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Matthew 11:1 - 11:6: John the Baptist



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg reflects on the passage in Matthew 11:1-6, where John the Baptist asks if Jesus is the Messiah. While John may have had doubts, Gregg notes that it's not uncommon for believers to have their faith tested at times. Gregg encourages those struggling with doubts to seek answers in Scripture and to continue searching with an open heart. Ultimately, as Jeremiah's words suggest, those who seek will find what they are looking for.

Transcript

Today we're turning to Matthew chapter 11 and continuing Matthew's account of the life of Jesus. This chapter actually focuses even a little more on John the Baptist in the earlier portion, because the first story has to do with John the Baptist and then Jesus begins to eulogize John and talk about his significance and that takes up the better part of Matthew chapter 11. So this is a chapter where John the Baptist figures prominently and John at this time was in prison.

He had been arrested by Herod the king up in, well he was the Tetrarch really, up in Galilee because John had been criticizing Herod for having stolen his brother's wife and married her. And John continually told him, it's not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. And this bothered Herod, but it even bothered his illegitimate wife more and she instigated Herod to arrest John.

And so John was now in prison. And the context here is a little different than the same story occurring in Luke because we've just completed Matthew chapter 10, which is a lengthy discourse recorded of Jesus sending out the twelve on a short-term outreach. And then we have this story about John the Baptist.

But in Luke, this story follows immediately after the record of certain miracles that Jesus did, including the healing of the centurion's servant and the miracle of raising a dead man in a town of Nain. These things were reported to John while he was in prison, according to Luke 7.18. And that led John to send messengers to Jesus. Now, let me begin reading at Matthew 11.1. Now, it came to pass when Jesus finished commanding

His twelve disciples that He departed from there to teach and to preach in their cities.

And when John had heard in prison 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? Jesus answered and said to him, Now, this is a perplexing story to many because John asks a question of Jesus. He sends messengers from prison, where he is detained, and asks Jesus whether Jesus is in fact the Messiah or not. That is the meaning of the question, Are you the one that we were expecting, or should we look for another? Now, this raises questions.

Did John have doubts as to the identity of Jesus? It seems difficult to imagine that he would, because he had been baptizing, and God had spoken to him and said, You know, one of these days you're going to baptize a man, and the Holy Spirit will come down on him in the form of a dove. And when that happens, he's the one who will baptize in the Holy Spirit. And so John, one day, was baptizing, and Jesus came to him.

And when Jesus was baptized by him, the heavens opened, the Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I'm well pleased. Now, obviously, John saw and heard these things and later gave testimony to it. But how could he then, at some point later, this might have been maybe approaching a year and a half or two years later, John is in prison.

How could John wonder whether Jesus was who he had thought he was? I mean, John saw these supernatural things. He saw the dove come down. He heard the voice from heaven.

Could John possibly, at this time later, be entertaining doubts? Now, it is possible that John was doubting, but I'm going to suggest a couple of other possibilities as well. We cannot rule out the possibility that John had his doubts, because many times people who see tremendous miracles still have doubts at a later date when those miracles are not occurring, as one would hope they would. We remember how the Israelites were led out of Egypt by Moses through a parting of the Red Sea, a miraculous separation of the waters, so that the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.

And then, when Moses spread his rod over the sea again, the sea came down and drowned the Egyptians that were pursuing them. Now, that was a stupendous, tremendous miracle, and the Israelites celebrated it quite exuberantly. But three days later, they were without water in the wilderness, and they began to question whether God was with them and whether God could save them and so forth.

Now, one might think that having just seen such a great spectacle as the parting of the Red Sea, as God had done just three days earlier, that they should have had more faith. They should have had no capability of doubting God's ability to take care of them. And yet, they did doubt.

And before we really are too harsh on them in our judgment, we should remember, I'm sure many of you can remember times, when you prayed very desperately for something to happen. You prayed to get a certain job, you prayed that somebody who was dying would get better, or you prayed that some circumstance would arise that seemed unlikely apart from God's intervention, and it happened. I'm sure that among my listeners there are thousands who can remember, if they think back, that there have been times when they prayed for something and God answered their prayers.

