

MATTHEW 11:2-30

THE REJECTION OF THE MESSIAH

“Now when John in prison heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, and said to Him, ‘Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?’ And Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me.’ . . .” (11:2-30).

In chapters 1 through 10, Matthew has clearly established the *identity* and *character* of Jesus. He is without question the Christ, Israel’s Messiah, the Son of God. When Matthew begins a new section of the Gospel, he assumes this identity without taking any space to prove it: “Now when John in prison heard of the works of Christ, . . .” (11:2). Having declared Jesus’ identity, Matthew now proceeds to show how Jesus was *rejected* by His own people, in spite of who He obviously was.¹

Matthew 11 contains several themes relating to the unbelief of Israel and their rejection of their Messiah.

THE OBVIOUSNESS OF JESUS’ IDENTITY (11:2-6)

We are somewhat prepared for the skepticism of the Jews toward Jesus, but the question posed by John the Baptist catches us off guard:

¹“He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (John 1:11; RSV).

“Are you the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” (11:3). What was the reason for this doubt on John’s part? Was it not he who said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)? Had he not earlier refused to baptize Jesus because he recognized His superior nature? Was he not present when the heavens opened and God’s voice spoke: “This is my beloved Son. . . .”? Why now does he *doubt* or even *wonder* who Jesus is?

From 3:7-10 we learn that John preached a coming judgment. With the coming of the Messiah, he probably assumed that that judgment was about to happen. But it did not happen. Now John was in prison, out of the picture as far as the messianic events were concerned, and he very likely began to wonder, “Are you He . . . or . . . ?”²

Jesus’ reply was not so much an *answer* as an *invitation*—to “see for yourself! The evidence is all here as a matter of public record—you decide what to tell John.” The evidence which Jesus cited in verses 4 and 5 refers to events which had happened with frequency in His own ministry. They were also events predicted in Isaiah 35 and 61 in connection with the coming of the Messiah. That such things were now happening through Jesus indicated that He *was* “the one who is to come.” Because this was so obviously the case, He pronounced a blessing on “he who keeps from stumbling over Me” (11:6). No valid reason

²See Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1988), 74-75.

exists for anyone familiar with the messianic predictions not to see the truth!

Is there any valid reason *now*? Seeing the light and the goodness that Jesus has brought into the world, can anyone honestly deny that He is God's chosen one? Who else in all the history of the world is still so actively influencing the lives of all mankind for good after *two thousand years*?

THE FICKLE UNBELIEF OF ISRAEL (11:7-19)

Misreading the identity and intentions of Jesus was nothing new for the religious leaders of the Jews. They had also misread John. Jesus took them to task for their foolishness. What did they *expect* when they went into the wilderness to see John? Obviously, John had not met their expectations, but Jesus said this was because He was *far more than what they had expected*. He was not even "a prophet"—He was "*more than a prophet*"! He was God's specially selected messenger, sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. Because of their fickleness, Jesus likens these blind leaders to spoiled children playing in the marketplace (11:16-19). Whatever happened, it never pleased them! They always insisted on their own way. John was an ascetic, denying himself the ordinary pleasures of normal food and drink; they concluded that he had a demon. Then came Jesus, eating and drinking like an ordinary man, and they accused Him of gluttony, drunkenness, and befriending the wrong people! They were much like the unreasonable husband who asked for two eggs for breakfast, one scrambled and one fried, and then blew up at his wife because she fried the wrong one!

The problem was not a lack of credible evidence—the Jews had simply *decided* not to believe. Faith is a *decision*. When a jury hears a case in a court of law, they are asked to decide the case on the basis of evidence presented. Are the witnesses credible? Have the facts been established? Is there room for reasonable doubt? They must *decide* whether or not to believe what they have seen and heard. Likewise, *unbelief* is a decision. Jesus highlighted this when he said, "And if you care to accept it. . . . He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (11:14, 15).

It is no different today. If you *will* to believe, you *can* believe. If you are unwilling, no amount

of evidence will satisfy you. Just as Jesus' miracles "proved" nothing to those unbelievers who witnessed them, so now the record of the Scriptures "proves" nothing to those unwilling to believe. Paul emphasized this great truth in 1 Corinthians 1:18, when he said that the gospel is the "sweet smell" of life to some people and absolute *foolishness* to others.

What is it to *you*? What is *He* to you?

