



HAS GOD EVER LET YOU DOWN?

Special Lesson: December 31, 2023

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I. Background:

- A. For various reasons, perhaps mostly because we sit on the threshold of a potentially turbulent New Year, I want to do something different today.
- B. If you follow (legitimate) news much, if you study Bible prophecy, and if you pay attention to what many people are saying: you already suspect that 2024 is going to be a very significant, and perhaps very challenging year.
- C. There are good reasons for this:
 1. It's an election year. We should be ready for more man-made crises, more deceptions, more fraud, and more efforts to thwart basic laws and justice.
 2. Wars and rumors of wars are mounting every day. What's going on in the Middle East right now is only likely to get worse. China vs. Taiwan is also pending.
 3. Major nations like China and the US have economies that are more fragile than most of us realize. We are a hair trigger away from a big economic meltdown with far-reaching ramifications.
 4. You get the point. 2024 could very well be a year that is challenging in many ways.
- D. The things I want to talk about today are a departure from our present study. I receive a lot of questions and comments from folks, and so for various reasons, including keeping an eye on 2024, I want to ask a very probing question today:

II. "HAS GOD EVER LET YOU DOWN?"

- A. I'm not interested in hearing the cliché replies.
 1. You know, "In all things, God works for the good of those who love Him,"
 2. Or, "God's plans are to give me a hope and a future,"
 3. Or that old standby, "He knows what's best for me."
- B. Believe me, those responses ARE Biblically based.
 1. They're true when they're properly applied with the right heart to the right situation.
 2. However, in my experience, many Christians say this kind of stuff when they are under profound distress and their faith has reached its limits and they are tapping out.
 3. In times like that, they are barely able to conceal their pain, barely able to describe their confusion, or barely able to contain their rage.
 4. TWO COMMENTS HERE THAT ARE VERY IMPORTANT:
 - a. Just because we can force certain words out of our mouth does not mean we are saying what we are truly feeling.
 - b. Also, just because we can't admit what's really going on does not mean it isn't.

NOTE: I've been thinking a good deal lately about some prominent people in the Bible.

- c. More specifically, I've been thinking about how they reacted when God seemed to lift His veil of protection from them, and they became vulnerable to their enemies.
- d. I've been thinking about how they became angry when God didn't perform as they were most hoping He would.
- e. I've been thinking about how they went from being public powerhouses for God to suddenly becoming whimpering cowards that hit a wall of despair and wanted to die.

C. I'll give you some quick examples:

1. David was anointed to be future King of Israel. That promise was given to him by God.
 - a. Yet, he reached a moment of fear and vulnerability in the journey God put him on. David ended up going to those who were in fact his enemies.
 - b. He chose to put on an act and pretend he was a madman. He reduced himself to whatever groveling means were necessary to preserve his life (***Cf. 1 Samuel 21***).
 - c. It was a very low point for one who had once faced Goliath and had publicly declared his unwavering faith in God.

D. Then there is Jonah. This is someone who was like you and I in so many ways.

1. God gave him a job to do, but he didn't want to do it. He took evasive action and he fled from his responsibilities.
2. He went through a lot before God finally got his attention once more.
3. He eventually, albeit reluctantly, did what God had asked him to do. He preached a message of repentance to a group of people he personally couldn't stand.
4. He got himself a front row seat to watch those people get blasted by God. He was sure God would destroy them; after all, they were corrupt and evil.
5. But God didn't do what Jonah hoped He'd do, and Jonah became angry.
6. God didn't execute justice the way Jonah felt He needed to. In Jonah's eyes, the bad people "got away with it," and they didn't get what they deserved.

E. Thirdly, there is Elijah. He went out on a limb to publicly take a stand for God.

1. He did this in front of hundreds of evil people who wanted him dead and refused to believe in the One True God.
2. However, God demonstrated Himself to everyone, and Elijah was vindicated in so many ways against so many odds.

