

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **When God Sits on His Hands**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 11:1-19, 14:1-12

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Have there been times when your world seemed to be crashing down on you, and God was silent? Perhaps a loved one dies, or you lose your job, or one of your children is stretching you to the breaking point, or your health is threatened, or your spouse tells you he or she doesn't love you anymore. And some of you have had all those things happen to you in a relatively short period of time. Even if you're not personally facing tragedies like this, you have close friends who are, plus you see all around you war, racism, immorality, homelessness, drugs, crime, corruption, abortion, child abuse, terrorism, AIDS, etc. And you are tempted to wonder, "Where is God in all this?"

Our Scripture text today tells the story of a great man of God who struggled with his faith because it seemed God was sitting on his hands while he rotted in prison. It is found in Matthew 11:1-15. Instead of reading it I want you to watch a dramatic presentation of this passage, word-for-word from the NIV:

*After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.*

*When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was 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 cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away 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 desert 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 kings' 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.' I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.*

Let's allow Max Lucado to tell us, as only he can, what John was doing in prison, based on the account found in Matthew 14:1-12.

*He was a child of the desert. Leathery face. Tanned skin. Clothing of animal skins. What he owned fit in a pouch. His walls were the mountains and his ceiling the*

stars.

*But not anymore. His frontier is walled out, his horizon hidden. The stars are memories. The fresh air is all but forgotten. And the stench of the dungeon relentlessly reminds the child of the desert that he is now a captive of the king.*

*In anyone's book, John the Baptist deserves better treatment than this. After all, isn't he the forerunner of the Christ? Isn't he a relative of the Messiah? At the very least, isn't his the courageous voice of repentance?*

*John's problems began when he called a king on the carpet. On a trip to Rome, King Herod succumbed to the enticements of his brother's wife, Herodias. Deciding Herodias was better off married to him, Herod divorced his wife and brought his sister-in-law home. The gossip columnists were fascinated, but John the Baptist was infuriated. He pounced on Herod like a desert scorpion, denouncing the marriage for what it was – adultery.*

*Herod might have let him get away with it. But not Herodias. This steamy seductress wasn't about to have her social climbing exposed. She told Herod to have John pulled off the speaking circuit and thrown into the dungeon. Herod hemmed and hawed until she whispered and wooed. Then Herod gave in.*

*But that wasn't enough for this mistress. She had her daughter strut before the king and his generals at a stag party. Herod, who was as easily duped as he was aroused, promised to do anything for the pretty young thing in the G-string.*

*"Anything?"*

*"You name it," he drooled.*

*She conferred with her mother, who was waiting in the wings, then returned with her request.*

*"I want John the Baptist."*

*"You want a date with the prophet?"*

*"I want his head," replied the dancer. And then, reassured by a nod from her mother, she added, "On a silver platter, if you don't mind."*

*Herod looked at the faces around him. He knew it wasn't fair, but he also knew everyone was looking at him. And he had promised "anything." Though he personally had nothing against the country preacher, he valued the opinion polls much more than he valued John's life. After all, what's more important – to save face or to save the neck of an eccentric prophet?*

*The story reeks with inequity. John dies because Herod lusts. The good is murdered while the bad smirks. A man of God is killed while a man of passion is winking at his niece. Is this how God rewards his anointed? Is this how he honors his faithful? Is this how God crowns his chosen? With a dark dungeon and a shiny blade?<sup>1</sup>*

The initial message I see in Matthew 11 is this:

**Even a mature believer can be confused by the outworking of God's plan. (11:1-3)**

We sometimes put our biblical heroes on pedestals and think they could never struggle with their faith like we do. The fact is, most of them struggled in a major way at one point or another, and

the Scriptures are not afraid to record their weak moments for us. A significant struggle is obviously going on in John's mind as we meet him in this passage. He is locked up in a gloomy fortress, awaiting execution. From some of his disciples he learns about the wonderful words and works of Jesus, but what he hears doesn't add up. I suspect he is wondering, "If Jesus is that powerful, why doesn't he do something about my incarceration?" He asks two of his disciples to go and ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come (i.e., the Messiah?) or should we expect someone else?"

Now what has happened to the uncompromising faith of this man? Less than two years before John himself was pointing to Jesus and crying,

*"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29).

*"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"* (Matthew 3:11).

*"I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God"* (John 1:34).

Has prison broken his spirit? Has persecution produced a chink in his spiritual armor?

