

# John's Question

📖 Matthew 11:1-6

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We're studying the Gospel of Matthew. What is the distinguishing characteristic of Matthew? It is far and away the most Jewish. From the words and sayings we see it is Jewish. From the lack of explanation of customs we see it is Jewish. From the number of quotations from the OT we see it is Jewish. Matthew is so Jewish you have to virtually become a token Jew to understand it. It focuses on the coming of a Jewish King descended from David and Abraham and the Jewish kingdom program as covenanted to David and Abraham.

What is Matthew's argument? That Jesus is the King and in light of the rejection of the King the kingdom is postponed. Why would Matthew write this argument? What objection would a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew have to the claim that Jesus is the King? If Jesus is the King where is His kingdom? How could Matthew construct an argument to counter that objection? By showing that Jesus has all the credentials of the King and that the reason His kingdom did not come was because they rejected Him. In the wake of the rejection the kingdom's arrival was postponed until a nation of Israel comes along and receives Him. During the postponement God is now building the Church.

We're still working in the early sections where Matthew is showing that Jesus has all the credentials of the King. In the flow of argument Matthew writes narrative and follows the narrative with a concluding discourse. Each section ends with a discourse. Matthew is well-known for his discourses. There are five sections of narrative followed by discourse. How many have we completed? The first two. What's the first narrative-discourse section? Matthew 1-7; Matthew 1-4 is the narrative; he recounts the genealogy, the virgin birth, the fulfillment of prophecy, the forerunner, the temptations, the authority; Matthew 5-7 is the discourse. What's the name of the discourse? The Discourse on Kingdom Righteousness. It's answering the question, "What kind of righteousness does Israel need to enter the kingdom? What's the answer? A righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees. To clarify the kind of righteousness He said, "You have heard it said...but I say to you." That series of contrasts was meant to show the difference between Pharisaic righteousness and true righteousness. He wasn't addressing the individual condition for entrance into the kingdom in that discourse; which was always faith. What was He addressing? The national condition for entrance into the kingdom; which was always righteousness. That generation was being given the opportunity to repent and return to the righteousness of

the Law. The Law was God's rule of life for the nation Israel and the condition for ultimate blessing in the kingdom was always obedience!

What chapters cover the second narrative-discourse? Matthew 8-10; the narrative is Matthew 8-9; he organizes the miracles thematically, revealing the kingdom program, the ability to bring in the kingdom conditions and the ability to restore the kingdom to Israel, interspersed in this narrative are sections on discipleship; Matthew 10 is the discourse. What's the name of this discourse? The Discourse on Kingdom Missions. What's Jesus doing? He's instructing His apostles to go out and spread the message of the at hand kingdom. Who were they to go to? The lost sheep of the house of Israel. It was an Israel only mission. It's one reason I'm a dispensationalist. I see these distinctions in God's dealings. A non-dispensationalist has a very difficult time with the exclusivity of this mission. At the time Israel was being given the opportunity to repent but that time was running out. There's a clock called the 70 weeks of Daniel and that clock was ticking... There wasn't much time left before the 69<sup>th</sup> week came to a close. Then the Messiah would be crucified and raised, He would depart, a time of trouble known as the 70<sup>th</sup> week would come and He's speaking in that context to those who went out on behalf of the King. They would be challenged to remain true to the King in the midst of intense persecution. At the conclusion of this discourse, in 11:1 we read the words characteristic of a transition, "And it happened when Jesus had finished..." (*ΚΑΙ ΕΓΓΕΝΕΤΟ ΟΤΕ ΕΤΕΛΕΣΕΝ Ο ΙΗΣΟΥΣ*). Matthew always uses these words to signal a transition to his audience. Constable says, "Here is another of Matthew's formulas that ended a discourse (cf. 7:28-29; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1)."<sup>1</sup>

