

YOU WANT ME TO EAT *WHAT*?

Matthew 11:1-6

A lawyer's client was accused of murder. The evidence against him was very strong except that the police had never found the body of the alleged victim. When the lawyer stood up for his closing argument in the trial he knew it was time for a desperation "hail Mary" type effort. He came up with what he thought was a brilliant stratagem that just might work. He said, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a big surprise for all in the courtroom today. Within one minute, the supposed victim is going to walk through those doors at the back of the room."

As you can imagine all in attendance were stunned at this revelation. Every head in the room turned to stare at those doors, especially those of the jurors, as they all waited eagerly for the dramatic appearance of the missing person. The minute passed, but the doors remained closed; no one entered the room. Finally the lawyer said, "As you may have guessed, I made that up. The supposed victim is not going to show up today. However, you all looked at those doors with anticipation. That means you had some expectation that it could well happen. In other words, you had reasonable doubt that the victim is even dead. You doubted that a crime had even been committed. Given that you have reasonable doubt, I submit that you must return a verdict of not guilty."

Judging by the looks of all in the room it seemed that perhaps the desperation attempt had won the day for the accused. The jury was sent out to make its deliberations. They weren't gone long. They soon came back reporting they had reached a verdict. The verdict was announced. The accused was guilty. The lawyer was stunned. After the trial the lawyer asked the jurors about it. "You all looked. You clearly questioned whether the victim was dead. How could you not acknowledge that you had reasonable doubt?" One answered, "Yes, you're right. We all looked. However, your client didn't."

We've all seen television shows and movies in which the jury is instructed that they must know beyond reasonable doubt that the accused is guilty. Wouldn't it be great if we could know that what we believe is true beyond any reasonable doubt? Unfortunately, that's not the case. One of the downsides of life is doubt. Today I want to talk about doubt. Let's look at an example of it in Matthew 11:1-6.

DOUBT HAPPENS

John the Baptist was in prison because he had the temerity to publicly say that the fact that a local ruler named Herod had stolen Herodias, the wife of his own brother, Philip, was not kosher. Herod didn't like the negative PR so he threw John in prison to shut him up. John has been in prison for a while at this point and his prospects for getting out were dim. His prospects for having his head cut off were really good.

Things weren't turning out the way John expected them to go. He believed that Messiah had come. He knew the prophecies about the great things that would happen when Messiah came. Messiah would set up his kingdom that would never end. The government would be on his shoulders. He would be the Prince of Peace. John thought that was going to happen. Messiah would see to it that crummy Herod would get his just desserts. John would get out of jail and live in the kingdom of Messiah, a kingdom of peace, goodness, holiness and prosperity. Instead, Herod, who was no saint, was still in power and was holding John in prison. Where was the everlasting kingdom of the Messiah? Nothing seemed to be happening, so John began to question if he had misread the situation. He began to doubt. He sent friends to ask Jesus, "Are you really the promised Messiah, or was I wrong?"

This is quite a change from John 1:29-30. John told people he himself was not the Messiah, but that the promised one was alive and among them at that time. "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, "a man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me."'" In verse 34 he said, "I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God." Notice the statement "I have seen." In John 1:32 John said, "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him." He went on to say that he wouldn't have known Jesus was Messiah except that God had told him the one on whom he saw the Spirit come down was the One. I don't know exactly what he saw, but in prison he began to doubt what he had seen with his own two eyes.

John knew who Jesus was. He unequivocally proclaimed him to be the Messiah, the Lamb of God, the Son of God. Yet later in prison he began to question that because he sure didn't seem to be taking over like he thought Messiah would. Did John just not have enough faith? Listen to what Jesus said about him in Matthew 11:11. "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." This was not a man of weak faith. He was among the greatest of humans.

It wasn't like John was just a fair weather friend either. He had sacrificed to serve God. He lived out in the wilderness wearing animal skins for clothes and eating locusts. Let's be clear on that. He had a diet of bugs. He had boldly confronted one of the most powerful men in Israel about his blatant sin. John paid the price for his faithfulness by ending up in prison. This was not a guy who would only believe if God gave him a nice, comfortable life. He was a rugged, godly, courageous and committed man of faith.

