

Reading: Matthew 11:1-19

Theme: Jesus encourages belief in Him.

The developmental process of children is fascinating, as we see their abilities, talents, skills develop. There is also the development of speech, but within that there is the awful moment when they learn a terrible word, one that makes parents cringe - it is the 3-letter word “**Why?**” For a short while after that it feels it is said about everything! “*Eat your breakfast up.*” “*Why?*” or “*There’s a nice dog.*” “*Why?*” It may be quite a frustrating time!

Yet as grown-ups, teenagers, we can also question “*Why?*” - not in a mechanical sense, but as we are faced with situations, with problems, with uncertainties. We find we can question and wonder “*Why is this happening? Why do I feel like this?*” We can have doubts over many things in our lives - a career, homes, cars, relationships, some even about their marriages. There may be someone here this morning like that. There may also be someone here who may have doubts regarding Christianity and questioning why this or that; do you really need to believe this, is the Bible true and trustworthy?

Maybe some of the young people are like this or even some of the adults. The young people here mostly have had the privilege of growing up in Christian homes and may always have accepted that there is a God, that Jesus died to save us, have accepted Christian standards, yet they may be getting to doubt, to examine and think through things for themselves and in doing so may have many questions. For some of the adults, you may have heard of Christian things and the things you heard may have affected you, made you to think and question. You have doubts, questions that remain unanswered, unsaid, but you want answers; you are not content to leave the matters unresolved.

If you feel like that, I want to encourage you to keep on questioning and looking for the answers. Christianity welcomes **questions and honest seeking**. You are not to feel you are wrong to have such questions or doubts. You would be wrong to say you have doubts and questions, but unthinkingly write Christianity off and dismiss it as a waste of time. Your doubts and questions need to be examined! We learn from the passage we read that the Lord Jesus didn't frown on questions and doubts, but carefully and gently answered such in a way that would give the questioner all the material they needed to answer their questions. This is what strikes me from v1-6. We will learn things from these verses to encourage us to do as John the Baptist did - to ask Jesus to deal with our questions and doubts. We will see 4 things from v1-6:

1. The Work of Jesus.

Recently we saw the Lord Jesus sent His 12 disciples out on a short preaching tour. He told them of their work and also spoke of their long-term service for Him in a series of warnings and encouragements. The opening verse of this chapter links us to that incident. In many ways v1 could possibly be the end of chapter 10 - where Jesus finished instructing the apostles. The disciples, we presume, have been sent out and Jesus then goes about a work of His own - in their cities. Here the NIV is wrong in its translation "*the towns of Galilee*" as it is an interpretation of "in their towns or cities". Probably **it is** the towns and cities of the Galilee region, but it does not say that in the Greek – NIV footnote says "*in their towns*".

This means Jesus went out and about teaching and preaching and from v5 we assume He did many mighty works. Possibly the phrase "*in their towns or cities*" refers to the places the disciples were at. As they taught, preached and did good, their Master follows on and furthers such a good work.

Here is a lovely encouragement for us who teach, preach, work with young people and children - that our Saviour and Master, the Lord Jesus, is interested in the work and we can ask Him to be there as we try to serve Him, ask Him to come and work, to establish the work we are trying to do for Him. The Lord Jesus went out and His primary work was **teaching and preaching** - telling of God, of His ways, of the kingdom of God, of the way of God, to call people to get right with God and teaching them how to live-in God's ways. All this teaching was reinforced by the mighty miracles He did.

This first verse about the work of Jesus would be a fitting conclusion to chapter 10, yet it also serves as a fitting introduction to chapter 11 – as John the Baptist hears of Jesus' works while he was imprisoned. John was in prison because he exposed the wrong of Herod Antipas - who is not the same Herod as at Jesus' birth, but a descendant of that Herod. This Herod had fancied his brother's wife and had taken her as his own wife! John had challenged him, exposed his guilt and Herod had him locked up for it. Yet he did not kill him because remarkably Herod had a fear, a respect for John (Mark 6:20), but couldn't let him remain free. That event had been about a year before the event here. Life in prison would not have been easy for John, but he did have access to visitors and news of Jesus' work came to him and so we see:

2. The Questions of John.

John has 2 questions, or one question in 2 parts - was Jesus the one who was to come – in other words, was He the Messiah, the Christ? Or should they look for another? If Jesus is the Messiah then John knew there was no need to look for someone else! Why did John have such questions? He was a remarkable prophet, was

the herald of the King, he had recognised Jesus as the anointed one, the Messiah from God at Jesus' baptism; he pointed his disciples to Jesus saying "*Behold the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world.*" John had recognised that Jesus must increase and he himself decrease. Yet John still has these doubts and questions! If he had such, then why do we wonder if we have doubts and questions!

Some suggest that John did not have these questions personally, but he used such to cause his disciples to realise it was Jesus they should be following and not him and Jesus' answer gave John further opportunity to point them again to Jesus! Now this sounds good in theory, but I feel John himself had these questions and doubts. Here are some of the reasons why I think this:

Consider John's circumstances: John was in prison, had been there for a year or so and was in very unpleasant circumstances. For someone used to the open spaces of the desert, having the freedom of movement and more recently the busy life of activity, this imprisonment must have been an awful thing. It would have been worse because he'd not done anything wrong, but spoken the truth of God's word and standards and was being punished for such!

Remember that John was an ordinary man and was no Superman, was no hard case. He was a man of like feelings such as us and this imprisonment must have got him and worn him down. When things do not go right for us, when we are in seemingly "bad" situations it is so easy for us to feel down and be prone to dark thoughts, doubts, questions and nothing is ever right. John's circumstances and the fact that he was just an ordinary man affected him.