So tonight we come to the third narrative followed by discourse. Let's summarize what we learned in the second narrative-discourse and then look ahead to what's coming in the third. Toussaint says of the second section, "This section of Matthew's Gospel presents the King in His power on the earth. He works all sorts of signs which prove the nearness of the kingdom. To further declare the nearness of the Messianic age He sends forth His disciples, delegating great authority to them. As He sends them forth He instructs them, keeping in mind the Old Testament eschatological calendar of events."<sup>2</sup> That's a good summary. I want to point out one statement Toussaint made here. He said that the signs prove the nearness of the kingdom. In other words, sign miracles are not normative, they signal "the nearness of the kingdom," that it is on the verge of breaking into history. In other words, signs relate in some way to the kingdom; either it is near, as here, or it is threatened, as in the OT period of Elijah and Elisha. So signs have to do with the kingdom. They don't relate to the Church. The reason you see them in the Book of Acts is because the kingdom offer was put back on the table briefly and the apostles needed authentication to write the NT canon of Scripture. But they are not normative. When the Church has run its course and the rapture takes place then the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel will begin and the kingdom will be near again and more sign miracles will occur. So this is one reason I am a cessationist, meaning I think Scripture teaches that signs miracles have ceased during the present age. I'm not so naïve as to think this is a final proof for the cessation of sign miracles but it is one element in the cumulative case for cessation of signs. Signs occur in connection with the kingdom and are not normative. At this time there were many signs because the kingdom was near.

The third narrative-discourse section is Matthew 11-13; the narrative is Matthew 11-12; Matthew recounts the confusion of John the Baptist, the escalation of opposition to the kingdom, the genuineness of the offer of the kingdom, the coming judgment for rejecting the miracles, various questions about the Law, more miracles and the unpardonable sin, the rejection of Jesus by the leadership followed by Jesus' pronouncement of no more signs; the discourse is Matthew 13. The discourse is parabolic. For the first time Jesus speaks in parables. Why does He speak in parables? Because of their unbelief and rejection. What's the content of the parables in the discourse? The postponement of the kingdom. All the parables relate to the postponement of the kingdom during which time later revelation will explain the Church. So, where we are now in Matt 11 the kingdom offer is still on the table but by Matt 13 that offer is going to be off the table, a time of postponement will be revealed during which the Church will be formed and once that is complete then the 70<sup>th</sup> week will come and finally the kingdom. So Matthew 11-13 are critical chapters because they explain to unbelieving Jews why Jesus is the king but His kingdom did not come; they rejected it. From a human perspective its arrival will be postponed until they, as a nation, receive Him. We shouldn't gloss over the reality of the impact of certain choices upon history, even though in God's mind there is a history that must play out and will play out; sovereignty and human responsibility are both true, both having their respective quality and sphere of operation.

To start the new narrative turn to Matt 11:1. **When Jesus had finished** are the words of transition. In this use He **had finished giving instructions to His twelve disciples**. This is the first use of the number **twelve** with the word **disciples**. In 10:1 he had used the number "twelve" with the word "apostles." We point out that it must have had a striking effect upon the average Jew who would automatically connect the number with the number of the tribes of Israel. The **twelve disciples** here refers to the same group of twelve apostles that He had just **finished giving instructions to**. As **His disciples** they were His students; as His apostles they were His delegates. Jesus had many more disciples but only twelve were His delegates. As His delegates they had more intimacy with the Messiah than the others. He had just **finished giving instructions to** them. The word translated **giving instructions** is *διατασσω* and means "to give (detailed) instructions as to what must be done..."<sup>3</sup> Matthew's evaluation of the instructions he had just been given were that they were "detailed instructions."

From here Matthew does not trace the twelve disciple's ministry to the lost sheep of the house of Israel but instead focuses only on Jesus' own ministry. We may take it that Jesus sent them out by two's and He himself went out alone. He used the divide and conquer strategy. This was wise given the short time left for Israel to respond to the kingdom offer. So Jesus alone **departed from there to teach and preach in their cities**. **Their cities** must refer to the **cities** of Israel consistent with His instructions to the twelve and not any cities of Gentiles or Samaritans. Israel was the chosen covenant people of God, if they responded positively they would be given opportunity to bless the nations by taking the message to them. But first Israel had their opportunity.

In verse 2 we have the word **Now** (δε) which signals a change in scene (cf Matt 1:18; 4:12). **Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"** Briefly, the use of the word **disciples** for John's **disciples** shows clearly that the word "disciple" does not necessarily mean "a believer in Jesus." Anyone who was a teacher could have disciples. However, the fact that John still had disciples is troubling because John told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus, yet they had not yet believed in Him (Acts 19:4).

