

Listening to Matthew 11

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[0 : 00] You know, when Alexander asked me just last week to fill in, I thought, well, as they say to writers, don't they? Write about something you know, or at least something you love.

Today, Matthew chapter 11, I can tell you, I just, I've always, I don't know when it started, but I always delight in this particular Matthew passage. I don't know if it's a good or bad thing to have especially favorite things in Scripture.

I guess it's okay. But this is one of mine. It always seems to dazzle, almost, if that's the right word. I don't know, again, quite why. It never seems altogether graspable, always.

Maybe that's why I like it so much. There's lots here. More here, Matthew 11, which is in front of you, than meets many a reading, at least I've found it so. But again, why we love anything is not obvious, but it's good to have things in your life which you just love, you keep coming back to.

I think there's history here, indirectly at least, there's theology, moral and spiritual formation, all here I find in Matthew 11.

[1 : 06] So in the way of Shakespeare, I kept thinking about Shakespeare as I was putting together these few thoughts today. Act 11 in Matthew's Gospel, the drama of Jesus, Matthew puts in front of us.

And in the bard's way, as you see in front of us here today, just simply, we might list the characters in this act. Enter, as you go to theater, they always have the little thing they give you to tell you who's in the play.

And then as every act happens, you're told who's going to be in this act. Enter, there's that language there in front of us. Enter Jesus of Nazareth, right off the top of this passage.

Then disciples of John the Baptist make an appearance. And then the proverbial crowds. We'll hear about crowds today. But then, more thoroughly than usual, when you get the program, when you go to the theater, our program might list, by means of unpacking the passage, there are invisible actors.

Of course, John the Baptist doesn't show up on the stage here, but we hear of him in prison. The prophets Malachi and Isaiah are quoted in this act of Matthew.

[2 : 29] Of course, an author is always present in a play, invisibly, of course. Matthew is here. And, of course, so are we.

We're in this play, in a sense, the watchers, the listeners of or to this drama. In fact, as you know, this is a well-known passage in Scripture. At the conclusion of chapter 11 or act 11, we are, in fact, invited right into the play.

By the main actor, Jesus. So, there, by way of introduction, before the curtain rises, I'm going to get rid of this extended metaphor now.

It's a prayer. So, let's just pray before we look at this passage in Holy Scripture. Lord, open our eyes. For we are blind unless you open our eyes, that we may see wonderful things in your word this morning.

Yes, Lord, give us ears to hear. Amen. Again, in front of you, we'll go right to the words of the passage.

[3 : 38] When Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.

We'll hear about cities in a while in this passage. Verse 1. Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples. He went on from there to teach and preach in their cities.

This gospel, just again, by briefly, by way of background, the gospel of Matthew, it's often pointed out, has five main discourses. Each ends with a variant on words like, when Jesus had finished instructing, as it does here.

An example, first major discourse in Matthew's gospel is the famous Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5 through 7. It concludes with the words, when Jesus finished these sayings. So Matthew has this way of sort of signaling, here's the end of a discourse. He does it five times. Five discourses echoing, almost certainly for sure, five scrolls in the Pentateuch. [4 : 41] Here we have Rabbi Jesus unfolding Torah. Torah unfolded by Rabbi Jesus. The gospel, of course, opens with a genealogy right off the bat in Matthew, uniquely of the four gospels, all, of course, very Jewish.

And Matthew, it's usually thought, at least traditionally in reading Matthew's gospel. I certainly hope it's true. I think it probably is true. We are reading a work of a Matthew who was a scribe trained for the kingdom.

And he takes from his treasure store things new and things old. You read that at chapter 13, verse 52. Matthew, a scribe trained in the ways of the kingdom.

A gloss on that famous moment in Matthew's gospel, a gloss from the Cambridge Bible commentary, I find very interesting. It says this, The ideal disciple is a rabbi with understanding of the kingdom, who can, therefore, bring forth from a well-stored mind.

A commentator in the Cambridge series thinks the treasure chest is, in fact, a well-stored mind in the interpreter. A well-stored mind, bringing out the riches of the Old Testament truth and the New Testament truth, the riches of the new teaching of Jesus in this case.

[6 : 10] So there is, we're listening to Matthew, a scribe trained in the ways of the kingdom, unfolding the treasure of Jesus. So we continue right on with verse 2.

Now, when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, Jesus, are you the one who is to come?

Or shall we look for another? Weighty words right off the bat, I think, in Matthew 11. It's one of the things that makes it intriguing. Are you the one?

Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another? There are about 30, there are 30 verses in Matthew chapter 11. Eighteen of them about, are about John the Baptist.

He's a big player in this chapter. He's in prison, this powerful desert-dwelling prophet. What a strange character John the Baptist must have been.

[7 : 12] And he's likely anticipating his death, as we know from Samuel Johnson, that concentrates the mind. And he intensely there, in prison, ponders, obviously, the Christ.

Are you? John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ. He's thinking about the Christ. A bit of a fraught word in our time. The Christ. It means Messiah, anointed one.

I think you should go further. I've gotten in the habit of going further now in my own reading of Scripture. And where you come across this word outside of Scripture, Christ, I would think, means, we can talk about this in the discussion time, Israel's true identity.

That's what Christ means. Israel's true identity. He is Israel, in a sense. So John ponders the deeds of the Christ.

