

# *“According to Matthew”*

A study of the Gospel of Matthew

*Part 12: Shattered Expectations*

Over the past few studies we have been looking at a section that dealt with the authority, the 'exousia' of Jesus. Chapters 8 and 9 saw demonstrations of the power he had, healing sickness, delivering from death and evil, calming storms. In Chapter 10 we saw how Jesus desired to empower His disciples for mission and how He sent them out on their first missionary journey.

We also heard of the price that discipleship involved; total commitment. They are promised nothing but a cross and a crown. They cannot have one without the other. However they are to know they are truly cared for and that even the words they have to say will be granted to them through the Holy Spirit. It is in mission that they will discover the reality of His kingdom and bring great gifts to all who responded to their message that 'the kingdom was near.'

We also commented last time that this message of 'the kingdom that was near' was similar to that John the Baptist had proclaimed. The first part of Chapter 11 gives us an update on John, followed by some further information about his significance. Let us read 11:1-6.

**1 After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. 2 When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples 3 to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” 4 Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 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. 6 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”**

We discover that John, the great forerunner and prophet of Jesus was in prison. Soon he would be executed by Herod, his head a prize that would be won by the sensuous dancing of a girl whose mother was living with Herod as his wife (though she was actually his brother's wife). It was John's protests against such an immoral action that had landed him in jail.

We saw earlier in Matthew how John recognized the uniqueness of Jesus. He was there at the baptism when a voice proclaimed '*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*'. (Matthew 3:17). One suspects news about Jesus' mission had come to John, both the good reports and the accounts of opposition.

John's mission was not going well. He is languishing in a prison cell and his fate is uncertain. In such a situation it is hardly surprising he has questions to ask about the mission of Jesus. We don't know exactly what expectations John had of one who came as the Messiah, because it was a loaded title with a variety of interpretations. But did Jesus fit any of the expectations?

So some disciples of John seek out Jesus and ask Him a pointed question. '**Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?**'. To answer them Jesus directs the disciples of John to the acts of mercy He was performing. '*Tell John what you see and hear, blind seeing, lame walking, good news to the poor!*'

The words that Jesus uses carry a meaning that goes far beyond just the acts of mercy themselves, and are a reference to Isaiah Chapter 35, a passage that was considered to be a prophecy regarding the coming Messiah. There is little doubt that John would have known these words by heart. Take a look at Isaiah 35 and hopefully you will see their significance.

### **Isaiah 35**

**1 The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, 2 it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.**

**3 Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; 4 say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."**

**5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. 6 Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. 7 The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.**

**8 And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. 9 No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, 10 and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.**

By referencing Isaiah 35 Jesus was saying a whole lot more than "Yes". He was telling John, in a way that maybe only John would truly understand, that not only was He, Jesus, the promised One, but that a time was coming when John would rejoice at the mighty works of God, when *'sorrow and sighing would flee away'* (35:10) and the true followers of God will enter *Zion 'with singing; and everlasting joy will crown their heads.'*

Sometimes a simple 'Yes' doesn't catch the meaning of what we really want to say. At times when lovers declare their love for each other they will reference poems (or more likely these days movie scenes) and say things like, "Did you see that guy on the Titanic who gave his all to save that girl... hey... I love you more than that!" The passage that Jesus offers John was a declaration that the work of the Kingdom was going forward.

As John's disciples leave, one suspects there is a murmuring in the crowd, a shift of focus away from Jesus and towards John. 'John... yeah... what ever happened to him? Heard he was in prison! Guess he had his day! Who was that John guy anyway?'

Reading the crowd Jesus addresses their questions and suggests that if they could grasp the importance of John it would help them understand His own significance. Read verses 7-14.

**7 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? 8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. 9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 11 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. 12 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. 13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. 14 And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. 15 Whoever has ears, let them hear.**

Jesus reminds the crowd of the way John had ministered to them and how he provoked their curiosity. He was unlike the religious leaders of their day. He was more like some prophet of old, unbending, stern and provocative. Dressed in camel-hair, coming out of the desert where he reputedly lived on a diet of locusts and honey. Delivering a message, ‘Repent. The Kingdom is near’ and blasting the Pharisees who stood and watched as being a brood of vipers, destined to be cut off from the true people of God and burned up by fire. ‘Repent or Be Damned, Turn or Burn’. ‘Well’, Jesus tells them, ‘John truly was a prophet. But he was a whole lot more than just any old prophet.’ He was the greatest of them all. Why? Because his mission was to prepare the way for the Kingdom to be revealed in the life and works of Jesus.

Maybe as a comment on the way that John was currently suffering the violence of Herod, Jesus talks of how the Kingdom had always been subjected to violence and opposition. As you recall some of the Old Testament stories about confrontations between the people of God and the nations that surrounded them, or even those personal stories of individual prophets like Daniel in the lions Den, there was a history behind such statements. These words would surely be of particular comfort to the early church whom Matthew wrote for, as they faced persecution that characterized earliest church history.

Jesus then makes this statement about John: ‘**If you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.**’ **V14**. The reference here is to the Old Testament prophet Malachi and some of the final verses of the Old Testament. Take a look at Malachi 3 verse 1, and Malachi chapter 4.

#### **Malachi 3**

**1 “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.**

#### **Malachi 4**

**1 Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them. 2 But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. 3 Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act,” says the LORD Almighty. 4 “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. 5 “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”**

John’s ministry is the bridge between the Old and the New. In biblical literature he is the bridge between the Old and New Testament. Theologically he is the bridge between the Old and New Covenant. John’s apocalyptic preaching references Malachi. In John’s preaching in Matthew Chapter 3 there is talk of branches being cut off, judgments of fire and consequences for children of Abraham, alongside the prophecy of a messenger who is to come.

