

John the Baptist Questions Jesus Matthew 11:2-19; Luke 7:18-35

“Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?” – John the Baptist What is behind this question of John’s? Let’s examine the facts of Scripture, it will give us the hints we need to understand.

I. Question of John the Baptist - “Art thou he that should come? Or look we for another?”

“And the disciples of John showed him of all these things. (“Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ,” Matthew 11:2) ¹⁹And John calling unto him two of his disciples sent them to Jesus, saying, Art thou he that should come (Lit. - Coming One)? or look we for another? ²⁰ When the men were come unto him, they said, John Baptist hath sent us unto thee, saying, Art thou he that should come? or look we for another? ²¹And in that same hour he cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind he gave sight. ²² Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John (“again” Matthew 11:4) what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. ²³And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended (Gk - don’t be stumbled; caused to go astray; fall away) in me.” Luke 7:18-23

- John’s Situation – By this time, John the Baptist had been in prison for about 7 months and was probably expecting a violent death at any time. What did he do to merit such treatment? In his preaching, John condemned the immorality between Herod Antipas, the ruler over the region of Galilee, and Herodias. Matthew 14 will tell us how Antipas respected and feared John, but how Herodias will plot and trick Antipas into killing him. But at this time John, the prophet of the wilderness and open air, had been confined to almost complete solitude and prison life. His message God had given him had been silenced but John’s loyal disciples had kept him informed on the works of Jesus.

Now, reread this passage again, what generated the question John sent to Jesus? It was Jesus’ works! John’s response to Christ’s miracles was confusion. For he sent two of his disciples to Jesus with this burning question. “Art thou he that should come? Or look we for another?”

- Jesus’ Answer – Please notice, that Jesus did not immediately answer them (v. 21). Instead, He let them continue to observe His wonderful works and words, the very thing confusing to John. After a while, Jesus told them to go and tell John “again” about the healings and teachings that they had seen and heard. John the Baptist knew the Old Testament, and he knew his part in the coming of the Messiah; he was the forerunner! He had said, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord,” John 1:23 John the Baptist also knew the characteristics and works of the Messiah. (Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 42:6-7; 61:1-2a) These are the very works Jesus had John’s disciples observe and then go back and report to him. All of these would have been a confirmation of the person of Jesus. He was the Messiah!

Then Jesus will give a personal remark of encouragement to John in verse 23. It is called a Beatitude of sorts. “A blessed person is one who is not offended or stumbled or falls away because of me.” I think we all can be encouraged by it. I will touch more on this in our Believer’s Application.

II. Commendation of John the Baptist – “much more than a prophet.” After the disciples of John leave, Jesus will give a wonderful public commendation of John the Baptist. Don’t forget God can be pleased with man. Here we see the highest of praise by Christ for this faithful prophet!

“And when the messengers of John were departed, he began to speak unto the people (“multitudes” Matthew 11:7) concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? ²⁵ But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously appareled, and live delicately, are in kings’ courts. ²⁶ But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.” Luke 7:24-27

- “reed shaken with the wind?” – A reed illustrates weakness in character. The long grasses that lined the Sea of Galilee would have been what would have come into the mind of the listeners that day. John was not easily swayed, a compromiser, or one who lacked confidence in God’s plan for Him. I read one commentary that said, instead, he was more like the wind that shook things up!
- “man clothed in soft raiment?” – Soft raiment illustrates weakness in person. I can almost imagine the crowd smiling at this statement of Jesus. Most of them that day would have known the exact opposite would have been true of John! He did not live a lovely life of ease and comfort. He wasn’t a wimp or a sissy. Remember also his age, right around 30, he was a strong, rugged young man, who lived a life of poverty, and self-sacrifice.
- “A prophet?” – John’s person and message was that of a prophet! The people of Israel hadn’t had one for 400 years and many understood that John the Baptist was a prophet. But here Jesus will say John was “much more than a prophet” because he was the prophet whose coming was prophesied! (Mal. 3:1) Warren Wiersbe said this concerning John, “His ministry was the climax of the prophets and law.” WW p. 34 All the Old Testament prophets looked for the One who would redeem Israel. John the Baptist was the prophet who would proclaim the Messiah’s coming! He was “much more” than a prophet – he was the climax of prophets!

