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Miracles, Eulogy for John (Part 2)



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

In this speech, Steve Gregg speaks about John the Baptist's life and how he was greater than other prophets before him. He mentions that John's example exhibits the unshakeable faith required to stand firm in the face of adversity. Steve also notes how some prayers are not necessarily what God wants, and that we should seek God's will instead of praying for our own desires. Overall, the speech delves into the importance of faith, prayer and trust in God.

Transcript

...or greater than the fact that Jesus found this centurion, a Roman, who had greater faith than all the Jews Jesus had met thus far. Anyway, that is the occasion that Matthew puts Jesus making this statement. If you'd like to look at the parallel to that statement in Luke 13, I would like to draw your attention to it, partly because I don't know if we're going to be bringing it up again in a later portion of The Life of Christ, so we'll take it at this time just in case.

In Luke 13, in an entirely different context, it says in verse 28, Luke 13, 28 and 29, "...there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the prophets in the kingdom of God and yourselves thrust out. They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, to sit down in the kingdom of God." Now, this is saying the same thing that Matthew records Jesus saying over in what we just looked at in Matthew 8, although the order is reversed. He first mentions the Jews being cast out, and then secondly mentions Gentiles coming in.

I would point out to you, though, especially it is valuable in Luke 13 for comparison to the Old Testament, because whereas in Matthew it just says, what's it say, the east and the west, in Luke's version of the same statement, they will come from the east and the west and the north and the south. All four compass points are mentioned. Would you look with me at Isaiah chapter 43, verses 5 and 6. Isaiah 43, 5 and 6, "...fear not, for I am with you.

I will bring your descendants from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to

the north, give them up, and to the south, do not keep them back. Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I have created for my glory." Now, actually, many people in reading this passage in Isaiah feel that this is simply talking about restoring the Jews from their exile.

The Jews of the diaspora who are scattered throughout the Gentile world, that God would bring them all back to Israel in the last days, or back to the promised land. But this talk about bringing from the east and the west and the north and the south seems to have its echo in Jesus' words in Luke 13, 29. "...they will come from the east and the west and the north and the south and sit down in the kingdom with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." But there he is talking about Gentiles.

And I am of the opinion that the New Testament writers, following Jesus' lead in this, understood these prophecies which the Jews thought were about their own nation, and about their own people being gathered from Gentile territories, that Jesus guided the apostles to believe, and they certainly reflect that belief in their writings later on. This was really prophecies about Gentiles coming into the church in large numbers. Certainly it is when Jesus makes these statements.

Whether he is alluding back to these prophecies in Isaiah, I don't know. But I think he is. Now, let's get back to Luke 7, where we started.

This story of the healing of the centurion's servant is one of a very few, I can think of two others immediately, where Jesus performed a miracle without seeing the patient. There is a case somewhat like it in John 4, at the end of that chapter. We won't look there.

But there is a nobleman of Herod's household who approached Jesus about his son, who was sick, near unto death. And Jesus healed him from a distance. This time Jesus was in Cana, and the nobleman was from Capernaum, but had come as far as Cana to ask Jesus to heal his son.

And Jesus gave a command, and the son was healed, although he was 14 or more miles away. Then there is the case of the Syro-Phoenician woman, another Gentile, in this case. And this was up in the region north of Israel, in Phoenicia.

And she came to Jesus because she had a demon-possessed daughter. This is found in Matthew 15, and parallels. And Jesus at first didn't give her the time of day, but she kept pestering him, kept persisting.

And finally he gave her what she wanted, and said, O woman, graze your faith. And so her daughter was healed, though Jesus never laid eyes on her daughter. When she got home, she found her daughter delivered of demons in her right mind.

These three cases, there may be more, but I can't think of any offhand, all have something in common. And that is that Jesus healed, or did something, in every case it

was a healing or a deliverance, without seeing the patient. Without seeing the person who is in need.

And this demonstrates that Jesus didn't have any tricks up his sleeve. You know, people sometimes talk about the cures that Jesus did, maybe being psychosomatic in nature. Many people have diseases that are just in their head, but they have physical symptoms.

And once you convince them that they're well, the symptoms go away. And maybe Jesus was an artist at this, some have said that Jesus hypnotized people, and so forth. And this is impossible in the cases where he didn't even see the people involved.

He certainly didn't make suggestions for them, or work upon them psychologically to get them to think they were well. They never saw him or heard his voice when they were healed. Which shows that Jesus is not also confined to space, in terms of his power to do things.