If a man that strong, a man with that kind of faith, a man who had been given clear communication from God about the identity of Jesus later fell prey to doubt, do you suppose that we will be exempt from it? It's safe to say that every believer will deal with doubt at some point. If you've been feeling like you're not very spiritual, you're weak because you have at times struggled with doubts when it seems like others are so sure of

their faith, be comforted. You are in good company. John the Baptist was in your tribe, and the truth is that all of us have our doubts at times.

Doubt is unpleasant. It nags at us. It obliterates peace. Its biggest drawback is that it keeps us from committing. James 1:6 says, “He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” James wasn't referring to big powerful swell driven waves, huge 15 foot high monsters that roll in with massive force and thunder onto the shore. No, he had in mind the choppy little wind waves that he had seen on the sea of Galilee that have no consistent direction or power. Verse 8 says like those choppy little wavelets one who doubts, “is a double minded man, unstable in all he does.” When we doubt, we are unstable, tossed around. We can never commit. We are caught in between, one foot in, one out. I'll bet that you have some examples of that very thing in your own life.

I occasionally have a crisis when we go to a restaurant we've never been to before. On our recent trip to visit our daughter and son-in-law we flew into New Orleans and spent one night there before taking a train to Meridian. We walked around the French Quarter for a bit, taking in the sights and looking for a restaurant that would not cost the equivalent of the national debt to eat at. We landed at a place that like many restaurants in New Orleans had lots of things on the menu that were unfamiliar to me. I like to think of myself as a discriminating eater. It's not my fault. Science now affirms that some people taste things more intensely than others, and I'm one of them. So my taste buds can easily get overwhelmed by strong or spicy flavors. I'm looking at this menu with things like crawfish etouffee, jambalaya, boudin, gumbo, shrimp and grits Napoleon and gulf fish filet with crawfish stuffing topped with a crawfish cream sauce. Have you seen crawfish? God told the Jews not to eat stuff like that. In fact, there was hardly anything on that menu God would have said was okay for the ancient Jews.

To say I was dubious would be a significant understatement. We asked an employee what his favorite menu item was and he gave a recommendation. But could I trust that? I doubted. I was like a wave tossed by the wind, I was double minded, unstable in all my ways. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't commit. Should I take the safe route and just order the one thing on the menu I was sure about, the Black Angus hamburger? It would likely be good to eat but then I'd have to face people at home asking me if I liked the food in New Orleans and tell them, “Well, my hamburger was good.” But if I boldly went where other men have gone before and ordered the bizarre food, I might end up starving and have to look for a fast food joint to stave off the hunger. It was a dilemma caused by my doubt. Our server came to take our order and I just wanted to punt. Doubt makes it so hard to commit. I knew I was going to preach the sermon I did last week that encouraged you all to live by faith and take risks. I did. I'm proud to say I survived the experience.

Should I marry this person? As long as you are doubting, you're not going to be able to commit. Should I take this job, buy that house? Doubt freezes you. You want to hang

back, afraid of making a bad decision and the consequences that will accompany it. The biggest problem about this is that when we doubt God we can't commit to him either. We might stick one foot in, but we won't jump in with both feet. It's a miserable place to be.

There are different kinds of doubt. They are related but come from different sources. There is *intellectual* doubt. Is the Bible really God's Word? Did God create the world, or is the dogma of our culture correct that this is all just a result of a miraculous string of accidents? Could God really enter the world as a human? How can that be? I read some of those stories in the Old Testament and they bother me. Like the one in 2 Kings 2:23-24 where a gang of punk kids mock the prophet Elisha calling him "Old Baldhead." Now I am personally sensitive to a taunt like that and think a bunch of arrogant jerks who would do such a thing deserve some serious consequences. However, the passage says Elisha called down a curse on them, and then two bears came out of the woods and mauled 42 of them. Can this really be God's work and is this really his truth? Is there really life after death? You could make an awfully long list that will fall into this category.

