

“Go And Tell... This Generation”

Matthew 11:1-19

May 3, 2026

INTRO: WHICH OF YOUR BELIEFS ARE WRONG?

(How do you know? Who told you? Why don't you know?)

PRAYER

CONTEXT:

- Gospel of Matthew on The Gospel of Jesus Christ
- Matthew's exegetical outline: 5 core sections
- Transition point between section 2 & 3...
- Last time 11:1-3... Today we double down on doubt.

BIG IDEA:

It is impossible to over-state the importance of Christ, His cross, His grace, & His Gospel in each of our lives.

Doubting God is never ok, always sinful, often tragic, even eternally damning... unless & until personally & faithfully-fixed thru Christ's Gospel-grace, truth, & love!

PREVIEW:

1. Read ...to Hear.
2. Realize ...to Help.
3. Respond ...to Heal!

I. READ ...to Hear.

TEXT: Matthew 11:1-19

1When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.

2Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples **3**and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" **4**And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: **5**the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. **6**And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

7As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? **8**What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. **9**What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. **10**This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'

11Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. **12**From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. **13**For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, **14**and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. **15**He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

16"But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, **17**"'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'

18For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' **19**The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

II. REALIZE... to Help.

(Translational; Doubt-ful; Missional; Foundational; Gospel; Confrontational; Accountable)

**Privilege and responsibility
are 2 paramount themes
throughout chapter 11.**

A. **TRANSITIONAL** Introduction (v.1)

- a. Christ continues to *go and make disciples...*
- b. The problems of doubt, deny, & disobedience
- c. Culminates with the Parabolic Discourse (ch.13)

T/S: JB is in prison for righteousness vs. The Gospel

B. **DOUBT-FUL** John The Baptist (vv.2-3)

- a. Understanding biblical doubt:
- b. Jesus loves stumblers & stumblers love Him!

i. **Origins**

1. Burdens

Difficult Circumstances

Humanly speaking the *career* of **John** the Baptist had ended in disaster. He had been the fiery, independent, dramatic, confrontational, courageous man who preached exactly what needed to be preached, to whom it needed to be preached, and when it needed to be preached. He was fearless, aggressive, and faithful to the Lord in every way. He called sin sin and sinners sinners. And now he was in **prison** because of his faithfulness.

2. Buy-in Worldly Influence
3. Blind-spots Incomplete Revelation

Ignorance and unbelief always blind the eyes of men to the realities of the kingdom that are all around them.

4. Bad-thoughts Unfulfilled Expectations

JOHN THEREFORE EXPECTED JESUS TO TAKE "HIS WINNOWING FORK IN HIS HAND" AND START CLEARING THE THRESHING FLOOR AND BURNING UP THE CHAFF. HE EXPECTED JESUS TO DISPLAY THE BLAZING POWER OF ABSOLUTE, COMPLETE, AND WORLDWIDE JUDGMENT.

ii. **Dangers**

1. **SATAN**
2. **SIN**
3. **SLIPPERY SLOPE**

Hebrews 11:1 & 6

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen... Without faith, it is impossible to please God!

Romans 14:23

Whoever doubts is condemned... For whatever does not come from faith is sin!

- Doubt, like so many other aspects of life, is ultimately defined by its context, motive, & fruit.

Doubt is often the doorman for sinful disobedience!

Doubt is often the grease that lubricates the sinful machinery of man's demise.

Doubt is often the food that feeds the monster of sinful unbelief.

- c. Overcoming biblical doubt:
 - i. **Grace**
 - ii. **Faith**
 - iii. **Truth**
 - iv. **Love**
 - v. **Obedience**

C. **MISSIONAL** Christ's Reply (vv.4-6)

- a. ***“Jesus answered them...”***
 - i. See the grace & mercy in His responding.
 - ii. See the grace & mercy in His response!
 - iii. See the grace & mercy in His truth in love.
- b. ***“Go and tell”***
 - i. See the biblical & missional both/and here.
 - ii. Don't just go. Don't just tell. Go AND tell!
- c. ***“what you hear”***
 - i. Read 1 Timothy 4:16
 - ii. How important is your choice of teachers?
 - iii. How important is it to guard your ears?
- d. ***“and”***
- e. ***“what you see”***
 - i. Read, realize, & respond to Acts 1:8 now...
 - ii. Show/tell a miraculous Christ-like witness?

The Lord Jesus determined to give John a more direct and personal report of evidence. Luke tells us that... ***“at that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He granted sight to many who were blind”*** (7:20–21). Right on the spot and before their eyes, Jesus put on a display of miracles expressly for the personal benefit of John’s disciples and even more, for John himself.

- f. Jesus is saying: **“BE my witnesses!”**
 - i. *I’m fulfilling ALL the Law & Prophets...*
 - ii. *I’m fulfilling Genesis, Isaiah, Malachi...*
 - iii. *I’m even raising the dead (see Luke)*

- g. ***“...blessed is the one not offended by Me.”***
 - i. Divine blessing!
 - ii. Conditional phrase (*“the one”*)
 - iii. Faithfully obedient (*“not offended”*)
 - iv. The true, biblical & missional Messiah
 - v. Romans 1:16-18 says it all!

D. FOUNDATIONAL vs temporal... (vv.7-11a)

- a. Do not miss the Gospel-grace here...
- b. Do not miss the Gospel-mercy here...
- c. Do not miss the Gospel-truth here...
- d. Do not miss the Gospel-love here..
- e. Do not miss the Gospel witness here!
- f. **JESUS IS APPLYING MATTHEW 7:21-27**
- g. **JESUS IS PREPARING 1 COR. 3:10-15...**

- h. ***“What did you go out to see?”***
 - i. **Jesus preemptively questions doubting JB’s potential detractors & doubters!**
 - ii. Jesus endorses JB as foundationally firm!
 - iii. Jesus says JB is foundationally faithful.
 - iv. Jesus does NOT condone JB’s doubting.

- i. ***“What did you go out to see?”***
 - i. Jesus contrasts JB with the pharisees...
 - ii. Jesus distinguishes JB from the hirelings.
 - iii. Jesus is endorsing JB’s ministry (1 Jn. 3:18)

- j. ***“What did you go out to see?”***
 - i. Jesus declared JB’s biblical uniqueness
 - ii. *Jesus raised JB up above all born of woman*
 - iii. **Jesus did NOT condone JB’s doubting.**

E. GOSPEL Distinctives... (vv.11b-15)

- a. Old covenant Prophet(s) were awesome...
- b. *Jesus The Christ on John the Baptist...*
 - i. *Supernaturally womb identified...*
 - ii. *Only a 6 month ministry*
 - iii. *Never performed a miracle*
 - iv. *Contrast with Moses’ role*
 - v. *Contrast with Elijah’s miracles*
 - vi. *Contrast with Elisha’s 2X miracles*
 - vii. *Contrast with Daniel’s position*
 - viii. *Contrast with Jeremiah’s 50 years*
- c. Old covenant Prophet(s) were awesome...

- d. New covenant Christians are greater!
- e. KINGDOM CITIZENSHIP:
 - i. Condemns ANY & ALL other citizenships.
 - ii. The **kingdom's least > the world's best.**
 - iii. **"kingdom of heaven" (2X) IS AT WAR!**
 - iv. **We are warriors "with ears to hear..."**
 - v. **"let them hear"** is Christ's exhortation!
 - 1. **Not all ears that can hear do hear!**
 - 2. **Biblical hearing includes heeding...**
 - 3. Christians are not always Christ-like.
 - 4. **Missional hearing is miraculous...**
 - 5. **Active listeners usually hear best.**
 - a. Do you have ears that hear God?
 - b. Do you want to hear God?
 - c. Do you heed what you hear...?

This phrase calls for a response from the crowd and, at the same time, introduces Jesus' rebuke of Israel for rejecting John's role... and Christ's establishment of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus equates his ministry as Messiah with God's own arrival, another awe-inspiring revelation of his divine identity.

