

# When it's Not What it Seems

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at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.  
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Matthew 11:2-11

*And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples 3 and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" 4 Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: 5 The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. 6 And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." 7 As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. 9 But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. 10 For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.' 11 Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."*

Have you ever wondered why God didn't put the same vitamins in ice cream or a good pie as He did in Kale? One year Karen and I planted Kale in our garden because of its reported value—super food they call it. It was the most unpleasant tasting vegetable I have ever ate. Why couldn't a good chocolate chip or peanut butter cookie have Kale's nutritional value? I believe it's a great object lesson that things don't always turn out the way you want them. A lot of things that are supposedly good don't seem to be and a great many things that are bad for you are often pleasurable. Why do you think sin's appeal wins a big crowd? Sin offers fun, but the fun is short lived. There is always a pay day some day.

Life is like that—what you would first suspect is often not what happens. You would think good overcomes bad and evil comes in last place. But it doesn't always work that way. The psalmist often pondered the question why the wicked don't seem to suffer like the righteous. With frustration he writes about the sinful,

*They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men. . . They have more than heart could wish. . . Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches. Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning. (Psalm 73:5, 7, 12-14)*

Not everything works as you would think and there are many things in life that are not as they are advertised:

- A firefly is not a fly – it is a beetle.
- A prairie dog is not a dog – it is a rodent.
- A lead pencil does not contain lead – it contains graphite.
- A silkworm is not a worm – it is a caterpillar.
- And the funny bone is neither funny or a bone – it is the spot where the ulnar nerve touches the humerus bone.

## I. John's Problem

John was imprisoned by Herod for nearly a year before his execution. This would mean that John did not witness the first year of Jesus' miraculous Galilee ministry where thousands were following Him, but he heard about it. The text says in verse 2, "And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ." He heard how Jesus was conducting Himself; he heard about His methodology, His miracles, and while sitting in the damp darkness of a dungeon prison cell John wondered was this the ushering in of the kingdom or merely a compassion campaign. Where was the overthrow of Rome? Where was the expulsion of the hypocritical religious leadership? Where was the return of the Davidic kingship? If Jesus was the Messiah, why then was He not doing what the Messiah was supposed to do?

Things don't always seem the way they ought. Now John the Baptist is one of the great heroes of the faith. He was the forerunner, the announcer of our Lord. And yet John suffered questions because things don't always seem the way you think they should. What happened to John bares a great resemblance to us when life doesn't turn just exactly as you had planned. Isn't this right? Things have happened that we did not anticipate and we have questions—how do we deal with this?

Let's look at John's problem.

### A. John Did Not Doubt Jesus' Identity.

This week I got a call from one of my dear friends, Brother Mack Tomlinson, a pastor from Denton, Texas. He's preached here a few times. He called and said, "I need to run something by you. Do you believe that John" and he cited this very text "when he was in prison and sent those two messengers, two disciples, and asked Jesus the question in verse three, 'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?' do you believe he was really doubting Jesus and who He was?" I answered him as I've answered you, I don't think that at all. We talked about it for a little while and then my dear brother said something to me as far as the application of that, what it meant to him, and the minute he did my spirit leapt within me and I knew at that moment this was the text I was supposed to preach from. So I thank God for that phone call and for dear friends with whom I can discuss Scripture with and can even help me see things that I have never seen before.

So, did the Baptist doubt Jesus' identity?

*“and said to Him, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’” (Matthew 11:3)*

His statement may appear that he was doubting but tell me, how was that possible? Go back in John’s history. Surely his mother, Elizabeth, had to tell him the story of his miraculous conception and birth. A part of that story was when cousin Mary came to visit, pregnant with the Lord Himself, that John was filled with the Spirit in his mother’s womb. Now, nearly 30 years later, preaching and baptizing in the Jordan Valley, John had a promise from the Lord, “The Messiah is coming and you’ll know it. Here’s how—I’m going to give you a sign. You will see the Holy Spirit descending from heaven and resting upon Him in the form of a dove.” When Jesus approached the Baptist to be baptized, do you remember what John said? “Why, I’m not worthy to unloose Your shoes. I ought to be baptized by You.” When he had baptized our Lord and raised Him up out of the water, the heavens parted, and the sign and promise was fulfilled—the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove and rested upon the Lord Jesus.

