

Jesus as the fulfilment that answers John the Baptist

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[0 : 00] So if you want to turn that up in your Bibles. Matthew chapter 11 and the first six verses.

After Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples. He went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. When John who was in prison heard about the deeds of the Messiah.

He sent his disciples to ask him. Are you the one who is to come? Or should we expect someone else? Jesus replied. Go back and report to John what you hear and see.

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

Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. Thank you for praying. I'm in the middle of moving house. And so I feel quite weary. So would you mind if I pray again that God would particularly sustain us as we go through his word.

[1 : 23] Heavenly Father thank you that you are sovereign. That you speak your word. And you change us by your spirit. Father please would you do that now we ask.

Please might what we see here be profitable for us. Would it cause us to hope all the more for the Lord Jesus. Would we have our expectations set right. We pray this for Christ's sake.

Amen. Amen. Thank you. Everyone loves a good underdog story don't they. There's a reason why so many movies are based on that trope.

You've got Rocky where the plucky young Italian stallion finally beats the world champion through sheer force of will. You've got Braveheart where William Wallace leads the Scottish tribesmen to several victories over the evil English.

Even Star Wars the young man from Tatooine becomes the one who changes the galaxy by bringing balance to the force. Now I've picked old movies there because I'm assuming that everyone has seen them.

[2 : 25] Who cares about them. But these tropes are so common in movies because what an underdog story does is it plays with our expectations. We have expectations of how the world should work.

But then when we see someone who is weak or a down and out bucking the odds well that captures us. The underdog wins. We know perhaps they shouldn't.

Our expectations kind of being subverted draws us in to the story. It draws us into the movie. We're cheering for the hero.

Our expectations are really, really powerful. If you have expectations for something, then they will guide your feelings and they will guide your thinking and they will guide your hope.

Just for example, let's move from the movie theatre to Christmas morning. You're going back to being a child again. And you've written down all of your hopes and wishes on that gift list.

[3 : 37] But you go downstairs the day before Christmas and none of the presents under the tree look like that bike you want. It looks like you're going to get a jumper and socks again. Those are great gifts the older you get, by the way.

And when you're that child, it's hard when your expectations aren't met. It leaves you feeling flat. It leaves you feeling like you want something more. That is so often how our expectations guide us.

Maybe you've got expectations about how God should be working in his world. Maybe how he should be working in our lives. Maybe how he should be building his kingdom.

And those expectations will be built from a lot of what we want, but also from a lot of voices and loud pressures from the world around us. And if we don't get our expectations right, then we're going to feel flat.

[4 : 40] Then we're going to feel like maybe there's something better for us than Jesus. And the big point from this passage this evening, or this has all been building up to, is that Jesus is the one who sets our expectations.

As Christians, perhaps you're not a Christian here today. You're having a look at Christianity. This is the big point of what we're going to see. We're going to look at lots of other stuff, but this is the big point. Jesus must set our expectations.

We've got two points tonight, if that's particularly helpful for you, if you like taking notes and you like that structure. And the first one, very simply, we stumble when we have the wrong expectations. We stumble when we have the wrong expectations.

Just coming out of chapter 10, Jesus has been saying there's going to be opposition to his message. There's going to be opposition to his ministry. Sometimes it's going to be explicit from his opponents, persecution and anger.

Sometimes it's going to be a little bit more under the surface. As people wrestle with who Jesus is and what he came to do. When they look at how God is working in the world and they say, that doesn't fit with what I want.

[5 : 56] That's what happens here. Look down at verse 2 with me. Jesus has just finished his teaching block in verse 1. These little sayings after Jesus had finished instructing, that kind of sets us up for a new section in Matthew's Gospel.

It begins this in verse 2. Here's the thing.

Jesus' life, his ministry up to this point, has actually made John quite uncertain. Like that child on Christmas morning, John is looking at Jesus, but he wasn't seeing quite what he was expecting. So he asks, Jesus, I was preaching that the king was going to come and turn the world upside down. He was going to judge the wicked. He's going to pour out his spirit on the righteous. Are you that guy? Back again in verse 2, Matthew gives us a little clue as to why John is quite so confused.