3. But then fear overtook him and he fled for his life. He went from being a victor to feeling a victim.
 4. Depression and despair overtook him, and he wanted to die. He wallowed in self-pity.
 5. He let go of “what he knew,” and instead he chose instead to embrace “what he felt.”
6. Chances are good that most, if not all of you, have already connected with something in those three brief Old Testament examples. You see a bit of yourself in those situations.
- F. That’s why I feel I need to be candid here and ask some uncomfortable questions:
1. Have you ever been mad at God?
 2. Did you ever strike some sort of bargain with Him in your heart, and now you’re upset that He didn’t keep up His end of the arrangement?
 3. Are you still doing everything you can to keep “fighting the good fight,” but all you feel is profound exhaustion and despair?
 4. Did you take the high road, do what you thought was right, make the best decisions you were able to, and now you believe you got the raw end of the deal?
- G. If you think those questions are uncomfortable, then I want to “turn up the heat” even more:
1. Did you pour yourself into the task of raising your children the right way, only to have them disappoint you or maybe even alarm you with their personal choices?
 2. Are you laboring in a ministry while others with less gifting, less commitment, and less maturity are getting all the rewards and recognition?
 3. Did you pray and try for years for a baby, yet one still didn’t come? Meantime, irresponsible kids are popping out feral kids like rabbits?
 4. Did you carefully plan for a simple and responsible retirement, only to see it mostly evaporate in the wake of unexpected health problems and medical bills?
 5. Have you lost your job and now you are struggling to find a means to pay the bills?
 6. Have you been penalized in some way for being honest and doing what was right?
 7. Did you find the woman of your dreams or the man of your dreams, but things haven’t turned out so well, now you wished you hadn’t found them at all?

So let me ask the question again, **“Has God ever let you down?”**

NOTE: If you are feeling that way, you are not alone. It might have even been that way for people that knew Jesus personally. In fact, I think the Bible makes the case that this is exactly what happened.

- H. We can talk all day about our personal “relationship with God,” however...
1. Three NT Biblical characters come to my mind that REALLY knew Jesus personally.
 2. They interacted with Him.
 3. They watched Him.
 4. They learned from Him directly and they knew who He was.
 5. They spoke with Him and their lives are recorded in the NT as being part of His life.
 6. Once again, I strongly suspect it could be argued from Scripture that all three felt let down in some way by Jesus.
 7. However, the larger point is all three characters made the choice to respond to Jesus in these difficult moments in different ways.
 8. Also I think, with some reflection on the matter, these are ways we still respond to Jesus today.

I. John the Baptist

1. What do we know about John the Baptist?
 - a. He had a key role BEFORE Jesus’ ministry.
 - b. He probably knew Jesus growing up and maybe they played or worked together as they were cousins. This is not an unreasonable assumption.
 - c. John proclaimed Jesus in his own ministry role as the “voice in the wilderness.”
 - d. Rough and rugged character: unconventional, strong, self-reliant, firm convictions (“brood of vipers” in **Matthew 3:7**)
 - e. Inspiring leader: he had many followers and disciples.
 - f. He seemed to have the right attitude about Jesus (**John 3:30** – “He must increase, but I must decrease....”)
 - g. Jesus said of John the Baptist “there is none greater.” (**Luke 7:28**)
2. It is difficult to fully grasp how much contact John actually had with Jesus.
 - a. We know that the two “met” when they were both in the “womb,” but that hardly counts as a relationship. (**Luke 1:39-55**)
 - b. Then there was the baptism meeting where John baptized Jesus, (i.e. **Matthew 3:13-17**), and he felt Jesus should be the one baptizing HIM!
 - c. However all in all, it seems they had little face-to-face contact (Remember, John the Baptist was arrested early in the ministry of Jesus Christ, so there was no opportunity for further contact after that point).

3. **Question:** SO – HOW DID JOHN THE BAPTIST RESPOND TO JESUS?

a. Through the lens of his own desperate situation:

- Time had passed since that glorious baptism. Jesus was now out there with His own growing ministry while John the Baptist was in prison.
- John's stand against the corruption of the leadership and against sin had gained Herod's attention.
- John had stood up for what was right, and now his life was about to be ended.
- The only information John had of Jesus at this point came through reports from John's own disciples.

b. Through the lens of his disappointment with Jesus:

- Jesus and John were very different, and it's not beyond reason to suggest these differences may have begun to concern or even disappoint John.
- For example, John's choices and attire set him apart from the crowd, while Jesus (by all accounts) blended in.
- For example, John and his disciples fasted much while Jesus and His disciples ate and drank with sinners no less (**Matthew 11:18-19**)
- John performed no signs in his earthly ministry (**John 10:41**), but Jesus, and now His disciples, performed miracles of every kind (**Matthew 9:35, 10:1**).
- Now John was sitting in prison with his life on countdown. It's not hard to imagine his disappointment.

c. Through the lens of his unfulfilled expectations of Jesus:

NOTE: You can imagine the questions that may have gone through John's mind:

- If Jesus was really the Messiah as he himself – John the Baptist – had announced, then why did Jesus not do something more?
- Why had Jesus not gotten down to the business of establishing His kingdom?
- When he could resist his own feelings and insecurities no longer, John sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus directly, "Was Jesus really the promised Messiah or not?" (**Matthew 11:2-3**)
- John's unfulfilled expectations are clear here: he wanted to know if he had been misled or were they to look for someone else? Was Jesus their ONLY hope?
- Jesus' reply was "blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Basically, Jesus says this, "Blessed is the man

who endures in his faith even when I don't perform precisely to his expectations.")

NOTE (Bottom line): The Scriptures make it clear that John had certain expectations of Jesus. He had certain ideas about how Jesus needed to operate and work in the lives of men, and he challenged Jesus on these things.

We can say John the Baptist was wrong for this, that he had the matter upside down. However, honestly, we're not much different.

- d. We're like John the Baptist in the way we expect God to work.
- e. If God does not fulfill our expectations, we get disappointed, we feel disillusioned, and we get desperate.
- f. We permit ourselves to think, if our Lord is really the God He says He is, then we feel we have a right to expect something different from him.

NOTE: I expect John died with some of his questions unanswered. Even though Jesus sent John's disciples back to him with a reply, the answer Jesus gave seems to avoid the heart of John's question.

Now - let's look at a second character.....

J. Judas Iscariot

1. What do we know about Judas Iscariot?

- a. He had a key role during Jesus' ministry (he was one of the original 12 disciples and basically lived with Jesus for 3 years)
- b. He was a Jewish zealot. His goal was to overthrow the Roman oppression.
- c. He was given assignments and divine powers by Jesus (***Cf. Matthew 10:1-4***)
- d. He was the Treasurer of the disciples.
- e. He saw Jesus perform many miracles and he heard Jesus teach.
- f. Jesus even called him "friend" at the same time as Judas betrayed Him.
- g. Judas Iscariot's name is now synonymous with: betrayal, treachery, and disloyalty.

2. **Let's ask ourselves the same question we asked with John the Baptist: "HOW DID JUDAS ISCARIOT RESPOND TO JESUS?"**

NOTE: (I want to ask this same question in another more poignant manner):

"How could Judas live, eat, walk, and talk with Jesus Christ day in and day out for three years and still turn out the way he did?"

- a. He probably felt let down, resentful and angry ("Satan entered him" ***John 13:27***).

- b. The Bible teaches that our anger always gives Satan an opportunity (***Ephesians 4:27***), therefore we need to guard against our resentments and anger.
- c. Judas' response was likely dominated by selfish desire ("money" – ***Matthew 26:14-16***, or by "a desire for political change." Jesus didn't overthrow the Roman empire as a Jewish zealot would have wished Him to do.
- d. Judas' selfish intentions led to profound personal compromise. It fostered hatred, and it permitted murder.
- e. It's what Judas wanted that clouded his better judgement and destroyed him.
- f. He wanted things to work out HIS way, not Jesus' way.
- g. When Jesus didn't do what Judas most wanted him to do, Judas was through with him. He cast Jesus aside.

3. The same thing can easily happen to us!!!

- a. We can easily get focused on one or two ambitions in our lives to the exclusion of all else God is trying to accomplish.
- b. We end up ignoring the things God is doing in our lives, the things He is saying to us, the way He is working in our lives, in the lives of our friends and families, or even in our country and in the world.
- c. Because we become selfish in our expectations of God, we start compromising and doing things we never once thought we would.
- d. There is a HUGELY IMPORTANT principle at stake here:
 - We can be surrounded by believers and ministry and still fail.
 - We can hear the regular teaching of God's Word and still fail.
 - We can be schooled and taught by the best and still fail.
 - We can witness God at work and the miracles of ministry, and still miss the most important need to be in a right relationship with God.
 - But, if we are thinking about ourselves, if we are focused on what we can get out of the situation (or what we think the results of the situation should be), or if we cannot let go of what we feel should be done and what we feel should happen, then we are in great danger of missing what God needs to accomplish in our own lives.
 - If we're not careful, we can end up sacrificing what is most important for the things that hold relatively little value.