But that’s not all. It was immediately chased by an audible voice from heaven, “This is My Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” Days after that, Jesus would visit where John was baptizing and on several occasions John raised his finger, pointed, and said to his disciples, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Now tell me, after all that, do you really believe John is doubting who Jesus really is? I don’t think so.

## **B. John’s Struggle was How Jesus Conducted His Messiahship.**

“I know You’re the Messiah, but maybe there’s somebody else who’s supposed to come and do all this conquering and burning up and judgment.” That’s what John was looking for. In the announcement of Jesus’ coming before Jesus arrived on the scene, John said in Matthew 3:12,

*“Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3:12)*

John, like all of the religious leaders of that day, anticipated the Messiah to be a conquering king, not a suffering servant. They thought and believed this was the restoration of David’s kingship and the reestablishment of the nation of Israel to its rightful place among the nations. I mean, this is what it appears John himself believed. You must remember that Jesus in verse 13, two verses after our text ended, says of John, “For all the prophets in the law prophesied until John.” In other words, Jesus is telling us that John the Baptist does not belong in the New Covenant because the New Covenant has not begun. John is the last Old Testament prophet, not Malachi.

The Bible tells us those Old Testament prophets didn’t really understand everything they prophesied. In 1 Peter 1:10, Peter says this.

*“Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you.”*

Oh, they knew certain things, they had certain persuasions and indications of what would come but it was all a shadow and veiled. Even John the Baptist wasn't quite sure, especially when he heard what Jesus was doing and how long He had been doing it. "My goodness, Man, You've been preaching for a year and I'm sitting here languishing in this prison. Let's get with it." Do you ever feel that way with God? "Come on, Lord. I've endured long enough. Come on now. Certainly You can't ask a man to endure this much and then some more?"

This is what I think is John's problem was.

### **C. Great Men Can Be Discouraged.**

As great as the young prophet was, he was a young man like Jesus, and as Grizzly Adams like as he must have been, he still was worn down. John was a man of the outdoors. The sky was his roof and the fresh air of the Jordan Valley his air conditioning. No wonder after a year of confinement he had some disturbance of heart.

His diet was was far different than Herod's fancy fare. He lived off of locusts, a grasshopper like bug, and wild honey. To look and listen at him you may have been tempted to think he was a bit off his rocker, a little strange, eccentric. Wearing an old camel hide and leather belt and minus a comb and razor, I'm sure he was a sight. He was more recluse than refined. And captivity had to be more difficult for a desert rat like John than for the average city dweller.

He had lived for most of his adult life in the wilderness alone. Even great men, like John, can get down in the dumps. The man whom Jesus compared John to, the old prophet Elijah, knew despair, even depression. After a great success, but very short-lived, the prophet ran off into the wilderness begging to die. His revival on Mt. Carmel turned out to be a one-hit wonder. Thinking it would lead to a sustained movement that would change Israel forever, the one-day revival fizzled out when the evil wind-bag Jezebel went on her jealous tirade, threatening Elijah. Feeling failed and washed-up the depressed prophet crawled up into a fetal position and pouted. Great men can be brought low.

Abraham Lincoln suffered many sleepless nights in the White House overcome by a cloud of melancholy. The prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon, was now and again crippled by a spirit of depression. Doubts, discouragement, and depression strike the high and mighty and the lowly and weak.

Now I don't want you to take any pride in the fact that you have something in common with Spurgeon, Lincoln, and the Baptist. The point is that you're not alone when you are discouraged. When you suffer any of these kinds of moods or just simple doubt, the devil wants to convince you that you are a failure and nobody has it as bad as you do. It just isn't true. You're unique but not that unique. What I do what you to take note of is not John's problem but Jesus' answer.

## **II. Jesus' Answer**

Jesus deals with John with benevolence and biblical accuracy and the promise of blessing. John was dealt with the greatest compassion.