F. **CONFRONTATIONAL Christ... (vv.16-17)**

- a. Jesus confronts & rebukes this generation 3X
- b. We must not limit the scope of His exhortation
- c. Christ's 3 initial rebukes are centered around:
 - i. **Self-righteous self-absorption & pride**
 - ii. **Rejection of the Christ's marital grace...**
 - iii. **Not willing to have a funeral for self...**

G. **ACCOUNTABLE** Generations... (vv.18-19)

- a. The problem with people is in their hearts...
- b. Every generation is born in sin & selfishness...
- c. The problem is NOT with the good news but in & with the bad hearts.
- d. Christ closes here with 2 more rebukes:
 - i. You people denied JB...
 - 1. He came without...
 - 2. You called him demonic...
 - 3. Your unbelief is never satisfied!
 - ii. You people are denying Me...
 - 1. I came with...
 - 2. You called me shameful & sinful...
 - 3. Your unbelief is never satisfied!

Hardened hearts try to rationalize their decisions to reject the message by falsely accusing the messengers.

III. **RESPONDING... to Heal**

How should we respond for eternal, biblical, missional, global, cultural, familial, personal, & spiritual healing?

Let's apply God's Word!

"Go And Tell... This Generation"

(what you have heard & seen... of our miraculous Messiah!)

1. Messiah came to “go and tell” & He tells ALL who become His to do the same... it defines Christ-likeness.
2. Go and tell what you’ve heard from 2 Timothy 3:16-17
 - a. Genesis 1 & 3 then John 1 & 3...
 - b. Matthew 22:36-40
 - c. 1 Corinthians 10:31
 - d. Matthew 28:18-20
 - e. Acts 1:8
 - f. 1 Peter 5:8 / 2 Corinthians 11:14-15
 - g. Ephesians 6:10-20
 - i. See 1 Timothy 4:16 in light of the above
 - ii. See Matthew 7:15 & Acts 20:29 as well
 - iii. Beware the false teachers & shepherds...

*** Think about our children’s “Telephone Game.” ***
3. Go and tell what you have seen...
 - a. The grace of God vs. the goodness of men...
 - b. The Miracles of God vs. the morals of men...
 - c. The Gospel of God vs. the good news of men...
 - d. The dangers of liars vs. the disciples of the Lord...
 - e. The dangers of warfare vs. deceptive worship...
 - f. The dangers of religion vs. divine relationships...
4. Only Christ was perfect... everyone else sins & stumbles.
 - a. 1st John 2:6
 - b. Romans 8:1
 - c. Christians live in this glorious narrow way tension!
5. Christ alone can make a person righteous (2 Cor. 15:21).

6. Without Christ's righteousness, hell awaits every soul.

7. Every true Christian is a work in progress!

CLOSE:

**BIBLICAL UNBELIEF IS NEVER SATISFIED
WITHOUT GOD'S GRACE RECEIVED BY FAITH.**

Discouragement left to fester leads to doubt which leads to discontentedness which leads to disconnection which leads to disobedience which leads to denying & defying Christ.

- Look at/for what God IS doing vs what we think is missing or wrong!
- Do not be ashamed or offended by God's providence!
- Doubt is Satan's #1 weapon that he uses against those being blessed by God.

Remember: doubt is the Devil's doorman & onramp to unbelief... & his first domino to drop on the trail to destruction!

- *Make God's ways your preferred ways – no matter what!*
- Doubting-Unbelief is ALWAYS sinful, NEVER satisfied, often tragic, & ETERNALLY damning... without Christ's truth, love, mercy, & amazing grace.

• *Let me tell you what I heard & saw this today!*

PRAYER

•

STUDY NOTES:

Jesus was & does choose & use the ordinary-underwhelming “you & me’s” of this world to BE miraculously & missionally transformed into His extraordinary & overwhelming overcomers in this world & His kingdom!

NIV Life Application Commentary:

Matthew 11:1-30

I. ORIGINAL MEANING:

ALTHOUGH JESUS GAVE authority to his disciples to go to Israel (10:1–7) and later to all nations (10:16–23; 28:18–20), he has not yet transferred his work to them completely.

He now himself goes to Israel to teach & preach.

HE STILL CONFINES HIS MINISTRY TO “THE TOWNS OF GALILEE” (11:1), but soon the populace will have had their opportunity to hear the gospel message (cf. 4:13–17; 11:20–24).

Then Jesus will expand his ministry throughout the surrounding cities of Israel and the Gentile regions (15:21–34). Restrained resistance to Jesus’ ministry has appeared occasionally (9:3–4), but

now overt opposition begins.

The altercation begins innocently enough through questions from John the Baptist (11:2–19), but it quickly escalates into opposition and hostility from the Jewish religious leaders (12:1–45).

JOHN THE BAPTIST QUESTIONS JESUS (11:1–6)

TRANSITION (11:1).

THE conclusion to the Mission Discourse is signaled by the stylized formula, “*After Jesus had finished*” (11:1; cf. 7:28; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).

This formula also serves as a transition to the next section of narrative (chs. 11–12).

Matthew says nothing about the Twelve’s actual mission (cf., by contrast, Mark 6:30; Luke 9:10).

The next time the disciples appear in this Gospel, they are accompanying Jesus on his short trip.

John questions Jesus through his disciples (11:2–3).

Early in the narrative Matthew noted the arrest of John the Baptist as the impulse for Jesus to begin his Galilean ministry (4:12).

John had been imprisoned by Herod Antipas at the fortress Machaerus, where ultimately he was put to death (see 14:1–14). As he awaited his fate, John heard about “the deeds of the Messiah” (11:2; NIV “what Christ was doing”), presumably the teaching (chs. 5–7), miracles (chs. 8–9) and mission (ch. 10) in Galilee.

Matthew uses the title “the Christ” or “the Messiah” (*ho Christos*) for the first time since his opening chapters (see 1:1, 16, 17, 18; 2:4), making explicit that **John wanted clarification about Jesus’ identity and ministry as the Messiah.**

John sends some of his disciples to Jesus. These disciples were committed followers who had gathered around him to assist him in his ministry as the prophet preparing the way for the Messiah, who would usher in the messianic age (John 1:35–42; 3:22–4:3; see comments on Matt. 9:14). They apparently stayed as close to John as they could while he was in prison, and evidently John was able to communicate with them.

Along with John they were becoming increasingly alarmed as to the future of the messianic program. Earlier they had questioned Jesus about the incongruity of their own practice of fasting with Jesus’ disciples lack of participation in that activity (see comments on 9:14–17).

Armed with John’s question, they travel from the fortress Machaerus north through Perea alongside the Jordan River, crossing into Galilee near Capernaum (where Jesus was ministering)—**nearly a hundred miles on foot.**

John instructed his disciples to ask of Jesus, *“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”* The expression “the one who was to come” is an allusion to the Messiah, the Coming One, the expression John used to refer to Jesus at the beginning of the public ministry (3:11).

This phrase draws on expressions such as “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD” in Psalm 118:26 and recalls Zechariah’s prophecy, “See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech. 9:9)—the prophecy Jesus fulfilled at his entry to Jerusalem (Matt. 21:4).

John’s question seems out of character with his earlier bold and courageous declaration of Jesus as the Coming One (cf. 3:1–14).

Some commentators have explained John’s question as intended not for himself but for his disciples’ clarification. But Jesus directs his answer back to John himself. Others suggest that John’s question reflects a state of depression that has come on him from being imprisoned. But the question implies more concern for the arrival of Messiah than for his own condition.

Most likely, John is concerned because his present experience does not match the message he gave about the Coming One’s arrival, which promised blessing on those who repent and judgment on those who do not.

It is natural for John to experience perplexity as he languishes in prison, much as had earlier prophets such as Elijah (e.g., 1 Kings 19:1–18) when their human experience did not fully correspond with God’s message through them. John rightly expected the Messiah to be a judging figure, so events are not unfolding as he anticipated. **The divine judgment and time of messianic blessing do not seem to have arrived as he projected.**

Jesus is not carrying out judgment; rather, he seems to be concentrating on healing and helping. John needs to have his understanding of the messianic program reconfirmed.

