

## **“Disappointment with Jesus”**

### **Matthew 11:1-6**

*When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. <sup>2</sup> Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup> and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” <sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”*

You'll recall that John the Baptist was a prominent figure and had a prominent role before Jesus began His public ministry. He was the *forerunner* of the Christ, the one Isaiah prophesied would “prepare the way for the Lord.” He came in the spirit and power of Elijah and was reminiscent of the esteemed prophet in his appearance and mannerisms.

John boldly proclaimed that God's kingdom was near. The promised Deliverer from David's offspring was about to arrive on the scene, and He would rule on David's throne. John admonished people to get ready for this by repenting of their sins and getting right with God. For the dawn of God's kingdom demands a readiness and a righteousness that corresponds to the King's character.

What is also noteworthy is that John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. He was born just a few months before Jesus to Elizabeth and Zechariah (the high priest at the time), and the events and circumstances surrounding his birth were an evidence that he would have a special role in the unfolding of God's plans and purposes. When he became an adult, his message and his ministry attracted large crowds, and many responded by being baptized as a sign of their moral and spiritual readiness for Messiah's coming.

There were actually some who thought John himself was the Messiah. But John said, “No, there is one coming after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” Then, when Jesus showed up one day when John was baptizing in the Jordan River, John said of him, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. <sup>30</sup> This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me’” (John 1:29-30).

Jesus' baptism was John's cue to step away from the spotlight. John said, “He must become greater; I must become lesser.” So, he happily handed over the reins to Jesus, expecting Him to aggressively and immediately establish God's kingdom and execute God's justice.

But several months went by. And John waited...and waited...and nothing of any real significance seemed to happen. Roman rule was as strong and oppressive as ever. Rome's lackey in Palestine, Herod Antipas, was as indifferent to God and His laws as ever. In fact, he created a scandal by stealing his brother's wife, and dismissing his own. John was so appalled that he called Herod out in public and told him what God thought about what he had done.

For this rebuke, Herod put John in prison, and there he sat waiting...and waiting...and nothing happened. Think about this: Here was a man who was, himself, the fulfillment of prophecy, who *himself* had a miraculous birth, a special calling, an extremely consequential role in the advent of God's kingdom, decommissioned for doing his job.

And when all you do is sit...and wait, you can't help but think. And John's thoughts,

quite naturally, were about God, and the kingdom, and Messiah, and how his crummy, confining circumstances corresponded to this grand vision of liberation and justice that he had been preaching so faithfully and fervently.

For John, it didn't add up, and it led to confusion, doubt, and perhaps even some disillusionment. New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce, suggests that John had been in prison long enough to develop a prison mood. The circumstances of his imprisonment did not make any sense to him. The person he had been assigned to introduce to the world didn't make sense either. For although he knew that Jesus was doing things—verse 2 tells us that “he heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ...”—they were not the deeds he thought the Christ would do. Jesus' deeds were not nearly as dramatic or as politically consequential as he thought they would be.

So, one day, when John's disciples came to visit him, this discouraged man of God sent them to Jesus to ask Him a question. It was only one question (with two parts)—but it was a nagging question—a question to which he once thought he knew the answer but wasn't so sure anymore. *“Are you the One who was to come, or shall we look for another?”*

There are two Greek words for “another”. One is “another of the same kind.” The other, “*heteros*”, is “another of a different kind.” John uses the latter, meaning, “Should we be looking for a whole different kind of person?”

Why would John say this? I would submit to you that it's because Jesus did not meet his expectations. Jesus was not doing what he thought He would do as Messiah. Yes, he heard about the deeds of the Christ, verse 2, but those deeds were not John's concept of messianic deeds. He was healing the sick, opening blind eyes and deaf ears, curing diseases, casting out demons, and even raising the dead. That was okay...that was all well and good...but that was not the job description of Messiah, according to John. Jesus was exercising His power for *mercy*, and John expected Messiah to exercise His power for *judgment*.

Earlier, in chapter 3, John had said, <sup>11</sup> *“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he...will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”* (3:11-12). The metaphors of a winnowing fork, chaff, and unquenchable fire are indisputable references to judgment.

And these were not John's words; they were words *God* had given him about the Messiah. So, he was confused, because while he was locked up in prison, he heard that Jesus was exercising mercy, not judgment. Jesus wasn't calling down fire upon people, He was showering them with lovingkindness. He wasn't piercing them with a winnowing fork in order to punish them, He was touching them with His hands in order to heal them. And it troubled him, because it seemed to contradict his own message that Messiah was coming to judge the world in righteousness.

In other words, Jesus did not meet John's theological expectations. And it led, I believe, to disappointment.