The deeds of the Christ. John hears of them, we're told. And Jesus, sending John's disciples back with an answer to his question, rehearses these deeds.

[8 : 23] At verse 4, we'll run through them very quickly. Jesus says to John in prison, via John's disciples, sent to inquire of Jesus. He says, the blind see, John.

The lame walk. Lepers cleanse. The deaf hear. The dead raised. And the poor hear good news. This, as you know, is a medley of Isaiah texts from chapters 29, 35, and 61.

At the daybreak, if we may put it that way, the daybreak of the messianic future, as it arrives, these things, these mysteries will be evident in Israel, so the prophet Isaiah says.

And Jesus says to John in prison, they're happening now, John. They're happening. These amazing works. These mighty acts. John, again, has heard of the deeds.

He's thinking about them. And yet he asks, are you the one? Are you the one? Why, we can say. Why does he want to pose this question?

[9 : 30] It could be this simple. Some have suggested. One sign of the messianic arrival is not mentioned here, as Jesus rehearses the acts that will be evident in Israel when the messianic age is about to arrive.

I mean, this could be an over-reading, but maybe this is part of John's dilemma. It is mentioned, this not mentioned act of the messianic age here, but it is mentioned in Luke chapter 7, verse 18, Jesus famous preaching in a synagogue, a preaching which got him into a lot of trouble, and they tried to

throw him off a cliff.

Jesus, on that occasion, read, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the recovering of sight to the blind. Release of the captives.

The Messiah, announced by John at the Jordan, brings freedom. But John, he's in prison. Get that? Something to think about, John. You're in prison, I've come to preach release to the captives. That may create a little bit of doubt in John's mind.

[10:43] But more, John, of course, famously was a fierce man. Probably understood. Fierce. God called him to a fierce ministry, if you will, demanding deep repentance and preparation for the arrival of the Messiah.

An axe, some of his famous words, an axe will be put to the tree, if you will, of the tree of Israel.

She'll be felled if she doesn't prepare herself. His person, his life, had fierceness about it all.

The place of his ministry, or where he came from at least, was the threatening wilderness. Jesus, he likewise could be severe. We'll see a touch of that in this passage.

But his message was apparently quite different than John's. Not contradictory, but different. This friend of sinners, preaching forgiveness and mercy, as we hear later famously in this passage, we'll talk about it.

Gentle and lowly in heart. He invites people to him. Did John ever woo the faithful with such words? Doesn't seem likely.

[11:53] No. So there's a kind of perplexity in John's mind. The difference. I'm in prison. He comes to set the captives free. Are you the one, Jesus?

Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we look for another? It's amazing that John the Baptist could come to the place where he could ask that question.

The mighty prophet. The mighty prophet who'd seen, there's the Lamb of God. And yet, in prison, he could, some kind of perplexity.

Matthew 11 is, in a sense, broadly speaking, it seems to be, it's about issues of identity and the pain involved in gaining self-knowledge.

I think we'll see this as this passage unfolds. Spiritual and moral self-knowledge, the most important kind, of course, in life. A theme, a gospel theme always.

[12:55] Sometimes people just don't know who they are. Jesus, friends, famously on one occasion said, You do not know what spirit you are of.

To James and John, the sons of thunder, Jesus nicknamed them. They didn't know who they really were. They wanted probably to call down fire from heaven like Elijah did on people who didn't respond to Jesus' message.

So they have sort of a Bible precedent. Shall we call down fire from heaven? You don't know really who you are, James and John, yet, do you? You don't know who you are.

It's hard to know who you are. John the Baptist, in fact, may have gone to his death not knowing really who he was.

This comes through fairly clearly in the Gospels. May not have known who he was. Jesus knows who he is. At verse 14, he says to the crowds, we'll get around to the crowds in a moment, If you are willing to accept it, he says to the crowds, he, John the Baptist, is Elijah, who is to come.

[14:05] Jesus identifies him. That's Elijah. As we know, asked by priests and Levites in John's Gospel, if he, John the Baptist, was Elijah, John answers with a firm, no.

I'm not Elijah. Jesus says he's Elijah. John says, I'm not Elijah. If you're willing to accept it.

This is a bit of Shakespeare here. You know, in this passage, people seem to be wearing disguises in Act 11 of Matthew's Gospel. Who's who here? Who's who in this passage?

If you are willing to accept it. That's biting. If you are willing to accept it. So simple and so searching a little phrase. If you are willing to accept it.

No. It seems to me this means something like, no. Embrace the truth. That you are deeply inclined to not seeing what heaven is showing you.

[15:09] That couldn't be true of anybody in this room, but apparently people have this problem in life. We often don't really get it, do we? To get it to be my age, it's more clear sometimes, oh yeah, at that stage of my life, I wasn't getting this.

Or I wasn't getting that. And a bit more clarity comes to you. But then again, I'm probably slipping into other forms of ignorance. If you're willing to accept it. So simple and searching a little phrase.

I love that in Matthew 11. It's a biting little phrase. The Pharisees, some, were approaching a searching truth when they asked Jesus in John's Gospel.

Do you remember? Are we blind? They asked Jesus on one occasion. A very, Pharisees' occasion, some of them could be very open to hearing Jesus.