Sometimes he didn't do things until he arrived, like when Lazarus was sick. The sisters of Lazarus in John 11 sent to Jesus and asked if he would come and heal Lazarus. Actually, they didn't ask, they just sent the message, Lazarus is sick.

They either wished for Jesus to come and heal him, or felt that maybe Jesus could just give the order from wherever he was, and he could be healed. However, Jesus didn't heal Lazarus, he let Lazarus die. And he didn't raise him from the dead either, until he came down to be physically present there.

Lots of times Jesus wanted to be there in order to give a follow-up interpretation of what he's done, or to teach a lesson or whatever around the miracle he had done. But he was quite capable of doing miracles without being there. Well, not his deity, but some of his privileges.

Well, I believe so, because it's the Spirit of Christ, it was the Holy Spirit acting through Christ that did all these things, and it's the Holy Spirit that's in us who can still do them. We are his flesh and his bones, we are his body, the Bible says. And we've been given his name and his authority.

The difference would be, and this is the only difference, it may be slight or great, our ability to know for certain what the Father is saying to do. I don't think Jesus ever mistook it, and I think sometimes we do. We don't always hear quite as clearly, I think, and we sometimes pray for things that the Father isn't leading us to pray for.

We can be mistaken about the Father's will, but insofar as we really have a word from the Lord, insofar as we really know what God wants, I do believe we can speak as Christ, as it were, in his name, and with the same authority. In other words, you wouldn't even necessarily need to confront a demon-possessed person if you knew for sure God was calling you to a command. Demons come out, Jesus delivered a girl of a demon without

even seeing her.

And no doubt it could be done again. Okay, now, let's go on to this next story here, in Luke 7, verses 11 through 17. Now it happened the day after that he went into a city called Nain.

It must have been quite near to Capernaum, since it was the very next day, and he was in Capernaum for the previous story. And many of his disciples went with him in a large crowd. And when he came near to the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow.

And a large crowd from the city was with her. Now the picture has been painted. We've got a large crowd in verse 11, and a large crowd in verse 12.

They go in opposite directions on a collision course. One large crowd is coming into the city. The other large crowd is coming out of the city, and they happen to meet each other at the city gate.

Now, one large crowd is following Jesus around. The other is following a coffin with a dead man in it. Now, certainly this is a graphic portrayal that Luke intends for us to have.

I mean, the repetition of the expression large crowd in these two successive verses suggests that we're supposed to get a vivid picture here of two entourages with purposes directly opposed to each other intersecting. We have a crowd that is there because of death, and we have a crowd that is there because of He who is the life, who is the resurrection and the life. And when they intersect, what happens? Now, in the Jewish religion, contact with a dead body would make a person unclean.

The law did not have the ability to keep a person from becoming ceremonially defiled if they came into contact with certain things, and a dead body was one of those things. To come in contact with a dead body would make you unclean, I believe, for seven days. Some things would make you unclean only until the evening, but I believe it was seven days with a dead body.

So here we have the power of uncleanness, the power of death, the power of defilement. All these people in the funeral celebration were going to be unclean for the next seven days. That was just what you encouraged when you attended a funeral.

One crowd was unclean, the other crowd was following Jesus. And then they meet at the city gate. Now, there is a little more to the picture given to us that we should not pass over too lightly.

And that is that the man who is dead was the only son of a widow. Now, that would be a sad situation for a woman to be in, no matter what society. Even in modern society, where a woman loses her husband and her son and has no others.

She certainly would be a lonely woman and bereft. In that society, it was even worse. It was, you know, by multiples of who knows how much.

Because, first of all, she could not go out and get a job. She was too old to go back to her father's house, in all likelihood. I mean, her father was probably not even alive.

And all the things that a woman could do for a living, she was deprived of, except for begging. And she probably was going to be truly bereft, unless she became like old Anna and prayed day and night in the temple and perhaps could live like the priests do, a bit off the temple things for the poor. But she was pretty much going to be not only lonely, but poor, abandoned, and so forth.

The reason God gave people children was partly so that when those people are old and can't take care of themselves, their children can support them. So when this woman's husband died, she had her son, and only her son, as her hope of support. And now he was dead.

And she was all alone. Her story is a pitiful one, and Luke gives us all the details necessary to appreciate how terrible her plight was. And it says in verse 13, when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.

