

Have you ever felt let down by something? Maybe it was a meal at a well-known restaurant. You so looked forward to tasting a particular chef’s cuisine, but when you actually ate the food, it was very ordinary. Or maybe it was a long-anticipated movie: the sequel to a film you really enjoyed, and you wait for years for the next installment of the series. You eagerly go to the theater only to discover the new movie turns out to be kind of a dud.

And so, you feel let down, disappointed, deflated. Well, if this has ever happened to you, then you also know that it’s a little difficult to *admit* that the food or the film really wasn’t very good. You maybe hedge a bit when someone later asks you how you liked it. So let’s shift to Matthew 11. John the Baptist is in prison. **In prison.** Let those two words sink in. **In prison.** And he’s got a question. He’s in prison where you have nothing but time to think so John has a burning question. But the person to whom he wants to ask this question isn’t there and hasn’t visited him lately. So, John dispatches a cadre of his friends to go to Galilee, track down his cousin Jesus and confront him with the question that was tormenting John **in prison.**

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else” (v. 3) one of these days? Here’s a question borne of let-down. John is **in prison.** Have I mentioned that? Worse yet, the reason he is **in prison** is precisely because he got into a bunch of trouble by announcing that his cousin Jesus was the Lamb of God, the Messiah, the One whose sandals John himself was not even fit to carry. John was **in prison** because he told the world that his baptism by water was nothing compared to the baptism by fire that Jesus would soon unleash.

But as the days and weeks passed, it became increasingly clear that Jesus was not going to do anything to spring John from his prison cell. No political revolution was on the horizon which could lead to John’s release and pardon by a new emperor by the name of Jesus. Plus, Jesus was not baptizing *anybody*, not even with water much less by fire. John heard many reports and rumblings

about what Jesus was doing way out in the sticks of Galilee, but the simple fact was that Jesus was out in the sticks, quietly ministering and teaching.

John was the preview of coming attractions. He was like those movie previews you see before the main feature—the trailers that make the new film appear to be spectacular and gripping and generally everything you’re hoping it will be. John presented and packaged Jesus in a certain way, but Jesus was not living up to John’s preview. In his darker moments, John thinks he landed in prison for nothing. Maybe he supported the wrong man. From prison he asks, **“Jesus, are you the One or what? Is anybody else—anybody better—waiting in the wings? If so, bring him on before it’s too late!”**

Do you think Jesus winced when heard John’s question as delivered by his disciples? It’s a cutting question. It had to hurt a little. Jesus answers this painful inquiry by telling John’s disciples to tell John what they had seen and heard. Genuine miracles were being done and genuinely good news was being preached to the poor. It was an interesting answer for several reasons:

First, isn’t it fascinating to see that if John was going to believe Jesus was God’s Messiah, he would have to do that in the same way that we do? Believing what *other* people report about Jesus and his ministry! John himself was not able to hear Jesus’ words in person nor could he witness a single miracle up close. John would just have to believe the testimony of his friends, which is all that we have to go on, as well. We have to believe what Jesus’ and John’s disciples claim they saw and heard is true.

A second curiosity is that apparently Jesus is telling John what he already knows. We’re told in verse 2 that **in prison** John already heard what Jesus was doing. Actually, that’s not quite what verse 2 says. Did you notice how cleverly Matthew phrases this? He referred to Jesus not by name but simply as *“the Messiah.”* Within the narrative section of Matthew’s gospel this is only the second place that we find the word “Messiah.” The first came in chapter 2 when the Magi prompt King Herod to ask his Bible experts where “the Messiah” was supposed to be born. But Matthew has not called Jesus the

Messiah—until now. Now he throws in the very loaded title of *Mashiach* (מָשִׁיחַ), meaning “anointed one.” Everything Jesus is doing is happening only because he is the Messiah. Yes, John heard about Jesus’ activity and yet he himself is not at all certain that this is what the Messiah ought to be doing. So, John asks his painful question only to receive an answer from Jesus that repeats what John has already heard.

But the third interesting thing about Jesus’ answer is the last line he tacks on in v. 6: “*Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.*” In a way, that little tag line is Jesus’ gentle way of giving John a kick in the pants! Even so, Jesus is being kind and compassionate towards John. Jesus did not say, “*Blessed is the one who never, ever has the slightest doubt about me!*” Had he said something like that Jesus would have slammed John as well as anyone else who has ever harbored a doubt in the quiet recesses of their heart. Jesus didn’t chide John for having a hard time figuring everything out. Jesus did not deny that his ministry was surprising and it happened in out-of-the-way places.

