

## **THE QUESTIONING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST**

The Messianic credentials of Jesus have been on display for the nation to see, building to the climactic emphasis on Christ's Lordship authority, and now the issue is this: what would the response of the nation be? The main theme now put forward in Matthew 11-12 revolves around how the people should respond to Jesus.

That is the great issue in Matthew 11-12. And sadly, we find the response was largely one of REJECTION as chronicled in these chapters. This rejection was led by the religious leaders, which climaxed in the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit in chapter 12.

The rejection of Christ is seen in the rejection of His forerunner – John the Baptist. Jesus just got done saying, “***He who receives you receives Me***” (Mt. 10:40). Well, they hadn't received John the Baptist, and they didn't receive Jesus either (exceptions, of course).

### **Matthew 11:1 (NKJV)**

**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.**

After commissioning the 12 and endowing them with miraculous kingdom powers as His special apostolic representatives, Christ then began His own teaching and preaching tour in Galilee as seen here (cf. 4:23; 9:35; 11:1).

Christ's teaching (Gk. *didasko*), meaning *to explain and give instruction*, was probably about Scripture and how it applied to Himself, and His preaching (Gk. *kerusso*) evidently revolved around His message that “the kingdom is at hand” as seen in 10:7.

Matthew 11:2-19 finds its parallel in Luke 7:18-35. Matthew 4:12 has already mentioned John the Baptist's imprisonment, but background details are not mentioned until Matthew 14:3-12. Here in chapter 11 we have a glimpse of John's struggles in prison during the course of Christ's Galilean ministry.

### **Matthew 11:2–3 (NKJV)**

**2 And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples**

**3 and said to Him, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”**

It is thought that John the Baptist, now in the prison of Herod Antipas, had probably been there about a year or so.

John's "crime" was that he dared to speak out about the adulterous marriage of Herod to his brother's wife, and so Herod had him put in prison (cf. Lk. 3:19-20). In prison, John had heard about the miraculous works of Jesus, but he had ONE major question. He sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus: "***Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?***"

This was not a question of carnal doubt, but rather one of puzzlement. Clearly the idea of "***the Coming One***" refers to the Messiah. All the way through the OT, the prophets had prophesied of a coming Deliverer-King. But here seems to be John's struggle. He had preached that the Messiah would bring judgment and deliverance.

**Matthew 3:10–12 (NKJV)**

**10** And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

**11** I indeed baptize you with water unto 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.

**12** His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

John saw clearly the blessing aspect of Christ's ministry in all the healings and so forth, but where was the judgment on the wicked that he had preached was coming? The way he envisioned it was that judgment would immediately come on the wicked, and then Jesus the Messiah would bring in the kingdom in keeping with his message, "***Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.***" (Mt. 3:2) How could this prison experience be explained in light of this? John is saying, "***Did I miss something about You Jesus?***"

You see, we often grapple with THE TIMING! John's message was right, but he didn't understand the timing. Looking back, we see clearly that Jesus came presenting His credentials as the Messiah, as seen in His kingdom miracles. The kingdom was being offered on the condition of repentance. But this was not the time for judgment! First, He must give Israel an opportunity to repent and receive Him. This is what His first coming was all about. Grace is extended first and then judgment if that grace is rejected. Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:17).

### **John 1:11–12 (NKJV)**

**11** He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.

**12** But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:

### **John 3:17 (NKJV)**

**17** For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

John did not see the truth of TWO separate comings. He thought this was it. He was preaching repentance, and those that repented he thought would immediately go into the kingdom. So, he didn't get it. It didn't add up to him.

If Jesus was the COMING ONE Who brings judgment to sinners and deliverance and blessing to His people; if He is the One Who brings in the kingdom; then why was he now in prison facing death? He expected to go into the kingdom with the Christ - not to death row!

“The Messiah was a king, and He was to rule Israel on David's throne. That Messiah would come in like Judas Maccabee and drive out the foreign oppressors was assumed.” – **Ed Glasscock**

“John is troubled not by what Jesus is doing (v. 2), but by what He is not doing. If Jesus is indeed the Messiah, where is the sweeping judgment that John predicted (3:7-12), and why is the forerunner allowed to languish in prison?”

– ***Evangelical Commentary on the Bible***

There was a reason that in His sermon at Nazareth from Isaiah 61 that Jesus stopped mid-sentence (cf. Lk. 4:16-21).

### **Isaiah 61:1–2 (NKJV)**

**1** “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

**2** To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, **[STOPPED]** And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, (see Luke 4:16-21)

This was “***the year of the Lord's favor***” – a season of grace whereby an open invitation was being given to the nation to repent and receive Jesus as their Messiah. This was not the day of vengeance. That will come in due season at the Second Coming. But John did not understand this.

Again, this was an honest question seeking clarification, not rebel defiance. And God is patient with honest questions. He gives space for our weakness as seen in how Jesus goes on to defend John in the following verses.

We often cannot comprehend the ways of God, which are not our ways (cf. Isa. 55:8; Rom. 11:33). We only know what we have been told. And even then, we often just don't get it.

This is where faith comes in. Faith is taking God at His Word even when we don't understand the WHY of what is happening. Charles Spurgeon famously said, "To trust God in the light is nothing, but to trust him in the dark—that is faith."

Even so, being human, we often struggle. We often have questions – just like John the Baptist. But John did the right thing in going to Jesus with his questions. We should do likewise!