## **A. A Benevolent Answer.**

Jesus does not rebuke John's struggle. He does not reprimand His forerunner. Stop and think about it. You're Jesus and Your number one man is doubting You, questioning Your mode of operation. What would you think? *Man, we've got to buck this man up. We've got to prop him up. If word gets out that John is doubting Me, it'll spread like wildfire. The devil will use that and he will discourage people and maybe it will even bring down the 12. We've got to deal with this. You tell John to get himself together. You tell him that lily-livered, jellyfish-spined men have no place in the army of God. Come on, man!*

Is that what Jesus said? Not at all.

Look at what He does in verses 9 and 11.

*"But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet... Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist."*

He doesn't critique John, He compliments John! This is astounding. I like this. You know why I like this? Because I too wrestle with doubts from time to time, I too can get discouraged and I like to think that if this is the way Jesus dealt with His forerunner, then He will deal with me in the very same way.

Jesus doesn't throw a temper tantrum and throw a jealous fit when you and I struggle with our faith in Him, look what He does! Jesus covers for him. He doesn't destroy John's reputation, He exalts it. He doesn't expose the weakness of his heart, He protects it. He encourages him, He doesn't discourage him further.

Beloved, this, I tell you, is the way God works. It's the way He works with you. I know those thoughts running around and bouncing around in your head that says you're a failure, you messed up, and God can't even stand to look upon you—I'm telling you right now that is not the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's not the Spirit of our Lord. It's a spirit alright but it's not Jesus, it's the devil. It's not true. He understands when you mess up.

The writer of Hebrews says you have a high priest who sympathizes. That means He knows, He feels, He has compassion for you when you blow it, when you're discouraged, and when you doubt. He's there, not to give you the heel, but to give you the extended palm of His hand to lift you up. A hand up.

I know you can tell me, "Well, Jesus sometimes rebuked His disciples. Remember Peter? He's sinking and Jesus says, 'Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt Me?'" Yes, He corrects his faith, but look how He does it—with a hand up. That's the way God does it because He's good like

that. He's a Father who knows how to love His children much better than you and I know how to love ours.

I love the story I shared on Wednesday night. I read it recently. It was a story of a dad who, on his birthday, heard a racket in the kitchen. He got out of bed and slipped downstairs and there he found his little girl bent over on the floor crying. He said, "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"Daddy, I'm so sorry, I wanted to make you breakfast in bed, I got everything ready but I dropped it and made a mess here on the floor. I'm so sorry."

What kind of dad would walk over to that little girl and say, "How dare you? Haven't I told you not to be in the kitchen alone? And look at this mess you've made? You've soiled this floor. I don't expect you to do anything but clean this floor; you can't play with one toy, you can't go outside until you get this mess cleaned up right now." Come on, tell me, what kind of dad would do that? Not a very good one.

Instead, the father did what any good dad would do. He got alongside his daughter, hugged her and cuddled her and said, "Sweetheart, I'm so proud of you. Let me help you." And he helped his little girl clean up the mess. It's a true story.

I want to believe that's the way my Father is when I mess up. I said I want to believe that. I'm not wanting something against the odds, I'm not swimming upstream here, I have a text,

*"among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist."*

I wonder what He says about you when you mess up? What benevolent answer does He give you?

But there wasn't just a benevolent answer, there was a biblical answer.

## **B. A Biblical Answer.**

*"Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: 5 The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them." (Matthew 11:4-5)*

Do you know what Jesus does just then? This is very important. Jesus gives John a biblical answer. In other words, He took him back to the Word of God. These are statements right out of the book of Isaiah.

*"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped."  
(Isaiah 35:5)*



*“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;” (Isaiah 61:1)*

He’s saying, “John, go back to the Scriptures. You know the Old Testament well. Remember when the Pharisees came to you thinking you might be the Messiah and they asked if you were. What did you do? You took them back to this very same book and quoted from Isaiah saying, ‘No, I’m not the Messiah, I’m just the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord.’ Don’t you remember in that same prophetic book about Me it told what would be the signs of My ministry?’”

