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**The Gospel of Luke**  
**XXII. Who Is Not Offended By Me**  
**Luke 7:18-35**

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John the Baptist was having some doubts about Jesus. And just the fact that this was so makes me feel a whole lot better about the doubts that sometimes arise in my own faith. If the one whom Jesus names in our passage as *“among those born of woman none is greater”* could experience doubts, then perhaps our own experience of doubt is nothing to be ashamed of. Perhaps doubt does not at all represent the sort of failure of faith we fear it might. And, truth be told, John the Baptist is not the only great Biblical figure who doubted – Abraham doubted, Moses doubted, David doubted, Jeremiah doubted. Even the disciples, who were with Jesus night and day, who witnessed Him risen from the dead – even they wrestled with doubt. All of which suggests that doubt is not the enemy of faith, so much as it is just faith’s expected companion.

In fact, the Bible goes so far as to suggest that our experience of doubt can often be the occasion, the opportunity, for growing into a stronger depth of faith. Remember the prayer of the father of the boy with the unclean spirit: *“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.”*<sup>1</sup> Our doubts, if they push us toward a deeper wrestling with God, a deeper engagement with the Word of God, can be precisely the pathway into stronger faith. That has certainly been my experience – and I suspect yours as well. I think that is also what Frederick Buechner means when he defines doubt as *“the ants in the pants of faith.”* He continues, doubts *“keep [faith] awake and moving.”*<sup>2</sup> So, that’s the first thing we may draw from John’s doubting: that doubt is not necessarily a bad thing – provided that our doubts propel us into a deeper wrestling with God and with the Word of God.

But I don’t think we should gloss over the specific nature of John’s doubt in our passage this morning – because it has something more to teach us. Our passage is not just a commentary on doubt in general, but also an examination of a particular – and particularly difficult – form of doubt. John sends to Jesus a specific question: *“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”* In other words, John’s doubt is not merely intellectual – as when, say, we have doubts about the Virgin Birth or some other portion of doctrine. John’s doubt runs deeper – it is existential; it is experiential. Remember, John is in prison as he sends this question to Jesus. And nothing about Jesus, so far, seems to be unfolding according to John’s expectations.

Ah, and there it is – John’s *expectation* of what Jesus was coming to accomplish and his *expectation* of just how Jesus was going to accomplish those things. It was John’s expectations about Jesus, more than anything Jesus was actually doing or not doing, that have become for John the source of his doubt about Jesus. Mark that – it’s an important distinction. Remember what

John had been preaching out in the wilderness before Jesus came – that the Messiah was going to come as a mighty warrior, with an axe in one hand and a winnowing fork in the other. And that with fire and judgment the Messiah was going to set things straight down here on earth. That's what John was expecting the Messiah to do and to be.

And, instead, Jesus has come – well, not at all like a mighty warrior. Jesus was teaching the crowds, not bashing Roman heads. He was healing the sick, not throwing the sinners into unquenchable fire. For that matter, Jesus was hanging out with sinners and even befriending them. And Jesus had not even gone to Jerusalem yet, where all the real power was to be confronted – instead, Jesus had just been journeying, seemingly randomly, through some pretty out of the way places and peoples. From John's perspective, Jesus is not doing anything the way John expected Him to. And John's doubts, therefore, come specifically from the fact that Jesus is not meeting John's expectations of what the Messiah should be and should be doing: *“Are you the one, or shall we look for another?”*

And this also explains how Jesus answers John's doubting question. As John's disciples look on, Jesus continues healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and so forth. And then He tells John's disciples to go back to John with this specific message:

*Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.*

Now, you and I readily miss the real meaning of those words – but John would not have. Jesus is not merely saying to John, “Hey, just look at all these neat things I'm doing here and try harder to believe.” No, Jesus is straight on countering and correcting John's false expectations. He is telling John that it is not Jesus' performance that is the problem – Jesus is doing exactly what the Father has sent Him to do. Rather, the problem is that John has gotten it completely wrong in what he expected the Messiah to be and to do.

