

—Matthew 11:2-11

It's only about 30 miles from the Jordan River, where John had been baptizing, to the fortress of Machaerus, where John was now imprisoned. 30 short miles, but a world of difference.

We can hardly imagine the horrid circumstances in which the prisoner found himself. The rock walls of the dungeon closed in on him. The sounds of prison were all around him: the clanging steel of the guards, the screams of victims being tortured for information or flogged for punishment, the quiet moans of those nursing their wounds, and the shrieks of those gone mad. The air was hot and thick and heavy with the smell of waste. And here was John the Baptizer, prophet of God, forerunner of Christ, the one promised in the spirit and power of Elijah, chained like a dog.

There were moments of reprieve, like when he was permitted some face time with his disciples. Visiting with them he was able to send this message to Jesus. *“Lord, are you the one who was to come? Or should we expect someone else?”* Even Herod Antipas sent for John from time to time to speak with him. Herod Antipas was the son of the late Herod the Great who, thirty years earlier, had tried and failed to kill Jesus when he slaughtered the babies in Bethlehem. It was Herod Antipas who had seized John and put him into prison, because the preacher had dared to accuse him of sin. John had told Herod that he was in the wrong for taking his brother's wife as his own; John had called Herod to repent and leave his sin, and he found himself cast into prison. But in spite of this, Herod still liked listening to John. Perhaps it was Herod's conscience that nagged him, because he knew that John was right. Perhaps Herod was just intrigued by this fiery preacher from the wilderness of Judea, and so he sent for John now and then. But mostly, John lay in Herod's dungeon, surrounded by the squalor and the screams.

I don't care how strong you are, the devil can use circumstances like these to make hay with a person's mind. He can fill your head with crazy thoughts. As the minutes turned into hours, then days, then months, we can only imagine the thoughts that ran through the Baptizer's mind. So boldly he had pointed to Jesus and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” So calmly he had told his own disciples about Jesus, “He must increase, and I must decrease.” But that was before his arrest, before the dungeon, and before the doubts.

John was waiting for the Messiah, but what did John the Baptist expect from Jesus? Rescue? Deliverance from the hand of Herod? Why was the Messiah running around the countryside while his faithful prophet languished in prison? Was John the Baptist expecting the wrong things from Jesus? Or was it just the devil messing with his mind, jabbing at John's faith, fanning his fears and compounding his doubts? You can sense the tension, the insistence, the urgency, even anxiety, in the question John sent with his disciples: *Are you the one who was to come? Or should we expect someone else?*

It's easy to trust in Jesus when everything is going well. It's easy to believe in here, in church. This is a sanctuary, a place of refuge, where we're surrounded by fellow Christians, singing, praising, encouraging one another. It's easy to put our hope and confidence in God our Savior, until life gets real. Until the doctor sits down and tells you that you have cancer, and your time is short. Until a loved one is seriously injured in a terrible accident—or maybe doesn't survive. Until your kid who got straight A's at Emmanuel Lutheran School and Arizona Lutheran Academy tells you he's in a gay relationship and says he hopes you'll understand. Until your favorite niece, who's always been a church-going Christian, tells you she wants to transition to a man. I wish I could pretend these things don't happen. I wish I could use more mundane examples of things that knock us around badly enough—like losing a job or facing surgery—but the fact is, we do experience even more difficult things like this in our lives, among our loved ones, in our families. And when they come, they rock our world. And that is when Satan comes and messes with our minds and fills us with questions and doubts. Is my faith real? Am I trusting in the right things? Why do I feel so crushed and hurt and empty? Where is Jesus?

Satan plants the seeds of doubt in the heart of a young Christian man or woman, baptized and raised in a Christian home, confirmed in the Christian faith, and now moving off to college, who finds that for the first time in his life he has to take personal ownership of all the things he's been taught all his life. For the first time he's surrounded by a whirlwind of different philosophies, surrounded by countless new temptations, each of them calling to him with its invitation. Christianity is just one of many options set before him, and he wavers, “Jesus, are you the one? Or will I follow a different path?”

Those doubts arise in the heart of us who have reached the middle years of life, as we look in the mirror and see deepening laugh lines, a few more crow's feet, and a few more gray hairs. We find ourselves tossing and turning in the pre-dawn darkness, reflecting upon the years gone by and the dwindling years ahead, and the devil raises the ugly specter of the sins of our youth and the sins of our yesterday. "Jesus, are you the one who can deliver the peace my heart craves?"

It doesn't sound a whole lot different from the doubts John the Baptist was having. Brothers and sisters, by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, you have staked the eternal destiny of your immortal soul on this Jesus of Nazareth! Is he the one? Or should we place our trust in another?

Listen to Jesus' response 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 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."* Listen to how gently and tenderly Jesus deals with John. He could have said, "John the Baptist! What's wrong with you? Where's your faith?" But he doesn't, answer that way because Jesus knows us. He is our Brother. He knows our frailty and our weakness. He knows our discouragement, our depression, our doubt. And when our dark emotions carry us to crazy places, Jesus returns us to reality—to the facts.

Jesus' reply wasn't just a reference to the things that were happening across the land. Yes, there were the formerly blind who now could see, yes, there were the formerly lame dancing for joy, yes there were former leper outcasts now cleansed and reintegrated into society, and yes there were parents in Galilee who were praising Jesus because they had received their loved one back from the dead. Amazing things were happening across the length and breadth of the countryside, for wherever Jesus went he brought his holy touch to heal and transform. But Jesus' answer said more than just, "Look what I'm doing, John." Jesus' reply took John back to Scripture, back into the Old Testament, back to the promises of God written in the book of Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah chapter 35: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy," and Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." These were clear messianic prophesies that could only refer to the Christ.

To assuage John's doubts, to calm his fears, and to bring comfort to his heart, Jesus pointed John not just to the miracles, but to the promises. He led him back into the Word, the Word of prophetic truth, the Word of promise given by a God who does not change and who cannot lie.

And so it is for you. You trust in the imminent arrival of the Messiah. You place your hope in Christ and are watching and waiting for Christ to come again. It is the Word of truth that has convinced you and caused you to place your hope, your confidence, your expectations for the right things in Jesus Christ and in no other. It is this Jesus to whom you look for the salvation of your soul: to his obedience in your place, to his willing sacrifice on the cross, to the blood that has washed you free from every stain, to his glorious victory over death, to his intercession and pleading for you at the right hand of God. You are looking to the fruit of the womb of the virgin, to the Word made flesh, who made his dwelling among us, for healing and righteousness. You are waiting for the celebration of Christmas, when you will look into the manger and gaze into the face of God!

Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come? Or should we expect someone else?"

Brothers and sisters: For the righteousness that comes from God; for the confidence to be able to stand in holiness before the Lord of hosts when he comes on the great Day of Judgment; for the forgiveness of your sins, and for the promised crown of everlasting life . . .

There is no one else! There is only Jesus. Amen.