

There is often a dissonance between expectation and reality. Many of us here today are struggling with that. Some of us went into our marriages with great expectation and reality is breaking your heart. Some of us are hurting parents. Our kids are struggling; we don't know what else to do. We are tired, scared and discouraged. Some of us had such high expectations for our career. We invested in a good education in a particular field because we wanted to make a difference and change the world. We took a job with a company we believed in. After working there a while you see the ugly underside that unethical things happen with your coworkers or supervisors and you are urged to participate.

Each of us go into our marriages, our parenting, our workplaces with expectations, with a sense of being called by God. We invest with the expectation that attention to these investments will bring joy and fulfillment. But things are not working out. You are out of ideas. You are out of energy and almost out of hope. As our song said, "You feel like you are being held to the flame," and you are trying to hold on to the promises of God. You cry out to God, "I know you are able. I know you can save me from the fire with your mighty hand, but even if you don't my hope is you alone."

But unmet expectations are causing you to doubt. The tough situations—your visible reality—are challenging what you believe about God. To sing out loud, "It is well with my soul" seems hypocritical, a lie, because things are not well. You are going through a season of doubt. I want you to know if you ever doubt ... If you are asking the questions, "Is it worth it? Is it true?" you are in good company, because the greatest men and women in the history of our Christian faith went through seasons of doubt about God.

If you are here today and this isn't your season for doubt, this may be your season to encourage someone who is being held to the fire.

Expectations versus Reality

I remember a past season in my life when a person on my staff and I were just not connecting and certainly not on the same page. It was draining. It was frustrating. It was time consuming and I allowed it to affect other areas of responsibility I had in the church. In fact I remember in the middle of all of this, all I could do was get a sermon together each Sunday. It affected my attention and energy toward my family and my church family.

The conflict felt like a wet blanket was thrown over every area of life. It was all I could think about. It was all about trying to fix something that was broken. I remember a guy who saw that I was struggling and invited me to play golf to just take a break. I declined his invitation because I needed to fix this thing before I could go out and play. I didn't want to play until it got fixed.

I began asking God, is this worth it? Is it true? I had doubts. I had doubts about my calling, my giftedness, my capacity to lead and impact others. But I remember a colleague coming alongside me and telling me, "It's okay to have doubts, even the greatest leaders do, but Dan, don't let doubt take you out." He was a poet and didn't know it. Let God teach you something under that wet blanket. Doubts are invitations from God for more intimacy with him. He will teach you something about yourself and about him through this. There are times when unmet expectations will cause us to doubt God, but we can't let doubt take us out.

In our last two studies in Matthew chapter 10, we saw Jesus instructing his disciples to go out as sheep among wolves. He let them know that persecution is a strong possibility for those who follow Christ and that the gospel may even divide families and loyalties; to know that there is a reward in heaven for those who take up the cross of Christ and stay strong following in his steps even when faced with opposition. Being a Christian doesn't guarantee a pain-free prosperous life. Being a Christian doesn't guarantee we won't experience seasons of doubt. But as my friend quoted me, "Doubt doesn't have to take you out."

So after Jesus finished instructing his 12 disciples in went on from there to preach and teach in the towns surrounding Galilee. (Matthew 11:1)

This brings us to one of the most colorful characters in the Bible; John the Baptist. As far as people who knew about Jesus at this time, John had to be in the top five. In fact, if you remember from earlier in Matthew, people asked him if he was the Christ, the Promised King, and he said, "No, No, I'm not the Christ. The Christ is still to come. I'm just here to get you ready. I baptize you with water but he will baptize you with purifying fire and the Holy Spirit." Soon after, God gave John the privilege to baptize Jesus. And on that day, when John saw Jesus coming to be baptized he said, "Behold the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sins of the world."

The number one thing about John's life was that he knew who Jesus was and was willing to tell anybody about him, even the most powerful. In fact, John had no fear. He rebuked King Herod

for marrying his brother's wife. And what was Herod's response? He threw John in prison.

Jesus Speaks into John's Doubts about Jesus

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (verses 2–3)

John languished in prison. John had to be confused because he was sure he was right to confront Herod's evil, and yet Herod was still in power and he was caged in a prison. The prison, according to the historian Josephus, was in the fortress of Machaerus in a hot dry desolate area 5 miles east of the Dead Sea. It wasn't the end of the world, but you could see it from there.

John had to be emotionally drained as well. This prophet, this free spirit, this preacher who roamed the countryside was unable to fix his situation. It's interesting to compare John at this point in the story to the prophet Elijah. Years earlier Elijah had confronted and denounced King Ahab and Queen Jezebel for their sins. Elijah, totally drained from the experience, fled to the desert and wanted to die.

Jesus was not living up to what John expected or prophesied. Why didn't Jesus just come, overthrow Herod, and set John free? Questions formed in his mind. Doubts began to appear. So John verbalized his own doubts in the form of a question, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Then he sent some of his disciples as messengers to Jesus to ask for him.

