

IS JESUS THE SON OF GOD OR DO WE LOOK FOR SOMEONE ELSE?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

Last Sunday, I found myself spiritually perplexed as I heard the news that over one billion people turned on their televisions to watch the final game of the World Cup of soccer between West Germany and Argentina. The game was followed by drunkenness, riots, destruction and killings. On Monday, most of those people returned to the emptiness of the lives they had been living before the spectacle of the World Cup. "Lord Jesus," I prayed, "you are offering the world eternal salvation, yet one third of the world's inhabitants are turning to a soccer game for some kind of temporary salvation from their pain and misery.

"Lord, I'm perplexed! We live in a world besieged by all kinds of evil that is overwhelming us physically, emotionally and spiritually. As a nation, we are struggling with the problems of the homeless, poverty, pro-life versus pro-choice, a drug epidemic, crack babies, rising crime, overcrowded prisons, a breakdown of the family unit, child abuse, child kidnaping, child pornography, runaways, sexual immorality, and the terrible AIDS epidemic. Lord, I'm perplexed! In light of all these horrible problems, why didn't you arrange last Sunday in such a way that (a) during the soccer match the one billion people watching could have heard at halftime a clear message of the wonderful gospel of Jesus Christ instead of glimpsing a few signs that read 'John 3:16'; or (b) better yet, the game could have been interrupted at halftime by your second coming in clouds of glory, where every eye could see you and every tongue in every nation confess you as Lord of Lords and King of Kings to the glory of the Father."

That is how I felt as I watched the final of the World Cup. We need the gospel, but we also need our Lord to rule in justice in order to deal with these terrible problems which have their beginning in the hearts of wicked men. Last week, my heart was perplexed and impatient. I found myself saying, as the Christians of the first century said, "Where are you, Lord, and where is the promise of your coming again?" I hungered for him to return to this world as King of kings to set up his kingdom of righteousness where justice reigns.

If you have ever been perplexed by the slowness of our Lord's second coming, then you can appreciate how spiritually perplexed was John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. John had a deep passion to see our Lord set up his kingdom on earth. According to the Old Testament prophets, the Messiah would appear and offer salvation to the world, and Israel's enemies would experience the wrath of God. But as John sat in a Roman prison he became perplexed over the ministry of Jesus because in his estimation the wrath of God was not being poured out.

Today, as we return to our studies in the gospel of Luke, we will see that the author of this gospel will continue to thread these wonderful stories of salvation, like pearls on a string of redemption, throughout his account of the life of Jesus. Luke's theme for his gospel is found in Jesus' words, "it is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call righteous men but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). Today's story will be no different; it is a message of eternal hope in a world of hopelessness.

We find Jesus in his second year of public ministry, teaching, preaching and healing in northern Galilee. The last time we were together we saw the wonderful compassion of our Lord expressed toward a widow from the small Galilean city of Nain (Luke 7:11-17). She was on her way to the cemetery to bury her only son, but Jesus astounded everybody by raising the man from the dead. News of this went out all over Judea and the surrounding district, and finally fell on the ears and into the heart of the imprisoned John the Baptist. As marvelous as this story was, it apparently caused John to become perplexed about the ministry of Jesus, so much so that he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the One who is coming, are you the Son of God, or do we look for someone else?" Another way of asking this question is, "Jesus, are you the Messiah

who was to come and bring upon this earth the good news of salvation, and deliver your wrath and judgment against our enemies and restore Israel to a place and time of glory in which you will reign in righteousness?"

As we watch our world drowning in a polluted pool of injustice, greed, corruption, immorality, hate and murder day in and day out, certainly some of us can be tempted to become as perplexed as John the Baptist. But it is my prayer that after we look at Luke 7:18-35, our perplexed hearts will be sobered and we will be greatly encouraged to cling to the spiritual reality that Jesus was and continues to be the risen Son of God. He has promised that as he came to earth the first time as Savior, he will come the second time as King. We do not need look for another savior and king.

Let us take up Luke's account then, where John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to ask of Jesus the question that had been burning in his heart, "Are you the One who is coming, or do we look for someone else? Our text will clearly demonstrate,

I. Jesus is the Son of God! Look at His Miracles

7: 18- 23

And the disciples of John reported to him about all these things. And summoning two of his disciples, John sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are You the One who is coming, or do we look for someone else?" 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 coming, or do we look for someone else?" At that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He granted sight to many who were blind. And He answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me."

