

Disappointment

John the Baptist was in prison when he heard what Christ was doing, and he sent a message through his own disciples asking the question, “Are you the one who was to come or are we to look for somebody else?” Jesus gave them this reply, “Go and tell John what you hear and see – that blind men are recovering their sight, cripples are walking, lepers being healed, the deaf hearing, the dead being raised to life and the good news is being given to those in need. And happy is the man who never loses his faith in me.” (Matthew 11:2-6 Phillips)

It is important for us in understanding the above passage to appreciate John’s situation. It is not a comfortable one. In fact, he is in a hard place – even for a crusty prophet used to the rigors of the wilderness where wild honey and locusts served as his daily rations. Jesus himself gave tribute to him saying that no one had ever been born of mankind who was greater. John the Baptist, this great prophet of God, is in prison.

It seems a strange place for one so called of God, this languishing in Herod’s dungeon. After all, he is Elijah, the one sent to prepare the way of Christ’s coming, the one who himself baptized Jesus and witnessed the Holy Spirit descending and remaining upon him. Who, even as an unborn child within his mother’s womb, had leapt for joy at the news of his Savior’s arrival. (Mt 11:10,14; Jn 1:32; Lk 1:44)

Why is John in prison? Who put him there?

The scriptures tell us that John spoke out against Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee, because of his wickedness – which included the adulterous taking of his brother Philip’s wife as his own. Herod responded by locking John up. (Lk 3.19-20) And so the great man of God, the herald of Christ’s ministry on earth, is put out of society’s sight while miracles take place all around him. Miracles that, as the text point out, John heard about even in prison.

It would be easy for us to say that Herod put John in prison and leave it at that. But this would fall short of the truth of the matter. It would be a more accurate rendering to say that God allowed Herod to imprison John. And he did so for God’s own glory and John’s good. For the glory of God is inseparable from the good of his creatures. To claim that Herod did it all on his own without the slightest involvement on the part of God is to render

God helpless and fail to understand that there is nothing that takes place within the reaches of the entire universe over which God does not reign, moment-by-moment, in sovereign majesty. No sparrow falls to the ground nor the hairs of a head perish but by God's leave. Knowing these things is why the apostle Paul described himself as "... a prisoner of Christ Jesus". (Phile 1:1) I don't deny that this is a monstrously challenging truth! For it means nothing less than it is ultimately God who gives his sad permission to allow the presence of evil, horrendous evil, in this world.

For now.

To John, it must have seemed like such a simple matter for Jesus to set him free. After all, a minor jailbreak should be a cakewalk compared to healing a leper, restoring sight to a blind person, or raising the dead.

Maybe you think so, too.

If you've never found yourself disappointed in God, hang on. Sooner or later – days, weeks, months, maybe years – it's going to be your turn. And if you don't think it can happen to you, then you've forgotten that the student is not above his Master.

Remember Jesus on the cross? The spotless Lamb of God who had taken upon himself the sins of the whole world. The perfectly obedient Son who did only that which he saw the Father do, only what his Father asked. In the agony of his passion he cries out, "My God, my God, *why have you forsaken me?*" (Mt 27.46 *emphasis added*)

The scriptures are full of examples of individuals who, at some point in their lives, felt the keen, biting edge of disappointment. Moses, for all his faithfulness to God's chosen people, was told he couldn't enter into the Promised Land but had to view it at a distance from the top of Mount Nebo just before he was to die. (Deu 34:1-5) Job loses all his possessions, his children, and his health even though he is "blameless and upright". (Job chapters 1-2) Ezekiel is told that the wife he loves more than anything else on earth will suddenly be taken from him and he is not to shed so much as a tear. (Ezek 24:16-18) And now John the Baptist, announcer to the world of the incarnate God, finds himself in similar straits. While God in the person of his Son is doing "good things" all around him, he himself feels forsaken, an opinion seemingly underscored by his circumstances.

John's distress is intense. Enough to cause doubts to creep into his thinking. Perhaps he reaches out a hand to touch the hard rock wall of his cell. A sensory check to see if all this is real or just some terrible dream. It's damp to the touch. No light of the sun finds its way to his weary eyes. Heavy

metal shackles chaff ankles and wrists. This solitude is different from his desert home. It has the cutting bite of loneliness to it. The gloominess of the air settles heavily on his very heart. It isn't hard to imagine what rambling thoughts hell sought to inject into his mind. *If Jesus were really God he wouldn't have abandoned you, John. Perhaps you were just kidding yourself about his being the Messiah. No Savior would let this happen to you. At least, no Savior who has the power to do anything about it!*

Can you sense John's dilemma? It is our dilemma, too. For somewhere along the line we will find ourselves disappointed in God. The death of someone we loved as much as our next breath. The loss of a job leading to financial ruin. A child that never wants to see you again. The suicide of a dear friend. The rape of a helpless woman. The senseless murder of schoolchildren by fellow classmates. The list of human agonies is endless, each a potential seed of the devil's lie: *If God were really good and truly loved you, he wouldn't allow such things to happen!*

The doubts take hold and John sends some of his own disciples to ask Jesus a question on behalf of all of us who have tasted dregs of bitter disappointment: "Are you the one who was to come or are we to look for somebody else?"

