

"I Am John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:1-19)

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[0 : 0 0] Cool. Matthew chapter 11, verse 1 to 19. I'm reading NIV. After Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?

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 proclaimed to the poor.

Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John. What did you go out into the wilderness to see?

A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in king's palaces.

[1 : 1 2] Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.

Truly I tell you, among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

To what can I compare this generation? There are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others. We play the pipe for you, and you did not dance.

We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, he has a demon. The son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

[2 : 2 2] But wisdom is proved right by her deeds. Thank you.

But before that, I'm going to pray for God to speak to us through this word and this message. So will you bow your heads and pray with me? Father, your word is amazing.

It is full of wonderful characters and people. And here we are reminded of someone who went all the way in following you. Lord, we've been exploring different ways on how we can go deeper into following you and your son, Jesus Christ.

So help us to see afresh what it looks like to be sold out for you, even when things are hard, when we have doubts, and yet, and when we're unsure of our role in your great gospel plan.

Father, I do pray for any new visitors here, that you would help them to engage with your word today. And I pray for those who are weary and tired, that you would engage their hearts with your gospel message as well.

- [3 : 51] Father, I pray now in Jesus' name. Amen. I pray for those who are weary and tired, that you would help them to be here.
- How long will I be stuck in here? Here in this prison? Don't they know? I'm John the Baptist.
- I've got people to see. I've got a message to tell. It's been three weeks now. Three weeks, almost four weeks. Four weeks here in lockdown. I've taken away my favorite camel hair coat.
- The food here is lousy. I miss my locusts and my wild honey. The stuff they pack and save here for me, it's just not quite the same. And not that I ever shaved in the wilderness before, but I could use a shave right about now.
- I know. Maybe I could sneak out a window while a guard's not looking. I've heard stories of people breaking out. Man absconds from managed isolation.
- [5 : 23] Ha! Take that. Ha! You folks over there locked down too, huh? Hmm.
- I seem pretty muted. Maybe I'll just sit here. Sit here and talk to this strange wall with a strange eye. Would you listen to my story for a bit?
- Yeah. Listen to John the Baptist's story. That'd be nice. There's not much else here to do right now. Well, I can at least share.
- There's been three things on my mind lately. Three things. I mean, the first thing is this. I've been having doubts about Jesus. You see, I remember the day I baptized him.
- It was south of here. You know the place. Bethany. In the desert of Judea. At the Jordan River. The same river where Joshua crossed into the promised land.
- [6 : 31] And back then, the message burning in my heart was, repent. The kingdom of heaven is near. And you know what?
- People were listening. They poured in from all over the region. They lined up in queues. They squeezed together.
- And one by one, they were confessing their sins. Preparing for the kingdom. And I got to baptize them in that river. There were ordinary people.
- Mums and dads. Students. Workers. There were tax collectors and soldiers. There were even some religious people. But, I mean, I called some of them out for the hypocrites they were.
- Stop deceiving yourselves, I said. You should be bearing fruit and keeping with repentance. And then, and then he showed up.
- [7 : 32] Jesus. The son of God. The lamb who takes away the sins of the world. Oh, his face when he showed up. He looked so beautiful.
- So strong and kind. So worthy. So whole. Jesus. So powerful. I had no right to even touch his shoes.
- But then, then he joined the queue. He lined up to be baptized. And I said to him, no, no, no, no, no. I, John, need to be baptized by you.
- But you come to me. He said, though, I'm here to fulfill all righteousness. I'm here to join your team.
- To be counted among you. And so I did it. I baptized him. And I remember. As soon as Jesus was baptized.
- [8 : 35] How the Lord himself showed up. And that moment, heaven tore open and the spirit of God fell upon him like a dove.
- And that voice. That voice from heaven that said, this is my son whom I love. With him, I am well pleased. There was a son of God.

Our true king, I thought. Our Messiah. But it's been a while since I've seen Jesus. A few weeks ago, I heard that he and his disciples there.

They were on some kind of missions trip around the towns in this area. And you know what? Hearing about who he's picked. I got to be honest with you. I don't see their potential.

Some fishermen. A tax collector. How will this lot proclaim God's kingdom? It's not an easy ride.

[9 : 37] They must get worried a lot. I hope Jesus reassured them a bit. Because it ain't easy being an evangelist. You might just end up in a place like this.

In prison. In prison by Herod. Ah, Herod. Herod Antipas. He's the one who put me in here. Everyone loves him.

Ruler of Galilee. Everyone's locked down. There's soldiers everywhere. But it's like they've forgotten. Or they don't care. I've heard that every day at 1pm.

Someone gets up. Announces all the good stuff he's been doing. Projects he's got going. They still love the temple that his dad built. Everyone loves him.

Aaron. Aaron. Aaron. Ah. That fox. He says he fears God. But. I told him better. I reckon he was just playing politics all this time.

