Jesus and John the Baptist
Luke 7:18-35

As we've seen over the last few weeks, Chapter 7 addresses the question: who is Jesus? And one of the things that Theophilus – who Luke first wrote this gospel to, and you and I, need to know about Jesus is: Is He the Messiah? Is he the one who the Old Testament prophets said would come? Because if he isn't, Theophilus shouldn't waste his time with him, but if Jesus is the Messiah, then that's a game changer. So… is Jesus the Messiah? That's a question Theophilus needs an answer to, and so too, it seems, did John the Baptist.

When faith wobbles.
When I was a boy there were these toy figures called Weebles. They're shaped like an egg, with the fat end at the bottom with a weight in it, which keeps their centre of gravity low, so you can knock them down and they just spring right back up. Their advertising catch phrase was, 'Weebles wobble but they don't fall down!' But, if you cut out that weight from their tail end, like my brother and I did, and then give them a push, they wobble, fall over, and don't get up again.

Now you can go through things in life that can knock your faith sideways, like a flick of the finger knocks over a Weeble. But whether or not you stay standing or get back up having been knocked down depends on whether the weight of the gospel, the weight of the word of God, centers your gravity.

And John the Baptist is in prison and he's going through just such a time. There was a time when hundreds came out to hear John preach, when it seemed like whole towns flocked to him and be baptized by him, when he was the most listened to preacher of the day. But now that's all gone. John dared to rebuke King Herod for his adultery and, as a consequence, John is languishing alone in prison. John's ministry is over, the crowds are gone, he's in jail, awaiting death.

Now, isn't it true that when things get difficult in our lives, when things aren't going the way we had hoped, when we face mounting pressure at work or difficulties in our relationships, that those things can deeply affect our outlook on life? And they can affect your faith. And that seems to be what was happening with John. His circumstances where making him question things. And those questions were centered around who Jesus was. John's under pressure, things aren't working out the way he had hoped and he's questioning: Is Jesus really the Coming One? Is he really the Messiah? Or should we look for another?

You see, we know from John's preaching back in Luke 3 that John was expecting the Messiah to usher in an era of justice and blessing. Blessing to those who repent, and judgment on the wicked. But here is John in jail, about to meet his death at the hands of Herod. And to John it must have seemed a million miles from his expectations of the messianic age, with the wicked still triumphing. And as a result, John's wobbling: Jesus isn't what John had envisaged him to be. Things shouldn't be like this. So had he nailed his colours to the wrong mast? In siding with Jesus, in declaring him to be the Messiah, had he backed the wrong horse? Was Jesus who John thought he was, or had he wasted his time, and should he go looking elsewhere?

Now, I can almost guarantee you, that there will be times when you face emotions like John faced. When the circumstances of your life make you question: is God really on my side? How could what is happening to me happen if God wants the best for me? And when things don't have a happy ending you might be tempted to question: is this Christian faith real, is Jesus really who the Bible says he is, or have I just backed a loser?

I don't know about you, but I find it reassuring to know that even the great saints like John had their moments of wobble. But what can we learn from John, to help us when our faith wobbles under pressure?

Firstly, look what John does. He calls on friends to help him. V19 says that John called two of his disciples to him and sent them to the Lord on his behalf. When you are struggling, get others to pray for you, especially if you are struggling to pray yourself. John couldn't visit Jesus in person, so he asks others to go on his behalf. And if life is such that it's causing you to wobble in your faith, get your friends around you and get them praying for you. And if you're not yet in a home group, get in one. It's precisely because the Christian life is not to be lived alone and we need one another at times like this that we have small groups in the church.

Secondly, John turns to Jesus. If John does have doubts about Jesus, he doesn't let those doubts fester. He knows who to turn to. But let me ask you honestly, when you doubt do you turn *to* Jesus or away *from* Him? Do you allow your circumstances to turn your gaze away from Jesus? You see here, John may be wobbling, he may be questioning, but he turns to Jesus. So when things get bad, when the temperature starts rising, when circumstances make you question: pray, bring these issues before him, tell him how you're feeling, confess your doubts and your fears, go to Jesus, not away from him.

Thirdly, note how Jesus responds to John. Jesus grounds him in truth. He doesn't answer John directly, he doesn't say, 'sure I'm the one to come, sure I'm the messiah'. He turns John back to the word of God and he recalls for John one after another of Isaiah's prophecies of what would happen when Messiah came and how they were being fulfilled in Jesus: v22 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight (Is 35:5); the lame walk: (Is 35:6); lepers are cleansed: (Is 53:4); and the deaf hear: (Is 35:5); the dead are raised up (Is 26:19); and the poor have good news preached to them (Is 61:1).'