Perhaps, but frankly, I don't think this is so much a case of circumstances undermining faith as it is confusion regarding the unfolding of God's plan. If you recall from chapter 3, John's preaching put a lot of emphasis on repentance (and the threat of judgment if people did not repent!). John proclaimed of the Messiah, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:12).

John clearly believed Messiah was coming for two purposes: to rescue the righteous *and* to judge the wicked. What he is hearing from his disciples is that Jesus is preaching beautiful sermons and healing people right and left, but where is the judgment? And what sort of Messiah would leave His forerunner to languish in prison?

By the way, before moving on to Jesus' answer, I want you to notice where John brings his questions—straight to Jesus. When we have spiritual doubts it's best not to keep them to ourselves, and it's certainly not helpful to stew and get bitter. The thing to do is to express our doubts to the only One who can help. We can be honest with God. I have often said that God is not afraid of your questions. He may not give you the answer you want, but at the very least He will let you know He's there and still in control. Well, in response to John's questions, . . .

**Jesus provides reassurance that God's plan is on schedule and on track, though it's not always discernible to us. (4-6)**

Look again at verses 4-6 of Matthew 11, where Jesus tells John's messengers that He is indeed the Messiah:

*"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."*

The proof Jesus offers of His messiahship is, first of all, that His kingdom is one where *the rejected are received*. In the first century none were more shunned than the blind, the lame, the lepers, and the deaf. They had no place, no name, no value. They were seen as canker sores on the culture, excess baggage on the side of the road. But those whom the people called trash, Jesus calls treasures.<sup>ii</sup>

Not only that, His kingdom is one where the Gospel is preached –the good news that salvation is by grace through faith. No other world religion offers such a message. All others demand the right performance, the right sacrifice, the right chant, the right ritual, the right seance, the right experience, maybe even the right suicide. Theirs is a kingdom of tradeoffs. You do this, and God will give you that (you hope). The result? Either arrogance or fear. Arrogance if you think you’ve achieved it, fear if you think you haven’t. Christ’s kingdom is different. It is a kingdom where membership is granted, not purchased. You are adopted, not when you do enough, but when you admit you can never do enough. The result is you serve, not out of arrogance or fear, but out of gratitude.<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus concludes his response to John by pronouncing a blessing on those who take no offence at him. How gentle is this rebuke! Jesus does not scold John for doubting. Instead he reminds him that a special blessing awaits those who continue to trust despite their confusion and despite the difficult circumstances in which they find themselves. Jesus may not offer immediate vindication to the righteous or immediate judgment on the wicked, but he reassures us nonetheless that God’s plan is on schedule and on track.

Now while Jesus is having this dialogue with John’s messengers, a crowd is gathered around Him. Jesus doesn’t want them to think He is rebuking or John repudiating him in any way.

**Jesus affirms John’s faithful service, though he does *not* promise to spare him from the crucible.**

You will notice that He praises John both negatively and positively.

**A negative tribute reveals what John is not.** He is not a reed waving in the breeze; that is, he is not easily swayed, not a spineless man, not a fickle, vacillating person. He is a sturdy oak. Nor is John a silk and satin courtier. His actual garments described in Matthew 3:4 are a camel’s hair coat and a leather belt around his waist. John is no pantywaist, no bootlicker ready to kowtow to the political authorities. He has lived the hardest of lives on the simplest of rations in the roughest of places. Instead of indulging in luxury in a king’s palace he has openly rebuked the king, earning himself a reservation at Herod’s Hanoi Hilton.

**A positive tribute reveals who John is.**

**1. He is a prophet.** A prophet was a spokesman for God, and among the Jews there could be no higher pedestal on which to place a man. While there had been many prophets in Israel’s golden

age, the people of Jesus' day had never seen one before John arrived on the scene. The last of the OT prophets, Malachi, had lived 400 years earlier. They would flock to see a prophet, and they did, to see John. But this estimate of John is not sufficient.

**2. He is more than a prophet.** He is God's special messenger, Messiah's forerunner, the one whom that last OT prophet, Malachi, predicted would come before Messiah Jesus to prepare the way for him. And he quotes Malachi 3:1, where God says, to Messiah, "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

But then Jesus goes even further, and tells us that John is not only a prophet, and not only the forerunner.

**3. He is the greatest of Old Testament saints.** When you first hear "OT saint," you may be a bit confused. The story of John the Baptist is recorded in the New Testament, yet I call him an Old Testament saint. The reason is that the historical line between the old and new covenants is not technically to be drawn between Malachi and Matthew; rather the line is the cross of Jesus Christ. Every believer living and dying before the Cross was, in effect, an Old Testament saint; those living after the Cross are New Testament saints.

