

mp3/51/MATTHEW 11 v1-11.MP3

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[0 : 00] So Matthew chapter 11. After Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?

Jesus replied, Go back, and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me. If you have a Bible in front of you, please turn with me to Matthew's Gospel chapter 11 and the first six verses.

With apologies to those of you whose sight may not allow you to do it. For the rest of you, I do commend very strongly to you the practice of actually having your own Bible, and bringing it to church, or borrowing one here, and looking as the Scriptures are opened up.

You do need to be sure that what is said comes from this book. So Matthew chapter 11 verses 1 to 6. I want to speak about something this morning that disturbs many who attend Christian meetings.

[1 : 32] It troubles casual visitors, it troubles regulars, and it even troubles people who have long been committed as members of a gospel church, and I'm sure it troubles some of you.

And if it doesn't trouble you personally, it probably troubles people you're trying to help, both inside the church and out there in the world, because many people are troubled by the issue of doubt.

So I want to speak to you about doubt this morning, a theme which is illustrated here in John the Baptist. And I want to ask three key questions this morning from this passage of Scripture.

What is doubt? How does it come about? How come, you know, what causes it? And then thirdly, how can we deal with it?

How can we begin to overcome doubt? So three questions illustrated here in Matthew 11 on the subject of doubt.

[2 : 40] So the first question, what am I talking about? What do I mean by doubt? What is doubt? Well, the kind of doubt that I'm talking about is clearly here illustrated in the life of John the Baptist.

When John heard in prison what Jesus was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?

Please notice there is no indication in the text that the question is asked by John on behalf of someone else. And if that were the case, I think there would be indications of that.

What we have here is the reality that sometimes, not just people on the fringes of things, or people who are, would describe themselves as weak followers of Christ, but some of the most eminent of Christ followers have periods when they struggle to answer the question, is Jesus Christ really?

The one way to God. Is he the long promised one, whom God sent into this world to reconcile them and others, and multitudes of people, to himself?

[4 : 02] So a very, very fundamental question indeed. He is not sure about Jesus anymore. Not absolutely sure.

He's looking for help. Doubts have arisen in his mind. And today, many people struggle with the same question. For some people, and it may be somewhat temperamental, it is a settled state. They are always in turmoil, always in doubt. But for many others, just occasionally, somebody who has been eminent, and fervent, and long standing in the following of Christ, who has spoken with such clarity, as John the Baptist, who said, behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

And yet, such people sometimes go through periods, suddenly hit, whereby their confidence drains away, and they are uncertain, concerning the very heart of the gospel, and concerning Christ

himself.

And maybe that is you. It can hit those who have been very confident. Or maybe it's you, because you're an outsider, and largely you've dismissed the Christian faith, but the doubt comes the other way around.

[5 : 27] Have you been right? To kind of dismiss all this Christianity as so much moonshine, and of no truth or consequence. So does doubt trouble you?

Trouble is the right word. It is unpleasant to be so unsure. Maybe you hear something. Somebody says to you something about a friend of yours, you've known and trusted for a very long time, but this comment, this, which they claim they've heard this person say, or seen them do, just unsettles you about your confidence in that person.

And it's a very troubling thing. Well, it's exactly the same here. It's a very disturbing thing to be uncertain about Christ and what he claims.

The very heart of the Christian message. When so much hangs on it, you'll notice how Jesus' closing words here, that he once passed on to John, is, blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.

I think all blessing depends in the end on having a relationship with Christ and holding on to Christ and going on believing in Christ because he is the only way to God.

[6 : 45] It is those who trust in him who have eternal life. And that is a huge issue. So what do I mean by doubt?

What is doubt? Well, the way I'm talking about it this morning, I mean by that uncertainty about whether Jesus is the only saviour, whether he is the Lord of glory, whether he is the only way to God, whether all who depend on him have eternal life.

And doubt is very different from scepticism. Scepticism is the basic, blatant dismissal of all claims made for and by Jesus Christ.