Jesus responds to John’s questions (11:4–6).

Jesus reiterates to John's disciples that the way his ministry has unfolded (chs. 8–9) is in line with the prophetic promises.

In Jesus' ministry are fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies that described the coming messianic ministry in these very terms: The blind receive sight (9:27–32; Isa. 29:18; 35:5), the lame walk (Matt. 15:30–31; cf. Isa. 35:6), those who have leprosy are cured (Matt. 8:1–4; cf. Isa. 53:4), the deaf hear (Mark 7:32–37; cf. Isa. 29:18–19; 35:5), the dead are raised (Matt. 10:8; cf. Isa. 26:18–19), and the good news is preached to the poor (Matt. 5:3; cf. Isa. 61:1).

Therefore,

Jesus explicitly confirms that in his ministry the messianic age of blessing has arrived.

But the implications are even more profound because the miracles accomplished by Jesus fulfill expectations previously associated with God and the eschatological Day

of the Lord. Jesus indicates that he has
come in the place of God performing
the work of God.

So,

**JESUS CONFIRMS FOR JOHN THAT
THE BLESSINGS OF THE MESSIANIC
AGE HAVE ARRIVED WITH HIS
MINISTRY.**

*But/(AND) Jesus likewise mildly rebukes John and his
disciples by calling them to see the bigger picture
in his ministry: ***“Blessed is the man who does not
fall away on account of me.”****

**THIS BEATITUDE (SEE COMMENTS ON 5:3) FUNCTIONS
AS BOTH A WARNING AND A CHALLENGE.**

- It is a warning to those who fail to understand correctly Jesus' identity and ministry and so fall away from faith in his saving activity.
- It is a challenge to those with eyes of faith to stand firm in what God has revealed about Jesus in John's own message and in Jesus' ministry.

John and his disciples need to see the bigger picture of God's timing and manifestation of blessing and judgment in Jesus' messianic ministry.

On the one hand, the Old Testament prophets often telescoped near and far events in God's program, so that future events appear alongside of present events. John and his disciples should look for God's timing of the complete fulfillment of blessing and judgment in Jesus' present and future ministry (cf. 24:36–42). On the other hand, each of the prophecies to which Jesus alludes as being fulfilled in his ministry includes in the immediate context references to both blessing and judgment (Isa. 35:4–6; 61:1–2).

John and his disciples must use eyes of faith to recognize both blessing and judgment. Jesus has brought the blessing of healing and good news to the poor and oppressed (11:4–5), yet those who reject his ministry and message face certain judgment, which even now is pronounced by Jesus (11:20–24; cf. John 3:31–36; 5:25–35).

Jesus' Tribute to John the Baptist (11:7–19)

AFTER MILDLY REBUKING John for not seeing with eyes of faith the full picture of his messianic program, Jesus speaks to the crowds about John, giving a glowing tribute to this greatest of those born of women (11:11–15).

HE THEN REBUKES THE CROWDS AND THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS FOR NOT RESPONDING TO JOHN'S MINISTRY AS WELL AS HIS OWN (11:16–19).

John is more than a prophet (11:7–10).

John was immensely influential among the people of Israel (3:1–6).

The crowds may have heard of his questions about Jesus' messianic identity, and if John was experiencing doubt, they may be following his lead and be experiencing doubt as well. So, **Jesus compels them to recall the tremendous impact that John's ministry had originally had among them.**

He begins his tribute by inducing the crowds to specify correctly John's identity and mission, which in turn will lead them to an accurate understanding of Jesus' own identity and mission.

Jesus asks, "What did you go out into the desert to see?" **John's call to repentance was extraordinary, as throngs of people continually went out to him (3:5).**

Through three rhetorical questions Jesus gives the crowds contrasting options about John, which will force them to acknowledge his true identity and mission.

- (1) ***Was John a "reed swayed by the wind?"***
 - a. **The metaphor of tall reed grasses growing along the shores of the Jordan suggests weakness and vacillation with every changing wind of opportunity or challenge.**
 - b. **John, by contrast, languishes in prison because of the strength of his resolve to confront every challenge and speak the truth.**

(2) **Was John “a man dressed in fine clothes?”**

- a. The expected answer is “Of course not!”
- b. **John consistently lived an ascetic lifestyle in keeping with his call for repentance.**
- c. John’s question about Jesus did not come from materialistic opportunism.

(3) **THE CROWDS SHOULD RECALL THAT THEY WENT TO THE DESERT TO SEE THE FIRST PROPHET SENT FROM GOD IN FOUR CENTURIES.**

- a. **John was like the Old Testament prophets because he was God’s spokesperson who called the nation to repentance** and...
- b. **John declared God’s program of salvation.**

But John was more than any prophet of the Old Testament because he was the one about whom a prophecy had been given—the prophet who would announce the arrival of the Messiah and the inbreaking of the kingdom of heaven.

Because Malachi 3:1 refers to preparing *God’s* way, Jesus dramatically implies his own divine status,

although it is doubtful that the crowds or even Jesus’ disciples understand that distinction at this point in his ministry.

John’s greatness and the greatness of the messianic kingdom (11:11).

JESUS CONTINUES TO DEFEND JOHN BY POINTING TO THE GREATNESS OF HIS MINISTRY, YET HE GIVES A SURPRISING TWIST BY POINTING TO THE GREATNESS OF THOSE IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN:

“I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

The phrase “among those born of women” contrasts ordinary human birth (Job 14:1; 15:14; 25:4) with the birth of those born anew into the kingdom of heaven. The contrast is not between human accomplishments but between eras. The arrival of the kingdom of heaven ushers in an incomparably greater era than any preceding it.

John is a transitional figure who has prepared the way for the Coming One, but Jesus implies here that John will not live to see the full arrival of the kingdom.

Jesus’ institution of the new covenant in his blood is a dividing line. The complex of events including the cross, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Spirit at Pentecost brings the arrival of the kingdom’s redemptive life, by which time John was executed.

John is the greatest of those born during the Old Testament era because of his crucial role in preparing the way for the Messiah and his kingdom.

His mission was great because of the greatness of the One he introduced.

But those in the kingdom are greater because of their privilege actually to have entered it.

Violence and the kingdom of heaven (11:12).

Jesus continues his tribute to John by harking back to the beginning stages of his announcement that the kingdom of heaven will soon arrive in the ministry of the Coming One: *“From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.”*

This saying of Jesus has been widely debated,

with the difficulty arising primarily because the **verb *biazo*** (NIV *“forcefully advancing”*) and the **noun *biastes*** (NIV *“forceful men”*) can be taken in either a positive or a negative way.⁸

The interpretations come down to whether the two clauses are to be interpreted positively, or negatively, or a combination of both.

(1) On the positive side, some suggest that Jesus is pointing to the powerful advance of the kingdom and the zeal and courage of those who dare to accept the invitation to enter.

(2) ON THE NEGATIVE SIDE, OTHERS CONTEND THAT JESUS IS POINTING TO THE VIOLENCE THAT THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS SUFFERED AT THE HANDS OF EVIL, VIOLENT MEN.¹⁰

(3) Still others suggest that Jesus is pointing to a combination (both/and) of positive and negative features—the kingdom is advancing powerfully, but evil men are attacking it violently.

VIEW (2) IS SUPPORTED BY THE FACT THAT THE NOUN *BIASTES* IS NORMALLY, IF NOT ALWAYS, RENDERED IN A NEGATIVE WAY TO DESIGNATE “VIOLENT MEN.”

Since the verb *biazo* and the noun *biastes* are related, Matthew intends them to reflect a parallel expression by Jesus, meaning that both clauses should be interpreted more naturally with the same force.

THUS, IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEGATIVE CIRCUMSTANCES OF JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE RISING OPPOSITION TO HIS OWN MINISTRY, JESUS POINTS TO THE ONGOING OPPOSITION THAT THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS ENCOUNTERED SINCE THE DAYS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST. THE FIRST CLAUSE PROBABLY INDICATES OPPOSITION FROM THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT GENERALLY, WHILE THE SECOND CLAUSE PROBABLY POINTS TO THE FORCES OF SPECIFIC EVIL PEOPLE, SUCH AS HEROD ANTIPAS, WHO HAS EVEN NOW IMPRISONED JOHN.

