
Offended in Christ

By David Wilkerson

February 7, 2005 In Matthew 11, we find John the Baptist in prison. His powerful, anointed ministry to multitudes in Israel had been abruptly cut off by King Herod. Now the crowds who had followed John fervently were gone. The “voice of one crying in the wilderness” had been silenced.

John’s public ministry had lasted only a year. But during that time, God had demonstrated his power through John’s preaching. Educated Sadducees had gone to hear his convicting messages. Even the proud Pharisees couldn’t stop from going to hear him. Soldiers, politicians, tax collectors, rich and poor alike flocked to hear the prophet’s burning words.

Jesus himself dignified this godly man. He said of John, “Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” (Luke 7:28). Christ also identified John as the prophet whom Isaiah predicted. John was the one who would lay a straight path before the Messiah, in preparation for his coming (see Isaiah 40:3).

We know that John also was a student of Isaiah’s prophecies. The word that came to him could be traced to Isaiah’s writings. And John referred to Isaiah when the priests and Levites asked him to identify himself. When they inquired, “Who are you, really?” John always answered, “I am not the Christ.” Finally, when they pressed him further, John identified himself as the one about whom Isaiah prophesied. He told these religious leaders, “I’m who Isaiah says I am. I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (see John 1:19–23).

John the Baptist was anxious to confirm that Jesus was the Messiah. Apparently, John’s captors allowed him to stay in contact with his disciples. So his followers brought him reports about the miracles and ministry of Jesus. These reports had to be amazing to John’s ears. Day after day, Christ was performing marvelous works and wonders throughout the region.

John’s disciples were at Nain when Christ miraculously raised a mother’s son from the dead. They were standing in the crowd as that young man sat up in his coffin and began to speak. At that point, Scripture says, “There came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people” (Luke 7:16).

“The disciples of John shewed him all of these things” (7:18). John’s followers related everything to him with excitement, amazement and awe. And they were filled with reverence for Jesus as they described all the works he was performing: the lame walked, the blind could see, and evil spirits fled people they had tormented for years.

Amazingly, John didn’t share his disciples’ enthusiasm. Instead, he took two of them aside and instructed them, “Go back to Jesus. I want you to ask him, ‘Are you the Messiah? Are you the one who is to come?’ Ask him to tell you who he is.” “When John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, and said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?” (Matthew 11:2–3).

Tell me, does John’s question seem baffling to you? This was the reaction of the greatest prophet who had ever lived. Think of it: he was receiving eyewitness reports daily of all the incredible miracles being wrought by Christ. Yet still John had to know from Jesus himself if he was the Messiah prophesied about in the Scriptures.

Remember, John was a man of the Word. He had spent his whole life studying the Scriptures in solitude. He had meditated daily on the law, the prophets and the Psalms. And the Bible tells us clearly that John recognized Christ's deity.

He had pointed to Jesus and stated, "Behold, the Lamb of God." He had seen the Holy Spirit descend on Christ as a dove. And he had heard the Father's voice declare Jesus to be his own Son. Finally, John himself had said of Christ, "I must decrease, while he must increase."

This was spoken by a man who had lived in caves his whole adult life, denying himself all creature comforts. (Indeed, just weeks ago, archeologists claim to have discovered a cave where John lived as he baptized the multitudes.) Everything this godly man did was in preparation to fulfill God's calling. So, what prompted John now to grill Jesus about his identity? Why such an uncharacteristic outburst after hearing about all the wondrous works being done in Israel?

What's even more puzzling is that John's disciples apparently presented his questions to Jesus before a vast multitude (see Matthew 11:7). How shocked those crowds must have been as they heard John's men posing their audacious questions. No doubt, Jesus' own disciples were equally shocked. What could John have been thinking at the time?

I have to wonder what sort of deep, dark trial of the soul John was going through. Clearly, doubt had gripped John's heart. And he simply couldn't hold it in any longer. In spite of all the miracles Christ had performed, all the incredible works his own disciples had reported — the dead being raised, the lame being healed, the poor being ministered to — something troubled this godly man's soul.

