

What Did You Go to See?
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
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Introduction

Let’s start off with what some call an “ice breaker” question. Maybe you’ve heard about these? If you go to a party, sometimes everyone can be a little slow to get to know each other. A good party organizer watches for this. And they’re ready with a fun question that gets everyone talking - An ice breaker.



So, here’s a classic: What do you like to watch in your free time?

This is an easy question for most people. Some like sports. Others like to take in a movie. Some like to listen to music or watch a concert, etc. Everybody has something they like to do in their free time.

Now, let’s move on to a harder question: Who do you go to when you have questions about life? Who do you go to see when you want answers? That’s a different question.

We’re back in our study of Matthew, and we’re in chapter eleven where we started a series called: Faith, followers, and Failures. Jesus is speaking to several individuals and groups of people. Matthew is reporting to us what Jesus said. The words are important, of course, however, in this section of his book, Matthew is concentrating on reactions. Some react with faith, some become followers, but some fail.

In our first session, we learned some things about John the Baptist. He was an example of faith. Today, we’re going to learn more, but with a different focus. Let’s read:

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.’

(Matthew 11:7-15)

What's Jesus doing here? Let's find out by taking this apart.

I. More About John

Jesus is going to start by telling us more about John.

“As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John”
(Matthew 11:7)

Why is Jesus doing this? Let’s quickly think about what we know about John. In the last session, we learned that John was a great man of faith. However, he was placed in a situation where what he believed was stretched. Even though he had been faithful, he had been arrested by the King and thrown into jail. So, John was in a predicament. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah. He believed that Jesus was the great king who would bring an end to injustice. However, at that moment, he wasn’t seeing evidence of this.

How big a problem was this? It was a big problem on several levels. To understand it, let’s think some more about John the Baptist.

Before John was born, an angel was sent to his father, whose name was Zechariah. Zechariah was a chief priest, so he was an important man. John came from a good family - A family of faith. Here’s what the angel said about the son that would be born to Zechariah:

...he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:15-17)

Look at this: The child will be “filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born”. There is no record of this happening with any other human being. John will lead his entire life dedicated to serving God. He will have access to power that no other human had, outside of Jesus.

“He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.” (v 16)

God was going to use John in amazing ways. There were all kinds of confused people living in Israel in his day - People who were wandering away from the faith. John would help them to return to God.

“And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah...” (v 17)

As if this weren't all amazing enough, the angel says something momentous. Elijah was one of the greatest prophets of Israel. He was right up there with Moses. The angel is saying that John will be on the level of these great men. That phrase, "the power of Elijah" will be very important later, so keep a bookmark on that point.

Time prevents us from giving this text the full treatment that it deserves. Let's skip to the last point:

"...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (v 17)

John was not going to merely turn bad people into good people. That would be fine, but he's going to do much more: John is going to prepare a people - To make them ready for the Lord. And that's exactly what John spent his life doing.

The more you understand about John, the more you can see why it was so troubling to him that he found himself languishing in prison. But here is where we see even more of why John was a great man. He was not merely a powerful man who could lead people to righteousness. He was a humble man. Let me explain.

John developed a following - A significant following. Sometimes if you become the center of attention, it's easy to develop a big ego. It's tempting to imagine at some point that everything is about you. John wasn't like that.

At one point, some of John's followers noticed that people were listening to Jesus more than they were listening to John. If John had a big ego, that would be a problem. But here's how John responded: "He must become greater; I must become less." (John 3:30) Those are the words of a humble man. Those are the words of a man who doesn't need to be the center of attention. John's purpose was to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus, and John was content to do that.

Now, we mentioned that John had a predicament: His situation didn't appear to match what he believed. He had a choice here. Some might say to themselves, "You know, a lot of people think I'm perfect. If I let people know that I'm experiencing doubts, they won't think as highly of me as I would like. Better to remain silent." That's what a man would think if he had a problem with his ego. But doing that would make John a hypocrite. And being a hypocrite doesn't work for people who are truly led by the Spirit of God. Letting yourself fall into hypocrisy is bad for the soul, so John had to speak up.

Next, because John was truly humble, he was open to the idea that he was wrong. If he was wrong, a lot of people would be hurt. Again, a hypocrite would care more about his status than he cared about the truth. And again, that's not who John was.

Finally, if someone had an ego problem, they would have false concerns. A lesser man might say something like, “If people find out that I’m not sure about Jesus, their faith will be hurt.” And again, the solution would be to remain silent.

The things I just mentioned are the thoughts of a pompous man. Those are the thoughts of someone who thinks everything revolves around him. And John’s job was to prepare people for God. John understood that everything revolves around God, not people. It turns out, the best thing for people’s faith is truth, and John knew that.