What is Jesus doing? He’s doing what He does to you. He takes him back to the Word. He’s saying, “John, it doesn’t matter what you see or what you hear, it’s what I’ve said. When you’re discouraged and doubtful, when you feel all alone and that I’ve abandoned you, all you’ve got is what is most necessary—My word. It’s not how you *feel* about it. It’s not what you *think* should happen. It’s not even if things don’t seem what they appear, it’s what I’ve said, and what I’ve said is what I’ve done. I said I was going to heal the blind, I was going to unstop deaf ears, I was going to preach the Gospel to the poor. Take heart, this is what the Word of the Lord says.”

This is what I must do when the heart begins to waver, when my knees begin to buckle, spiritually speaking. I have to go back to my anchor. And it isn’t my conversion date. It isn’t some experience I’ve had with the Lord. It is this—“Thus saith the Lord.”

I collect stories and things for preaching purposes and I have a file and I was going through it. I hadn’t even planned to tell you this story, but it just popped in my brain so I’m going to run with it and trust the Lord.

You know Billy Graham. You probably haven’t heard of one of his contemporaries and a good friend and an associate evangelist in his Youth For Christ days named Charles Templeton. Billy Graham said he was one of the most dynamic young men he’d ever met and one of the best speakers he had ever heard. He came to Youth For Christ about the same time and they were sent out before the Billy Graham organization began. That was in 1946. A couple years later Charles went off to Princeton and after Princeton, liberal theology stole his faith. He doubted the Word of God, doubted miracles, and became an agnostic.

Billy tried to reason with Charles but he said, “I just can’t go there. The Scriptures and reason seem to be at odds with one another. I can only accept what my mind can understand. I just can’t accept the virgin birth, the resurrection, all those miracles, Billy. And you ought to wake up too, sir, and realize there is a lot of fairy tales here that we’ve been saying is the Word of the Lord.”

Graham said to his apostate friend, and I paraphrase, “Charles, I’ve wrestled with the authority and inspiration of Scripture also, but I’ve come to believe it’s God’s Word, even though I can’t explain everything. I can tell you this—something happens when I stand behind a pulpit and I say,

‘The Bible says,’ or ‘God says.’ Something happens when I simply say, ‘God said.’ ‘The Bible says.’ Something happens and I see it every time I preach. Peoples lives are changed.”

Friends, there is only one anchor in life and it’s not what you’re feeling, seeing, hearing, or thinking. It is the Word of the Lord. When doubts assail, there is only one anchor that will withstand all of the gale forces of doubt and discouragement and it is the Word of the Lord. “John, go back to the Book.”

### **C. A Blessed Answer.**

*“And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me.” (Matthew 11:6)*

That’s a beatitude. An old Southern Baptist evangelist Vance Havner had a way of saying things so uniquely that made the point so succinctly. I’ve not learned that skill, as you’ve noticed. He paraphrased Jesus: “Blessed is he whomsoever does not get upset by the way I run My business.” That’s what Jesus was saying to John. “Happy are you if you don’t get upset by the way I do My business.”

Sometimes we get upset with the way Jesus runs His business. We don’t like it. We, like John, or Elijah before him, throw our little pouting parties, usually they’re not well attended—typically only one person shows up. Sometimes misery loves company and you can find somebody else to listen and console you and feel sorry for you but that will only last so long because people can only handle the poochy lip disease for so long. Have you never heard of that disease? John’s got it. What’s the answer for the disease? The beatitude. “John, you’ll be so much happier if you just let Me do My business My way.”

God just doesn’t do it my way, does He? His way is not often our way.

And old Quaker prayed one morning, “God, I am not surprised that you have as few friends as you do because of the way you treat the ones you have.”

Surely John was thinking, “Why are You doing this? If You’re about ready to bring in the kingdom, come on, I want to be there at Your right hand, I want to at least be a part of it, but I’m stuck here in jail. How much longer?” We’ve all been there. God did something so different than we thought. He allowed God to turn out in a way unexpected by us. We’ve all had some of our prayers not answered according to our heart’s desire.