The saying foreshadows the gathering opposition to Jesus, which will come to a climax in his arrest, trial, and execution by the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

John and Elijah (11:13–15).

Jesus' tribute to John peaks with a powerful testimony to the role John has played.

Jesus used the expression "Law and the Prophets" to refer to the entire Old Testament revelation (5:17); now he reverses their order, perhaps emphasizing the prophetic role of both the Old Testament and John himself:

"For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John."

John is the culmination of a long history of prophecy that looked forward to the arrival of the messianic kingdom. That prophetic hope has been realized in John's preparation for Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom of heaven.

Thus, Jesus turns to the crowds and announces, "And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come." Malachi prophesied that Elijah would prepare the way for Messiah (Mal. 3:1; 4:5).

Malachi did not imply a reincarnation of Elijah or that Elijah would return to life in a whirlwind the way that he left. Perhaps that is why John earlier had denied that he was Elijah (John 1:21).

John fulfilled Malachi's prophecy in that at his conception he was designated as the one who would minister in the "spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17).

For those who receive John's ministry, he is the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy (see Matt. 17:10–13).

THEREFORE, JESUS SUMMONS THE CROWDS TO EXERCISE FAITH IN BOTH JOHN'S PREPARATORY MESSAGE AND JESUS' IDENTITY AS THE MESSIANIC DELIVERER: "He who has ears, let him hear."

This phrase calls for a response from the crowd and, at the same time, introduces Jesus' rebuke of Israel generally for rejecting John's role of preparing for Jesus Messiah and the establishment of the kingdom of heaven.

This call to recognize John as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy is even more dramatic when we recall that Elijah would prepare for the coming of the Lord himself in the great and terrible day of the Lord (cf. Mal. 3:1; 4:5–6).

Jesus equates his ministry as Messiah with God's own arrival, another awe-inspiring revelation of his divine identity.

The discontented generation (11:16–19).

JESUS NOW REBUKES THE PRESENT GENERATION.

The expression “this generation” recurs often in Matthew’s Gospel pejoratively to designate the current generation of Israel’s people—including the crowds and the religious leaders—who have rejected John’s and Jesus’ ministries (cf. related expressions, such as “a wicked and adulterous generation”).

This is not a blanket condemnation of Israel, because Jesus’ own disciples are Jews and large crowds of Jews still follow him around (cf. 14:13–21), but **IT POINTS SADLY TO THE FACT THAT ONLY A SMALL MINORITY OF THE CURRENT GENERATION WILL ENTER THE NARROW GATE TO THE KINGDOM BY ACCEPTING JOHN’S AND JESUS’ INVITATION (7:13–14).**

Jesus taps into the current cultural setting by drawing on

games that children played in the marketplace.

In many villages the marketplace was the regular playground for children while their parents shopped, bartered, and exchanged local news.

But **JESUS INTRIGUINGLY COMPARES THE INNOCENCE OF CHILD’S PLAY WITH THE DEVIUSNESS OF THIS GENERATION OF ADULTS WHO ARE PLAYING AN EVIL GAME.**

The difference is between childlike, which is positive (cf. 18:1–5), and childish, which is essentially selfish, petty, & insistent on having one’s own way.

When children invite other children to join them in playing games, childish children insist on having their own way. The current generation is like such children, who continually want to set the agenda of games. They are like pouting, petulant children who criticize other children because they wouldn't go along with their agenda.

When they announce to everyone by playing a flute that the game they want to play is "wedding," they become upset when other children don't go along by dancing. Then when they change the game and announce a funeral game by singing a "dirge," they are upset when the other children don't immediately fall in line by putting on a face of mourning.

Selfish childishness insists on having its own way.

LIKewise, THIS GENERATION REJECTS THE INVITATION TO THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN BECAUSE JOHN AND JESUS DON'T PLAY THE GAME THAT THEY WANT.

They rejected John because he did not dance when they wanted to be merry, and they are rejecting Jesus because he does not mourn when they want to fast (e.g., 9:14–17). Like hardhearted sinners, the generation of Jesus' day expected John and Jesus to conform to their expectations and refused to allow God's agenda to alter their own.

"For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' " The expression "neither eating nor drinking" contrasts everyday, carefree indulgence with John's rigorous personalization of his message of repentance in the light of the soon-arriving kingdom of heaven (see comments on 3:1–11).

THOSE WHO REJECTED JOHN'S MESSAGE INTERPRETED HIS RUGGED APPEARANCE AND ASCETIC DESERT HABITS AS PROOF THAT HE WAS DEMON-POSSESSED, LIKE THE DEMONIACS WHO CHOSE TO LIVE IN TOMBS OR IN THE DESERT (8:28; 12:43).

The same people will also accuse Jesus of being demon-possessed when he exorcises a demon on the Sabbath, bringing him into conflict with their Sabbath rulings (12:24).

It is the way of those with hardened hearts to try to rationalize their decision to reject the message by falsely accusing the messenger.

Reversing the accusation, when Jesus came eating and drinking, they accused him of being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners’ ” (11:19).

By referring to himself once again as the “Son of Man” Jesus gives another reference to his unique messianic identity as the great physician who sought out those who needed his healing touch of salvation from sin (see comments on 8:20).

It is a hardhearted generation that distorts Jesus’ salvific association with those who need spiritual healing (see comments on 5:46; 9:9–13) **into an accusation of him being a rapacious and inebriated party animal.**

But, as Jesus, says, **“wisdom is proved right by her actions.”**

Wisdom (*sophia*) was often personified in Judaism as a woman giving her children practical guidance in everyday affairs (Prov. 8; cf. Wisd. Sol. 7–8; Sir. 51:13–30).

The personification exemplified the way in which those who are guided by God’s practical approach to life make right decisions.

The saying here appears to be proverbial. Some interpret it to be Christological, with Jesus identified as Wisdom incarnate. Elsewhere in the New Testament Jesus is referred to as “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24, 30), and

the message of the gospel is “God’s wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:7), which has become reality through Jesus’ death on the cross (1 Cor. 2:8).

In this view, **AS WISDOM INCARNATE, JESUS’ DEEDS, INCLUDING THOSE CRITICIZED BY HIS OPPONENTS, WILL ULTIMATELY VINDICATE HIM.**

However, since the emphasis in the passage is not primarily Christological but salvation-historically attuned to the developing ministries of John and Jesus, it is better to understand “wisdom” here in its more usual sense in association with God’s wisdom. God’s wisdom will be “proved right” (or “vindicated”) by her actions in the ministries and lifestyles of John and Jesus.

Wisdom is the application of knowledge to life in such a way that a person’s activities are a concrete example of a life lived well in God’s presence.

IF THIS GENERATION HAD TAKEN JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS FOR WHO THEY SAID THEY WERE, THE KNOWLEDGE OF THEM AS FORERUNNER AND MESSIAH WOULD HAVE BEEN PROVED RIGHT BY THEIR ACTIONS, AS SEEMINGLY OPPOSITE AS WERE THEIR LIFESTYLES.

This interpretation appears to explain best its occurrence in this context.

II. BRIDGING CONTEXTS:

WITH JESUS' MESSIANIC message (chs. 5–7) and miraculous ministry (chs. 8–9) established and the disciples' mission to Israel commissioned (ch. 10), Matthew tracks a change.

Crowds still follow, but the mood is different.

There is a beginning dissatisfaction with Jesus, which is an ominous harbinger of a swing to reject Jesus as Israel's Messiah.

In chapter 11 we find a number of questions raised about Jesus' identity and mission, while in ch. 12 we find outright opposition.

Israel has been privileged to be given the first opportunity in salvation history to receive Messiah, and Jesus will continue to give them further opportunity to acknowledge him as their Messiah, but the time is drawing near for accountability to their decision, either for or against him.