So, he did something that would only be done by a truly humble man - A man who cared about truth more than he cared about his reputation. He sent messengers to Jesus to ask him: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else? (Matthew 11:3)”

We learned in our last session that Jesus gave John a reply that was appropriate for a man of faith. That answer gave John what he needed to fulfill his destiny. He was faithful to his God and to his mission to the point of death.

Now at this point, Jesus has some work to do. There’s actually something to the notion that people might be troubled at the news that John was experiencing doubts. If there was no answer to this, their faith might in fact be hurt. The problem is not that people need to be encouraged sometimes - The problem is who is ultimately responsible for faith, and that’s Jesus. So, Jesus starts the discussion by telling people about John. He wants to establish and strengthen their faith.

Let’s see how he does it.

II. Who John Was Not

Jesus starts out by saying who John was not:

“What did you go out into the wilderness to see? (Matthew 11:7(b))”

John the Baptist spent most of his ministry in an area far away from the population centers of his day. There was no public transportation. There were certainly no cars. You would have to walk a day or two from even the nearest towns. You would have to pack food and supplies. So, if people went to see John the Baptist, they must have believed there was good reason. Jesus starts with that: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see?”

A. A Popular Voice

Jesus suggests, “A reed swayed by the wind?” If you’ve ever been near a body of water, you’ve seen reeds. These are tall grass with fluffy tops. They’re light, so they sway easily in the wind. It just takes a gentle breeze. They’re certainly beautiful to watch. However, the symbol of the

reed wasn't merely a nice picture. It was a type of imagery used by ancient rabbis. It's easy for reeds to sway back and forth whenever you have the slightest wind. So, the Rabbis used it as a symbol for someone who agrees with whatever is popular. You've all heard the phrase, "Which ever way the wind blows." It's like that.

So, Jesus asks, "Did you all go on a long trip just to hear someone say whatever is popular at the moment?" The answer is, no, of course not. You can hear people say those things at home.

Today, you'd be surprised how many voices around us have learned the fine art of saying whatever is popular - whatever is safe. If you can say popular things well, you can draw quite a crowd.

Well, that wasn't who John the Baptist was. Jesus moves on.

B. A Rich Celebrity

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. (Matthew 11:8)

There are people in the world who are successful, and who profit from their success. There's nothing wrong with that - At least most of the time. Those people often become celebrities: Movie stars, pop singers, wealthy business tycoons, and the like. They live in beautiful homes. They drive expensive cars. And yes, they wear fine clothing. they're very popular. For example, people line up for hours to see a Hollywood premiere. The red carpet rolls out to welcome famous movie stars.

Sometimes, these people get interviews on talk shows. They give us advice about all kinds of things. But think about it: Does the fact that someone is a good singer, or a good athlete really mean that they have answers for the rest of us? No. If you let yourself think about it, there's something a little bit "off" when someone does that.

Now, we said that there's nothing wrong with being successful and having money. *Most of the time*. It's another thing when we we're dealing with religious leaders. I'm not sure there's any religion where the leaders are officially supposed to get rich from their jobs. So, when we run into religious leaders who get wealthy from their ministries, we get a little suspicious. There are exceptions, but normally, these kinds of people seem a bit fake somehow.

When we first met John the Baptist in Matthew 3:1-4, he lived in the wilderness. He wore a garment of camel's hair. There is some disagreement about exactly what that was, but most commentators agree that it's a rugged outfit - Not made for looks or comfort. And think about John's diet: He ate locusts. In other words, he lived on bugs. They were Kosher bugs, but they were still bugs. Not filet mignon. Not eggs benedict. Not fine European wine.

So, Jesus is saying that people who went to see John did **not** go because they wanted to see a rich celebrity. They went because they wanted something **real**. And John was the real thing.

III. Who John Was

So, having told us what John was not, Jesus is now ready to tell us who he was.

Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you... (Matthew 11:9)

The people in the days of John the Baptist went to significant lengths to see something. They travelled out into the wilderness - Most of them on foot. They went to all that trouble because they believed that John was a prophet.

The man they went to see had some struggles with doubt. Did that mean he wasn't a prophet? Did that mean all their efforts were for nothing? Jesus assures them: They went out to see a prophet – and that's what they saw. A true prophet is someone who speaks the very words of God. Perfection is not required.

Remember what people faced in those days. They had been invaded by the Romans. The Romans taxed them and oppressed them. The people of Israel watched as their own countrymen collaborated with the Romans. The Tax collectors happily took their money and then some. The royalty was nothing much more than a puppet government catering to the invaders.

So, these people had questions - Questions about life. They could stay home and hear all kinds of people who thought they had answers. But no. They wanted to hear something very special. They were faithful people who wanted to hear the words of God.

And Jesus tells them, that's what they got. In fact, they got something more.

“...and more than a prophet. (v 9 (b))”

The last true prophet prior to this time was a man named Malachi. Malachi lived 400 years earlier. His book is the last of the Old Testament. After him, there were 400 years of silence. And now, God sent someone - Someone who was very special. Jesus goes on to tell his followers just how special John was.