Sort of starting to suspect that they may be in the presence of the Messiah. Are we blind? I stumbled.

[16:35] To be offended and to, in fact, desire our illusion. So Jesus says to John the Baptist, after sending the disciples back with the rehearsal of the works of the kingdom now evident in the ministry of Jesus, He says to John, blessed, says Jesus to John, blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

Again, another kind of searching statement. It goes right to the heart of the reader, it seems to me. We are to be changed by Jesus and his good news.

John, the crowds we'll see here soon, need growth in their capacity to see divine truth. John still needs to grow.

He's a bit offended, in some sense, by the ministry of Jesus. He's there, but he's not quite there. This whole passage is redolent of knowing yourself.

What does it take for me to not be offended by Jesus? What does it take for me to grow? How do I grow? And speaking of people needing change, Jesus next, you see in our chapter, next in our passage, addresses, ah, the crowds.

[17:56] The crowds. I love, what a great character having you play. The crowds. Ah, yes. How do you address crowds? Well, famously, someone once addressed the crowd by saying, friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.

The crowds, easily flattered, usually clouds. Crowds rarely get a good, a good, rarely get good pictures of crowds. Easily flattered, open to manipulation, self-seeking, short-sighted.

The heart, in theory at least, the very heart of democracy, how it works, the crowds. Gives you a pause for thought about our system, doesn't it? The crowds. But, you see in our passage here, starting at verse 7, Jesus does not flatter the crowds.

You can't imagine Jesus flattering anybody, can you? Verse 7. He questions the crowds. He interrogates the crowds. He challenges them.

Famous words, aren't they? What did you go out into the wilderness to see? What did they go out into the wilderness to see when they traipsed out into the wilderness to see John the Baptist?

[19:09] Did you go there to see a reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?

Someone who maybe shops at Nordstrom's, maybe? No. No. Those kind of guys, Jesus says, the crowds are in king's houses.

He's relentless. What? He repeats himself. What then did you go out to see? Then he turns on them. Again, a prophet? Yes, I tell you, more than a prophet.

More than a prophet. At this point in the play, I think the director has to say, crowds go quiet. More than a prophet? More than a prophet? What's he going to say next, this Jesus?

This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face. Who will prepare your way before you?

[20:05] A shocking revelation to the crowds of who John the Baptist was, who they were listening to. He quotes Malachi there, chapter 3, verse 1.

Identified as Elijah at the end of Malachi, chapter 4, 5, and 6. There, the one spoken of by Malachi precedes Israel's God approaching Israel.

The crowds must have, the ones who were clicking in, and Jesus assumes some in the crowd are getting what he's saying. They must go silent at this point.

The point is clear enough. The one you went out to see was announcing the approach of, you fill in the blank.

You fill in the blank, crowd. I think this is a perfect example of Emily Dickinson's astonishing words in one of her poems.

[21:09] One of her poems begins with the words, Tell all the truth, but tell it slant. People can't take all the truth, so give them a curveball.

Let them work it out. Tell all the truth, but tell it slant. Jesus is saying, who was Elijah? And he's also at the same time saying to them, Who was John the Baptist?

And therefore, who might I be? Who do you think I am? Who was John the Baptist? Who am I? Can you get the identity issue straight here?

And also implied, there's always a shadow discourse to every discourse. Some philosophers like to tell us. Who are you? Who are you coming to John? Who do you think you are? Who's on stage here?

Who is everybody here? Jesus continues, and we must listen at verse 11. He continues to talk to the crowds about John the Baptist. Truly.

[22 : 14] That's an awesome word. Truly. Are you listening? Give me your ears. Truly, I say to you, among those born of women, there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

What a thing to say about someone. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. I think Jesus just now is perplexing the crowds with more and more revelations about who John the Baptist may be.

A mother's son. That just means a human being. A human being. John is great. Jesus is telling them. Just with this right on the surface of what we're reading here.

But a greater is here. And those, if I may gloss it this way, those who enter into this new mystery present now in Israel, even the least of them are greater than John.

So Jesus is telling up in the ante for the crowds to figure out what have they been doing going out into the desert to listen to John.

[23 : 16] They've been shallow. Are you seeking to read shaken by the wind? Maybe someone dressed like a king? Your motives are strange.

You don't really know what you're doing. Wake up, Jesus is saying to the crowds. Jesus continues. And more. In this passage, it seems to me everything just intrigues. Jesus continues.

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence. And the violent take it by force. Another searching word to the crowds.

The kingdom has suffered violence. There are three possibilities that I've come across in reading about Matthew 11.

About what these kind of words might mean. Their meaning is quite intriguing. It invites pondering. The violent take it by force.

[24 : 17] First, one possibility is that the members of the kingdom are in fact oppressed. They're being oppressed by violent people. There are spiritual forces in the world that would like to keep you from the kingdom.

That's a possibility. Second, the kingdom is wrongly understood and pursued. You shouldn't pursue the kingdom by force, but some do it that way. That's a possibility that some have suggested.

The third one, the one I've always been inclined to for what that's worth, the third one goes like this. Yes, the kingdom is understood and approached or entered by people of deep, even fierce sincerity.

To get to know the kingdom, you've got to be hard on yourself. You've got to work hard at knowing what the kingdom is about. You can't be like the crowds, a bit curious about a desert preacher who's got a good reputation.