And when He did, it was such a boost of faith. I mean, I'm sure many of you at that time thought, wow, there is a God. You know, I mean, my prayers have been answered in just such a tremendous way.

And yet, seeing such things does not prevent us from having doubts at a later occasion. We have short memories, and sometimes just the present circumstances are so much with us that we forget the significance of everything that God has shown us before. So I'm not going to rule out the possibility that John the Baptist may have been doubting at this point.

He was rotting in a third world jail. That's not a very pleasant situation. He was the forerunner, supposed to be at least, of the Messiah.

And he believed, I think, as most Jews did, that the Messiah would be a deliverer. You see, the Jews were a subject people, an oppressed people under the subjection of the Romans. The Roman armies occupied the land and ruled the land.

The Israelites didn't appreciate that much, and they looked forward to the Messiah coming and driving out the Romans, which is how they interpreted the Messiah's mission. That is not, of course, what Jesus did, and he did not interpret the Messiah's mission the same way they did, but most Jews did, and I think John the Baptist probably did himself. And that being so, it probably seemed incongruous that the Messiah would have appeared in the person of Jesus on the one hand, and yet that his main forerunner, John, would be rotting in a prison under the control of Roman authority.

Isn't the Messiah supposed to do something about this kind of thing? And the fact that Jesus did not appear to be doing so may well have caused John to wonder, you know, maybe I made a mistake about this guy, maybe it's not as I thought. Now, most of us would rather think better things of John than that, would rather suspect that John didn't have his doubts, and I will suggest some other possibilities to you. Perhaps he didn't have his doubts on this occasion, and there are at least a couple of ways we could look at it otherwise.

But I just want to say we can't rule out the possibility that John, in his human nature, just like any of us, might have doubts on occasions after he had seen such things as we might think would preclude the possibility of later doubts. I mean, we've all had that

experience, or maybe not all, but many of us have, and therefore it is certainly not unthinkable that a man might have doubts after he'd seen great miracles. And so I'm going to consider that John may well have had his doubts at this time, but there are a couple of other possibilities.

One of them is very closely related to the one that I just suggested, except it would not require that John had doubts. It might just be that John was impatient. Again, assuming that John expected the Messiah to deliver his people from the Romans, and John being uncomfortably situated in the Roman prison in Galilee, it may well be that John knew Jesus was the one, but wanted to register his complaint that Jesus was not really doing what he thought he was supposed to do, at least not quickly enough.

Now, if this was John's attitude in sending messengers to Jesus, saying, Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for someone else? It would be more or less a rebuke of Jesus, not a question seeking an answer, but rather a recognition that Jesus is the Messiah, and ought he not get about the business of being the Messiah? After all, John's a faithful promoter of his, and shouldn't the Messiah do something to spring John from jail and drive the Roman presence out? Now, again, this is related to the first theory. The first theory is that John actually did have doubts. This other suggestion would suggest John didn't really have doubts.

He was just impatient and wanted to spur Jesus on to his mission, as John perceived it, more quickly. And that is a possibility, it seems to me. Now, there's a third possibility that's been suggested, and it's rather interesting, and that is that John had no doubts himself, but that his disciples had doubts.

And it was for the sake of these disciples, of John, that John sent them to Jesus with this question, not because John wanted to know, but because John wanted his disciples to know. Remember, John was a great promoter of Jesus. In John chapter 3, John the Baptist said to his disciples concerning Jesus, he said, He must increase, and I must decrease.

John was definitely discouraging his own disciples from continuing to follow him and encouraging them to follow Jesus instead. But for some strange reason, there were still some disciples, out of some kind of misguided loyalty, who were still following John the Baptist around. And it may be because, although they appreciated John's message, perhaps they weren't sure about Jesus really being the Messiah.

If that was so, then John might send them to Jesus and say, Listen, ask Jesus if he's the Messiah or not. And John might well think that Jesus then could convince them. And we can't rule that out as a possible interpretation of the situation entirely.