THE CONDEMNATION OF UNBELIEF (11:20-24)

Verses 20 through 24 are a sobering condemnation of several of the very cities where Jesus had done His "mighty works." Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum were three towns on the north coast of the Sea of Galilee, and were the scene of many of Jesus' miracles (e.g., Mark 6:45; 8:22; Luke 9:10; John 1:44). He had even *lived* in Capernaum! (See 4:13; Mark 2:1; Luke 4:23; John 6:24.) But that would not cause the city to be "exalted to heaven" (11:23). On the contrary, it would "descend to Hades"! In spite of the mighty works done by Jesus in these cities, they stubbornly refused to believe. If such works had been done in "Tyre and Sidon," two Gentile, pagan cities, they would have been brought to repentance without hesitation. Why? Because they would not have already prejudiced their minds against the evidence. Even wicked Sodom would have responded in a better way than God's chosen people had done! Rejection of the Messiah is such a serious offence, that at judgment, Sodom will fare better than the cities that had every opportunity to believe and yet refused to do so. As evil as Sodom was (see Genesis 19), at least they had not seen the Christ.

Every person who hears the Good News of Jesus and refuses to believe it carries an added burden into the judgment. ". . . And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required; . . ." (Luke 12:48). Most of us have been given "much" in the way of opportunities to hear and believe. We have no reason not to have great faith in the identity of our Savior. If we do not, we have no one to blame but ourselves. The evidence is sufficient, if we are willing.

THE INVITATION TO THE HUMBLE (11:25-30)

We might think that with so much unbelief

and stubbornness of hearts, Jesus might turn away in indignation. On the contrary, He continued to invite those who would follow Him (11:28), another indication of His wonderful grace toward sinners. The things of God are "revealed" to "babes" (11:25), those humble enough to accept them, in contrast to the fickle children of 11:16, 17. William Barclay points out that Jesus is not here condemning intellectual *power* but intellectual *pride*.³ The "wise and intelligent" who are unable to perceive spiritual truths are, according to A. B. Bruce, "the accepted custodians of the wisdom of Israel," their religious leaders.⁴ The "babes," by contrast, are those ignorant of scribal tradition but who will listen to the voice of God. The "wise and intelligent," we must remember, have the things of God "hidden" from them not on God's initiative, but on their own. They are "hidden" because of their unbelief. When we refuse to acknowledge truth, we make ourselves "blind" (John 9:40, 41). It all comes down to what we do with the Son: "... nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (11:27). Life and death, heaven and hell, being forever with the Father or forever without Him—all are dependent on our willingness to believe and obey the Son.

³William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1957), 15.

⁴A. B. Bruce, *The Expositor's Greek Testament: The Synoptic Gospels*, ed. W. R. Nicoll (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 177-78.

It is the *willing* who are invited to "come" in verses 28 through 30. Jesus invites "all who are weary⁵ and are heavy-laden" to come to Him and receive rest. Many in Jesus' day were exhausted by their search for God and by the burdens placed on them by others.⁶ Such imprisonments of people's religious freedoms still occur today, with a myriad of formulas, regulations, creeds, penances, rules, etc. But you can *stop* and *rest* in Jesus, knowing that by following Him, you have found all that God has to offer you. For this reason, you are invited to "take His yoke," the symbol of submission to Him, which is not burdensome but "easy" and "light." Following Jesus does not weigh us down—it sets us free and gives us rest. It is much easier than the burdens of sin, guilt, confusion, and judgment which inevitably come when He is rejected.

CONCLUSION

Most of those who saw and heard in Jesus' day said, "No," to Jesus' loving invitation. Most today still do. But you can say, "Yes," and receive His innumerable blessings by *deciding* to believe.

—Tommy South

⁵Barclay translates this, "You who are exhausted," and adds, "The weary search for God ends in Jesus" (*Gospel of Matthew*, 17-18).

⁶This is seen in Matthew 23:1-4, where Jesus accused the scribes and Pharisees of binding heavy burdens on men's shoulders but doing nothing to ease their burden for them.

Applying Scripture to Life

Seeing the Whole

The three blind men went to see an elephant. One rubbed his hands over the side of the elephant and formed an impression of an elephant from this experience. A second put his hand around the leg of the elephant and knew that he had the picture of an elephant in his mind. The third grabbed hold of the tail and formed a picture in his mind. When they returned home, they compared notes of their impressions. The first one said, "An elephant is just like a great big wall. I rubbed my hands all over him." The second one said, "I

thought the elephant looked like a tree. I rubbed my hands up and down him." The third one said, "I thought the elephant was like a rope. I grabbed hold of him." In a sense, each was right but they had a very limited impression. If you took a wall, added four tree trunks and a rope at one end, along with the head of an elephant at the other end, you would have a picture more consistent with the appearance of a real elephant.

The Historical Jesus

Will Durante in his *History of Civilization* said that the de-

nial of the existence of Jesus seemed never to have occurred even to the bitterest Gentile or Jewish opponents of early Christianity.

Giving

"For giving is living," said the angel.

"Go feed to the hungry sweet charity's bread."

"Must I keep giving again and again?"

My selfish and quarrelsome spirit said.

"Oh, no," said the angel, piercing me through,

"Just give until the Master stops giving to you."

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