

Matthew 11:2-11

Greater than our Expectations

Father: I want to lift up our staff, staff families, and others in our church who are suffering sickness this week and this season in general; we pray for their healing and restoration. But I am grateful for our church family who is here today as we continue this series through Advent in the book of Matthew. Father, as we look at this troubling moment in John the Baptist's life, I pray that you help us see ourselves and see our expectations for what you're going to do, highlighted and contrasted with the greater promise of what you have done, are continuing to do, and will do in the future through your Son, Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.

John's Ministry: Last week we looked at Matthew 3, particularly at the very odd figure that was John the Baptist. He was a prophetic preacher in the wilderness who had the job of preaching repentance from sin because the kingdom of heaven was at hand. He was, Matthew said, a prophesied figure who would cry, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" He brought a word of comfort to God's people and to God's enemies, a word of warning.

John went on to baptize Jesus as God's agent of commissioning for Jesus as the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus and the Father spoke from Heaven to declare Jesus his Son, in whom he most pleased. In this, John passed the baton to one he said had sandals John was unworthy to carry. John is quoted in John 3:30 (different John) that he must decrease so that Jesus may increase. He knew his preparatory work for Jesus as the Messiah was coming to a close, and Christ was on the ascendancy.

John's ministry wasn't without controversy. Last week we saw a religious group, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who came up to view John's ministry with angry curiosity. We

saw John rebuke them, calling them children of Satan because of their self-righteousness and comfort in their own power. But John didn't just make the religious in society angry. In fact, according to Matthew 14, he infuriated the politically powerful as well. You see, he called out the terrible behavior of Herod Antipas, the puppet king who ruled Galilee on behalf of Rome and who began an affair with and ultimately married his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. Now, Philip was Herodias' half-uncle, and his daughter with Herodias, Salome – whom we'll come back to – ended up marrying her uncle, a different Philip called the Tetrarch... There's a reason we didn't preach this text on Family Worship Sunday, some real Jerry Springer business with this family, and I think we see why John called out this family. Being politically powerful, though, Herod Antipas had John arrested and kept captive, and that's where we see John now, languishing in prison when he starts to hear news of all that Jesus has been doing and saying since John baptized him in Matthew chapter 3.

John's Offense

Now, if we put ourselves in John's shoes, remembering that John has spent his ministry proclaiming the kingdom's coming through the person of Jesus, only to find himself locked away in what my five-year-old calls "The Big House." And if we're in John's shoes, we might start to wonder.... Did we make a mistake? Is Jesus the right guy? With this experience in mind, we might not be surprised by verses 2-3.

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples

and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"¹ John is

saying, "Jesus, you got give me something here. Are you the one I was preparing for? Are you

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 11:2–3.

preparing for someone else, and I miscalculated?” You see, John likely didn’t expect to spend the coming of the kingdom in a jail cell. He was expecting Jesus to come in like a wrecking ball and overthrow people like the Pharisees and Sadducees and corrupt political rulers like Herod Antipas and his messed up family. Surely, Jesus wouldn’t let his herald rot in prison if he was engaging in a national revival project. Instead, Jesus is teaching ordinary, everyday people about the things of God and healing their sick.² That’s great, sure, but is that all the Messiah is going to do?

Beyond that, John has heard that Jesus eats and drinks with sinners and tax collectors. That concerns at least John’s disciples – who likely remain at large because wanted poster technology was not very good at this time. They ask Jesus in Matthew 9, “We fast, we deny ourselves food, just like the Pharisees. Heck, John ate locusts and honey, a fact that is as gross this week as last week. But you, Jesus, and your disciples seem to be hanging out with people and having a grand old time compared to John us?”

You get the sense that there is some frustration and disappointment building here. Is Jesus the Messiah or not? And if so, what is he doing? Why isn’t he engaged in social overthrow? Why isn’t he busting John out of prison, presumably with a file hidden in a cake, but possibly with a good old-fashioned storming of the Bastille-type action or even just calling down fire from heaven?

