

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Kingdom: A Study of Matthew 8–13

STUDY TEN

When Disappointment Leads to Doubt

Matthew 11:2–11

What do you do with your doubts? Most people are afraid to admit them, thinking they will shove us out of God's favor. John the Baptizer expressed his doubt openly and with a lot of emotion—which gives us hope when we doubt.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

JOHN the Baptizer first appeared in Matthew's gospel as the "voice shouting in the wilderness" sent by God to clear a path for the Messiah (Matthew 3:3). For the repentant, John offered cleansing baptism. Against the arrogant, he wielded a message of "coming wrath" (3:7). He was the last of the Old Testament prophets—a steel-tipped arrow of conviction, tempered in the desert and aimed right at the heart of the nation.

Herod Antipas arrested John near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry (4:12; 14:3). By the time of the events of Matthew 11, the desert-dweller had been sitting in prison for some time, hearing about Jesus' preaching and healing ministry across Galilee and the surrounding region. John began wondering, "Why hasn't Jesus begun judging the wicked and freeing the oppressed?"¹

As is often the case when we build up expectations, John may have imagined a reality that wasn't in God's plan. Jesus came first to *bear* sin's curse, and then bring judgment at His second coming. When the events John envisioned didn't happen, a dark cloud settled into his damp cell. His disappointment became a breeding ground for doubt.

Let's join John in his dungeon of doubt as He sends an agonizing message to Jesus: "Are you the Messiah we've been expecting?" (11:3). It's the kind of question we may have asked from our own pit of despair, "Jesus, are You who You say You are?" Thankfully, Jesus' reply set free John's heart, and it can do the same for us.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Do you ever feel doubt's prison walls closing around you? Perhaps when tearful prayers find no answer, you secretly wonder about God's goodness. Or, when you suffer for doing right, you doubt God's fairness. Where can you go with your questions? John the Baptizer took his to the Lord. Use the space below to write down any doubts you may have. Then lay them at the feet of the Lord in prayer as you seek answers through His Word.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Read *Matthew 11:2–11* and take time to linger over the verses. Peruse one paragraph two or three times in a row and pause between each reading. Then go to the next paragraph and do the same. Reading Scripture thoughtfully helps us internalize the words and see them not just with our eyes but with our heart.²



Observation: John's Doubts and Jesus' Response

Did you notice the basic outline of Matthew 11:2–11? It includes John the Baptizer's *question* (Matthew 11:2–3), Jesus' *answer* to John (11:4–6), and Jesus' *address* to the crowd (11:7–11). Also, did you notice the absence of admonishment from Jesus toward John? Not one word of shame falls from Jesus' lips, only assurance and support—exactly what sincere questioners need.



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John the Baptizer's Question—Matthew 11:2–3

John bundled his doubts and desperation into a heartfelt question with two parts: “Are you the Messiah we’ve been expecting, or should we look for someone else?” (Matthew 11:3). According to prophecy, the Messiah, David’s heir to the throne, was to “bring justice” (Isaiah 42:1) and “proclaim liberty to captives” (61:1 NASB). What mental and emotional issues might have influenced John’s questions?

John wasn’t throwing rocks at Jesus for being a fraud. Rather, he was laying his broken spirit before Jesus in a humble search for answers. Let’s see how Jesus tenderly handled John’s confusion.

Jesus’ Answer to John—Matthew 11:4–6

When the messengers delivered John’s questions, Jesus answered without a hint of rebuke. What proof of His messianic identity did Jesus give (*Matthew 11:4–5*)?

In the spiritual realm, Jesus was bringing justice and He was setting captives free. As commentator R. V. G. Tasker noted, Jesus was “*attacking the citadel of evil* by restoring health and sanity to human beings suffering from the ravages of sin and disease” (emphasis added).³



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Next, read *Matthew 11:6 in several Bible versions*, summarize the blessing Jesus gave John, and explain how it logically connects to 11:4–5.

Blessings await those who are not offended because an answer hasn't come as they expected. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Jesus' Address to the Crowd—Matthew 11:7–11

After John's messengers left, Jesus turned to the crowd. What did He say about John's *convictions* (*Matthew 11:7*)? His *self-denial* (*11:8*)? And his *calling* (*11:9–10*)? What high honors did Jesus give John (*11:11*)? By implication, what was Jesus saying to us when we seek Him with our honest doubts?