What was the ministry of John the Baptist? According to Luke 1 and 3, John was born of Zacharias and Elizabeth to eventually fulfill the 800-year-old prophecy of Isaiah, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight, so that 'All flesh shall see the salvation of God'; (40:3-5), and the 400-year-old prophecy of Malachi, "Behold, I am going to send My messenger and he will clear the way before Me" (3:1), a reference to the forerunner of the long-awaited Jewish Messiah.

And what was the message of John the Baptist? He came "preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 'repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Here, John was preaching the salvation offered to the nation of Israel, "and they were being baptized by him in Jordan River as they confessed their sins" (Matt.3:6). But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "As for me, I baptize you with water, but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals: He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire, and His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3: 15-17). The forerunner of Jesus came with a message of hope and salvation for those who would receive it, but a message of judgment for those who rejected it. That was John's ministry and his message.

But Herod Antipas sought to muzzle this message of John the Baptist. In the early days of his ministry, John's message invaded the sinful heart of Herod Antipas, who had gotten rid of his own wife to marry his brother's wife, Herodias. According to the late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen in his "Life of Christ," John..."cut straight into the quick with words that were clear, decisive, and abrupt. Pointing his finger at Herod and his wife seated on their golden thrones, he said, 'You have no right to your brother's wife' (Mark 6:18). Herodias winced. She knew that John was recalling the fact that she had seduced Herod, who was already in her power. One look from her was enough for Herod. Before John could finish the next sentence, iron chains were thrown about his wrists and guards began dragging him from the court to throw him into the black dungeon below. The preacher was imprisoned but his words were not—they would echo in conscience long after the voice had been silenced." For months. John was kept in the dark dungeon of the Machaerus. This prison was attached to one

of Herod palaces, located some five miles east of the Dead Sea and some 15 miles south of its northern tip, what is today modern Jordan.

John was left with a perplexing question. He had been in prison for several month and had heard all about the miracles of Jesus, and especially about the raising from the dead of the widow's son. So, based on these reports, and on his own miserable condition, he sent out word by his disciples to ask Jesus a most important question: "Are you the One who is coming, or do we look for someone else? The "expected one" or the "coming one" was a well known designation for Israel's Messiah.

Was John doubting that Jesus was the promised Messiah? I really don't think so, for four reasons. First, John well understood from the prophets (Isa. 40:3, Mal. 3-4) that he was called by God to be "the forerunner." Second, he was convinced of the truth of his message, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." Third, his ministry was confirmed by the descending of the Holy Spirit on Jesus at his baptism: "I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God" (John 1:34). And fourth, he was so confident after the baptism that when he saw Jesus, he said to his two disciples, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). These facts do not add up to doubt, but rather, I would suggest, to perplexity and impatience

Why was he perplexed and impatient? John's understanding of the Messianic plan of redemption was based on the prophecies of Isa. 61-63. Jesus' first coming involved the preaching of the gospel, and his offer of physical, emotional and spiritual healing (John 3:16-18). His second coming would involve a ministry of judgment and wrath, first against the evil within the nation of Israel, and then against the nations, especially, in John's mind, the hated Roman Empire who were oppressing the Jews. Further, John was probably thinking, "And while we are at it, what about getting me out of this terrible prison?"

John's problem had to do with the sequence of events. He did not understand the difference between the first coming, a time when Messiah would offer salvation to Jews and the Gentiles, and the second coming, which would deal with the judgment of the nations who had rejected Jesus as Messiah. In his book, "According to Luke," David Gooding wrote, "John is not the only one to have felt the problem. To this very day there are many who feel that they cannot believe in Jesus if He is interested merely in the saving of individuals and not in putting right the great political, economic and social evils of the world."

Now we come to Jesus' reply to John's question. The two disciples brought one question from John, "Are You the One who is coming, or do we look for someone else?" and Jesus responded with two answers. In his answers, however, Jesus did not promise John that he would be released from prison, or that he would at this time defeat Israel's enemies. Rather, he said, "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard; the blind receive sight (Isa. 61:1), the lame walk (Isa. 35:6), the lepers are cleansed (this was a new phenomenon, without reference in prophecy), the deaf hear (Isa. 35:5), and the dead are raised up (also new), the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Isa. 35:5-6). This final act was our Lord's greatest work because all the rest were temporary relief when compared with eternal realities. The Lord was not saying that he would fail to fulfill all prophecy about his Messiahship; the truth was arranged in a set of built-in priorities. But again it is a question of sequence: (1) the miracles; (2) the message of salvation in the first coming to earth as the Son of Man, and then through his church; and then (3) judgment and wrath when he comes again as Lord of Lord and King of kings.

