

## *The Question*

### *Luke 7:18-27*

When John was a toddler wobbling dimpled knees, his parents were already wrinkled and old. His father was a priest. So God's Word and God's ways were his daily bread from the cradle.

When he was grown, he retreated into the blistering moonscape of the Judean Desert. Then one day he strode down the steep hills past the tall palm trees of Jericho.

He stopped in the tropical trench where the leaf green waters of the Jordan trickled past reeds and rushes to the Dead Sea. Then he started preaching.

The crowds were small at first. But soon both riverbanks were crowded with people. Priests and publicans alike hiked down the serpentine road from Jerusalem through chalky dust and breathless heat just to listen to the desert prophet preach.

But all of that ended a year before Jesus called a widow's son back from the dead. It ended the day Herod Antipas pulled his panting chariot horses to a stop to listen to the Baptist preach.

Antipas was one of Herod the Great's luckier sons. His father did not get around to killing him. But he was just as perverted and power-mad as his father was.

John saw Antipas at the back of the crowd. Then he pointed a bony finger at Herod. And the king was enraged at what he heard.

*...when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison. Luke 3:19-20*

Stone faced soldiers with sharp swords led John across the river and over the brown hills of Moab. They stopped at the Machaerus, Herod's fortress palace on a high hill overlooking the Dead Sea.

The view from the castle was stunning. The waters of the Salt Sea far below were neon blue and sparkled in the sun.

But John's quarters had no view. He was locked in an underground dungeon. Days dragged into weeks, and weeks piled up to months. And still the Baptist was in solitary confinement.

### *The Problem*

In Herod's Black Fortress, the Baptist had but one daily companion. Antipas himself would wander down to the prophet's dungeon cell hoping to hear John preach.

Herod wore his life of dissipation and degradation on his face. His eyes were bloodshot, bagged and rimmed with red.

He was weak and wayward, a leaf in the wind. And sometimes when the wicked old ruler was in a jovial mood, he allowed some of the Baptist's disciples to visit him. When they came, they told stories about the Man John called the Lamb of God.

*The disciples of John reported to him about all these things. Verse 18*

John's followers told their master about Jesus' wild popularity. His crowds seemed to grow every day.

The Baptist questioned his visitors closely. But he did not hear what he wanted to hear. So he sent them back to Christ with a question.

*Summoning two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?" Verse 19*

John did indeed ask the question. That much we know. But why? That is the real question.

It could not have been that the Baptist did not know for sure the Carpenter from Nazareth really was the promised Messiah. God Himself had pointed Jesus out to John.

*John testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God." John 1:32-34*

Still, as he sat in the dank darkness of his dungeon cell, one thing haunted John. And it had nothing whatever to do with what Jesus did do. But what He did not do.

John had studied the sacred scrolls since he was a child. So he knew what Isaiah predicted concerning the Christ.

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; Isaiah 61:1*

That was what bothered John. If he had been right back in his desert days, Jesus was the promised Messiah. That means He came to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners.

And John was a prisoner. So why did not Jesus set him free. As the Promised One, He had the power to change Herod's heart. He could even overpower Antipas and force him to unlock John's cell.

Deep in the sweltering darkness, the Devil whispered terrible questions into the Baptist's ear. If Jesus was the Son of the loving God John served, why was he abandoned, forgotten and alone?

That is the hardest of all the tests our God allows to come our way. It was the dilemma that dogged Job through sorrow, setbacks and sickness.

If God really is in control of my life, and if He is a God of love, why am I experiencing such terrible pain? Why does He refuse to deliver me from this world of agony I am in?

Jesus never answered John's deepest question. Instead, our Savior reminded the desert prophet that even in his agony, God was in the process of blessing him. But John had to respond with faith.

*Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me. Verse 23*

Blessed is the one who does not stumble and whose faith does not fail no matter what happens. That was Jesus' message.

Christ had great compassion for the widow of Nain. And He had even more empathy and pity for Herod's prisoner.

But Jesus was and is and ever shall be the Creator God whose ways are past finding out. So there was no simple answer to the Baptist's question. It was God's will. That is all he needed to know.

Yes, Jesus knew His herald was in a world of pain. And the Savior shared his sorrow. But He also knew there is no substitute of simply trusting in the great God of Heaven in such terrible times.

That is the Master's message. When we do not know where our God is leading us or why, we must hold His hand all the tighter.

## *The Proof*

John was deeply troubled. What he knew from both God's Word and revelation collided with what he was experiencing. So he sought reassurance from the only One who could give it to him.

*When the men came to Him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to You, to ask, 'Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?'" Verse 20*

There is not the slightest shred of evidence that our Redeemer ever rebuked the Baptist because the prophet was struggling with doubt. Christ never condemns or criticizes us when we come to Him seeking honest answers and assurance.

Instead, the Savior smiled softly. Then He invited John's messengers to spend a day with Him, watching and listening.

*At that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He gave sight to many who were blind. Verse 21*

As John's disciples watched, people came carrying palsied children on litters. Others came with blind eyes like cloudy gray marbles. Still others were crippled, coughing up blood, or raging away with wild eyes, tortured and tormented by savage demons.