However, I don't think it's the most likely scenario, and I'll tell you why. If, in fact, it was John's disciples and not John who had doubts, then when Jesus said to them, Go tell John what you've seen here, it'd be sort of with a wink and a nod. Of course, it's not really

John who needs to be told.

He'd just be telling John's disciples to pay attention to what had happened here and to report it back, knowing that as they reported it, it would convince them themselves of who Jesus was. And that's not impossible, but the problem here is that his last comment to John, or for them to take back to John, was this one in verse 6, And blessed is he who is not offended because of me. Now, the word offended here apparently means stumbled.

That is, their faith is hurt, their faith is damaged. And when Jesus says, Blessed is the man who is not stumbled, whose faith is not hindered by what I am doing, I believe that that might be a soft rebuke against John. He didn't say, Cursed is he who doubts what I'm doing.

He said, Blessed is he who does not stumble at what I'm doing. He was not rebuking John outright, but stating that it's more blessed for someone to not stumble and to trust Jesus and say, Listen, I'm doing the right thing. Trust me in this.

Now, I think that John may well have had his doubts, but whether he had his doubts or not, let's say John didn't have his doubts, but he was just trying to hurry Jesus up to get about the mission. Jesus is saying, Well, listen, let me tell you, am I not doing the things that the Messiah is supposed to do? And, you know, if I'm not doing what you think I should be doing, please don't be stumbled. Please don't lose faith because I'm operating a little differently than you anticipated the Messiah to do.

And it sounds to me like this rebuke would be something that Jesus is sending back to John because John is the one who seems to be having either doubts or impatience in this matter. Now, when Jesus told the disciples of John, Tell John the things which you see and hear. In Luke's Gospel, as I pointed out, the disciples had just reported to John before this some miracles that Jesus had done.

And even as these people were here asking Jesus the question, there were other miracles going on. And he lists some of the things that they had seen and heard. In verse 5, he says, The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear.

The dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. Now, one might think that just a report of those doings would in itself convince people that Jesus was the Messiah. But this had a convincing factor that goes beyond simply the value of the miracles themselves.

And that is this, that the Old Testament prophets had predicted that the Messiah would do these very things. In Isaiah chapter 35, there is a prophecy about the time that the Messiah would come. And it says in verses 5 and 6, this is Isaiah 35 verses 5 and 6, The

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

Now, that is what would happen when the Messiah comes. The eyes of the blind would be opened, the ears of the deaf would be unstopped, the lame would leap, the tongue of the dumb would sing. Now, what did Jesus say? Go tell John what's going on here.

The lame are walking, the blind receive their sight, the deaf are hearing. In other words, the very things that the prophets said would happen. Now, what's interesting about this is that there were Jews, John the Baptist might have been among them, but there were Jews who thought that Jesus was not doing the things the Messiah was supposed to do because there were certain things that the prophets had spoken of in describing the Messiah's mission that they had latched on to and wanted to basically define the whole mission of the Messiah in terms of.

And they had neglected the fact that the prophets had predicted the very things Jesus was doing as well as the things that Jesus wasn't, you know, they thought that Jesus was not doing. Now, there's another scripture here that Jesus is alluding to, and it's Isaiah chapter 61 and verse 1. Because in Isaiah 61, verse 1, which is a verse with the Messiah speaking, it says, The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to preach the good tidings to the meek or to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, etc.

Now, Jesus on one occasion in Luke chapter 4 read this verse from Isaiah 61, and then when he shut the book of Isaiah, he spoke and said, This verse has been fulfilled in your hearing. In other words, my speaking to you is the very thing that this was predicting. What is the prediction? That the Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings, that's the gospel, to the poor or to the meek in some translations.

Now, one of the things Jesus told John's disciples to report is in Matthew 11, 5, the poor have the gospel preached to them. Okay, so he says 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. This is a clear allusion to Isaiah 61, 1. So, Jesus draws from two different passages in Isaiah, both of which describe the ministry of the Messiah, and he points out that those very things are being fulfilled at that very moment, and that John's disciples should go back.

Now, notice Jesus didn't say, John, I am the Messiah. Let me just remove all mystery about this. You asked me directly.