Privilege and responsibility are 2 paramount themes throughout chapter 11.

Incomparable privilege of bearing witness to Jesus Messiah:

The culmination of God's salvation history has occurred in the deeds of the Messiah, with the generation of that time being one of the most, if not *the* most, privileged in all of history.

(1) They were privileged to witness these events unfold. Jesus points to his activities of healing and preaching as explicit confirmation that he is indeed the Messiah (11:4–5). Both the crowds and the religious leaders of the cities that witnessed these miraculous messianic deeds were also among the most privileged (11:20–23).

(2) That generation was the most privileged because they had been honored to witness John the Baptist's ministry.

John should be recognized as a great man in his own right (11:11).

He was the first prophet to speak in Israel in hundreds of years.

He was an immensely important historical figure...

He was the link between God's saving activity in the Old Testament and his saving activity in the ministry of Jesus Messiah.

The people were privileged to witness this one who was more than a prophet, the one who himself was privileged to fulfill Malachi's prophecy of Elijah preparing the way for God's arrival.

(3) The honor that John had was almost nil in comparison to those with the faith and courage to respond to Jesus' messianic ministry and enter the kingdom of heaven (11:11).

It was a great privilege to belong to this era of God's salvation history. But beyond that privilege was the even greater one of being in relationship to Jesus, to have experienced forgiveness of sins and transformation of regeneration by the Spirit (26:26-29), to belong to the church, the body of Christ (16:18-19), and to be involved in the Great Commission to bring the nations to Jesus as new disciples (28:18-20).

Greatness according to Jesus is not primarily related to accomplishment, which is the prevailing yardstick of the world.

Jesus measures greatness simply in one's acquisition of the redemptive work of Jesus and one's service to others in advancing the cause of the kingdom (cf. 18:1–4; 20:20–28).

Privilege in the kingdom of heaven does not come from jockeying for positions of greatness but by being a member of the new order that Jesus brings and bearing witness to him. **JESUS OFFERS PRIVILEGE TO ALL WHO RECEIVE IT.**

(4) This generation was honored to be the first witnesses of the astonishing revelation of the relationship between Father and Son and now to be included in that relationship.

Father and Son from eternity had a uniquely transparent knowledge of one another (11:27).

They intensely and intuitively knew each other's essential being and shared each other's thoughts, emotions, and will.

And with the Incarnation, Jesus' mission was to reveal that relationship to humanity and include in it those who dared to respond to such an astounding revelation.

Miracle of miracles, those who enter this relationship will find rest from the human toil of trying to figure this whole thing out on their own.

We enter into a discipleship to Jesus in which we learn from him directly.

Jeremiah had prophesied of this sort of new covenant life:

***I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,'***

*because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.*
(Jer. 31:33–34)

Isaiah too prophesied of a coming day for Israel when they would experience a relationship with God in which he would give direct guidance to their daily lives:

Although the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression, He, your Teacher will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher. And your ears will hear a word behind you, “This is the way, walk in it,” whenever you turn to the right or to the left. (Isa. 30:20–21 NASB)

The Old Testament theme of God with his people finds explicit fulfillment in the relationship of Jesus with those privileged to undertake the easy yoke and light burden of discipleship to him.

Do we think of discipleship to Jesus in this way?

Do we understand how much of a privilege it is to be a part of the kingdom of heaven?

I suspect that too often we take for granted our relationship with Jesus, our peace with the Father, and the reality of the church as the body of Christ.

We may even forget that it was out of God’s voluntary great love and sacrifice that our current spiritual

existence is even possible, and that the nature of this existence is greater than any that came before Jesus.

This information should encourage us to take the most advantage of the benefits of kingdom discipleship to Jesus by fully realizing who we were meant to be as human beings—those who fully love and serve God and others out of a renewed and loving spirit, not from compulsion (cf. chs. 5–7). This should also energize us to pursue intentionally our spiritual development.

The unavoidable responsibility that accompanies privilege:

The second major theme of this chapter is that with privilege and opportunity come unavoidable responsibility.

When we witness the acts of the Messiah, our responsibility is to respond humbly in belief.

John and his disciples were privileged to prepare the way for Jesus, but that privilege brought personal responsibility to continue humbly to believe in Jesus Messiah's mission, even when things weren't going as they anticipated.

But it also brought them a wider responsibility, because...

if they did not in faith continue to hail Jesus as Messiah, they would lead others astray.

With the advantage of witnessing John's and Jesus' ministries came the unavoidable responsibility to exercise one's will (11:14), to open one's ears to hear (11:15), and to respond to the message that John fulfilled the prophecy about Elijah coming to prepare for God's arrival and the Day of the Lord (cf. 11:10; Mal. 3:1; 4:5–6). But instead, that generation childishly demanded their own agenda, refusing both John's and Jesus' message and libelously condemning both messengers (11:16–19). But God's wisdom in salvation history will prove this wicked generation wrong, and they will bear the full responsibility for rejecting God's messengers.

III. CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

REST.

Of the many different types of people who gather together in Christian worship each week, one group deserves special attention: those who come to the Lord with a questioning heart in need of rest.

It may be a person who suffers at work under an uncaring boss; it may be a person in a marriage with an uncaring or cheating spouse; it may be a faithful parent with a spiritually wayward child; or it may be a young person who has lost a friend in a tragic death.

Oftentimes these kinds of people will come into a worship setting to question—sometimes respectfully, other times not—the Lord’s control of life.

They are seeking some kind of resolution in their heart to a big question in their lives for which they have no answer and for which they may even doubt that God has an answer.

What they need is rest.

It is the wise pastor or youth worker or Sunday school teacher who recognizes how many people come to church with this need of rest. Jesus extends the same invitation to rest to each, though not all will respond to him in the same way.

(1) Experience and expectations.

Some come with questions because their experience does not match up with how they expect God's will to be carried out. As God's prophet preparing the way for the Messiah, John the Baptist had special revelation about Jesus' messianic identity. However, his present experience of being in prison awaiting execution did not jive with his expectations of the judgment that the Messiah's arrival would bring.

Jesus' reply forced John to look at the facts of his ministry and adjust his expectations to fit God's activity (11:1–6).

Many people can relate to John's situation.

The young mother of three children whose husband is diagnosed with terminal cancer may plead with God to understand how he could leave her with this unexpected, lonely burden. The youth pastor who is unexpectedly forced out of the church by the new senior pastor may question what it really means to follow God's leading. The veteran missionary couple who have sacrificed throughout their lives to spread God's message only to discover that their denominational retirement fund has unexpectedly been dissolved may question their own wisdom and God's provision. These are just three real-life situations that come to mind; each of us can think of dozens of others where our own experience does not match what we expected from following God's leading.

From Jesus' reply to John's question we may infer three guidelines to such questions:

- (a) Jesus' reply displays compassion for John's circumstances and suffering**, which is always a necessary element to be included in any of our responses to those whose questions stem from suffering. The young wife and mother whose husband died of cancer needed years of compassionate care by our community of faith, which gave her the strength to trust God's wisdom even in the most difficult circumstances.
- (b) Jesus did not allow John's current climate of questioning to cancel out John's prior,**

lifetime courageous ministry. Jesus' tribute to John may have been the reminder he needed to call himself back to the message that he had preached for so long. The youth pastor ousted from his former position needed to be reminded that even if he is not appreciated by one person, that does not cancel out the thousands of lives that he touched throughout his years of ministry. He needs to learn from this difficult experience, but not allow it to cancel out the memory of the effectiveness of his past ministry or deter him from future ministry.

(c) Perhaps most important, Jesus pointed to the fulfillment of Scripture in his healing and preaching ministry. **JOHN'S EXPECTATIONS MUST CONTINUALLY BE GUIDED BY THE REALITY OF GOD'S WORD.** The retired missionary couple had leaned on God's Word throughout their career, and it is what brought them back to a realistic understanding of God's purposes in their lives. **Even though humans failed them, God's Word promised that he would be faithful to them, and they found remarkable peace in the middle of their dilemma.** As a result, the Christian community responded with an outpouring of love and support for them, by which God was proven once again to be faithful in their lives.

