

# The Greatest of All Time

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[ 0 : 00 ] So tonight's Bible reading is from Matthew chapter 11 and we're reading verses 1 to 11. You can find it on page 976 of the Bibles. I'll give you a wee second to find it.

Matthew chapter 11. After Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, are you the one who is to come or should we expect someone else? Jesus replied, go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John. What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind?

If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in king's palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

This is the one about whom it is written. I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. Truly, I tell you, among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. Thanks. Thanks, Joe, and let me add my welcome to Darren's. It'd be a great help to me if you'd keep your Bible open at Matthew chapter 11. Let's join together and pray again and ask for God's help.

[ 2 : 12 ] Let's pray. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. Father, we pray that you would grant us ears to hear your word, to hear what you are saying to each of us here this evening in this passage.

We pray that the Holy Spirit would come and impress on us the gospel truth for our lives, would open the eyes of the blind, that we would more clearly see the greatness and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Well, have you ever noticed that there are a lot of questions in life? In our midweek roots group, each week we have a different icebreaker question. For example, if you were to replace a band member of any rock or pop group, who would you be? I wouldn't embarrass the person who jumped to answer that with H from steps. But another question. If you were to ride into battle on any creature, real or mythical, what would it be? Or another one, do you spend more time thinking about the Roman Empire or your ex-best friends?

Perhaps most contentious and polarizing of all was last week's question. What is your most favorite and least favorite type of soup? Apparently, scotch broth isn't very popular in some quarters here.

So many questions. But one question that's captured our collective imagination in recent times is who is the greatest of all time? Who is the GOAT? The G-O-A-T, the greatest of all time.

So in football, the debate rages on who's greater, Messi or Ronaldo, Pele or Maradona? Who is the greatest of all time? Well, did you notice what Jesus says in verse 11?

[ 4 : 36 ] Truly, I tell you, he says, John the Baptist is greater than all who came before him. And the least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist.

So the least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist. And John the Baptist is greater than all who came before him. So are you one of the least in the kingdom of heaven? If you are, then Jesus says you're greater than John the Baptist.

And Jesus says John the Baptist is greater than Abraham and David and Moses and all the rest of them. So that means you are too. But what does he mean? Clearly, none of us here are greater leaders than David or Moses.

None of us are greater prophets than Isaiah or Ezekiel. So let's back up and set this verse in its context and follow the flow of the argument as a whole.

The passage actually starts with yet another question. It's an important question, perhaps the most important question that any of us could be asking. In verse 3, John the Baptist asks Jesus via his own disciples, Are you, Jesus, the one who is to come?

[ 5 : 54 ] Or perhaps should we be expecting someone else? In other words, John asks Jesus, Are you definitely the one? Are you the one we've been waiting for?

The promised Messiah? The one in whom all our hopes are placed? Are you the one? Jesus' answer to this question is affirmative.

Of course, yes, I am the one. And as you'll see from the points on the notice sheet, his answer is basically twofold. There's two main headings. Firstly, consider the scriptures, verses 1 to 6.

That's basically the message Jesus gives to John's disciples. Consider the scriptures. Yes, I am the one. And then secondly, consider John the Baptist from verses 7 and following.

That's what he says to the crowd. So firstly then, to John's disciples, consider the scriptures.

They're the answer to your question. Now before we come on to Jesus' answer, let me ask, did any of you find it a little bit surprising, John's question?

[ 7 : 03 ] Is Jesus definitely the one? Isn't that a little bit surprising? Not so much the question itself, but who's asking it? Isn't it surprising that John the Baptist, of all people, seems to be having a second thought, seems on the face of it to be doubting who Jesus is?

After all, John's the one who's been proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah right from the outset of Matthew's gospel. No doubt he's discouraged here. And the question, the question that you should be asking is why?

Why is John the Baptist discouraged? Now clearly he's in prison. He's being held in Herod's fortress prison down by the burning mountains of the Dead Sea.

And sometimes if we're honest, our faith can be rocked, can't it? By our circumstances. We can be shaken by sudden illness or bereavement or things not working out in a job or in a relationship.

Or when we're subject to opposition in sharing our faith, we can become discouraged by all sorts of things. If we're not careful, doubts about who Jesus is can begin to creep in.

