

## DOES GOD LET YOU DOWN?

By Steve Schmutzer

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Does God ever let you down?

*Wait.* Before you answer, I'm not interested in cliché replies. You know, "In all things, God works for the good of those who love Him," or, "God's plans are to give me a hope and a future." I don't want to hear that old standby, "He knows what's best for me."

Those responses *are* Biblically-based, and so they're true when they're properly applied with the right heart to the right situation. But in my experience, too many Christians say this kind of stuff when their faith has reached its limits. They are barely able to endure their pain, describe their confusion, or contain their rage.

Just because we can force certain words out of our mouth does not mean we are saying what we are truly feeling. Just because we can't admit what's really going on does not mean it isn't.

Let's be totally honest here - have you ever been mad at God? Did you ever bargain with Him in your heart and now you're upset He didn't keep up His end of the arrangement? Are you still "fighting the good fight," but you're exhausted and despaired? Did you take the high road - but you got the raw end of the deal?

Now - let's get down to the brass tacks:

Did you pour yourself into the task of raising your children the right way only to have them disappoint you with their choices?

Are you laboring long and quietly in a ministry while others with less gifting, less commitment, and less maturity are getting the reward and recognition?

Have you prayed and tried for years for a baby and one still hasn't come? Meantime, irresponsible parents are popping out feral kids like rabbits?

Did you carefully plan for a simple and responsible retirement - only to see it all evaporate in the wake of unexpected health problems and medical bills?

Have you lost your job and now you are struggling to find work that pays the bills?

Did you find the man or woman of your dreams, but things have changed and now you wish you hadn't?

So let me ask the question one more time: does God ever let you down?

If you are feeling that way, or are tempted to - you are not alone. Even people that knew Jesus personally might have felt that way....or at least they may have felt they had reason to.

You see, we can talk all day long about our “relationship with God,” but three Biblical characters come to my mind that actually *knew* Him personally. I mean, they interacted with Jesus, they watched Him, listened to Him, and learned from Him. They knew who Jesus *really* was!

*Their* lives are recorded in the New Testament as being part of *His* life, so the personal connection went both ways. Despite that, I think it could be argued that all three of these people might have felt some disappointment with Jesus. Put another way, they might have admitted they felt let down by God.

But all three characters faced their natural reactions and chose to respond to Jesus in different ways. I think we can learn something from their examples because these are ways we still respond to Jesus Christ today.

The first of these three characters is John the Baptist. He had a key role *before* Jesus’ ministry. Since he and Jesus were cousins, he probably knew Jesus as they were growing up together. Maybe they even played together as children – this is not an unreasonable assumption.

John the Baptist turned out to be a rough and rugged character – unconventional, certainly. He was a strong man with equally strong convictions. He didn’t think twice about confronting the hypocritical religious leaders and calling them a “brood of vipers” (Matt. 3:7). His straight talk and no-nonsense approach attracted truth-seekers, and he had many followers and disciples.

A time came however when John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus’ ministry as a “voice in the wilderness” (John 1:23). He did this because he had a right view of Jesus. John said of Him, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30), so John the Baptist grasped the proper priorities and how things needed to be.

None of this was an act. John the Baptist was a man of God who had a passion for proclaiming the truth and for living it out. His extraordinary ministry and exemplary character were affirmed when Jesus said of him that there was “....none greater” (Luke 7:28). To be sure, John the Baptist was the real deal.

It is difficult to know how much time John the Baptist actually had with Jesus Christ. There *was* that special occasion where John had baptized Jesus (Matt. 3:13-17), and John had felt that Jesus should have baptized *him* instead.

But in their adult years, it seems they had little face-to-face contact. We know John the Baptist publicly confronted Herod Antipas for the king’s sins (Matt. 14:1-13), and this had resulted in John’s arrest and imprisonment – and ultimately his beheading. This happened early in the

ministry of Jesus Christ, so there was no opportunity for further contact between the two cousins after that point.