² Leon Morris, [*The Gospel according to Matthew*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 275.

This gets to an important question. Can we trust the character of God, even when we don't know the reason for our own "disappointments" or our suffering?³ It's sometimes hard, yes? Trusting God is difficult when the job situation isn't panning out as expected. It's difficult when your marriage suffers and does not meet your expectations. When your kids are not living the life you envisioned for them. These moments test our ability to trust in God, especially if a good job, a happy marriage, perfect kids, or any of another million things we could think up form the basis for our trust in God. We set these expectations in place, and if God doesn't fulfill them as we expect, it can put our faith in a tailspin.

I think that's what John is experiencing and why he asks Jesus this rather pointed question. And we might expect an answer from a dishonest person that promises John what he wants to hear. But that's not what we get.

Matthew 11:4 And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."⁴

At first glance, this seems like a simple laundry list of things Jesus has done. A little like when Bekah is telling me she needs more help around the house, and I get defensive like, I got gas, I mowed the lawn, I spent half an hour fixing that light switch so I can get that little box off my desk, that helped! But that's not what Jesus is doing. Each of these things is a citation from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, usually in the context of God promising future good through

³ This question, along with the core outline, was supplied by David Ritchie, Lead Pastor, Redeemer Christian Church, Amarillo, TX.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 11:4–6.

his presence. Each of these things is something Jesus has done and has been recorded in the book of Matthew up until this point. Jesus says to John, “I am who you think I am. I am the Messiah you heralded.” But something is interesting about this list of prophecies. The last one Jesus mentions, “the poor have good news preached to them,” comes from Isaiah 61:1, which reads

**to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,**

But the very next line is:

**to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.⁵**

Jesus doesn't mention anything about liberty to the captives. He is telling John that yes, Jesus is the Messiah. But that does not mean all will be easy or well at the moment. It will be hard. John's own life will end when Salome, Herod Antipas' niece, is coached by her mom, Herod's illegitimate wife, to demand John's head on a platter after dancing for Herod and getting him to promise whatever she wanted. (I told you this family was messed up.) John does not get what he most immediately wants from Jesus, his freedom from prison. And Jesus will not always give us what we think we want most. That's not what he is promising to John, and it's not what he's promising to us. It's not that he doesn't care. It's that he cares about it in a different perspective, in a different way than we ever could. We never hear John's response, but that's okay. It's not the most important thing. In omitting that response, Matthew invites us to

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 61:1.

answer that question about how we will respond to Jesus ourselves, even in the darkest moments.

Part of me wishes I could tell you that work will work out. That your marriage will be okay. That the kids will be all right. But that is not what Jesus has promised us. We may want that. He may give that in his time. But it's not what he has promised us. Before you check out, before you say, "What good is Jesus for then if he doesn't get me what I want? What I think I may even need?" let's track along with Jesus a little bit longer. He says, blessed is the one who is not offended by me and so, while we may at first be offended by this message from Jesus, let's hear him out. Let's see where the blessing he is talking about lies.

Something Greater than John

As John's followers head back to John, Jesus wants to make sure that people know he is not opposed to John even as he clarifies some things to John. He doesn't hate John or resent John or is angry with John. I think he's genuinely sympathetic to John.⁶ This is what he says:

Verse 7: **As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,**

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."⁷

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 277–278.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 11:7–10.

The implication, of course, is that many of the people had also seen John, heard his preaching, maybe were disciples of John at some point themselves, and perhaps John baptized them. Jesus is asking them, why did you go out in the wilderness to see this guy?