You've got to be fierce. You've got to storm the kingdom by force. I think maybe, was Jesus so subtle as to perhaps all bits of all three are included in this strange language?

[25 : 30] I've always, again, I'm still inclined that the third one is correct. You know, Jesus could be severe about getting to know yourself or being, how do you relate to yourself?

Sometimes he'd say, if it's necessary, chop off your hand, pluck out your eye, do anything to get things straight. Do anything. Be severe as you can imagine to get your mind clearly on the things of the kingdom and the things of holy living.

The violent, take it by force. Get real here. It's hard work. The kingdom is understood and approached only by such people.

Just a footnote to that kind of thought. You know, Jesus on occasion would say things, especially he'd say in John's gospel. Remember Jesus says early in John, Behold, an Israelite in whom there is no guile.

Jesus said that, you recall, of Nathanael. How did Nathanael get to be a guy with no guile in him? Was it easy? Did he just grow up that way?

[26 : 38] Presumably not. Such people truly seek, with great difficulty perhaps, the ways of heaven. They really fight to get it right.

Purity of heart, says Soren Kierkegaard in this regard. Purity of heart is to will one thing. I've got to get it straight. I'm a Jew in Israel.

We're expecting the Messiah. What do I have to do to get it straight? Who he is? Who's John?

Who's Jesus? How do I get this straight? It's hard. The kingdom of heaven suffers violence.

Again, I think the third one is probably the most likely. But again, maybe all of them have, resonates at all three of those levels.

Just in passing, I wasn't going to mention, just in passing, Tom Wright thinks that, what did you go out into the desert to see?

[27 : 37] A reed shaken by the wind? There was a coin struck by Herod, the Herod who was the local Herod in this region. Coin struck.

Out of deference to the Jews, he didn't put a portrait on it. That would be a graven image. He put on it, rather, a well-known piece of the topography in that area, a Galilean reed, it was called.

Jesus may be subtly at a hidden level saying to some in the crowd who were maybe leaning in the direction of being a zealot, let's get rid of the Romans by force.

And Jesus is saying, did you go out into the desert to seek another Herod who will lead us to freedom that way? Think again, he's saying to them.

You're looking for another Herod. That may be beneath the surface of this. There may be a hidden, to us, not to them probably, or some of them, a hidden symbolism there. If you are willing to accept it again, Jesus says to them, John the Baptist, he is Elijah who is to come.

[28 : 47] And so this portion ends by saying, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. Another kind of just get it straight.

Work at it. Be violent if you have to, to get this stuff straight. He could have ended it, I guess, by saying, lend me your ears. But that would have been Shakespeare.

He left that one for Shakespeare. Leaving the crowds for just a moment. Jesus is about to help them realize the or a source of their darkness.

This passage seems to me filled with so much material. But one more word about John in prison. It's good to think, I've found in this passage, to think this through. Did John have a kind of pre-understanding?

Maybe held unconsciously. We all have these in our lives. A kind of pre-understanding about some kind of timeline for heaven's ways regarding his ministry and the one who followed him, Jesus.

[29 : 49] Maybe this is kind of obvious. Maybe this was John's heir, a kind of presumption. Again, I'm in prison. If you're the Messiah, where's the kingdom? So Jesus says, again, go and tell John.

That little phrase, go and tell John, includes something like, you must be, something like, John, you've got to be willing to think again. I'm telling you something. Think this through.

Even, maybe he's saying to John in more of our kind of theological language, remember the freedom of God, John.

God is free. He doesn't follow anybody's timeline. Have you found that in your life? If I have, I often pray, pray, pray, pray. Okay, now, right about there, Lord, it would be a great time to do that. And he never follows my timeline. He's free. He's sovereign. He'll answer when he wants to, our God. He's free. God is freedom.

[30 : 54] It's a profound truth. It's an abyss of unthinkable freedom. He does what he wants to do when he wants to do it. And it's best that way.

Our timeline doesn't work. My ways are not your ways. Israel knows this truth. How often I have found that out, I'm sure you have too.

The late John Webster wrote a book about Karl Barth's ethics. I've not read it, but I love the title. I don't want to read this book because it may spoil the title. I love the title of a book.

It's called The Hastening That Waits. The title of a book about another theologian's ethics, John Webster. Alas, the late John Webster.

The hastening. I'm hastening. I'm waiting for the kingdom. And therefore, I wait. I think a lot of the Psalter presents a kind of hastening.

[31 : 50] Now, Lord, now, do something. And the answer of the psalm seems to be, yes, you have permission to pray that way. Wait. The hastening that waits.

The kingdom is at hand. And for this kingdom, we must wait. Was John simply in prison? He's forgiven, I'm sure.

He was just impatient. I want the kingdom on my timeline. Are you the one who should come? The almost challenging Jesus. Do more. Do more.

Jesus said, go and tell him. The works of God are being done, John. Just wait. Back to the crowds. Oh, it's good to talk about crowds. They're a great bunch. What was the error at work in the crowds?

And aside here, I take it, we're talking about the crowds. I don't have any formal definition of crowds. I tried to come up with one for myself. Crowds represent, as I understand it, the currently prevailing beliefs and attitudes among, quote, the regular folks.