And he said to her, Do not weep. Now, it's hard to know whether she had any idea who he was. But I do not believe he had ever raised anyone from the dead prior to this.

Therefore, almost nobody, including those who knew who he was, would probably expect him to be able to raise the dead. Even some of his close friends, Mary and Martha, didn't expect him to raise Lazarus from the dead, even though they knew him well. And yet he did.

It's hardly likely that this woman would know Jesus to be one who was about ready to raise her son from the dead. And for him to say, Don't weep, must have sounded fairly callous. Although the Bible says he said it because he had compassion on her.

She must have thought, What do you mean, don't weep? Don't you think I've got something to weep about? Don't you think I have a right to be sorry, to be sad? I lost my husband some time ago, and now I've lost my only son. You know what I'm facing? It's easy for you, a very old Jewish man in his prime, to talk about not weeping when you can take care of yourself easy enough. But do you know what my life is going to look like for the rest of my days? Well, Jesus told her not to weep, but then he gave her a reason not to.

He says, He came and he touched the open coffin. Now, Jesus could have stood at a distance and raised the dead. We know that because the previous story just told that he healed a person who was at the point of death with a word, without going into the house.

Jesus could have as easily given a word. And when he raised Lazarus, by the way, from the dead, he didn't touch him. He just commanded him to come forth, and he did.

In this case, Jesus went over and he had actual physical contact with the coffin. He invited that physical defilement that the law would associate with the contact with a dead body upon himself. The pallbearers were already defiled.

That was just part of what happens when you go to your funeral. You just figure you're out of it. You're unclean for seven days.

But you do that for your friends. But it's a pain in the neck. But Jesus never knew these people.

He'd never met them before. And here he goes up and unnecessarily touches the coffin. Now, the Jews, no doubt, after this, would have been inclined to say that Jesus was unclean.

Uncleanness in the ceremonial sense was sort of an invisible thing. It was more of a ritual, symbolic thing. It wasn't really something you could see.

And so, any Jew looking at Jesus after this would be inclined to say that he was unclean for the next seven days. He couldn't go into the synagogue. He couldn't be in society.

However, I think no one was disposed to say that about him when the man that he touched rose from the dead. I mean, after all, if someone said, now, Jesus, you're unclean because you touched the dead body, he could say, well, where's the dead body? Show it to me. You know, there was no dead body anymore.

The evidence was gone. No one could accuse Jesus of touching the dead because there wasn't a dead person. There was now a living person.

Jesus came and he touched the coffin. And those who carried him stood still, not knowing what to do. This is a strange guy.

First of all, he's got a crowd around him. Who is this guy with the crowd following him? Secondly, why is a total stranger growing up and defiling himself by contact with this coffin? So they just stand still, not knowing quite what to do. Probably looking at the widow or whoever's in charge, saying, what do we do next? The gate's kind of clogged by all these people here.

We can't proceed. And here's this guy telling the widow not to weep and touching the coffin. And Jesus said, young man, I say to you, arise.

And he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And Jesus presented him to his mother. Then fear came upon all and they glorified God, saying, a great prophet has risen up among us.

And God has visited his people. And this report about him went throughout all Judea and all the surrounding region. Later, he healed two more people on record.

There may be others, good, and probably were others that he raised that were not recorded. But he raised Jairus' daughter from the dead at a time later. And he also raised Lazarus.

So there are three cases in the Bible recorded that Jesus raised dead. We haven't saved Jairus' daughter yet, have we? That's yet to come. Okay, so here we see something that happened literally but has tremendous symbolic value.

Here's this entourage following Jesus and the entourage following the coffin. And that defiled and dead ceremony comes into contact with that celebration, that wedding feast, that celebration of life that was associated with Jesus. And instead of defiling Jesus and those who were with him, the contact undefiled the funeral participants and undied the dead, you know.

I mean, this simply demonstrates that Jesus, when he comes into contact with death and defilement, is not overcome by it. It's overcome by him. And therefore, we have this story, no doubt, to point that fact out.

Now, the people glorified God and they said, A great prophet has risen among us and God has visited his people. Now, God has visited his people perhaps makes you think that they were saying Jesus is God. But Jesus is God and was God, but they didn't necessarily know that.

Their statement doesn't necessarily reflect an awareness of that. To say God has visited his people is a very Hebraic expression. It just means that God has come to our rescue again.

