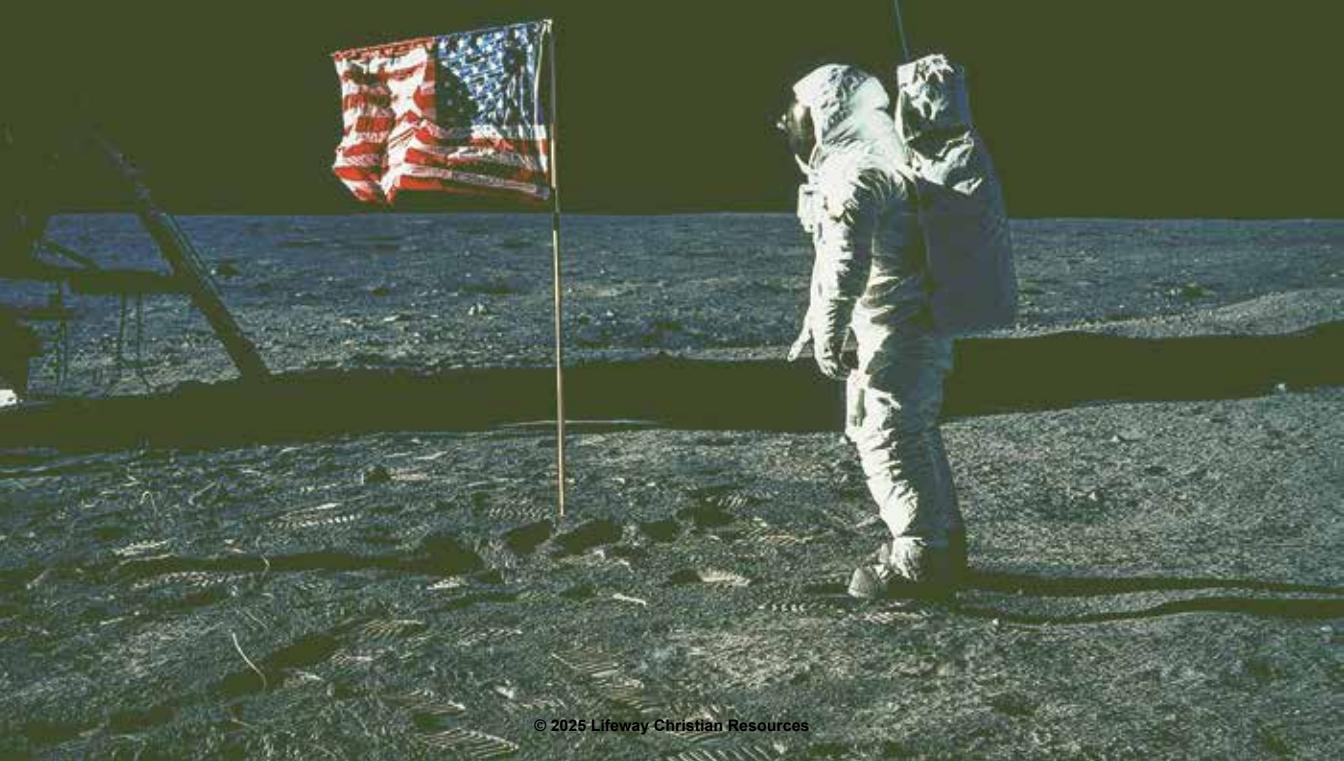


SESSION 10

# Confronting Doubts

MATTHEW 11:1-6,16-24

JESUS DEMANDS DECISION.



Skepticism abounds! It has been almost fifty-seven years since Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, yet there are still people who believe it was a hoax. Nearly every news story today will elicit skepticism concerning the facts. Doubt and skepticism are good if they force us to investigate the truth. They can be disastrous when they lead to denial of truth. Such was the case with Jesus. Skepticism led many to miss the life He offered.

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WHAT ARE SOME THINGS YOU ENCOUNTER THAT LEAD TO  
DOUBT AND SKEPTICISM?