The verse gives us a glimpse of John's situation in prison. Why was John in prison? John had been arrested because Herod Antipas had entered into an incestuous marriage with his half-brother, Philip's wife, and John repeatedly told him it was not lawful to have her. Herod Antipas would have had John executed but the people considered John a prophet and so he did not consider it politically expedient to execute him (cf Matt 14:3-5). Instead he put him in prison at Machaerus, one of his father Herod the Great's three fortresses (the other two were at Herodium and Masada). Machaerus was located on the E side of the Dead Sea in modern day Jordan. This is where John was when he **heard of the works of Christ**. The fact that John **sent word by His disciples** shows that he was able to receive visitors and was also privy to what Jesus was doing.

On this occasion John **sent word by his disciples** asking Jesus a question. The question is verse 3, **"Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"** This question has confused a number of expositors. How could John be asking such a thing? Before we try to clarify the confusion we should understand exactly what John is asking. There are three evidences that he is asking if Jesus is the Messiah. First, the title **The Expected One** is a Messianic title. Literally the title is "The Coming One." This title is derived from Psalm 118:26 which states, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD."<sup>4</sup> Since **The Coming One** is a Messianic title the question John is asking through his disciples is, "Are you the Messiah?" Second, the expression **"or shall we look for someone else"** is literally, "or shall we look for another." The Greek word for "another" is *ετερος* and means "another of a different kind." This word shows that John is wondering whether Jesus is merely human. Since the Messiah was not a mere human then maybe they should look for someone of a different kind if Jesus was not Him. Toussaint says, "Either Jesus is the Messiah or He is a mere human being. If He is human, then John must look for a different kind of person."<sup>5</sup> So the question should they look for another kind of person is another indication that he is asking whether Jesus is the Messiah. Third, in the context Matthew has in mind the Messiah. In verse 2 he says, **Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ**. The Greek word **Christ** is *Χριστος*, the Greek word for the Hebrew Messiah. Matthew clearly accepted Jesus as the Messiah and pointed out that John was hearing **of the works of** the Messiah. We might paraphrase the question this way; "Are you the Messiah, or are you a mere human and we should be looking for someone else?"

Now that we know what question John is asking we want to know why John is asking it. There are at least four things about John which render his asking this question very confusing. First, John was prophesied to be the forerunner of the Messiah. In Luke 1 we have John's birth. His father was Zacharias, a priest of the tribe of Levi.

When it was revealed that his wife would be with child Zacharias doubted. As a consequence he was struck mute and forced to communicate with a writing tablet for the duration of the pregnancy. When the child was born his mother named him John and the people wondered since no one in the family had that name. Zacharias then took his tablet and wrote, "His name is John." At that moment his mouth was opened and he began to prophesy many things. One of the things he prophesied is Luke 1:76-77, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; For you will go on BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE HIS WAYS; To give His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins..." Why, if John was prophesied by his father to be the forerunner of the Messiah, would he later question whether Jesus was the Messiah? Second, John stated that He was the fulfillment of Isa 40:3. In John 1 the Pharisees (1:24) in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to inquire who John was. He denied that he was "Elijah" and he denied that he was "the prophet." When they asked him who he was he said in John 1:23, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said." Why, if John knew he was the fulfillment of Isa 40:3 did he later question whether Jesus was the Messiah? Third, on the next day when John saw Jesus coming he declared Him to be the Lamb of God. In John 1:29 it says, "the next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has higher rank than I, for He existed before me." If John identified Jesus as the one coming after him then how now is he questioning whether Jesus is the Messiah? Fourth, John had confirmation from heaven that Jesus was the Son of God. John 1:32 says, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God." How then could John now be questioning whether Jesus is the Messiah? These four evidences are strong evidence that John was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah but then later doubted.

There are two evidences that he began to doubt. First, the presence of John's disciples after John had already identified Jesus as the Messiah. In Matt 9:14 we find "the disciples of John came to Him, asking, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" Why, if John had pointed to Jesus as the Messiah, are these disciples still following John? Wouldn't John have pointed them to Jesus and said, "Follow Him?" It seems strange that after John had pointed out Jesus as the Messiah there are still disciples of John the Baptist running around. Either they were ignorant of John's message or they were rebellious against John's message. Second, the question John sent as to whether Jesus was the Messiah. These two evidences, perhaps among others, show that there may have been some doubt in John's mind as to whether Jesus was the Messiah.