“(“Verily” Matthew 11:11) For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women (Jewish clique – human/mortal man) there is not (“risen” Matthew 11:11) a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but (“notwithstanding” Matthew 11:11) he that is least in the kingdom of God (“heaven” Matthew 11:11) is greater than he. (“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if ye will receive it, this is Elijah, which was for to come.” Matthew 11:12-14) ²⁹ And all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified (Lit - agreed with and obeyed) God, being baptized with the baptism of John. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel (Lit. will) of God against themselves, being not baptized of him (“He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” Matthew 11:15).” Luke 7:28-30

- “he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” – Jesus plainly says that John was the greatest prophet ever to live! What a commendation from God! But then He seems to say something surprising, the one who is the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John. How can that be? You see, John never was able to be part of the fulfillment of the Kingdom. He announced it was coming, but never saw it! Those of us who have all the revelation of Christ’s ministry - His death, burial, resurrection, the commissioning of saints, the filling of the Holy Spirit, access to God, the establishment of the planned church. But John saw none of this. He told Israel it was coming but John never experienced it! The very least saint, maybe a young, untaught, simple soul, is greater in privilege than John the Baptist. So we have an equation from Jesus: prophets great -> John the Baptist greater -> Believers in Christ (greatest) He preached Jesus coming, we preach Christ crucified! (Col. 1:10-14) He went before Christ, but we have the

privilege to follow Him! (Col. 2:6-7) John saw himself as the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:29), but we became the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25-32). Soak it up! What privileges! Luke 16:16; John 15:15

- “the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.” – There seems to be debate among scholars about the meaning of this phrase. The issue is the words “suffereth violence.” The Greek uses this phrase both positively or negatively depending on the setting. We have English words whose meanings are also dependent on the sentence they are found; they are called homonyms. Desert – dry place; leave someone; fair – light-skinned; fun carnival; lie – tell an untruth; on a couch ---- In my study, I believe, the key to understanding the context of this phrase is in the words, “until now.” “until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence,…” Jesus is speaking of the specific time between the ministry of John the Baptist and the present and both John and Christ suffered opposition, rejection, criticism, and even violence! This will get worse. John will soon be martyred, and Christ will be crucified. But realize the Religious Leaders will seek to kill Jesus eight times before Calvary. Jesus will go on and illustrate the unbelief and fickle hearts of “this generation” giving more strength to the negative interpretation. The world has never been a friend to God and His people.
- “this is Elijah, which was for to come.” – Early in his ministry, John will be asked if he was Elijah as prophesied in Mal 4:5-6 and he will deny it. (John 1:21) The Elijah of Mal.4:5-6 is literally Elijah who will come and be part of the Tribulation Period. But here Jesus is equating John in spirit and power with Elijah. In Matthew 17:10-13, Jesus will teach this same thought – John the Baptist was a type or likeness of Elijah. They both were bold in their confrontation of sin, both pointed people to God, and both were rugged men of the wilderness.
- “all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God,” – Jesus reviews John’s ministry. The humble sinners heard, accepted the message, repented, and demonstrated their commitment by being baptized by John.
- “Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves,” – The Religious Leaders rejected God’s man and message, but this was their normal pattern. Even today, religion tends to hold its doctrine dearer than the words and truths of God!
- “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” – This phrase of Christ is recorded in the Gospels 8 times! It’s simple but very profound! The one who comes with a desire for knowledge and truth, who comes to hear, accept, and obey is the one who has “ears to hear.” This can be a trait regardless of age or spiritual depth. It’s just an eager soul for knowledge and a willingness to follow truth. Jesus is saying, “let him hear.”

But then Jesus will describe “this generation.” They didn’t have a heart to learn, accept and obey.

III. Condemnation of “this generation”

“And the Lord said, Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation? and to what are they like? ³²They are like unto children sitting in the marketplace, and calling one to another, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept. ³³For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, He hath a devil. ³⁴The Son of man is

come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! ³⁵ But wisdom is justified (proven) of all her children.” Luke 7:31-35

- “men of this generation?...what are they like?” – Jesus is speaking about those around Him who were not hearing, receiving, and obeying. Most of the Religious Leaders of Christ’s day will lead the people into rejecting Christ as their Messiah. Jesus will call them, the blind leading the blind in Matthew 15:14, but here He will call them spoiled children!
- “danced;”/“wept” – The commentaries were unanimous in saying these two actions are children playing. Dancing would be playing wedding or feast days. Weeping would be acting out a funeral. But these children won’t cooperate with each other, they can’t agree, and nothing satisfies them!

Jesus goes on to show them how they had rejected God’s plan the same way!