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## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

After sending out the disciples in chapter 10, Jesus apparently undertook a solo preaching tour in the surrounding towns of Galilee. During this period of preaching and teaching, Matthew introduced the element of doubt concerning Jesus. There was no doubt among the people that Jesus was a mighty miracle worker and teacher. The issue lay in the evidence that He was the Messiah. They understood the coming Messiah would overthrow the Romans and usher in peace and prosperity. But Jesus didn't fit the anticipated pattern. Even John the Baptist was puzzled and sent his disciples to question Jesus (Matt. 11:1-6).

After Jesus answered the question sent from John, He asked the crowds about their views of John. What might they have thought about John, whose role was that of the forerunner to the Messiah? Jesus assured the crowd of the legitimacy of John's baptism and ministry. He affirmed that John was the forerunner to the Messiah. In addition, Jesus referred to John as the greatest among all who lived under the

old covenant. With the coming of Jesus, a new covenant era began. Under the new covenant, anyone who was part of the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus would be greater than John (vv. 7-15).

Jesus directly confronted the doubters and skeptics (vv. 16-19). He condemned their unbelief and specifically called out the unbelief He found in Galilee (vv. 20-24).

The closing section in Matthew 11 may not fit chronologically with the preceding verses. Rather, it set up a contrast to doubt and skepticism. Those who come to Jesus in faith will find their deepest hunger and greatest thirst satisfied (vv. 25-30).



**1** When Jesus had finished giving instructions to his twelve disciples, he **moved on from there** **A** to teach and preach in their towns. **2** Now when John heard **in prison** **B** what the Christ was doing, he sent a message through his disciples **3** and asked him, “**Are you the one** **C** who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” **4** Jesus replied to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: **5** The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the **good news**, **D** **6** and **blessed** **E** is the one who isn’t offended by me. [ . . . ] **16** To what should I compare this generation? It’s like children sitting in the marketplaces who call out to other children: **17** We **played the flute** **F** for you, but you didn’t dance; we sang a lament, but you didn’t mourn! **18** For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ **19** The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a **glutton and a drunkard**, **G** a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” **20** Then he proceeded to denounce the towns where most of his miracles were done, because they did not repent: **21** “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago. **22** But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the **day of judgment** **H** than for you. **23** And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will go down to **Hades**. **I** For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until today. **24** But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”

**A.** Jesus resumed His preaching and teaching. It can be presumed that the disciples were also ministering in various towns around Galilee.

**B.** Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great) had put John the Baptist in prison. He would later order John’s execution (Matt. 14:1-12).

**C.** The Messiah (see Ps. 118:26; Heb. 10:37). Despite hearing about Jesus’s works, John’s time in prison caused him to doubt.

**D.** Jesus proclaimed the arrival of God’s kingdom, which offered healing and hope to the marginalized and oppressed.

**E.** The word suggests joy and contentment, particularly for those who put their faith in Christ despite their challenges.

**F.** Children would play in public spaces, pretending to be at a wedding (playing a flute) or a funeral (singing a lament).

**G.** Some condemned both John’s austerity and Jesus’s liberty. Neither accusation was valid.

**H.** God will hold people accountable for their rejection of Jesus. Cities in Galilee faced a higher standard because they had witnessed the Messiah’s works and message.

**I.** The realm of the dead is often associated with judgment or separation from God.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

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## 1. Uncertainty

(Matt. 11:1-6)

We may experience honest doubts, but confessing our doubts to God is a step toward genuine faith.

- **How would John have understood Jesus's reply in verses 4-5 based on his knowledge of the Old Testament?**
- **How should we respond to our honest doubts or question about Jesus?**

## 2. Cynicism

(Matt. 11:16-19)

We are to be sensitive to the fact that God sometimes works in ways that contradict our expectations.

- **What primary complaints did people have about John and Jesus? Why?**
- **How do people's preconceived notions about God cause them to miss what He is doing?**

## 3. Denial

(Matt. 11:20-24)

Take seriously the fact that all people will bear responsibility for how they respond to Jesus.