[ 8 : 22 ] So is that what's going on here with John? Is it because he's languishing in prison? Well, that's not what it says. If you look with me again at verse 2, it's obviously not going to help his mindset being in prison.

That's for sure. But the fact he's in prison seems almost by the by. No, it's when John heard about Jesus' deeds that he sends his disciples to find out if Jesus is the Messiah.

And that's surprising, isn't it? Because surely Jesus' deeds include everything Jesus has done up to now. That includes Jesus' great teaching, the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 to 7.

It includes Jesus' great miracles in chapters 8 to 9. It includes the great training mission of chapter 10. That's what Jesus has been doing. Teaching, performing miraculous signs, and training others. So why on earth should John be discouraged about that? Well, what becomes clear as we read Jesus' answers is that John the Baptist had some false expectations.

[ 9 : 31 ] There's a disconnection between what John expected of the Messiah and what Jesus was turning out to be in reality. John expected a certain kind of a Messiah.

So what had he preached? If you turn back to chapter 3, chapter 3 of Matthew's Gospel, you'll find on page 967, you'll see what kind of Messiah John preached.

Chapter 3, page 967, verses 11 to 12. John says, After me comes one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his freshing floor, gathering his sweet into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

He's expecting a Messiah, in other words, who comes bringing judgment. So where's the fire?

Where's the winnowing judgment? See, John's troubled not so much by what Jesus is doing, but by what Jesus isn't doing.

[ 10 : 44 ] The reason that he's so discouraged is Jesus is turning out to be a little bit different to what he expected. So let's consider again Jesus' response in verses 4 to 5 of chapter 11.

Let's think about Jesus' response. Go back and report to John what you hear and see, Jesus tells John's disciples.

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

And Jesus' words correspond to what Jesus has just been doing in the previous chapters of Matthew. So at the beginning of chapter 8, a leper is cleansed.

In chapter 9, two blind men receive our sight. A lame, paralytic man is unable to walk. A girl is raised from the dead. And among the poor who receive good news are those blessed at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

[ 11 : 47 ] Now these words that Jesus says are taken more or less from the prophet Isaiah, more or less straight from Isaiah. And we might be able to see on the screen.

Jesus is quoting from two passages in Isaiah that prophesy some 700 years earlier about the coming Messiah. Jesus' deeds attest to what the scriptures promise.

Jesus' deeds attest to what the scriptures promise. The scriptures back up Jesus' deeds. So do you see what Jesus is doing? He's telling John's disciples to go back to John and tell him again about his deeds.

But this time, in terms that John will recognize unmistakably as words taken from scripture. And so John's to search the scriptures and reconsider again Jesus' deeds in light of what the scriptures say and what they have foretold about the coming Messiah.

And that's an important lesson, I think, for us all, isn't it? Jesus didn't just suddenly appear in the Middle East, didn't come out of a vacuum from nowhere. He's not a myth like Robin Hood, not a made-up fairy tale.

[ 13 : 01 ] But the fulfillment of promises and patterns set out in the scriptures written over many centuries and by many authors. So John's to re-examine Jesus, going back to the Bible and seeing what it says about him.

But you see, it's as much about what Jesus doesn't say as about what he does say. Because significantly, in both the passages of Isaiah, Jesus quotes from, Jesus misses out the bit about judgment.

We'll see that in the next slide. So when Jesus quotes from the part of Isaiah 35 that says, then will the eyes of the blind be opened, right before it, Isaiah describes God coming with vengeance and divine retribution.

Jesus leaves that bit out. Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61 about preaching good news to the poor. But just after it, Isaiah talks about the day of vengeance of our God.

Jesus leaves that bit out too. So what's Jesus doing? Hasn't Jesus been to Bible school? Doesn't he know that a text without a context is a pretext for telling, making the Bible say whatever you want it to say?

[ 14 : 19 ] But Jesus knew that John knew Isaiah. John himself had quoted from the book of Isaiah more than once. So when his disciples quoted these words back to John from Jesus, identifying Jesus' ministry with Isaiah's prophecy, Jesus knows that John would have remembered the context of judgment.

So what Jesus is doing is he's pulling those two things apart, the judgment on the one hand and the blessings on the other. And he's saying in effect, look, it's already begun.