[10 : 38] Someone had to tell him the obvious. It's not lawful for you to marry your brother's wife. Get it? Was I too direct? Maybe.

But someone's got to say it. No one will. But where was Jesus? Why doesn't he come here to Tiberias? To confront Herod.

Why has he not come to face Herod? To bring the Holy Spirit and fire here? Didn't the Lord Almighty say to the prophet Micah? I will send my messenger.

Who will prepare the way for me. And suddenly the Lord you are seeking. Will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant. Whom you desire will come. When Messiah comes.

That's what he'll do, right? He'll be a refiner's fire. He'll purify this land. He'll march into Jerusalem. He'll bring the revolution of our times. Turn fathers back to their sons.

[11 : 37] And sons back to their fathers. That's what the prophet said. That's what we've been fasting for. Been getting baptized for. I don't get what's going on with Jesus.

I mean, right now he's just. He's just doing his thing. In some small dusty villages. Teaching in some synagogues. Preaching on hilltops.

Healing a bunch of people. How's that going to help? When will he be crowned as king? When will he be lifted up high? For the world to see.

And look around. Now I'm in lockdown. I'm stuck here. I don't know.

I'm having my doubts. Wall, have you ever felt that way? So sure of the son of God when you were baptized. But now you're not so sure.

[12 : 38] Well, I'm not one to mince words. The other day I asked him straight up. I sent some of my disciples along. Are you the one who was to come? Or should we expect someone else, Jesus?

And you know, the disciples I sent to ask him, they came back. But they came back a bit funny. They said they heard and saw all the things he did.

And this was his message. This is the message from Jesus. He said, the blind receive sight. The lame walk. Those who have leprosy are cured.

The deaf hear. The dead are raised. And the good news is preached to the poor. Jesus, is this your roundabout way of talking again?

You sound like my dad, Zechariah, when he sings one of his long songs. Maybe I think I know what he's referring to, what Jesus is talking about.

[13 : 40] I do remember the scroll of Isaiah. It promised that one day, one day God will come with vengeance, with justice to save us. I can even see those words in my head now.

Then will the eyes of the Lord, 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.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness. They are like water. And streams in the desert. Maybe I shouldn't doubt.

Is that what you want me to do, Jesus? With my doubts to remember the promises of old, to see that you are living proof that God has come to save us, to open blind eyes, to restore, heal, and change lives.

What do I have to do? Do I keep trusting you? What would you do? Oh, Wall, I wish you could chat with me. I wish you could tell me.

[14 : 47] Do I stop believing Jesus and his kingdom? Or do I just keep following him and pointing people to him no matter what? I don't know.

What should I do? It's not just these doubts I've been having about whether Jesus is the one to come, though. Jesus, if your kingdom really is advancing, there's something else I don't get.

I don't get. I don't get this either. I don't understand why Jesus thinks I am Elijah. That's not my name. I'm John the Baptist. Why does he think, though, I'm Elijah?

I mean, that's what he's been telling the crowd, so I've heard. But apparently he's been saying things like this. What do you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you. And more than a prophet.

This is the one about whom it's written. I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you. It's a bit ironic. I'm no messenger of God right now.

[15 : 53] I'm just a nobody stuck in jail. And I mean, if anyone should be Elijah, it should be Jesus. He's the guy who's memorized Torah back to front.

If anyone could challenge false priests and call down fire, do a showdown on Mount Carmel, that'd be Jesus. Although, I guess I do look the part of Elijah more.

I mean, the scroll of kings does say that he wore camel's hair, too. Oh, I miss my coat. And the Lord, the Lord did feed Elijah in the wilderness, too, didn't he?

Hmm, me too. You know what? Maybe it's not a bad thing to be like Elijah, to be someone who prepares the way for the Lord.

Maybe it's not a bad thing to bring healing, his healing to the poor and the outcasts. Maybe if I'm stuck here, there could be other Elijahs, other people who will point to God's kingdom, who will point the way to the Lord.

[17 : 03] Maybe that's what Jesus meant when he said, Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist. Maybe that's how God's kingdom works.

He uses the weak. The ones who have nothing to offer. Yeah. But if I'm Elijah, how much more than should everyone else be, too?

I mean, what have I heard that they haven't heard about Jesus? What have I seen that they haven't seen? People used to come from cities and towns to me for good news, but maybe one day our people will go out to cities and towns with good news.

Maybe that's it. Maybe they'll see something better than that day when Jesus was baptized. I don't know, Jesus. Whatever you're planning to do, I hope you do it soon.

And I hope it really fixes all our sins. Maybe there is another good thing that comes out of me being here. Maybe if I'm in prison, it means other people are free to serve you.

[18 : 14] Maybe if I can't preach, others can. Maybe if I make way, others step up. It's not my kingdom, after all.

It's God's kingdom. It's not my ministry. It's God's ministry. I guess if I am John the Baptist, then others can be, too. Others to prepare the way for the Lord.