[32 : 55] It's usually the regular folks who are in the crowd. Not always. That is, these are not socially recognized folks in leadership positions in Israel, but they sort of represent maybe much of what Israel's come to at this point.

These are the folks. What pre-understanding, what presumption rules with this strange player in Matthew's Act 11? Well, Jesus doesn't think he tells them what their problem is.

And at verse 16, he begins to tell them what their problem is. Again, Jesus doesn't flatter people. But to what shall I compare this generation? That doesn't sound too encouraging if someone says that to you.

What shall I compare you to? But to what shall I compare this generation? Questions are powerful, aren't they, rhetorically. Jesus uses questions sometimes like rhetorical hammers.

Ask this question. I'm asking you this. I ask you this. Shall I compare you to a summer's day? Isn't quite the tone of these questions.

[34 : 08] No. It is like, Jesus says, children sitting in the marketplaces, calling to their playmates. Very famous words, aren't they, these? We played the flute for you.

You did not dance. We sang a dirge and you did not mourn. These are quite daring words, really, that Jesus is speaking to the people he loves, his fellow Israelites, his Jew speaking to other Jews. Matthew 11 is critique from within, Tom Wright would remind us. All of the New Testament, we hear Jesus critiquing Israel. It's critique from within. He's one of them. It's family disputes in the Gospels. We played the flute for you again. You didn't want to dance. We sang a dirge. You didn't want to mourn. A daring down-to-earth observation. I mean, can you put it in this much, in this earthy street language?

No matter what kind of game heaven proposes, you don't want to play. Jesus tells the crowds, no matter what heaven does, you won't listen, no matter what they do.

[35 : 19] It's a very biting challenge to the crowds. For John, verse 18, famous words again, Charges again, never leveled at John the Baptist, we may be sure.

He was a tough guy to hang around with at the local pub. He just never showed up. He was out in the desert eating locusts and wild honey and getting ready to tell you that you're probably going to hell.

A tough guy. The axe is laid to the tree. The crowds think. You see, the crowds think. I think that I will know, they will know what their God's actions will or must look like.

But that's not always the case. God is free. He's free to perplex us at times. They have ceased, the crowds it seems, Jesus is saying to them.

You have ceased to be teachable and open to God's freedom, to God's mystery. The summation of this first half of Matthew 11 goes to the very heart of that truth.

[36 : 47] It goes to the very heart, would you agree, of both John's perplexity and the crowds in comprehension. Both, I think, are addressed by this famous one-liner from Jesus.

Wisdom, he says, is justified by her deeds. That is profound.

That's so simple, but it's so profound. It's also true, is it not, of our lives. God is justified in the way he's been treating you along life's way. I may not feel like it at times, and I haven't felt like it at times, but God is justified in the way he's been dealing with me.

God, reverence your circumstances, said a Puritan. That's God's way of speaking to you. God, wisdom, is justified by the way wisdom acts.

Wisdom is justified by her deeds. John needs to hear that. The crowds need to hear that. Am I overstating this? I think we spend all of our lives learning that truth, in a sense.

[37 : 54] My life, a long life's way, God is justified by her deeds. Wow. John's ministry was from heaven. We know that from John's gospel.

Jesus once very shrewdly challenged Israel's leaders to come to grips with that issue. Where does John's authority come from, he asked them, when they were trying to trip him up about something. Jesus, on the other hand, is the man from heaven. One of the great themes of the whole gospel, certainly a theme of Matthew's gospel. The son of man, Jesus calls himself here.

The son of man. One of those little moments that you come across as a lover of the gospels. I know you are. Why does Jesus call himself this? The son of man. Richard Bauckham helped me immensely here.

A simple little thing he says about this. He believes that this is Jesus' way of self-identification. And it was, in the uses of Jesus, a kind of ongoing riddle.

[38 : 53] A little mini parable that he was constantly throwing out at people. I'm the son of man. I'm the son of man. In other words, think through who I might be.

Who am I? What is the witness of my person and my deeds right now? Think it through. We're like the crowds. We're like John the Baptist.

The son of man perplexes us and he says, think it through. Keep thinking about it. Use violence, if you will. Spiritual violence. Get it straight.

The son of man, he calls himself. He came eating and drinking. He came to be with Israel. To identify with regular people. He liked these people in the crowds, I'm sure.

As dumb as they were. Spiritually deaf. But he loved them. So, John in prison and the crowds are addressed.

[39 : 51] Very briefly now, as you see about, is it not about, but at verse 20. Very briefly, for time's sake. Now, unrepentant cities are spoken to.

Here's where Jesus could sound, when he wanted to, a bit fierce like John the Baptist. They have seen mighty works, but to no avail. We're told in this passage.

Again, verse 20. Then he began, Jesus, to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.

A bit of perplexity in my own mind about how a city, as a collective, is denounced. But apparently it works. You can denounce a whole city.

A whole prevailing culture, it seems, Jesus will denounce. A whole prevailing attitude in a certain community. A kind of woe oracle is spoken here.

[40 : 49] And I'll shorten it all for time's sake. Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum. Places where response might have been expected, they are asleep.

Little footnotes, interesting. Chorazin is otherwise unknown in scripture. I don't think anybody knows where Chorazin was. Jesus apparently had some sort of ministry there. It's a little reminder that the Gospels don't tell us everything that Jesus did.