- John the Baptist/Son of Man – John had come to Israel with the spirit of Elijah. He was obviously a man sent from God; he was everything the Old Testament said about the forerunner of the Messiah. He lived an isolated, sacrificial life, preached against sin and repentance toward God. Yet that “generation” called him basically crazy! Jesus was accessible and social. He was comfortable with the Religious elite and the most rank of sinners. He received women, Gentiles, Samaritans, and Publicans. But “this generation” criticized Christ by saying, He was gluttonous and a winebibber. Both rumors were untrue. The method of ministry was different, even could be said, the opposite. But that “generation” could not be satisfied. They demonstrated their spoiled nature and unwise heart. Both men were sent from God to Israel, and they will reject them both! We will find that “generation” will always take the opposite view of God - they were godless!
- “But wisdom is justified of all her children.” – In other words, a wise person is seen by the consequences of their choices. Wisemen would see the wisdom of both types of ministry. Realize, that God’s plan can include different types of methods to reach people and disciple! Religionists despise differences from their status quo! Wisemen will be childlike and humble not proud, childish, and stubborn! Wisdom is proven by action!

We have looked at John’s question, Jesus’ answer, Christ’s commendation of John, and the strong statements against “this generation.” But I want to swing back now to what started this narrative, the questions from John, “Art thou he that should come? Or look we for another?” Why did John ask this? What was his motivation? The answers to these questions will give us some powerful lessons today.

IV. Why these questions of John? - “Art thou he that should come? Or look we for another?”

Facts:

- John had convincing evidence that Christ was the Messiah. John’s birth and family – Luke 1:15-17, 76; John’s message was from God – John 1:15-32; 29-30; 34; John saw the Holy Spirit descend to Christ – John 1:31-34; John heard of the works and message of Jesus – Luke 7:18
- If John really doubted, why ask Jesus? An impostor would only lie. Yet John sent two disciples to ask Jesus his questions.

Have you ever been posed a question, but the question is actually a BIG clue to another need?

“I can’t do this, can you help me?” actually revealing “I’m lazy and I don’t want to work this hard!”
“Are we there yet?” actually revealing “I’m tired of riding.”

Let's consider the possible motive/motives of John.

Possible Motives:

- Desired to see Christ come out more publicly as the Messiah. It was obvious to John, that Jesus was doing Messianic works, but he did not understand why Christ did not plainly claim His position! Jesus was very public and drew huge crowds, yet a great public declaration had not been made! This more subtle strategy was not John's "plan" for the Messiah!
- Desired to see the Gentiles put down. For hundreds of years, the Jews had been under foreign leadership. They awaited their Messiah King to sit on David's throne. This was the center of the teachings concerning the Coming One at the time of John. Most Jews had forgotten the suffering Savior of Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22. John announced Jesus as the "Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." But John had a different "plan" on the reality of how Jesus would accomplish salvation and sit on a throne!
- Desired release from prison. After John faithfully lived a life of total separation from anything comfortable; after he had preached repentance, the coming kingdom, and declared Jesus as Messiah; after he had encouraged his own loyal disciples to follow Jesus, and boldly reprimanded the wickedness of powerful people, John was put in prison! John the Baptist was forgotten by the common man, rejected by the Religious Leaders, and unjustly thrown into prison by a weak, fickle politician. It can be understandable that this was not in John's "plan." Has Jesus forgotten me too? Doesn't Isaiah say the Messiah would release the prisoner? Could I not be a help in the Messiah's reign? You have done great works for others; I could use one too!
- Desire to see judgment on the wicked. John preached with conviction, intensity, and confidence. He boldly declared the Messiah's work of judgment on those who would not repent. Matthew 3:6-12. But from the reports about Jesus' ministry, John heard only about large crowds, healings, and acts of mercy; nothing of judgment, wrath, and unquenchable fire on unbelievers. In John's "plan" he probably would have liked to see harsh judgment fall on those who lived so outside of God's truth.