It is after John's arrest that we learn of his doubts about Jesus Christ. In a desperate situation with his life on the line, John the Baptist faced gnawing questions. Reports of Jesus had found their way into John's cell, and news of Jesus' ministry had worked its way into the fabric of John's deepest frustrations.

Time had passed since that glorious baptism, and Jesus' ministry was now flourishing while John's had abated. John's disciples fed him bits and pieces of information as they were able to, and it's fair to say these reports reinforced the misgivings John had of Jesus.

You see, the ministries and activities of Jesus and John were very different, and it's not beyond reason to suggest these differences aroused John's concerns. John's choices had set him apart from the crowd while Jesus' choices had blended in. John the Baptist and his disciples fasted often, but Jesus and his disciples ate and drank with sinners (Matt. 11:18-19). John performed no signs in his earthly ministry (John 10:41), but Jesus - and his disciples - performed miracles of every kind (Matt. 9:35, 10:1). John lived reclusively, but Jesus was a very public person who was often surrounded by enormous crowds of people.

Now John was sitting in prison, captive most of all to his own disappointments. It's not hard to imagine the questions that may have gone through John's mind. "If Jesus was really the Messiah as he himself - John - had announced, then why wasn't Jesus doing more?" "Why was Jesus not getting down to the business of establishing His kingdom and burning up the wicked with unquenchable fire?" (Matt. 3:12). "Was he here in prison because Jesus was powerless to do anything about the situation?"

When John the Baptist could resist his own insecurities no longer, he sent some of his disciples to confront Jesus and to ask Him directly, "Are you the promised Messiah or should we be looking for someone else?" (Matt. 11:2-3).

The question is a revealing one because it shows John had expectations of Jesus that were unfulfilled. It also shows that John the Baptist was unsure, doubtful, and delicate - the same way you and I have felt from time to time.

John wanted to know if he'd been misled. Was Jesus their *only* hope or was somebody else going to come along that was a better fit for the job? Was Jesus Christ really the Messiah, or not?

Jesus sent John's disciples back to John with an answer, but it was hardly the one John the Baptist was seeking. Jesus challenged John to consider the evidence of His miracles, and he added, "...blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

In other words, Jesus exhorted John to cling to the truth of Old Testament Scripture. He did not give John a simple “yes” or “no” answer, but he left him hanging a bit. Jesus responded to John’s heart instead of his mind because John’s heart was the seat of his faith.

We can say John the Baptist was wrong for the ideas he had about how Jesus needed to operate, but – honestly - we’re not much different. We expect God to work in certain ways too, and if God does not fulfill our expectations, we also get disappointed. We may not like to admit it, but it’s easy for us to think that if our God is really the God He says He is, then we have a right to expect something different from Him.

I feel it’s likely that John died with some of his questions unanswered. That doesn’t mean his faith wasn’t real. It means he was human, and because he was human, his reactions to Jesus Christ were imperfect – the same way yours and mine can be too.

A second character that probably felt let down by Jesus Christ was Judas Iscariot. What do we know of him?

As one of the original 12 disciples, Judas Iscariot basically lived with Jesus for three years. He was given assignments and divine powers by Jesus (Matt. 10:1-4), and he was the official treasurer for the group (John 12:6) - albeit a deceptive and self-serving one.

The bottom line is, Judas saw Jesus perform many miracles and he heard Jesus teach many times. He learned directly from the King of kings and Lord of lords, and he had the opportunity to grow as few others did. He saw the mistakes and the actions of the other disciples, and he learned from all of this. In other words, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, Judas Iscariot had the optimal schooling in the Gospel of the kingdom.

But it’s likely that Judas Iscariot was also a Jewish zealot. Many scholars believe his surname, “Iscariot” was a form of the title *sicarii*, meaning "dagger-men." This was a group of zealots who despised the Roman oppression. They were known to carry a knife with them so they were prepared to assassinate traitors and capitulators.