Jesus *was* the Messiah, as Matthew tells us in verse 2. But believing that also required accepting the peculiar shape Jesus’ ministry was taking. John drilled a round hole to make way for Jesus’ ministry, but the actual ministry looked like a square peg. The NIV translates Jesus’ words in verse 6 as blessing the one “*who does not stumble on account of me.*” The original word in Greek, *skandalizo*, means more than stumbling. It means to be scandalized by Jesus. In Jesus’ day a “scandal” was literally something you could trip over and cause you to fall flat on your face. The Greeks would say that a *skandalon*, a scandal, is something that can trip you up!

To enter God’s kingdom you need to pass through Jesus. He is the way, the door, the gate that leads to life eternal. So blessed are those who can pass through that door without tripping over the methods of Jesus’ life and ministry. Blessed is anybody who can see Jesus for who he really is, despite the fact that Jesus led no major political revolutions and didn’t replace Caesar in his day. What John had to go on was the gospel as reported by others. All that John

could do was live with the contradictions he felt in his heart, not to mention in the circumstances of his life. He introduced God's Messiah to the world, he laid the groundwork and he prepared the way for Jesus, yet now he was rotting in prison while Jesus was out in Timbuktu doing what looked like the spiritual equivalent of helping little old ladies across the street! That's how John must have seen things through the bars of his prison cell. It was not merely doubt that John had to overcome but troubling inconsistency. Jesus as much as admits to the oddity of it all but can finally do no more than beg people to not trip over it, to not fall on their faces because of it. Faith is, as often as not, a matter of keeping our balance as we walk through the troubling contradictions of life. **Faith is the ability to live with a certain measure of tension between what we believe in our hearts and what we so often see with our eyes.**

We are not in a situation comparable to John the Baptist on that long ago day reported in Matthew 11. We've got twenty centuries' worth of people having faith in Jesus as God's Messiah to help bolster our own faith. Still, if we're honest, we admit that we too live with certain tensions and contradictions. We know Jesus was not Superman—impervious to pain and immune to death. **This Jesus we adore was human.** He could be hurt, and he was. He could be killed, and he was. He died. End of story, according to many people, but not according to us! We believe the preposterous notion that the carpenter's son who lived and taught in the backwaters of the Roman Empire was not merely important, but was the Son of God in the flesh. We think that somehow, some way, in and through all the surprising and confusing things he said and did, when Jesus came he brought the Kingdom of heaven.

We're not John the Baptist whose images and ideas of God's Messiah were altered by the actual Messiah who showed up. But our faith, like John's faith, still has to live with all the contradictions of faith. Jesus did not rebuke John for his doubt, and that should be comforting. C.S. Lewis once said, "Surely there are times in all of our lives when the whole Christian story seems outrageous. Can it really be that the very Son of God lived, died, and rose again on the surface of this tired old planet? And if so, can it really be the case that some

2,000 years later people argue about whether or not it ever happened? If God himself once walked around on this earth, shouldn't that be blazingly *obvious*?"

How can it be that anyone would miss what Christians claim is the galaxy's single most important event: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead? To this day if you tell a devout Jew that Jesus is everyone's true Messiah and King, the Jewish person will likely ask you, "If Messiah has come, where is his kingdom? Why don't things look a lot better in this world than they do?" If we're honest, we admit that we feel the sting of that question in a way that's similar to how John's question must have stung Jesus.

At the end of the passage it seems Jesus is comparing the world to stubborn children who insist that everyone play only *their* games and according to *their* rules. We've all seen such bossy kids on the playground—they alone want to call the shots for whatever game they've dictated everyone to play. So also, Jesus says are the people in this world who want to tell God to play according to *their* rules, to dance to *their* tunes, to display power according to *their* definitions of what constitutes power. You can't win with people like that, Jesus says. John lived an austere life, and the world called him "crazy." Jesus lived an exuberant life, and the world called him a "playboy."

You can't win with some folks. You can't let them dictate what your faith should be like. Like John the Baptist, we are called to trust in the words of Jesus the Messiah. Maybe it doesn't add up neatly according to the world's way of doing spiritual arithmetic. Maybe we see the apparent contradictions between the Jesus who we believe rules the world and a world which is still so filled with pain and difficulty. We can still pray for the Lord to strengthen our faith. *Today, as it was 2,000 years ago, Jesus is either the steppingstone to new life or a stone we trip and fall over.* In Matthew 11 Jesus paradoxically said this about John the Baptist: "*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*" (v. 11). **By becoming least, we become greater in the kingdom of heaven? That's exactly what Jesus said.** Amen.