

Text: Matthew 11:1-19

Title: John the Baptist's Prison Depression

Truth: The Bible gives you direction on how to handle depression.

Date/Location: Sunday October 24, 2021 at FBC

Introduction

11:1 records that after Jesus instructed the 12 on their ministry responsibility, He Himself went out to teach and preach in their cities. Without a doubt, He continued the ministry He was doing and became the 13th to go out on the mission He had just given to the 12.

I. Background to John's Imprisonment

- A. Jesus knew about John being in prison since Matthew 4:12, which was recorded immediately after the temptation in the wilderness. Evidently John was not free for long after the baptism of Jesus. God arranged for Him to be set aside shortly thereafter.
- B. The whole story is told in a retrospective manner in Matthew 14:1-12. Herod imprisoned John for criticizing his marriage and calling him out on other evil that he had done (Luke 3:19). Herod had married his sister-in-law, brother Philip's wife. John protested that it was illegal for him to have her as wife. She was next of kin and she belonged to his brother. He was so enraged that he wanted to kill John—that shows how deep his desire was toward his wife. But also Herodias wanted to get rid of John. They obviously had love (lust) between them such that they refused to heed righteous advice.
- C. Yet Herod was constrained by his fear of the mass of people who considered John to be a real live prophet, like those of old. And that he was. Herod knew this, because Mark 6:20 says that he feared John himself, because he knew John was holy. It might have been a case of some superstition that if he did not treat John well that he would be cursed. Of course, he seemed to overlook the fact that he had put John *in prison!*
- D. Eventually circumstances came about in which there was a opportunity for him to carry out his desire, albeit at the urging of

his step-daughter, and despite the fact that he still seemed to have some misgivings about it in terms of his fear of John and of the political ramifications.

- E. To put some color into this black and white picture, we might like to know how long John was in prison. Some suggest 6-10 months, others one year, others up to two years. The chronology is a bit murky to me because of the way in which the gospels are arranged, not always in chronological fashion. A prime example is that in Mark 6:14, John's arrest and murder are recorded, but at the time that Herod is hearing about Jesus and reflecting on what he had done to John *earlier*.

We can narrow in on the timing like this:

1. Matthew 3:15 tells us that John baptized Jesus, so he was put in prison after that. Luke 3:20-21 presents the events in the opposite order, but it is clear that Luke is jumping ahead of the timeline in Luke 3:20. John 1:29 gives the details of Jesus's baptism
2. John 3:23-24 indicates that John continued to baptize people around the time that Jesus spoke to Nicodemus.
3. The reports of Jesus got back to Herod apparently during the ministry of the 12 as they itinerated around the nation. Mark 6:17 puts this after the 12 are commissioned, and before their return to Jesus. Luke 9:1-11 records it in compact form: the 12 are sent, Herod hears of Jesus (perhaps because of the notoriety that is growing because of the band of men going around spreading Jesus's message). Herod knows that John was dead, but thinks he may have come back to life. And then the apostles returned from their ministry. This seems to indicate that John was killed either before the 12 are commissioned or shortly thereafter. This timeline is supported by Matthew 11—which comes after the commissioning of the 12 in chapter 10.
4. In chapter 11, however, John is alive in prison and asking about Jesus. So sometime *after* the 12 are sent must be when John met his demise.
5. Jesus's teaching about rewards at the end of chapter 10 may foreshadow the situation about John the Baptist. Herod did the

- opposite of receive a righteous man, a prophet, in the name of the prophet. He rejected John and treated him shamefully.
6. Examining a timeline of the life of Jesus, it appears that He sent the 12 toward the end of 28 A.D. They would have returned perhaps some months later.
 7. A reconstruction of events could be like this: Jesus began His public ministry sometime in 26 AD. John was imprisoned sometime in late 27 or early 28 AD. He sent messengers to Jesus near the end of that year. Shortly after inquiring, when the 12 were out on their mission, he was killed. Days or weeks later Herod was hearing reports of a great activity of preaching and healing around the nation and wondered if John was resurrected. This would mean John was in prison around a year or slightly more.

II. John's Inquiry, 11:2-3

- A. John also had heard in his prison cell about what Jesus was doing, but the psychological and physical pressures of prison, the injustice of the situation, and the expectation of impending death any day caused him to doubt the identity of Jesus. He was the one who had pointed out the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; he had baptized Jesus; he had seen the dove come down and light on him. But he was probably in what would be called today serious depression.
- B. But something was wrong. John had been preaching that the coming One would baptize with the Spirit and fire. He would bring judgment to the brood of vipers, and anyone who would not repent. Then Jesus came, and John thought all that would begin to unfold. But it did not. There was something else going on. Jesus was still preaching the kingdom was coming—in fact giving the same message John did (repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand); He was offering the kingdom; He was calling for repentance; and He was healing multitudes of people of their diseases. But John was overlooking these things, not processing them properly in his grief. The Romans were still in power. What was going on?
- C. John asked then, if He really was the promised One to come, or if there was another. His depression had John figuring that he might

have been wrong; something was not what he expected. He should not be waiting in jail this long about to die for His righteous stand. Rather, perhaps a triumphant Jesus should rescue him and save the people and the nation.

