

**Luke 7:18-23**  
**No Doubt**

All of biblical history has pointed to the coming of Christ. From the beginning, the biblical narrative has had as its focus the story of redemption by the atoning work of the Messiah. It began at the beginning. Jesus was present at creation, “Let Us make man in Our image” (Genesis 1:26). Then His coming was foretold after the Fall,

“And I will put enmity  
Between you and the woman,  
And between your seed and her seed;  
He shall bruise you on the head,  
And you shall bruise him on the heel” (Genesis 3:15).

The Messiah was promised to be of the seed of Abraham, “ In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” (Genesis 22:18). It was said He would be of the tribe of Judah,

The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
Nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet (Genesis 49:10).

In addition, the history of ancient Israel is replete with illustrations of the coming Christ. Noah’s ark symbolized the Messiah as a place of refuge for all God’s people He has chosen to save. When Abraham discovered a ram to substitute for his son Isaac, it symbolized the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ, “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). The countless spotless lambs offered in sacrifice were understood to be a foreshadowing of the Christ, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). The several appearances of the angel of the Lord were manifestations of the pre-incarnate Christ.

The priesthood of ancient Israel was a preview of the Messiah as our great High Priest, “<sup>14</sup>Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. <sup>15</sup>For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:14-15). The bronze serpent to whom the Israelites looked in the desert so that they might live was an anticipation of the coming Messiah, “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:14).

The greatest king of Israel, David, was both a shepherd and a king. So, too, would be the Messiah. Jesus said of Himself, “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11). And Jesus claimed to be a king, “now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, ‘Are You the King of the Jews?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you say’” (Matthew 27:11).

The Psalms are saturated with praise and prophecy of the coming Messiah. A few examples:

<sup>7</sup>I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD:  
He said to Me, ‘You are My Son,  
Today I have begotten You.  
<sup>8</sup>Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance,  
And the very ends of the earth as Your possession.  
<sup>9</sup>You shall break them with a rod of iron,  
You shall shatter them like earthenware” Psalm 2:7-9.

“For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol;  
Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay” (Psalm 16:10).

<sup>4</sup>“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?  
For dogs have surrounded me;  
<sup>16</sup>A band of evildoers has encompassed me;  
They pierced my hands and my feet.  
<sup>17</sup>I can count all my bones.  
They look, they stare at me;  
<sup>18</sup>They divide my garments among them,  
And for my clothing they cast lots” (Psalm 22:1, 16-18).

And of course the Old Testament prophets foretold the coming of the Messiah in extraordinary detail:

Isaiah said He would be virgin born, “therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). The “suffering servant” of Isaiah 53 is as eloquent and moving a picture of the Messiah’s death as there is in Scripture,

<sup>5</sup>But He was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,  
And by His scourging we are healed.  
<sup>6</sup>All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way;  
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all  
To fall on Him.  
<sup>7</sup>He was oppressed and He was afflicted,  
Yet He did not open His mouth;  
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,  
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,  
So He did not open His mouth” (Isaiah 53:5-7).

Micah told of the Messiah’s birth in Bethlehem, ”But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,

From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.  
His goings forth are from long ago,  
From the days of eternity.” (Micah 5:2).

Jeremiah spoke of the “massacre of the innocents, “Thus says the LORD,  
‘A voice is heard in Ramah,  
Lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children;  
She refuses to be comforted for her children,  
Because they are no more.’” (Jeremiah 31:15).

Hosea foretold the removal of the family to Egypt, “When Israel was a youth I loved him,  
And out of Egypt I called My son” (Hosea 11:1).

Zechariah foresaw

His glorious entry into Jerusalem during the last week of His life,  
“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
He is just and endowed with salvation,  
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9).