There is *spiritual* doubt. Does God really care about me? Does he really love me? Has he really forgiven me? Am I really his child and will I really go to heaven some day? It doesn't feel like the Holy Spirit is in me and it sure doesn't look like it either. Can that really be true? Does God really hear my prayer and does it make any difference?

There is *circumstantial* doubt. This may be the most poignant. If God loves me why would he let these things happen to me? There is this good thing that I want, that I need, that surely God wants for me but I have prayed and prayed and he hasn't given it to me. Why would a loving God keep something good from me? I have known faithful Christian people who were out of work and trying hard to get a job to support their family, they prayed and did all they could to find a job, to no avail. I've known people who longed to get married, a good and godly thing, but years went by with no answer from God. Why? I look at all the pain in this world and wonder if there really is a God why would he let such awful things happen. I have known people who essentially have abandoned faith because they have been so disappointed in the circumstances of life. This was the source of John's doubt. I thought Jesus was the Messiah, but why is my life turning out the way it is if that's true? I read a comment by pastor and author Matt Chandler, who, while in his 30's, was diagnosed with a potentially fatal cancer. He said, "It is not an easy thing to find out you're terminally ill...Here's the thing about terminal illness—you're all alone in it and it doesn't matter who else is there." I suspect if I was diagnosed with such a disease before the age of 40 like he was, that would likely have raised some doubts.

My guess is that you have had doubts at one time or another in all three of those categories, and likely wrestle from time to time with doubt in one of those areas. Doubt is going to dog all of us.

DOUBT IS NOT INVINCIBLE

Doubt is not the sum total of a person. The good news about John is that even as he doubted, Jesus said he was among the greatest of humans. In other words, Jesus considered him a great man of God even as he was wrestling with his doubts. That will also be true of us from time to time. We may have some doubts, but that is not all there is to us. Jesus knew the outcome of John's life. He would be faithful to the end. God also knows the outcome of our lives. He sees the whole picture and our doubts that crop up from time to time are a small part of it.

Doubt is not the same as unbelief. The difference between them is that doubt hasn't decided but unbelief has. Doubt says, "I don't know if I can believe" where unbelief says, "I cannot believe this." In my existential crisis in Le Bayou Restaurant in New Orleans, I was doubting, not unbelieving. If I absolutely did not believe that I could trust the recommendation of the employee of the restaurant, I would have had no crisis. I simply would have refused to consider ordering one of those bizarre foods and would have had a hamburger. Sitting in his prison cell, John was not unbelieving. He had not concluded that he had made a huge mistake and that Jesus was not, in fact, the Messiah. He was doubting. For a time he didn't know for sure if he had been right about Jesus. *Because doubt has not made up its mind, it can be beaten.*

A crucial approach to dealing with doubt is to do what John did. He did not pretend. He did not live in denial. He admitted his doubts. He was not defeated by that. He didn't say, "Well, I'm doubting Jesus is actually the Messiah, so ballgame over." He faced the doubt and sought answers. In John's case his doubt was circumstantial, but it had an intellectual element. It is particularly important to face doubt and look for some answers when you are dealing with intellectual doubt or spiritual doubt. It is helpful to find out all you can. There are sources of evidence that can help you with some of those answers.

Unfortunately one of the mistakes some people make when they doubt is to go to all the sources they can find to feed the doubt. Notice that John didn't ask Herod, the Pharisees or the Romans whether Jesus was the Messiah. He asked Jesus. Go to the sources that might have some answers for you. Wise Christians, good books and scholars that research whatever question you have, the Bible itself, and especially the Lord himself.

When your doubt is spiritual, the source of those answers will always be God's Word. Can God really love me? Yes, whether that seems reasonable, whether it feels like it or not, God does love me. He proved that at the cross. Does God hear my prayer? Yes, Jesus instructed us to pray not as a mere exercise but because the Father in heaven hears us.