It is a kind of, you know, I do not believe that. Now, the problem is that sometimes people dress up their scepticism as if it were doubt.

And they have a question. They ask you questions. And they seem like serious questions. How do you know that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead?

[7 : 51] How do you know that he is the only way to God? And they seem like serious questions. They're the very same questions that some people ask with true sincerity. But you see the difference between scepticism and doubt in that the sceptic has always got another question.

There is never an end to the questions that a sceptic asks. Because actually, all they are is smoke screens. They are reasons not to consider seriously the Christian message.

message. But it is very, very different for the person who has doubts. These are heartfelt and disturbing things. They're unwelcome.

He or she would love to be sure. And often they come, as they did with John, from the heart of an honest seeker after truth. And for such a person, bewildering, it is a bewildering and frightening thing to face doubt concerning Jesus Christ.

So that's my question, in a sense. Do doubts about Jesus trouble you? Well, let's have a look, secondly, at what causes doubt.

[9 : 04] What causes doubt? It's a very important question. You see, I think that many people who do have doubts about Christ and the truth of the great facts of the Christian gospel, they fear that their doubt is the breaking through in their mind of realism.

So, you know how it is. You've got a friend who can do some magic tricks and you watch, absolutely astonished by what this person can produce from up their sleeve or the fact they can always know what card you've picked up from a deck of cards.

But, when the fourth time you watch what they're doing, there is just something that begins, a little glimmer that breaks through, gives you some idea about how they might be doing what seems to be completely magic.

And a lot of people, when their doubts arise in their mind about their Christian understanding, about the truth of the Christian faith, about who Jesus is and what he has done, they fear that those doubts are kind of, you know, the breaking through of true light that proves that they are thinking, they've been thinking and believing nonsense.

And doubt often panics people to think like that. but this passage shows that the cause of doubt is something very different. It's not what we fear it may be, the breaking in of reality which disproves

these things which have been so important to us that seem to give the answer to the questions of life and hope even in the face of death.

[10:54] The causes of doubt are different. We see them well illustrated in this incident of John the Baptist. What causes John's doubts in Jesus? Well, I'm not saying these are the only things but let me mention, let's keep it simple, let me mention two very obvious things here.

His doubt is caused partly by his own situation. Notice this. When Jesus heard, sorry, when John heard in prison what Christ was doing he sent his disciples to ask him are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?

John is in prison. Now, I know sometimes people give us the impression these days that prisons in Britain are like hotels. I have a great deal of difficulty believing that having been into Armley jail just to visit somebody else I hasten to add.

but in John's day it was a desperate situation. How hard it must have been for him to cope.

What anxiety about the future totally justified. He was going to be beheaded by Herod. So incredibly isolated.

[12:18] and it made him low. And when people are low in spirits then it is easy to doubt. Doubt often comes to people just because their life is unbelievably hard.

In that sense it's a totally irrational response. It's nothing to do with the evidence at all. It's simply an emotional response to the difficulties of life.

And that is the cause of many people's doubts. Is that not so? that like John doubts arise from our own situation actually a million miles away from the truth or otherwise or things that reflect on the truth or otherwise of the events of the life death and resurrection of Christ and the purpose of his life.

But John's doubt I don't want to suggest to you that John's doubt is entirely irrational. Even in terms of his life the doubts arising from his own situation there is the element that says well this man's life has not turned out as he would have expected.

He has faithfully and with astonishing clarity and commitment preached God's truth to his generation.

[13:40] And yet what has he got for his preaching? He has ended up in prison. Surely it's very easy in those circumstances to ask the question have I been wrong?

Have I really been called by God? Is all I've said is that really been the truth? I felt it was God's word. I believed it was God's word for this people but where has it got me?

And you see it is so easy to argue like that. You know I thought when I became a Christian life would be simpler life would be happier life would be more fulfilling life would be delightful and yet I find the situation that I've got more burdens and more heartaches and I'm more isolated from people than I was before.