The price for the betrayal of Judas,

<sup>10</sup>I took my staff Favor and cut it in pieces, to break my covenant which I had made with all the peoples. <sup>11</sup>So it was broken on that day, and thus the afflicted of the flock who were watching me realized that it was the word of the LORD. <sup>12</sup>I said to them, “If it is good in your sight, give me my wages; but if not, never mind!” So they weighed out thirty shekels of silver as my wages. <sup>13</sup>Then the LORD said to me, “Throw it to the potter, that magnificent price at which I was valued by them.” So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the LORD.” (Zechariah 11:10-13)

The falling away of the disciples,

“‘Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd,  
And against the man, My Associate,  
Declares the LORD of hosts.  
‘Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered;  
And I will turn My hand against the little ones’” (Zechariah 13:7).

The piercing of the dead Messiah’s side,

“I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will

mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn” (Zechariah 12:10)

Jesus claimed to be the Messiah. He said that Abraham longed to see Him, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). He said that David called Him Lord, “<sup>41</sup>Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question: <sup>42</sup>‘What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?’ They said to Him, ‘The son of David.’ <sup>43</sup>He said to them, ‘Then how does David in the Spirit call Him “Lord,” saying,

<sup>44</sup>”The Lord said to my Lord,

‘Sit at My right hand,

Until I put Your enemies beneath Your feet”?”

<sup>45</sup>‘If David then calls Him “Lord,” how is He his son?”’ (Matthew 22:41-45).

The claims continued after Jesus was born. We have already seen the testimonies of the angel Gabriel, Zacharias, Elizabeth, the angels who spoke to the shepherds, and John the Baptist himself. Clearly, Jesus was the expected one.

The evidence was overwhelming. The long prophesied Expected One had finally come, Yet most did not receive Him, and even those who did, had their doubts.

### **The Expected One**

Word of what Jesus had been doing reached even the prison, several miles east of the Dead Sea, where John the Baptist was being held. His disciples had “reported to him about all these things” (v. 18). Think of the healing of the centurion's servant and the raising of the widow's son, news of which had spread throughout the region. No doubt, John heard these stories with varied emotions. After all, he had fulfilled his mission of preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah. He knew that he was to decrease that Jesus might increase (John 3:30). Still, John had been imprisoned for as long as a year and would eventually be martyred for his exhortation to Herod Antipas about the illegitimacy of his marriage. He must have wondered why Jesus allowed him to linger there.

While in prison, John was still permitted visitors. Therefore, “summoning two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord” (v. 19). This was a common occurrence as we can see from Matthew 9:14. With John imprisoned, several of his disciples must have begun to follow Jesus, though many also joined the Pharisees (again, Matthew 9:14).

The question they were to ask was simple and straightforward, “are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?” (v. 19). No offense was intended, but John had risked (and lost) all in proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah. Some believe that John's motive was to encourage his disciples to follow Jesus and not to have any petty jealousies regarding Him. They suggest that John knew that if he sent his disciples to Jesus, they would see for themselves that He was the Messiah, and would follow Him after John was gone from the scene. Perhaps this is the case, but if so, then why did Jesus tell the disciples “go and report to John” (v. 22). A better argument can be made that John had begun to have doubts.

### **Doubts**

Doubt is a consequence of the Fall. Like sin, all are vulnerable to it. Even the great examples of faith in the OT were not exempt from its attack. Abraham (when God told him he would have a son), Sarah (at the same time), Moses (when God told him to speak to Pharaoh), Gideon (when the Israelites were subject to the Midianites), and Elijah (when he heard Jezebel was after him) all had their moments of doubt.

There are many explanations for John's doubt, and I think we can relate to (and hopefully learn from) them as well. First, John may have doubted because he lacked all the necessary information. In the OT, Scripture spoke of the coming Messiah both as the "suffering servant" and as the "conquering king," and it was not clear that there might be a gap (two thousand years at least) in between these two manifestations of the Messiah. The only cure for such doubt is a clear understanding of Scripture. We have an advantage John did not, the entire corpus of Scripture with two thousand years of thoughtful interpretation behind it. It is an advantage we cannot afford to waste.

