

Prayer

Lord God, we offer You our hopes and dreams, our thoughts and feelings, and our faith and deeds. Align each of these with the priorities of Your Kingdom and Your eternal plan, and grant each of us joy and happiness as we live as Your disciples according to Your call. Thank You for calling us and using us, Lord God, and may we always serve You according to Your will. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Think today about the words of Jesus, and imagine what Jesus might say in each circumstance in which you find yourself.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the ministry of God's people on TV:** Pray for Christian TV channels. Some are good, and some are pretty awful, so pray that good and Godly standards will be set and maintained
- Give thanks to God for the weekend past, and the opportunities you have had for enjoyment and for the worship of God
- Pray for Christians in Arab countries, whose lives and communities are often under threat

Meditation

Jesus, what do You see when You look at us?
Do You see disciples who are committed to You?

Do You see people who live as if they know
That without You, sin holds sway in this world?

Do You see people who read Your Word,
And seek the fullest understanding of Your Gospel?

Do You see people energised by the Spirit
Transformed by the redeeming power of Your love?

Do You see people motivated to do Your work,
Confident You can use them to change the world?

Do You see people who talk to You in prayer,
Who share everything with You, in complete trust?

Do You see people who are completely obedient,
Willing to do whatever You ask, at whatever the cost?

Jesus, what do You see when You look at us?
Tell us the truth, for this, and this alone, can set us free.

Bible passage - Luke 7:18-28

¹⁸ Now John's disciples brought news of all these things to him. So John sent for two of his disciples ¹⁹ and commissioned them to ask the Lord,

'Are You the One we are expecting, or should we wait for another?'

²⁰ When the men had come to him, they said,

'John the Baptist has sent us to You to ask, "Are you the One we are expecting, or should we wait for another?"'

²¹ Just then, Jesus had healed many of diseases, illnesses, and evil spirits, and given sight to many who were blind. ²² So He answered them,

‘Go and tell John about what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. ²³ And blessed are those who do not fall away because of me.’

²⁴ When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John:

‘What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swaying in the wind? ²⁵ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothes? Surely those who wear expensive clothes and live in luxury are found in royal palaces. ²⁶ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you; more than a prophet! ²⁷ This is he about whom it is written,

“Look! I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”

²⁸ I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’

Bible Study

Review

The story of Jesus’ ministry now takes a dramatic twist. In the previous three chapters of his Gospel, Luke has described the facts of Jesus’ early ministry, and told us about His successful work of teaching, preaching, healing and casting out demons. Suddenly, the disciples of John the Baptist arrive on the scene, and interrupt the flow. John had been locked up in prison by Herod Antipas (3:20), so he only had contact with the outside world through his followers. It seems that John has become uncertain about what was going on, and sent his disciples to assess what Jesus was doing.

The story in our passage today is well-known. Whatever the state of his faith, it seems that John’s patience had failed him. When preaching by the Jordan, he told crowds that the Messiah would announce the kingdom of God and heal the sick, but also judge the world and baptise with the Holy Spirit (3:16). Whatever great deeds Jesus had done, He had not yet demonstrated God’s judgement of the world or baptised anyone, least of all with the Holy Spirit.

From the standpoint of history, we know that God’s judgement of the world and the sending of the Holy Spirit was all yet to come. The world has now been judged by Jesus’ death on the Cross and His consequent resurrection, and the Holy Spirit has come in power on the first day of Pentecost and continues to empower His disciples to this day. As a mere man, John could prophesy these things but he did not see them. For him, these things lay in the future, hence his question.

It becomes easier to interpret this passage of Scripture when we understand how John felt. Jesus’ comments about John, which were made to John’s disciples after they had questioned whether He really was the Messiah, was no rebuke. Jesus admired John, He knew the mission for which John had given his life, and He regarded him as the greatest within the Kingdom of God (7:28). He therefore spoke in order to prevent any friction between His disciples and those of John, and to approve John’s prophetic role.

To begin with, Jesus confirmed the truth of John’s prophecy about the Messiah, and that He had fulfilled this. He acknowledged that He had healed people of illnesses, cast out evil spirits, and given sight to the blind. These were all classic signs of the coming of the Messiah, and Jesus did not want John to lose sight of this important fact. Hence His words ‘and *blessed are those who do not fall away because of me*’ (7:23).

After John’s disciples left bearing this message, Jesus turned to the crowd of people following him, and spoke strongly in support of John. The address found in verses 24-26 may well be the original reported words of Jesus, for they have character and intensity. Using remarkably attractive and free flowing speech, Jesus spoke to confirm John as a true prophet of God, someone who was not swayed by opinion (7:54), who had endured a harsh life in order to do God’s will (7:25), and exercised a ministry that fulfilled Scripture (7:27). John, said Jesus, was the greatest in the Kingdom. There was no higher accolade.

Although this passage of Scripture is relatively easy to understand, it bears a subtle message for the Church today. As prophesied by John, Jesus came to do more than preach, teach, heal the sick and cast out

demons. In addition to this, He came to act in power, to judge the world, and to baptise with the Holy Spirit. So if Christians today are to demonstrate God's Kingdom rule, then these things should be evident within the life of the Church. There may be many different ways in which these they are manifest within the Church, but they should not be absent.

