

# For Those Disappointed with Christmas

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Date: 15 December 2013

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[ 0 : 00 ] Living God, we believe that you enabled Matthew, the tax collector, to write these words about John the Baptist.

And they catch us off guard. And so we pray now that you would help us understand what is going on in this story. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Are you the coming one? Or should we look for someone else? It has to be one of the most surprising questions Jesus was ever asked.

Given who asks it, it also has to be one of the saddest questions Jesus was ever asked. Are you the coming one?

Or should we look for someone else? Christmas is a time of great expectation. It is also a time of great disappointment because of the great expectations.

[ 1 : 10 ] It happens to me nearly every time we sing joy to the world. Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Yes, joy indeed.

The Lord of lords has come. And then we sing the next line. Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room. And I realize with great pain, every heart has not received the king. And every heart has not prepared him room. And then we come to the line. No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.

Amen, I say. Yes, yes, yes, a thousand times. And then I see sin and sorrow still growing all over the world and in me.

Oh, I see the blessings flow all over the world and in me. But too many thorns still infest the ground. Are you the coming one?

[ 2 : 09 ] Or should we look for someone else? John the Baptist was given two unique privileges relative to Jesus Christ. First, he was a cousin of Jesus.

During their growing years, John and Jesus likely spent a lot of time together. Their families certainly celebrated many of the Jewish feasts together until John went to live in the desert. And second, John was the last prophet in a long line of prophets who foretold the coming of Messiah. And as the last in the line, John was the prophet who actually got to see with his own eyes the one about whom all the other prophets had been speaking.

And then he gets to personally introduce this one to the world. With great joy and passion, John spends his entire adult life pointing to Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of all the prophetic expectations.

Make ready the way of the Lord. The kingdom of heaven has come near. He will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

[ 3 : 24 ] Behold the Lord.

Behold the Lord. Matthew 11, 11. Truly I say to you, among those born of women, there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist.

Jesus says that after he asks his question, not before. No one greater than John. Now Jesus always means exactly what he says.

And Jesus is not given to uncritical exaggeration. No one greater than John. Greater than Abraham? Greater than Isaac?

Greater than Jacob? Greater than Israel? Greater than Moses? Greater than Joshua? Greater than Samuel? Greater than David? Greater than Solomon? Greater than Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Amos and Hosea?

[ 4 : 38 ] Greater than Isaiah, the great prophet? No one. Greater than John. No one. Are you the coming one? Are you the coming one?

Or should we look for someone else? Before Jesus arrives on the scene, John was extremely popular. Large crowds, thousands of people, would throng to hear him preach on the banks of the Jordan River.

When word was spreading that the coming one had come, crowds left John and they began to flock to hear Jesus preach. John's disciples likely felt very badly for John.

And they expected John to feel badly. But John declares, now this joy of mine has been made full. Joy. Joy made full.

And he must increase and I must decrease. John gave his whole life to prepare people for the arrival of the Messiah, the Holy One, the Savior, the coming one. And when he finally came and when people were following him, John's heart overflowed with joy.

[ 5 : 49 ] And then soon, the joy turned to doubt. The circumstances of John's life changed drastically. In his zeal for God's justice and holiness, John had challenged the morality of Herod Antipas.

Herod Antipas was one of history's most powerful and ruthless leaders. Herod had taken to himself his brother's wife, Herodias. And John confronted that powerful politician with his adultery.

And dared to call that politician's action sin. Now, when we are confronted by our sin, we have two options. Either we own up and repent.

Or we have to silence the voice that stirs our conscience. Herod chooses the latter and throws John into prison. And from that prison cell, John sends a message to Jesus.

A surprising message in light of all that John had been preaching and had witnessed. Painfully short. Are you the coming one? Or should we look for someone else?

[ 6 : 58 ] John had given his all for this Jesus. This Yeshua. This Yahweh to the rescue. But now he wondered if he had been wrong. And he was concerned for the thousands of people he would have led astray if he was wrong.