And all of them went away healed and whole. That is what Jesus wanted John's messengers to see. In the upper room, the Savior summed up the principle to His disciples.

*Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. John 14:11 (NIV)*

Again and again, Jesus declared He was the Son of God. And that ought to be enough evidence for any man. But it is not the only proof we have that He really is our Master and Messiah.

The works He did and continues to do today also declare that the Carpenter from Nazareth has to be our Immanuel: God in human flesh. The lives our Lord has changed declare His deity.

But even the miraculous works our Master performed are not the only proof He really is God's Son. When the sun was setting and all the hurting had been healed, Jesus added yet another proof.

*And He answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the Gospel preached to them." Verse 22*

The Master did more than merely point out what the messengers had seen. He also quoted ancient prophecies: prophecies He knew the Baptist would recall. One of them is from the book of Isaiah

*Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Isaiah 35:5*

Both Elijah and Elisha performed amazing miracles. They healed the sick and even raised the dead. But no one had ever given sight to the blind before.

That was a sign miracle only the Messiah had the power to bring about. And, Jesus reminded John, He was fulfilling that prophecy on a daily basis.

Isaiah also prophesied the Promised One would proclaim good news to the poor and afflicted. And Jesus was also doing that every day.

That is the final proof Jesus really is God's Son. We know He is the Savior of all mankind because He fulfilled each and every one of the prophecies the Old Testament said He would.

So the question is not now and never has been whether we have sufficient evidence and positive proof that Jesus is Lord and God, Savior and King. Only one question remains.

Will we choose to believe?

## *The Prophet*

The Baptist's messengers left with a light in their eyes. And when they were gone, Jesus looked at the seekers and disciples who crowded around Him.

He could see doubt in the eyes of some of them. Others shook their heads in disdain. They had once considered John a prophet. But now he struggled with doubt. So maybe they were wrong.

When the Savior saw that, a fire gleamed in His eyes. And when He spoke there was a hard edge to His voice.

The people who pressed around Jesus were doing what God Himself refused to do. They were disapproving and disdainful of the desert prophet for the doubt and despair John was struggling with.

And our Savior simply would not allow that. Our Lord never looks down upon believers when dark and difficult days breed doubts and questions.

Jesus watched the Baptist's messengers disappear down the road and over the hill. Then He rebuked those who dared to disdain and disparage His forerunner.

*When the messengers of John had left, He began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?" Verse 24*

Thousands of Jews had traveled the dusty mountain road to hear John preach. Had they gone all that way to hear a man who bent like a reed with whatever wind happened to blow?

Did they think the Baptist was so weak he was unable to stand terrible trials and powerful pressures? If that were so, John would not be languishing in prison.

All the prophet had to do was apologize to Antipas. If John merely told Herod he had been wrong and was sorry he rebuked the wicked old king for stealing his brother's wife, his cell would have been unlocked long ago. But even in his pain, John refused.

That is our Lord's lesson. If anyone is to serve Jesus Christ, he must be willing to stand as John stood. We who serve the Savior must stand like an oak not be blown about like a leaf in a gale.

No matter how dark and difficult our days might be and no matter how much sickness or sorrow we must endure, our faith must stand firm. Even when we cannot see our way and do not know what our God is doing in our lives, we must trust Him still.

He is still the God who loves us. Jesus is still the Savior who died for us. And His Spirit is still at work within us to transform us into His holy image. No amount of pain or problems changes that.

But John had more than a resolute spirit. He was also a self-sacrificing servant of God.

*But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who are splendidly clothed and live in luxury are found in royal palaces! Verse 25*

John was not a pampered preacher who pleased the powerful and dressed silk and linen. He did not serve the Savior selfishly.

And if we are to serve as he did, we cannot either. John willingly dressed in rough clothing and ate whatever God provided for him, even when all there was to eat was locusts and wild honey.

Those who serve Jesus Christ cannot be muddled and muddied by mixed motives. We cannot serve God and serve ourselves at the same time. We must serve our Lord and serve Him only.

The Jews had flocked to hear John for one reason. They believed he was a prophet. And they were right.

*But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. Verse 26*

A prophet has no message of his own. Like the men who came to the Master on John's behalf, a prophet is merely a messenger, faithfully delivering a message that is not his own.

That is what John did. He relayed the message his God had given him in the desert. Repent! Christ is coming!

*This is the one about whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way before You.' Verse 27*

We are not prophets. But we do have a message to deliver. We are to proclaim that Christ has come, that He laid down His life for us, shedding His blood and giving His life that we might live.

We are also to tell people the same thing John did. The hour is late. And the time to repent is now. Christ not only has come. He is coming again, not to heal and to help, but to judge and condemn.

No, Jesus would not have anyone to look down upon John. He was much more than merely a good man. He was the best of men.

*I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. Verse 28*

We enjoy privileges John never knew. God's Spirit was upon Him; He is within us. He looked forward to the Savior's sacrifice and the forgiveness of sin; we who trust Jesus experience it.

Yes, we are highly honored. But with great honor comes great responsibility. We must serve our Savior as faithfully as John did.

No matter how dark and difficult our days might be.