- **Jesus pronounced a warning to the cities that had the greater opportunities to witness His miracles. How does this warning apply to you?**

## Apply the Text

- **Acknowledge that some people sitting in your Bible study may struggle with doubt. Discuss with your group ways to respond that will not alienate or condemn those struggling with honest doubts.**

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### KEY DOCTRINE:

#### Last Things

The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord. (See Luke 16:19-26; 2 Peter 3:7-13.)

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### BIBLE SKILL:

Use a Bible atlas and Bible dictionary (print version or on the internet) to locate and learn about places mentioned in Scripture.

Find the location of Tyre, Sidon, Sodom, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum in a Bible atlas or map. Then use a Bible dictionary to learn more about these locations. What are some significant facts about these cities that Jesus emphasized?

## TALK IT OUT

**Focus on Matthew 11:4-6, noting the types of miracles Jesus referenced.**

When John the Baptist heard in prison what Jesus was doing, he sent his disciples to ask if Jesus was indeed the Messiah (Matt. 11:2-3). Jesus confirmed His identity as the Messiah by pointing to the kind of things He was doing (vv. 4-5). The miracles Jesus referenced fulfilled Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah (Isa. 35:5-6; 61:1).

**What do you think had happened to cause John's uncertainty about who Jesus was? Be willing to share with one another anything that has challenged your faith.**

Rather than answering John's question directly, Jesus challenged his followers to go and report to John the evidence that pointed to who Jesus was. By linking what He was doing to the Old Testament prophecies concerning Him, Jesus provided us with a model for the right way to answer doubt—examine God's Word.

**How can you tell the difference between honest doubts and willful disbelief? Do you respond to both in the same way? Explain.**

Memorize Matthew 11:5-6, considering the evidence in your life that points to who Jesus is.

## Prayer Requests / Notes

# DAILY EXPLORATION



## Day 1: Matthew 11:1-3

*Consider reasons why John the Baptist had doubts about Jesus.*

While in prison, John heard news of what Jesus was doing. Most scholars think John had been in prison for over a year and had heard only sketchy reports of Jesus's ministry. What he heard didn't necessarily answer his questions about Jesus. He may have been asking himself, "Why hasn't Jesus started the revolution? Why hasn't He used His powers to get me out of prison?"

In response to these creeping doubts, John sent his disciples to Jesus. Their question to Him was simply, "Are you the one who is to come?" The phrase "the one who is to come" was a frequent way of speaking of the coming Messiah. It appears in the psalms, "He who comes in the name of the LORD is blessed" (Ps. 118:26).

Although John had declared that Jesus was God's Messiah (John 1:29-34), his circumstances and perhaps an inadequate understanding of the role of the Messiah opened the door for doubt. Even today, focusing on our circumstances can cause us to doubt what God is doing. John likely shared the expectations of most Jews who believed the Messiah was to be a conquering military leader like David. This Messiah would remove the Roman government from Israel. But this wasn't happening with Jesus. John might have wondered, "Did I misunderstand who Jesus is?"

**Be honest about any doubts you have about the faith. Identify a strong Christian in your life with whom you can discuss doubts as they arise.**



## Day 2: Matthew 11:4-6

*Pay attention to how Jesus responded to John's question.*

To answer John's question, Jesus pointed to the evidence. He gave a list of miracles He had performed. Jesus was alluding to the Old Testament prophecies concerning the types of miracles the Messiah would perform. Jesus was saying to John, "Identify me through the miracles that I do."

Luke's account of this question from John's disciples is followed by this statement: "At that time Jesus healed many people of diseases, afflictions, and evil spirits, and he granted sight to many blind people" (Luke 7:21). Then, Jesus told John's disciples to "go and report to John what you have seen and heard" (7:22). These were the messianic miracles prophesied in Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; and 61:1-2a.

Note that Jesus mentioned first the giving of sight to the blind. This had never occurred until the coming of Jesus. The man born blind whom Jesus healed in John 9 responded to Jesus's critics: "Throughout history no one has ever heard of someone opening the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he wouldn't be able to do anything" (John 9:32-33).