There's some debate about what Jesus means by a reed shaken in the wind. Is he talking about a nice panoramic scene, like going out to see the foliage? I don't think that's what Jesus is getting at.⁸ I think he's these folks did not go out to see the kind of person who bent whatever way the wind was blowing. They didn't go out there because John would tell them what they wanted to hear.⁹ He was preaching repentance from sin. That's never an easy message to deliver or to receive. Nor did they go out to the wilderness to find ZZ Top's sharp-dressed man, who belongs in the halls of power, rubbing shoulders with kings and princes. They go out to John because he would get them political power and prestige. He was a weirdo who was the exact opposite of a sharp-dressed man, wearing camel fur, not soft clothes. He eats locusts, not escargot and lobster. (Actually, that's weird. Really poor people eat bugs, and really rich people eat bugs but with more butter. I don't know what to make of that.) But John wasn't going to be able to give his followers access to the halls of power and turn them into a political machine. That wasn't why they went out to him.

They went out because John was a prophet. He told them hard truths about themselves, their society, and their need for God to move in their lives. But more than a prophet, he had the specific mission of going before God as God came to his people. Jesus quotes Malachi 3:1,

⁸ John Nolland, [*The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 454–455.

⁹ R. T. France, [*Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 197.

which reads **“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.”** John’s mission means the coming of God to be with his people, and Jesus is that fulfillment.¹⁰ In a sense, John then is greater than, while still a part of all the Old Testament prophets, many of whom suffered. Many of whom were persecuted. Many of whom were martyred.

Jesus says of John, in verse 11:

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.¹¹ John was great. Jesus loved John. John was his cousin. They had known each other before their births when their pregnant mothers got together, and John leaped in his mother’s womb because of Jesus. Jesus held John in high esteem and acknowledged that John’s ministry was powerful.

But for all of John’s expectations of the Messiah, of Jesus, they were too small. He still didn’t have the complete picture of what Jesus came to do. He didn’t recognize the paradigm shift that was made. And that’s why Jesus goes on and says:

Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.¹²

This statement doesn’t diminish John at all. It’s not a swipe at John. But the message of Jesus, the story of Jesus, is greater than John could preach. Jesus was going to turn everything on its head. He didn’t come to rescue one people group. He didn’t come to bust John out of the

¹⁰ R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 197.

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 11:11.

¹² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 11:11.

pokey. He didn't come to resolve a few conflicts and humble a few Pharisees and Herod. He didn't come to our make job situations right or give us the perfect marriage or the perfect kids, as great as those things would be. Jesus came as the suffering servant, destined to die so that we might be reconciled – that means made friends again – with God. And he came to rise himself from the dead so that we might have eternal life with God and with Christ in a New Creation that he will bring with him at second Advent, at his return. John prepared the way for Jesus to come the first time, and he didn't have the whole picture. But we do. That means that no matter how you might rank yourself in the kingdom of God, you're greater than John.

When I think about my position in the kingdom, it could be easy to despair at little. I think of Matthew, Paul, and Peter and the countless saints that have suffered and endured what I have not. Who have written great books and worshiped with a depth I long for. I might think, "Shoot, I might be pretty close to "the least of these." If there's a totem pole, I'm awfully low on it. Maybe you feel that way sometimes.

But here is good news for us! We have the complete picture! We have the entire message. We get to bring that to our world! A world not unlike John's, full of self-righteous religious people and corrupt politicians and the same sickness and death and fruitless labor that has haunted human beings since nearly the beginning. But no matter where you think you are in the strata, the message you have received, and you get to bring as you prepare the way for Jesus' return in the future, is greater than anything even John the Baptist expected.

I want you to remember that. I want you to preach that to yourself when it seems God has disappointed you. Is what you're missing out on what God has actually promised you? Or

has he promised you something far greater? Thank God that he has a greater plan than we could ever imagine but also gives us a complete image of that coming greatness!

Works Referenced

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Discussion Starters

1. Read Matthew 11:2-11 and summarize in your own words. John's ministry caused him suffering, for God's sake. Have you ever been called up to suffer in some way for God?
2. John expected that Jesus' ministry wouldn't let him languish in prison. What expectations do you have of God that feel unmet? Why do you have these expectations?
3. How is the actual story of Jesus bigger than our expectations of God? How can this help us endure times of trial or suffering?