Are you the coming one? Or should we look for someone else? Ever felt that way? Ever wanted to ask some form of John's question? What went wrong for John?

Why the doubts? Matthew tells us that while in prison, John hears a report about the works of Jesus. What works?

The works of Jesus that he was doing in the villages and towns of Judea and Galilee. Kingdom works. And what John heard in the report disappointed him. And not that what he heard was bad news.

Quite the contrary. What he hears is good news. Really, really, really good news. Healing of the sick. Freeing of the demonized. Raising of the dead, for goodness sake.

[ 7 : 59 ] Then what bothered John? Not what Jesus was doing. Although he was bothered by those with whom and for whom Jesus was doing it.

As I will show in a moment. But what bothered John was what Jesus was not doing. Jesus was not fulfilling John's expectations of what Messiah was to do.

And how Messiah was to do it. So, enthusiasm and joy give way to disappointment and doubt. Are you the coming one? Or should we look for someone else? Anyone identify with John?

With the one of whom Jesus says there is no one greater. What specifically troubled John? The answer lies on two levels.

A theological level and a personal level. They usually go together. The theological and the personal. So, consider each of these levels separately.

[ 9 : 01 ] And then listen to Jesus respond. To John. Consider the theological level of John's disappointment. As we saw last Sunday. John the Baptist reveals his expectations.

Of Jesus. In his preaching. Matthew 3. 11. I baptize you in and with water. But the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. And he will baptize you.

In and with the Holy Spirit. And fire. Last Sunday. I kept those two together. Holy Spirit and fire. Because I argued that Holy Spirit is holy fire.

But it seems that in John's mind. They end up being separate. It seems that John expects two great moves of the Messiah.

Baptize in and with the Holy Spirit. And baptize in and with fire. According to the prophets. The Holy Spirit is the greatest gift of the age to come.

[ 9 : 57 ] The prophet Joel records God's promise for the Messianic age. It will come about that after this. I will pour out my spirit on all humankind. Isaiah records a similar promise.

For I will pour out water on the thirsty land. Streams on the dry ground. I will pour out my spirit on your offering. Your offspring. And the prophets are clear. That along with this pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

Would come a flood of other gifts. Joy. Healing. Forgiveness. Renewal. Wholeness. The new birth. And fire. Fire too was to be a mark of the Messiah's coming.

Thus. Before he records the promise of the Spirit. Joel records the promise of fire. Blow the trumpet in Zion. Sound an alarm on my holy mountain.

For the day of the Lord is coming. Surely it is near. A day of darkness and gloom. A day of clouds and thick darkness. A fire consumes before them. And behind them a flame burns.

[10:57] For John. Fire is a sign of judgment. It's a sign of purifying judgment. For John. Messiah will come and judge the world. Messiah will come and destroy all evil and wickedness.

And purge the earth of sin and injustice. So. John the Baptist expects his cousin to do two great works. Baptize the righteous in and with the Holy Spirit.

And baptize the unrighteous in and with fire. Thus. The reason John is troubled. In John's mind. These two works were to occur.

At the same time. And all at once. Baptizing in and with the Spirit. Baptizing in and with the fire. Were to take place at the same time. And all at once.

This is why John warned people to repent. With great urgency and compassion. He urged people to change their thinking. And make a U-turn in the road. And prepare for Messiah's coming.

[11:57] In John's mind. A radical separation was to take place immediately. The axe is already laid. At the root of the trees. He preached. His winnowing fork is in his hand.

To clear the threshing floor. To gather the wheat into the barn. But he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. In John's mind. The Messiah comes. And immediately.

Immediately. He affects a radical purging of the world. What a great expectation. No more let sins and sorrows grow.

Nor thorns infest the ground. The King will come. And destroy all oppression. All evil. All sin. And then. Having judged and purified everything.

He will then. Baptize the world. In and with the Spirit. Now you see why John is disappointed. By the reports of Jesus' work.

[12:50] The gift of the Holy Spirit is being poured out before the fire. And. And this is what bothered John the most. John hears nothing about fire.

