

## Should We Expect Someone Else?

John the Baptist is a towering figure in the story of salvation.

A powerful and enigmatic personality, John fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that when Messiah came, people would hear, "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'prepare the way for the Lord and make straight paths for Him.' "

The voice was the voice of John the Baptist and in order to prepare the way for the Lord, John urged people to "...repent of their sins and "produce fruit in keeping with repentance," so that they could "...flee from the coming wrath." Messiah was at the door and "every tree that did not produce good fruit would be cut down and thrown into the fire." John prophesied in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, denouncing sin and warning that judgment was at hand. He loudly and fiercely attacked the religious and political leaders of Israel for their immorality until finally King Herod had him thrown in jail.

John had long been awaiting the arrival of the Messiah and the kingdom He would bring. But what kind of Messiah did he expect? What would he do when He came? John's own words supply the answer. To the Pharisees and Sadducees he said, "who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?...the axe is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire...His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor, gathering His wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Clearly, John expected Messiah to be a judge who would separate mankind into two groups: the righteous and the wicked, the wheat and the chaff, the sheep and the goats. The heaven-bound and the hell-bent. And the judge was at the gate.

And then Messiah came. John himself participated in his coronation at the Jordan river when the Father and the Holy Spirit appeared at Jesus' baptism and proclaimed Him to be the Messiah and the Son of God. He was all that John expected that he would be. But as Jesus set about his ministry, he wasn't doing the kind of things John expected him to do. Instead of judging sinners, he ate and drank with them. Instead of condemning sinners he forgave them for their sins. Instead of consigning sinners to hell he offered them eternal life in heaven. And instead of sentencing them to burn with unquenchable fire he offered them living water. This was not at all what John expected Jesus to do and what made it worse is that while Jesus was doing all this, John, was rotting in jail.

You can see why he was confused. Why were the wicked not getting their comeuppance? Where was God's wrath over sin? Who were the wheat and who were the chaff? So John sent Jesus a message: "are you the one we were looking for or should we expect someone else?"

I can't help but think that you and I have some of the same thoughts that John had. In the words of the Psalmist, "why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?" Why doesn't the Lord pull down the wicked from their lofty posts and give them the punishment they deserve, and set the righteous free from their troubles and give them the reward they deserve? We assume, of course, that we are among the righteous. But are we? Are we righteous? In His Sermon on The Mount, Jesus commands his disciples: "be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect. "Are we perfect? Are we even close?"

Just consider: if the average lifespan of an American male is seventy-six years, and if he committed one sin a day—told a white lie, entertained a lustful thought, uttered a harsh word to someone, passed up an opportunity to help someone who needed it—by the time he was seventy-six he would have committed 27,740 sins. 27,740 transgressions of God's Law! (By the way, the average lifespan of an American female is 81 years. It is rumored that they enjoy the last five years more than all the rest.) In any case, how would you like to stand before a human judge and try to defend that kind of a record? "Your honor, it's true that I've broken the law 27,740 times--but I always meant well." Basically, I'm a good person. Of course, the real state of things is considerably worse than that, isn't it? How many days do you get through with only one sin? Only one vain thought? One covetous desire? One lustful impulse? One foul word about a motorist who cut you off in traffic? Listen to what the Bible says about man's moral condition: "there is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." God sums it up: "every inclination of the thoughts of a man's heart is only evil all the time." Knowing this, do we really want "the guilty" to be judged for their sins and punished accordingly? Only if we are terminally masochistic. We don't need a judge: we need a Savior!

And so Jesus came, restoring sight to the blind, healing the lame, cleansing lepers, opening the ears of the deaf, preaching good news to the poor and raising the dead to new life. And calling them blessed who accepted Him for the kind of Messiah He was. "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

Fall away on account of Jesus? How could that be? How could anyone reject a Savior who restored sight to the blind, healed the lame, cleansed lepers, opened the ears of the deaf, preached good news to the poor and raised the dead to new life? How could anyone reject that kind of a savior? Oh, it's easy: it happens every day. It turns out that accepting Jesus and the gifts He brings is more difficult than you might think. It requires that we abandon any thoughts of our own sufficiency and trust in his sufficiency. That we give up on our own

strength and trust in his strength. That we stop depending on ourselves and depend upon Him. That we learn to let his Holy Spirit guide us rather than trust in our own judgment. And this is very, very hard for us to do because it delivers a mortal wound to our pride. The first commandment in our human way of thinking is, "here—let me do it." We would rather believe that the Lord helps those who **help** themselves, which is not in the Bible, than that the Lord helps those who **deny** themselves, which **is** in the Bible. Until we realize that we are the poor, the blind, the lame, the deaf and the terminally ill whom Jesus came to heal and save, he can neither save us or heal us. We will continue to be imprisoned in our narcissism with only death to look forward to at the end. To be saved we must first realize that we need saving. To be found we have to realize that we are lost. To be healed we must first understand that we are sick. To be set free, we must first become aware that we are in prison. To come alive in Christ, we must first realize that we are dead in our sins.

John, Jesus tells us, was a prophet and more than a prophet—that he was the greatest man ever born into this world. Courageous, strong, faithful to his calling, John was all that a man could be. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist, yet *he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*" But what a man can be by his own strength is nothing compared to what God can make of him! John was a forceful man who yearned for the kingdom of Heaven to be imposed by force. He was not lacking in zeal or strength or courage. But the kingdom of Heaven does not come by force, it comes by faith. Faith—the most passive of all things—receives the kingdom of Heaven like the hand of a beggar receives a gift from a king. But God's power works through faith and that is why faith can move mountains. Above all, faith receives Christ and if we have Christ, we have everything. And if we lack Christ, we have nothing.

"Faith," the author of Hebrews wrote, "is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Faith cannot be conjured up by human will nor grasped by human reason. Faith can only be created in the human heart by the Holy Spirit of God. But once we have faith we have God and Christ and all the riches of the kingdom of heaven. Faith opens our eyes and ears to the wisdom of God and allows us to see things through Jesus' eyes. Faith enables us to know Christ in a way that even His Apostles did not know Him, for as He said to Thomas: "because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have believed." Faith turns us into precious children of our Heavenly Father, who wants nothing more than to shower us with His gifts. Through faith in Jesus Christ, our trials and tribulations can be turned into blessings. Through faith we will go to be with our Father when we leave this world. John the baptizer was looking for a judge, but he got a Savior. Thanks be to God who knows better than we do what we really need. Amen.