

St. Matthew Chapter 11

Jesus sends His disciples out while John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus. Chapter 11 is mostly filled with the conversation between Jesus and John's disciples, and Jesus' testimony concerning John. In the chapter Jesus preaches a harsh word of law to the unrepentant cities, and the chapter ends with Jesus speaking of Himself and His Father who reveals His wisdom not to the wise but to babes. At last we are tenderly invited to take up the light and easy yoke of Jesus' Gospel.

John Sends His Disciples to Jesus (11:1-19)

John the Baptist was thrown in prison for preaching the law to Herod [see 4:12; 14:3], and from His cell He hears of Jesus' works. This shows how the words and acts of Jesus were being published abroad, that even in prison John could have news of Jesus.

John, ten, still in contact with his disciples, sends them to Jesus asking, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?” [11:3]

The Coming One. This is a title of the Messiah, the long expected and promised Savior of the world. [see Psalm 40:7; 118:26; Daniel 7:13]

Do We Look for Another. The question with this text concerns who is included in the “we” of the disciples question. Is John the Baptist part of the “we” or not? Was John having doubts about Jesus, or was He just sending his disciples to learn of Jesus for themselves?

It is not strange for the prophets of the word of God to themselves doubt the promises they have been given. Consider, for example, Elijah in the wilderness, 1 Kings 19:1-10. This is, in fact, the stunning definition of worship we find in our Confessions: “faith fighting against despair.” [Treatise 44]. And yet it is to Jesus that John looks to for answers and assurance. His faith was not quenched, but strained. John had promised the Messiah's grace as well as His judgment. Jesus, it seems to him, is only come with grace and mercy.

The Things You See and Hear. Jesus strengthens John's faith and the faith of his disciples by reporting the miracles He has performed. These are His witnesses [see John 5:36; 10:25]. But there is more to Jesus' answer than a list of His miraculous accomplishments, these are marks of the Messiah that were promised by the prophets.

Isaiah 35:4-6 ⁴Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense; he will come and save you.

⁽⁵⁾ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.

⁽⁶⁾ Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.

See also: Psalm 22:26; 72:12,13; 146:8; Isaiah 29:18; 42:6,7; 43:8; 61:1-3, 66:2; Zechariah 11:7;





John the Baptist Preaching

We find in Jesus' answer that comfort comes from the promises of the Scriptures. "Yes," is Jesus' answer to John's question, "Yes, I am the Promised Coming One."

Jesus had told the disciples that He had come to bring "peace, not a sword." [10:34] Now He promises a blessings to those who are not offended by the offense of the Gospel. "Blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." [11:6] Why was Jesus offensive? To whom was/is He offensive?

They Departed. When John's disciples depart Jesus begins to teach all those around who John is. He also was promised, which Jesus shows by quoting Malachi 3:1. We know that John was also promised in Isaiah 40:1ff and Malachi 4:4-6, the last verses of the Old Testament. John is a prophet, and even "more than a prophet." [11:9] We rightly consider John to be the last and greatest prophet of the Old Testament; he did with his hand what all the other prophets could only do with their mouth:

point to the Messiah. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." [John 1:29]

But the greatness of John is a comfort to us. "Assuredly, I say to you," says Jesus, "among those born of woman there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." [11:11] What a paradox: John is the greatest, and yet less than the least in the kingdom. Such is the privilege of the children of the kingdom, that they would see the suffering and death of Jesus, and would behold His resurrection. John would be the last martyr before the death of Jesus, cut off before He could see the glory of the Lord in the suffering face of Jesus. So it is that all of us in the church have what the prophets longs for, "and all these [Old Testament saints], having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us." [Hebrews 11:39-40]

The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence. Jesus has preached this sermon before, noting that the prophets were all rejected [5:11,12] and that the disciples would likewise be rejected [10:16ff]. John the Baptist was imprisoned for his testimony, and would be beheaded, and so goes the Lord Jesus.

More than all the prophets and apostles, the Lord Jesus was despised, rejected and killed. Such violence is still found in the church, or better yet, against the church. The devil never rests or stops seeking those Christians who he could devour. This is as Jesus promised, “In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” [John 16:33]



St John the Baptist, the Last of the Prophets

So Jesus ends His discourse on John by saying that He is the last of the prophets. “For all the

prophets and the law prophesied until John.” [11:13] St John the Baptist is the great hinge between the Old and the New, between the promise and the fulfillment, between the waiting and the rejoicing, the one who would come in the office of Elijah [Malachi 4:5]. “Let him who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Jesus Chastises This Generation

Jesus then takes opportunity to contrast Himself and John, and chastise the people who rejected them both. John came with severity and austerity, fasting and living in the wilderness, and they said he had a demon. Jesus came eating and drinking and He was called a glutton and drunkard, a friend of sinners. So Jesus tells a short parable, almost like a verse from a nursery rhyme, to explain their confused rejection of God's kingdom:

We played the flute for you,
And you did not dance;
We mourned for you,
And you did not lament.

Like the children who refused to play in the wedding, and then refused to play funeral. Their rejection of both John the Baptist and Jesus shows that their objections were only a cloak for their hypocritical unbelief. If it was true that they were repulsed by the Baptizer's asceticism, then they should have been attracted by Jesus' association with feasts and sinners. But the mind of the flesh cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God. [1 Corinthians 2:14] Those who reject John and Jesus were like the silly children who were upset when John wouldn't join the party, or when Jesus refused to mourn.

Lenski notes, “What they demand of John they condemned in Jesus; what they condemned in John they demand of Jesus. In reality, by both actions they condemned themselves.”

Jesus continues, “Wisdom is justified by her children,” or “and justified was wisdom from her works.” The divine wisdom of John and Jesus does not depend on the judgment or acceptance of this wicked and perverse generation, but on its children, its works. Just as Jesus' works were His word, His testimony to John, so do they testify that John and Jesus were both “sent from God.”