As William Barclay puts it. John expects to hear. The wrath of God is on the move. And what he hears is. The mercy of God has come near. John hears nothing about judgment.

In terms of axes. Winnowing forks. And burning chaff. And what made things even more problematic. Is. John hears. That the very people.

He expects. To get the axe. Are the people. With whom Jesus is partying. Jesus is keeping company. With the chaff. For goodness sake.

He's pouring out the blessings. Of the Holy Spirit. On the unrighteous. So John has. To send messengers. To Jesus. Asking. Are you.

[13:46] The coming one. Or should we look for someone else. But his question. Is not purely theological. It arises out of his own personal circumstances.

The second level. Of his disappointment. John is in prison. The incongruity of that. The herald of God's Messiah.

Is imprisoned by the unrighteous ones. Messiah was supposed to destroy. Joy. While in prison. John could hear the music. And singing. And dancing. In the castle above him. As Herod and his friends. Got drunker. And drunker. And then he would hear the news. About Jesus.

Which only added. Insult. Injury to insult. Because Jesus is holding feasts. All over the place. With drunkards. And prostitutes. And tax collectors.

[14:40] Jesus was reaching out. To the very chaff. On whom John had called. The fire of God. And John sees. No indication.

That Jesus was moving. To free John from jail. Jesus. Jesus doesn't even seem to try. To cleanse his threshing floor. Of such refuse. Like Herod and Herodias.

John's question is very existential. If you are the Savior. And King. Whose arrival. I've spent my life announcing. Why am I in jail?

Anyone identify. With John? John is profoundly disappointed. Theologically. Because Jesus did not fit. Into John's presupposition.

And he's profoundly disappointed. Personally. Because Jesus is freeing other people. But not him. Such disappointments often go hand in hand.

[ 15 : 43 ] Do they not? Behind nearly all. Not all. But nearly all theological anguish. Is personal hurt. Beneath many of the intense religious controversies of our time.

Lie emotional wounds. That have been touched by the issues. So for example. We wrestle with the affirmation. Our God reigns. Not because there's no evidence of it.

But because our lives are not going the way that we thought they should go if God is reigning. We argue about whether or not Jesus still heals in miraculous ways.

Not because there's no evidence of it. Not because there's no evidence of it. But because he's not healed us or our loved ones in miraculous ways. We are offended by exuberant worshipers.

Who tell us Jesus can give you joy. Not because there's no evidence of joy in their lives. But because we ourselves are not experiencing the joy. John the Baptist's expectations of the Christ of Christmas were not being fully realized.

[ 16 : 49 ] On both the theological and personal level. So he has to ask Jesus. Are you the coming one? Or should we look for someone else? Again, ever felt like asking that question of Jesus?

A loved one for whom you have prayed your life out dies. You get cancer. You lose your job.

Natural calamities wreak havoc. A war you prayed wouldn't happen does.

Violence stalks your street or your neighborhood school. Depression lingers weeks and weeks. You have to admire John's honesty. He had to know.

Are you God's Messiah? Or should we start a search for a new candidate? Now as the text tells us. Jesus clearly honors John's honesty.

And Jesus gives him an answer. He sends messengers back to John. With a return message. So. Consider now Jesus' response. Jesus answers John on both levels.

[ 17 : 56 ] On the theological and the personal. He addresses the theological first. Matthew tells us that Jesus gives John a report of what he's been up to.

And Luke adds the interesting fact. That as Jesus gives this report. Right at that moment. Jesus then does more of what John had heard. Luke says.

At that very time. Jesus cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits. And he granted sight to many who were blind. Then he gives his report. Matthew 11 verses 4 to 5.

Go and report to John what you see and hear. The blind receive sight. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised up. And the poor have the gospel preached to them. Boy that's a theologically loaded report.

But notice. That Jesus is not telling John anything new. John's heard all this before. But what Jesus is doing. Is he's giving this report in a special way.