But Jesus says do not suppose that I've come to bring peace on the earth. The very previous chapter. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.

It's very interesting. Sometimes our doubts come from our own experience but because we have not really understood what it is to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

[15:04] Our doubts may arise as John's did. Life becomes much more difficult than we had expected and we ask ourselves the question can I really be following the truth?

So that's one area from which this man's doubts arose from his own situation and so often that is the case. Perhaps totally irrational or perhaps at least understandable conclusions that arise from the difficulty of life in following the saviour.

the other place from which his doubts clearly arise is his expectations of Jesus. His expectations of Jesus. Notice what we're told in verse 2.

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing it was when he heard what Christ was doing that the question arose are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?

In other words his expectations of what the Messiah would do were different from what Christ was doing.

[16:11] And what were his expectations? Well if you turn back to chapter 3 and verse 11 he said this concerning the one who was to come chapter 3 and verse 11 of Matthew I baptise you with water for repentance but after me will come one who is more powerful than I whose sandals I'm not fit to carry he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire his winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with

unquenchable fire.

And where is the evidence of Christ baptising with the Spirit says John and where is the evidence of this great work of judgment in the nation? And of course John's problem was he didn't understand God's timetable.

Christ would baptise with the Spirit when he had conquered in his death and resurrection and ascended to heaven and then he would baptise with the Spirit and he would come again for this supreme act of judgment.

But John didn't grasp and understand and understand those things and so he had these questions. Jesus didn't seem to be doing exactly what he had expected him to do and so he has these doubts. Are you the Christ? And you see doubts today in our hearts can rise from a very similar kind of area. We don't, Christ doesn't seem to be doing in his church and in this world the things that we expect him to do.

[17 : 59] So for example, this church has been preaching Christ fervently, had leaders who've done that over many, many years and yet how few relatively speaking how few people have come to faith in Christ?

And perhaps that is a problem to you. You come from outside, you've just taken an interest in Christianity, you're beginning to ask the question, is it true? But there seems so few people who are prepared to say yes it is true.

So this raises question marks, can you believe these things these Christians say to you? And yet you see even in scripture times, how many followers did the Lord Jesus Christ have after three years of public ministry?

Well he chose twelve, one of whom had deserted and the others have kind of wobbled on the brink and there are 120 gathered in the upper room and that is in spite of this extraordinary work of many miracles and outstanding preaching.

It's very striking. Notice here incidentally he's not just pointed to the works of Jesus but to his words. the order in verse 2 is significant.

[19 : 25] Sorry, in verse 4 is significant. Go back, Jesus replies, and report to John what you hear and see.

His expectations of Jesus. We, our expectations of Jesus are sometimes not met. Few people seem to grow as Christians and to be the kind of people that we see described for us in the scripture.

And that causes doubt to Christians and doubt to onlookers. What causes doubt? Well so often it is these two things. Either the difficulties of our own situations or our own unrealistic expectations. Christians. But notice neither are clear evidence that Christ is not the only saviour. So it's very striking. Doubts arise from things which are not central.

Even though we might have doubts about the central things in the Christian faith, that isn't actually where the doubts tend to come from. So having had a little think about how doubts arise, let's finally have a look at how to handle doubt.

[20 : 48] And the example of John helps us here also. How do we deal with doubt? Well let me say this, that most of us can tend to think that doubt is like some deadly disease, like cystic fibrosis or multiple sclerosis or motor neurone disease.

In other words, when you've got it, you've got it. There are no cures and it's almost certain that things will get worse and prove to be fatal.

And we think of doubts like that, the rising of doubts in the mind and you can so often think this is going to destroy me. I'm going to lose my faith because of these doubts that arise here.

My friends, it is not so. this passage helps us to see how we may attack those doubts, how we might handle them. If you handle doubt properly, that doubt can actually help you to a stronger faith or to a real faith for the first time.

