

Matthew 11:1-6

I. Verses 1-3 – When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

On the one hand, these two verses are a shock to many people! Remember the boldness and the fearlessness of John as he uncompromisingly preached the truth to the multitudes? Jesus Himself will say in verse eleven:

✓ Matthew 11:11 – Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was a spiritual giant and hero of the faith. He is the one who said of Jesus:

✓ Matthew 3:11 – He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.

And when Jesus came to be baptized by John:

✓ Matthew 3:13-14 – John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

The Apostle John tells us that when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he said:

✓ John 1:29, 31-34 – Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world... I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel... I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.

And yet this same John the Baptist, who so boldly and fearlessly testified to the truth about Jesus is now questioning that truth. “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” It’s almost like I need to rub my eyes and read it again! Could John really, possibly ask a question like this? It seems impossible that John the Baptist should be having such a serious crisis of faith, and yet he is. So what could possibly have brought this about?

Notice again these words: “When John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ.” First of all, John heard about the deeds of the Christ! John *knew* that Jesus was giving sight to the blind, causing the lame to walk, cleansing lepers, restoring the hearing of the deaf, raising the dead, and preaching the good news to the poor. John *knew* all of this, and yet he still asked: “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” We can see from this that there was not for one moment any excuse for John’s doubt. So then, what was it that caused John to doubt? I think the answer can be summarized in the simple fact that John was in prison. “John heard *in prison*

about the deeds of the Christ"! In light of the power and mighty deeds of the Christ, then *why* is the one who prepared His way—why is the forerunner of the this very Messiah—still in prison? John is probably thinking back to the message that he preached on the banks of the Jordan River.

- ✓ Matthew 3:7-8 – When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance... Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

John is confused and plagued with doubt. Things just aren't making *any sense*. John can't argue with the fact that Jesus is performing the deeds of the Messiah. But then shouldn't He be burning the chaff with unquenchable fire? When does that part come? And this isn't just an academic question for John! John is painfully aware of the fact that the chaff has not yet been burned up because he himself is languishing *in prison*. Perhaps we can identify with John. Would we have responded any differently? So what answer will Jesus give to these messengers who have been sent from John's prison cell?

II. Verses 4-5 – And Jesus answered them, “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 up, and the poor have good news preached to them.

Jesus' answer to John is in one sense no more than what he *already* knows. Remember, John has already heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ. John already knows that Jesus is giving sight to the blind, causing the lame to walk, cleansing lepers, restoring the hearing of the deaf, raising the dead, and preaching the good news to the poor. John already knows these things... and yet this is the only answer Jesus gives to John. There is no explanation of his imprisonment. There is no explanation of how or when John's preaching will ultimately come to fulfillment. On these questions Jesus is completely silent. And yet Jesus leaves no doubt about the answer to the one question John actually asked. The entire life and ministry of Jesus had been foretold by the Old Testament prophets. In all that Jesus did, He was clearly and obviously fulfilling what the prophets *said* the Messiah would do.

- ✓ Isaiah 29:18-19 – In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.
- ✓ Isaiah 35:5-6 – Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.
- ✓ Isaiah 53:4 – Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.
- ✓ Isaiah 26:18-19 – Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.

- ✓ Isaiah 61:1-2 – The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.

So John asks the question: “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answers in so many words: “Yes, I am the one who is to come. You shall not look for another.” But Jesus was actually saying more than this. By drawing John’s attention to the prophecies of Isaiah and their fulfillment in His own life and ministry, Jesus was clearly telling John that the promised kingdom of the Messiah had *arrived*. The King and His kingdom both come together. You cannot have the King without the kingdom. The Messiah and His rule both arrive together. You cannot have the Messiah without His rule.

- ✓ Matthew 12:28 – But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.
- ✓ Luke 17:20-21 – Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

The Pharisees were asking Jesus when the promised kingdom of the Messiah would come! They knew of no other kingdom to ask about! And Jesus responds that the kingdom of the Messiah promised in the Old Testament does not arrive with signs to be observed, because, in fact, the promised kingdom was already in the midst of the people in the person and authority of the King!

We should be careful here. Jesus does not say that the kingdom is not consummated with signs to be observed, He merely says that the kingdom does not come (or initially arrive on the scene) with signs to be observed. So here again we see the “already”/”not yet” of the kingdom. What the Old Testament prophets didn’t understand was that the Messiah’s kingdom would have small and insignificant beginnings (like a grain of mustard seed), but would then gradually grow until it filled all the earth. The prophets in the Old Testament clearly saw the ultimate triumph of the kingdom at the second coming of Christ. They *also* prophesied about the humble beginnings and the gradual and peaceful spread of the kingdom, but this they did not understand. They just couldn’t understand the idea of an “already” and a “not yet” at the same time!

- ✓ 1 Peter 1:10-12 – Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the *sufferings* of Christ and the subsequent *glories*. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

Jesus counted John the Baptist himself as the last in this long line of Old Testament prophets:

- ✓ Matthew 11:13 – For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.