If John was concerned because he did not see evidence of God's judgement and the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' early ministry, how much more should we be concerned about their absence, now that God has come to judge the world in Christ, and the Holy Spirit has indeed been given at Pentecost?

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these questions:

- What did John the Baptist really think of Jesus, and why did he ask these questions?
- How are the ministries of Jesus and John connected?
- How and why does Jesus praise John the Baptist?

Notes on the text and translation

V19 'Are You the One we are expecting, or should we wait for another?'

Other translations:

'Are You the One who was to come, or should we expect someone else?' (NIV)

'Are You the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' (NRSV)

The phrase used by most translations is *'are You the One who is to come?'* However, I have chosen to translate *'are You the One we expect ...'* because the Greek sentence suggests expectation. The Jewish people lived in a time of heightened expectation of the Messiah, so I believe that this is the best way of expressing the text.

V23 'And blessed are those who do not fall away because of me.'

Other translations:

'Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me' (NIV)

'Blessed is anyone who does not take offense at me' (NRSV)

The Greek word 'skandalidzo' means to give offense, or more specifically, to cause someone else to fall or stumble. Jesus prays that no one will turn away from God because of Him; it is a very 'human' prayer, but for Jesus, anything that causes another to stumble or turn away from God is a curse (*'if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off ...'* Matthew 18:8,9).

Going Deeper

What did John the Baptist really think of Jesus, and why did he ask these questions?

We really do not know exactly why John sent his disciples to speak to Jesus, we can only guess at his reasons from looking carefully at this text and everything else we know about him from scripture. So far in this study, I have said only that John the Baptist was uncertain about what he had heard about the ministry of Jesus, but can we be a little more precise?

One possibility is that John was indeed beginning to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah. He had prophesied that Jesus would do things that He had not yet done, and his questions may have been designed to spur Jesus to action. The Messiah was to judge the world and send the Holy Spirit, and in the absence of such ministry, surely John had the right to challenge Jesus. On the surface, this seems a reasonable assumption, but it flies in the face of all we know about a man who was immensely tough and who prophesied without fear for many years, in the face of considerable opposition. Indeed, he endured incarceration at the awful Machaerus prison on the Dead Sea on account of his work.

Is it possible therefore to imagine that John was still full of faith and was more concerned about others. Now if John was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he understood that Jesus' time to judge the world was yet to come, then his questioning of Jesus could be designed to help his disciples. There is some evidence that John recommended that his disciples follow Jesus (John 1:36,37), but perhaps there were those who remained loyal to him. It was therefore those who were sent to Jesus, not really for John's benefit, but for their own. John wanted these disciples to see for themselves that Jesus was the Messiah. Perhaps he sent them to Jesus in the hope that they would listen to him and follow him.

Of course, we can never know. John was enduring the harsh environment of a prison and in circumstances that amounted to little more than torture. We can only imagine what he endured, and as scripture reveals, his death was only months away (Matthew 14:1-12, Luke 9:7-9). If John was losing hope that Jesus would fulfil his prophecies, then Jesus' words are words of encouragement. If John stood firm and was trying to goad Jesus into action, then Jesus' words merely serve to reassure John that his prophetic work was God's will. If John was trying to point his own disciples to Jesus, then this passage reveals that Jesus did no more than continue his ministry as God required of him; each one would have to make up their own mind about Him.

Perhaps, as in so many real human situations, the truth lay in some combination of all the possibilities. What we can say is this. Jesus did everything in His power to bolster John's self esteem and speak consistently about the Kingdom of God.

How are the ministries of Jesus and John connected?

This passage of Scripture serves to help us connect the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. Of course, we know that John came preaching the coming of God in judgement and power (3:1-14), and he preached the baptism of the forgiveness of sins. His ministry attracted much attention and he lived and worked not so much in the same way as the Old Testament prophets, but as the people of his day imagined them.

The Old Testament prophets varied from the outlaw Elijah, the shepherd Amos to the priests Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Not all of them lived in the desert! In truth, the only one of these who lived a life away from society was Elijah (together with his disciple Elisha). The people of Jesus' day honoured Elijah as one of the greatest of the prophets, perhaps more than we do today because of our knowledge of the written works of Isaiah and the other 'written' prophets. The stories of Elijah and Elisha were the stuff of legend in a time before people had general access to the written word.

People believed that Elijah would come again to herald the coming of God's Messiah, their hope being based on the word of the prophet Malachi:

Look, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. (Malachi 4:5)

This was also connected in their minds with the great words of Isaiah, speaking of God's coming to save His people:

A voice cries out, 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.' (Isaiah 40:3-5)

Put together, it is easy to see why people regarded John as the second appearance of the prophet Elijah, heralding the coming of the Messiah. John prepared the people of Israel in Jesus' day by raising the already heightened expectation that the Messiah would come, and he told people plainly that Jesus was the Messiah (John 1:36,37)

Everything Jesus says in today's passage of scripture reinforces both this interpretation of scripture and John's fulfilment of it. Jesus was not yet ready to come in judgement on the world and not yet ready to send the Holy Spirit on all His disciples. He was ready to accept that He had done the works of the Messiah. He was ready to accept that He was the 'One we are expecting' (7:20), and the one who fulfilled both John's teaching and Old Testament prophecy:

'Go and tell John about what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed are those who do not fall away because of me.' (7:22,23)

How and why does Jesus praise John the Baptist?

