

The Encouragement of the Prisoner John the Baptist

Doug Hamilton

Matthew 11:2–6 Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent *word* by his disciples³ and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?”⁴ Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see:⁵ *the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.*⁶ “And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.”

- In the above passage we learn some additional information concerning John the baptist and his struggle from the prison cell that Herod had confined him to. It was only months before on the banks of the Jordan River that John proclaimed that Jesus was the expected Messiah sent from God to take away the sins of the world. The coming of the kingdom of God was something he fervently looked forward to coming very shortly and he spoke of it with great boldness.
- Herod had him arrested and thrown into prison for his preaching against the sin of taking his brother’s wife Herodias to be his own, something that violated God’s word. As he waited in the dungeon on what appeared to be his own pending execution, he began to have his faith shaken. He likely thought, “I was sure Jesus was going to be the ruling Messiah, to take over this corrupt government and right the wrongs against the people of God. Why am I in prison right now suffering in such a way?” I am persuaded this is the reason that John the baptist sent his disciples to go and speak with Jesus about the issue.
- The evidence that Jesus sent back to encourage John in his moment of suffering was astounding. He said to the disciples of John to report back of the wonderful works of healing, both externally and internally, even to the point of resurrection from the dead. It was not a message of a physical deliverance from that prison cell that John would hear, but a mental deliverance to the glory of that kingdom he looked forward to!
- If you could imagine being John when his disciples came back and brought him an update concerning the workings of the Christ.
 - “You should have seen what the Son of God was doing! He was performing many great medical miracles on the people!”
 - “He brought people back from the dead. He touched this young man’s coffin at the funeral procession to the grave and the man came back to life! (Luke 7:14)
 - “He spoke the greatest words of hope that we have ever heard!”
 - “There is no doubt, you were absolutely right. He is the Messiah, the expected One of God, just like you were saying! The kingdom is still coming!”
- This was exactly what was needed to lift the countenance of a great servant like John the baptist. Even though he would suffer execution shortly thereafter, he faced his persecution with great strength, knowing more than ever that Jesus was the Messiah. I am convinced John was led into the execution chamber with the hope of Jesus ever so present in his heart as they decapitated him.

The Point of the Lesson

- There are many times in our service to God that the world deals some very troubling blows to our faith. We could be bombarded with issues of health, unemployment, loss of someone close to us or even direct persecution. If we are not careful, we could easily be swallowed up in sorrow and robbed of the boldness in Christ that He has called for us to have in our walk with Him. Jesus does not want us to have a shaken faith, but a BOLD

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faith, one that can look death in the eye with great confidence in knowing that HE IS LORD, HE IS POWERFUL and HE IS THE SON OF GOD!

- Using the same evidence that the disciples brought back to John the baptist, I would like to remind you amidst your struggles that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and the kingdom of God is doing quite well. I want to be your messenger to encourage you from any “prison cell” of despair.

The Setting:

- Think about all the things that have attacked the foundation of your faith this week concerning Jesus Christ being the true Son of God. Look at your prison walls of bad health, depression, money problems, family troubles, bad relationships, broken down cars and leaky roofs, overdue bills and under-due wages, bad news that came and the good news that never showed up. This world is tough. It would be so easy when caught up in the pains of this world to not really remember that Jesus Christ is still as much as Messiah today as He was back then and has always been.

1) “Go and report to John what you hear and see: *the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT*”

Matthew 9:27–31 As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!”²⁸ When He entered the house, the blind men came up to Him, and Jesus said to them, **“Do you believe that I am able to do this?”** They said to Him, “Yes, Lord.”²⁹ Then He touched their eyes, saying, **“It shall be done to you according to your faith.”**³⁰ And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them: **“See that no one knows about this!”**³¹ But they went out and spread the news about Him throughout all that land.