In fact, at the end of John's Gospel, we're told that. Everything he did was written down. The world couldn't contain the books that would be written. Jesus apparently went to some city called Chorazin, preached there, did mighty works.

No response. Tyre and Sidon, these are kind of heathen cities out on the sea coast of a great trading empire, sort of the New York or London of the day.

Judgment will be less severe for them. Jesus, I, biting tells Israel. Jesus could sort of put the knife in, if I may use street language. Israel, you're supposed to be awake to this stuff.

[41 : 50] It's going to be easier on the day of judgment for the pagans than for you. More of that in a moment. Just as Sodom will be somewhat spared compared to these places, again, where his ministry has been present but neglected.

The truth stands always. To whom much is given, much will be required. A theme of Jesus' ministry all the time.

Israel was given much. To her, much will be required. Israel, why are you asleep? Why are you asleep? This passage is redolent of that question. Matthew, again, is asking us to ponder things old and new.

I think in this passage, Matthew would, as a scribe, a rabbi, he says, think through what's happening here. Why is this all happening? John, the messenger of the Lord, perplexed and in prison.

The crowds, ignorant and simply uncomprehending about what's going on here. And in a sense, even worse, some cities in Israel, they're unable to respond at all, even to mighty works done right in their midst.

[43 : 06] Everything is going wrong, in a sense, as Matthew presents it here. Some of Jesus' disciples are being sent out, but Israel as a whole seems unresponsive.

This anticipates Paul's perplexity in Romans. Paul never really understood, he says this, was perplexed by the prevailing unbelief in Israel.

Why? Why this perplexity? Different levels of perplexity, of course. In the light of Jesus, Israel's Messiah, that is to say, her true identity is right in her own midst.

She doesn't recognize her own identity in her Messiah. Why, therefore we can ask, on a broader scale, I think it took me years to work this through, if I'm still working it through.

A lot of Christians are perplexed by this, I think, at times. Why the Old Testament at all? Why Israel? Why this story of Israel? Why this response? Why the drama of the Hebrew scriptures?

[44 : 08] We all know famously, around the second century, there were somewhat influential Christians who wanted to chuck the Old Testament. Just get rid of it. We don't need it.

It's over. It's been superseded. The most succinct, just briefly on this, the time marches on, most succinct and profound answer I know of, I've received from the late Thomas Torrance, professor of dogmatic theology at the University of Edinburgh.

He writes like this about Israel, broadly speaking. Why is the drama of Israel in front of us in Holy Scripture? He says this, he says a lot more than this, but succinctly, his succinctness, I've got to make more succinct.

To be the bearer of divine revelation, he writes, that's what he thinks Israel is. That's her essential calling. She bears divine revelation.

To her are the oracles of God, Paul says. To be the bearer of divine revelation, that is what Israel is fundamentally. To be, he continues, to be the bearer of divine revelation is what?

[45 : 15] It is to suffer, he says. When God comes near to reveal, you suffer. Because God is light, and we're not light.

God is light, as John says. God is light in him, there's no darkness at all. Israel were the people who had to bear the presence of light approaching, revealing her lack of light.

To know God is to suffer, suffer finally into true knowledge of yourself. Sort of like John the Baptist and the crowds and the cities that didn't want to respond to the light.

Not only to suffer, Torrance continues, just briefly, a bit more from him. Not only was Israel called in her whole mystery of her life together to suffer.

Not only to suffer, but to be killed and made alive again. Over and over again. She was faithful. Things went along. Then exile. Judgment.

[46 : 17] Things went wrong. Then a recalling to the land. Then judgment again. Israel was always suffering with God. Wrestling with God was Israel's calling.

This is, Israel is the prehistory, therefore, of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in Israel. He comes and perfects Israel.

He goes, as Tom Wright would put it, on the cross. Jesus goes into Israel's final exile. And when he rises from the dead, Israel is finally perfectly obedient in covenant fulfillment.

Like being presented before the Ancient of Days, as in Daniel. Holy and just and righteous in his presence. As she was called to be. And therefore, a light to the nations.

This whole drama is not an accident. It's not just, oh, they got it wrong in the first century. What a shame. No, it was all part of the mystery of God's plan. This perplexity of John, the crowds, the cities.

[47 : 20] This is Israel's agony as she deals with her Messiah. The concentrated light given to his people just reveals darkness.

When the light comes, it reveals who we really are. Our true identity is Jesus. Do you ever think of that? Such a happy thought. We're going to be made in his likeness.

There's a lot of me that has to go before that happens. In fact, I think it's more like all of me has to go before I get to be my true self in the mystery of Jesus.

In Act 11, chapter 11, the best comes last. I race along here. At that time, verse 25, at that time, Jesus declared. He sums up everything that's happening in this chapter now.

Jesus. At that time, Jesus declared. I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.

[48 : 22] He continues. What famous words these are. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. It's God's will to hide from some people.

In some measure, at least. God reveals to some he hides from others. Israel, by the way, already knows this. Of course, the high and lofty one dwells with the humble.

The proud he knows from afar. That's what Jesus is repeating here. The humble will know him. The ones who are pierced with the light of God's truth and made humble by that.

