

Third Sunday in Advent

ADVANCING OR DOUBTING THE MESSIAH'S WAY?

Matthew 11:2-11

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Analysis by Bill White

2When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

7As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

11Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

DIAGNOSIS: Doubting Christ

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Suffering for the Sake of the Christ Inhibits the Advancement of Jesus' Kingdom*

John the Baptist's observable problem is that his witness to the Messiah's advent has landed him in prison. Herod has thrown him in jail because of his preaching (Matthew 14:3-12). Hence John finds himself suffering the consequences of proclaiming God's judgment on sinful behavior and the coming of another kingdom.

Might Christians today also find themselves alienated, resented, suffering, even imprisoned for proclaiming Law & Gospel, for preaching a message such as, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming (again) after me..."? And might we not become discouraged and our sufferings inhibit us from working to advance the Kingdom of God?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Doubting Jesus*

Even worse, as he considers his own suffering and miserable circumstances, combined with the absence of any significant news of revelatory exploits by Jesus, John the Baptist begins to doubt whether or not Jesus really is the long-awaited Messiah. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (v. 3). John's doubting betrays his lack of real fear, love, and trust in Jesus.

How about us? Are we not filled with doubt when we find ourselves in miserable circumstances and see ourselves as suffering for the sake of the Kingdom, combined with an absence of strong enough evidence that Jesus really is who he says he is and really is powerfully at work in our lives and in our world? This begs the question: When push comes to shove, is our faith really in God's Messiah Jesus-as he really is, on his terms-or is our faith in a messiah of our own creating? Doubting may lead to unbelief or misplaced belief.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Doubting Is Deadly*
Worst of all, if John's doubts (and ours too!) move him to unbelief or to belief in a messiah of his own creating, the consequences are deadly. When John's proclaimed and desired judgment does come, he may find that his faith in God-apart-from-Christ has legal (at least, in the theological sense) ramifications.

PROGNOSIS: Trusting Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus' Deeds Destroys Doubt*

Ironically, the lack of evidence that caused John's doubts (namely, John not seeing or hearing about Jesus bringing God's judgment upon this sinful world and establishing God's Kingdom) are the very things Jesus was in fact doing, just not in the way John expected and desired. Jesus was indeed ushering in God's Kingdom, but it was not yet time to fulfill God's Kingdom. Jesus does demonstrate messianic evidence for John to hear and see (vv. 4-6). These are in fact the works of the predicted Messiah (Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1). Moreover, Jesus' way of bringing God's judgment upon this sinful world was to take God's judgment and the sins of the world upon himself and sacrifice his life upon the cross. Specifically, unbelief and doubt are crossed-out by the cross of Christ and God-in-Christ replaces God-apart-from-Christ.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting Jesus*
Better still this crucified and risen Messiah now comes to us offering to exchange the gift of faith for our unbelief, offering to swap true fear, love, and trust in God for our doubts. Real faith in God's Messiah, and the Messiah's ways, is offered to us!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Suffering Endured, Christ's Kingdom Advanced*

Best of all, not only are our doubts and unbelief overcome by this gift of faith in Christ, faith also inspires us and enables us to do the work of the Kingdom. We don't "got to" proclaim the advent of God's Messiah in the midst of little or no supporting evidence, we "get to"! We don't "got to" keep the faith in the midst of our sufferings, we "get to"! We don't "got to" keep doing acts of Christian love, justice, and mercy in circumstances that would cause many to lose heart, we "get to"!