By the way, John's theological expectations of Messiah were not wrong. They were incomplete. He didn't know the whole story, and he didn't know God's timeline. The Christ is indeed the Executor of God's justice, and He most certainly *will* judge. But John thought that judgment would happen immediately and that it would involve a political movement and a military campaign. He didn't yet know about the cross. He didn't yet know that God's method of executing justice would be to pour out His wrath toward sin upon the Christ Himself—that Jesus' own blood would be the means of satisfying God's justice. John didn't

yet know that there would actually be *two* comings of Messiah—the first to exercise love and mercy by saving His people from their sins, and the second to bring judgment upon those who reject Him.

John's expectations were not wrong, they were incomplete. But those incomplete expectations nearly ruined his faith in Jesus.

That leads me to share this principle with you. *Even God's VIP's have crises of faith because of their unfulfilled theological expectations.* It has happened with scores of characters in the Bible, including Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Jonah, and Jeremiah. And it happened with John the Baptist. These were godly men who, at some point in their lives, had at least one experience where God did not do what they thought He was going to do, or He didn't do it in the way they thought He was going to do it. And it led to a crisis of faith.

But may I remind you that no one knows the exact details of God's will and how it will unfold. Not even Jesus knows the exact time He will return to this earth, but only the Father. And may I remind you that God is under no obligation to reveal these details, or to explain exactly when and how He is going to work, or to consult with us before He does something just so that we can stay in the loop and not be taken by surprise. It's *His* story, and it will unfold exactly how He wants it to, whether we like it or agree with it or not, or whether He communicates with us about it in advance or not.

Because the story is not about any of us. It's not even about VIP's like John the Baptist. It's about the Father glorifying His Son, and the Son glorifying the Father. And that story is so magnificent and has so many marvelous layers that no human being could ever imagine it, let alone understand the depth of its meaning. And yet one day we'll get it. It will all come together for us and it will all make sense. Even the things we interpret now as disappointments.

But I would like to suggest that there may have been something else going on with John besides Jesus not meeting his theological expectations. It's possible he was disappointed in Jesus because He didn't meet his *personal* expectations. John and Jesus had been kindred spirits. John and Jesus were the greatest tag team ministry partners of all time. John and Jesus were also *cousins*! And it's very possible that when John spoke out about Herod's sin and was arrested, he thought his imprisonment would be short-lived because his miracle working cousin would soon get wind of it and rescue him. So, he waited for Jesus to come and get him, and he waited...and waited...and Jesus never showed up.

That hurts. Especially after all you had done for Jesus. You spent your life wearing itchy clothes in a desolate wilderness eating nothing but locusts and wild honey, not because it was your lifestyle preference but because it was your God-given assignment. God told you to prepare the way for Jesus, and you sacrificed, you put yourself out there, you took a lot of flak, but you were faithful.

And now...when you are struggling—when you are in desperate circumstances—where is *He*? You're confused, you're confined, you're discouraged, and you expect that Jesus will at least have the courtesy to show up for a visit and offer you some comfort. You expect that He will at least address your concerns and clear up your confusion. But Jesus didn't show up—He didn't even send a note. And it's possible that John felt abandoned, as though Jesus had forgotten about him, or perhaps turned His back on him. It's possible that John felt hurt by Jesus and was maybe even a bit angry that Jesus had not lifted a finger to help him.

I wouldn't be surprised if some of you sitting here today were in a similar frame of mind. You're struggling with the Lord right now. You've been faithful to Him, you've been devoted

to Him, but your life is not turning out the way you thought or hoped it would. You've prayed for a mate but you're still single. You've prayed for a child, but your womb is still empty. You've prayed for a job but you're still passing out resumes. You've prayed for healing but you or your loved one is still sick. And because God is silent it feels like He doesn't care—it feels like He's turned His back on you.

May I say, first, that you're not alone. John the Baptist struggled with the same things. So did Elijah. So did David. So have countless other VIP's in God's story. And if *you* are in that place, I want to encourage you not to succumb to your feelings, and not to succumb to the notion that we have a quid pro quo relationship with God. We think that if we do this, this, and this for God, He will do this, this, and this for us. There is an expectation that God owes us something because of our faithfulness to Him.

But that's not the way God works. God is obligated to be true to Himself and true to His Word, but He doesn't owe us anything. Because, once again, His story isn't about us. It's about Him and His glory, and it's only by His grace that we get to even be in His story.

I would submit to you that disappointment with Jesus, more often than not, is the result of thinking that my life on this earth is a separate story from God's grand, eternal story—a story in which God is obligated to make me happy and healthy and comfortable. But our personal stories are *not* separate stories. They are subplots of God's story, of which He is the Author.

And that's why Jesus could respond dispassionately when John's disciples came to Him and asked Him the question, *“Are you the One who was to come, or shall we look for another?”*

He simply answered, *“Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”*

Before we look at Jesus' response to John's question, I'd like to consider for a moment what Jesus did *not* do or say. He didn't get angry with John and rebuke him for his doubts. “John! Forerunner! Friend! Cousin! Don't you know me? Don't you trust me? How could you think for a second that I'm not the One who was to come?”