You need to do what John the Baptist did. John did not simply try and ignore his question. He didn't sit in prison and hope they'd go away.

[22 : 06] Those doubts you have, they won't go away because they have come for a reason. Nor did he let these doubts simply go round and round in his mind in the hope that he would solve them.

He didn't do that either. If you do that you just become less certain and more depressed. Nor did he single out some sceptical person with whom he could discuss these issues.

He did something sensible about it. What did he do? Well he did three things. There are three things here. The first he did specifically himself and that is he sought help from Christ himself. You notice that? He heard in prison what Christ was doing. It raised all kinds of questions in his mind and he sent his disciples to ask him. Who is the him? Jesus.

He asked Jesus are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else? If you have doubts my friend you can cry out to Christ himself.

[23 : 14] You can bring your problems and burdens and doubts to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You can tell the Lord Jesus Christ about the problem you have. Or why you're losing your certainty.

Or why you're struggling to hold on to belief that he is the only saviour and the one who can give you and has given you eternal life.

You can seek help from Christ himself in prayer. And you might say to me, I can't do that. I'm not even sure. At this particular moment in time, I'm not even sure that he is there to hear me pray. That's how real and terrible sudden doubt can be. Or you say, I can't pray to him because it's my own fault. After all these years my faith ought to be strong and now I'm having doubts.

I'm ashamed and embarrassed. I cannot come to Christ like that. My friend, of course you can.

What was Jesus' attitude to John the Baptist?

[24 : 22] Did he say to John the Baptist, you, through his friends, he didn't say to these friends, you go and tell him to get a grip, to sort himself out, that now is not the time to lose faith in man.

There is no sense in which Jesus is just heaping criticism on John the Baptist. If you have any doubt about that, read all that he said then, how warmly and enthusiastically he speaks about John the Baptist in verse 7 and following.

I haven't got time to look at that, but it just shows Jesus' attitude to this man. He seeks to help him. What he says to him is things that if he gets his mind around them will greatly help him to lose the doubts will fade and go away.

He is approachable. It's very striking, his brother Jude writes in his letter in verse 22, inspired by the very spirit of Christ, he gives us this exhortation, be merciful to those who doubt.

You can seek help from Christ himself. Now you might say, well I've tried that, but my doubts haven't gone away. Well keep going my friend, but that isn't all you must do.

[25 : 50] You must pray, but that isn't all you must do. Secondly, you need to do what John was instructed to do, that is to reflect on the facts about Jesus Christ.

Jesus replied, go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

He says, you've witnessed these things, now go and tell John exactly what you have seen. So what have we got to do? We've got to attack our doubts by getting into the scripture.

These are the eyewitness reports of what Jesus said and has done. That's very interesting, isn't it? Christianity invites inquiry. Jesus says, John needs to think about the facts, he needs to get his mind round all the evidence, all that I am in fact doing.

[26 : 57] Very striking. But what help was that to John? He knew all that. Very interesting, isn't it?

It was when John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent with this question and Jesus simply sends him back with well look at what I am doing and saying.

You think well that's no solution. Those are the very things that were causing John the problem.

Well notice two things. Firstly, he uses scripture language. And the way he answers John's query is in effect to quote bits of Isaiah back to him which were about what the Messiah would do.

So he's saying to John, I am doing what the Old Testament said the Messiah would do. But he's doing something else as well.

He's saying to John, John you're not really looking, you're not really thinking about these things.

These are astonishing things, you've become familiar with hearing about what I'm doing, please just stop for a moment and realise how amazing are the things that are being witnessed.

[28 : 16] Because they are truly amazing. The blind receive their sight. This is not in Jimmy's, they're not St. James' Hospital in Leeds with some great operation. This is a man who speaks and the blind see.

The lame walk. Not after six months with the physiotherapist, but instantly. those who have leprosy, which shuts them out from the community, which just, as it were, goes from bad to worse, all their

nerve ends go and in the end bits of their limbs drop off.