The Jewish zealots were principally motivated by socio-economic and political considerations. They believed that if they turned their nation back to God and incited a war against the Romans, the Messiah would rise to lead them and establish His Kingdom.

It’s easy to see how all this may have played out in Judas’ mind. Jesus was a righteous Jew and a descendant of King David. He spoke of establishing His kingdom, and he cast out demons, produced abundant food, and controlled the weather. Surely Jesus could lead the Jews to victory over the Romans and usher in God’s Kingdom! In Judas’ activist mind, his own ideas made perfect sense.

But somewhere along the line the situation changed. Judas became disappointed as Jesus let him down. Jesus began to talk about dying, and His descriptions of His coming Kingdom didn’t fit with

Judas' ideals. Judas began to doubt Jesus, and he began to openly chide Jesus for His choices and priorities (John 12:3-6).

We know how this turned out. Judas chose to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver (Luke 22:3-6; Matt. 27:3-5). Perhaps Judas had come to a point where he felt Jesus was a false Messiah, someone who was not fulfilling the expectations Judas had of a ruler that would lead Israel into her kingdom. We don't know for sure – but it all seems to fit the larger story.

The bigger issue is the questions that are raised by how things ultimately transpired: “How could Judas live, eat, walk, and talk with Jesus Christ day in and day out for three years and still turn out as he did?” “How could Judas miss the Messiah when he knew him so well?” “How could Judas hear the Gospel so clearly and miss having the right relationship with Jesus Christ?”

We are left with some element of speculation, but it's reasonable to assume that Judas resented Jesus and felt justified in his own views (Mark 14:6-16). Ultimately, that triggered his decision to turn Jesus over to the authorities. The greater account of Judas Iscariot suggests he had some underlying anger issues with the whole situation – which may explain why “Satan entered him” (John 13:27). The Bible teaches that our anger always gives Satan an opportunity (Eph. 4:27).

In the end, Judas' response to Jesus Christ was likely dominated by a selfish desire for political change. Jesus didn't overthrow the Romans as Judas wanted Him to, and so Judas' selfish intentions led to profound personal compromise. It fostered resentment, clouded better judgement, and it ultimately destroyed him.

Judas Iscariot wanted things to work out *his* way – not Jesus' way. When Jesus didn't do what Judas most wanted Him to do, Judas was through with Him.

Today, Judas Iscariot's name is synonymous with betrayal, treachery, and disloyalty. He's one of the most hated figures in Scripture – so it's not without some hesitation that I suggest his patterns are often our own. To lessen the blow, I'll speak for myself.

It is easy for me to get focused on one or two goals in my life to the exclusion of all else God is trying to do. In this situation, I can end up ignoring the things God is doing in my life, the lessons He is teaching me, or the way He is working in the life of my church, my friends, my family, and even my country.

Because it's natural for me to become selfish in my expectations of God, it's not hard to start compromising here and there and doing things I once never thought I would.

I believe there is a huge principle at stake here. You see, we can be surrounded by believers and ministry and still fall. We can hear the regular teaching of God's Word and still fail. We can witness God at work and still miss the most important need to be in a right relationship with God.

If we persist in thinking about ourselves first - what we can get out of the situation, what we think the outcomes should be, or how we feel “who” should be doing “what,” then we completely miss what God most needs to accomplish in our own lives the very same way Judas missed it. At that point, resentments creep in and we say and do things we ought not to.

And here’s the third and final character: the thief on the cross. By this, I mean the “good” thief (Luke 23:39-43). We don’t even know his name. There were two thieves who died with Jesus, and while both received the penalty for their crimes, the “good” thief gave Jesus the proper respect.

I feel that – for various reasons - the “good” thief is the most remarkable man of the three individuals we have assessed. What do we know of him? Not much, I’m afraid.