"And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me." Our Lord then turned to the prophet Hosea's words of encouragement to the people of Israel about their future blessing after their return to the Lord, "For the ways of the Lord are right, and the righteous will walk in them, but the transgressors will stumble in them (Hosea 14:9)." But the Lord in a gentle way offered blessing to the ones who do not fall into the trap of believing that there was another "expected one." As in the past, the Jews were always enticed by the false promises of the "strange gods" of the other nations. In the New Testament, this word "offense" is always used metaphorically, and ordinarily of anything that arouses prejudice, or becomes a hindrance to others, or causes them to fall by the way. Sometimes the hindrance is in itself good, and those stumbled by it are the wicked: Christ is a rock of offense (Rom. 9:33), and the cross is a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23).

John the Baptist was perplexed and impatient about the first coming of the Messiah. The early church, as well as many of us today, are perplexed and impatient about the second coming of our Lord, but the apostle Peter

helps to keep our minds clear when we ourselves or others say, "Where is the promise of His (second) coming?" This will be a coming in judgment, says Peter: "The Lord is not slow about His promise as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up" (1 Peter 3).

So the answer to John's question, "Is Jesus the Son of God for do we look for another?" is, "He is! Look at his miracles!" And secondly,

II. Jesus is the Son of God! Look at His Messenger

7: 24-35

And when the messengers of John had left, He began to speak to the multitudes about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out and see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are splendidly clothed and live in luxury are found in royal palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'Behold, O send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.' I say to you, among those born of women, there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." And when all the people and the tax gatherers heard this, they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John. "To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children who sit in the market place and call to one another; and they say, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.' For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, 'He has a demon!' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man, and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

Jesus told the two disciples go back and report to John what they had seen and heard. Then our Lord turned to the multitude of people around him, those who had repented and were baptized by John, the curious, the formerly sick, and the Pharisees, and asked them three rhetorical questions so that they would not forget who John was. He wanted to remind the nation, not of what they went out in the wilderness to see, but why they went out into the wilderness. They went to be with John because they believed he was the forerunner of Messiah, and if so, then Jesus was Messiah, and the people should have put their trust in him as Savior and Lord.

Here is Jesus' first question: "What did you out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?" "No!" said the Lord. "You did not take your time and money to walk to the wilderness to see a reed shaken by the wind. You went out to the wilderness to see a oak tree stand against all the sin within Israel, and fearlessly proclaim the truth of the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. No, if you saw John in the wilderness you saw a rock, an oak tree standing in the middle of a storm. He would not be moved from his message and ministry. Behold, I am going to send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord" (Mal 3:1). So Israel, some 400 years before Christ, was looking first for Elijah (871-851 B.C.), the fearless prophet of old who took on the likes of Ahab and Jezebel and the 450 prophets of Baal. And then the "Expected One"? But John wasn't sent to the nation to be looked at, but to be listened to. "What did you do?" asked Jesus, "listen or look? If you listened, you received forgiveness for your sins and the promise of eternal life now. If you only looked, you are still in your sins."

Now Jesus' second question, "But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?" "No!" said Jesus, "you did not go out to the wilderness to look at a man dressed in soft clothing, for all you need to do to see a man splendidly clothed is to visit the homes of the rich or those who live in the royal palaces. But in contrast, you found a man dressed in a rough camel hair coat, eating locusts and wild honey. Again, you

should have listened and responded to the word of life instead of being mere spectators."

"But what did you go out to see? A prophet?" Here is Jesus' third question. "Yes!" says the Lord, "but if you went out to the desert to see a man of God named John, filled with the Spirit of God, speaking the very words of God, then you saw a prophet. But you saw more than a prophet, for you saw a man who fulfilled the 400-year-old prophecy of Malachi (3:1) This is the one about whom it is written, 'Behold, I will send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.' If John is the forerunner, then Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah. I say to you, among those born of women there is no greater (in position) than John. He is greater (1) because he was the prophetic messenger of Malachi 3:1; (2) by the way in which he prepared the way for the King; (3) in the way he pointed out the King: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1: 29); in the way he announced the necessity of repentance as the only way for a sinner to enter the Messiah's kingdom; and (4) in the way he stepped back after the King arrived: "He must increase and I must decrease" (John 3: 30). "Yet he who is the least in the kingdom of God is greater (in knowledge of events) than he." Why? Because believers in Christ since that day have a greater understanding of spiritual realities. They understand the cross, the resurrection, the age of the Spirit, and the meaning of the second coming.