Jesus concluded His address with a curious contrast: “Yet even the least person in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than [John] is!” (*11:11*). *What did Jesus mean by this statement?*



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Interpretation: Understanding Jesus' Point of View

Jesus viewed the kingdom of heaven within the larger framework of God's redemptive plan—the details of which were hidden to prophets like John. According to Pastor Chuck Swindoll,

Jesus knew things John didn't. He knew of His impending atoning death and miraculous resurrection. He knew of His commissioning of the apostles and His ascension to the right hand of the Father. He knew of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the establishment of the church, and the preaching of the gospel throughout the church age. . . . He knew of His second coming, when He would finally bring about the perfect kingdom John the Baptizer and all the Jews of the first century were hoping for. *John wasn't wrong in his picture of what the messianic age would look like; he was just wrong about the timing of the events* (emphasis added).⁴

To visualize John's view of prophetic events, read the article, "Prophetic Telescoping," on page 213 of Pastor Chuck's commentary *Insights on Matthew 1–15*. How does Pastor Chuck explain the previously unforeseen gap of time between Christ's first and second coming?

As great as John was as the forerunner of *Christ*, he didn't enjoy the spiritual position we have in *Christ*. "Our position in Christ situates us in an exceedingly glorious place," writes Pastor Chuck.⁵ God has "raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 2:6). And in the "future ages," we will be shining examples of God's grace because of our union to Christ (2:7).



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What, then, did Jesus mean when He said, “the least person in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than [John] is!” (Matthew 11:11)? For help with the answer, consult page 214 of *Insights on Matthew 1–15*. For an online resource, see *Constable’s Notes* at netbible.org.

Our *position* in Christ brings us an even greater blessing than John received as the *proclaimer* of Christ—not because of anything we have done but because of God’s grace!

Jesus said something of John He said of no one else: “Among all of those on earth, none is greater than John.” And He said this on the heels of John’s doubting.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Insight from Luke’s Account

Luke’s account of this same incident includes a tidbit of information that adds even more insight into God’s grace. What was happening at the exact moment the messengers asked John’s question to Jesus, according to *Luke 7:20–22*?



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Reflect on the divinely orchestrated timing of the events. What was the significance of the messengers *seeing with their own eyes* the answer to John's doubts? What does this timing say about God's gracious ways of reassuring us when we doubt?

No one is immune to succumbing to doubt. No one moves from earth to heaven sailing on calm seas, never knowing the feeling of sinking. It's a wonderful fact that Jesus did not shame John for his doubting. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: What We Need to Remember about Our Doubts

Our doubts about the God we love can weigh us down like heavy chains pulling us into an abyss of uncertainty. And yet, in the darkest depths, God often reveals His richest treasures. What spiritual riches might we discover from Christ's response to John?

First, *doubts arise because we are human*. As in John's case, our hopes form a reality that may not be in God's plan. When anticipation leads to unfulfilled expectation, we become vulnerable to disappointment when things don't work out. Then disillusionment. Then doubt.

Have you seen this pattern in your life? If so, can you trace the roots of your doubts back to their source and invite God to help you trust His plan that you can't fully comprehend?



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Second, *doubts may temporarily disturb our relationship with God, but they won't destroy it.* How does Jesus' honoring of John give you assurance that God won't abandon or shame you when you have doubts?

Third, *special blessings await those who can live with life's inequities.* Think of all the saints in Scripture who made it through their hard times to receive God's blessing.

- Blessed are the Jobs, who suffer yet stay faithful.
- Blessed are the Josephs, who endure unjust treatment yet refuse to live in bitterness.
- Blessed are the Hoseas, who continue to walk in obedience even though their spouses leave them.
- Blessed are the Pauls, who pray for relief from a thorn in the flesh yet hear the Lord's response, "My grace is all you need" (2 Corinthians 12:9).
- And blessed are the Johns, who can live with unanswered questions, who rest in what they can see, and who wait patiently for God to reveal what they can't see.

On your journey through doubt, "keep on asking," "keep on seeking," "keep on knocking" and the Lord's door will always "be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).



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A FINAL PRAYER

At the beginning of this study, you laid your questions and doubts at the feet of Christ. Now close by using the space below to pen your own prayer of trust in the Lord.

Father,

ENDNOTES

1. The cause of John the Baptizer's arrest brings his doubt into clearer focus. John had publicly rebuked Herod Antipas for divorcing his wife to marry Herodias, the ex-wife of his half-brother. Herod Antipas arrested John "as a favor to his wife Herodias" (Matthew 14:3)—who was pulling all the strings. Herodias was a hot-headed Jezebel, spoiled by power, and bent on killing John, who, like Elijah, dared expose her and her husband's sin. Why hadn't Jesus confronted these wicked rulers of Israel as the messianic prophecies foretold?
2. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
3. R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 115.
4. Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Matthew 1–15*, vol. 1A (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020), 212.
5. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Matthew 1–15*, 214.