They are cured. The deaf here, the dead are raised. At the very heart of the Christian message is Jesus Christ, who has demonstrated that he is the God man, and yet he has laid down his life, the perfect sacrifice for sinners and triumphed over death.

Doubts are not resolved by magic, but by being shown to be false. Faith does not come in a vacuum. Learn all you can. Faith is a response to knowledge and understanding.

It is with other people. people. You know, if you have doubts about somebody, if you get to know them better, you know whether your doubts about them are justified or not. We need to do the same with Christ.

[29 : 48] Get our minds full of all that he has said and done. No one spoke like this man. No one did what this man did. He has triumphed over death.

And he has spoken in ways which indicate that he is indeed what he claimed to be. The way, the only way to God.

And then finally, so how are we to handle doubt? Seek help from Christ, reflect on the facts about Christ, and then remember what he promises and act.

Notice verse 6. He closes with these words to John, blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me. Happy is the man who does not fall away on account of me.

Now it's a warning isn't it? He is warning John to hang in there. But it is also a wonderful promise, a lovely promise. If you don't fall away, if you hold on to me, you will be blessed, you will be supremely happy.

[30 : 58] That's a wonderful promise. And what a spirit of fight against doubt. Now, often people feel they must have all their doubts and fears removed before they could possibly follow Christ.

My friend, that is unrealistic. You will never understand all that God said and does. And it's not necessary. Do what Jesus encourages John to do.

See the big evidence and trust. Put your hope in Christ today. Cry out to God on the basis of what Christ has done. Because he has demonstrated the truth of his words and his claims.

And then hang in there with the promise ringing in your ears. Blessed is the man or woman who does not fall away on account of me.

Let me close with this, my friends. Fight your doubts. It's vital because although Jesus is amazingly patient with those who doubt, it is a very dangerous thing to let doubt remain.

[32 : 06] Fight your doubts. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me. It's a blessing.

It means that all blessing depends on this. Grasping Christ, having him as saviour and continuing to trust in him.

Everything depends upon that. It means that true life transforming blessing comes through resolving the doubt and resting on Jesus Christ, the saviour.

In a moment we're going to sing a hymn. And the hymn is this, I heard the voice of Jesus say, come unto me and rest, lay down thou weary one, lay down thy head upon my breast.

And the response is this, I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad. And the writers experience Horace Boner's experience is this, I found in him a resting place and he has made me glad.

[33 : 17] So let's stand to sing our closing hymn 579, a hymn of genuine creation. Before I pray, can I just encourage you, if you are free this evening, come and join with us at half past six and God will and we're going to look at that extraordinary passage of scripture, probably the best known passage in the whole Bible, the 23rd Psalm, but it is really a wonderful place to mine from great things there.

Let's pray. Our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you that you're a God of exquisite patience. We thank you that you're a God who understands all the anxieties and doubts and fears that arise in our hearts.

You know their true cause, Lord, and you know how to help us, to strengthen us and help us to overcome those things.

Lord, we, those of us who've had any experience of this, know how frightening it can be. We pray, Lord, that in your people's hearts you might sweep away doubt as they cry out to you and reflect on the wonders that lie at the very heart of the Christian message.

And as we see the promises of Christ, Lord, enable us, Lord, to be people who exercise our faith. And so, by genuine experience of you, keep doubt at bay.

[34 : 50] Forgive us, Lord, that we are such feeble people. And Lord, here again, as a subject just makes us so aware that without you we are lost.

keep hold of us and draw more to yourself, Lord. May they find clarity and certainty in the place of doubt and uncertainty and a glorious realisation that Christ is the perfect saviour.

We thank you that all depends not upon the quality of our faith but upon the greatness of the one in whom that trust is placed.

and Lord, may he be all our joy and our hope. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[35 : 57] Amen. Amen.