

Topic: Faith: A Reasonable Struggle

Subtopic: Faith requires patience and perseverance

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/gYpTF1XVPN4>

Today’s Gospel features John the Baptist sending his disciples to Jesus with the question, “*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*”¹ John is sincerely puzzled.

John had lived in expectation. He appeared in the wilderness of Judea, calling people to “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*”² He even had the boldness to rebuke King Herod for his adulterous relationship with his brother Philip’s wife and got locked up for it.

When Jesus answered John’s question, he told his disciples, “*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them.*”³ This was a direct quote from Isaiah chapter 35, read in our Old Testament lesson today. But if you notice, he didn’t quote all that Isaiah said would happen. Jesus did not come with “*...vengeance and the recompense of God.*”⁴ Nor had “*...sorrow and mourning disappeared.*”

Consequently, John was perplexed, especially since he was sitting in a prison cell suffering under the reign of a wicked king. He must have wondered, where is the decisive action of the Messiah if his “*ax is laid at the root of the trees?*”⁵ And where is his unquenchable fire that will “*burn up the chaff?*”⁶of

¹ Matthew 11:2-3

² Matthew 3:2

³ Matthew 11:4 taken from Isaiah 35:5-6

⁴ Isaiah 35:4b

⁵ Matthew 3:10

⁶ Matthew 3:12

unrighteousness? Shouldn't Herod experience the vengeance of God?

These legitimate questions have origins in the writings of prophets who were guided by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus answers John's question, he doesn't explain everything but shares enough evidence to assure John even if his doubts seemed to have some merit in Biblical prophecy; much of which still needed clarification and fulfillment.

Therefore Jesus does not chastise John for having such doubts. In fact, he even commends him for he was not like "*a reed swaying in the wind.*"⁷ The man people went out in the wilderness to see was neither unstable nor faithless. His question arose not from personal weakness or vacillation but from a misunderstanding about the nature of the Messiah's veiled place in redemptive history, which still needed to be unfolded. There would be a future era when the Messiah would fulfill everything in the scriptures concerning him. But this dispensation was a season of forbearance due to the grace and mercy of our God.

Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians that we see Biblical truths only like "*a reflection in a mirror; (but one day) we shall see them face to face. Now (we) know in part; then (we) shall know fully, even as (we) are fully known.*"⁸ This metaphor means that, for the time being, we will not have every question fully answered to our satisfaction. But, like the answer Jesus gave to John's disciples, we will be given enough spiritual insight to sustain our faith.

In his book "*The Logic of God,*" Ravi Zacharias wrote: "God has put enough into this world to make faith in Him a most reasonable thing. But He has left enough out to make it

⁷ Matthew 11:8

⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:12

impossible to live by sheer reason alone. So faith and reason must always work together in that plausible blend.”⁹

In John’s case, he remained in prison, suffering under the rule of a wicked king. Therefore, it is not surprising that patience is today’s theme in our New Testament reading. In this epistle, James was encouraging the saints in Jerusalem during a very distressing time. There was a famine in the land and much poverty among the Christians. Being Christians, they had received little of the general relief donated by the Jewish community. Then there was also the persecution that pushed them down even further. So they were weary and needed encouragement. James is aware of this and affectionately appeals to them to ***“Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming.”***¹⁰

In his desire to encourage them, he uses various illustrations of patience to drive home his message. First, he implores us to ***“see how the farmer waits.”***¹¹ Think about his life of laborious toils and anxious delays. He must wait for the “early rain” in spring and the “latter rain” in the fall, upon which his crops depend for fullness as it ripens. Patience is, therefore, a necessary part of life. ***Finally, he urges them to take “the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of patience in the face of suffering. See how blessed we consider those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen the outcome from the Lord.”***¹²

Jesus pointed out that John was ***“a prophet and more than a prophet.”***¹³ And if a prophet like John needed a clearer

⁹ Ravi Zacharias, The Logic of God, p.129

¹⁰ James 5:7

¹¹ James 5:

¹² James 5:10-11

¹³ Matthew 11:9

perception of things, then we certainly do too. In a day and age when we rely only on ourselves to get things done, it's going to take patience and perseverance to trust in a God who doesn't do on our timetable in the way we would expect. When Mary was pregnant and waiting to give birth to the Messiah, she never expected that he would be born in a barn and that they would have to flee to Egypt to save the baby's life.

All of us have troubles, trials, and disappointments, and we have had goals and dreams that have taken a detour. But ultimately, our lives are blessed if we persevere and don't let these things derail our faith. After giving a detailed list of his works of mercy, Jesus concluded, "***And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.***"¹⁴ In this regard, we need Isaiah's admonition to "***strengthen the feeble hands and make firm the feeble knees.***"¹⁵ That is why we have Advent, which teaches us the value of waiting patiently in hope. It is a time to put our expectations in line with his, "***for we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone with this hope purifies himself, even as he is pure.***"¹⁶ And what better time to do that than now. *Amen.*

¹⁴ Matthew 11:6

¹⁵ Isaiah 35:3

¹⁶ 1 John 3:2-3