Many times in the Old Testament, the expression of God visiting is either referring to God blessing or judging, but not usually coming down in human form as he did in Christ. So, their statement is very Hebrew in its structure, but it doesn't necessarily mean that they recognized Jesus was God on the earth. But they did glorify God as the one who had sent Jesus and had done this thing.

Now, I would just point out one other thing. If you ever want to raise the dead, you might as well see how it's done. In verse 14, he went and he spoke to the young man and said, I say to you, arise.

Now, in the three instances where Jesus raised the dead, it was pretty much the same pattern. With Jairus' daughter, he said, talitha kumi, which is Aramaic for little girl, I say to you, arise. Exactly like this statement, with the exception that little girl is in the place of young man.

If you're speaking in that case to a little girl, in this case to a young man. He addresses the person and says, I say unto you, arise. Likewise, at the tomb of Lazarus, he leaves out the I say unto you, but he does say, Lazarus, come forth.

Now, what I want to point out to you is Jesus didn't pray for the sick and he didn't pray for the dead to arise. He commanded them. Now, to act in Jesus' name is to act as he would.

Some people feel that maybe that means we should go around and command all the dead to arise, but Jesus didn't command all the dead to arise. There were many cemeteries Jesus must have walked by where he left all the dead intact. There were many sick people at the pool of Siloam that he didn't heal.

He didn't heal everybody, he didn't raise everybody. But when he knew it was the will of his father for someone to be healed or for someone to be raised, he knew what to do. And that was to command them to be healed or to command them to arise.

He was acting in his father's authority to do this. If you look at Acts chapter 9, we'll find that Peter is called into a church that has just lost one of their older ladies, who was a real blessing to them, Dorcas, also called Tabitha. In Acts chapter 9, verse 36, it says that Joppa, there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which is translated Dorcas.

Both ones in Greek and ones in Hebrew, they both mean gazelle. I think I'd like Tabitha better than Dorcas, though, if I were a girl. Although I knew a girl named Dorcas.

This woman was full of good deeds and terrible deeds, which she did. Good works and terrible deeds, which she did. But it happened in those days that she became sick and died.

And when they had washed her body, they laid her in an upper room. And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them. Then Peter arose and went with them.

And when he had come, they brought him up to the upper room. And all the widows stood by him, weeping, showing the tunics and garments, which Dorcas had made while she was with him. But Peter put them all out and knelt down and prayed.

And turning to the body, he said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. Now, Peter, in this case, apparently knew that Jesus wanted to heal her.

Now, he didn't pray for her to be healed, as far as we know. It says he prayed, but it doesn't say he prayed for her to be healed. If he did pray for her to be healed, she wasn't healed by his praying, because he later, after praying, said, Tabitha, arise, just like Jesus

would.

He called her by name and told her to get up, and she did. Just the way Jesus did it. Now, why did he pray for her? I suspect he prayed for guidance.

I suspect he prayed to know whether it was the will of God. Peter encountered many dead men, including the apostle James, who had died prior to this. No doubt Peter would have loved to go to James after his head was cut off and say, James, arise, and have him come back to life.

It would be really neat to see the head get attached back onto the neck. And there had been other Christians who had died, who, as far as we know, they didn't rise from the dead. It cannot be assumed, every time a believer dies, that God wants to raise them from the dead prior to his second coming.

He will raise them at the second coming. And the Bible says, precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of the saint. So it's not always a bad deal for them to be dead.

But there are times, either when it's for the glory of God and when God wishes it, to raise someone from the dead. And I think Peter had to know whether this was one of those times or not. And he prayed, and after he'd done so, he turned and did exactly what Jesus would have done.

Because he'd watched Jesus raise people from the dead at least three times. He said, Tabitha, arise. So we see that this is the way to do it.

So if you ever want to raise someone from the dead, that's how you do it. You just call them by name and tell them to get up. But don't be surprised if they don't.

Because I don't know very many cases in modern history where God raises the dead or wants to. I do believe it has happened. I've heard stories that I have no reason to doubt that claim to have occurred.

I remember when my wife was killed, there was somebody in the church, a lady. It typically is. No offense to ladies or anything, but typically as a lady, she said, God has shown me that God wants to raise her from the dead, my wife, June.

And so I thought, oh boy, what am I going to do now? Partly to humor them and partly out of some little hope that God might have spoken to this woman, we gathered about 30 people around the coffin and we worshipped for a little bit. And then some of the people there began to command the body to rise from the dead. Well, it didn't.

