

BLESSED IS ANYONE...

Matthew 11:1-19

Key Verse: 11:6

“Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

In today’s passage, we see the convergence of two ministries—those of John the Baptist and Jesus. John was in prison; his ministry was steadily diminishing. Jesus was healing and preaching powerfully; his ministry was flourishing. Not only were these ministries converging, but so were two different views of the Messiah. According to John’s view, the Messiah should bring justice to the world. However, Jesus was serving many needy people like a spiritual doctor. It was not quite what John had expected, and he was discouraged. Jesus helped John to realize that the work of the Messiah was going on just as it had been prophesied. By accepting this, John would be blessed. Do we have expectations of Jesus that are not based on the truth about him and his work? If we do, and these expectations are not met, we can lose our joy and stumble. Let’s listen to Jesus’ words and learn to see his work so that we too may be blessed.

First, the deeds of the Messiah (1-6). After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee (1). Jesus’ teaching and miracles came out of his great compassion. They were so powerful that people all over the country were talking about them. Matthew describes these as “the deeds of the Messiah.” John, who was in prison, heard about what Jesus was doing. However, John did not say to himself, “These are the deeds of the Messiah. Everything is going well.” Instead, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, **“Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”** (2) It meant, “Are you the Messiah,¹ or not?” It seems that John’s conviction had been shaken, and he revealed this publicly. Though this was a serious matter, it is understandable. John was in prison for rebuking Herod’s sin of adultery (14:3-4). The evil Herod was the kind of person John expected the Messiah to judge. He had introduced the Messiah by saying, **“His winnowing fork is in his hand...he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire”** (3:11b-12). However, Herod’s wicked act seemed to go unpunished. At the same time, John, after living a holy and sacrificial life, was languishing in prison. Jesus had not even visited him. This may be why

¹ “the one who is to come” is a Messianic title based on Psalm 40:7 and 118:26.

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John wavered. Here we see that even great men of God struggle before injustice and rejection. Once, the great prophet Elijah was fearful and tired of fighting against the evil Queen Jezebel. So, he asked God to take his life (1Ki 19:4). It is hard to keep on confronting the evil and injustice of the world. It is especially hard when we are in an adverse situation because of our faith. At such times, we need reassurance and confirmation. Where can we find it? John brought his question to Jesus.

How did Jesus help John? He did not sympathize with John. He did not apologize for not visiting. Let's read verses 4-5. **“Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.’”** Jesus turned the focus of John's disciples away from their master's imprisonment to what he himself was presently doing. Their question could be answered if they just looked around them and listened to the stories of those who were there. For example, two blind men had come to Jesus and cried out, **“Have mercy on us, Son of David!”** Jesus touched their eyes and their sight was restored (9:27-30). Some people brought a paralyzed man to Jesus. When Jesus said, **“Get up, take your mat and go home,”** the man got up and went home (9:1-7). A man with leprosy came to Jesus for help. Jesus reached out his hand and touched him, saying, **“I am willing...Be clean!”** Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy (8:2-3). Jesus had also opened the ears of the deaf and raised a dead girl to life. Jesus did not say, “I am the Messiah.” Rather, Jesus let his deeds prove his identity. Jesus' deeds were something only God could do and they exactly fulfilled prophecy. For example, Isaiah 35:5-6a say, **“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy”** (See also Isa 42:7; 61:1). Jesus helped them believe that he is the Messiah because it was God's truth, though he was not doing what they expected. Jesus' work was not political reform, social justice or economic prosperity, but a gracious restoration of people's lives one by one.

The point of the Messiah's ministry was to proclaim good news to the poor. The good news is the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus came as God's anointed King to rescue people from the power of sin and death and to reign over us with life and peace. Jesus himself did everything to bring this about. He suffered and died for our sins. Then God raised him from the dead.