- D. This is quite a weakness for a man we would think is, as Jesus is about to say, the greatest to ever live, even among the class of those known to Israel as the prophets. But he is a man of like nature with us, just like Elijah was (James 5:17). Notice that Elijah also had at least one major bout of “prophetic depression.” It is found in 1 Kings 19:4 and surrounding verses. He also was under threat of death. If such threats are credible, they really *do* something to the victim of the threats unless they are accustomed to it or are extraordinarily cool under pressure.

III. Jesus’s Answer to John, 11:4-6

- A. Jesus instructed the disciples of John to return and tell them what they were observing with their own eyes. Jesus worked miracles in the sight of John’s disciples so that they could be eyewitnesses of these marvels and tell John what they saw.
- B. Their report: John—the blind see. The deaf hear. The dead live. The lame leap. The dumb speak. Sinners are forgiven! Lepers are healed. He preaches the good news to the poor in Israel.

I understand that *poor* is not merely economic in meaning; it refers to those “poor in spirit” as in Matthew 5:3. Those who focus on the economic meaning miss the need for the human spirit to be rightly aligned to God through repentant faith, and instead replace the idea of salvation from sin with the popular modern idea of salvation from oppression. That is an earth-bound, worldly “gospel,” but it is not the gospel of divine grace. Jesus did *not* promise elevation out of poverty in this life, nor escape from all oppression in this life.

The combination of miraculous activities demonstrates that the One doing those activities is more than Moses, beyond Elijah, exceeding Elisha, or anyone else who has come before. He is the one who will fulfill Isaiah 35:4-6.

- C. Jesus then pronounced a blessing upon John, and others like him who were not offended at the person and message of Jesus. This reminds me of the blessing of John 20:29. Blessed are *you*, too, dear one, if you embrace Jesus Christ and are not offended at his teaching. There are plenty of people today who still fall on that stone of stumbling; who are offended at the simple gospel message of Christ (Luke 2:34); who think it foolish to believe in the man of Nazareth who died on a Roman cross (1 Cor. 1:18). But blessed are those who believe in Him (Romans 9:32-33).

IV. A Similar Episode of Depression, 1 Kings 19:1-18

- A. The backstory of 1 Kings 18 is that Elijah has just called the nation of Israel to turn back and be faithful to God, and God judged the false prophets of Baal and Asherah by killing them. This enraged the queen, Jezebel, and she threatened Elijah's life.
- B. The depression of 19:1-7. God immediately treated Elijah with rest and nourishment.
- C. The complaint of Elijah to God, 19:8-14. Elijah complained that he had been zealous for God (true), that Israel was abominable in their rejection of the covenant made with God through Moses (true), and they were seeking his life (at least some were).
- D. The answer of God in 19:15-18. God's answer was not a fluffy "there, there now dear child." He had already prescribed some physical rest and nourishment. In addition, God told Elijah:
1. Continue to serve Me. He gave Elijah particular assignments to do, 19:15-16.
 2. Look at what I will do through Jehu and Elisha, 19:17.
 3. Remember that the people of God have not disappeared. Look at what God is still doing in your nation, 19:18.
- E. In other words, look to God and what He is accomplishing. Look at truth. If you look to yourself, you will invariably become depressed. The prescription for self-centered depression is to get your eyes off yourself. Get them onto God and His program. Get *involved* in what He is doing. Notice that you are not the only Christian, nor the only one who has difficulties. John was told something similar: Behold the works of the Messiah. He *is* the coming One.

“Oh, but I don’t feel like it. Woe is me.” Now you are making excuses and disobeying. I cannot help you if you are in that mindset. Turn away from self-focus and turn to a God-ward focus, and see how it improves your outlook. “I don’t know what to do next.” Answer: Take one step, even a simple one, in serving God. Ask a trusted Christian friend for advice. Serve someone else. Recall God’s blessings to you before, and His promises to His people. Turn to Jesus.