Another possible cause for John's doubt was misguided expectations. It is said that disappointment is the difference between expectation and reality. Current Jewish thinking was heavy on the "conquering king" and rather dismissive of the "suffering servant" aspects of the Messiah. Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 notwithstanding, first century Jewish thinking focused on a Messiah that would throw off Roman imperial rule and re-establish the kingdom of David. So prevalent was this view that even after Jesus had died on the cross His disciples asked, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

Jesus had made no attempt to be king. In fact, He was intentional in making certain that it did not happen, "So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone." (John 6:15). This attitude on the part of Jesus was confusing at best, and frustrating at worst, to those who followed Him. <sup>21</sup>From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. <sup>22</sup>Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.'" (Matthew 16:21-22). This is simply the most famous example.

These false expectations must have been especially significant for John, as he had been very outspoken in his presentation of the Messiah as bringing judgment of those who did not repent, "indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3:9). Yet Jesus had brought compassion and healing rather than judgment, and this unmet expectation had, perhaps, caused John to doubt.

We must remember that we cannot make God in our image. Isaiah 55:8-9,

“<sup>8</sup>For My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD.  
<sup>9</sup>For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
So are My ways higher than your ways  
And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Finally, John may have been caused to doubt because he was in the midst of personal suffering. He had served God faithfully. He had preached his message without fail, and yet here he found himself imprisoned and facing imminent death. That seemed inconsistent with a sovereign, omnipotent, loving God. Furthermore, there is nothing in the biblical record to indicate that John had committed some grave sin for which he was being disciplined by God. He had served God since birth (Luke 1:15), and there is no reason to suspect that he had wavered in either his devotion or his duty.

We, too, can doubt when we are undergoing personal suffering. It is then that we ask “why is this happening?” It is during those times that we are temporarily blinded to all that God has done, all the grace we have received, as we focus only on the present moment. We must focus on what we do know of God when things happen that we do not understand. We know He is loving, we know He is sovereign, and we know “that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

### **Certainty**

The response of Jesus to the question of John’s disciples is powerful. He does not answer with words, but with actions. No sooner had the disciples of John the Baptist said “John the Baptist has sent us to You, to ask, ‘Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?’” (v. 20) than “at that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He gave sight to many who were blind” (v. 21). This episode of multiple healings is in agreement with other times of a similar nature that Luke has already described (Luke 4:40-41, 6:17-19). Jesus healed those who were sick, demon possessed, and physically handicapped (v. 21). Jesus specifically displayed His power and authority as the Messiah in answer to the question.

One might think that the progression from “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up” (v. 22) would be sufficient to restore John’s faith. But there was more. Jesus continued, “the poor have the gospel preached to them” (v. 22). This was the climax. This was why Jesus had come. This was the Messiah’s ultimate plan.

That Jesus did this graciously is evident from the fact that He did it. Jesus did not give the Pharisees such a privilege when they asked for signs and wonders because He knew their heart and their motives, “<sup>38</sup>Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.’ <sup>39</sup>But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet’” (Matthew 12:39-38).

Jesus completely understood John’s doubts. He wanted to reassure him that his life had not been misspent. Though in prison, Jesus wanted John to know that he had done well. Jesus told John’s disciples, “Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them” (v. 22).

Jesus was making a point that was as old as ancient Israel and would be emphasized further as Christian doctrine developed. “You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:16), Jesus said, and He showed it.

The true quality of a prophet was known only by the accuracy of their prophecies. The true quality of the Messiah was seen here. The true quality of a believer today is seen in their fruits as well.

### **The Caution**

As we have said, Jesus responded graciously. He was accustomed to being doubted, even by His followers. His grace to Peter and Thomas in the future would bear that out. His message to John concludes with “blessed is he who does not take offense at Me” (v. 23). This is not a rebuke, but an encouragement. Jesus understood that His appearance as a “suffering servant” would be offensive. It was not what the Jews expected, and certainly not what they had hoped for. Still, Here He was, with a plan beyond their understanding. Jesus reminds John that perseverance will result in blessing.

### **Take Aways**

When tempted to doubt, may we turn to the truths of Scripture and remember what God has done for us in the past. May we call to mind that His ways are not ours (misguided and uninformed) but perfect in their plan and execution.