We do know that when Jesus was crucified, there was a cross on either side of Him. On His left and right were two criminals. In the Greek language, they are called “*kakourgos*” which has the straightforward meaning of “*criminal,*” “*evil-doer,*” or “*one who commits serious crimes.*” The “good” thief was a bad man.

Other gospels call him a “robber.” He could have been a bandit - someone that ambushed others, took advantage of them, and left them for dead. It’s very likely that this “good” thief had been the sort of person that Jesus had in mind when He told His parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). This “good” thief had been a burden, a blight on society – and so he was sentenced to death for his crimes.

But despite his faulty resume, this “good” thief had a *right* view of God! He asked the other bellicose thief, “Don’t you fear God?” He put the “bad” thief in his place by correcting the latter’s improper assumptions of Jesus Christ.

To put this remarkable situation another way, the “good” thief’s mouth revealed the condition of his heart (Luke 6:45). The Bible teaches that you are what you say, and the “good” thief said to Jesus Christ, “....remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Whoa! By ANY measure, this is an astounding statement! Consider that by this point, all of Jesus’ disciples had fled the scene, and only John is recorded as being at the cross (John 19:26). These disciples were the men Jesus had personally trained. These were the guys who had seen supernatural evidence of Jesus’ power and authority. These were the guys who had learned from the Messiah Himself – and they were nowhere to be found!

The “good” thief, on the other hand, had had none of that training and experience. He had not spent the same time with Jesus Christ and he had not seen all the miracles Jesus had done. He knew far less about Jesus than others did. By conventional standards, the “good” thief had missed the boat.

On top of all that, Jesus Christ was now dying. Beaten and bloodied so badly, He was now unrecognizable (Isaiah 52:14). Jesus was breathing His last right there beside the “good” thief,

and by all measures of the term, Jesus Christ appeared *mortal*. Few people at that crucifixion scene were confident in Jesus Christ's future kingdom.

But faith sees through the way things seem to the way they really are (Heb. 11:1), and so here the "good" thief showed more faith than many upright personalities in the Scriptures. The "good" thief saw Jesus Christ correctly.

He didn't see a dying man – he saw a living King of kings. He didn't see someone who had failed and was unable to deliver – he saw someone who was assured of having the final victory. He didn't see someone who was abused and humiliated by others – he saw someone who had infinite power.

In short, the "good" thief recognized Jesus Christ as the Messiah! He knew Jesus was not an imposter or someone who couldn't deliver on His promises. The "good" thief looked beyond the limitations of that horrible situation, beyond the natural questions that saturated that awful scene, and he fully understood that Jesus Christ would still receive and set up His everlasting kingdom.

The "good" thief faced personal adversities that exceeded those challenges John the Baptist and Judas Iscariot had faced, and yet – *against all human understanding!* – he still believed that Jesus was exactly who He said He was. For his astounding demonstration of genuine faith, the "good" thief received way more benefit than he had bargained for.

It's a weighty question, but I have to ask it. Which one of these three men are you most like right now?

Are you like John the Baptist: insecure, unsure, disappointed, and needing reassurance that God is still able to be the God you most need? Are you asking God to reaffirm Himself to you so that you can be convinced of His promises and plans?

Perhaps you are like Judas Iscariot: angry, resentful, focused on what you most want and what you feel the situation should be. Are you taking in the regular teaching of God's Word and participating in a ministry – but it's having little effect on changing who you are and how you're seeing things?

Or, are you like the "good" thief? You are in a place where the odds are stacked against you - and by all standard assessments there is no clear evidence that God is demonstrating Himself to you the way your desperate situation most needs Him to.

Do you find yourself in a tenuous spot where you cannot see the power of God in the circumstances you are facing - - - and yet your heart is still bursting with faith?

I cannot answer the tough questions of these last few paragraphs for anyone but myself. However, my prayer for all of us is that our faith rises up and shows itself in the tough and uncertain times just as the faith of the “good” thief did.

The “good” thief didn’t see Jesus Christ as someone who had let him down – he properly saw the only one who gave him hope.

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