Whether Jesus' words are to impress the disciples of John or to encourage John himself, the latter part of our passage today is undoubtedly designed to praise John. Elsewhere, Jesus tends to praise only His Father, and interprets each event as for His glory, and it is remarkable that He praises John.

Jesus praises John by telling those around Him that John was a true prophet, who knew the Word of God and would not be 'swayed' (7:24) like a reed in the wind (other translation have 'shaken'). Next, Jesus' comments about clothes (7:25) seem a little odd. It is possible that the words I have translated 'expensive' (7:25) could be a first century word for 'effeminate', with a hint of sexual innuendo. This certainly makes the whole phrase sound more obvious and logical. For Jesus then seems to say that John is no effeminate politician or court spokesman, he is a 'prophet' (7:26) in the true sense of the word. Jesus then affords John a great accolade, by applying the prophetic words of Malachi and Isaiah directly to John:

"Look! I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." (7:27)

This is constructed from the two great prophecies already mentioned:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me (Malachi 3:1)

A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD (Isaiah 40:3)

Finally, Jesus affords John the greatest of compliments, saying *'there is no one greater than John'*. In a hint of His teaching to come, Jesus translates this into 'Kingdom' perspective by adding, *'yet the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he.'* This sounds rather backhanded unless you recall Jesus' later teaching that in God's Kingdom, *'the first shall be last and the last first'* (Matt 20:16, Luke 13:30).

Application

If we are to understand this passage of Scripture fully, from Jesus' references to the prophets to his final compliment to John (that he is the least in the Kingdom), then we need to be people who are familiar with God's Word in detail. A casual understanding of the prophets is no good, for in order to understand how Jesus thought of John's ministry, we must be familiar with the prophecies of both Malachi and Isaiah. It is in linking the two that we find the truth about John the Baptist and the Messiah. If we read carefully, then we will find that this is not found in one Old Testament prophecy alone. The interpretation of the prophets, a subject key to our understanding of the New Testament, is hardly ever a matter of connecting with solitary prophecies. Nearly all the major connecting points between the Old and the New Testament are through multifaceted prophecies (e.g. Paul's famous complex and influential OT quote, found in Romans 3:10-18, which is a composite of prophecies from Isaiah and the Psalms).

One of the most important things we can observe about this passage is the comment that it gives on the work of the Messiah. It reminds us that Jesus' work of teaching, healing and deliverance is but one part of His ministry on earth. It is the part of it He did before He was killed, and rose again. For this reason, if we build the life of the church on the assumption that we must fulfil Jesus' ministry, then it should not be a matter of merely continuing His ministry of teaching, healing and deliverance. This is hard enough to embrace, and there are many questions we may ask about what it means. The complete ministry of Jesus clearly must include what John the Baptist prophesied about Jesus, and what Jesus eventually did, which was to bring God's truth into the world and therefore judge it, through His death and resurrection. In addition to this, He sent His Holy Spirit on all people, as John expected. Now there are many questions we may ask about how the church makes these things real in today's world, how God judges the world today, and how and why the Holy Spirit is active now. But we cannot ignore the fact that these things are an essential part of Jesus' work as Messiah, and it is our duty to continue what He did.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does John the Baptist contribute to our understanding of Jesus' ministry?
2. Discuss in your group whether you think that John doubted whether Jesus fulfilled the role of the Messiah.
3. What does this passage of scripture tell us about the role of a prophet, either in the past or in the present, or in the future?

Personal comments by author

I find the figure of John deeply challenging. He was a man faithful to his task before God, to the point of imprisonment and eventually death, and in this, he prefigures many other Christians who have borne this witness through the centuries. Such testimonies of faith should never be lost. I fear that today, because of the terrible way in which some governments work, there are people who die for their faith today, who are never known. Therefore, I think it right that we should not forget John the Baptist, and in remembering him, think of all those others who have stood firm in faith to the very end.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Explore the idea of the prophet, and look up all the references in this study, relating to John the Baptist. Ask yourself what this teaches us about the work of the church today. Make sure that you come to your own conclusion and not necessarily those of this study or any other author.*
 - *Write down a list of your conclusions about the role of John the Baptist in the life of Christ. Keep this somewhere safe and refer to it whenever you come across this great character in the scriptures. It is far too easy for us to forget his importance.*
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Final Prayer

Lord God, You sent the prophets in ancient times to tell Your people what You were doing. Send Your prophets to us today, so that we may become confident in what You are doing within our world. Bless us we pray with a knowledge of Your will, and keep us safe in Your Word. AMEN