Jesus knows our weaknesses. He doesn't get bent out of shape when we falter in our faith. He knew what John was wrestling with; He knew the expectations that John had; He knew that John didn't have a complete understanding of the kingdom. So, He doesn't get angry. He doesn't criticize or rebuke him. In fact, we will spend next week looking at the next several verses where Jesus commends John, saying that *“among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist”* (11:11). That's high praise.

But I want you to notice something else about Jesus' response. He didn't rescue John out of prison either. He didn't say, “Oh my goodness, I've been so busy I forgot about John's arrest and imprisonment. I need to dispatch some of my angels to release him from his prison cell.” Nor did He drop what he was doing and make a beeline for the prison so He could cheer John up and give him a fuller explanation of God's plans and purposes.

I like what one preacher said. “Jesus is the friend of the disappointed, but it doesn't mean that He will reshape His agenda to accommodate our disappointment” (H.B. Charles, *Cutting it Straight*, 2017). Furthermore, Jesus doesn't rewrite God's story just to relieve our agony. He didn't do it for John, and He didn't do it for Himself. When He was in the Garden of Gethsemane just before He was crucified, Scripture says that He was in great agony, and said, *“Father, if you are willing take this cup from me.”* In other words, “If there's another way we can get this done, please do it! *Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done*” (Luke 22:42).



Jesus doesn't rewrite God's story just to relieve our agony. Because even in that agony, God is at work—teaching us to trust Him, showing us that life is not about the here and now. It's about God's eternal purposes. The fact is, John never made it out of prison. Just a short time later, in a cold, calculated plot devised by Herod's love interest, he was beheaded. I believe Jesus knew he would be, but He also knew that the eternal reward for John's significant role in God's story was not worth comparing to the suffering he experienced here on earth.

But there is something else Jesus did not do when John's disciples asked, "*Are you the one who was to come, or shall we look for another?*" Jesus didn't give them a direct answer. When asked "Are you the One who was to come," He didn't say, "Yes, I am." And to the question, "Should we look for another?" He didn't tell him, "No, you should not!" It seems to us that a simple "yes" and "no" would have been appropriate. But Jesus, in His wisdom, had something more in mind for John's benefit.

And so He answered, "*Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.*"

Jesus tells John's disciples to go back to John and report what they had heard and seen—that miracles were being performed by Jesus. And not just any miracles, but certain kinds of miracles—miracles that John knew had been prophesied about the Messiah in Isaiah 35 and 61, which states that Messiah would open blind eyes and deaf ears, that He would make the lame to walk and make lepers clean, and that good news would be preached to the poor. That was Messiah's job description, according to Isaiah, which was God foretelling how His story would unfold.

Jesus wants John to know that God's story is unfolding exactly the way He said it would. With one exception. Isaiah did *not* predict that Messiah would raise the dead. Jesus threw that one in there for John so that he could know that Messiah was even exceeding Isaiah's expectations.

Jesus wants John to know that while He may not be meeting his expectations, everything is going according to script and according to schedule. "So John, even though I know you are disappointed, even though things are not going your way, you can trust that God is having *His* way, that God is fulfilling His purposes, and that nothing—not Herod, not Rome, not imprisonment, not even death—will stop Him from doing what He wants to do in the way He wants to do it."

And then Jesus closes His comments to John with a beatitude or a statement of blessing. He says in **verse 6**, <sup>6</sup> "*And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.*" Blessed is the one who doesn't trip over Me or stumble because of Me.

Jesus is acknowledging that He Himself can be a stumbling block even for His own servants. How? When He does something that we don't understand or we don't think is best, or when we think He should have done it in another way, or when He *doesn't* do something that we think He should do.

Jesus is saying, "Blessed is the one who doesn't trip over my agenda, or stumble over my schedule. Blessed is the one who doesn't trip over how I handle my business."

Jesus' message for His followers is, "Keep standing on the Word, because God is faithful to keep His Word. Remember that God said, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways,' declares the Lord. 'For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts' (Isaiah 55:8-9). Father knows what He's doing. Father is always working, even when it doesn't seem

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like anything is happening. And I am His Son and I am the Christ, and I do nothing except what He tells me to do. 'Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.'"

## Disappointment with Jesus Matthew 11:1-6

**Main Idea:** Because Jesus did not meet John's expectations of what Messiah would do, he struggled with doubt and confusion about Jesus' identity as the Christ

### John's Ministry

#### John's Inquiry (2-3)

His past work: Jesus' forerunner

His present circumstances: Imprisoned

His angst about Jesus

Confusion about Jesus' methods and ministry

Disappointment in Jesus' inattentiveness

His reference to "another"

#### Jesus' Response (4-6)

Consider the evidence (4-5)

Miracles of a supernatural origin (5)

Fulfillment of prophecy (5)

Stay the course (6)

#### Principles:

*Even God's VIP's may have crises of faith because of their unfulfilled theological expectations*

*When God heals others but not you, it doesn't mean you are less precious to Him*