

Expectations are powerful, but dangerous things. Expectations can motivate people to do things they otherwise would not do, but they also can lead to terrible disappointments. If you expect a great reward for going above and beyond the call of duty, it can motivate you to put in extra hours and effort. This can be a powerful motivation to accomplish great things.

The problem is that the opposite is true as well. Disappointment is very hard. As Proverbs 13:12 says: “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.” Disappointment can leave one dejected and depressed.

This very dynamic was powerfully shown by the great author Charles Dickens. In his classic work, Great Expectations, you see the great hope and effort young Pip puts in with the hopes of socially elevating himself and becoming a gentleman. However, in the end, Pip finds himself disappointed and having lost many of the friendships and the secure, albeit humbler, social position he once held dear.

It may seem to some to be sacrilegious to suggest that followers of Jesus and even prophets can be disappointed in God’s working, but we see this clearly in our Gospel this morning. In fact, our text starts in a rather depressing place. We are told that this all started, “when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ.”

Think about that. John the Baptist, the great prophet of that era and forerunner of Christ was in prison. John, whose birth was foretold by an angel, John, the long-foretold prophet, who came in the spirit of Elijah, was languishing in prison!

While confined to his prison cell, John followed reports of what Jesus was doing. This makes sense; John had predicted great things about Jesus. As we heard last week in Matt. 3 John declared of Jesus:

I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 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.

Talk about great expectations!

But this wasn’t what John was seeing. He was moldering in prison, and as John listened to the reports, this is not what Jesus was doing! Jesus was not separating the good from the bad and burning the bad. He was eating with tax collectors and sinners. It appeared that Jesus wasn’t winnowing or even baptizing with fire at all!

So, John decided to investigate: he sent word by his disciples and said to [Jesus], "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Remember, these are not the words of one who has been wondering who Jesus is. He saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus; he heard the voice of the Father from heaven, and John had boldly declared Jesus to be "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." So, this question didn’t come from someone who was not sure who Jesus is. No, these are the words of one who is disappointed in what he has believed in.

This is like how we can be disappointed when we don’t see God acting as we expect. Those times that we pray earnestly for healing, and we expect to see it, but often don’t. When we pray for deliverance from a problem and are still stuck. When we beg for forgiveness and deliverance from sin, only to find ourselves stuck in guilt and falling back into that sin.

Sometimes we look at Jesus’ promises and can honestly wonder at times.

Think about some of the promises we find in the Bible: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame” (Rom 10:11), “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer 29:11). Yet often we still feel heavy laden, ashamed and like the times are evil. At these times we feel like John, imprisoned by life and despairing; this is when we need reassuring.

So, John sends messengers to Jesus. “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.’”

Jesus shows great patience and understanding for John and his disciples. Jesus’ answer is not to defend Himself or to say, “Just wait, I’m getting there.” No, Jesus simply points to the evidence of what He has done. He points to the miracles that no-one else could possibly do.

But most of all, Jesus is pointing out to John and to us that He is the fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies. He points especially to prophecies of Isaiah from Isaiah 35 and 61. Jesus is doing the Messiah things.

Then Jesus gives a curious conclusion “blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” It is not “blessed are those who believe,” but “who is not offended by me.” The Greek can even be translated “who is not scandalized by me” or “is caused by me to sin.”

Jesus is reminding us that people can be offended that He is not who we want. No! Jesus is not a king who gives worldly peace and prosperity. He is not a

judge who destroys all those bad people we don’t like. He is not one who the whole world will recognize as Messiah.

Instead, He is the One who suffers for His people. The One who died on the cross in place of the evildoers. The One who died to pay the penalty even for those who reject Him and choose hell. No! Jesus is not the savior you might want; He is the savior you need!

And don’t let your misguided expectations lead you away from Him. When John’s messengers headed back to John, Jesus turns to another group that are facing disappointment. “As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see?’”

This is a curious rhetorical question to which Jesus proffers rhetorical answers. “A reed shaken by the wind?” Considering that John was in prison for speaking truth to power, he was clearly no reed and was certainly not easily swayed.

Or, Jesus proposes, did they go to see “A man dressed in soft clothing?” Jesus answers this question Himself: “Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses.” Again, this is definitely not John of the camel’s hair clothing and a diet of locusts and wild honey. John lived anything but an easy life.

So, Jesus offers one more possible answer: “What then did you go out to see? A prophet?” Yes, this is who John was: that and more. “Yes,” Jesus declares, “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."” John was the rare prophet who was himself prophesied!

Yet the fall of John must have left many people disappointed. How could God have let His great prophet rot in prison? We think the same way when we see

struggles of the Church. We see faithful churches fighting and struggling to survive. We see so many efforts to share the Gospel fall on deaf ears.

We have expectations that God will bless His servants. And we struggle when we see those who reject God seem to be better off than we are.

Jesus is pointing our attention beyond the disappointment we see. He declares boldly, “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Where do you find true and lasting greatness? By being in the “kingdom of heaven.”

It is by being a part of God’s people, redeemed, cleansed and given new life that you find what will truly be great for all eternity. We may look at ourselves and see we are among the “least in the kingdom of heaven.” Yet by being in Christ, we find we have received true greatness.

Let’s be honest, we do expect great things from God. We expect health, peace, prosperity, hope, and life. Ultimately, God will give us those things. However, they may not come in the form we hope for and may not even come in this life. But we have a sure hope for these and more for all eternity. Our hope is sure, because Jesus sealed it with His own blood and proved His victory beyond doubt with His resurrection. We do have hope in Christ, and this is a hope that will not disappoint you.