Let me give you a direct answer. Yes, I am the Messiah. He didn't say that.

He said, listen, John wants to know if I'm the one. Tell him what you see. John should be acquainted with the scriptures well enough to know whether these things are pertinent

to the Messiah's ministry or not.

And he quotes from direct passages from Isaiah. And he sends the disciples of John back with this information. Now, his final, his parting shot, as I mentioned earlier, was, blessed is he who is not offended or stumbled because of me.

You know, as I pointed out a moment ago, in the direct context, this statement would apparently mean that if Jesus was not conducting himself in the way that a man thought the Messiah should conduct himself, do not lose faith. Do not stumble over that. Don't be offended by that.

Rather, trust me, he's saying. I may be doing things differently than you think I should, but I'm doing what I should be doing. And blessed are you if you can get past this time that it confuses you.

You know, confusion has caused many people to lose faith. And confusion often comes from simply not being able to put it all together. Right? I mean, you read something in the Bible, and it just doesn't make sense to you.

And the reason it doesn't make sense to you is because it doesn't seem to agree with something else you read in the Bible, or it doesn't seem to agree with what seems true to you, or maybe what the church has taught you or something. And so you get a little confused. Now, let me just suggest to you that being confused can often lead to lack of faith, can actually lead to people losing the faith because they can't sort things out.

Remember, Jesus said that some of the seed that the sower sowed fell on the wayside, and it did not penetrate, and the birds came and ate it up. And Jesus, when he explained that parable, said, Well, those seeds are the ones who hear the gospel, and they don't understand it. And so the devil comes and snatches the seed away, the Word of God away.

And there certainly are those kinds of people who, because there's things they don't understand in the Bible, their faith is just taken away. The impact of the Word of God is just removed completely. Now, you might say, Well, isn't that a mistake on God's part? Shouldn't he make it less confusing? Shouldn't he make it so that we wouldn't be confused and therefore we don't lose faith? Well, remember, God does not appeal to people to come on their own terms but on his.

And throughout the teaching of Jesus, it becomes clear that God expects a total commitment from people who are totally devoted to following Jesus, no matter how difficult that is. Now, there are people who are motivated inwardly that way. They demand that they have the truth.

They will not settle for less, even if it's difficult to come to. And there are other people who are a lot more lazy about the truth. And if it doesn't come easy, they don't care to

have it.

Now, only the people in the former group can really come to God. In Jeremiah, it says, You will seek for me, and you shall find me when you shall search for me with all your heart. That part, all your heart, is very important.

In Proverbs, it says, If you will cry out after wisdom and for knowledge, and you will search for her as for hid treasures, then you shall find the knowledge of God and understand the fear of the Lord. Notice that the knowledge of God does not come without total commitment and craving. Now, why am I saying that? Well, simply because of this.

There are people whose craving for truth and for God is so great that even when they don't understand something, they will not defect. And the fact that they stand by him, even through periods where some things are not fully explained to their satisfaction, proves that they really have that dedication to Christ that others do not have. And a very good example of that is in John chapter 6, where Jesus was talking about himself being the bread of life, and people had to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

Many of his disciples no longer walked with him after that, it says in John 6 and verse 66. But Jesus turned to his other disciples and said, Will you go away also? And Peter said, Lord, to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life. Now, it's not that Peter understood what Jesus had said better than others, or that he was less confused by it.

It's just that he was determined not to fall away. He was not going to stumble because of it. He couldn't quite understand what Jesus was talking about or why Jesus was saying those things.

But whereas others departed from Jesus in the face of that kind of uncertainty, Peter represented a different kind of person who said, I don't understand it, but I'm not going away. Where can I go? After all, you do have the words of eternal life. Now, let me just say there are many things in Scripture, and maybe many things in God's dealings in your life that you will not understand.

You might even think God shouldn't do those things. But blessed is he who is not stumbled by what God does, by what Jesus does. To where can you go, after all? He alone has the words of eternal life.

I hope that you will be among those that will refuse to be confused, and will rather press on to know God, and will not be offended by what he does that is not what you would have predicted, or what you would have prescribed for him to do.