The age is dawning. The blessings of the kingdom have begun and I'm fulfilling those words. The good news is being preached to the poor, the lame, the blind see, but, but the time of judgment is not yet.

He leaves out those words. Instead he adds, blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. In other words, don't be disheartened, John.

I am definitely the one. You're not to expect someone else. If anything, your expectations are to be changed. The day of judgment which John foretold is not eliminated but postponed.

[ 15 : 41 ] John was discouraged because he thought he understood. But what he thought he understood didn't turn out quite that way.

And that can be deeply disorientating, discouraging, even for the most mature and devoted Christians. There's all sorts of things that can discourage us but it's deeply unsettling, I think, if the thing we think we know turns out not to be the case.

So I can think of a lovely Christian couple we know, passionate about Jesus, dedicated to the church, not from this church I should say, devoted to their study of the Bible, devoted to prayer, dear Christian friends who were struggling to conceive a baby.

They together sought the Lord in prayer and came to believe sincerely in their hearts that God had given them assurance that God was going to bless them with a baby boy by such and such a date. And when the time passed and they were still not pregnant it was a painful double blow. Not only was no baby on the way but if they were wrong about that how could they be sure about anything at all?

[ 17 : 05 ] And one of the lessons I think for us to learn is a lesson that Jesus taught John we need to learn the importance of returning and returning to the word of God making sure our views are being reformed and reformed and reformed by it.

And so then we're not going to be discouraged by misinformed or misguided expectations but are instead fixed on the sure hope that Jesus really is who he says he is.

And so it's as John's disciples depart that Jesus turns to address the crowd about John. So this is our second main heading. Consider John the Baptist Jesus addresses the crowd.

He's the answer to your question. As soon as John's disciples are gone Jesus gives a ringing a resounding endorsement of the greatness of John the Baptist.

And the world has its own criteria for greatness doesn't it? What makes you great in your mind I wonder? What gives you importance your sense of worth your family your career your income your education your influence?

[ 18 : 24 ] But Jesus shows us here if we'd only realize John's greatness according to the Bible's criteria for greatness who John is and what his ministry is really all about if only we understood the weight of all that we'd see that in remarkable ways John the Baptist himself points to Jesus and attests to him being the one who is to come.

Now in his day John the Baptist himself had created quite a sensation John's preaching had created quite a sensation and a movement into the wilderness of a multitude of people had been remarkable.

And we might note that it is with John not with Jesus that the mighty advance of the kingdom had commenced and Jesus launches into these rhetorical questions in verses 7 to 9 to remind the crowd of who John is to remind them of his character.

So then what did you go out in your droves in the desert to see? What did you expect? A reed swayed by the wind? There were plenty of reeds up and down the river Jordan blowing in the wind but no one familiar with the boldness of John's preaching with his courage to stand up to the Pharisees of King Herod would ever describe him in such terms.

A solid weighty stone pillar perhaps. A pathetic feeble buffeted papyrus reeds. Not so much.

[ 20 : 02 ] So then what did you go out to see? Where did you go? Were you expecting to see a refined dandy parading around the more fashionable boroughs of Jerusalem dressed in a suit cut by hawks of Savile Row?

Well of course not. Don't be ridiculous. Those who wear fine clothes are in king's palaces not in king's prisons. John is dressed in the rough clothing of a prophet.

He ate the weird diet of a prophet. The locust and the wild honey. So is that what you went out to see says Jesus a prophet? Yes indeed he was a prophet.

And yet he was more than a prophet. What on earth does that mean? What makes him more than a prophet? Jesus tells us.

He was more than a prophet in the sense that not only does John like the Old Testament prophets foretell the Messiah's coming but because John is the immediate forerunner of the Messiah he himself is foretold in the Old Testament prophecies.

[ 21 : 11 ] In other words John not only spoke the word of God as a prophet but John was one about him the word of God spoke as the fulfillment of prophecy.

He was prophet and prophesied about. That's what Jesus demonstrates in verse 10 quoting from the Old Testament prophet Malachi. Yes I tell you and more than a prophet this is the one about whom it's written.

I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you. So before the final one who is to come the Messiah there is another messenger who is coming.

And later on in Malachi we're told to expect a latter day Elijah. So Malachi prophesies the coming of one to announce the Messiah who will be an Elijah like messenger.