Because, you see, that message Jesus sends back with John's disciples is not just a description of current events – Jesus is actually quoting back to John one of the most important and central Old Testament prophecies regarding what the Messiah would be and would do. What Jesus is citing for John is basically Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 61, and a whole host of other prophecies as well. Remember, too, that it was with these same words that Jesus began His public ministry while preaching in His hometown synagogue – precisely how He described to the hometown crowd what He had been sent to do by the Father.<sup>3</sup>

Again, the message Jesus is sending to John is that there is no problem whatsoever with Jesus' performance – I mean, who do we think we are to judge Jesus' performance anyway! The problem, the issue that has led John into doubt, says Jesus, is the fact that John has got it all wrong in what he was expecting of Jesus. And I think that is also why Jesus ends His message with that curious blessing: *“And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”* Meaning, I think, that blessed is the one who is willing to receive me as I am and for what I have come to do – even if he or she had been hoping for something different.

Wrong expectations leading to existential, experiential doubts – Jesus not doing what we expect Him to do. The truth is that you and I often end up wrestling with doubt because of that very same mistake – wrong expectations of Jesus. It’s one thing to intellectually struggle with an item of doctrine – we can toss that back and forth in theological debate, mull it over, come to a conclusion. But when it is our wrongful expectations of Jesus which lead us into doubt – when we believe Jesus is letting us down, that Jesus is not doing or being for us what we want and expect Him to – that is when doubt really becomes a problem. Even to the point of causing us to become so offended by Jesus that we are tempted to turn our backs upon Him. I’ve seen it far too many times – faith shipwrecked on a set of wrong expectations that have nothing to do with what Jesus has actually said to us and promised to us.

In fact, I suspect all of us do this, are guilty of this at some point – wrong expectations, which Jesus of course does not meet, leading to a crisis of doubt. We are all like John the Baptist in this, at least sometimes. For that matter, we are all like the Biblical figure of Job in this – the patron saint of wrong expectations leading to doubt leading to a crisis of faith. I think all of us, just like Job, operate – if only in the back of our minds – from this idea that we’ve got an agreement signed and sealed with God. An agreement detailing how we will act and what God will guarantee us in return. That is certainly what Job thought. That as long as we, for example, live as basically decent people, come to church every Sunday, give our tithe, even serve on a church committee, then we can count on God to uphold His end of the deal – which is to keep us and those whom we love from all harms and hurts and hardships whatsoever.

That’s the deal, I think, that exists in the back of the minds of most Christians: we do our part and therefore God is supposed to do His part – or, at least, what we have decided is His part. What never seems to dawn on us, at least not until the trouble comes, is that while we may think we have made that deal with God, God in fact has never made that deal with us. That, in truth, while we might have signed the contract on the dotted line – God never did so. Jesus never said that being a Christian would exempt us from the normal difficulties of life in this world. In fact, He has even said things to us like in the world you will have tribulation<sup>4</sup>, and the rain falls on the just as well as the unjust<sup>5</sup>. But we don’t want to hear those things. And we, therefore, are operating from a very wrong expectation of how things stand between ourselves and God.

And so, when the trouble comes, we become furious with God for letting us down on His end of the imaginary deal we have made with Him. When trouble comes, we even begin to doubt what kind of God He really is, since He’s not at all acting like the sort of God we thought we had – we even begin to doubt if He is really even out there at all. That’s what is contained in John’s question from Herod’s prison block: *“Are you really the one, because I’m not seeing it. You’re not doing what I expected you to be doing and you’re not acting the way I have been counting on you to act.”* That’s exactly what Job does – the very same thing, and on a much bigger scale. Our hero Job – I mean, he really does let God have it. Chapter and verse after chapter and verse of getting in God’s face and complaining about God’s apparent failures towards him. He even, at one point, basically challenges God to a fist fight!

But Job, to his great credit, hangs in there with God. Just keeps on arguing with God, accusing God, criticizing God – even if still only on the basis of his own wrong expectations of

God. Which gives God time to show Job two very important things. One, that the agreement Job expected God to keep was something existing only in Job's head – a wrong expectation, based upon a wrong understanding of who God is and how God operates. And two, that just because God's way is not Job's way, doesn't mean all is lost. Rather it means precisely the opposite – that, in the end, what God is doing and how God is doing it actually will turn out to be exactly that which is best for Job – if Job will just trust Him, hang in there with Him, not be offended by Him.