And I wasn't too surprised to tell the truth. Some might say, well, so you didn't have enough faith. But there's no reason to be unhappy in my faith.

I wasn't the one commanding her to rise. Maybe someone else didn't have enough faith.

But I personally think it just wasn't God's will to raise her.

If God had raised her up, I wouldn't have any of my kids today that I have. Maybe God knew that that was better. So, you know, it's not always the will of God to raise the dead prior to the second coming, but all the dead will rise when Jesus comes back.

And why he chooses to raise some from the dead prior to that and not others, I don't think anyone can say with certainty. It's just the will of God. And so we have to accept it.

And I don't have any problem doing that. Let's turn over to Matthew chapter 11 now. We don't have very much time.

We have a long chapter, which means we probably won't finish the chapter, which I should do to be on schedule, but I seriously doubt that we can. Matthew 11, starting with verse 2. And when John had heard in prison, this is John the Baptist, of course, about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to him, Are you the coming one or do we look for another? And Jesus answered and said to them, Go and tell John the things which you hear and see. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear.

The dead are raised up. This is right after he raised up the widow's son. So if John's disciples, who had been sent by John from his prison cell, were in that large crowd that was accompanying Jesus at the gate of Nain, then they had seen this dead rise.

He said, Go and tell them what you have seen. The dead rise, and the poor of the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of me.

Now let's stop there for a moment. Many Christians have really stumbled about this because of John the Baptist expressing what appears to be doubt about Jesus. I remember he was above me when I was younger, and it's very clear from talking to a number of people who have talked about this that they have trouble with it.

How could John the Baptist have to ask a question like that? Are you the coming one or do we look for another? After all, didn't he see the heavens open and a dove, the Holy Spirit come in the form of a dove and rest upon Jesus and hear an audible voice saying, This is my son in whom I am well pleased. And by the way, wasn't it also the case that even before he saw that, the Holy Spirit had spoken to John and said, You'll recognize the one when you see the dove, when you see the Holy Spirit come in the form of a dove on him? And then it happened. How could he be without certainty on this matter? Well, we give human nature too much credit if we think that something as supernatural as that can banish forever all doubt.

I'd remind you that the Jews saw God open the Red Sea and drown the Egyptians in it and three days later had forgotten that God was with them and had wondered whether God had just led them out in the wilderness to die. They were grumbling within three

days as to wondering whether God could save them. And they'd just seen one of the most stupendous miracles ever performed three days earlier.

Now, before we criticize them, let us remember that we have seen some dramatic things too. I would be very surprised if there's anyone here who could say you have not seen any remarkable answers to prayer. If you haven't seen any, maybe we should talk.

But I certainly have seen a lot of them and I'm sure you have too. Things that when you prayed for them, they just seemed like only God could do the thing that you're asking. And then it happened.

And when it happened, you thought, I'll never doubt again. I mean, this is totally supernatural. This is totally God.

How could anyone ever not know there's a God when this kind of thing happens? But how many days is it later, how many weeks later, when you're pinched in a circumstance and things aren't going as you wish they were and your prayers are not being answered as quickly as that one was or as dramatically as that one was, that you begin to wonder, is God really listening? Is God really there? Now, you might be so strong in faith that you've never had such doubts arise, but I dare say that almost everybody has at one time or another experienced some form of doubt or questioning, even after having seen some great thing that should have been enough to keep them forever from ever doubting God again. And if you're not one of those people, then more power to you. But John was one of those people.

John had seen great things, but he had his doubts. Why did he have his doubts? Well, because Jesus just wasn't doing what the Messiah was supposed to be doing, he thought. John was a prophet, but he wasn't omniscient.

You've got to remember, the prophets themselves, the Old Testament prophets, Peter says in 1 Peter chapter 1, verses 10 through 12, that the Old Testament prophets didn't understand the things they prophesied. They searched diligently and inquired of God what they were talking about, and he said, never mind, none of your business. A later generation will understand this.

It's 1 Peter 1, verses 10 through 12, paraphrase. But the point is, John was just another Old Testament prophet, but greater than most. In fact, greater than all the previous ones.

But still, he didn't understand everything. He knew what God had told him to say, and he said it. But he didn't know the whole plan.