[7 : 13] He says that what Jesus had been doing between chapters 5 to 10 are the deeds of the Messiah. Now, the Messiah is quite an unusual word, actually, in Matthew's Gospel.

It's like a little neon sign in the text that's just pointing out something for us here. I think Matthew wants to point out people were expecting certain things from their Messiah.

The Jews thought he was going to be this great king who kicked out the Romans and set up a new nation, restoring God's people back to their Old Testament glory.

John's expectations were a little bit different. He seemed to think that when the Messiah turned up, in an instant, everything would be changed. There would be what we're hoping for as Christians at the end of the age.

There'd be kind of this division between those who have followed God and those who haven't. There'd be judgment and salvation. There was either going to be a national revolution or a cosmic makeover.

[8 : 18] But the reality in Jesus' life is that neither of these things happened. Jesus came and he healed people and he taught them.

The reality of Jesus' ministry was there was no kind of overthrowing of Roman armies. There was no spirit poured out during his earthly ministry. Was this the world really being changed by God's Messiah?

And just to cap it all off, verse 2 again, John, who's been preaching that the Messiah is going to come and change the world, where he's in prison.

Has his life been a waste? Here's a Jesus who didn't fulfill his expectations. It doesn't look like he's going to get another shot at setting up for a new Messiah.

Let's just pause for a moment because it's really not that difficult to put oneself in John's shoes.

Often, the life that Jesus offers, the ministry of his spirit amongst his people, well, wasn't the kingdom supposed to be more powerful?

[9 : 35] Wasn't sin supposed to be dealt with a bit easier? I mean, I know this shouldn't be easy, following Christ, but maybe I was expecting something a little bit easier than this.

As Ben helpfully said, I don't know many of you guys here. I don't know the struggles of your church family. And that makes it difficult to kind of come in and say, as a Christian, what were you expecting?

What are the things in your life that are challenging what you thought life of Jesus might be like? What are the things that are causing you to go, really, Jesus, are you going to stick me with this? This is a shocking statistic. Did you know that in the U.S., the average lifespan of a minister in a church is five years? Most of them only last five years, maybe a little bit less, and then they burn out of ministry forever.

And I was just struck a little bit about why this was. A couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege of going to a morning run by the Sussex Gospel Partnership. And the whole point of the morning was that they were setting up what long-term success in ministry looked like.

[10:46] They wanted to give us a realistic understanding of what you were getting in for if you decided to go into pastoral ministry. I have a number of friends who are in ministry.

You know, we were all told at university, you should go do gospel full-time set-apart ministry. And so we went in, and we went in with these kind of rose-tinted glasses on. But on that SGP morning, a minister who ministers in the U.K., he courageously stood up and told us his story.

He said that if you go in expecting mega-church success, if you go in expecting to create dynamic pastoral change through one conversation, if you expect that you are not going to be burdened with the same thing that other Christians are burdened with, then you will probably not last your five years.

Instead, he opened up about the loneliness and the boredom of church ministry, where much of it is on your own, the pain of backbiting amongst the congregation, the constant risk of burnout as your mental and emotional and spiritual faculties are constantly being used.

And as I spoke to a number of the other younger ministers at this conference over coffee after he'd finished, all of us were struck. We may have known our stuff, questionably, we may have known our stuff, but I don't think any of us had fully grasped the reality of what life in full-time ministry was going to look like.

[12:26] Why are so few American pastors able to stick it out for the long term? Why do they burn out like matches? Well, I think it's because they went into ministry without the right expectations.

We stumble, as all Christians, when we don't have the right expectations of what life with Jesus is going to look like. When our expectations of what the Christian life aren't met, what's the normal response?

There's discouragement. It's lack of trust. It's looking for something that's a bit easier. It's what Jesus, in verse 6, called stumbling, falling over.