- Of all the senses of the body, to me sight would have to be one of the most important. With is you can read your Bible, go for a walk, drive a car, watch a movie, watch your children grow and observe some of the highest mountains in the world. Imagine how difficult it would be for you to have never seen a rainbow after a rainstorm, a flowering garden or your child’s first smile. Sight is really a blessing and if we have it, then we should thank God daily for that privilege.
- God has always commanded a certain love and care for those with disabilities, particularly the blind. To hinder them in their distress is absolutely abominable to Him.
 - *Leviticus 19:14* ‘You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall revere your God; I am the LORD.
 - *Deuteronomy 27:18* ‘Cursed is he who misleads a blind person on the road.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’
- Often times to be blind in the first-century meant having to resort to a life a begging and being led around the streets by a family member. It would behoove us to always reach out to the blind with our love and compassion for in doing so we honor our Lord in a special way.
- This is why when a couple of blind men literally could hear of the glorious Son of God walking through the crowd, they tried to gain His attention for the greatest help to a blind man, the gift of sight. “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” They were literally asking Jesus to stand in their shoes and see through the darkness that had taken over their eyes. Jesus touched their eyes and they were opened again.

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- This is an incredible sight both literally and figuratively. These men's life were changed by the hand of Jesus. Imagine John the baptist hearing one of the stories about the blind receiving their sight and how encouraging it would have been to him!
 - "You should have seen it, they were so happy to have been healed that they were telling world about the glory of Jesus the Christ!"
 - You should have seen the joy in these men's hearts when they visually laid eyes on their loved ones after all these years!"
 - "Isn't it exciting knowing that Jesus is exactly Who you proclaimed Him to be?"

2) "Go and report to John what you hear and see...the lame walk"

Matthew 9:1–8 Getting into a boat, Jesus crossed over *the sea* and came to His own city. ² And they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, **"Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven."** ³ And some of the scribes said to themselves, "This fellow blasphemes." ⁴ And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, **"Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?"** ⁵ **"Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, and walk'?"** ⁶ **"But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"**—then He said to the paralytic, **"Get up, pick up your bed and go home."** ⁷ And he got up and went home. ⁸ But when the crowds saw *this*, they were awestruck, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

- First-century society was not a handicap-friendly environment. It was common in that era for a crippled person to have to resort to a life of begging on the streets from a cot or piles of blankets (Acts 3:1). In many countries even to this day, family members will drop off a crippled family member at a busy street corner to beg for the day.
- There was an unfair but common association made with handicapped individuals and sin. The people reasoned that tough situations only occurred to sinful people, but Jesus said it also rained on the just and the unjust, the sun rises on the good and the evil (Matt 5:45). If you were handicapped in first-century Israel, you were also stigmatized with unconfirmed sin (John 9:2). This is why Jesus addressed the crippled man, "...you sins are forgiven", for the culture had to see a disconnection from the physical and spiritual.
- Not only did Jesus address a spiritual compassion for the man, but healed him of the crippling effects of his condition. The man just stood up and carried his gurney home with him!
- I am sure the news that Jesus healed cripples to walk again had to lift the emotions of John the baptist from his dungy prison cell.
- Does this news not encourage you about the kingdom of God and God's Son Jesus Christ. The thought of Jesus changing the future of a formerly written-off crippled man is so encouraging! Can you not sing a joyful verse or two from your prison cell of distress?
- I'll Fly Away Some glad morning when this life is o'er, To a home on God's celestial shore, When the shadows of this life have gone, Like a bird from prison bars have flown, Just a few more weary days and then, To lead on where joys shall never end. I'll fly away.

3) "Go and report to John what you hear and see...the lepers are cleansed"

Matthew 8:1–3 When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him. ² And a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, "Lord, if You are willing, You can

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make me clean.”³ Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “**I am willing; be cleansed.**” And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

- Leprosy is a devastating disease that plagued the ancient culture. The nature of the disease is quarantine from the others who are healthy. This was a great devastation emotionally for anyone who had it.
- Leviticus 13:45–46 “As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’”⁴⁶ “He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.
- Tell of the leper colony in India. (The joy they had in human touch and closeness.)
- How do you think John felt when he heard about the joyous lepers that were cleansed of the social isolation from their family and friends? Can you actually pretend that this did not cause joy in the mind of this death-row inmate? Was he not having confirmed that Jesus IS THE SON OF GOD?