I should add one additional element that jolts me as I read this passage. On the one hand, John's question reassures us that if this great prophet has questions, it's all right for us to have questions as well (NO! NOBODY'S SIN AUTHORIZES US TO SIN – PERIOD! – JDP).

I need to be honest when I encounter situations that tax my faith or my understanding and be able to express when my experience baffles my expectations (YES – BUT THAT IS DIFFERENT – JDP). This is where it is especially important to have colleagues and confidants who understand and can help us through situations that we may not have encountered before and which catch us unexpectedly off-guard.

Jesus acted as a stalwart friend to John in this situation.

But, on the other hand, **we may have the potential to lead others astray with our questions.**

Jesus mildly rebukes (OXYMORON... - JDP) John for not seeing clearly the fulfillment of Scripture in his ministry (11:6).

If John continues to allow his circumstances to take his eyes off of the reality of God's activity in Jesus' ministry, he will not only stumble himself but will almost certainly continue to lead his own disciples astray and the crowds who venerated him as God's prophet.

There are times when we may need to endure silently our circumstances and trust God's leading.

I've seen Christian leaders virtually destroy their ministries because they bring home every detail of their ministry to their spouse, needing a sympathetic ear to whom they can ventilate their struggles. One friend did this so regularly that he and his wife came to despise the people of their ministry because they only spoke of the bad, virtually never sharing together the good. They repeated this in their last two callings and are now out of that ministry.

Our present experiences exert a powerful influence on the way we view God's activities in our lives and in the lives of others.

We will find the fortitude to endure when we experience compassion, respect, and a clear understanding of God's will according to his Word.

(2) Agendas and motives.

There are also those whose personal agenda for God's work causes them to question and to distort the motives of God's messengers.

Jesus compares the current generation to children who stubbornly demand that other children play the game they want, and when they won't go along, they slander their character.

**THERE WAS NO WAY OF PLEASING THAT GENERATION,
BECAUSE ULTIMATELY THEY DID NOT WANT TO**

**SUBMIT THEIR OWN RELIGIOUS AGENDAS
TO GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION.**

John was too ascetically religious,
and Jesus was not pious enough.

The response of this generation suggests a couple of points:

- (a) As convinced as we may be about our own agendas for what we believe to be the right way of doing God's work, having a healthy personal humility allows room for God to adjust our agendas.
- (b) **The religious leaders and even the crowds missed, and even distorted, the message of both John and Jesus because of their stubborn refusal to hear God's voice in their messages.**

One of my colleagues has been a leader in evangelical academia and scholarship for over forty years, and he is firm in his doctrine and his understanding of the way in which ministry and academia should be conducted. It would be quite an undertaking for someone to try to change his views of the kingdom or how leadership within the church and school should be accomplished. Yet what keeps him continually alert to grow in his understanding of God's Word and work is his deep-seated humility. **He would rather ask my opinion on an issue than demand that I hear his.** This does not suggest that we cannot have a healthy skepticism about suggestions or have a healthy confidence in what God has taught us. But it does suggest that **we need to have hearts that are soft enough to be receptive to Jesus and the ministry he brings to us through others.**

(b) In Jesus words, "But wisdom is proved right by her actions" (11:19), **he gives the comforting assurance of being**

vindicated in the midst of rejection. Jesus and John were both rejected, and those who follow Jesus now may experience rejection.

JESUS CONTINUALLY LAYS OUT THE HARDSHIP OF THOSE WHO FOLLOW HIM.

However, there is a level of vindication that will become self-evident in the deeds of the individual, and ultimately in the hands of a just God, that should give us strength and confidence.

When we are confident of the truth of God's Word & follow that truth, the truth itself will vindicate our actions.

Obviously this needs to be tempered with the points above, that we must be careful of prideful attachment to our own agendas. But when lived out with healthy humility, we can find confidence in contending for the truth of God's Word.

(3) *Smugness and a hardened heart.*

The self-serving agenda of those who question the motives of the messengers eventually leads them to reject Jesus, and the smugness of their hardened heart leads them to impending eternal judgment.

This was the fate of people in Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (11:20–24), and it is the fate of those today whose privileged position leads them to question Jesus' identity and message. **This is the sad story often found within liberal Christian academia, where scholars may have been raised in churches where they confessed Jesus as Savior but whose**

increasing secularism leads them into a profound skepticism about Jesus.

New Testament scholar **Robert Funk**, founder of the infamous Jesus Seminar, tells of his own journey, which led him from a youth where he confessed Jesus as his personal Savior, to the point where in his early adulthood he rejected a life of ministry and later ultimately rejected Jesus as any kind of divine Savior. **He prefers instead to create a picture of Jesus that conforms more comfortably with his modernist agenda, smugly contending that those who continue to believe in the Jesus of the New Testament and the creeds of the church are “compliant, mindless adherents of the received tradition.”** His is a sad commentary.

A very different New Testament scholar, **Dale Bruner**, warns all who have had the privilege of experiencing the risen Christ’s miraculous presence to see whether we have given him his rightful place in our lives. Capernaum seems to have had a sort of town motto based on Isaiah 14:13, “lifted up to the skies” (11:23), indicating perhaps a sense of civic pride in having Jesus’ ministry based in their city, but they smugly rejected him as their Messiah.

In the same way, modern countries that have been privileged to experience Jesus’ miraculous presence through the work of the church and Word and who may even boast, “In God We Trust,” as we do in America, are called to account for what we have done with Jesus.

Bruner writes:

Christian countries are in special trouble on judgment day, not because Jesus has not really been in their communities but because he has.

Jesus' presence, without change, can lead to a damnation deeper than Sodom's....

Capernaum stands for all self-conscious Christianity, for all Christianity smug in its possession of Jesus, in its being the center of Jesus' work....

Jesus is not always impressed.

It is going to go better in the judgment day for notorious pagans than for self-satisfied saints.

The sum of the matter is this: Christians should take Jesus seriously. When they do, they escape judgment; when they do not, they invite it.

These are serious words, but no less serious than Jesus' warning to the cities that had been privileged to witness his ministry but then rejected him out of their own smugness and hardened heart.

(4) Weariness and rest.

Finally, **there are those who have eagerly desired an intimate relationship with God, but by following the practices of the self-righteous religious leaders, they have only become weary and increasingly burdened.**

Jesus invites them to know true rest, for their weariness and burdens can only be released by rest in Jesus' yoke of discipleship (11:28–30).

Ironically, we find ultimate rest in the easy yoke and light burden of discipleship.

There seems to be something counterintuitive to finding rest in a way of discipleship that demands the highest commitment imaginable, where seeking the kingdom of heaven is to be placed before personal comfort and where we are guaranteed rejection by those whose hearts are hardened to the message of the kingdom. However, this yoke is what Jesus offers to us as being the greatest privilege imaginable.

From the text and from John's situation at least four reasons for his doubt can be seen—reasons that also cause many people & Christians today to doubt.

THOSE REASONS ARE:

1. **DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES,**
2. **WORLDLY INFLUENCE,**
3. **INCOMPLETE REVELATION, AND**
4. **UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS.**

1. DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

Humanly speaking the *career* of **John** the Baptist had ended in disaster. He had been the fiery, independent, dramatic, confrontational, courageous man who preached exactly what needed to be preached, to whom it needed to be preached, and when it needed to be preached. He was fearless, aggressive, and faithful to the Lord in every way. He called sin sin and sinners sinners. And now he was **in prison** because of his faithfulness.

On a trip to Rome, Herod Antipas, governor of Galilee, had taken a liking to Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, and had seduced her. After returning to Galilee, Herod divorced his own wife and married Herodias. When John the Baptist heard of it, he publicly confronted Herod with his sin and was promptly thrown into prison. Only Herod's

fear of the multitudes kept John from being killed immediately (Matt. 14:5).