John was the transitional prophet between the age of the Old Covenant and the age of the New Covenant, the age of promise, *promise*, **promise**, and the age of fulfillment in the kingdom. This is why Jesus will say that “the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John the Baptist]” (Mat. 11:11). John did see the initial **seed** form of the kingdom in the person and works of the Messiah. But he did not see the fuller arrival of the kingdom with Jesus’ ascension and enthronement at the right hand of God and the Messianic gift of the Holy Spirit promised not only by the Old Testament prophets, but foretold by John himself. So if we can understand the confusion of the prophets who lived before John, how much more can we understand the confusion of John who actually lived to see the arrival of the kingdom without any of the signs that everyone expected. Not even John was privileged to have an explanation of the things about which he himself was prophesying. In fact, the full explanation could really only be understood as the events themselves gradually unfolded – as the mustard seed of the kingdom was beginning to sprout and grow. And so John was called to be the preacher and herald of something which in this life he would never fully understand. Can you imagine? Like all the prophets before him, He was called to proclaim something whose fulfillment would come about in a way he never could have envisioned. But John’s lot was even more difficult, because he was called to witness the actual arrival of the kingdom while he himself languished in a prison cell. John couldn’t yet understand the full implications of Jesus’ words recorded in the Gospel of John:

- ✓ John 3:18-19 – Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is *condemned already*, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And *this is the judgment*: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.
- ✓ John 9:39 – *For judgment I came into this world*, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.

The final reward and inheritance of eternal life awaits the consummation of the kingdom and the return of Jesus Christ. But the blessings of the consummated kingdom are ours even now through the firstfruits of the Spirit who has been poured out upon us (Romans 8:23; John 10:10) In the same way, the final judgment still awaits the consummation of the kingdom and the return of Jesus Christ. But that divine judgment is actually already at work in the present age as men and women reject and rebel against the King. The unquenchable fire is coming in its fullness, but even today it has already been kindled and begun to burn. Already... not yet. And so John’s warning is no less true and applicable today than it was when he first preached on the banks of the Jordan – though John himself never understand how.

In reminding John of what he already knows, Jesus has answered John’s question without offering any explanations. So now there is only one more thing that Jesus must say to John.

III. Verse 6 (Conclusion) – And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

Remember, like all the prophets before him, John was called to proclaim something whose fulfillment would come about in a way he could never possibly have envisioned. But remember especially that John’s lot was uniquely difficult, because he was called to witness the actual *arrival* of the kingdom while he himself languished in a prison cell. And in the midst of this, John was called not to doubt, but to believe – though he couldn’t understand. “Blessed is the one

who is not offended by me.” Here is a tender and gentle rebuke from Jesus, but also a wonderful encouragement and comfort. John has been offended by the Messiah. He has stumbled in his doubt and confusion. And for this he is without any excuse. But Jesus calls him now to the *blessedness* of *believing and trusting* even when he doesn’t *understand*.

Now this is easy for us to agree with – as long as we’re not John. But when we find ourselves in John’s place, it doesn’t matter how much of a spiritual giant we might have been in the past, the sin of doubt and unbelief can suddenly and powerfully take hold. What are the circumstances that you just don’t understand? More to the point: What are the apparent *contradictions* between what God has *said* and what God is *doing* that you find it impossible to reconcile? Jesus didn’t offer any explanations to John, but He did *assure* him of the truth. Jesus *is* the one who is to come. John doesn’t need to look for another. In fact, he *must not*. And *blessed* is the one (what a *happy estate* has the one) who trusts and believes *especially* when it seems that nothing at all makes sense.

Teaching our Children

Q. John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus a question. What was John’s question?

A. “Are you the one who is to come [the promised Messiah], or shall we look for another?”

Q. Why is this question so surprising coming from John the Baptist?

A. ~ John the Baptist was a spiritual giant and hero of the faith! (See Mat. 11:11 on p. 1)

~ John the Baptist was the one who first announced who Jesus was! (See remainder of Scriptures on p. 1)

Q. What could possibly have caused someone like John to doubt whether Jesus really was the promised Messiah?

A. ~ John heard about all the *mighty deeds* of Jesus while he (the one who announced Jesus’ coming) was sitting in a *prison cell*.

~ Read Scripture on top of page 2 in light of John’s imprisonment

Q. How did Jesus answer John’s question about whether He really was the Messiah?

A. “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 up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”

Q. Did Jesus tell John anything he didn’t already know?

A. No. John already knew all of these things. Jesus did not add any more explanation.

Q. If Jesus wanted John to know that He really was the promised Messiah, why did He remind John of the things that He had been doing? (How did this prove that Jesus was the Messiah?)

A. Everything Jesus did was a fulfillment of what the prophets said the Messiah would do! (See Scriptures on bottom of page 2 and top of page 3)

Q. What was the *answer* to John's confusion about why He was still in *prison* even though he had been announcing *the arrival of the Messiah and His kingdom* (the answer John was never given)?

A. Talk with your children about the "already" and the "not yet" of the kingdom. This is *very important* for them to understand! (See bottom of page 3 and page 4)

Q. John was confused. He didn't understand the truth about the "already" and "not yet" of the kingdom. But did this give him a good reason to doubt the truth about Jesus?

A. No. Jesus tenderly rebuked John: "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me." (How happy is the one who believes and trusts in me even when he doesn't understand.)

Q. If John the Baptist could doubt, is it possible for us to doubt as well?

A. Yes

Q. Do we ever really have any good reason for doubting God's Word?

A. No!

✓ Talk with your children about trusting and believing in the truth of God's Word even when life doesn't make sense and we don't understand.