When John is wobbling Jesus gives him the weight he needs to center his gravity, to keep him from falling; he gives him the rock to plant his feet on, and it's the word of God, fulfilled in Jesus. And Jesus is saying to John: John, in the midst of your circumstances, trust God's word, and trust me. So when you're struggling, remind yourself of truth, the truth of Jesus and what He has done for you.

But, fourthly, I want you to see that Jesus doesn't give John false hope. You see, in Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 61, which Jesus takes up as his mission statement in Luke 4, and which he reminds John is being fulfilled in his day, something follows good news being preached to the poor, but Jesus leaves it out here. And what

Jesus doesn't say to John, what Jesus leaves out will speak just as loudly to John as what he does say, because John knows these prophecies. Do you know what Jesus leaves out?

Listen to Isaiah 61, this is what Jesus is calling to mind for John: 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has annointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.' And Jesus doesn't say it.

John is captive, John is in prison, and Jesus makes no mention of the prisoners going free. Jesus mentions the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, and the poor. They all get a mention, but not the prisoners. You see liberty to the captives, opening the prison to those who are bound, is not going to be the outcome for John. And his faith must be grounded not on a change in his circumstances, but on Jesus and the word of God. And for us, when we face difficulties, there is no magic verse that promises all will be well in this life. As Paul and Barnabas encouraged the early Christians in Acts 14:22 'through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.' Some of these promises, as for John, await the future, full reign of the Messiah, when all shall be well.

Now, does Jesus proclaim liberty to the captives? Yes he does, but it may not be how we expect. Which is why Jesus sends back the messengers with a word both of encouragement and loving rebuke to John: v23: 'Blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

True blessing, he says, comes – regardless of your situation, even when you're stuck in prison and your circumstances aren't going to change – true blessing comes by knowing Jesus and trusting him. So don't give up, don't be offended by me.

But why would you? Why would someone take offence at Jesus?

Taking Offence at Jesus

I think this passage gives us two closely connected reasons why people got offended by Jesus in His own day and why it still happens.

Firstly, we want to make God in our own image. We don't like all that we see in the Bible, so we want to pick and choose the bits we do like and create a kind of designer God: I want a bit less wrath, and a bit more love. Less of this talk about sin and sacrifice (which is a bit messy after all), and more freedom for me to do what I want.

Mark Dever who's the pastor of Capital Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC tells a story about a time he was teaching a doctoral seminar on the subject of God. Dever says that 'A student called Bill responded politely but firmly that he liked to think of God rather differently. For several minutes, Bill painted a picture for us of a friendly deity. He liked to think of God as being wise, but not meddling; compassionate, but never overpowering; ever so resourceful, but

never interrupting. “This,” said Bill in conclusion, “is how I like to think of God.” My reply, Dever says, was perhaps somewhat sharper than it should have been. “Thank you, Bill,” I said, “for telling us so much about yourself, but we are concerned to know what God is really like, not simply about our own desires.”

And that is the danger, that we take our desires, how we want God to be and when God as He reveals himself to us in the Bible fails to conform to our image, we take offence at Him and set up our idol made after our own image, instead.

And that, to a small degree, is what John was struggling with. Jesus was not conforming to the pattern John had expected, so Jesus encourages him: don’t take offence at me; John, trust me. And it goes without saying that when it comes to the uncreated God it is infinitely better to know Him as he really is, than spend our lives going after a creation of our own imagination.

But Jesus spells out a second way people take offence at God, and that is when we want God to dance to our tune. We want to set the rules. We want him to do things our way, according to our time scale, the way we want and when he doesn’t, well we get offended and go and play elsewhere. And that’s the point of this parable Jesus tells of the children sitting in the market place in v31-2. One commentator has called it ‘the parable of the brats.’

V31: ‘To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?’ – so just note, even with all the crowds who followed John and are now following Jesus, still it seems that most people, and especially the leaders, didn’t. Most people weren’t interested. So, especially you young guys, don’t be fooled that the majority are always right. Just because you’re the only one in your class, or your year who believes, doesn’t mean they’re right. It wasn’t any different in Jesus day. V32: ‘They are like children sitting in the market place and calling to one another ‘we played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’

In other words, they wanted to call the tune as to how God should do things, and when John the Baptist and Jesus wouldn’t play ball, they took offence. They wanted John to be more fun, but when Jesus came they wanted him to be more gloomy, and stop going to parties. You see, we want to create God in our own image and we want him to dance to our tune. We want him to be for this and against that and when you hear that that’s not what God’s like, you say, well stuff that, that’s not how I like to think about God.