If we resist the light, we'll remain just in the darkness. Like the crowd, like the cities. In some little measure, like John the Baptist.

God reveals to some he hides from others. Israel had a sublime knowledge of God at the best. What glories Israel saw.

[49 : 23] This is heaven's gracious will. To reveal to little children. One of those simple little phrases that Jesus says all the time, but it's so challenging.

In this regard, I just noticed it the other day. Perhaps it's my favorite opening to an epistle in the New Testament. Much neglected, a little epistle like John's second epistle.

Remember how it opens? The elder to the elect lady and her children. I love that. The elder, the apostolic authority, forms the church.

The elect lady. And who, what is the elect lady? Just little children who are teachable by the elder's doctrine. That's the whole story of the gospel.

The elder to the elect lady and her children. Beautiful, beautiful words. Verse 27. Again, racing to our conclusion. Jesus says, How do you comment on that?

[50 : 38] Jesus claims a unique knowledge of God. That's all it is to him. I know the Father. What do you say? What do you say about that?

Jesus claims a unique knowledge of God his Father. Jesus was infinitely unique. Richard Baucom. I love Baucom.

Absolutely. The gospels present a novum. An N-O-V-U-M. They're a witness to an unthinkable presence in the world. Unbelief goes out of its way to produce mountains of books and stuff to figure out how the gospels came together.

What influenced Paul and what influenced the gospel writers. It's all a muddle. Because the witnesses, we met a unique mystery.

He judges your inquiries. Your inquiries don't judge Jesus. God calls reason into his presence. Reason doesn't call God into its presence.

[51 : 41] The elemental mistake of the enlightenment. Reason. Can make everything transparent. No, it can't. It's a gift from God to be used obediently in the presence of the mystery of God.

And so verse 28, we race to the conclusion. The best is here. But the best brings about least things to say. So it's okay to see it at the end of the talk.

Come to me. Famous words. All who labor and are heavy laden. And I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me. For I am gentle and lowly of heart.

And you will find rest for your souls. My yoke is easy. My burden is light. Again, it feels kind of futile to comment on such words.

I wonder how many people have taken decisive, life-changing steps in their life on the basis of these words. These are so beautiful. I'm going to hear them sung at the Orpheum in December.

[52 : 41] I think Handel did something with these words, didn't he? Thank goodness. Adam and Eve perhaps are deeply hidden, way behind this kind of moment.

Adam and Eve excluded from the garden are given lives of toil and trouble. Aren't they? We are all, we all labor and are heavy laden.

It's given to us in life. We seek rest, of course. The yoke of the law was Israel's way. God gave it to Israel. Rabbis spoke of the law, of course, in praise.

We still speak of the law. Oh, how I love thy law. It is my delight all the day long. It's a beautiful thing, the law. So you put off, the rabbi said, the yoke of earthly kingdoms and you put off the yoke of worldly care and live under the yoke of the law and it will give you life.

The way of Israel is profound, was profound, remains properly understood, still very profound. The yoke was for two, of course. You would, in a sense, marry the law.

[53 : 46] Jesus says, you come to me and we'll bear this mystery of life. I'll bear it with you. Come to me.

Come to me. I will give you rest. No one knows for sure if there's some sort of background stuff here in the mind of Jesus of Nazareth as he says these particular words.

Just maybe it comes from the book of Exodus. I think it's 33, 14. Don't quote me. I'm sure that's it, though, from memory. Because I looked it up and I...

It's Exodus 33, 14. It's a little passage in Exodus. Moses, always troubled about his ability to lead Israel. He hears his God say this.

My presence will go with you and I will give you rest. Amy, Jesus is... Who am I? All the way through this passage.

[54 : 44] Who am I? Who is the Son of Man? Who is... Who am I? There we go. Each gospel, of course, is written by someone who knows the outcome of the drama.

Matthew is a very Jewish document. As we say, he knows who he's describing. Shakespeare, he wrote a play. He knew how it was going to end, presumably. So in chapter 11, Jesus the Jew speaks to and of John the Baptist, the greatest prophet.

He speaks to his fellow Jews, the crowds. He speaks to deaf Jewish cities. What does Matthew know about this Jesus who he presents?

We know he knows lots about him. I love the words. I referred to them earlier. So at the close, I learned so much from Professor Tom Wright at St. Andrew's Bishop Wright. He writes this in the context of Paul's understanding of Jesus, but it would apply to every gospel writer.

He says this, one of his crucial sentences. What the creator, covenant God, was supposed to do for Israel at the end of history, as raise her up, present her before the Ancient of Days in glory, this God had done for Jesus in the midst of history.

[56 : 01] See? Jesus is Israel's destiny. In the middle of history, he fulfilled the mystery of Israel. Jesus is Israel. He's brought Israel into what she's supposed to be.

Again, the crowds, John the Baptist, the cities are dealing with their true identity, but they're off. They can't quite get him, as we often can't quite get Jesus. But wisdom is justified by our deeds.

So in conclusion, John the Baptist, the crowds, deaf cities, do they defeat the purposes of God? After all, they appear helpless. They are helpless, in fact, in the presence of the light.

But now, Paul says, a righteousness from heaven, a righteousness of God has been revealed, has been manifested. Yes.