Now here is what Jesus says about John's greatness, and He introduces it with His patented call to attention: "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women (that doesn't leave many out) there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." Despised he may have been by many in contemporary Judaism, but the Baptist was great where it counted—with God. But if it is surprising that Jesus calls John the greatest up to that time, it is even more surprising that He then adds, "Yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Jesus is not denigrating John at all but highlighting the amazing privilege it is to be a part of the kingdom He came to establish, whose first phase is the Church. John belongs to the time of promise; we belong to the time of fulfillment. John is a servant; we are sons. John is the friend of the bridegroom; we are the Bride. As great as John is, it is greater to participate in the kingdom than to announce it.<sup>iv</sup>

But even though Jesus affirms John's faithful service and praises him as a prophet, Forerunner, and the greatest of OT saints, . . .

**Still John is not granted immunity from trial.** John never gets out of prison. Within weeks of this incident his head is severed from his body and presented to this wicked king's wife on a silver platter. Turn with me to Matthew 14:6-13.

*On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. John's disciples came and took*

*his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.*

*When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.*

I suggest to you that the problem we face when God seems to sit on His hands may not be that He is silent; rather it may be that we are listening for the wrong answer. I quote Lucado once more:

*“If you’ve asked for a mate, but are still sleeping alone ... if you’ve asked for a child, but your womb stays barren ... if you’ve asked for healing, but are still hurting ... don’t think God isn’t listening. He is. And he is answering requests you are not even making.*

*Saint Teresa of Avila was insightful enough to pray, “Do not punish me by granting that which I wish or ask.” The apostle Paul was honest enough to write, “We do not know what we ought to pray for.” The fact is, John wasn’t asking too much; he was asking too little. He was asking the Father to resolve the temporary, while Jesus was busy resolving the eternal.”<sup>v</sup>*

I don’t mean to suggest that Jesus is unconcerned about your problems or the injustices you face. He cares about inequities and persecution and prejudice and pain. He knows what it is like to be punished for something He didn’t do. In fact, He knows what it’s like to feel the silence of God. At the most traumatic moment of His life he cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). As God sat on His hands, Jesus died.

But viewed another way God never accomplished more than He did at that very moment—our redemption was purchased, our sins were forgiven, and we were given the right to become children of God. And He may never accomplish more in your life than He does at the point you are suffering the greatest.

I want you to watch a video this morning. It was recorded at the Olathe Bible Church on November 4, just four weeks ago today. It is a testimony from Kirk Rogg and his wife. Kirk is the son of Ron and Deanna Rogg. Ron is a former district judge here in Wichita, and he is the Peacemaker whom Ray Dorsett talked so much about in his recent testimony. His son Kirk was diagnosed with ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s Disease last April. He had an unusually virulent form of it, and last Sunday morning he went to be with the Lord. I want you to see this because it provides a very contemporary example of faith and trust, even when God seems to be sitting on His hands.

Note: The video can be seen on the website of Olathe Bible Church ([olathebiblechurch.com](http://olathebiblechurch.com)).

**Conclusion:** I wish the story of John the Baptizer had a “happily ever after” ending, with John released from prison and ministering side-by-side with Jesus for the remainder of his days. But God didn’t choose to do that. He didn’t choose to heal Kirk Rogg. And He also may not choose to spare you from the trials you are facing. He will, however, provide assurance that His plan is on schedule and on track. He will affirm your faithful service, as He did John’s. And He will

assure you that He cares.

Please listen carefully to the words of a song Sarah Anderson is going to sing: *When Answers Aren't Enough*.

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i. Max Lucado, *The Applause of Heaven*, 159-161.

ii. Lucado, 170.

iii. Lucado, 175-176.

iv. A very interesting but enigmatic statement is made in verse 14: “And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.” When John himself was specifically asked if he was Elijah he denied it (John 1:21). Yet later in 17:12 Jesus specifically says, obviously in reference to John, “But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished.”

In the very last paragraph of the OT, the prophet Malachi writes, “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

You may recall that the prophet Elijah never died physically; he was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Therefore, he could conceivably return in his physical body and serve once more as a prophet in the last days.

Jesus seems to say here in Matthew 11 that John the Baptizer could have served as the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy had the Jewish people accepted Jesus as their Messiah. But since they did not, the fulfillment of that prophecy must wait. In fact, I believe Elijah may be one of the Two Witnesses mentioned in Revelation 11, who will preach and do amazing miracles during the Great Tribulation, who will be martyred by the Anti-Christ, and then will be raised from the dead by God’s power.

v. Lucado, 177.