And he still had his own, like any prophet would, he still had his own opinions about how these things were probably going to be materializing. And apparently, John was like most Jews, thought the Messiah was going to have a fairly political kind of a career. And to

make matters worse, John was now imprisoned by the oppressor.

Herod had put him in jail. Herod was a Roman official. Therefore, John's eagerness to see the Messiah throw out the Romans and vindicate the righteous must have been increased tremendously by his stay in this third world prison, third world jail.

The whole world was third world back then, but if you've ever heard about conditions in a Turkish prison or something, and some of you perhaps have, or a Mexican jail, then you can have some appreciation for John's eagerness to get out. And if it was part of John's theology, if it was almost certainly, as with most Jews, even Jesus' mother and brothers thought this, even the disciples thought this, that the Messiah is going to throw out the Romans, and he's going to start ruling here, and his friends are going to be the ones who are going to be in power. Well, John the Baptist must have been looking forward eagerly to Jesus doing this since as soon as Herod would be thrown out, then John would be released.

He wouldn't have to rot away in jail. And, of course, as it turns out, John died there. He never was released, except by death, and Jesus never did overthrow the Romans, at least not in the manner that people expected him to.

And John didn't quite understand what was going on. Aren't you going to fulfill the prophecies about the Messiah? Are you the one that the prophet said was going to come or not? Now, Jesus, as far as I know, when asked this kind of question, he never just gave a straight yes or no answer. The only person that he directly told that he was the Messiah was the woman at the well in John chapter 4, and she didn't ask him if he was.

He volunteered the information. She said, I know that when the Messiah comes, he'll tell us everything. He said, I'm him.

But on the record, he never told anybody else he was the Messiah directly. He hinted at it in many ways. Well, here, John's asking, are you the Messiah or aren't you the Messiah? Are you going to get about the program? Are you going to start fulfilling the prophecies or not? And Jesus didn't say, yes, I am, but he told the messengers, I want John to figure this out for himself.

You give him the data, and let him decide whether I'm the Messiah or not. What is the data? He says, go and tell him what you see and hear. Verse 5, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

Now, anything in particular significant about that group of items that he said to report? Well, if you look back at the book of Isaiah, chapter 35, there was a well-known messianic prophecy about the kingdom age, about the messianic age, what the Messiah would accomplish at his coming. And in Isaiah 35, verses 5 and 6, it says, the eyes of the

blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. The lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.

These were things that the prophet said would be associated with the coming of the Messiah, what he would do. Open the eyes of the blind, open the mouth of the dumb, the ears of the deaf, and heal the lame so that they leap. What does Jesus say to go tell John? The blind receive their sight, the lame walk.

He adds a few things, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up. Certainly, these are just the kinds of things that the Messiah is supposed to be doing, according to the prophecy. What's that last thing in Matthew 11, 5? And the poor have the gospel preached to them.

That is from Isaiah 61, verse 1. Isaiah 61, 1. The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor. Preach the gospel to the poor. Now, Jesus read this actual verse, Isaiah 61, 1, in the synagogue of Nazareth, according to Luke 4. And after he read it, he shut the book and said, today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

So he very clearly said this scripture is about him. And therefore, it is a messianic passage. It says, the spirit of the Lord God is anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.

Well, Jesus says, go tell John, the poor have the gospel preached to them. In other words, John was wondering whether Jesus was really going about the program right or not, whether he was really doing what the prophets said the Messiah was supposed to do or not. And he said, well, tell him what I'm doing.

Let him decide whether I'm doing what the prophets said I should do or not. Of course, he was. And John, no doubt, was familiar enough with the prophets to know that when he was told this.

In verse 6, Jesus said, blessed is he who is not offended or stumbled because of me. And what that seems to mean is, I am doing things differently than many think I should. That is going to stumble many people.

But the man is a happy one who can put up with what I do, even though it may not be what he expected me to do. Who will not be stumbled because of the course of action I'm taking, just because it's not a course of action he thought I was supposed to take. I'll do what my father says to do.

I will fulfill the prophecies. But I will fulfill them in the way that they are intended to be fulfilled, not in the way that you imagine them to be fulfilled. And you're an unhappy person if that stumbles you, and if that causes you to stop believing.

But happy is the man who will not be stumbled, who will wait and see, who will trust that I'm doing the right thing, even though it doesn't appear to them according to their traditional ideas that I am. And that is the final message that he sent to John. As far as we know, there was no further communication between John and Jesus before John's death.