John was imprisoned at an old fort at Machaerus, located in a hot and desolate region five miles east and fifteen miles south of the northern end of the Dead Sea. He was placed in a dark, stifling dungeon that was little more than a pit. After some eighteen months in the limelight, this free spirit of the wilderness was confined and isolated. He had been in prison for perhaps a year when he sent the two disciples to Jesus.

William Barclay captures much of the significance of John's situation:

He was the child of the desert; all his life he had lived in the wide open spaces, with the clean wind on his face and the spacious vault of the sky for his roof. And now he was confined within the four narrow walls of an underground dungeon. For a man like John, who had probably never lived in a house, this must have been an agony. In Carlisle Castle there is a little cell. Once long ago they had put a border chieftain in that cell and had left him for years. In that cell there is one little window which is placed too high for a man to look out of it when he is standing on the floor. On the ledge of the window, in the stone, there are two depressions worn away. They are the marks of the hands of the border chieftain, the places where, day after day, he had lifted himself up by placing his hands on the ledge that he might look out on the green dales across which he would never ride again. John must have been like that; and there is nothing to wonder at, and still less to criticize, in the fact that questions began to form themselves in John's mind. (The Gospel of Matthew, vol. 2 [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958], p. 2)

John was a true saint and a true prophet of God—holy, loyal, selfless, and unreserved in His service to the Lord. He had done exactly what God told him to do. He had been filled with the Spirit from the time he was in his mother's womb, and all his life had lived under the Nazirite vow the highest vow, of dedication a Jewish man could take. But now he could not help wondering if prison, shame, hunger, physical torment, perplexity, and loneliness were his rewards.

John knew the Old Testament well, and he could hardly have kept from wondering where the God of comfort (Ps. 119:50; Isa. 51:12) was now. And if Jesus were truly the Messiah, why did He let his forerunner and servant suffer in prison? Where was God's love and compassion, not to mention His justice? Where was God's promise that the Messiah would "bind up the

brokenhearted, ... proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners; ... proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning" (Isa. 63:1–3)?

When a believer has faithfully and sacrificially served the Lord for many years and then experiences tragedy, perhaps even a series of tragedies, it is difficult not to wonder about God's love and justice. When a child is lost to death or to unbelief, a husband or wife dies or leaves, cancer strikes us or a loved one, **we are tempted to ask, "God, where are You now when I really need You? Why have You let this happen to Me. Why don't You help?"** But **if we dwell on such thoughts, Satan magnifies them and tries to use them to undermine our trust and confidence in God.**

EXCEPT FOR WHEN WE WILLINGLY CONTINUE IN SIN, WE ARE NEVER SO VULNERABLE TO DOUBTING GOD'S GOODNESS AND TRUTH AND BELIEVING SATAN'S LIES AS WHEN WE ARE SUFFERING.

John knew where to go to find the answers to his questions and the resolution of his doubts.

He had indeed begun to have doubts about Jesus' identity as the Christ; but it was to Jesus that he sent his disciples for confirmation.

In his mind he had perhaps been crying, "Lord, why don't You help me?" Now, through his disciples, he was pleading, "Lord, please help me!"

In His great love and mercy, Jesus was glad to respond, performing miracles especially for John's sake and promising him spiritual blessing if he did not waver in trust even in the midst of mystifying circumstances.

Paul was himself in prison, probably in Rome, when he wrote, ***"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God,***

which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:4–7).

He went on to say, *“I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.... And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (vv. 11–13, 19).*

Negative circumstances are painful and trying, but our response should be same as John’s—going to the Lord and asking Him to quell our doubts, anxieties, and fears (cf. James 1:2–12).

2. INCOMPLETE REVELATION

A second major cause of doubt is incomplete revelation.

Although John had **heard of the works of Christ**, his information was secondhand and not complete.

He had been in prison for a year; but even while he was preaching,

He had no direct contact with Jesus after the baptism.

If Jesus' own disciples failed to understand Him fully and demonstrated "little faith" after being with Him intimately for three years, it is easy to understand why John had doubts. He was not an "eyewitness of His majesty," as were Peter, James, and John (2 Pet. 1:16–18; cf. Matt. 17:2), nor did he have the opportunity to see with his own eyes or handle with his own hands the Son of God as He taught, preached, and healed, as had the twelve and many others besides (see 1 John 1:1).

John did not experience the full truth about the Messiah he was sent to proclaim. He was in a position not unlike that of the Old Testament prophets.

"As to this salvation," Peter explains, "the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow" (1 Pet. 1:10–11).

The information that John's disciples brought back to him was still not firsthand, but their report was based on confirming demonstrations of divine power that Jesus performed specifically for John's benefit.

Many believers today also doubt certain truths about God because of incomplete information,

because they have inadequate knowledge or understanding of His Word. The Christian who is immersed in Scripture has no reason to stumble. When God is allowed to speak through His Word, doubt vanishes like mist in the sunlight.

JESUS RESPONDED TO THE DOUBTS OF THE TWO DISCIPLES ON THE EMMAUS ROAD BY FIRST REBUKING THEM FOR BEING “SLOW OF HEART TO BELIEVE IN ALL THAT THE PROPHETS HAVE SPOKEN.” THEN, “BEGINNING WITH MOSES AND WITH ALL THE PROPHETS, HE EXPLAINED TO THEM THE THINGS CONCERNING HIMSELF IN ALL THE SCRIPTURE” (LUKE 24:25, 27).

After Jesus revealed to them who He was and “vanished from their sight, ... they said to one another, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?’ ” (vv. 31–32). Even before they knew it was Jesus who was speaking to them, the truth of His Word began dispelling their doubts and building up their faith.

We all need the continual truth of His Word to protect us from doubt and to dispel doubt when it comes. The Bereans were noble-minded and “received the word with great eagerness” because they examined “the Scriptures daily, to see whether” the things Paul preached were true (Acts 17:11).

3. WORLDLY INFLUENCE:

A third cause of doubt is worldly influence, from which not even the godly John was completely insulated. What Jesus was preaching and doing did not square with what most Jews thought the Messiah, the Expected One, would do, and John probably shared some of those misconceptions.

The Messiah was expected first of all to free Israel from her bondage, which at the time was under Rome. He obviously could not establish His own kingdom of justice and righteousness without first dealing with the pagan, unjust, and cruel Romans. But **JESUS HAD DONE NOTHING TO OPPOSE ROME, EITHER IN WORDS OR ACTIONS.**

The Jewish people also thought the Messiah would eliminate all suffering—all disease, affliction, hunger, and pain. Yet Jesus' miracles, marvelous and extensive as they were, had not fully banished those things from Israel, much less from all the world.

Many Jews also probably envisioned a type of welfare state, in which all their material needs would be provided for them. They expected health, wealth, and instant happiness, and when Jesus fed the multitude on the far side of the Sea of Galilee, they were ready to immediately crown Him king (John 6:15, 26)

John the Baptist knew Jesus refused to be made king, and that He had done nothing to change either the pagan and brutal political and military systems of Rome or the worldly and corrupt religious system in Israel. Sin was still rampant, injustice was still the rule, political and religious corruption were the norm, and the world was essentially the same as it had been for thousands of years—except for a few cleansed lives and healed bodies. No visible kingdom was in sight, and no radical changes could be seen.

A common misconception about the Messiah was that His coming would be preceded by the coming of a number of other men. First Elijah would return, then Jeremiah, then a group of other prophets. Therefore, when Jesus asked His disciples, “ ‘Who do people say that the Son of

Man is?' ... they said, 'Some say John the Baptist [who by that time had been killed]; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets" (Matt. 16:13–14).

It is possible that John the Baptist thought that perhaps Jesus was not the Messiah after all but only one of those forerunners, as he himself was.

Jesus' own disciples had some of those misconceptions concerning the Messiah. They were continually righting doubts about Jesus because He did not fit their preconceived ideas. Even after the resurrection they still expected Him to establish His earthly kingdom. "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" they asked (Acts 1:6).

He had repeatedly told them about the nature of His mission and plan, but the ideas they had formed from the world around them clouded and distorted their understanding.