But why did John begin to doubt? It's my suggestion that he began to doubt because the timetable of Messianic events was not unfolding quickly enough for him. If you turn back to Matthew 3 we see John's understanding of the timetable of Messianic events. John wasn't wrong in his understanding of Messianic events and John wasn't wrong in his identification of Jesus as the Messiah, but John might have been a little impatient with regard to

the timetable. This chapter is a key section of Matthew and in it you find John baptizing. The location of his baptizing was Bethany beyond Jordan. For those of you going to Israel and Jordan this is over in Jordan, NE of Jericho. I'm not sure if we'll visit there but it's also historically the location where Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind and that adds to the John/Elijah connection in the NT. Observe in 3:7 his address to the Pharisees and Sadducees, they went out to investigate and he says, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" What do you see that John has on his mind? Wrath coming. Wrath for the Pharisees and Sadducees if I'm not mistaken! John was right that wrath was coming on God's enemies but down in Matt 11 he's in prison under the oppression of God's enemies and he's thinking, "Hey, what's going on here? Where's the wrath so I can get released and go into the kingdom?" He's impatient. He continues in verse 8 saying, "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance;" in other words, in light of the coming wrath they needed to repent and bear good fruit in order to avoid the wrath. In verse 9 he cuts off their false theology before they even voice it saying, "and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham." In verse 10 notice again his timetable for the wrath, "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." So did John think that the wrath was coming soon? Absolutely. The axe was already laid at the root of the trees in his estimation. Messiah was coming to judge. Verse 11, "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but 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. One baptizer, two baptisms, with the Spirit and with fire, fire being a metaphor for judgment. It would separate the remnant from the non-remnant. Verse 12, "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." Judgment. The Messiah is coming in judgment and John is saying, "I'm in prison. Where is my deliverance? What's the hold up in the Messianic timetable of events? Let's get the judgment rolling so we can get to the kingdom. Pentecost says, "Since Messiah was to put down oppression and deliver Israel from the Gentiles, John was becoming impatient as he waited for the One whom he believed to be the Messiah to do what He had come to do."<sup>6</sup> Now that's my understanding of how to account for the statements in Scripture. John's understanding of Messianic events was correct, John's understanding of Jesus as the Messiah was correct, but John's understanding of the timing of the Messianic events was not correct.

Now there's a poignant lesson embedded here. We can be right in our theology, like John was, and get impatient with God. God's in control and He has His own timetable, regardless of your timetable and my timetable. The world keeps getting worse and worse and sometimes we need reassurance. If John needed reassurance it's no wonder we need reassurance. And that's why we keep going over and over and over the truths related to Christ's soon coming, because even if we know them, like John knew truths, we need to keep having our hearts reassured of the truths.

So John is asking the question about whether Jesus is the Messiah in order to get reassurance. And how does Jesus answer? Matt 11:4 **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, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.** What's the point of quoting these works? To reaffirm to John that indeed Jesus is the Messiah. There was no more proof needed. The proof was in the works themselves. These were Messianic miracles and gospel preaching. Nothing like this had ever happened in Israel. So John may want to get out of prison; John may want to get the show on the road and get to the kingdom. But John just needs to be patient. Jesus is who His works claim Him to be. The miracles are proof enough. His message is enough. What OT passage does Jesus quote? Isaiah 35:5ff. What's the context of Isa 35? The kingdom. In verse 4 of that chapter it says, "Say to those with anxious heart, "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you." Who in this context has an anxious heart? John. Who wants God to judge His enemies? John. Who wants to be saved? John. And then Isaiah 35 goes right into the miraculous removal of all physical maladies in the kingdom. It's a remarkable passage that Jesus would quote because it addresses precisely the need of John, someone who is in prison, under injustice and wants God to judge and bring in the kingdom. So yes John, I'm the Messiah, look at what I do, I do what Isa 35 says I will do. I'm the Messiah and I will bring in My kingdom. This would reassure John.