Verse 7, as they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John, what did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses, not out in the wilderness. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet, for this is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. The quote is from Malachi 3.1. It's quoted a number of other times in the New Testament as well about John the Baptist.

Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women, there has not arisen one greater than John the Baptist. But he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Well, I don't think I can comment on anything beyond this, so let's go back and look at these verses just a little bit here.

Jesus is trying to get the people to identify in their own minds exactly what they expected when they went out to hear John. Everybody in Judea had heard about John, and no doubt everybody in Galilee had too. He was all the rage.

People went out to be baptized by him or hear him preach. But when they first heard about him, when they made that trek out to the wilderness, what were they hoping to find there? Your typical prosperity teacher in fine clothing? No, they don't live out in the wilderness. Prophets of God don't dress that way.

That's how kings dress. Prosperity teachers tell us that we're king's kids, and therefore we're supposed to live like king's kids. But neither Jesus nor John the Baptist nor the apostles, all of whom were also king's kids, none of them lived like kings.

Not in this world. Paul rebukes the Corinthians because in 1 Corinthians 4 he says, you already are reigning as kings and that without us. He said, I wish you were kings, because then we'd reign with you.

He's saying basically you've kind of jumped the gun a little bit. Sure, you're going to reign with Christ, but you're already acting like it's time. No, it's time to suffer with

Christ.

If we suffer with him, we'll reign with him later. I wish the time would come when you could reign with him, because then I'm going to reign with him too, but I'm still suffering. How come you're not? He's implying to them.

But the king's kids are at war. The king is at war and his kids are in the trenches. And therefore, you don't look for the king's kids in king's houses.

Not yet. You look for them out on the battlefield. You don't go out looking for someone who's dressed comfortably and living comfortably out in the wilderness.

You look in king's houses for that, but you don't look for prophets there. You don't look for a reed shaken by the wind. Somebody who's tossed to and fro by the winds of opinion.

Someone who's going to stand firm is what they found out there and who he was. He didn't get shaken, although his faith was sort of shaking a little bit at this point. But that's why Jesus sent back the message he did to encourage him in it.

But the thing that Jesus wanted to say about John begins in verse 9. What did you go out to see? A prophet? Did you think it was a prophet? Well, you were right. He was a prophet, but more than that. He was more than a prophet.

He was the prophet of whom it was said that he would go before the Lord. Malachi had spoken of him. So had Isaiah.

Isaiah chapter 40 is not quoted here, but it is at the beginning of Mark's gospel. And it's quoted also in Matthew 3 and Luke 3. It's all three of those gospels. And by the way, John chapter 1, John himself quotes Isaiah 40 about himself.

All four gospels apply Isaiah 40 verses 3 through 5 to John the Baptist. It's a voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Here, however, the Malachi passage is given.

And basically, he is more than just any prophet. He is the prophet who would be sent last before the coming of the Messiah to prepare the way for the Lord to come. All other prophets in their own way were preparing the way, but they were somewhat distant from the fulfillment.

John the Baptist was there to put the final touches on the preparation. And therefore, he stands above all other prophets in that respect. And he continues in that vein in verse 11.

As surely I say to you, among those born of women, there has not arisen one greater than John the Baptist, but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Now, this is confusing because it sounds like Jesus contradicts himself. There's none born of women, and every human being is born of women.

There's none greater than John the Baptist, except even the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than him. It sounds like Jesus can't make up his mind or he wasn't paying close attention to what he was saying and got it wrong. But this can be resolved in Luke's parallel to this statement, which is found in Luke 7, 28.

It says, among those born of women, there has not arisen a greater prophet than John the Baptist. Now, that's only in the textus receptus. Therefore, it is in the King James, and it is in the New King James.

It's not in the modern translation. It just says one greater. But in the textus receptus, which many believe, I'm one of them, that it is a better set of manuscripts than the Alexandrian text, Luke's version has Jesus saying, there has not arisen a greater prophet than John the Baptist, but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

That's Luke 7, 28. Now, that makes a little more sense, it seems. He was talking, I mean, although some manuscripts leave out the word prophet there in the Luke parallel, in the context, he's saying, did you go out to see a prophet? Well, yeah, you went out to see more than a prophet.

For him to then say the greatest prophet would be quite fitting in the context, and that's what apparently he did say. John is the greatest prophet ever born among women. That is, of those who have been born only once.

