

Courage in the Midst of Doubt

Matthew 11:2-11

At one time or another each of us gets discouraged. When I say that we get “discouraged” I mean that we sometimes lose the courage we need to pursue God. It takes courage to seek after God in this life. For example, it takes courage to trust God to take care of you when your suffering - physically or emotionally or mentally. Sometimes we look at our own suffering and it doesn’t look like God really cares about us. It doesn’t look like walking with God has reward in this life. Like Job, it takes real courage to say, “Even though he slay me, I will hope in Him” (Job 13:15).

It takes courage to keep seeking God when our lives don’t turn out as we’d hoped or when people we love experience some sort of tragedy. Honestly, sometimes it doesn’t look like God is doing too great a job of running the universe. Sometimes we think, “I could do a better job than God is doing.” When those thoughts cross our minds, it takes real courage to keep walking with Him.

It takes courage to continue seeking God when you’re battling some temptation (or even addiction) that dominates your life. Sometimes it’s easy to lose heart and think, “I’ll never get better, so what’s the point in trying?” We need courage to continue seeking God and trusting Him to bring us healing and wholeness.

You may be discouraged right now. Maybe you even wondered if coming to church today would make you more discouraged - hearing about and singing about things you’re not experiencing. If I’m describing you, I’m really glad you came today because we’re going to study a passage of Scripture that has the potential to re-frame how we think about our lives and our circumstances. I’ve been praying that this passage would give you courage.

We’re studying the life of John the Baptist this Advent season because John’s birth was so closely intertwined with the birth of Jesus. Today we’ll consider Matthew 11:2-11, a passage that describes a time when John the Baptist was discouraged. When he was in prison he actually began to doubt whether Jesus was who he thought He was. From Jesus’ response to John we learn two important perspectives that can **give us courage** in the midst of doubt and difficult circumstances. First, Jesus says:

Be encouraged by the advance of the Kingdom all around you. (Matthew 11:2-6)

Verses 2 and 3 set the context:

2 Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?”

We learn in Matthew 4 that “John had been taken into custody” (4:12). He had been arrested because he spoke out against King Herod for marrying his brother’s wife. After living in freedom in the wilderness for many years, John now finds himself in a Roman

prison. It's estimated that he had been in prison for a year when he asked his disciples to inquire of Jesus, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"

A couple years earlier, when Jesus had come to him to be baptized at the Jordan River, John had been certain of Jesus' identity. He had pronounced Jesus to be "the Christ" and "the Lamb of God" and "the One who has a higher rank than me." But sitting in prison he wasn't so sure any more. John 3 gives us some clues as to why John might have been doubting Jesus' identity. There we read John's description of what would happen when the Christ arrived on the scene. This is what he told the Jewish authorities of his day (Matthew 3:10):

10 "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

John also made this pronouncement about how Jesus would separate the wheat from the chaff:

12 "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Sitting in prison, it sure didn't appear to John that Jesus was cutting down trees that bear bad fruit, throwing them into the fire. It didn't look like Jesus was gathering the wheat into the barn but burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire. It looked like the Pharisees and the Romans were doing what they'd always done: keeping the people in bondage spiritually and politically. Before too much longer John would be beheaded. The kingdom of God wasn't advancing the way John thought it would. And so John sent his disciples to ask Jesus directly whether He was the Messiah or whether they should wait for someone else. [It's not that John was wrong in any of these prophecies. If anything John needed to adjust his expectations for how they would play out.]

Notice how Jesus answered John's question. Even though John was sitting in prison, the signs of the Kingdom's advance were unmistakable.

4 Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5 *the* blind receive sight and *the* lame walk, *the* lepers are cleansed and *the* deaf hear, *the* dead are raised up, and *the* poor have the gospel preached to them. 6 "And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me."

Isaiah had prophesied that when the Messiah came that He would proclaim "good news" (good news) to the afflicted (Isaiah 61:1) and that He would do these types of miracles (Isaiah 35:5-6). Jesus wanted John to know that these very things were happening. The readers of Matthew's gospel have just read how Jesus went around the cities of Galilee doing these very things. Matthew 8, for example, records how Jesus delivered two men who were tormented by evil spirits. Jesus demonstrated how a word

from His mouth was more powerful than the demons who had possessed these men for years.

Jesus' message for John was, "You don't need to look for anybody else. I am the Christ and the Kingdom is advancing." We don't have John's response recorded, but I think we can safely assume that he found Jesus' answer to be satisfying because his deepest passion was to see God's kingdom advance. Even though John probably didn't understand the timetable or the details of how Jesus would separate the wheat from the chaff, it was enough to know that the Kingdom was advancing.

All of this is instructive for us, isn't it. The implication is that even if your circumstances are oppressive and disappointing (like J-B's circumstances!), you can still **be encouraged by the advance of God's kingdom all around you!** John's experience challenges us to take our eyes off of ourselves and see what God is doing in the lives of others in the body of Christ and to see what God is doing in other cultures and other parts of the world. This isn't meant to minimize any difficulties you're experiencing or to trivialize any pain you might be experiencing. But if your encouragement (and joy) is limited to **your** specific circumstances, you may not be encouraged very often or very deeply. But if you are open to being encouraged by how the kingdom is advancing in and through others, the sky is the limit.