Yet, when Jesus heard John's questions that day, he didn't supply a direct answer. Nor did the Lord try to convince John of his deity. Instead, he simply told John's disciples to remind him that great miracles were happening: "Go, and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Matthew 11:4-5).

Why did Jesus answer this way? It was because he was God in flesh, and he knew that John was human. No matter how powerfully anointed John was, he was still subject to all the feelings and passions that are common to man. And Christ knew that John was in danger of being overwhelmed by doubt.

First of all, Jesus knew that this fiery prophet would rather be dead than locked up in prison like a caged animal. John had lived all his years in an unwall'd wilderness. He slept in caves and ate what he found in the fields. He loved freedom, he loved nature, he loved walking through the land and meditating on God's Word. To be imprisoned now had to be hell on earth for John. I'm sure he was depressed beyond anything he'd known.

John also must have wondered why he was still in prison, why Jesus hadn't delivered him. After all, Isaiah had prophesied that the Messiah would set the captives free when he came. And, if Jesus' words about John were true, wouldn't this man be one of the first to be delivered?

Don't misunderstand: I don't believe John was looking for some personal validation from the Lord. Not at all. The fact is, John the Baptist had a burning passion for God and a hatred for evil. And he simply wanted to see sin defeated.

John had lived with a certain vision of the kingdom of God for years. And he had longed for it day after day. All this godly man wanted was to see God's Word fulfilled.

To John, that meant seeing God's name avenged in the earth and his righteousness established. When the Messiah came, John expected to see him lay the ax to the root of all wickedness, bringing down every proud thing that offended him. He expected to see the wicked consumed like chaff, cut down and burned with unquenchable fire.

Weren't these the things predicted by all the prophets of old? John knew that God was merciful. But until sin was uprooted, men could not live without fear (see Luke 1:72-74).

Yet, now that the day of the Messiah had come, none of those things were happening. What John had expected to see — what he had longed for his whole lifetime — simply wasn't coming to pass.

You may object at this point: "Is it really possible for a godly, praying, anointed believer to despair of life?" According to the Bible, yes, absolutely. Just ask David, Job or Jeremiah. Even the apostle Paul wrote about being tested "beyond endurance, even despairing of life."

Still, Jesus never addressed John's despair. Instead, he sent John's disciples back to him with this special message: "Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me" (Matthew 11:6).

Lovingly, Christ was showing John the roots of doubt in his heart. Jesus was saying, in essence, "John, you are offended in me. You're troubled in spirit by the way I'm going about establishing my Father's kingdom. I'm not meeting your expectations about the ways you hoped things would be. And that is causing you to doubt."

The truth is, the reports that John heard about Jesus' ministry didn't correspond to what he believed would happen when the Messiah came. John was perplexed by Jesus' ministry. The works that Christ was doing simply weren't the kind that John had preached would come. John's prophecies echoed what many Old Testament prophets had said: that the Messiah would reveal his strength with fire, purging and cleansing. According to John, Christ was coming to avenge all wickedness.

We know that everything John believed was founded on, "It is written..." And John knew the words of the prophets. Thus, he was keenly aware of Malachi's prediction: "The day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch" (Malachi 4:1).

This was the vision John had of the coming Messiah. And he told the crowds in Israel, "He that cometh...shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:11-12).

At that time in Israel, a certain belief prevailed about the coming Messiah. In short, Israel's Savior was coming to crush the oppressive Roman rule. When Christ appeared, he would set up his own political-religious government and begin legislating holiness on the earth. And he would rule over that kingdom with a rod of iron.

Yet this didn't correspond at all to what John was hearing about Jesus. First, John heard a report that

Jesus was celebrating at a wedding. Then he heard that Christ was actually going into sinners' homes and eating with them. And now he learned that Jesus had sent his disciples out in pairs throughout the country, commissioning them to heal and bless people.