Now Toussaint adds something interesting here and others have noticed it as well. He says, "The import and implications of this answer are great. Not only does it confirm the Messianic character of the person of Jesus, but it also shows the nature of the kingdom." His point is that John had an expectation of the kingdoms near arrival. When the kingdom came the Gentile oppressors would be defeated and he would be set free. If John was wrong about this view of the coming judgment and kingdom then this is the most logical place for Jesus to have corrected him. The progressive dispensationalists and covenant theologians are saying that the kingdom had already come in a spiritual way in the person of Jesus. All that one needed to do to enter it was believe in Him. However, John seemed to think that the kingdom had not yet come! John seemed to be hoping that it would come soon. So strong was his sense that it would come soon that he began to doubt whether Jesus was the Messiah! McClain says of Jesus' answer, "Such an answer was worth a thousand merely verbal affirmations. To John it was intended to show that he had not been mistaken about the identification of Jesus with the promised Mediatorial King of Old Testament prophecy, nor about the nature of the Kingdom. And to us Christ's words should prove what to John needed no proof; namely, that when the kingdom is established on earth, it will be a literal Kingdom, exhibiting all the various aspects revealed by the Old Testament prophets." Not the least of which is the removal of all physical maladies. There's only one thing in this list of six things that's not physical. Blindness restored is physical, lameness healed is physical, lepers cleansed is physical, deafness cured is physical, the dead resurrected is physical. All these things are physical. The only spiritual thing is preaching the gospel to

the poor. Isn't this telling us that the nature of the kingdom is physical and the way into that kingdom is spiritual? If not then I am very confused about what the Bible is teaching.

Jesus final statement in verse 6 says, **And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.** The Greek word **take offense** is *σκανδαλισθη* and means "to stumble over something so as to fall." His point is to pronounce a blessing on those who when they consider His works don't stumble over Him so as not to believe. The one who doesn't stumble over Him is the one who does believe. He is therefore **blessed**.

Now, in conclusion, we didn't get very far, I'd hoped to get farther, but we enter into the third narrative-discourse section tonight. This section is the climax of the kingdom offer to the nation Israel which faces increased opposition and culminates in the rejection and consequent parabolic discourse. In 11:1 Matthew begins with his words of transition, "When Jesus had finished..." He had just finished giving detailed instructions to His twelve disciples. From here we don't trace their ministry but follow Christ alone. He departed from that locale to teach and preach in the cities of Israel. 11:2 changes the scene, taking us to the desert fortress of Machaerus where John was imprisoned. He had access to the outside world through visitors and when he heard of the works of Christ that He was doing he sent word by his disciples. In 11:3 they ask, "Are you the Coming One, or are you merely human and we should look for another." It is my thinking that doubt had already crept into John's mind because as far as he was concerned, the Messiah's work of judging God's enemies and setting him free to go into the kingdom were nowhere near taking place when they should have been. John's overall view of the Messiah's work was not wrong but the timetable of His work was wrong. I think John was impatient and needed reassurance as to Jesus' Messiahship. This Jesus gives in 11:4ff. "Go and report to John what you hear and see." Six works of Jesus are listed. Five of the six are physical restorations and one is spiritual. They all relate to the kingdom. It seems to me that the way into the kingdom is to respond positively to the kingdom message and the results are restoration from physical maladies in the kingdom. Jesus was already demonstrating that He could restore from all physical maladies, thereby proving that He was the Messiah. In 11:6, blessed is the one who believed in Him and did not stumble over His works.

By application what can we learn? We can be right in our theology of last things, just like John was right, the Messiah was going to do these things, but we can be wrong on their timing such that we become impatient in their coming to pass. Too often we become impatient for the rapture and wonder why God is letting the world get so bad. The simple remedy for this impatience is to have our hearts reassured by continual hearing of the truths of Scripture. This will set our hearts at ease...

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 11:1.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 144.



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<sup>3</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 237.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus had already claimed to have come in the name of Lord (cf Matt 7:21-23) and was referred to as Lord by many who sought healing (cf Matt 8:2, 6, 8, 21, 25), a title He never denied. Some of these uses may be only a title of reverence (e.g. 8:25, compare with 8:27) but others seem to attribute deity to Him.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 148.

<sup>6</sup> Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 198.