One of the most dangerous things we can do is to refuse to admit our doubts or suppress the doubts a child might have. That would be like ignoring an infected wound. Maybe it will go away. More likely it is going to fester and get much worse and if not dealt with, eventually it might kill you.

G. Campbell Morgan had already enjoyed some success as a preacher by the time he was 19 years old. But then he was attacked by doubts about the Bible. The writings of various scientists and agnostics disturbed him (e.g., Charles Darwin, John Tyndall, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer). As he read their books and listened to debates, Morgan became more and more perplexed. What did he do? He cancelled all preaching engagements, put all the books in a cupboard and locked the door, and went to the bookstore and bought a new Bible. He said to himself, "I am no longer sure that this is what my father claims it to be--the Word of God. But of this I am sure: If it be the Word of God, and if I come to it with an unprejudiced and open mind, it will bring assurance to my soul of itself." The result? "That Bible found me!" said Morgan. The new assurance he had, gave him the motivation for his preaching and teaching ministry.

Another key to dealing with doubt, especially with circumstantial doubt, is to look for what I call hidden reefs. When we were in New Orleans we went into a shop that sold antique guns, coins, maps and currency. It was fascinating. We saw some coins from the reigns of Caesar Augustus and Nero. But we also saw some treasure coins like Spanish doubloons. Some are coins from ships like the Nuestra Senora de Acocha that sank when it struck a reef off the Florida Keys in 1622. The reef is under the surface of the water and out of sight from above, but it can destroy a ship. Sometimes our doubts are caused by reefs, something that is not on the surface and not always immediately obvious.

One such reef is faulty theology. This was John's problem. In his theology Messiah was going to set up his kingdom on earth, defeat all enemies and create a heaven on earth. This was common theology in his day. It was understandable given that some ancient prophecies in the Old Testament depict Messiah doing just that. But the prophecies also speak of Messiah suffering and dying for the sins of others. John understood that. He had said Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He knew Messiah would be sacrificed like the Passover Lamb to bring forgiveness of sin and eternal rescue. But the misery and injustice of his incarceration caused him to skip over that part and focus only on the conquering part. When that great victory didn't happen in the time frame he needed, he began to doubt. He lost sight of the whole theology of the Messiah.

Our faulty theology usually comes in the form of, "if God really is there and really loves me, he will..." (You fill in the blank.) Give me the job I need, cause my spouse to change, heal me or my loved one of this disease, you can make a long list of ways to finish that sentence. The theology behind that is that a loving God mostly wants us to have pleasant circumstances in this world. God must be cruel if he doesn't want that, or maybe he doesn't exist at all.

What John needed was to remember that God is great but does work in ways that may be mystifying to us. He needed to trust in God's wisdom, his sovereignty and goodness and believe that God was working a great plan even if it involved some hardship for John. We need to remember the same thing when we doubt because our circumstances cause us to

question God. A little reflection on biblical history would have reminded John of this truth. Joseph suffered terrible hardship and injustice for many years of his life, including betrayal by his own brothers, slavery in a foreign land, injustice and imprisonment for years, yet it was all part of God's plan to bring about good for Joseph, for his family, for God's people, and in the end, for the whole world. David was told by Samuel the prophet that he was God's choice to be the King of Israel. He then endured years being hounded by Saul who wanted to kill him, living in caves out in desolate wilderness areas. Jeremiah faced years of rejection and persecution for his faithfulness to God. The list goes on. We should learn that we must never make our circumstances the gauge of whether God is real and trustworthy.

Another hidden reef is disobedience to God. This was not a problem for John, but it often happens today. Years ago there was a guy who started coming with his family to the church we were in at the time. He was a seminary graduate who had previously been on the staff of a well-known megachurch. He was a charismatic guy, a natural leader. He had left ministry as an occupation and was successful in business, but he still wanted to serve the Lord. It was completely confusing when several years later he began to let it be known that he was doubting his faith. I and others tried to help him with his doubts, but he knew as much theology as I do. I could not tell him something he didn't know that would resolve his problems. I just could not understand what was going on. The real issue became clear some time later. He abandoned his wife and children to go live with another woman. He dealt a devastating painful blow to those he was supposed to love. He had taken up with this woman earlier. That's what his "doubts" were really about. He had to find some way to justify what he wanted to do, which was to leave his wife and his kids and go have an affair with this woman. If the Bible is true then his intended action was inexcusable disobedience to God. So the Bible had to not be true; then he could do whatever he thought would make him "happy."