And here's the third and final character....

K. The thief on the cross (and I mean "the good thief") – *Luke 23:39-43*.

NOTE: This character, in many ways, is the most remarkable of the three men we are talking about today. What do we know about the thief on the cross? Not much.

1. When Jesus was crucified, there was a cross on either side of Him.

- a. On His left and right were two criminals (In the Greek, they are called kakourgos: “criminal,” “evil-doer,” “one who commits serious crimes.”)
 - b. Other Gospels called these two “robbers.” They could have been highwaymen, bandits, folks that swooped down on others and took advantage of them and left them for dead.
 - c. In other words, this ‘good thief’ had a bad resume.
 - d. This is probably the sort of person Jesus had in mind in His parable of the Good Samaritan

2. But, despite all that, this thief had a RIGHT view of God!
 - a. He is quoted as asking the more bellicose thief, “Don’t you fear God?”
 - b. His mouth revealed the condition of his heart.
 - c. He’d made some bad choices, but somewhere along the line, “where the rubber meets the road,” the ‘good thief’ had gained a right view of God.
 - d. That’s why he said to Jesus, “*Remember me when you come into your kingdom...*”

3. By ANY measure, this is an astounding statement. Consider the following:
 - a. All of Jesus’ disciples had fled by this point. Those who had walked, talked, and ministered with Jesus had fled. (Only John is recorded as being at the cross).
 - b. The ‘good thief’ has seen the least of Jesus’ ministry, at least when compared to John the Baptist and even Judas Iscariot
 - c. Jesus, moreover, is in the process of suffering and dying. He has been humiliated by the Romans and the Jewish religious leadership.

4. Yet, the thief sees Jesus the right way:
 - a. He does not see a dying man. He does not see someone who has failed, or someone that cannot deliver what He promised.
 - b. He doesn’t see someone who won’t have the ultimate glorious victory.
 - c. He does not see someone who is lacking in power, authority, or final say.
 - d. He sees the Messiah! He knows Jesus is not an imposter or someone who won’t come through with His promises.
 - e. He understands Jesus will still receive and set up His kingdom.
 - f. The thief on the cross still believes, AGAINST ALL ODDS AND ALL HUMAN UNDERSTANDING! that Jesus is who He says He is!
 - g. And so, the ‘good thief’s’ heart demonstrates more faith than anyone else at that morbid scene.
 - h. For that matter, the ‘good thief’ demonstrates more faith than any of the examples we’ve mentioned today.

- III. So which one of these three are you most like right now?
- A. Are you like John the Baptist: scared, insecure, unsure, concerned, needing reassurance that God is still able to be the God that you most want and need?
 - 1. Are you asking God to reaffirm Himself to you so that you can be convinced of His promises and capacities?
 - 2. Have you focused on the challenges of your personal situation so much that your vision of Jesus Christ has dimmed?

 - B. Perhaps, you are like Judas Iscariot: angry, resentful, focused on your own agenda, on what you most want, and what you feel you most deserve?
 - 1. Are you taking in the teaching of God's Word and maybe even participating in ministry, but it's having little effect on really changing who you are?
 - 2. Do your resentments gnaw at you, each day eroding a little bit more of the faith you claim to have?

 - C. Or – are you like the thief on the cross?
 - 1. The odds are against you, there is no human evidence of God's work in your life the way you feel you most need to see it.
 - 2. By every reasonable assessment, the situation has become dire. You cannot see a way out. Hope is no longer a viable option for you.
 - 3. Are you in a situation where you cannot see the power of God at this particular juncture and within the circumstances you are facing and yet your heart is still bursting with faith?

CONCLUSION:

I believe 2024 could be a year that will challenge us in ways we've not ever been tested. We will continue to face disappointments, injustices, and unanswered questions. Despite all that, my prayer for all of us is that we find ourselves responding to Jesus as the thief on the cross did.