It all left John confused. He couldn't help comparing Jesus' works of compassion to the fiery prophecies he'd studied in Scripture all his life. Wasn't the Messiah supposed to avenge sin? What about Isaiah's prophecy concerning wicked judges? "It is he...that bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity.... He shall also blow upon them, and they shall wither" (Isaiah 40:22-24).

Israel's judges at that time were desperately wicked. They invented self-serving laws that went directly against God's Word. Yet these judges weren't being judged at all. In fact, the proud Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes were becoming even more arrogant. They had rejected Christ and sought to oust him from their midst. Yet, all the while, Jesus seemed so passive about it.

John had to think, "This just isn't what I see in the Scriptures. Why isn't Jesus laying his ax to the roots of the wicked? Why isn't he making things hot as an oven for the evildoers, as Malachi said he would? Why isn't he bringing down these wicked judges, reducing them to chaff?"

So, John's question to Jesus was, in essence: "Aren't you the one the prophets described? If you are, then why isn't the picture adding up for me?"

The same devil who tempted Jesus in the wilderness is the one who attempted to destroy John's faith. God's promises are meant to build up our expectations in him. We're to claim his Word as the rock-solid promises of a loving, powerful Father to his children. Yet, often, when we don't see his Word being fulfilled according to our schedule, the enemy floods our minds with questions about God's faithfulness. Satan's aim is simple: to rob us of all our confidence in the Lord.

I'm convinced the devil tried to raise all kinds of doubts in John. I imagine him whispering into John's ear: "Yes, this Jesus is a man of God. He is indeed a holy man. But he's just another prophet performing miracles. Think about it: Moses opened the Red Sea and brought water out of a rock. Elijah raised a dead man. And Hosea preached the Word to the poor. Jesus is just another prophet going about doing good.

"So, you can forget about seeing God's kingdom come, John. Just look at your own situation. If Jesus was God's Son, he would have explained to you who he is. But he didn't answer your cry. And now you're hearing reports about others getting miracles. Their prayers are answered, their cries are being heard. But look at you. You just heard the guards say that Herod's wife wants your head on a platter.

"If Jesus is the Messiah, then why are you still in such need? Why hasn't he kept his word, as Isaiah and the prophets laid it out? And why hasn't your own preaching worked for you?"

Satan uses these same lies and deceptions against us today. And his goal is to plant seeds of doubt in us about God's Word, his promises, his delight in us. The enemy whispers: "You say your heavenly Father is a God of miracles, of the impossible, that he hears your requests before you even ask. Then why all this suffering? Why all the silence from heaven? Why isn't there a single shred of evidence that God has heard your cry?

"Look around you. Everyone is receiving answers to their prayers. But not you. You're stuck in an

unfulfilling marriage. You pray for your children to be saved, but year after year goes by, and nothing changes. For years, you've preached God's faithfulness to others. So, why hasn't it worked for you? Why has he left you stuck here, in this awful condition?"

There is one sure evidence that unbelief has taken root in your soul. That's when you quit praying for what you once believed God could do. Suddenly, you no longer bring your burdens to him. You don't come to him in faith anymore. In short, you're no longer willing to let him do things his way in your life. That's when you know unbelief has sprouted up.

I want to expose Satan's most effective, destructive device. Peter tells us we are not to be ignorant of Satan's devices. And Jesus exposed one of the enemy's biggest devices when he spoke his message to John: "Blessed is he who isn't offended in me." The word for "offended" in Greek means "entrap, trip up, ensnare." I believe Jesus was tenderly warning John, "You ask me if I'm the one you claimed I am. John, can't you see that question is a trap? Satan isn't trying to get to me. No, he has set a trap for you."