V. Jesus’s Explanation to the Crowds, 11:7-19

- A. John would undoubtedly be encouraged by the report, like Elijah before him was encouraged to hear that 7,000 men had not capitulated to Baal. But God does not guarantee a soft landing for us in this life. John still was going to be martyred because He was a man of God and Herod was a vile king. The upcoming words of Jesus feel like a pre-eulogy before the murder of the Baptizer.
- B. The Lord asked the crowds what they saw in John the Baptist. Was he shaken by the fear of man—like a reed blowing in the wind? Did he bow to and for with every popular thought, every wind of doctrine, every new idea? Not at all. Was he a soft man, a man of royalty, a wealthy man of renown? No there too. He was dressed in camel’s hair with a leather belt and ate locusts and wild honey. He was the forerunner not only of Jesus, but also of the modern picture of a crazed prophet. Only in this case, he was not crazed.
- C. Jesus then asked another rhetorical question: did you see in John a prophet? Indeed, Jesus says, you did. This is really Jesus’s evaluation of John, not just the evaluation of the crowds. He said that John was a prophet and then some. He was a special messenger just like the one who was prophesied in Malachi 3:1, 4:5-6—the last book of the Old Testament as well as Isaiah 40:3.
- D. In fact, John was the greatest man to that time. Not because he was wealthy or powerful, but because He was holy and dedicated to God, and because he was a servant (Matt. 20:26, 23:11; Luke 22:26). He carried out his mission faithfully. He was a prophet who then saw the fulfillment of what he prophesied! He had a greater

office and a greater privilege. This does not diminish the OT prophets. It just says there was someone even more significant.

- E. All the people of God who enter into and enjoy the kingdom of Christ will be even greater than John! The greatness of the greatest servants of God will pale in comparison to what will be possible in God's kingdom in terms of service and seeing God's wonders.
- F. "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (v. 12). There are a couple of ways people take this statement, including one that is something like this: aggressive people get the kingdom because they take it; they are forcing their way into it (NET). But that is not how one enters the kingdom; entry is by repentant faith! The wording of the variation in Luke 16:16 complicates matters a little bit with the idea of "pressing into it" or forcing their way into it. The problems with interpreting it this way are three: again, you don't force your way into the kingdom by repentance, although there is a sense of determination and resolve that accompany repentance; not *everyone* is entering the kingdom, because only a few do; and finally, the kingdom was not actually inaugurated at that time, so no one actually "entered" it. Furthermore, some suggest that the kingdom makes forceful progress, but that is not the meaning of these words as plainly read.

Here is the correct understanding of the violent taking the kingdom by force. It comports with the fact that John the Baptist was in prison. He was, until Jesus, the foremost announcer of the kingdom. He was thrown in jail for announcing the righteousness of the kingdom. The Pharisees were against him and the kingdom of God. The Sadducees were against him. They were all also against Jesus, the other messenger of the kingdom. Their forefathers killed the prophets in centuries past (Luke 11:47, Acts 7:52, Romans 11:3-5, 1 Thess. 2:15). They were, consciously or not, trying to take the kingdom away from the people by force, withholding it from the nation using their power to silence the messengers of the kingdom. They wanted no threat to their power; they cared nothing about the true things of God.

G. Verses 13-15 speak of John's ministry as a prophet. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets, a transitional figure from the old age of Law into the new era of grace and faith. And in fact, *if* the people were willing to receive it, John would have fulfilled the Elijah prophecy as the forerunner of the Messiah and the kingdom would have begun somehow. But this hypothetical is actually a counterfactual. John said "I am not" Elijah (John 1:21). The nation as a whole was *not* willing to receive John, nor his message, nor the One to whom he pointed. Of course, a number of people did, witnessed by those who went out for his baptism, and those who followed Jesus. But remember, "many" went back and quit following Jesus (John 6:66).

If you have spiritual ears, listen. It is absolutely critical to hear what John preached and what Jesus is saying as well.

H. Verses 16-19 teach that the Jewish leaders and many of their people simply would not be satisfied at anything. They were implacable (hard-hearted, unyielding, obdurate, could not be pleased). Jesus likened them to young people playing, on the one hand calling for a game of joy, but their companions do not want to play that. Instead, they suggest what seems to be the desire of their companions, a game of mourning, but they did not want that either. They simply could not be pleased. They were immature like the children of the illustration (ouch!). Jesus explains next.

John was a very ascetic minister of the Word. The Jewish leaders rejected him because they said he was very strange in his behavior, attire, and food, and probably was demon-possessed. God in His wisdom then sent Jesus who was not ascetic but would participate at wedding feasts and dinners in people's homes. They rejected him too, making the excuse that he was a glutton and winebibber and a friend of sinners. Back at 9:34, they also began to accuse Jesus of being in league with the Devil. They had a standard playbook of complaints when they did not like someone. They simply refused to be persuaded. But how God arranged it, they had no excuses! Whether they liked their potatoes whole or mashed, there was an option for them, which shared the divine message of the kingdom. But they refused.

Conclusion

In the end, Jesus says, “wisdom is justified by her children.” The proof is in the pudding. The fruit shows the root. A good tree bears good fruit. The outcome of the Pharisees’ behavior was going to be the kingdom would be taken away. The outcome of those who received John’s and Jesus’s message would be salvation and eventual entry into the kingdom. Different fruit, different “children.” Some Bible translations have “wisdom is proven by her works.” The Greek text is slightly different in four letters, but the idea is exactly the same.

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