

John the Baptist's question, and Jesus' answer

Matthew 11 vv.2-19

Luke 7 vv.18-35

In a dark dungeon, probably in a strong castle, close to the Dead Sea, there sits a man. Who can that be? A thief or a murderer? ...

No indeed! This man is ... John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord Jesus. What? ... Is John the Baptist in prison? ... Why? ... What has he done? ... Listen!

As we have already told you John preached and baptised near the river Jordan and showed to the people the King who was coming. He was talked about throughout the whole land. Some spoke with respect and esteem about John, but others ridiculed him.

Herod the king also hears that a prophet has arisen who is preaching near Jordan. He is interested. He would also like to hear him. But he doesn't go to John, no, John must come to him.

And John goes!

Herod was a son of Herod the Great, who shortly after the birth of the Lord Jesus, had cruelly ordered the murder of all Bethlehem children of two years old and under. That Herod had now been long dead.

Now his son, also a Herod, reigns over Galilee.

This Herod was also an evil king who did not in the least worry about God's commandments. Do you know what he had done? ... He was married, but he did not like his wife and so he had just driven her away.

Now Herod had a brother named Philip. Philip was also married. The wife of Philip was named Herodias. And now Herod had stolen his brother's wife. Herod then had driven out his own wife and married Herodias, his sister-in-law. That was not allowed, it was a terrible sin.

I had to tell you this first, otherwise you would not understand what follows.

John the Baptist then must now come to the godless court of Herod.

Look, there the faithful preacher walks through the royal palace. In one of the many rooms Herod sits upon his throne. Next to him sits Herodias. Behind him stand his courtiers. They are all very curious to hear what John will say. Shall John the Baptist, who was always reproofing the sins of the people, be silent to the king? Or will he speak? ... It could cost him his

No, Herod too is reproved for his many sins.

"It is not lawful for thee to have Herodias", says John severely, "for she is the wife of your brother Philip". Herodias should be sent back to her own husband, for that is where she belongs, and not here.

A deathly hush has descended. All hold their breath. What will the king's answer be to that?

Herod is alarmed when he hears this reproof. He blushes.

Herodias is also alarmed, but her heart is filled with anger. She looks in fury upon John the Baptist. She clenches her fists. Herodias doesn't want to go back to her first husband, to Philip, no she wants to stay with Herod. She incites Herod to slay John.

The king shakes his head. No, he won't do that, he dares not, for he fears the people. They look upon John as a prophet. Whatever would the Jews say about it? There may well be an uproar. He must be careful. No, he dare not kill John.

But he still wants to please Herodias and so he takes John the Baptist prisoner, and the forerunner of the Lord Jesus is shut up at his command in a dingy prison.

John has been there now for weeks shut up in the musty cell. John still has many friends, however, and they do not forsake their master, but visit him regularly and tell him everything which is happening. They also tell him about the many wonders carried out by the Lord Jesus. Yes, one day John hears that a certain young man of Nain has been raised from the dead by Jesus.

When his friends have left, John thinks over what he has heard. It is all going so differently from what John had expected. He had thought that the King would take firm action against the sinful Jewish people. That is what he himself had done. He had thought that Jesus would reign as King.

That is not what is happening though. The Lord Jesus <sup>is preaching</sup> ~~preaches~~ and <sup>going</sup> ~~goes~~ about the country as a WELL-DOER. <sup>It is</sup> ~~is~~ true, certainly, that hundreds are <sup>being</sup> healed by Him; that great wonders and miracles <sup>are taking</sup> ~~take~~ place ... but <sup>as for reigning</sup> ~~to reign~~ like a King, no, the Lord Jesus <sup>is</sup> ~~does~~ not <sup>doing</sup> ~~do~~ that, at least, not in the way John had expected.

John does not notice that Jesus reigns indeed as King over the sick and afflicted, over death and destruction, and that even the devils are subject to Him.

Doubt comes into John's heart. Is Jesus indeed the promised King? Or? ... Or? ... Oh, he is no longer sure. He decides to send a question to Him personally.

So the next time his friends come to see him, he sends them to Jesus with the question: "Art thou he that should come or look we for another?" He wants to be certain.

His two friends go away and John remains behind, waiting for their return and longing for the answer which they will bring him.

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Look, there stands the Lord Jesus, surrounded by a great multitude, in one of the cities or towns of Galilee. They are all listening to Him.

Suddenly two men press forward, stand just in front of the Lord Jesus, and ask: "Our Master, John the Baptist, has sent us to Thee saying, Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?"

The Lord Jesus, however, does not answer them immediately.

During that same hour many come to Him: sick and infirm: those with evil spirits and some who were blind. They are all cured by Him. None are sent unhealed away.

Then the Lord Jesus turns towards the two waiting disciples of John and says: "Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached unto them."

Now, why does the Lord Jesus not just say: "Yes, I am the Messiah." Why is it this message which John's disciples have to bring to their master? ... Well, the Lord Jesus does it so that John can gather from those words and from His works, that Jesus is truly the Messiah, for all that had been foretold by the prophets. Those words were now being literally fulfilled, so that John no longer needed to doubt, for Jesus must be the long awaited King, otherwise all this would not be happening.