This gift of righteousness God sent to Israel to reveal to Israel her true identity and to fulfill her destiny for her.

[57 : 07] How he loved them. And even in a place like Matthew's gospel, we can meet him now. Our perplexity is shared. We share the perplexity, and yet we see this Jesus who comes to give us our true identity, to fill us with the meaning of our lives.

There it is. The righteousness of God for the world is here in Matthew 11, bringing us out of our darkness into light. The whole, the gospels are filled with such richness, so many different levels of understanding, of unfolding.

I find Matthew 11, to that end, very rich. That's other passages which, of course, are equally as rich. But I just love this passage.

That's what I wanted to say to you today about it. Well, we've got some, at least five or ten minutes for conversation. Let me, I must say a word of prayer before we turn to conversation.

Lord, thank you for your most holy word. May we read it, mark it, take it into our souls, and may it change us.

[58 : 18] May it do the work in us for which you have sent it. And we ask this in the name of our great teacher and Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. Matthew 11.

There she be. So please, please, tell me where I've gone wrong. This is a wandered from the track. Sir. Two things. A trivial question. Why do you call Matthew a rabbi? I thought he was a tax collector.

All right. But the profound question I'd like to hear more of is what the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he would be able to elaborate. To the first one, it's just a tradition of reading of Matthew.

You don't have, it doesn't, nothing turns on saying yes or no to it. But in the middle of Matthew, I think it was a book that I quoted the text, 11 or 13, there's a place where Jesus says, a scribe who's trained for the kingdom brings out of his treasure chest things old and new.

[59 : 22] And some people think that's maybe a hidden signature. That Matthew the tax collector became a teacher of the church, a rabbi, a teacher, is doing this for us.

Because Matthew's gospel is frightfully Jewish. It takes the whole mystery of Israel and relates it to Jesus. Hence the five discourses. This is Rabbi Jesus reading Torah.

And Matthew's showing us how the new mystery of Jesus fulfills the old. So in that, for the first question. Yeah, the greater than, no one greater than John the Baptist, but the least in the kingdom is greater than he is.

It has nothing to do with where we'll find John the Baptist in the hierarchy of heaven, if there is a hierarchy in heaven. It's nothing about his person, I'm sure. But it means, it's a rhetorical way of Jesus saying, what you're now confronted with in me is such a startling fulfillment of Israel's story that even the least who draw near to me are greater than what's come before.

So it's not a put down of anyone who's come before, but it's a new greatness is in front of us now. Jesus is saying about himself. I think that's the best answer I could give to that, yeah.

[60 : 38] I think the least, the least child who draws near to me is greater than what's come before. Ask Sheila.

Oh, Harvey, you've done it again. No. You've done it. The entire passage down to the comments. Thank you for that. This is really just a comment.

And I've always had a real sympathy for John, languishing in prison, for having spoken truth to power and really knowing he will not ever get out of there, and no, actually, evidence that Jesus, his cousin, had ever even tried to visit him.

And I guess because he did know he was a messenger. Mm-hmm. I mean, foretelling in a way the here and now, rather than what's going to happen in the future like a prophet might.

All he's really asking here is to be affirmed, I think. Mm-hmm. Yeah. And to go to his desk knowing that his mission was accomplished.

[61 : 54] Right. And, you know, I think it's, I have heard people say that he was having a crisis of faith, which I don't believe. Mm-hmm. But I do think he was asking for affirmation.

Yeah. I think that's exactly right. There's levels of, whatever his perplexity is, I'm sure it's, it's different ways of thinking. It's, it hardly seems, it seems a wild, overstate crisis of faith. No, I think he, he, my, my favorite comment ever on John the Baptist is from the, George Ladd, I know, Baptist, great scholar in the States years ago, said that he thought that John the Baptist got to, he's thinking about the historical reality of, he thought that John the Baptist was related to Jesus. He met him, got to know him, and he would slowly, maybe slowly, dramatize it a bit, he would come to realize that in his, his, his relative Jesus, that Jesus had no sense of sin.

And he was utterly shocked by it. And that's how he became convinced that he was looking at the Lamb of God, the pure Lamb, who could take away the sin of the world.

So there was a, on that reading, there was a dram in John's life about recognition. Which I find very, maybe just the drama that I love, but he, he, he saw, there's the Lamb who can fulfill the mystery of the temple, is what's behind that.

[63 : 25] But I guess John was human, and he could, in prison, I guess, I never had the experience, Lord, may I never have it. In prison, you can really get, think yourself into many a muddle, I'm sure.

Yeah. Is there time? Yeah, I hear, I hear voices, voices offstage over here. I can't say thank you enough. I mean, on so many levels, I always wondered about that sheaf, you know, the sheaf in the desert.

What an interesting, what you said? Well, a reed. A reed. I guess a sheaf is a bunch of reeds. What is a group of, what is a group of reeds?

A sheaf? A sheaf of reed? A sheaf of reed? Anyway, so many different aspects to reflect on, as always. Who's next week? Who's next week?

David's wife. David's wife. Oh, great. David's wife. David's wife. David's wife. Here I will be speaking on a very engaging and interesting and timely topic.

[64 : 37] Did anybody read in advance? It's the, it's a long title. It's looking at a... It's transhumanism. Transhumanism. Oh, wow. All right, so, thank you.