This is what seems to be happening to John as he looks at Jesus and had these other expectations over here and goes, I'm not sure. This happens in the church, doesn't it?

This is the reason why the prosperity gospel makes such a wave in parts of the world because they sell a Christianity that has false expectations, you know, money and blessing and healing and power.

[13:44] Young people turn to Christ, but they haven't been told that they need to repent at the same time, and so when something like sexual morals come up, they decide, I can't do that. Often the Christian life can be very difficult.

Following Jesus, the crucified Savior, is not an easy path. I read this week that there is one man in a chapel in Wales. He's the only member of his chapel that's been going for 80 years and he still attends week after week so that that chapel might still be of service to his village.

What were you expecting when you became a Christian? What are you expecting in the ongoing Christian life? To people with expectations in Jesus' time, his ministry didn't look particularly impressive.

Funny though that is to believe because he's healing people and raising the dead. Now he bucked expectations. We stumble when we have the wrong expectations of Jesus.

And that means secondly, we stand firm when we submit to Jesus' expectations. We stand firm when we submit to Jesus' expectations.

[15:00] Look down with me in verses 4 to 5. Look at Jesus' response to John's disciples. Jesus replied, Go back and report to John what you hear and see.

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

Jesus tells John's disciples to go back and deliver an eyewitness report. Maybe he let them follow him around for a period of time.

Look at what you're seeing and hearing and go and tell John. John already knows this. Back in verse 2, Matthew's already told us that John is aware of what Jesus is getting up to. But Jesus isn't just randomly picking miracles out of a hat here. As he says to these men, John's disciples, go back and report these things, he's being very deliberate.

[16:05] Jesus is saying that as you see and hear these things, you are seeing that I am the Messiah and this is the pattern of my kingdom. Keep a finger in Matthew and if you would turn with me to Isaiah chapter 35.

Jesus' words to John's disciples are actually just loaded with Old Testament connotations and we're just going to have a look at a few references in Isaiah all about the promised king who's going to fix God's world.

So Isaiah 35 and talking about the hope for his people, let's start in verse 5. Actually no, let's start in verse 4.

Say to those with fearful hearts, be strong, do not fear. Your God will come. He'll come with vengeance, with divine retribution. He will come to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool.

[17:21] The thirsty ground bubbling springs in the haunts where jackals once lay. Grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. Here's a promise. God is going to come and when he does, his people will be saved.

And what's going to happen when God arrives and his people are saved? The eyes of the blind will be opened. The ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame will leap like a deer.

The mute will shout for joy. You'll start seeing people healed. You'll start seeing God restoring the lives and individuals. And verses 6 and 7, it points to a cosmic renewal of the world as well.

Let's go forward to Isaiah chapter 61. And Luke uses this in his gospel as well. Isaiah 61 verses 1 and 2.

The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

[18:27] He sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God to comfort all who mourn.

Jesus' teaching and healing ministry are not just the ministries of a good man or a notable prophet. What Jesus is deliberately pointing John's disciples to here is that in doing these things he is the king who will restore God's world.

He is God with them. And as they see this and hear him teach they are to go and tell John this and to go yes I am the one you've been waiting for.

Your expectations just have to adapt to what I'm doing. Every single miracle in chapters 5 to 10 every bit of teaching is another tick off the checklist.

Here is God's spirit filled Messiah. Messiah. Here is God's cosmic renewing king. Every time you see Jesus do something spectacular during his ministry it's not just it shows that he's God it shows that he is the Messiah who will put everything right.

[19:58] in Isaiah 29 you don't have to turn to it it's another messianic prophecy that Jesus is fulfilling with these words very similar words but they end with a reference to Abraham who God redeemed and this means that for God's people Jacob there is hope and there is holiness and there is blessing.

blessing. As the Messiah comes he brings that blessing to God's world. Do you remember back in Genesis 1 when God made the world and he blessed man and woman because he saw that everything was just as it should be and do you remember in Genesis 12 where after the world has been broken God says to Abraham I will bless you we're here in this Messiah this is where God is going to make good on that promise where everything is going to be put right and that's why in verse 6 I think Jesus said blessed is anyone who does not stumble an account of me.