I recall another conversation with a young, brilliant college-age young man who somewhat out of the blue was increasingly at odds with his parents. They loved him and were patient with him, but could not understand why he was suddenly questioning so many things he had believed up to that point. They asked me to meet with them and I correctly identified that the core of the problem was that he had not resolved to let God's Word rule in his life. He was letting man's ideas rule, not the Word of God. He questioned it at so many turns. He acknowledged that yes, that was indeed the heart of all the many conflicts he was having. It probably wouldn't have made any difference had I seen what was really happening, but I did miss something. I figured that the source of this change was that he had professors that were questioning the Word's authority and he was being swayed by their arguments. I thought it was primarily an intellectual matter. It was about 6 years later that some things came out that I now realize were the real core of the problem. This young man also had issues with his sexuality. If he accepted the Bible's authority then he would have to deny the sexuality that he felt was so important to him.

So he had to deny the authority of the Scriptures. The doubt was not primarily intellectual. He created intellectual problems as a way of justifying his sexuality.

This hidden reef is a function of what social psychologists call dissonance theory. If there is conflict between what we see and what we want to believe we will find some creative way of explaining away what we see. In their book, *Mistakes Were Made, But Not By Me*, which is all about our powerful tendency to justify and rationalize, Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson wrote (p. 18), “So powerful is the need for consonance that when people are forced to look at disconfirming evidence, they will find a way to criticize, distort, or dismiss it so that they can maintain or even strengthen their existing belief.”

When we doubt we need to look below the surface. Is there some distorted theology in there? Is there something we want that God tells us he doesn’t want in our lives, something that is more important to us than disobeying God?

Another step in dealing with doubt is to recognize the nature of faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, “without faith it is impossible to please God.” Faith is key in our relationship to God. 2 Corinthians 5:7 says, “We walk by faith, not by sight.” Why God makes faith the central issue is a topic for another day, but make no mistake, faith is the key to knowing God.

That’s fortunate in one way, because we all exercise faith every day of our lives. We cannot live without it. But it is unfortunate in another way because faith can be uncomfortable. Hebrews 11:1 says, “Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.” Yeah, uh, that’s the problem. That part about being certain of what I do not see causes me some heartburn.

By definition faith is trusting in something I cannot see. But how am I supposed to be *certain* about it when I can’t see it? Let’s return to Le Bayou Restaurant. How could I be *certain* that I wouldn’t be totally gagged by crawfish etouffee? How could I know without doubt that I wouldn’t absolutely hate boudin? That’s just the problem. I couldn’t. There was no being certain. I had to take it on faith. I had to listen to the testimony of our waitress who said, “Oh you’ll love this” and choose to believe that she was right. I had to choose to have faith.

My point here is that faith by definition means that doubt is inevitable. Faith implies an element of doubt. If you were to tell me that there is a massive ocean just to the west of us, I would not need faith to believe that. I can look that direction and see it. I know it is there without doubt or question because I can see it and touch it. But suppose you tell me that this music stand in front of me that is made of metal is actually made up of tiny particles that are in motion. I cannot see that or sense it in any way. In fact that idea seems to absolutely contradict what I can see and feel. In this case I have to exercise some faith that the person who tells me this does not have both oars in the water. I have to exercise faith to believe something that is the opposite of what I see. I can do that

because those who tell us such seemingly ridiculous things present credible evidence for their claim.

When it comes to spiritual things, when it comes to our Lord Jesus, there is evidence. What there will never be is absolute certainty. So we look at the evidence and put our faith in what seems to be the most likely true. But there will always be a gap. There will always be a little bit of doubt. That is the nature of faith, and that doubt will be there whether one believes or disbelieves.