This new Kingdom the new messenger is to bring far outpasses the former Kingdom in its glory. John says of Jesus “*He who is coming after me is mightier than I and I am not fit to remove his sandals*”. (Matthew 3:11). Jesus tells the crowds “**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**”. The greatness of the New Kingdom made even the brightest stars of

the Old Kingdom seem like they were in the shade. Even the least person in the new Kingdom would be in a better position than the greatest in the Old!

So Jesus tells the crowds, **'If you are willing to accept it, John is the Elijah who was to come.'** J.B Phillips in his translation of the New Testament puts Elijah's name in quotation marks. In other words Jesus tells the crowds, not that John was not a literal reincarnation of Elijah, but that if they realised the importance of whom Jesus was, they would recognize John as the Elijah figure that Malachi had prophesised.

This section concludes with a phrase that Jesus would use a number of times. 'Whoever has ears, let them hear.' This phrase has always struck me as amusing, because what else are ears for apart from listening. We could argue they function as pen carriers or spectacle arm holders, but that's stretching it. Ears are to listen with. So are the crowds now ready to listen to Jesus? Not likely! Our passage continues:-16-18

**16 "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:**

**17 "We played the pipe for you,  
and you did not dance;  
we sang a dirge,  
and you did not mourn.'**

**18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 19 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.' But wisdom is proved right by her deeds."**

The crowds are notoriously fickle. Jesus compares them to a bunch of bickering children. One group has a pipe and they are playing a happy tune for the others to dance to. But the others are saying "Oh, no, we don't want to dance". OK says the first group, 'Lets play funerals instead!' and they play a sad song. "Oh no" says the second group, "We don't want to play funerals". Sometimes you just can't win.

Having been around churches for most of my years I have observed how churches can complain bitterly about their pastors. So much so that they go and call a pastor who is very different the next time. And then what happens? They complain that the new pastor is different. Some folk are never happy!

Likewise with the people of Jesus day. They complained John was too stern. They complain Jesus is too lax. William Barclay comments 'They may have criticised John for his lonely isolation, but John had moved mens hearts to God as they had not been moved for centuries, they may criticize Jesus for mixing too much in ordinary life... but in Him people were finding a new power to live...' Hence the final verse in this section; **"wisdom is proved right by her deeds." (18)**

Whilst some had received the ministry of Jesus with welcome and acceptance, many had rejected Him and remained unmoved by the demonstrations of Kingdom power that acts of healing and deliverance had revealed to them. The gospels do not detail every town that Jesus visited or every miracle He performed. But we do in Matthew have reference to two towns where things had not gone well. Verse 20-24.

**20 Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. 21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. 23 And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you**

**will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. 24 But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”**

If only the people could realize what was going on in their midst! This was the new kingdom, this was the dawning of a new beginning. But, no, the people were too proud and self-assured to comprehend it. They thought themselves above such things as the message Jesus proclaimed. **'You, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades'**. Their pride will be their downfall.

Indeed pride is the root of unbelief in many situations. Either that or indifference. There seems to be with many folk today an inability to be impressed. No matter what happens they are seriously underwhelmed. Take them to the beach and they will complain it's too sandy. Take them to the city and they will complain it's too busy. Take them up a mountain and they will tell you there's nothing to do. You've met these people. You know what I'm talking about!

I wonder what the prophets would say to our generation who have so much of everything yet still take as a theme song, (as the Rolling Stones sang) 'I can't get no satisfaction'. Sophistication can be a curse! In our final section the tone changes and the wonder of simplicity is proclaimed, as well as assurance given that those who genuinely turn their lives to God will find the satisfaction this world denies. Verses 25-2.8

**25 At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. 26 Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.**

**27 “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.**

**28 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”**

The chapter closes on a note of thankfulness. Those who in humility accept what Jesus has to offer discover the riches of His Kingdom. The authority, 'exousia' that has been spoken of in preceding chapters becomes something they can share in. **“All things have been committed to me by my Father.”**

We are invited to place all our cares onto God. **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me”**

The word picture is a beautiful one. The yoke of Jesus day was a fitted collar like frame, shaped to rest upon the shoulders and neck of two oxen. Teamed together the task was easier for two than one. The burden was shared.

As we accept the invitation to participate in Christ's kingdom, He does not just leave us to it but comes alongside us. He yokes His life in harness with ours. We walk beside him. We learn from Him. He helps us carry our burdens. He does so, not as a hard task master, but gently and humbly. He will not overload us or weigh us down. He will not be harsh on us but easy on all those for whom the burdens of life seem all too much to bear.

Our chapter, though full of much that is difficult to understand or that sounds harsh, finishes on a gentle and pastoral note. In the next chapter we shall see that opposition to the mission of Jesus will continue to grow. Despite the opposition the message continues to be proclaimed!

The Gospel According to Matthew paints for us a picture of Jesus as King, ruling over a Kingdom that is differentiated from the kingdoms of this world through its emphasis on service. In this Kingdom the little things are the big things, love is the key to unlock God's blessings and the end product is joy.

Matthew introduces to Jesus, who seeks our wholehearted commitment and promises to walk with us throughout every situation that being a discipleship may bring our way. Though the way may sometimes be hard, ultimately it leads to life that even death cannot destroy.