This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” (v 10)

When we met John the Baptist in Matthew 3, we learned that he was the herald of the coming King. All great kings in those days had someone who announced their coming. This was prophesied by the prophet Malachi, who we mentioned a moment ago. Prior to Malachi,

prophets spoke about all kinds of things. They spoke about current issues. They spoke about things that would happen soon. But after that, they spoke about things that wouldn't happen for centuries.

John was the one who would see the coming King face to face. He and only he. So, he was very special. It would take a special person to do this. Jesus tells us more.

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. (Matthew 11:11)

Look at that: "among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." Think about that: "Among those born of women..." That's everybody who ever lived to that point. That means John is right up there with the best of them. As we said earlier, he's there with the greatest of the prophets: Moses, Elijah and the rest.

But then Jesus says something that seems odd at first: "...yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." What does he mean by that? You see, this is why the age of the kingdom, the age in which we live, is so incredible. Many believe that Jesus is talking about privilege. We all live down here on earth. Those who believe in Jesus will live in heaven one day.

There is a lot of discussion about what exactly happens in between. If we die, do we enter a state like sleep? Or is there a midway state? Do we leave time as we understand it and get transported centuries into the future? One thing we know for certain: Heaven is a much greater place than here. The least in the kingdom will be greater than the greatest on earth today. John, one of the greatest humans to live, points the way for the rest of us.

Jesus tells us more:

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. (vs. 12-13)

What Jesus is saying here is that John represents a massive pivot point in world history. Since John had arrived, something was going on. Let's take these statements out of order:

"For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John."

John was the last of a long line of men. He was the last of the great prophets - Men who would write the collection of revelation that we call the Old Testament. At the end of their time, something new would happen. The prophet Jeremiah wrote about it:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.
(Jeremiah 31:31)

So, there was an old covenant. The prophets from Moses to Malachi wrote about it. Their writings make up what we call the “Old Testament.” Then there was 400 years of silence. Now, God was ready to introduce the new covenant. John represented the pivot point.

Now, let’s look at the previous sentence:

“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. (Matthew 11:12”

Because there was a big change coming, the forces of evil went into overtime. They wanted to derail it so that it would be stopped before it got any momentum. All of the first representatives of this new covenant were under attack. John was under attack. Jesus was under attack. The apostles were under attack. And things would get worse.

That’s why God needed a very special man to herald in this new age. John was strong. He was courageous. He was faithful. His faithfulness to his calling resulted in him being arrested and eventually executed. What allowed him to do this? Jesus gives his final point:

And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear. (Matthew 11:14-15)

The prophecies of the Messiah included mention of the prophet Elijah returning. So, many thought they would see a physical return of this great prophet. That’s why it’s important to recall the words that the angel spoke to John’s father. John would have the “spirit of Elijah”. He would be empowered the same way Elijah was. It may be that Elijah will make a physical appearance before the second coming of Christ (More on that another day). In the meantime, John was someone in the same class as the greatest of the prophets. He may not have been perfect, but he was fully qualified to take on the special task that God required of him.

So, the people who travelled out to the wilderness found what they were looking for.

Let’s pull this all together.

Conclusion

Today, we've seen words of encouragement. John the Baptist was discouraged. Because he was a sincere man and not a hypocrite, he asked Jesus to clarify the situation. Jesus gave John the answer he needed. In the list of Faith, Followers, and Failures, John's faith won out.

Then, Jesus gave his followers the answer that they needed. Who did they go to see when they had questions about life? Someone who would give them popular answers? Many people do that today. The media is full of voices ready to tell you what's popular.

Did they go to see a rich celebrity? Again, you can turn on any talk show and see those people. But, the fact that they're rich and famous doesn't mean they have the answers.

No, the people of that day went to see a prophet. They went because they had questions about life. And they wanted to hear the words of God. Jesus told them that's exactly what they got.

In those days, if you wanted to see a prophet, you had to find out where they were. Then, you had to travel there. Today, we have something much easier. The prophets of the old and new covenants wrote down the words that God gave them. They're collected in the Bible.

So, that's where we go when we need answers. That's where we tell our friends to go when they want answers. That's why we study it every week in church and as often as we can at other times - Because it's the Word of God. And God has the answers to the great questions of life.

So, let's continue the great tradition that the people of Jesus' day followed. When someone asks us, "What did you go to see?" Let's be able to say that we avoided the talking heads on the TV. Let's allow others to stand in line at the Hollywood premiere. When we have questions, let's go to the words of the Great prophets. In the list of Faith, Followers, and Failures, let's ask God's help. Let's let his Word fill us and guide us so we can be on the side of Faith.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church
www.TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site
PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:
PeaceWithGod.net