What Jesus said to Philip shortly before His crucifixion applied to all the disciples: ***"Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me?" (John 14:9).***

Even after Peter confessed that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God," he could not accept the truth that the Christ would have to die, even though he heard that truth from Jesus' own lips (Matt. 16:16, 21–22).

The disciples on the road to Emmaus were puzzled for the same reason (Luke 24:19–24). All of them had been victimized by what people around them thought the Messiah should be and do.

The people's ideas about the Messiah were so distorted and ingrained that they disregarded or misconstrued whatever Jesus said or did that did not fit those ideas. When some of the Jewish leaders said to Jesus, "How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly," Jesus answered, "I told you, and you do not believe" (John 10:24–25).

People today, including some believers, are confused and perplexed about the plan of God for the same reason. Their minds are so full of the ideas of people around them that they fail to understand God's plan even when they read it in Scripture. We continually hear people ask, "If Christ loves everybody so much, why do children die and people starve and get diseased and become crippled? If God is a God of justice, why is there so much corruption and injustice in the world? Why do so many good people have it so bad and so many bad people have it so good? If God is so loving and merciful, why does He send people to hell? If God is so powerful and false religions are so evil, why doesn't He just wipe out those false systems?" Because the Lord does not fit their preconceived ideas of what He should be like, people are

perplexed, often indignant, and sometimes even blasphemous.

The world does not know God or understand His nature or His plan. “A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). The Jews who would not believe Jesus’ claim to messiahship even when He told them plainly of it, did so because they did not belong to Him. “You do not believe,” Jesus said, “because you are not of My sheep” (John 10:26).

To the unbelieving Pharisees who asked Jesus about “when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or, “There it is!” For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst’ ” (Luke 17:20–21).

Ignorance and unbelief always blind the eyes of men to the realities of the kingdom that are all around them.

4. UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS

The fact that John instructed his disciples to ask, *or shall we look for someone else?* seems to indicate that John’s expectations about the Messiah were unfulfilled. Under the Spirit’s direction, John had been boldly proclaiming, *“He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His*

sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:11–12).

John knew that what he preached was true, and he knew that Jesus was the one about whom he preached; yet Jesus had done none of those things. The Messiah was to come in judgment, and **JOHN THEREFORE EXPECTED JESUS TO TAKE “HIS WINNOWING FORK IN HIS HAND” AND START CLEARING THE THRESHING FLOOR AND BURNING UP THE CHAFF. HE EXPECTED JESUS TO DISPLAY THE BLAZING POWER OF ABSOLUTE, COMPLETE, AND WORLDWIDE JUDGMENT.**

But instead of executing judgment, Jesus assembled a group of twelve nondescript followers and began teaching them in the same manner as many other rabbis had done for centuries before Him. He demonstrated miracle-working power, but He used it only to save and heal, never to judge. Especially now that he was imprisoned, John no doubt wanted to cry out with David, “When my enemies turn back, they stumble and perish before Thee. For Thou hast maintained my just cause; Thou dost sit on the throne judging righteously” (Ps. 9:3–4); and, “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth!” (Ps. 58:11: cf. 35:1–9; 52:1–5). John wanted to cry out like the saints under the altar who said, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). But John saw no divine intervention, no judgment, no execution of justice. Jesus did not avenge the righteous. He did not even defend Himself against His accusers.

It has always been hard for believers to understand why God allows so many of His children to suffer and allows so many wicked, ungodly people to prosper. It was doubly hard for John the Baptist. For one thing, he had a deep devotion to righteousness and was called by God to preach repentance and judgment. More than that, he was called to proclaim the coming of **the Expected One** who would execute that judgment—which he thought would begin shortly, if not immediately, after the Messiah appeared on the scene.

Christians today sometimes get excited about the Lord’s imminent return; but when many years pass and He does not come, their hope, along with their dedication, often fades.

They do not stop expecting Him to return some day, but they stop thinking about it and hoping for it as much as they once did.

Some scoffers will even say, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation” (2 Pet. 3:4).

JESUS REASSURES JOHN

And Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me.” (11:4–6)

Jesus did not answer with a simple yes or no, because He knew that would not have satisfied John. He rather told John’s disciples to **present their teacher the evidence.** Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

Because many of John’s disciples had already been with Jesus and heard Him teach and seen Him perform miracles, part of the report to John would be a reminder of what they had reported earlier. In addition to having heard accounts from his disciples, John doubtlessly had heard from other sources as well, because people from all over Palestine—from Syria, “from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan”—had followed Jesus from early in His ministry, largely on account of His miraculous works (Matt. 4:23–25). After Jesus cleansed a man in Capernaum of an unclean spirit, “immediately the news about Him went out everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee” (Mark 1:28); after He raised Jairus’s daughter from the dead, “this news went out into all that land” (Matt. 9:26; cf. Luke 4:14,

37); and after He healed the Galilean man of leprosy, “the news about Him was spreading even farther” (Luke 5:15).

John was a great man of God and beloved by Jesus. As His faithful forerunner languished in prison facing imminent death, the Lord Jesus determined to give him a more direct and personal report of evidence. Luke tells us that when John’s disciples asked Jesus if He was “the Expected One,” that “at that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He granted sight to many who were blind” (7:20–21). Right on the spot and before their eyes, Jesus put on a display of miracles expressly for the personal benefit of John’s disciples and even more for the benefit of John himself. How it must have thrilled John’s heart not only to receive fresh confirming evidence of Jesus’ messiahship but to know that the Lord had performed that plethora of miracles specifically to reassure him in his time of loneliness and perplexity.

Although Jesus did nothing to relieve John’s physical confinement and suffering, He did send back to him special confirmation that He was indeed performing messianic works: **the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them**—just as Isaiah had prophesied (Isa. 35:5; 61:1). Jesus said, in effect, “This, John, is but a preview, a taste, a picture of the coming kingdom. You can see by what I am doing now that I care, that I heal, and that I have power over all things.”

John’s circumstances did not improve; in fact, he was soon beheaded at the cruel request of Herodias. But it is safe to assume that Jesus’ response was more than enough to encourage John and renew his faith and confidence.

Jesus' closing beatitude was primarily for the sake of John: **And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me**. It was a gentle warning, a tender rebuke. "Don't doubt," He said to John, "if you want to have the blessing of My joy and peace." The warning did not take away from Jesus' esteem for John, as his testimony immediately afterward shows (vv. 7–11).

Stumbling is from *skandalizō*, which **ORIGINALLY REFERRED TO THE TRAPPING OR SNARING OF AN ANIMAL. IT WAS USED METAPHORICALLY TO SIGNIFY AN ENTRAPMENT OR STUMBLING BLOCK AND CARRIED THE DERIVED MEANING OF CAUSING OFFENSE.**

Jesus' divine messiahship and the gospel of deliverance from sin through faith in Him are great stumbling blocks to sinful, unbelieving man, and Jesus did not want John to be affected by the world's skepticism and unbelief.

Matthew does not tell of the end to John's doubt until later. After John was beheaded by Herod, "his disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus" (Matt. 14:12). They went to Jesus because He was the most important Person in John's life and apparently had become the most important Person in their lives as well. When he died, John did not have all his questions answered, and he must have still wondered when Jesus would establish His kingdom, judge the wicked, and usher in the long-awaited kingdom of righteousness. John must have regretted not being able to witness those marvelous events about which he had so earnestly preached. But he no longer had doubts about who Jesus was or about His goodness and justice or His sovereignty and wisdom. He was content to leave in the Lord's hands the many things he did not yet understand—and that is the secret of being **blessed** and of not **stumbling**.

“If we are faithless, He remains faithful,” Paul assures us; “For He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). Even when we doubt Him, God is faithful to us. Doubt does not cause a believer to lose his relationship to the Lord, because God cannot deny His own promises to keep those whom He had saved. And because of His faithfulness, we can go to Him even when we doubt Him. In fact, *only* by going to Him as John did can our doubts be relieved.

John the Baptist would have loudly affirmed the apostle John’s declaration, ***“Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure”*** (1 John 3:2–3).