The short blessing in verse 6 was likely addressed to John personally. You are blessed, John, if you aren't offended by me. Jesus was warning John not to be tripped up by doubt.

**How should you respond to others' honest doubts and questions about Jesus?**



## Day 3: Matthew 11:16-19

### *Note the accusations made against John and Jesus.*

Many people in the crowds who followed Jesus were cynical. Jesus compared them to children at play in the marketplaces. In His comparison, He most likely was referring to two popular games that children played—weddings and funerals. Play-acting weddings would involve joyful singing and dancing. Acting out funerals would require somber wailing and mourning as was typical in that day. Inevitably there would be a child or two who refused to play, perhaps wanting to play funeral when the other children wanted to play wedding. Just like a disagreeable child who refused to join in the wedding game’s dance of joy, so some criticized Jesus for the joyful way He interacted with those sinners who followed Him. And just like children who refused to mourn at a pretend funeral, there were those who criticized the strict lifestyle of John.

John and Jesus lived contrasting lifestyles. Yet neither approach was acceptable to those who were skeptical of both men. They resented John’s austerity and call for repentance and Jesus’s association with tax collectors and sinners.

When Jesus said that “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,” He was saying that both the ascetic lifestyle of John and the joyful lifestyle of Jesus were correct in God’s grand scheme of things. Each of these has a place in God’s kingdom.

### **How do people’s preconceived notions about God cause them to miss what He is doing?**



## Day 4: Matthew 11:20-22

### *Note why Jesus denounced these towns.*

Jesus moved from mildly chastising the skepticism and doubts of those following Him out of curiosity to a full-blown denunciation of their unbelief. His message was simply this: You’ve had a greater opportunity to see God’s power and hear the message of the kingdom. Because of that, you carry a greater accountability before God.

This condemnation included the town of Chorazin as well as Bethsaida, the home of Peter, Andrew, and Philip (John 1:44). These villages had seen the power of Jesus and had heard His call for repentance, but they chose to ignore it. Jesus indicted them by pointing to two notoriously pagan Gentile cities, Tyre and Sidon. These two cities had been dreaded enemies of ancient Israel. Jesus said if they had seen the same miracles the inhabitants of Chorazin had seen, they would have expressed repentance by wearing the mourning clothes of sackcloth with ashes poured over their heads as a sign of grief. He later visited the region surrounding Tyre, where He healed the Syrophenician woman’s daughter (Matt. 15:21-28).

Jesus contrasted the coming judgment on Chorazin with that of Tyre and Sidon by declaring that the day of judgment would be more tolerable for the people of Tyre and Sidon. Chorazin would be held to a greater accountability because they had the greater witness of the miracles of Jesus.

### **Pray for lost people you know to respond to the gospel message.**



## Day 5: Matthew 11:23-24

*Identify the sin that kept the people of Capernaum from responding in faith to Jesus.*

Capernaum served as Jesus's headquarters. More miracles took place in Capernaum than anywhere else. But just like the towns mentioned in verse 21, its residents remained indifferent and perhaps hostile toward Jesus and His message.

Jesus spoke of their desire to be “exalted to heaven.” This could be an allusion to the Old Testament prophecy concerning the king of Babylon who sought to ascend to heaven and rule as supreme (Isa. 14:13). This was the sin of pride, and Jesus denounced their arrogance by stating that they would be brought down to Hades. The term *Hades* often refers to the grave or realm of the dead (Acts 2:27). The term also was used in the New Testament to speak of the place of torment for the wicked (Luke 16:23).

Once again, Jesus served notice that more tolerance would be given to Sodom than to Capernaum. The people of Capernaum would be held accountable for what they experienced but refused to embrace. Greater opportunity calls for greater accountability.

**How does Jesus's warning to the cities that had the greater opportunities to witness His miracles apply to you?**

## APPLY THE TEXT

Be honest about any doubts you have about the faith. Identify a strong Christian in your life with whom you can discuss doubts as they arise.

## JOURNAL