Did you notice in verses 13 to 14 it's in those very terms that Jesus describes John. He says if you're willing to accept it John is the Elijah who was to come.

[ 22 : 16 ] All the prophets and the law the entire Old Testament prophesied until John. That is they all look forward to the coming one to the dawning of the kingdom up to and including John.

It's all been building to this. All the law and the prophets culminate right here. The whole thing reaches its climax here. And what makes John different in God's providence and the whole sweep of it all?

What makes him different is his proximity to Jesus. He's not just a prophet but the messenger of Malachi. The one who gets to point to Jesus and say he's the one.

He's the one who is to come. And so now we can return to verse 11. Truly I tell you, says Jesus, what I'm about to say is of the utmost importance.

I tell you the truth, among those born of women there hasn't risen anyone greater than John the Baptist. Do you see what a wild statement that is?

[ 23 : 23 ] This is huge. Among those born of women. Or who's not born of a woman. In other words, Jesus is saying that up until this point in all history, John the Baptist is the goat.

He's the greatest of all time. The most important man who's ever lived. And do you know why? Because he introduced me, Jesus says.

That's what Jesus is saying. His greatness is because not only was he a prophet, but he was sent by God to be the person who gets introduced the one who is to come.

Because he gets to introduce me. That's what Jesus is saying. Just imagine I got up here this evening and said, Darren Jackson is the goat.

The greatest of all time. The greatest man ever born of a woman up to now. Because he got to introduce me.

[ 24 : 28 ] Good for a laugh perhaps. You'd think I'm bunkers. I had some kind of God complex. But nevertheless, that's what Jesus is saying.

John the Baptist is the greatest of all time in human history up to this point. Because he's been called of God according to scripture itself to point to me and say, there, there's the one.

There's the one. So what do you think that makes Jesus? Jesus is either a narcissistic megalomaniac or he is who he says he is.

The promised Messiah, the greatest of all time, bar none. But what does Jesus go on to say? He says, truly I tell you, the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.

And for this to make any sense, it stands to reason that the measure of our greatness must correspond to the measure of John's greatness.

[ 25 : 39 ] And John's the greatest up to that point. Because he gets to point forward to Jesus and say he's the one who is to come. Our greatness is greater than John's because we get to point backwards to Jesus and say he's the one who came, who healed the lame, who gave sight to the blind, who died for our sins on the cross, who paid for our sins by his sacrifice, who conquered death and rose from the grave.

John didn't get to see all that, he didn't get to live to see all that. So even the least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist, because the least in the kingdom can point to Jesus and his finished work more clearly than John the Baptist ever could.

God. The most awkward I've ever seen are senior pastor Martin. By the way, if you were here last week for the ordination, you'd have seen some of us wearing robes.

Apparently there are at least two independent votes being taken among some of you who are here, two independent votes about who looked the most awkward wearing robes.

I'm not going to name and shame the unofficial pollsters, but I can tell you that to my surprise, it wasn't me that topped the vote, it was Martin.

[ 27 : 07 ] That wasn't the most awkward I've ever seen him. The most awkward I've ever seen Martin was when Ray Ortlund, the American pastor, was here earlier in the year speaking to the men. And Ray embraced Martin in front of us all and pointed to him and said, here is a magnificent man.

And Martin didn't know where to look. Here is a magnificent man. Isn't this just what Jesus is saying to all of us who follow him?

Are you one of the least in the kingdom? Well, even if you became a Christian in the last few weeks, Jesus says you are greater.

You're even greater than the greatest of all time before Jesus because you get to point to him and tell others with the certainty of the scriptures and the testimony and the witness of John the Baptist

that Jesus is the one.

So whatever other questions you may have, whatever other questions life throws your way, you can be sure of the answer to this without a shadow of a doubt. Is Jesus definitely the one?

[ 28 : 28 ] Yes, he most certainly is. Let's pray. Help us to understand, Father, what an enormous privilege it is to know the Lord Jesus and to make him known.

we pray that you would encourage those who have been feeling discouraged in their walk with Jesus. By the Holy Spirit, would you minister to those who have been experiencing a season of doubt.

Help us all to trust in the Lord Jesus and to find our worth in him alone. For Jesus' sake, amen. And I'm going to hand over to Catherine and the band who's going to lead us. Amen.