[ 18 : 54 ] That would get John's attention. What Jesus does. Is he gathers all kinds of phrases. From the prophet Isaiah. Who incidentally foretold the work of John the Baptist.

And Jesus puts these phrases together. In such a way that John will hear clearly. A theological answer to his struggle. So listen to some of the texts Jesus puts together.

One is from Isaiah 35. Say to those with anxious hearts. Take courage. Fear not. Behold your God will come with vengeance. The recompense of God will come. But he will save you. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened.

The ears of the deaf will be unstopped. The lame will leap like the deer. The tongue of the mute will shout for joy. Chapter 29. On that day the deaf will hear words of a book. Out of their gloom and darkness.

The eyes of the blind will see. The afflicted ones will increase their gladness in the Lord. The needy shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. And then Isaiah 61. The spirit of the Lord God is upon me.

[ 19 : 51 ] Because he's anointed me. To bring good news to the poor. He sent me to bind up the broken hearted. To proclaim liberty to the captives. And freedom to prisoners. Jesus takes all of those phrases.

Hooks them all together. In such a way that John will hear clearly. You can see John. This is what Jesus is doing. You can see John. That I am the coming one foretold of Isaiah.

I am fulfilling the role of Messiah. People are being made whole. They're being set free. But John. I am not executing the role. The way you wrote the script.

The question is. Then. Where did John get it wrong? Where were his expectations in error? Let me summarize it this way.

Jesus coming in the days of John the Baptist. Was not the end. As John expected. But the beginning of the end. The coming of Jesus.

[ 20 : 52 ] In the days of John the Baptist. Was not the end. But the beginning of the end. What do I mean? The day of the Lord. Which John expected. The great and terrible day of the Lord.

As the other prophets put it. Still lies in the future. Thus. No fire. No axe. No winnowing fork. Yet. But although fire. May have been conspicuously absent.

From what Jesus was doing. The blessings of the age to come. The blessings of the Holy Spirit. Were very evident. It is not yet the end. Just the beginning of the end.

The beginning of the end. Which has no end. What Jesus has done. Which confused John. Is to stretch out the end times.

Separating the two aspects of Messiah's work. He comes first. Ahead of the day of the Lord.

Baptizing in and with the Holy Spirit. Bringing the gifts of the age to come.

[ 21 : 47 ] Peace and joy and healing and reconciliation. And deliverance and forgiveness. Then one day. On the day of the Lord. He will come baptizing with fire. Destroying all evil. Purging human existence of all sin.

John expects both baptism to occur at the same time. And all at once. Jesus does it one at a time. And Jesus does it two slowly. Only. But he is who John hoped for.

If John could just for a moment. Set aside his preconceived ideas. If he could consider for just a moment. That he has projected onto Jesus.

Expectations Jesus doesn't have. He would hear Jesus clear response. To his theological struggle. I am the coming one John. It is happening. The beginning of the end is happening.

People are being made whole. It's just that I'm not playing the role. The way you wrote the script. Then Jesus speaks to John's personal struggle.

[ 22 : 48 ] One line. It's a line that we need to go back to again and again. Blessed is he who does not stumble over me. Blessed is she who does not stumble over me.

The word stumble here is the word scandalon. Blessed are they who are not scandalized by me. It's an invitation to trust. If I may I'll paraphrase Jesus' words to John.

John. I'm aware of how disappointed you are in me. Given your expectations I understand. But John. I'm asking you to trust me. Yes. My methods and my timing.

Are not what you hoped for. I know what you've been preaching. And I agree. I too want to rid the world of sin and evil and pain. And guns and drug and human trafficking.

Hang in there with me. I know what I'm doing. Let me be Messiah my way. It's not a wholly satisfactory answer is it?

[ 23 : 47 ] But at times it's the only response Jesus can make. Like our expectations for Christmas. Our expectations of him can be off the mark. And at such times he asks us to evaluate our presuppositions.

Of how and when he should act. And trust him to be the savior in his way and in his time. This is not easy. I know.