Also, he was affected by a wrong understanding, expectation of Jesus. John was the one sent to prepare the way for the Lord - the King's arrival. John did so with a stern, hard, ground levelling ministry (Isaiah 40:1-8). He called on people to repent, he spoke of the coming One who would punish, cast out, who would purge His barn and burn the chaff. John's view of the Messiah was that of a conquering Judge who would sort everyone out... Yet here is Jesus and He is doing good, healing, being merciful, teaching amazing things in a caring and merciful way! No doubt this puzzled John and he couldn't harmonise the facts with his understanding and so he wonders, questions and doubts if this was really the Messiah, if this was the One that he expected as he imagined Him so differently!

John missed an important thing - he overlooked *“the Lamb of God”* and concentrated on, dwelt on the Judge. He didn't have the view of both and realise they were both the same Person, both His work, but at different times! We need to realise who Jesus is in every aspect of His being. If we dwell only on His love, we may imagine Him a soft, easy touch. We need to realise that the Saviour offered, is the same One who is the Judge of those who neglect or reject Him. We may fear at the thought of Him as Judge and be terrified, scared out of our wits, even think He'd never have time for us and we are doomed, but we need to realise this same One can be our Saviour even today.

John had his doubts and questions, but he didn't keep them to himself, but wisely sent and asked Jesus. Today you may have questions about Christianity and who Jesus is, then tell God, tell the Lord Jesus those questions and that you want, need answers. God will not condemn you for such questions, neither will we and we will try to answer those questions. Most importantly ask Jesus, God and you can be amazed, as was John, at:

3. The Answer of Jesus.

Jesus could simply have answered “*Yes, I am the Christ, the Messiah, the One that was to come.*” Yet John could have wondered and questioned if this One was trying to fool and dupe him! It would have been an unkind answer in many ways, but Jesus is not unkind, nor unwise in His answer then or now. The Lord Jesus answers John by giving him abundant evidence and proofs for him to think about and to consider. As John thought on such evidence, he would realise and be convinced there is only one answer to his questions – ‘Yes’ - Jesus had to be the Messiah! Having thought things through, John’s heart and mind would be settled as he realised, was convinced of the truth of who Jesus was.

Dr Luke in his gospel (Luke 7:21) tells us of Jesus’ response to John’s question “*At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind.*” Then He sent John’s disciples back and told them the exact answer to give him in v4-5. John’s disciples were to report of seeing the power of Jesus, the teaching and preaching of Jesus. Jesus words in v5 must have had a familiar ring to them as far as John was concerned, for here Jesus couples two OT quotes together - Isaiah 35:5-6 “*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.*” and Isaiah 61:1 “*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.*”

It is as if Jesus is gently saying to John “*You know the prophecies of judgement; but you don’t remember and realise these things I am doing are also true! I am doing miracles, I am preaching the good news, but see the fulfilment is better than expected - for the dead are being raised!*” The Lord Jesus gently and tenderly points

a downcast John to the evidences he failed to see! The Lord Jesus encouraged him to think again on these things and work out who it was speaking of and that it pointed John, and all around, to who Jesus really was. Jesus did this so John would no longer be left doubting, afraid or questioning, but he would be sure and certain.

For us all here, the Lord Jesus would invite us to consider who He is by looking at His life, teaching, the effect His gospel has had on society, to look at His word and its fulfilment in history, its fulfilment in our lives as it touches us and points out that it is real and true. If we had time, we could see the many, many fulfilments of OT prophecy in Jesus' life and ministry as well as the miracles which He did that pointed us to who He really is.

We can also look around at the evidences of the work of Jesus in this church and you would see the changed lives of men and women, of young people, who know that Jesus is alive and as their Saviour, who know many answers to prayers, who know His help in their lives in countless ways. Are we really ready to consider **the evidence**? Or will we persist in ignoring it and clinging to our doubts or the way we'd rather live as reasons, convenient excuses not to believe and live our life for Jesus?

Jesus provided a downcast, isolated and lonely John the Baptist with the clear evidence he needed. If you are serious about knowing Jesus as your God and Saviour, then He will do the same for you, as you go and ask Him your questions. It may be through your own reading, digging into things or questioning things. You may get understanding as you hear God's word in spoken and preached, as you speak with and question Christians; it may be in unexpected ways, but be sure He will be found by you if you seek for Him with all your heart.

4. The Concern of Jesus.

John had his ideas of the Messiah and he may have reacted against Jesus shattering those ideas. Jesus encourages John further by saying v6 *“Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”* The Greek word translated *“fall away on account of me”* or *“be not offended in me”* is the word from which we get “scandalised” and so Jesus is saying that John is not to be offended, shocked, stumble, fall or be scandalised on account of Jesus, by what he learned of Jesus, even if it shattered his precious darling ideas!

Jesus is basically saying to John *“Don’t go away from me John. If you do, you will not be blessed! Yet even if you John, still in prison, with your doubts and questions, realise who I am, then even there in prison you are blessed - with the comfort, joy, peace and hope of having me as your Saviour - for I am the Messiah, the One who came to save His people!”*

I wonder if this morning that what **you** know of Jesus, His claims, His claims on **your** life, if it offends you, scandalises you as you realise cannot save yourself, but must make Jesus your Saviour if you are to know your sins forgiven, be spared hell and get a home in heaven? If Jesus and the gospel offends you, then you are not blessed. If you are not offended and want Jesus or have Jesus as your Saviour, then blessing awaits or is yours already - eternal life, peace with God, sins forgiven, no angry God to face, being a child of God, having joy and peace in believing, knowing the help and comfort of God the Holy Spirit in your life. All this is given you in place of doubts and questions - for the Lord Jesus is still concerned and loving. You can, like John did (*I feel from what Jesus says of him next*), trust the Lord Jesus as your Saviour. The question is *“Will you make this Saviour your Saviour and do so even today?”*