

Prayer

We love You, Lord Jesus, because Your grace has proved to be sufficient for all our spiritual needs. You have stayed with us on difficult paths, ministered to our broken hearts, received our worship when we have lifted You in praise, and guided us through troubled times. We depend on You, Lord Jesus, and we praise You: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Crime

Pray about the availability of guns and knives at schools in towns and cities throughout our countries. Pray for young people to have a better experience of life than being led to crime.

On-going prayers

- *Pray about world tensions concerning Georgia and Russia*
- *Thank God for books to read*
- *Pray for those who design buildings in our cities and towns*

Meditation

The freshness of each day anticipates God's generous blessings

The glorious gifts He offers us are given to all who receive them:

The treasury of cherished moments reading the sacred Word;

The richness of quiet times of peace, replenishing the soul;

The opportunity to love again, where yesterday we failed;

The chance to be forbearing to all who need forgiveness.

The challenge of sustaining work we must not fail to do;

The joy of knowing that life has more, and we have more to give.

The privilege of following Christ, who sought to serve the poor;

The freedom to share in prayer with others who love the Lord;

The wonder of giving ourselves to God for rest of our days; forever;

The amazing truth of the Gospel lived in the light of Christ.

The opportunity is given us every day, to praise our Lord and Maker.

The more we do it, the more we receive the wonder of His love.

Bible Study - Matthew 11:7-11

⁷ As they left, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?' ⁸ Then what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? Look, those who wear fashion live in 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, "Look, I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

¹¹ Amen, I say to you, among those born of women, no one has arisen who is greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Review

If anyone had any doubts that Jesus held John in high regard, then the passage we have just read dispels all doubts. Jesus first spoke poetically about John, asking three times 'what did you come out to see?' (11:7,8,9). The first two have double meanings, but the last makes it quite clear that Jesus viewed John as a prophet.

When Jesus turned to the crowd and asked them about John, He played with them. Firstly, He asked them whether they had come out to see 'a reed shaken by the wind.' This would have brought a chorus of 'no' from the crowd, because John was known as a strong and uncompromising character. The second question asked whether they had come to see 'a man dressed in fine clothes' and this would have been answered with a 'no' in the same way, as everyone knew that John had worn the traditional rough clothing of an Old Testament prophet in the style of Elijah and Elisha. In the third question, Jesus asked whether they had come to see a prophet, and by contrast, this would have elicited a strong chorus of 'yes'. John had firm support as a prophet amongst the common people of the day. They were incensed at the fact that Herod had taken him captive, and their intense feelings were enough to keep the Pharisees at bay. Even they were sacred of the crowd's views about John, as is clear from the incident later in Jesus' life when they tried to ask Jesus a trick question about John and prophecy (Matt 21:23f.). Even the Pharisees virtually accepted that John was a prophet!

All this rhetoric was designed to affirm and build up John and his memory. There was even a double meaning to the first two questions which also raises his profile. A 'reed' was the imperial sign of Herod Antipas, the man who held John in prison. It was well known that Herod was in fear of John (14:1,2), so the very picture of a 'reed shaken by the wind' was something akin to a joke which the crowd would have loved! Moreover, Herod's magnificent palace was the only place where fashion had a place in Jewish society, and Jesus' second question mentions fashion, astutely contrasting it with John's attire which by contrast was Spartan. Again, the subtle connections would have been more than enough to raise a smile! Whichever way you read this little interplay between Jesus and the crowd, Jesus was affirming John, and more than that, went on to make it even more clear that he and John were connected in God's plan of Salvation.

In verse 10, Jesus quotes from scripture to speak about John; 'Look, I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' This is a combination of a text from the Law, Exodus 23:20, in which an angel of the Lord is commissioned to guide Israel into the Promised Land, and a text from the prophets; Malachi 3:1, 'see I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me ...'. Jesus confirmed John's identity in the most powerful way possible, by a quote which brought together both the 'Law' and the 'prophets'!

John therefore stands at the conclusion of the Old Testament Prophets, summing up their role in preparing the way for the Messiah and the work of God in salvation. Yet, more than that, he stands at the beginning of the New Testament, as the last verse in our passage shows. When Jesus says 'Amen, I say to you' (11:11 – not that I have translated this literally to bring out the strength of this point), these words are commonly reckoned to be a personal way of speaking that was unique to Jesus. Furthermore, he said these words quite specifically when He wished to emphasise the importance of what He had to say. In our verse here He explains that John was indeed the greatest man to have lived, and he had a place in the Kingdom of Heaven even if his was the lowest of places. Together with Jesus' saying that 'the first shall be last and the last, first' (Matt 20:16), it was akin to saying that John would be the first person into the Kingdom of Heaven.

It would have been easy for Jesus to say little about John. Jesus' cousin had done his work and was languishing in prison, but Jesus reflected the fact that God cared, and John had performed an invaluable service in the Kingdom of God. By speaking so positively

about John, Jesus demonstrated that God's work was not something that arose simply in Him as Messiah, but He was part of that great sweeping plan of God for the salvation of the world that had been at work throughout the Old Testament, and would go on into the future. Perhaps, at this point, only Jesus saw that the 'end times' would extend over centuries, as more and more people throughout the world would be given the chance to respond to the Gospel. Such a sweeping view of history may have escaped John himself and probably eluded the disciples while they were with Jesus. They only began to appreciate the enormity of God's salvation plan after Jesus had died and they had to begin putting into action in the church!

Jesus would hear nothing of belittling John, to whom he owed so much. He was and is the connecting point between the Old and the New Testaments; and Jesus still challenges us now to see how our own experience of life fits into the great sweep of God's work of salvation for the whole Universe.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. If the Old and New Testaments connect in John, discuss what he says and does which merit this acclamation.
2. Might it offend people to think that Jesus was having a laugh with the crowds at Herod's expense? Why would Jesus do this?
3. Discuss what John the Baptist said and whether it is prophecy in the way that we think of prophecy.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I love this passage of scripture because we get a glimpse of Jesus as someone who is having a joke with the crowds and yet also speaking very passionately. The combination gives us the feeling that we are touching Jesus as a very real man, away from the more formalised quotes we sometimes find recorded of what He said. It is interesting that we should get this type of quote here when Jesus was talking about John; perhaps he was one man Jesus truly looked up to in his early life.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Do you find it easy to crack a joke in church life? Over a period of time, observe how many genuine jokes and funny stories creep into your church life, and keep a note of how often this happens in sermons, and outside of them (they are standard technique in sermons!). What can you conclude from your findings?*
- *Do some more research into the life of John the Baptist using any tools at your disposal including the internet. Remember, do not regard anything as 'true' unless it is actually in the Bible!*

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, deal kindly with us today, we pray. Open our hearts to people around us so that we become people of compassion, willing to hear and respond to those we meet with the same love with which You have paid attention to us and our needs. Make us more like You, we pray: AMEN.