

John the Baptist: A lesson on not stumbling
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I want to begin with a question for you: what would stop you from believing in Jesus? You know, it happens all the time. Just two weeks ago Pastor Tim preached from Revelation 2-3 and he showed you all the places in those 2 chapters where God tells his church to overcome, to conquer, to persevere in their faith. They might not. They might fall away. They might stop believing and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. Several times in Revelation the author says, "This is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." That's seems to be a major point of Revelation; Christian, don't fall away.

There's this obscure man mentioned in the NT a few different times. His name is Demas. Demas became a part of Paul's church planting team. In the books of Colossians and Philemon, Paul passes a big "hello" to his friends from Demas; he's part of the team. Paul was training and developing this man. But even the great Apostle Paul himself had dropouts. Several years later, in the second letter Paul wrote to Timothy, a letter he most certainly wrote in prison, Paul mentions Demas again. He said (4:9-10), "Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with the present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." Demas became a casualty to sin. He didn't go to Thessalonica to plant another church or because he forgot his favorite sweater. The text says, "in love with the present world, Demas deserted me and went to Thessalonica." What did he love about the world? Did he miss the creature comforts that come with an easy life? Did he hate the humility that serving Jesus requires; did he want his name in lights? Did he want the sensual pleasure of being with different women on different nights? We don't know. But somehow, somehow he went from a member of Paul's church planting team to walking away from it all. He stopped following, he stopped believing and trusting in Jesus.

I had a seminary professor at Bethel who was different than the rest. Let's just say he was cool. He was challenging, insightful and provocative. He was also brilliant. Brilliant as in he got his first Ph.D. when he was 18, if I remember correctly. But he was dangerous, too. He pushed the envelope of what was orthodox and biblical. Quite frankly, I remember being a tad surprised even then that he taught at our school. It didn't feel like he quite fit theologically.

Today he is an atheist. Rather than teaching students and writing books about God and Jesus Christ, he tells people that faith in God is simply evolution's way of helping us cope with our fear of death. It goes to show you: faith in God has nothing to do with intellect. It's a matter of the heart; a matter of your will. Do you think his extramarital affair had anything to do with him walking away from God? Of course it did. Faith isn't offensive to reason; faith is offensive to our sinful, selfish desire to get what we want. And when faith gets in our way of what we truly want we'll throw it away.

What's remarkable about our story in Luke 7 is that it seems John the Baptist himself is tempted the same way. John the Baptist. The guy who baptized Jesus Christ with his own two

hands and saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus like a dove. John the Baptist was Jesus' own cousin, born for the very purpose of telling people about Jesus. How in the world could John the Baptist come to the point where he's not sure whether to believe and follow Jesus or not? Friends, if it can happen to Demas, if it can happen to my seminary professor, if it can happen to John the Baptist, then it can happen to you and me (READ Luke 7:18-23).

There's a sense in which when you read the gospels it's like you're watching a movie. Luke is telling us the true story of Jesus; so there are scenes and backdrops to the story. So, when you hear in vs. 18, "The disciples of John reported all these things to him," you're supposed to remember the scene where you last saw and heard of John the Baptist. I know a lot of you saw the new Star Wars movie; the movie ended with (PIC) Rey finding Luke Skywalker on a deserted island. Now there's tons of speculation: what's he been doing there? What will they do together on that island? If the next Star Wars movie opens with Luke and Rey fighting Kylo Ren on a snowy mountain you're going to think, "Hey, what happened on the island? We missed a part!"

So, where did we leave John? We didn't leave John the Baptist in a tavern drinking pints; nor was he swimming in the Dead Sea. Let's go back to Luke 3:18-20 to find out (READ).

In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist is recorded as saying, "He [Jesus] must increase and I must decrease." It's his respectful, reverential way of saying, "People need to see Jesus more and more and I need to just get out of the way!" Well, John got his wish, didn't he? Have you thought about John the Baptist at all in the last 3 or 4 chapters in Luke? I sure haven't. It's all about Jesus; rightly so. But don't forget where John's at now, in prison because of the righteousness of God. What does that mean? It means he's in jail because he's doing the work God has called him to do. John's message was to call people to repent. To turn people from their sins. The Messiah is coming; get yourself ready for him by turning away from sin and turning to the Christ. And he told that message to Herod while Herod was having an affair with his own brother's wife. Herod was the puppet king of Israel; Rome was in charge, but they would find a ruler from the people to advocate for the Roman emperor. Herod was their man. So when John the Baptist told Herod to repent, he didn't turn to Jesus and walk the aisle when the music played; he throws John the Baptist in jail. John is in jail because he's doing the works of God. And now he is wondering: Is Jesus *really* the one? Vs. 19 says John sent 2 of his disciples to find out if Jesus is the one or if we should wait for someone else.

It's not hard figuring out why John is wondering this. He's in jail; he's in the midst of a hardship. He's probably afraid, and he has reasons to be afraid. In two chapters Herod executes him. Didn't John Declene preach last week that Jesus leads to the truly abundant life? Do you think that's how John is feeling? So, guess what? John is tempted to fall away. He's tempted to walk away from faith and trust in Jesus. Look at vs. 23, the last words Jesus has for John the Baptist, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

This word *offended* is the main word in the NT for *stumbling* or *falling away*. Listen just two a couple of verses. John 16:1 [Jesus speaking], “I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away (stumbling).” Again Jesus in Mark 9:43, “And if your hand causes you to sin [to stumble] cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.” We use the word *offended* like being insulted. When I was 33 and the 18 year old teenager called me middle aged I was *offended* (not really... more shocked). If someone says, “What did you do to your hair?” We might get *offended*. In the NT, *offended* doesn’t mean insulted; it means to fall away and stumble. It means to turn away from that path of faith. Vs. 23 could be translated, “And blessed is the one who does not stumble in their faith or fall away on account of me.”

