰ Then he proceeded to denounce the towns where most of his miracles were done, because they did not repent: 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. ²² But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. 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. ²⁴ But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”

Jesus now moved from mildly chastising the skepticism and doubts of those following Him out of curiosity to a full-blown denunciation of their unbelief. His message was simply this: You've had a greater opportunity to see God's power and hear the message of the kingdom. Because of that, you are saddled with a greater accountability before God.

VERSE 20

The area around Capernaum witnessed the vast majority of the miracles of healing by Jesus. Yet they obviously continued in their indifference to the message of Jesus. Because of this, He began **to denounce** or censure them for their unbelief.

VERSES 21-22

The word **woe** was a familiar Old Testament word that expressed judgment as well as grief, wrath as well as sorrow (see Hos. 7:13; Job 10:15). This condemnation included the town of •**Chorazin** [koh RAY zin], which lay about two and a half miles to the north of Capernaum. Included as well was •**Bethsaida** [beth-SAY ih duh], the home of Peter, Andrew, and Philip (John 1:44). Its location is

somewhat uncertain, either being on the northeastern side of the Sea of Galilee or close to Capernaum on the western side.

These villages had seen the power of Jesus and had heard His call for repentance but chose to ignore it. Jesus indicted them by pointing to two notoriously pagan Gentile cities, •**Tyre and Sidon**. These two cities had been dreaded enemies of ancient Israel. Jesus said if they had seen the same miracles the inhabitants of Chorazin had seen, they would have expressed repentance by wearing the mourning clothes of **sackcloth** with **ashes** poured over their heads as a sign of grief. He later visited the region surrounding Tyre, where He healed the Syrophenician woman's daughter (Matt. 15:21-28).

Jesus contrasted the coming judgment on *Chorazin* with that of *Tyre and Sidon* by declaring that the **day of judgment** would be more tolerable for the people of Tyre and Sidon. Chorazin would be held to a greater accountability because they had the greater witness of the miracles of Jesus.

Greater opportunity calls for greater accountability.

VERSE 23

The same held true for •**Capernaum** [kuh PUHR nay uhm], which served as Jesus's headquarters. More miracles took place in Capernaum than anywhere else. But just like the towns mentioned in verse 21, they remained indifferent and perhaps hostile toward Jesus and His message.

Jesus spoke of their desire to be **exalted to heaven**. This could be an allusion to the Old Testament prophecy concerning the king of Babylon who sought to ascend to heaven and rule as supreme (Isa. 14:13). This was the sin of pride, and Jesus denounced their arrogance by stating that they would be brought down to •**Hades**. The term *Hades* often refers to the grave or realm of the dead (Acts 2:27). The term also was used in the New Testament to speak of the place of torment for the wicked (Luke 16:23). This second use of the term was Jesus's intent in this statement of condemnation.

Again, Jesus used the example of a wicked city that would have repented had they seen the type of miracles Capernaum had seen. In this case, the city of •**Sodom** was the example. Throughout the Old Testament, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah served as the prime example of wickedness before God.

► **KEY DOCTRINE: *Last Things***

The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord. (See Luke 16:19-26; 2 Peter 3:7-13.)

VERSE 24

Once again, Jesus served notice that more tolerance would be given to Sodom than to Capernaum. The people of Capernaum would be held accountable for what they experienced but refused to embrace. Greater opportunity calls for greater accountability.



Jesus pronounced a warning to the cities that had the greater opportunities to witness His miracles. How does this warning apply to you?



BIBLE SKILL: Use a Bible atlas and Bible dictionary (print version or on the internet) to locate and learn about places mentioned in Scripture.

Find the location of Tyre, Sidon, Sodom, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum in a Bible atlas or map. Then use a Bible dictionary to learn more about these locations. What are some significant facts about these cities that Jesus emphasized?

APPLY THE TEXT

- ⊕ We may experience honest doubts, but confessing our doubts to God is a step toward genuine faith.
- ⊕ We are to be sensitive to the fact that God sometimes works in ways that contradict our expectations.
- ⊕ Take seriously the fact that all people will bear responsibility for how they respond to Jesus.



Acknowledge that some people sitting in your Bible study may struggle with doubt. Discuss with your group ways to respond that will not alienate or condemn those struggling with honest doubts.



Be honest about any doubts you have about the faith. Identify a strong Christian in your life with whom you can discuss doubts as they arise.

▶ **Memorize Matthew 11:5-6.**

Prayer Needs

