

# 5. He must Increase

## LUKE 7:18-35 ARE YOU THE ONE WHO SHOULD COME?

In this final study we will now consider the life and teaching of John through the words of Jesus Christ himself. From prison, John sends two of his disciples with this question for Jesus. In **Luke 7:18** the disciples provide John with the news of Jesus' amazing ministry. John's plan was not to have disciples at this point, but there are two of them who are able to visit him whilst in prison. John is in a highly distressing situation at this point which would have tested him mentally and physically.

**Luke 7:18-20** The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "**Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?**" And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, '**Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?**'"

There has generally been two interpretations of this question. **One** is to suggest that John was doubting if Jesus was indeed the Messiah at all and that he had doubts in a moment of weakness. A **second** view is that John gets his disciples to ask Jesus this question for the disciples' benefit. A **third** more satisfying approach is here suggested, carefully considering the the Scriptural response to the question Jesus answers. No doubt the disciples did benefit, but there is much more to the question.

We suggest that John's imprisonment led him to desperately seek a response from Jesus who at this time was carrying out significant miracles. In effect, it is like John tactfully asks Jesus, "*please get me out of this prison!*" In other words, if you are the Messiah, why is it that I am still in this prison? Any of us in John's situation would surely ask a similar question, although possibly much more directly.

Jesus responds by partially citing **Isaiah 61**, the **very chapter** that tells of the bridegroom being like a priest who marries his bride at a time of great rejoicing in the Kingdom. It is likely Jesus uses this Scripture as direct flow on from John's significant statement in **John 3:29** about Jesus being the bridegroom.

**Luke 7:21-23** In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the **blind receive their sight**, the **lame walk**, **lepers are cleansed**, and the **deaf hear**, the **dead are raised up**, the **poor have good news preached** to them. **And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.**"

The idea that John doubted Jesus was Messiah is really just an **assumption** that is not in the Scriptural record. Jesus said of John that there was none greater born of women. In fact he said this **directly after** his answer to John in **Luke 7:21-23**, but when the messengers had left. John was the very voice sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus as Messiah. If anyone in the world was convinced Jesus was Messiah, it was John. A more reasonable explanation of his question is to place ourselves in the position of John in that prison and consider what we would have asked for. This is confirmed by careful reading of Matthew's record:

**Matthew 11:2-3** Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

John's question is a **desperate plea** for deliverance from prison. If Jesus is Messiah, then why had he not delivered John? Jesus then partially cites **Isaiah 42** and **61** to provide the answer. This being, **in effect** that the time is not right to release him from prison. That can only come in God's Kingdom (**Isa 49:9-10**). This is also clear from the extra comment Jesus adds (in **Lk 7:23**): "**Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me**" (NIV) In other words, the answer is not an easy one for John to receive. Look closely at which of Isaiah's words Jesus **leaves out** in his reply to John:

**Isaiah 42:6-8** I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a **light for the nations**, to **open the eyes that are blind**, to **bring out the prisoners from the dungeon**, from the **prison those who sit in darkness**. I am the LORD; that is my name...

**Isaiah 61:1-2** The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to **bring good news to the poor**; he has sent me to **bind up the brokenhearted**, to proclaim **liberty to the captives**, and the **opening of the prison to those who are bound**; to **proclaim the year of the LORD's favour**, and the **day of vengeance of our God**; to **comfort all who mourn**.

John would have known from this response that the time had come to lay down his life, awaiting resurrection from the dead and the ultimate release from the prison of sin and death. Jesus then says that John is the fulfilment of prophecy to prepare the way for Messiah. Stating that there is no greater man born of women was very bold, even by Jesus' standards. Here is a Divine assessment of the faith, conviction and perseverance of John, who was under severe trial at this point.

**Luke 7:24-28** When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you." I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (citing **Mal 3:1**)

Jesus questions what they went out to see. The multitudes always want to see a good show. But here was a man whose power was in his **voice**. The only thing to **see** was a man who lived his message.

Jesus waited until John's disciples had gone before speaking these extra words (**Jn 7:24-28**). A reed shaken in the wind is a person who bends easily to public opinion. John stood for what was right and suffered for it. It is very easy for us today to be reeds in the wind. God's Word remains the same despite changes in culture. It is true that the "least" of the immortals in the kingdom are greater than John in his mortality. Jesus however was the embodiment of all the principles of God's kingdom (**Lk 17:21**). These people had greater privilege than John right then as they were with Jesus.



## JESUS CHRIST EXPANDING JOHN'S MESSAGE

Repentance and baptism were central to John's message. The preaching of Jesus was entirely consistent with John's teaching.

**Mark 1:14-15** Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the **gospel of the kingdom of God**, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the **kingdom of God** is at hand: repent ye, and believe the **gospel**.

Jesus also continued to teach repentance (**Mk 6:12; Lk 13:5**). Jesus' miracles of healing were accompanied by teaching about the Kingdom (**Lk 9:2,6**). Jesus was confronted by the chief priests and elders while teaching in the temple (**Mt 21:23**). They questioned by what authority he taught. Jesus responded by asking if they accepted the teaching of John and spoke of the baptism of John. Jesus also took their rejection of John's teaching as a clear indication that they would not accept his authority. Christ's ministry focused on the common people who had accepted John's message of humility, repentance and forgiveness. The power of John's message to prepare believers for Christ is illustrated in the events of **Acts 18:24-28; 19:1-7** where a number of John's followers believe on Christ. In that case Apollos was "*mighty in the Scriptures*" but had only known John's teachings. He was then taught "*the way of God more perfectly*" and embraced the message of Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

John had said of Christ, "*I baptise you with water, but one mightier than I cometh. He shall baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*" Outpouring of the Holy Spirit often involved a comparison with John's baptism (**Mt 3:11; Mk 1:8; Jn 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16**). This was a determined event for a particular group of believers at that time to further God's purpose. Baptism with fire was a reference to the Roman invasion of Jerusalem in AD70. Jesus said, "*Every tree not bringing forth fruit will be hewn down and cast into the fire*" (**Lk 3:9**) Peter also warns of this in **Acts 2:15-20** (citing **Joel 2:28-32**).

## MORE OF CHRIST IN PRACTICE

Jesus challenges us: "*If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.*" (**Mt 16:24-25**) This teaching epitomises the life of John the Baptist. The whole life of Christ was one of sacrifice. Not just on the cross, but in all aspects of everyday life. This is the example for us to follow. True happiness can only be found if we **give our lives for others** in service to Jesus Christ and his Father. "**Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.**" (**Gal 6:2**)

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