

## BIBLE BACKGROUND

### MATTHEW 11:2-11

Verses 2,3

**When John heard from prison about the accomplishments of the Christ, he sent [for information] through his disciples saying to him, “Are you the Coming One or are we to wait for another one?”**

**John heard about the accomplishments of Christ from prison**, having been arrested by Herod Antipas (14:3-5), whose initial intention was to kill him. His disciples apparently, were caring for him whilst in prison and so he was able **to send** a message through them. John was unsure about Jesus, despite at first recognising his superiority and sinlessness (3:14). The lapse of time may have had a part to play on John's nagging doubts. Another factor may have been the apparent incongruence between John's prophecies about the Messiah and the reality of Jesus, his peaceful and lowly manner, absent of power and political victories. John had evangelised people and spoke of the one greater than he who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire but this event had not yet occurred (3:11). Time was running out and a third factor may have entered, that of his arrest. In his mind, he may have thought that his imprisonment and likely death would be a trigger for the Christ to manifest himself in power.

**Accomplishments** is a translation of the literal **works**, which refer not merely to the activities of Jesus but to creative actions of God, which are numerous spoken of (Gen 2:2; Jn 4:34). John could see that the Lord was at work in Jesus but still doubted.

**Are you the Coming One** refers to the messianic prophecies found in Mal 3:1, Num 24:17,19, Isa 42:1,4; Mic 5:2. John struggled to identify what he expected the Coming One would act with the works of Jesus. Jesus had not vanquished the wicked, establish peace between the nations and restored justice, key themes of messianic activity in the Old Testament (Isa 29:20,21 et al). John had preached the law, an uncompromising message of repentance and fiercely denounced the behaviour of the arrogant such as the Tetrarch and religious leaders (3;7). Jesus was not instigating a fiery baptism of judgement (3:10,12).

Verses 3-6

**When Jesus replied he said to them, “When you have returned, tell John what you hear and see: the blind can see again, the lame walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the gospel preached to them. Blessed is the person who takes no offense at me.”**

Jesus recited his catalogue of activities to evoke in John's memory Isa 29:18,19; 35:5,6; 61:1. There are two ways that this could be interpreted. First, Jesus was fulfilling the ancient prophecies but with an emphasis on the gospel, which liberates the poor, the least, the dying and the sick. His was a redemption motivated by love and compassion and not the imposition of law and the forcing of obedience. Second, though Jesus did not mention the judgement of God on all the nations, mentioned in Zeph 1:2,3, he had not yet reached this final stage that would come when the gospel had been preached to all the nations (28:16). John would not have known that this was in Jesus' mind (26:64); Jesus was asking him to trust despite not knowing the end of things and the completion of his ministry.

**Blessed is the person who takes no offense at me** is Jesus' appeal to all people. It follows on the demonstration of his love and his willingness to work amongst the cursed and the unclean. He appeals for faith and trust based on his 'body of work'. **Offense** comes from being scandalised, the literally meaning of the Greek. Jesus recognises that his actions could offend because his focus was on those considered law-breakers, unclean and unworthy. But from the passages in Isaiah, a person can see that the recreation of the world is taking place through Jesus. Such a person will be called **blessed** (5:3-11).

By elevating the poor, the sick, the unclean, and the cursed, Jesus was demonstrating the gospel. Indeed, the poor hear **good news preached** ευαγγελιθη to them, which gives us the word gospel.

Verses 7-11

**When these things had taken place, Jesus began to say to the crowd concerning John, “What did you go out to the wilderness to watch? A reed shaken by the wind? What did you travel to see? A man dressed in effeminate [clothing]? Look, those in wearing delicate things are in the palaces of kings. But what did you come out for? To see a prophet? Yes, and I am telling you, more than a prophet! This is the one written about: ‘Take note, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you.’ Truly I tell you, of those born of women no one has arisen as great as John the Baptist. But the person who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.**

Jesus issued a challenge to the crowd. His questions could be understood as a rhetorical device to highlight the significance of John. However, Jesus’ doubts about the sincerity of many who came to hear him suggests that the questions betray his thoughts about the people in the crowds, that they wished to see John as a pliable and non-confronting speaker for God. Ch. 13 presents Jesus’ negative view of the crowd, though some did respond and many were in need, whom he was willing to help (14:14), but in the end, they were the crowd who agreed with his crucifixion (27:25). To temper this view, it may be that the crowd differed from place to place and time to time (14:16; 15:32).

Expand on Jesus’ questions.

Expand on John as the paramount prophet.

The least in the kingdom. Jesus taught the crowds though many within them were ambivalent. He taught them about **the least**, not in the society of his time, but the least in the **kingdom of heaven**. This may be a verbal flourish and need not be seen to support a hierarchy of redeemed people in the heavenly kingdom. What is important is the contrast between the glorious state of the redeemed and the greatest believer on earth. Jesus was endeavouring to counteract the reverence we have for church heroes by drawing attention to the exaltation of the children of God in a heaven that is so much more glorious than what people are able to conceive.