Those who have experienced only natural birth. You see, John never did see the day of Pentecost. He never did see the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

He lived and died an Old Testament character. He wasn't even alive when Jesus in the upper room instituted the new covenant with his disciples. So John, like Malachi who predicted him, and Isaiah who predicted him, and many others before him, he was an Old Testament prophet.

He was a transitional prophet, and he was able to announce that the kingdom was coming at hand, but he never got to enter it. At least not in this life. Therefore, he never had the privilege of being born again.

He never had the privilege of being born of the Spirit. He was born of women, and as far as natural men are concerned, there's never been a greater prophet come along. Than John the Baptist.

But the person who is born again into the kingdom of God, and of course it's elsewhere in John 3 that Jesus said, unless you're born again, you can't even see the kingdom of God. You can't enter the kingdom without being born again. He told Nicodemus in John 3,

5. The least in the kingdom is one who has been born again.

And if somebody has been born again, they have a greater prophetic mystery than John did. See, in a certain way. If a man is a great prophet, it is because he's got a great message.

He may be a great man as well, but that's not what makes him a great prophet. He's a great prophet if his prophecy is a great one, and of great significance. John's prophecy was more significant than that of all the Old Testament prophets.

Because while they could say that the Messiah was going to come, John could say, there he is. He's here. That was the greatest prophetic burden any prophet was ever allowed to bear.

Until Christ came. But you see, while John could say the kingdom of God is at hand, the believer in Christ can now say the kingdom has come. We have a greater prophecy, as it were, a greater message than John even had.

Even the least Christian who has been born again into the kingdom has a message that is beyond that which John could claim. Because John never saw it come. He died too early.

And therefore, he could only announce that the kingdom was at hand. The believer today who is in the kingdom can say, here it is. It's come.

And we have the gospel of the kingdom as our message, and that is a greater prophecy, a greater word from God, than what John was even able to say, though his came close to it. Now, this statement also, there's more confusing in here. Verse 12.

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. Now, this could mean two things, possibly. It could mean that those in the kingdom, like John the Baptist, and Jesus and his followers, could expect, and some of them were already experiencing, violent opposition.

John was in prison. Jesus and his disciples would soon know similar persecution. And then he's saying, from the days of John until now, the kingdom of heaven is suffering violence.

It could mean that those citizens of the kingdom are experiencing persecution from violent people. And the second statement, and the violent take it by force, would simply mean that men like Herod were grabbing up people like John and forcibly incarcerating them and taking them by force. This, however, is probably not the meaning of the statement.

And I mean, the way it's worded here, it could be understood that way. The problem is that there is a parallel to it in Luke, which seems to shed a little different light on what it

means. The parallel in Luke, here, is in Luke 16, 16.

And it's worded just differently enough to give us a slightly different understanding of what it means. Luke 16, 16. The law and the prophets were until John.

Since that time, the kingdom of God has been preached and everyone is pressing into it. Now, that's the parallel. It's the parallel to Matthew 11, 12.

It says, the kingdom of God, since John, the king of God has been preached and everyone is pressing into it. Which seems to mean that everybody who's going to enter it is going to do so by pressing into it. It's not going to be easy to get in.

There's going to be resistance. It's going to take a forcible person to get in. It's not like the Jews are just going to slide in on the coattails of the Messiah.

They're going to have to fight their way in because there's tremendous opposition to it. Now, looking back at Matthew's statement, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence. The interlinear Greek-English New Testament put out by Zondervan renders this word, suffers violence.

Matthew 11, 12, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence. It's one word in the Greek, βιάζομαι. And the interlinear Greek-English New Testament put out by Zondervan translates that one word by these words, is taken by violence.

The kingdom of heaven is taken by violence. That is, by those of us who want to take the kingdom, wish to enter it, it requires violence. But the word violence there means forcibleness.

The Greek word really means forcibleness. So those who are forcible must take it by force. Again, the idea is if you're going to get in, you're going to have to press in.

That's what the Luke parallel says. Those who are getting into the kingdom won't find it just an easy thing. He said those who are strived to enter into the narrow gate.

He said it's hard for a rich man to get in, more difficult than for a camel to go through a guy with a needle. You've got to strive. You've got to be forceful.

You've got to be committed. You've got to be determined. And that's what he's saying about the kingdom.

John's arrest is just a precursor of the kind of thing that believers would have to look forward to to enter the kingdom of God.