It’s interesting to see how Luke seems to really heap the blessings and favor Jesus has for people in this passage. The good, compassionate and merciful works of Jesus are highlighted. We’re told right away in vs. 18 that the very occasion that sparked John’s curiosity and temptation were the reports of “these things.” What are “these things?” The healings! The miracles! The servant of the centurion healed; a mother receiving back her son from the dead. (Side note: wouldn’t hearing those things help John to believe that Jesus really is the one? Why does that make him doubt? We’ll get into that). In vs. 21 Luke says in that very hour, at the very moment when John’s disciples show up, Jesus is in the midst of a healing service. Our Lord is curing people of diseases, plagues and evil spirits. Blind people are receiving sight. Is Jesus the One? What in the world do you think? And then, finally, Jesus’ answer to John’s disciples is the same thing; rather than just saying, “Yep, I’m the one,” Jesus says, “Look around. Tell John the blind are receiving sight, the lame are walking, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead live again. The poor are given the good news.”

Now, Jesus being a faith healer didn’t automatically make him the Messiah. There have been all kinds of faith healers in the world. Some of them have been sent by God; some of them are sent by the Devil himself to deceive and lead people astray. Don’t be fooled by the supernatural, friends. Satan has the power and ability to disguise himself as an angel of light and replicate the works of God. Every now and then someone will ask me, “But did you hear about the miracles by so-n-so; what does that mean?” It doesn’t mean what we think it means; it just means this world is not a closed box of natural causes that so many believe. The reason this is supposed to make an impression on John the Baptist is because he knows his OT. The scriptures say that God’s Anointed One would come and do these very things. Preach good news to the poor; heal the sick; give sight to the blind. It was the fulfillment of the OT prophecies that spoke most powerfully of Jesus being the Messiah.

Look at vs 23 in chapter 7. “And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” Did you know that the OT prophecies also say that the Messiah will set the captives free. That’s the good news John the Baptist is waiting for. He’s captive! He’s in jail. He’s probably been praying for release and for freedom. But rather than Jesus giving John a ray of sunshine, giving him some hope that he, too, would experience the help of God right here, right now, all Jesus has for him is a warning. Don’t fall away on account of me.

Will you, my dear brothers and sisters? Will you fall away on account of Jesus? John the Baptist's hardships are tempting him. And your hardships will tempt you. "What about me? How come you're not helping me, Jesus? I've been praying for a new job and nothing. I've been patiently waiting for the darkness of depression to lift, learning the lessons and you don't hear my prayers! All we want is a baby and everybody else can get pregnant. What about us?" We saw earlier that John knew and heard and saw the works of Jesus, but rather than that leading him to faith it leads him to doubt. Why? Because he's left out. Everybody else is getting help. This whole faith thing seems to be working for a lot of other people, but it doesn't seem to be working for John.

You would think that if there was anyone Jesus would help it would be John the Baptist; the guy who baptized him, the prophet of God sent to validate his ministry, his very own cousin (remember, they were family). Jesus has all the authority needed to rescue John from certain death and he doesn't while, at the same time, he's helping strangers.

Jesus' purposes for you goes well beyond your earthly desires, dreams, comforts and well-being. Jesus is always working for greater purposes than earthly, temporal ones. God's goals for you and me are so different than what our goals might be. Some of us have the goal of a successful career with enough money to make life comfortable and even fun; God doesn't have that goal for you and me. Some of us have the goal of popularity; other people liking us, accepting us, loving us is very important to us. God doesn't have that goal. In fact, the very life God calls you to live and the message he tells you to spread is going to invite the ridicule and mockery of others. Some of us just want long life; let me see the grandkids grow up and play tee ball or graduate from HS. That's not God's goal for you and me. And we don't feel like we're asking for much; we just want to be comfortable. We like the hot water that comes from our hot water heaters, we like the conveniences of modern life. Just keep giving me those things, Jesus, and I'll be happy. That's not God's goal for you and me.

When God sends trials into our lives to lovingly bring us into a deeper relationship with him, we might just fall away because we haven't given up on our goals. The trial is a not so gentle way of God bumping you towards him; towards loving and treasuring him more than anything on this earth. But we don't always like the bump; we want God to leave us alone. That's why trials are dangerous; that's why some stumble in the trial. It's risky because some are not willing to let go of their dream and trust the sovereign grace of God in their life.

I think it's worth highlighting and making explicit: what is God's goal for you? If God's goal for you isn't primarily long life, healthy bodies, happy family moments or successful careers, what is it? Let me read 1 Peter 1:6-7 for the answer: In this you rejoice (God's saving grace) though now for a little while, as was necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith - more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire - may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus

Christ.” Someday, Jesus will come and bring us home. And on that day, your faith purified by the trials of your life will shine with praise to the glory of Jesus Christ.

I believe part of my responsibility for all of us in this church family called First Baptist is to help us get ready. Your day is coming, friends. One of these days you’re going to be like John the Baptist watching everybody else get all the blessings you’ve been waiting for and then you’ll sit and wonder, “Is Jesus really the one for me?” Why did I get cancer? How come we have to struggle paycheck to paycheck? Why can’t we get pregnant and everybody else can? This persecution and mockery are miserable. And I’m here telling, “he wants to give you something better; a purified faith.” Make that your goal, friends. Because when you do, though the trials are difficult, you won’t be disappointed or stumble.

Key verse: Luke 7:23 ~ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

Questions for the week

- Do you ever think of falling away of faith? Why or why not?
- Should we as Christians worry about falling away from faith?
- What are some things you learned today that are supposed to help you stand strong in your faith?