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His resurrection signals eternal victory. When this good news is proclaimed and believed it sets people free from all their bondage and makes them children of God. This happened to a most unlikely person. In 1976-77, New York City was terrorized by someone called the “Son of Sam.” His real name is David Berkowitz.² He killed several people and wounded others before he was apprehended by police, judged guilty for his crimes and sentenced to life in prison. He admitted that he was demon-possessed and consciously serving the devil. While in prison, a fellow inmate named Rick told him, “Jesus Christ loves you.” Later, Rick gave him a pocket Bible and suggested that he read the Psalms. As David did so, he was deeply moved. Psalm 34 struck him, “...**the poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.**” He knew he was a poor man—a most terrible and wicked sinner. Yet he perceived that God would listen to him. He was so overcome by God’s love that he fell to his knees and wept in repentance. When he arose, he was a different person, and has since lived as a witness of Jesus Christ. His new name is Son of Hope. His life shows that the good news of the kingdom sets anyone free to live a new life.

After pointing John and his disciples to the work of the Messiah that was going on around them, Jesus sent a message: “**Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me**” (6). Jesus urged John to accept the deeds of the Messiah and continue in faith. Then he would be blessed. But those who cling to their own expectations will stumble. Here we learn that when our expectations are not met, we should give them up and embrace Jesus as he is in truth, based on the Scriptures. It may be painful at the time, but it is the way of true blessing. Some may expect Jesus to make them rich, healthy and successful in every aspect of their lives. In reality, we experience pain and loss. The Biblical truth is that we are called to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus (Mt 16:24). Though our sufferings are real, they are temporal. The Lord uses them for our good—especially for our sanctification. And the Lord promises that when we suffer with him, we will share in his glory. St. Paul said, “**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us**” (Ro 8:18). This is everlasting glory in his kingdom. When we embrace the truth about Jesus: suffering first, and then glory, we can follow him through hardships with joy.

² <http://www1.cbn.com/700club/son-sam-becomes-son-hope>

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Some expect Jesus to bring justice on earth. This may be in regard to issues of racial discrimination, abortion, welfare, healthcare, the environment, immigration, the definition of marriage, foreign policy, and more. Since we are made in the image of God, injustice grieves us and we can ask, “Why isn’t Jesus doing something about this injustice?” This is not a new question. About 605 B.C., the prophet Habakkuk asked, “Why are the Israelites being punished by the Babylonians, who are more wicked than us?” When he brought this problem to God in prayer, God answered: **“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith”** (Hab 2:4, ESV). It meant that the proud Babylonians would be punished by God after he had used them for his purpose. Justice would come through a process. God wanted his people to trust in him, and said, **“the righteous will live by faith.”** After accepting this, Habakkuk confessed, **“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior”** (Hab 3:17-18). Though we cannot understand everything, when we trust God, we can rejoice in God himself. We can say that **“the Sovereign Lord is our strength”** (Hab 3:19).

It is also important for us to see what Jesus is doing at the present. Let’s remember how the Lord blessed the Chicago Area Easter Bible Conference by uniting our chapters, pouring out his Spirit on the speakers and sending more than 120 students who want to grow as Jesus’ disciples. The Lord has also been working through silver missionaries, beginning with Dr. Joseph and Esther Chung in Uganda. Now Daniel and Deborah Yang have so many Bible students in Rwanda that they must go there for an extended time. In Belize, under the guidance of Moses Chang, there was a summer Bible conference last weekend. Powerful messengers and testimony sharers were raised, and forty-three people attended. In Springfield and Austin, Texas, new generation leaders Dr. John Lee, Joshua Jeon and Isaac Kim are serving vibrant student ministries. In Malaysia, Ison and Nikki Hong’s family was established for the young people there. In Chicago, many American leaders are growing—there are so many that I cannot mention them all. The newly elected elders of Chicago UBF have taken their spiritual responsibility with passion and eagerness to serve the Lord wholeheartedly. The Lord is working in so many ways in and among us. Let’s lift our eyes to see what God is doing. As we do

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so, may the Lord renew our hearts to serve him with a new hope and vision in the days ahead.