Why did John send this question? "Are you the Coming One, or do we look for another?" I think we can wrap it up by saying **impatience based on the ignorance of God's plan**. I had mentioned earlier that we would find hints as to why John asked this from Christ's reply to him and the commendation that followed. Let's review:

- "much more than a prophet" – (Luke 7:28) There is not one hint of displeasure toward John in Jesus' words to the multitude that day. Only the highest of praise. Nothing about faithlessness. We can be sure John's question was not founded on a lack of faith.
- "Go your way, and tell John (again) what things ye have seen and heard" – (Luke 7:22) After the two disciples had observed Jesus heal and preach, Christ told them to tell John exactly what they saw. John knew these actions were works of the Messiah. Without words, Jesus confirmed to John who He was!
- "blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me." – (Luke 7:23) Here we see a wonderful truth gently taught to John; the one who will not be tripped up because of me is blessed. Every summer I see the same scenario on our dock at the cabin. One of the daddies will ask one of my grandsons, "jump in, I will catch you!" There are two reactions to this fun lakeside game, either we'll see: wide eyes, and an excited leap as the little boy jumps into his father's arms

or....we all get to hear.... “come a little closer,” “don’t drop me,” “I’m scared!” One little fella is calm and trusting enjoying both their dad and the lake; the other is fearful and uncertain of the plan of the father. One little boy is “blessed” because of his trust in Daddy’s plan; the other is concerned and questioning. Don’t get me wrong, John the Baptist was not a winey child, instead, he was a confident, get-things-done, judgment-and-fire messenger who was now out of the picture of the ministry God had prepared for him! Jesus said, “be blessed John, don’t be offended in me. Trust, the plan for both of us, it is in the Father’s hand.”

Believer’s Application:

Why do we question God’s ways?

- We don’t understand God’s ways. As believers, our desire, or we could say our plans, are full of comfort, ease, happiness, and carefree living. But God does not promise these, instead, He promises the strength and guidance to endure difficulties and faith built because of them! (Isaiah 55:8-11)
- We don’t think God is moving fast enough. Impatience with God is a sin. He does not live with the same time constraints as we do. Peter reminds us that a thousand years is like a day with God! (2 Peter 3:8) We must live our lives by faith, knowing God is working on our behalf.
- We want release from our difficult situation. As I write this, I am sitting in front of the fireplace at our cabin. There is a beautiful little fire blazing with red coals. Occasionally, as it burns, the logs shift causing small sparks to fly, and they drift up the chimney. It reminds me of a verse my pastor would often quote, “...man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.” Job 5:7 Life is full of difficulties and changes. Illness, relationship strains, family struggles, financial pressures, job concerns....and often....many of these things come at us at the same time! Again, these are opportunities to grow our faith and to display the light of Christ to the world.

Christ still answers questions! Realize, that Jesus not only gently and completely answered the question of John, but also answered the need of his heart! And Christ will do the same for us! How do we receive these answers today?

- Look at the works of Christ in your life! As we rehearse our past, and remember the comfort, leading, and blessings of God, all of these should build our faith for our future needs. We must remember God’s goodness in our lives. It will give us strength for our future! Psalm 77:11-14
- Look at the truth of the Scripture! In a time of doubt, confusion, and frustrations, let’s be women who will reach for our Bibles instead of our phones! Let’s talk to God first, let’s search His words before we communicate with others! It will be in the Scriptures we will be reminded that God is our “help in the time of need.” Psalm 46:1-2; 6-7; 10-11; 62:5-8
- Trust Him daily! Our minds must be focused on God. His attributes should be quick on our tongues. God’s faithfulness, love, compassion, mercy, kindness, justice, guidance, tenderness, and gentleness

should all be securely part of our heart's core! And with them, all His attributes! We need to trust God daily! Psalm 28:7; Isaiah 41:10, 31; 1 Peter 1:3-7; 2 Cor. 4:15-5:7; James 1:2-4

John sent to Jesus a question, "Are you the Coming One, or should we look for another?" It seems his discouragement based on his situation, and a lack of understanding the whole plan of God made him impatient. He lost focus on what he knew to be true, but Jesus gently reminded him to trust the plan of God. We know very little about the last days of John the Baptist in prison. But in Mark 6:20 it does tell us that Herod respected and would spend time with John. Their conversations are not recorded, but we do know what John's message from God – the kingdom of heaven is at hand, the Messiah is here, and repent. I would guess Herod heard variations of them all!

This is a wonderful lesson for us. We too can fall into the same human trap, discouragement, and impatience because we don't know God's whole picture! We should be walking by faith, not by as far as our earthly eyes and plans can see! We need to trust the Lord with all our hearts, not lean on our own understanding. In all our ways, acknowledge God's presence and His will, and then He can direct our paths! We can move forward confidently, be used by God to give light to the world, and disciple the next generation of faithful followers of Christ. Let's trust the Lord!

"And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me." - Jesus