In fact, at the end of the story, Job says three things to God. First, he tells God that he gets it now, that God has His own way and that God's way is far better than the way he was expecting God to act: *"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."*<sup>6</sup> And then Job tells God that he also now understands that it was never God who was the problem, but rather his own wrong expectations of God: *"I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."*<sup>7</sup> And then, last, Job tells God that even though he still doesn't understand all the mysteries of God's ways and workings, he is no longer offended by God – to the contrary, he has set aside his wrong expectations, and is now just glad to be able to cling to God in faith, no matter what comes: *"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. And I shall be content just to be what I am – a mortal, and not God."*<sup>8</sup>

And it is that same conclusion Jesus is leading to John toward in answer to John's own wrong expectations: *"The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."* Blessed is the one who is not offended by me, John. Jesus is correcting John's wrong expectation, revealing to John what the Messiah is really like and what He has really come to do and how He has come to do it. And He is inviting John to trust Him, to hang in there with Him, to not be offended by Him – even through the dark night, the storm, the unexplained and unexpected suffering. Because, in the end, Jesus will prove Himself to be so much more than John could ever have expected. And, in the end, Jesus will bring about a salvation that is so far greater than any deal John might have thought he had with Jesus. *"Blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*

And, to us, Jesus is now making that same offer, giving that same correction, inviting us to leave our doubt behind and enter into deeper faith and greater trust and truer joy. God may not do things the way we expect Him to, want Him to, demand Him to. But, in the end, the way God goes about His business with us and with this world is the best way, the all things work together for good way<sup>9</sup>, the making all things new way<sup>10</sup>. We may not understand, from moment to moment – but we can trust. We can doubt our doubts, and trust. Hang in there with God, until He is done – and we are able to truly grasp how He has been at work.

One story to illustrate. Nicholas Wolterstorff lost his twenty-two-year-old son in a mountain climbing accident. In his honest and truly helpful memoir of his grief, Wolterstorff writes of trying to understand; trying to reconcile his son's death with the love of God and the power of God:

*I cannot fit it all together by saying, [God] did it," but neither can I do so by saying, "There was nothing [God] could do about it." I cannot fit it together at all . . . To the most agonized*

*question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess. My wound is an unanswered question. The wounds of all humanity are an unanswered question.*<sup>11</sup>

But as we keep reading the memoir, we see that God is indeed answering Wolterstorff's question, much in the way He answered John's question – countering wrong expectations, revealing truth. And we see that as Wolterstorff continues wrestling with God, wrestling with His doubts about God, we see that God is indeed healing Wolterstorff. Such that, by the end, it is clear that Wolterstorff's disappointment with God, his wrong expectations of God, his own doubting question out of a prison cell of grief, have all been answered. He begins to see that even where he does not understand, he may nonetheless trust in the goodness, in the good purposes, in the mysterious ways of the God of our salvation:

*We're in it together, God and we, together in the history of our world. The history of our world is the history of our suffering together. Every act of evil extracts a tear from God, every plunge into anguish extracts a sob from God. But also the history of our world is the history of our deliverance together. God's work to release himself from his suffering is his work to deliver the world from its agony . . .*

*When God's cup of suffering is full, our world's redemption is fulfilled . . .*<sup>12</sup>

He's referring to the cross, where Jesus – unexpectedly, unless we had been reading the Scriptures very closely – where Jesus took all the sins and sorrows and sufferings and sadness of this world upon Himself and died, so that we should ultimately be free of all those things. And then rose again, so that all things should indeed be made new, so that all things should indeed be brought round to good, so that indeed all things we experience shall be redeemed – and we shall dwell in the joy and peace and love of His house forever. “*And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.*” Now, and when that day comes.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 9:24.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:16-21.

<sup>4</sup> John 16:33.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:45.

<sup>6</sup> Job 42:2.

<sup>7</sup> Job 42:3.

<sup>8</sup> Job 42:5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 21:5.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament For A Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 67-68.

<sup>12</sup> Wolterstorff, p. 91.