God doesn’t heal your loved one and they’re taken from you. You can’t help the way you feel. Like Martha, you cry, “Lord, if You had been there, my brother would not have died.” But He wasn’t there and Lazarus died. So did your wife. So did your husband. So did your child.

Perhaps you’ve given sacrificially to the kingdom and now your finances are suffering. You did it because you believed God wanted you to and now you’re in need.



Many of us have reared our children in church and prayed for their salvation, but they live like the world in which they dwell.

You told your spouse you loved them until the end of time, then one day they told you time had ended for them.

God sometimes doesn't treat us the way we think we should be treated. John surely thought if Jesus could give sight to the blind and loosen the dead from the grip of death, then surely He could deliver him from Herod's grip. But Jesus didn't and John is beheaded.

I believe that's why some people, even in this room, are not yet Christians this morning. You want to be saved. I believe there are people in this room right now who are not yet followers of Jesus but they want to be. But you're not a follower today because it hasn't happened yet the way you believe it should happen. You thought how it would happen and you're waiting for what you have invented in the imagination. You've asked God to save you but you've asked Him basically to save you your way and you're still waiting.

Friends, you'll wait until the day you die and breathe your last breath. It won't happen that way. "Blessed, happy, favored is the man who does not get offended when I do My business My way." If you're waiting for sparks, if you're looking for a Fourth of July Parade with fireworks and all of the attractions, I'm telling you, that's not the way God often saves. Sometimes, but rarely. Most of the time, God comes into the heart of a man or woman in a very stealthy, small, still way with very little fanfare.

We make a big deal about the encounter with Christ and no doubt it's a wonderful encounter, one you'll not forget, but sometimes the initial visit is often missed. It comes unaware and He's already occupying your heart before you realize it. He's already at home sitting in front of the hearth, comfortable within before you recognize He's there.

You're waiting for something to happen—I'm telling you, it probably will not happen. Why? Because God requires of you to do your business. What is your business in regards to salvation? Two things: repent and believe.

Repent. What does that mean? It means you make a U-turn and start going in the opposite direction. "Ah, preacher, I've done that. I've tried to change my ways. I've tried to stop that and I've tried to start, but I'm still not saved." Ah, friend, I told you there were two things. Repentance and faith.

Faith means you grasp the word of God and you hang on whether you feel it, whether you see it, or whether there is an experience to validate it. Does that make sense? You make a commitment of yourself to the Lord and you say, "I'm Yours, no matter what happens, no matter what I feel, no matter what I think. I am giving You me because I trust in You." Sometimes when that happens it doesn't happen with a great deal of trumpet blaring or wing seraphs singing. No angelic choir sometimes.

I thank God I had an experience that was very emotional. God knew me and He knew what I needed. I think the reason God doesn't do it that way for most people is simply because He's testing your faith, just like John here in prison. "Will you believe Me, even if you don't feel that I have forgiven and accepted you? Will you take Me at My Word when I say if you repent of your sins and trust me with all of your heart and follow Me I will receive you and not cast you out?" Friend, I'm asking you what Jesus is asking you right now—will you trust Him? Will you at this moment say, "Yes, Lord. I am going to follow Your business and not expect You to do it my way."

Friend, I guarantee you, according to the authority of this Book, He will save you. You will have been saved in that hour of faith and repentance. And if He saves you, don't be surprised that sooner or later you're going to feel something. I didn't say Christianity is emotionless. I've preached against that even recently. I'm just saying you don't put your eternity on hold until you feel something. Nor do you stake your eternal destination upon feeling something.

You base it on the fact that Jesus felt the lash, He felt the lash and the weight of the Father's wrath for your sins. That's what you base it on. He endured the pain. He endured the pain and feelings of rejection and loneliness.

Dear Christian, God is running His business and it is our business to do His bidding. God is very happy to mind His own business and we are most happy if we agree with Him.

We are most happy and hopeful when we give our minds and hearts to the business of God, letting God do it His way, whether it means popularity or poverty. If it means adulation by others or adversity and affliction. "Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, it is well with my soul." Amen.