

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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A Wavering Witness

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. (John 1:6-9)

Now 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? Jesus answered and said unto them, 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, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me. (Matthew 11:2-6)

The superficial theology of our time cannot deal with doubt or wavering faith to any degree whatever. It is sadly commonplace for advocates of these ideas to respond to any hint of doubt with such words as "If you have any doubt whatever, it is likely that you've never really been saved. You've been deceived, so you need to start over from the very beginning if you hope to have any assurance of your salvation." I have longed for an occasion to confront one of these people with John's case as outlined in these verses from Matthew. Would they be so callous as to put John's salvation in doubt? There is certainly no Biblical reason to glorify doubt or to institutionalize it. However, Scripture provides a number of clear examples of noble, godly people who fell for a season into doubt in the heat of trial. One other notable example is Elijah. When threatened by Jezebel, he ran to his cave for shelter.

The person whose narrow theological outlook contradicts these passages and leaves no reasonable basis for dealing with doubt in a regenerate elect creates an unrealistic, not to mention unbiblical cultural paradigm for people. It sets the sincere believer up for self-doubt and disappointment. Rather than finding reason to regain hope and faith in God, it imposes nearly impossible demands for self-performance that cannot be realized. Sooner or later every honest and conscientious believer in Christ will face seasons of trial and doubt.

After the fact when John was dead, Jesus referred to him as a bright and shining lamp (See our last study.), not as an inferior and unworthy witness whose very salvation was

questionable. One must wonder; if advocates of this unrealistic view of the Christian life were faced with a first century prison cell and imminent death as John faced when he sent his disciples to Jesus, how would they react? Would they endure the situation without a moment of wavering or doubt? Would they need a renewed message from Jesus to remind them of who He is and what He does for His own?

The existence of the New Testament church de facto testifies that God intended the life of faith to be lived out in a community of like-minded believers, not in an isolation cell apart from other believers. Even in prison John's disciples visited and ministered to him. He needed them there no less than in the peak of his ministry. No doubt they returned quickly with the reviving words of Jesus to him. The isolated Christian is a defeated Christian. Not only do we need each other for encouragement and godly counsel, we also need each other for rebuke and confrontation. The Lord's church is not designed to be a "mutual admiration society" where people ignore problems and pretend to be perfect little Christians. It is intended to be a place where real human Christians can—and do—confess their sins, receive exhortation, forgiveness, and prayerful encouragement that urges them to repentance and recovery from their sins (James 5:16). The Biblical Sunday morning sermon is not to be an empty pep rally speech. It is rather designed by God to confront life and its problems with frightening realism, but also with amazing encouragement and hope that stands on the solid foundation of God and His goodness, not on humanity's inherent—though

vainly imagined—goodness. Every one of the New Testament epistles—and likely the gospels and Acts as well—were written to deal with specific issues in the life of churches or individuals to whom the letters were written. A careful study of these letters will readily disclose many of the obvious problems that each letter addresses and corrects. A Sunday sermon that refuses to deal with the real world where the people in the pew live—where they also sin and doubt—is not a real sermon.

How did Jesus respond to John's painful question and doubt? He didn't give John a pep rally "Now go out there and win one for the Gipper" speech. He rather redirected John to shift his mental focus—and his faith—away from self and from his prison cell to his Lord. Notice the sequence of points that Jesus makes.

1. *The blind receive their sight.*
2. *The lame walk.*
3. *The lepers are cleansed.*
4. *The deaf hear.*
5. *The dead are raised up.*
6. *The poor have the gospel preached to them.*
7. *Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.*

Who accomplished all these things? When we face our moments of doubt and discouragement, we need to revisit this same list or a similar list of God's amazing dealings in our personal experience. Get the mind off of self and onto your Lord!

The near obsessive focus of many religious groups in our time on their "assurance of salvation" betrays an incredible—and wholly unbiblical—focus on self. To the extent that you live your life and perform your godly duties with the goal of gaining assurance—or anything else for that matter—for yourself, the more you will realize frustration and defeat. The more you forget yourself and do what God teaches you to do because He told you to do it, and you willingly and joyfully choose to do it for His glory and because He said it was the right thing to do, you will receive amazing assurances and enriching blessings along the way. The more you do things to gain assurance for yourself the less sure you will be about yourself and your standing with God. Isn't that the essential reality that Jesus intended when He designed discipleship's primary attitude to be self-denial and cross-bearing? Earning stars in "my" crown (How detestably self-serving can one be?), gaining assurance of "my" salvation (not materially different in its degree of self-serving

focus on one's personal benefits rather than God's glory), or other equally self-centered attitudes will never win God's smiling approval and blessing.

The authentic openness and honesty that John exhibited in his question to Jesus speaks worlds about his character. Had he pretended that he was living in the "heavenly sunlight" while in prison, even though he was quietly and privately smothering in self-doubt, would more testify of his superficial hypocrisy than of an authentic and honest faith.

John's noble and honest example does not encourage us to fabricate doubts. Nor does it suggest that we should magnify and focus all of our mental energy on one parade of doubts after another. With balance and grace it tells us that even the strongest of faithful believers will face occasions when they will struggle with their attitude and outlook. How should they deal with those moments? John obviously shared his mental state with his disciples, but he also sent them to Jesus for the right answer. There is no indication that John's disciples thought any less of him from the knowledge of his struggle. Likely they appreciated the ravages that a prison cell and temporary isolation can have on a person, so they rallied around him and—despite a significant danger to themselves—they visited him and sought to minister to him there. No doubt they quickly returned to John with the good news from Jesus. "John, remember what I've been doing since you baptized me. Would an imposter or a false Christ perform these works? John, rest assured. You testified the truth about me. Despite the trials of your present situation, the wedding will go forward as planned, and you, John, will have a place of honor in it because of your faithful service."

Will you take a few moments of honest—perhaps painful—introspection? When was the last time you experienced your "Are you the Christ or should I look for another" moments? How did you deal with it? Were you faithful and honest enough to confess your state of mind to other believers and to ask for their help in overcoming it? Or did you paint a smile on your face and try to hide your doubts? James assures us that confession and prayer will bring God's intervening grace, forgiveness, and restoration. Be bold and honest in your faith.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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