John verbalized his doubts. He verbalized his doubts about the one he knew so well, the one he had prepared the way for, the one he had told hundreds if not thousands of people to prepare to follow.

Have you ever had a season like that? You knew who God was and you knew who Jesus was and you were firm in your faith, but then something hits you and knocks you off balance? Something happens that caused you to question what you thought you really believed? And you ask, "Is it worth it? Is it true?"

Is it uncomfortable to hear that John the Baptist was going through a dark night of the soul? If he had doubts then what about us? Will we be able to stand when we face our unmet expectations? When we face our darkest nights of the soul will we be able to work through our doubts? Let's look together at Jesus' reply to John's disciples.

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 cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." (verses 4–6)

I think one of the most comforting things for me in this is that Jesus doesn't offload us if we doubt. We can doubt and be followers of Jesus at the same time. Doubt is not unbelief. At times

in our lives, we will doubt because we don't see the whole picture of what may be going on around us. Our thinking can be clouded by our difficult circumstances as it is here with John. Instead of condemning him, Jesus ministers to him from the Bible.

Jesus' reply to John was not one specific quotation from the Old Testament. The quote references Isaiah 35:5–6 and Isaiah 61:1–2. Both of these are prophecies that are directly tied to the Messiah. Jesus is telling John's disciples to watch what I do, and then tell John what you saw me do. Tell John what I told you from the Scriptures, and then he will know that only the true Messiah could do these things.

Did John still have some doubts? I think he did. John had to be thinking, "My disciples came back and they told me about Jesus, healing all these people, and preaching to the poor. Jesus did all that wonderful stuff for them. But what about me?" And then to paraphrase Jesus, he says in verse 6, "John, don't let the way I operate in your life cause you to stumble. Don't let your doubt lead to unbelief."

What must it have been like for John in that prison when one of his disciples came and said, "You're not going to believe it. We heard Jesus preach a sermon today. He went into his hometown of Nazareth and opened the scroll to the prophet Isaiah and began reading, '*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor and to set prisoners free.*'" Yep. That's what he said, John. And one more thing John, he isn't going to come and unlock your jail cell. He's operating differently in your life." He had to be thinking, "What about me?" So John asks, "How come Jesus isn't coming to me?"

I think John and we as well have to come to terms with this: **God makes promises and he always keeps his promises. But God does not promise to meet our expectations or meet our timelines.** I know most of us struggle with this. We expect God to do something in a certain way. But Jesus is telling John and us this morning, "I am doing what I promised, but I am not doing it in the way you expected. Don't stumble because of this."

My doubts come when the difference between my expectations and reality are so far apart that I find myself losing my balance and slipping off the foundation of what I truly believe about God. Getting back to the center of my foundation comes when I get my mind and heart back to the central miracle of the Bible.

Jesus was crucified, died and buried and on the third day he rose again. When his disciples saw him die right before their eyes, they began to doubt. Three days later when the disciples saw their leader overcome death they didn't doubt anymore. They saw and believed and their lives changed. They saw that it was worth it. They saw that it was true. And they boldly went out into the streets of Jerusalem spreading the gospel message and then they took the message out to the surrounding regions.

Even the strongest Christians, Christians who changed the world, had doubts—CS Lewis, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr. to name a few. They wrote about how they eventually rose from their dark night proclaiming, “It is worth it because it’s true.”

Some of us walked in here today doubting God because of our circumstances. We’re asking, “Do I really believe God is involved in the very personal challenges I am facing now with my children, in my marriage, in my job, with my finances? Do I really believe he will work out all things for his good and glory and that he will assure me that all of this is worth it and is true?”

Some of us have intellectual doubts. You have yet to believe. You’re asking, “Do I really believe in an intelligent designer of the Universe? Do I really believe there is a God? Do I really believe that he is personal and attentive to his creation? Do I really believe God loves me? Do I really believe that Jesus is his son? Do I really believe in the resurrection? Do I really believe in salvation for all who believe?” May you open your heart as well as your mind to Jesus this morning.

Did you notice that Jesus didn’t answer John’s question with a direct yes or no? Phillip Yancey, an insightful Christian writer says, “When Jesus answers questions he never wants to give us so much evidence that we’re forced to bow our knee. He just gives us enough, and if our heart desires God, there’s enough to have faith in God. But if our heart doesn’t desire God, he will never give us so much that we are forced into a relationship with him.”

Jesus gave enough that if John wanted to believe he would believe. Next Jesus turns his attention from John’s disciples to the crowds because these crowds are wondering, “If John is who he claimed to be, why is he in prison?”

Jesus Speaks Into the Crowd’s Doubts about John

As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. (verses 7–8)

Jesus then asks, “Did you go out to see a fancy rich man in soft clothes? Of course not, you wanted to see the guy who at least dressed the part of a prophet and you loved that he was all about exposing religious hypocrisy.”

Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:

**“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’**

Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has

been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. (verses 11–12)

Jesus is saying that from the time John started preaching about him, violence has been aimed at the Kingdom of God. One example is John being arrested and imprisoned on account of Jesus. It’s a foretaste of the violence we will see aimed at Jesus and his followers in the upcoming chapters of Matthew. To remove all doubt in the crowd about John, Jesus aligns him with their hero Elijah.

For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear. (verses 13–15)

Then Jesus tells the crowd, if you are willing to accept it, John is the spirit and power of Elijah. If you accept John as Elijah then that would mean accepting him as the forerunner of the Messiah and then accepting Jesus as the Messiah.

Accepting John and Jesus is exactly what his generation does not do. Jesus’ generation over 2,000 years ago is just like our generation. Jesus speaks into his culture and so these words speak into the doubts about Jesus in our culture as well. Jesus speaks into both his generation and our generation.

Jesus Speaks Into Our Generation’s Doubts About God

“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: (verse 16)

Jesus compares his generation to spoiled children playing games, either a wedding game or a funeral game, who were upset because Jesus and John didn’t play their games.

**“‘We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not mourn.’ (verses 16–17)**

The culture played a pipe like one would play at a wedding, but John would not dance. And the culture then sang a dirge—like one would sing at a funeral, and Jesus wouldn’t mourn. He explains further:

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.” (verses 18–19)

John called for all of Israel to mourn their sin and repent and they claim he had a demon. Jesus came like a wedding feast and they claimed him a glutton, a drunk, a friend of unclean sinners.

Jesus says wisdom here is the messages of John and Jesus. He is telling them that if they reject his message it doesn’t mean the message or messenger is wrong. People and nations throughout history have chosen the wrong messengers and messages to follow. The fact that our generation doesn’t follow Jesus doesn’t

mean that Jesus is a false messenger. It really asks all in this generation an honest question, Are you who doubt Jesus and his message being morally honest and sincere to investigate Jesus and his message before you reject it?

The wisdom here is Jesus and John and their messages will be proved right by their deeds.

What do we do when our unmet expectations produce doubt? We should understand from anyone who has passed through seasons of doubt that these seasons are normal. These seasons are times to discover, learn, and trust more. There are things we can't learn, depths we cannot reach in our relationship with Christ without the refinement that comes through seasons of doubt.

We are not meant to walk through seasons of doubt alone. John had his disciples around him in this season. It reminds me of an excerpt found in the book *Stories for the Journey*, by William R. White.

There was a European seminary professor named Hans and his wife, Enid. World War II forced them to flee to America where he found a job teaching. He was warm, gentle, beloved by his students, and he brought Scripture to life for them. Hans and Enid were very much in love. Nearly every day they took long walks together, holding hands, and they always sat close in church, until Enid died, overwhelming Hans with sorrow. Worried because he wouldn't eat nor take walks, the seminary president, along with three other friends, visited him regularly, but he remained lonely and depressed. Experiencing the dark night of the soul, Hans told his friends, "I am no longer able to pray to God. In fact, I am not certain I believe in God anymore." After a moment of silence, the seminary president said, "Then we will believe for you. We will make your confession for you. We will pray for you." So the four men met daily for prayer, asking God to restore the gift of faith to their dear friend. Many months later, as the four gathered with Hans, he smiled and said, "It is no longer necessary for you to pray for me. Today, I would like you to pray with me." The dark night of the soul had passed. Instead of carrying Hans to Jesus on a stretcher, his friends carried him in their prayers.

May God by his grace allows us to carry our brothers and sister who doubt with our presence and prayer.

There is a question we must bring to bear on our doubt this morning. Many of us are familiar with the gospel account when

Jesus walked on water. *"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"*

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:28-33)

A short time later Jesus taught the crowds about the hard teaching that Jesus is the bread of heaven, and that they must eat of the bread and drink of his blood. It was a hard teaching for sure. Many disciples couldn't accept it. They doubted and that doubt turned to unbelief and they deserted Jesus. *"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:66-69)*

Peter asks the question that all of us must ask if we doubt this morning. "Lord if we leave you, to whom shall we go?" If not you Jesus, who shall I go to? If not you Jesus, what else would I turn to? If not you Jesus, where would I go?

Every action has a reaction. If we step away from Jesus, we step toward someone else, or something else, or someplace else.

Peter's words speak to our hearts. "Lord, if I step away from you what would I step toward? Only you have the words of eternal life." If our doubt takes us out, we will cling to someone or something else and we will never realize what God may want to do for you and through you. If Peter had deserted Jesus he would have never fulfilled the calling Jesus had for him. He would have never reached the potential that Jesus had for him.

In your dark night of the soul, hold tightly to the Resurrection. Hold tightly to his word of eternal life, and let go of your own expectations. Let go of your own timelines. Believe today that your season of doubt has a purpose that will result in greater intimacy with God. To the questions, "Is it worth it? Is it true?" may each of us look forward to that day when the dark night ends and you will look back from a better place and answer, Yes!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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