I wonder which was harder for John to bear, the physical captivity or the mental captivity of doubting Christ.

Jesus sends John's disciples back with an answer. He tells them to go and tell John what they see and hear, what they are personal witnesses to. That Jesus is giving sight to the blind and making cripples walk. He is cleansing lepers and making the deaf able to hear. He is even raising the dead! But most importantly of all, he is delivering the gospel to those in need. (Like us!)

In one sense we lean back in wonder and exclaim, "What kind of an answer is that?" After all, it seems to underscore the doubts John had in the first place, almost mocking his predicament!

Yet on closer examination we find, as no doubt John did, too, that in his reply, Jesus points to scripture, the word of God, and through the words on to their Author. Jesus gives John the assurance of the unchanging character of God to trust in when all else – from the tiniest to the greatest factor of our circumstances – screams against the goodness of the Almighty. Jesus' answer to John is the same answer he gives to you and me. He gives us himself, the visible expression of the invisible God. The scriptures point to the Messiah being someone that would give sight to the blind and make

the deaf hear. Someone who would bring good news to the poor. Someone who would perform all the signs that Jesus was doing.

John's disappointment came from not understanding why God was allowing him to linger in prison when Jesus had all the power necessary to bring about a change in his circumstances. Changes perhaps more in line with John's own sense of what God ought to do.

Like John, we too struggle with understanding why God allows certain things that seem so contrary to what we expect or hope. Terrible things befall us for which we can find no suitable answers.

Except one.

Do you remember the last thing that Jesus said to John's disciples? "*Happy is the man who never loses his faith in me.*" Happy, blessed are those who are not offended and do not stumble in their trust in Christ Jesus because his handling of our circumstances doesn't match our expectations.

Being human means being finite in wisdom. There are a multitude of things that are simply beyond our comprehension. Our minds are incapable of the stretch, our earthbound language unsuitable for the exchange of such knowledge as the fullness of the wisdom of God. Where understanding fails, there is an antidote: faith in God in the Person of Jesus Christ.

It is childlike faith, indeed, that is most precious and so sorely needed. Not *childish*, but *childlike*. A child learns from experience that his father and mother can be trusted. There are times when the child must lean on what he has seen and heard on other occasions to sustain his trust in his parents in a new and more difficult situation. And so the building of trust goes on. So it is between ourselves and our Father in heaven. We have the scriptures, God's own word chock full of his unalterable promises. We have his Spirit. And we have his Son, Jesus, who is the Christ. In Jesus, the Father has given us himself.

Disappointment makes accusations against the character of God. It is the emotional expression of the difference between our imperfect love and his perfection. Faith in Jesus Christ rises up an eternal standard of unwavering truth against such claims.

John the Baptist never came back out of prison. In fact, God's plan for him included the prophet's beheading at the whim of the arrogant daughter of Herod's illegitimate wife. (Was his expression that he must decrease and Christ increase a prophecy of his own future?) Did John die "happy"? When Jesus' reply was brought to him by his disciples, did it put his mind at peace

and prepare him for his death? Did it dissolve his disappointment? I don't know. The Bible doesn't tell us.

But it may provide a clue.

Do you remember our Lord's own cry of disappointment on the cross? How he wondered aloud if the Father had forsaken him?

Now consider the resurrection. It sure doesn't fit with any image of abandonment now, does it? Just the opposite. Jesus is exalted to the highest heaven with a Name above all names. Disappointment is turned on its head! The cross, with its human perspective of utter defeat is transformed by Heaven into glorious, inconceivable victory. Trusting God, even to the point of death, is rewarded beyond all imagination!

I think the psalmist, David, captured Christ's conviction in the goodness of his Father when he said,

But because I have done what is right, I will see you. When I awake, I will be fully satisfied, for I will see you face to face. (Psalm 17:15 NLT)

Happy, blessed indeed, is the man or woman who never loses their faith in Christ!

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