I remember one day as a boy playing monopoly with my elder sister and younger brother and it became obvious that things were not going well for my sister and that her younger brothers were going to beat her, so rather than let that happen she picked up the board with all the houses and counters and money on it and through it across the room! And Jesus says people are no better than children playing games when it comes to responding to God. If they can’t have it their way, if they can’t make the rules, if they can’t call the tune, they don’t play.

But there is a real danger and tragedy in that, because just as you can have people who self-harm physically, by cutting themselves, so you can self harm your soul. When Luke contrasts the response to Jesus' teaching of those who were baptized with John's Baptism to that of the scribes and Pharisees, he says in v30 that the latter 'rejected the purpose of God for themselves.'

You see it is possible to reject the purpose of God, to miss the purpose of God for your life, by getting offended by God. It's possible to ignore God's call to repentance. It's possible to mock God's call to repentance through John the Baptist as the ravings of a mad-man. It's possible to see the grace of God to sinners in Jesus as somehow irreligious and not becoming. It's possible to pick apart the word of God as these scribes and Pharisees did and think you know it all and have all the answers and totally miss what God is doing in Jesus, to the harm of your soul.

But Jesus says, it doesn't have to be like that. V35 'wisdom is justified by all her children.' You don't have to respond to God like a child who doesn't get his own way, you can come in humility and repentance, acknowledging God's ways and his wisdom are right and in doing so become part of his family.

Children of the King, Citizens of the Kingdom

When the two messengers take Jesus' message back to John, Jesus turns to the crowd and asks them what it was about John that attracted them to him: v24 'what did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?' No way! No doubt you could have described John in many ways, but a spineless man-pleaser, blown here and there by other's opinions, certainly not! V25: 'A man in soft clothing?' John, soft clothing? He was famed for his camel hair tunic, and as for living in the king's courts like those who are dressed in splendid clothing, John was languishing in the king's dungeons.

So, Jesus asks, what did you go out to see? And he tells them: they went to see a prophet. Here was a man not bending with the times, not lining his own pockets, but preaching the word of God to them. And yet Jesus says, John was more than a prophet. Why? Because Jesus tells us in v27 that John was the one who the prophet Malachi saw coming some 500 years before John even took the stage: 'Behold I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' But just listen to what Malachi himself records God as saying in Malachi 3:1 'behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.'

You see John was more than a prophet because he was the one sent to prepare the way for none other than God. And Jesus almost casually throws this out: 'you went to John because he was a prophet, but he's more than a prophet, he came to prepare the way for God, and I've come.' And John is wondering in prison: is Jesus really the Messiah? And Jesus' response is: I am, and the Messiah is more wonderful even than John could have imagined.

And Jesus goes on to say in v28 that 'among those born of women none is greater than John.' Among those born the usual way, by natural birth, John's the greatest:

the last of the Old Testament prophets, the messenger coming before messiah. But great as John was, Jesus says in v28 'the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.' Anyone, however apparently insignificant, who puts their trust in Jesus, and is reborn, born by the Spirit, born as a child of God, into the kingdom of God, is greater than John.

You see, John lived in the Old Covenant, in the time of promise- he could only look forward, longing, hoping, trusting Jesus was the messiah. But we – the least in the Kingdom- get to live this side of Jesus – in the time of fulfillment. John, and all those before him, just saw the shadow, we see the real thing. John, great as he was, was just the warm up act – Jesus is the real show, who has fulfilled every promise. He is the offspring of woman who crushes satan's head; he is the seed and offspring of Abraham, through whom all nations are blessed. He is David's greatest son, who reigns on David's throne as King forever. He is the suffering servant who is pierced for our transgressions. He is the Lord come to his temple.

And Jesus says the least in the kingdom of God still gets to know and understand and experience more of God than John did, because he knows me. So church, when there are a thousand and one things you could give your life to – it is Jesus, the one who was to come, who can and should be the treasure of your life. And while there are a whole load of issues we could major on as a church – it is the Gospel, who Jesus is, and what he has done for us, Christ and Him crucified, that we make our main thing, so that the wisdom of God might be justified by her children.