Oh, the Saviour well knows what is going on in the heart of His faithful fore-runner, who is sighing there in that dungeon. He will remove the fearful doubting from the heart of His servant and so He points out to him the Heavenly Kingdom. Evidently John still had too much thought of an earthly kingdom, with

its splendour and glory. By means of this wonderful message it is as though the Lord Jesus says to him: "No John, do not look for an earthly kingdom. I am King over a better, a heavenly Kingdom, and that heavenly Kingdom is being built through My words and My works".

John's two friends depart. They will bring those words to their master. Look, there they go. Soon they have disappeared from sight.

Will their master have understood? ... The Bible tells us no more about it. But John did not send any more questioners. You may be quite certain that all doubt was removed from that imprisoned preacher. He saw, for a moment, ~~xxxx~~ through faith, the glory of that Kingdom. That Kingdom, in which for him also a place was prepared, through the blood of that Great, Eternal King.

Have you ever had a glimpse of the glory of that Kingdom? ...

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The people who are standing near the Lord have heard and seen all this. Perhaps some of them will have thought: "Has John got doubts now? Does he no longer believe himself that Jesus is the Messiah?"

Surely it was he that said "Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." He has repeatedly pointed unto Jesus.

Oh, perhaps some of them shrug their shoulders. That should not be however, and so when the disciples of the fore-runner have left, the Lord Jesus speaks about John. He tells the people who John really is.

He tells them that John is not someone who changes every moment just like a reed is swayed too and fro in the wind. Neither is John a man who sought riches and luxury and who walked about in fine clothing. But John is in truth a prophet, a great prophet, yes the greatest prophet who had ever lived. He is the fore-runner who should come.

And so you see boys and girls, in this way the Lord Jesus defends John the Baptist, and thus He honours him.

Some among that crowd nodded assent to what the Lord Jesus said, for it is ~~xxx~~ written that they justified God (Luke 7 v.29). Yes John was a great prophet.

Others laugh contemptuously and shake their heads. They do not believe the ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ words of the Lord Jesus. Then the Lord Jesus says with sadness in His voice: "Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation and to

what are they like? They 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."

Now, whatever does the Lord Jesus mean by that? ... just pay careful attention.

Children are fond of playing, aren't they? Whenever a troop of soldiers marches through the streets, then the children like to play soldiers too. Children love to imitate things that grown-ups do. You do it, and so did the children of the Jews in the days when the Lord Jesus was on earth. Sometimes when a wedding was celebrated in the land of the Jews the guests would dance to the music of a flute. It also often happened that when someone was buried mournful laments were sung. People wept as they walked towards the grave.

Well, the Jewish children imitated such things.

We can imagine a little group of children in an open space - a marketplace. They are going to play ... but what shall they play? ...

"Let's play weddings" cry some of them, "that's lovely."

"Oh no," say others "that is no good. We are not doing that, we don't want to. No, we know another game. Let's play funerals, then we can cry just like the grown-ups do."

But the others don't want to play that game either.

So they stand together, shouting and screaming, arguing together, but certainly not playing. They ~~pout~~<sup>pout</sup> and mope and are far from playing together.

And now the Lord Jesus compares these Jewish people to such quarrelsome children.

John the Baptist had come. He fasted a great deal and never drank wine. He preached solemnly and pointed out to them their sins. And did they listen to him? ... Did they believe his words? ... No, indeed, they abused him and said "He hath a devil!"

After that the Lord Jesus had come. He did eat bread and drink wine. And did they listen to the Lord Jesus? ... Did they believe Him? ... Again, the answer is no. They called the Saviour a glutton and a wine-bibber. They said: "He is a friend of publicans and sinners".

It made no difference. The Jews listened neither to John nor to the Lord Jesus. The Jewish people were just the same as those children.

So you see, that is why the Lord Jesus used that example. It was in reproach over their wickedness and unbelief.

Yet the Lord Jesus still warns them. For, if nothing at all helped, if everything was in vain, then God would punish those unbelieving Jews.

He tells them that Sodom was an evil city, and for that reason she was destroyed. But if the mighty works which they had seen had been done in Sodom, then says He, the godless inhabitants of Sodom would have listened and repented. He had done so many wonders among them, and yet they rejected Him. But soon, when death came, they would be lost for ever through their own fault. "Woe unto thee!"

Yes, the Jewish people will receive heavier punishment than the heathens, for the Jews know it all so well.

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Here lies for you too a very solemn warning, children. You too have God's precious word. You also ~~are~~ were warned time and time again. But if you cast it all aside and continue in sinful ways, then your punishment too will be tremendously heavy.

Beseech the Lord daily then to takeaway the unbelief out of your hearts, and to call you by His grace. Now it can still come to pass, but tomorrow perhaps no more.

When death comes, the time of grace is gone for ever!