And that is why Jesus pronounces blessed. On any of those. Who keep from stumbling over his way and his time.

But as unsatisfactory as that response may seem. It turns out to be the only response that satisfies. Why? Because it draws us to Jesus.

You see. Even if Jesus the Messiah had immediately purged the world of sin and evil. We would not yet be whole. We are not whole until we come to him.

[ 24 : 49 ] Even if Jesus had delivered John out of prison. John would not be whole until John himself came to Jesus. Even if Messiah did immediately remove all pain and sorrow and sickness.

Even if he did give us all that we asked for. We are not fully alive until we belong to him. We were made by him and for him.

And we are not whole. All we were meant to be until we are wholly his. He himself is our wholeness. He himself is our freedom. He himself is our joy and peace and light and life.

Jesus' words. Blessed are they who do not stumble over me. Draw us to himself. Are you the coming one? Or should we look for someone else?

John asked the question because he saw no fire. And because Jesus was acting too slowly. Where is Jesus not fulfilling your expectations?

[ 25 : 48 ] What's the parallel in your life for no fire? Where is he moving too slowly for you? The temptation when disappointed with Jesus is to look elsewhere.

To look for another savior. To go to other sources of comfort and pleasure and hope. But still he calls out to us. Trust me.

I understand your confusion. Trust me. I am the promised one. I am fulfilling everything promised of me and by me. Yet you have to let me be me on my own terms.

Blessed are those who keep from stumbling over me being Messiah in my way and in my time. You have heard the phrase already not yet.

Many times. Have you not? Already not yet. Jesus is already not yet. The promised Messiah has already come and already begun to fulfill his messianic work.

[ 26 : 47 ] Indeed the decisive part of his work is finished. He goes to the cross and raises from the dead. But he still is to come. He is still not yet. There is more to accomplish.

He comes the first time as suffering servant. He'll come the second time as the triumphant king.

Already not yet. Already baptizing in and with the Holy Spirit. Not yet baptizing in and with fire.

The complete eradication of evil. Not yet. The total purging of the world. Of disease. Decay. The demonic. And the death. Not yet. But because of the already.

The not yet. Will happen. The final outcome is not up for grabs. The final outcome is as certain as his birth in the manger.

For in the manger the living God has become one of us. Forever. Forever. Locking himself up with our humanity. Now his destiny is our destiny.

[ 27 : 48 ] The Christmas story awakens huge expectations. And rightly so. And what keeps us from falling into disappointment. Is remembering what John the Baptist did not seem to get.

Christmas is incomplete. Without Good Friday. And Easter. And Pentecost. And the second coming. Christmas is but the first chapter of the great story.

Nothing compares with the Christmas chapter. Nothing. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. But as wonderful as the Christmas chapter is. It is incomplete.

With all the other chapters. The purpose of Jesus' birth is incomplete. Without his earthly life and ministry. The purpose of his earthly life and ministry. Is incomplete.

Without his death on the cross. The purpose of his death on the cross. Is incomplete. Without his resurrection from the grave. The purpose of his resurrection. Is incomplete. Without his ascension to the throne of the universe.

[ 28 : 47 ] The purpose of his ascension to the throne of the universe. Is incomplete. Without his pouring out of the Holy Spirit. And the purpose of his pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Is incomplete. Without his coming again.

So. May I suggest. May I suggest. How we can stay alive. In great expectation. Even as disappointment lurks so close at hand.

We pray. The already. The already. The already. Welcome. Lord Jesus. Welcome. Into my world.

Keep filling me with your Holy Spirit. I give you full access to all of me. Use me for your purposes in the world. You pray the already. And then you pray the not yet.

Come Lord Jesus. Come again and bring your work to completion. Bring in the new heavens and the new earth. Pray the not yet. And then pray.

[ 29 : 48 ] The already not yet. In the meantime. Will you help me. Trust you. Help me trust you. To be who you are.

In your way. And in your time. Please. Do not let me stumble. Over you. Amen.