He must increase. I must decrease. It's not bad. I hope someone writes that down someday. Oh, but there's one other thing that I've been confused by, too.

Maybe it's a minor thing, but I'm also sad that our generation complains about us. I mean, I get it. I get it. Pointing people to Jesus makes me look weird, right?

Makes me look like an outsider. I don't mind. I felt like this for years now under the Romans. A minority group. And then those at the top, those Pharisees and Sadducees, they'll probably never change.

[19 : 26] So I guess we just look after ourselves. But it's my generation. My people who I'm sad about. Why won't they see that Jesus is the true king?

Why can't they see his everything that they've been hoping for and more? When I point people to Jesus, why do they mock and make fun of me?

Why do they do that to us? I mean, I don't join all those drunken feasts and people say, oh, John the Baptist. What a demon possessed guy. But then Jesus.

Well, you all know it. He eats and drinks with tax collectors and people say, here's a glutton and a drunken. A friend of tax collectors and sinners. It's like you can't win with our generation.

You know, you play a happy song, they don't dance. You play a sad song, they don't cry. Maybe that's how confused our generation is.

[20 : 30] They say, stop telling me I need God. And then they go and worship something else, like their work. Or they go and feed their reputation. Or they idolize their family.

Or they tell me off. You can't say Jesus is the only way. But then they say it as if it's the only way. Or they tell me it's hateful to say who you can and can't marry.

And, oh, they seem to do it so hatefully. I don't know. There's just no pleasing everyone when you serve Jesus. Am I right? Or am I just talking to a brick wall?

Maybe that's a fact of life. Maybe we're just called to keep pointing people to Jesus. Not to please people. But just to be faithful to God.

Maybe that's what Jesus means when he says wisdom is justified. It's proved by her actions. Maybe I shouldn't worry so much about what others think of me.

[21 : 37] Maybe it's better to let my actions speak for itself. But, you know, I'm still trying to make sense of the last thing Jesus said to me.

You know how he speaks in his roundabout, upside-down way. I mean, I guess when you're the son of God, you can do that. The last thing he said to me was this. Blessed is the one who does not fall away on my account.

I mean, I remember. I remember all the blessings. The Sermon on the Mount. That's how it started, wasn't it? And I feel it.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. I feel pretty poor in spirit right now. Blessed are the meek. I've had to be meek. It's not fun being in prison. And I've been hungering for righteousness.

I've been persecuted. I've been called names. But the way Jesus taught it there, and God's kingdom, that makes me more blessed. And the Pharisees makes me happier than even King Herod.

[22 : 50] But what does Jesus mean here? Blessed is the one who does not fall away on account of me. What does he mean?

Maybe I'll have to keep thinking about that one. Well, I've got a while to figure it out. I'm not really going anywhere. Although I did hear a guard say, apparently Herod's birthday is coming up.

Maybe he'll be in a good mood that day. Maybe he'll let me out and get some fresh air finally. Maybe he'll let me out and get some fresh air finally. I guess I'll wait and see. But Lord, help me while I wait to be a living sacrifice for you.

Amen. You know, I find it amazing.

That straight after Matthew 10, I was reflecting on this this week, straight after being challenged, right, by Jesus with the terms and conditions of following him and telling people about him, we kind of get this example of John the Baptist.

[24 : 39] So I don't know. I don't know if that encourages you, that we get a little snapshot of someone who struggles to follow Jesus, who has doubts, who's unsure of his role, kind of in part of God's salvation plan, and yet, yeah, keeps pressing on.

He's faithful to the end. So, yeah, I mean, that's how I think this passage lays itself out for us. And so I hope, even though it was slightly different, you were able to find, yeah, find that God spoke to you through that and challenge you about where you yourself might have doubts, where you yourself might be unsure about your role, but where you yourself need to be reminded, even if the generation around us doesn't always accept us, that what we're called to do is not to be perfect, but to be faithful and going deeper into following Jesus.

So why don't we pray and ask God to continue doing that in our lives. Let's do that. Father, you're so good.

You are so good to us. And yet, we know that this is a really difficult passage because if we really wanted to follow it, we would need to lay down and sacrifice our own lives, even, to follow you.

All the things that we loved, all the things that we care about and are passionate about, perhaps we'd have to give them up to follow you wholeheartedly. Father, thank you for John's example.

[26 : 25] Thank you that that even through his life, the start and the end of his service, he continued to be faithful to you. And like John the Baptist, we, Lord, we sometimes have doubts about whether following Jesus is worth it.

Like John, we sometimes might be sad that most of our friends and family, our generation, reject us, reject you, and yet help us to be, continue to trust that Jesus is worth it.

He does fulfill all our hopes and dreams. For a God who saves, and he is worth following and pointing to in lives of self-sacrifice.

So, Father, would you continue to do that in our lives as we continue to worship you week by week? Father, I pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.