This is one of the reasons we have people share their stories/testimonies - on Sunday mornings (in person or through a video), at baptism services, in life groups. Hearing how God has worked in somebody else's life gives us "courage" to keep seeking God. Instead of thinking, "Unless God does something for me, I don't want to hear about it," we can be encouraged by what God is doing all around us.

One of the reasons I love being part of Alpha is that it provides the opportunity to see how the kingdom is advancing beyond "me and mine." At Alpha a cross-section of this church (and of this city really) comes together to discuss the claims of Christ and the life He provides. It's fascinating to see how God opens people's eyes, heals their wounds, and draws them close to Himself. It's really an exhilarating thing when the kingdom advances in this way. Seeing God's Kingdom advance can give us courage - even when our circumstances aren't what we'd like.

If this first paragraph challenges us to be encouraged in spite of difficult circumstances, the second paragraph challenges us, **Be encouraged by your "greatness" in the Kingdom of God. (Matthew 11:7-11)** ["Greatness" is Jesus' word, not mine.] Not wanting to leave the wrong impression about John the Baptist, Jesus now addressed the crowds who had heard John's question. In the context of praising John the Baptist, Jesus makes a rather amazing statement about greatness in the Kingdom.

7 As these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 "But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces!

John wasn't blown different directions like a reed shaken by the wind. And he wasn't "soft" and undisciplined like those who live in luxury. He lived in the wilderness eating "locust and wild honey"; his clothes were made of camel hair (Matthew 3:1-5). If they wanted to see people in soft clothing, they could go to the palace of Herod where John was imprisoned.

9 "But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet.

10 "This is the one about whom it is written,
'Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You,
Who will prepare Your way before You.'

This is one of those passages that gives us a subtle insight into how Jesus viewed Himself. He basically said, "John was 'more than a prophet' because he had the distinction of 'preparing the way' for **Me**!" Only the Son of God could say, "John was greater than any of the prophets because he introduced **Me**!" And so John's greatness was a function of the greatness of the person he introduced. That insight prepares us for what Jesus says in verse 11:

11 "Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen *anyone* greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Spiritually John was greater than Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Esther, David, Isaiah, Daniel, or Ezekiel. Among those born on woman, nobody was greater than John the Baptist. Why would Jesus make that claim? John's "greatness" may have been secondarily related to his fervent devotion to God. But his greatness was primarily because he prepared the way for the Messiah - more directly than anybody else.

But why would Jesus go on to say, "Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John the Baptist]"? Just to clarify, if you trust in Jesus alone to pay for your sins, you are in "the kingdom of heaven"; if you are born from above, you are in the kingdom of heaven. In what sense is the "least" in the Kingdom greater than John the Baptist? I don't think Jesus is saying that the least in the kingdom is more spiritually committed and more mature than John.

I think we're "greater" than John because he lived and died before the new covenant in Jesus' blood was established. Whereas he looked forward to the day when God would remove the sins of the people "as far as the east is from the west" (Jeremiah 31), those who believe in Jesus **experience** that forgiveness. Whereas he looked forward to the day when God would put His Spirit permanently within all who believe, we have "the love of God poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:5). In other words, we live in days of fulfillment. Whereas John and the prophets before him longed for the Kingdom, we are actually **in** the Kingdom!

We understand things clearly that John and those before him only understood dimly. For all these reasons, whoever is least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist!

This statement should give us courage because it is a ***statement of theological truth***. This isn't a statement about what Jesus hopes will someday be true of us. This is a ***statement of spiritual reality***. Our response should be one of faith: believing that what Jesus says is true of me. To do anything else is an insult to Him and to His death on the cross. This reality - that we're living in days of fulfillment - should give us courage, courage to pursue the will of God in our lives no matter the cost.

Chances are that you don't think of yourself in any way "greater than John the Baptist." If you see your own weaknesses and sinful habits and don't think that realistically there's any way you'll ever walk in obedience, you lower your expectations. Instead of a life of power and a life of purity, we just "try not to blow it" too often or too horribly. But that's not why Jesus died an excruciating, humiliating death on the cross! He died to free us from the penalty **and** the power of our sin! That's not a pipe dream; that's a spiritual reality.

Jesus said things like, "You will do greater works than I have done because I'm going to the Father and sending you the Holy Spirit" (John 14:12). Jesus said, "He who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit" (John 15:6) and "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7). Instead of explaining away and qualifying to death everything Jesus commanded, what if we accept His estimation of what His death and resurrection would accomplish: giving us a spiritual capacity that is greater than John the Baptist?!?!

Just to clarify, I'm not talking about pretending you're good when you're not; I'm not talking about "staying positive." I'm talking about believing the gospel - the good news about who Jesus is and what His death and resurrection accomplished.

Personally, if I don't spend regular, substantive time dwelling on what God thinks about me and what Jesus has done for me, my ambitions for myself devolve into what I think I can reasonably pull off in my own strength. And I lose courage. Perhaps you've lost courage in some area of your life - an area of obedience, in a relationship, in the midst of suffering. If so, perhaps the first step is simply to be honest before God.

- Perhaps you've gone from doubt to unbelief in some ways.
- Perhaps you've not believed that the death and resurrection of Christ accomplished your freedom.
- Perhaps you need to ask God to give you the courage you need to move forward in faith.

As we enter into a time of prayer, be honest with God and invite Him to give you the courage you need to walk with Him.