Do you notice how all the Beatitudes talk about blessing? how Jesus comes bringing blessing that as we respond to him we're getting on board with going back to how things should be and God's promise throughout the whole Bible that blessing means a world put right by God's king.

Jesus says to John who is doubting and sceptical and a bit worried that he's got the wrong guy hear see I'm the Messiah through me everything will be put right.

Through me God will fix his broken world God will redeem sinful people. What my ministry looks like that will be true for the whole world.

[22 : 12] of course Jesus bucks expectations doesn't he?

John and the Jews they hadn't quite got it right. Jesus says to them my ministry is far greater than any of you were expecting.

I'm not just going to establish one nation in Israel I'm going to bring nations from all over the world into God's family.

I'm not just going to roll the end credits of history immediately when I turn up instead I'm going to minister to the least and to the broken that they might not be excluded but might be brought in to God's glorious kingdom.

And finally my ministry which you think looks unimpressive and small now well it's going to finish with the ultimate subversion of expectation as Jesus establishes his kingdom not through power not through conquest not even through argument but instead by giving up his life in the ultimate display of weakness so that all of the brokenness of our world might be put on him and everything may be put right as he becomes the suffering servant of Isaiah who takes away the sin of anyone who would turn to him and brings blessing upon them and then he rose from the grave and his ministry now is to establish a church in this world which is weak and suffering and perseveres by faith for 2,000 years but just think how many millions have been won over by the weak spirit filled faithful ministry of the church if we're going to get on board with

[24 : 20] God's purposes for our world then we've got to let Jesus set our expectations or else we will grow weary and we'll lose heart verse 6 we might stumble isn't it better to have Jesus set the expectations for us this Messiah king who's going to put everything right isn't it better to let him say for us to say to him you set the agenda I may be expecting all kinds of things from the Christian life I may be going through some horrors as a Christian now tell me what life with you looks like and I will follow the alternatives are pretty bleak fix the world yourself has anyone been keeping up with the conservative leadership debates the green new deal in the US that the media are lining up to take pot shots at we can't fix the world ourselves do we give up on the world do we eat drink and be merry it seems more than a little selfish nothing can be fixed doing that isn't it better to let

Jesus set our expectations look at what he guarantees freedom for the captives release from darkness for the prisoners freedom from our greatest problem our alienation and our death in our sin we can now stand before God holy and righteous verse six is the big challenge for us as Jesus comes and he sets the agenda he calls out blessed is anyone anyone no matter what you are going through no matter what your life looks like no matter what mess is in your heart anyone is blessed if they do not stumble on account of Jesus but instead trust him and follow him and let him set the path don't stumble continue to let him shape the expectations continue to let him lead let him shape your mind and your hopes and how you live and hold on to that wonderful promise if you do not stumble if you hold on to him then everything

God is doing in this world everything God is fixing all the blessing that he is bringing about well that is yours let me pray for us father we see that even Jesus' greatest cheerleader in John the Baptist can have those expectations which cause him to stumble and to be confused but lord we thank you that the reality of what Jesus did though it might challenge just though it might force us to adapt what we think about him oh lord is glorious as all your purposes for your world and your creation will be fulfilled through him and we know this is true because Jesus is alive and he reigns now and the promise is that he will return to do what John was hoping lord please would Jesus set the expectations and agendas for our lives we pray please might we humbly submit to him lord where that is particularly challenging for us in the midst of our circumstances lord please would your spirit work especially in us lord help us not to stumble over

Jesus but instead to hold fast to him to trust him and to let him lead the way father we pray this for his sake and we pray this for our sake that we may know your blessing and we ask this in Jesus name amen