We should not be concerned about believing even though we cannot know something beyond any doubt. We do it all the time. While we were in Mississippi we went to Pensacola, Florida for a couple of days with Michael and Carissa. We got into our hotel room there at about 8 in the evening. They do something strange in Florida. In the summer it is typically quite hot and humid there. They try to balance that by making indoor spaces arctic cold. Our room was frigid and with the air conditioning cranked up to the “icy” setting, the temperature was still on its way down. I, however, had a more pressing need than the room’s frosty climate. I had to go to the bathroom with considerable urgency. I made it to the porcelain relief station where I worked on delivering some solid waste into the sewage system. While I was doing my business a loud, incessant beeping started coming from the room outside the bathroom. Now I’m not always the most aware of people, but it wasn’t hard to figure out that had to be the fire detector. I found this to be more than a little inconvenient. I called out, “Laurie, what’s going on out there? What’s with the beeping?” No answer. I called again, louder this time. Still no answer. Now I was faced with a dilemma. Was it possible that a fire had started in our room and that somehow Laurie was incapacitated? Obviously something was wrong. Plus I assumed that very shortly someone from the hotel would show up to investigate the problem, and maybe even people in nearby rooms would be concerned. And I was not in a position just at that moment to respond to the emergency. What should I do? I had two sources of evidence. One was the alarm itself that screamed loudly that something was wrong and danger was at hand. The other was just logic and past history. How likely was it that there was actually a fire in our room and Laurie was incapacitated? I concluded it was unlikely. I could think of no way a fire could start in that room that quickly when we hadn’t done anything but put a suitcase down. I didn’t know that absolutely. I took it on faith that whatever the reason for the alarm, it was no real cause for concern and that Laurie was just fine. I called out asking her to do something again, to no avail. Then I finished my business as quickly as possible and went to investigate. It turned out that Laurie had decided to combat the freezing cold by turning off the air conditioning and turning on the heater. She had then fled the arctic room to go talk to Michael and Carissa in their room. The heater had not been on in so long that it produced a tiny bit of smoke that set off the detector. I turned off the heater and almost immediately the beeping stopped. I acted on faith even though there was obvious cause for doubt.

A crucial step in handling doubt is to do what Jesus said in this passage. In verses 4-6 he said, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see; The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” Jesus was saying, “Tell John what you see me doing and hear me saying.” All John needed to do was to look at what Jesus was doing. He was healing the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, and he even raised some people from death. He was preaching the good news to the downtrodden, the ones who were most open to the message that God was offering them mercy and grace. Though Jesus was not going to do what John had hoped he would do, he clearly was Messiah, for he was demonstrating the power of Messiah.

The point I take from this is that most of the time this is the same thing we need to do when we doubt. Look at Jesus. As was the case with John there have been and will be times in my life when I don’t see why God is allowing what he does. There are times when I wonder if praying makes any difference at all. I don’t have answers to all the questions that crop up from time to time. But when I just look at Jesus there are some things I know for sure.

Jesus did and said things no one else has ever done. He claimed to be the Son of God on earth. Then he said he would verify this claim by dying and rising from the dead. And he did that. I know that. He said he would die to bring forgiveness of sin and that if I put my faith in him I would be a child of God and have eternal life. I know that these things are true, whatever else may happen in life.

I may wonder if God really loves me at times because I don’t see how he could and because things happen in my life that I feel like God wouldn’t allow if he did love me. But I look at Jesus and I see that he died to save me. There is no greater love than to give your life for someone else, and Jesus did that for me. By looking at Jesus my doubt is put to rest.

Hebrews 12:2 says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.” It is keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus that will complete our faith and help ease our doubts. Whatever you may question, whether it be some of the strange events in the Old Testament or some of the puzzling and confusing things that happen in your own life, you can come back to looking at Jesus. He lived, he died on that cross and he rose from the dead proving himself to be the Son of God, proving that he is trustworthy. We can know that we have hope and life because of him, no matter what else may happen.