Christ had been through the same test himself, during his forty days in the wilderness. And now he was telling John, "The devil is setting you up, trying to ensnare you. But you can't entertain his lies. He says I'm not who I claim to be. Yet, if you believe that, John, then you have to conclude you're not who you claim to be. And that means you have to face the biggest lie of all: that you're a fraud, a phony. You have to conclude that you're deceived, a false prophet. John, you can't fall into this satanic trap."

Let me ask you: what do you think is at stake in Jesus' phrase, "offended in me"? What makes these three words so powerful? It's that Jesus knew the consequences for John if he gave in to Satan's lie. He knew what would happen if this godly man began to doubt who he was in Christ.

You see, all Satan had to do was to trick John into speaking three words. These three words would quickly undo all the prophecies that had been delivered centuries before. It would undo all the good that God had accomplished in and through John. And it would shipwreck the faith of untold multitudes, including generations to come. What were the three words that Satan wanted John to utter? "I have regrets!"

The word "regret" means "distress over unfulfilled expectations." To regret is to say, "My hopes have not been met." In short, it's a statement that refutes one's own faith.

Yet I believe John never got to that point. Instead, he received Jesus' message to him. And here was the essence of Christ's message: "John, there awaits you a blessing of faith and reassurance, if you will resist Satan's lies. Do not allow unbelief about who I am to take root in you. If you do, you'll doubt who you are and all that God has done in your life."

Today, the devil attacks us in the same way he came against John the Baptist. The devil sensed impatience in John. Impatience is the inability to wait or bear afflictions calmly. And when we grow impatient with God — when we're impatient to receive answers from him, and we mix impatience with faith — our attitude in prayer becomes a "strange incense" to the Lord. It fills our being, his temple, with an obnoxious odor. And instead of sending up a sweet-smelling incense of prayer, we exude a foul smell. Satan picks up this scent quickly.

Impatient believers are offended when they see God working miracles all around them but not in their

lives. They're offended at what they believe is God's slowness to answer them, and over time they feel neglected and imprisoned. Hebrews tells us such impatience is a form of spiritual laziness: "Be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Hebrews 6:12). We are instructed to follow Abraham's example: "After he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise" (6:15).

Scripture also tells us that "the Word of God tried [Joseph]." Likewise today, God's promises can try us at times. And if we don't add patience to our faith during these trials, we'll end up offended at God. Proverbs 18:19 states, "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle." The Hebrew word for "offended" here means to "break away, apostatize." In other words, when we're offended by God, there is a danger of spinning out of faith completely. And the longer we hold onto our offense, the harder it becomes to break through our prison bars of unbelief.

Yet James 1:2-4 gives us the cure: "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."

I ask you, dear saint: is there any regret in your life? What unfulfilled expectation is distressing you? What has offended you in Christ? Did you call out to him for help, but he didn't come in time? Did you pray for an unsaved child, and you've become impatient about seeing any results? Do you feel imprisoned in an unfulfilling marriage or job, and yet nothing has changed despite years of prayers? Do your requests seem to be falling on deaf ears?

Right now, Satan wants you to be impatient. He wants to make you anxious about God's promises concerning your life, your family, your future, your ministry. He's working to convince you that God is too slow, that he has ignored your requests, that he has left you behind. The enemy wants to bring you to the point where you're ready to give up on all your confidence in the Lord.

That's right where Satan led John the Baptist. Yet, John did the right thing in his moment of distress: he took his doubt directly to Jesus. And Christ knew immediately that John was calling for help. Jesus so loved this man, he gave John exactly what was needed. As a result, I believe John never again voiced his impatience. I'm convinced that when John stood before the executioner, his last words were, "Jesus is the Christ, the Lamb of God. And I am John, the voice crying in the wilderness. By God's grace and power, I have made his path straight."

Likewise, beloved, God is doing a work in you. And he will finish that perfect work in your soul. Your job is simply to hold on in faith. Then, when you have endured, you'll be able to say: "Christ is resurrected and enthroned. I am his beloved. And I have no regrets. He has fulfilled all my expectations."

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