How did the people respond to these words of Jesus? Verse 29: "And when all the people and tax-gatherers heard this, they acknowledged God's justice, having been baptized with the baptism of John." They understood the need to repent and satisfied the justice of God, so by faith they submitted to John's baptism as an outward symbol of an inner reality which had already taken place. All of this lined up with God's saving purpose (Isa 1:18-20). And how did the Pharisees respond? Verse 30: "But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John." There was no salvation for them.

And now the Lord's rebuke. Verse 31: "To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like?" Before the Lord stood the Pharisees and lawyers, the spiritual shepherds of Israel, weighed down with the letter of the law, their pride and arrogance. They were blind, deaf and dumb to the good news that was first announced by John the Baptist and now fulfilled in their very sight by Jesus. The long-awaited "Expected One" was standing in front of them, but the Pharisees rejected the purpose of God for them and refused to enter into the baptism of John, "a baptism of repentance for the forgiven of sins" (3:3).

The Lord then recalled a scene that one could find on any marketplace in Capernaum or Jerusalem, a scene of children playing their games and calling out to one another: "We (John and Jesus) played the flute for you and you did not dance (as in a wedding); we (John and Jesus) sang a dirge, and you did not weep (as in a funeral). You Pharisee are without life, love, compassion or understanding. No matter what is happening around you, whether a dance of joy or a funeral of sorrow, your hearts are so hardened you won't participate. You are like children in the marketplace-never happy, never satisfied, always complaining. We can do nothing to please you, to get your attention, to show you the seriousness of life now and into eternity. You are being childish. You are acting frivolously, irresponsibly and inconsistently."

Jesus then gives two examples to illustrate his point. First, says the Lord, "John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, 'He has a demon.' You used to watch John and stand at awe of him. Several of you Pharisees were baptized, but now you say, 'He is harsh and unsociable; his message is too severe; his power is of a demon, not of God.'" And second, "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man, and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!' You not only have turned against John, but now you are turning against me." As far as the majority of the Pharisees and lawyers were concerned, Jesus and John were in a no-win situation.

"Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children," says Jesus (verse 35). The spiritual children of John the Baptist were the ones with the most wisdom for they heard what John had to say, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!" and they responded to the invitation of God to enter into eternal life. John offered the wisdom of God (who is Jesus Christ, according to 1 Cor. 1:30) to the people of Israel and told them to repent of their sins in preparation for the coming of the King. Many listened to John's words and were baptized. "Children of wisdom" then are all those who were wise enough to take to heart the message of John and Jesus. John proclaimed the hope of salvation, and Jesus fulfilled the hope of salvation to all who bowed their heart to Jesus as the Son of God.

Last week, I was perplexed and a little impatient about God's program. As I studied the Old Testament, however, I could see why John was perplexed about the first and second comings of Jesus. But today we know that we are living in the Age of the Spirit, and that God is not planning on having a billion people all come to faith at the same time. Rather, he has called his people to become witnesses to their family and friends, fellow-workers and strangers. Recently, I was gently reminded of the wonderful way in which our risen Lord is still offering salvation to individuals, one, by one, by one in this of Age of the Spirit, a time given to mankind by God because he does not wish that any should perish. The "Agora" Bible study at a local hotel has become a wonderful place for businessmen to come early on Wednesday morning to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. Several months ago, one young businessman was invited by his friend. He came and listened week after week. One day, I asked him to have breakfast with me in the restaurant below. We talked about the gospel of Jesus Christ, and in the course of our conversation I asked him if he could think of any reason why he would not want Jesus Christ to become his Lord and Savior. He answered, "No." Then in a humble spirit he invited Jesus, the risen Son of God, to become his personal Lord and Savior. Later, he called his friend who had invited him to come and told him of his new life in Christ. He has continued to fellowship with us ever since.

Is Jesus the one and only Son of God or should we look for someone else? According to Luke's presentation of the facts, based on his miracles and messenger, Jesus is the Son of God and there is salvation is no one else. In his first coming, Jesus offered salvation to all who will place their faith in him. He will continue to offer that personal salvation until his second coming, and then comes the judgment. If you want to be saved from your sin and the wrath to come, now is the day of salvation. Place your faith in Jesus the Son of God, and he will save you from your sin and give you eternal life, his life, now and forever. The programme of Jesus Christ in the Age of the Spirit is to save people, not by making a half-time appearance at the World Cup of soccer, but by saving them one, by one, by one, expressing his life and his message of salvation through you, just as he did with my friend at our Wednesday morning group. Do not put off your eternal salvation for another moment. Commit your life to Jesus, the only hope for salvation, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we may be saved.

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