4) “Go and report to John what you hear and see...and *the* deaf hear”

Mark 7:31–37 Again He went out from the region of Tyre, and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis.³² They brought to Him one who was deaf and spoke with difficulty, and they implored Him to lay His hand on him.³³ Jesus took him aside from the crowd, by himself, and put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting, He touched his tongue *with the saliva*;³⁴ and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, He said to him, “**Ephphatha!**” that is, “**Be opened!**”³⁵ And his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was removed, and he *began* speaking plainly.³⁶ And He gave them orders not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them, the more widely they continued to proclaim it.³⁷ They were utterly astonished, saying, “He has done all things well; He makes even the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

- Jesus was in the region of Decapolis near the sea of Galilee. There he was presented with a man that could not hear and barely speak. Speaking is obviously linked to the ability to hear your own words. Without large amounts of speech therapy there would likely be a speech impediment. This was the time before deaf signing and the social limitations would have been difficult.
- Imagine what it would be like to not hear the beautiful verses of a gospel song unto God? Imagine what it would be like to not physically hear your child’s first word or your favorite song on the radio.
- In an odd procedure, Dr. Jesus opened his ears and freed his tongue. It was with that same freed tongue that proclamations concerning the glory of God came forth to the people in his life.
- Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsOo3jzkhYA> Are you not filled with joy to watch this woman hear for the first time?
- Do you not think that John the baptist was filled with joy to hear that Jesus healed the deaf? I would not be surprised if the disciples told John of the joy of the man that was healed from deafness. Are you not encouraged knowing the Jesus Christ is the confirmed long-awaited Messiah?

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5) “Go and report to John what you hear and see...*the dead are raised up*”

Luke 7:11–17 Soon afterwards He went to a city called Nain; and His disciples were going along with Him, accompanied by a large crowd. ¹² Now as He approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a sizeable crowd from the city was with her. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, **“Do not weep.”** ¹⁴ And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, **“Young man, I say to you, arise!”** ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to speak. And *Jesus* gave him back to his mother. ¹⁶ Fear gripped them all, and they *began* glorifying God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and, “God has visited His people!” ¹⁷ This report concerning Him went out all over Judea and in all the surrounding district.

- All this widow had left to her life was her son, the future of her family lineage. The word that her son had died would have utterly devastated not only her, but all that knew her.
- Jesus happened upon the crowd of broken-hearted mourners and felt compassion for the mother. That phrase of understanding from the lips of Jesus is powerful.
- What is even more powerful was the fact that He touched the coffin, gave the command to “Arise” and brought the young man back from the dead. The people were astonished and the report of Jesus spread throughout the land, likely including the prison cell of John the baptist.
- Can you just imagine the joy that John felt in his heart knowing that Jesus was bring people back from the dead? Imagine the boldness of John’s faith when this was confirmed to him.
- Does it not encourage you to know amidst your struggles this week that Jesus Christ is still at the right hand of the Majesty on high? It has a way of making the prison walls of despair melt like ice. He is conformed the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead (Rom 1:5).

6) “Go and report to John what you hear and see...and *the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.*”

Luke 4:17–21 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, ¹⁸ **“THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD.”** ²⁰ And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. ²¹ And He began to say to them, **“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”**

- Jesus made it clear from the beginning as He quoted from Isaiah 61:1-2, HE IS THE MESSIAH, the CHRIST, the HOLY ONE OF GOD! That is the good news that we no longer have to die in the guilt of our sins, but can be washed, sanctified and justified through His divine plan on the cross. He was offering hope to the hurting, just as foretold!
- I know this would have encouraged John the baptist greatly because he looked forward to this his entire life. Is this not what you are looking forward to concerning the core of your Christianity? Are you not encouraged to be reminded that Jesus clearly understood His mission to preach the gospel to the lost world?