Second, the Messiah in God's history (7-19). In addition to seeing the deeds of the Messiah, Jesus helped people understand the flow of God's history. As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John (7a). Not long before, these people had been avid followers of John. They had experienced the spiritual revival that came about through his preaching, on both a personal and national level. They had expected the kingdom of heaven to come upon Israel at once. Then came John's imprisonment. Then the Jewish religious leaders declared that Jesus, the one John pointed to as the Messiah, was driven by demons. Opposition to the kingdom had shaken John's followers and they wavered in their conviction. Doubt about John's identity and message was like a dark cloud in their hearts. With great compassion, Jesus helped them remember who John was. He began with some rhetorical questions, to remind them why they had gone out to see John. It was not because he was a reed swayed by the wind (7b). Reeds are weak and hollow. They represent people who have no clear identity or value system, and change easily. John was certainly not like that. Nor was John a man who dressed in fine clothes and lived in a palace (8). Such people travel first class, eat the most expensive foods, and star in their own reality shows while the rest of the world suffers in poverty. John was quite different. He wore clothing made of itchy camel's hair in every season. His menu was always locusts and wild honey which he could catch on the run.

Then why did people go out to see John? Was it because he was a prophet (9a)? Prophets stand on the side of God and speak the truth. They resist the deception and corruption of the world, and are the conscience of their times. Without them, the concepts of right and wrong, or good and evil become very relativistic. They teach the truth even though it is costly. Yes, John was this kind of person. He called people from the top of Israel's society to the bottom to repent their sins and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Though John was now in prison, the word of God he had spoken was inspired and true and it did not change according to the situation. Jesus wanted them to remember John's message and stand firm in it.

Jesus also called John, "**more than a prophet**" (9b). It was because he had a special mission, foretold by Scripture, as forerunner of the Messiah

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(10). This mission had been announced before his birth and had required pure devotion all the days of his life. Now his mission was accomplished. His life was short, but great and influential. Jesus recognized him as the greatest man of those born of women (11a). John's message was backed up by his godly integrity. Jesus went on, "...yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (11b). John belonged to the Old Testament era. He did not see Jesus' death, which gives forgiveness of sins or Jesus' glorious resurrection, which conquered the power of death, or the transforming power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Yet those who accept the gospel are born again by the work of the Holy Spirit and experience all these things. Christ lives in his people and transforms us into his own image. In that respect, those who accept Christ, even the least, are greater than John.

Jesus tried to help the people understand the times in which they lived, and the nature of the kingdom. Through the forerunner John the Baptist, the kingdom of heaven was introduced publicly to Israel. Then came Jesus, the Messiah, the King who was prophesied. Jesus' coming was the culmination of everything that had been foretold in the Prophets and the Law. In that respect, John was the Elijah who was to come—the last prophet before the Messiah. Jesus' main point is that the long-awaited Messiah had now come, and through him the kingdom of heaven had come. It was the most anticipated time in the history of Israel and God's greatest purpose for the nation. However, the kingdom of heaven was spiritual, and it would come through opposition and suffering. John would not get out of prison; he would die a martyr's death. What is more, the Messiah would die on a cross for the sins of the world and then rise again. Not everyone would understand the spiritual meaning of Jesus' words, but only those who were humble enough to hear the truth (15).

When Jesus saw the people of his times, he was sorry. They were like children in the marketplace (16). In hardness of heart and indifference they treated everything as a game (17). They were very demanding (18). They wanted a messiah who would satisfy their desires and meet their expectations. When he did not do this, they refused to accept him. Though the trend of the world was one of ignorance toward God and rebellion, there would be some who accepted the gospel and lived by the truth. As Jesus said, "**Wisdom is proved right by her deeds.**"

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In this passage, we have learned to hold on to our faith in Jesus even when our expectations are not met and we are in hardships. We have learned that the Jesus we believe in is the Jesus of the Bible and that our faith must be informed by the truth about him. When we face conflicts within, we should come Jesus through deep Bible study and learn about him more deeply. Let's not be deceived by the progressive, liberal agenda that is so prevalent on our campuses and throughout our nation. There is no true justice without the gospel. Nor should we be deceived by the cultural Christian influences that focus on living the best life in this world. Jesus calls us to his kingdom, especially the life to come. Let's accept the Messiah Jesus as he truly is and follow him to the end. We will be blessed indeed.