

DISAPPOINTMENT WITH GOD

Matthew 11:2-6

Herod Antipas was the Roman-appointed ruler of Palestine during the life and ministry of Jesus. His political accomplishments were great. His moral character was not. Herod's corruption was demonstrated when he visited his half-brother, Herod Philip, in Rome. Herod decided that Philip's wife, Herodias, could do better. He took her, dismissed his own wife and he started a new family with his sister-in-law. The Jews thought this was wrong. John the Baptist did not just think it. John publicly condemned Herod for taking his brother's wife.

There is a similar incident recorded in **2 Samuel 12**. King David committed adultery with Bathsheba. When she became pregnant, he had her husband Uria killed to cover up his sins. But when the prophet Nathan confronted him; David repented and turned back to God. Herod was no David. When John confronted him, Herod threw him in jail to silence him. Herodias, however, wanted John silenced permanently. She got what she wanted during a birthday party for Herod in which her daughter danced. When she finished, Herod vowed to give the young lady anything she wanted up to half his kingdom. Being advised by her mother, she asked for John's head on a platter. To his credit, Herod did not want to grant this request. But he was more concerned about what people thought than what was right. He executed John and presented his severed head as a gift to his wife/sister-in-law and niece/step-daughter. This is the tragic ending of the life and ministry of John the Baptist – beheaded in the aftermath of a wicked king's impetuous response to a perverted lap-dance.

At the time of our text, John had been in prison for some months. He would be there for only a few more months before he was executed. And we find this great man at a low point.

- This son of the desert was now a prisoner.
- This thunderous prophetic voice was silenced.
- This man of zealous integrity suffered injustice for telling the truth.

And John found himself at a low point of disappointment with God. **F.F. BRUCE** writes: "John had been in prison long enough to develop a prison mood. It was once clear to him, but his environment was so depressing and Jesus had done nothing to get him out... John longed for assurance." So **Matthew 11:2-3** says: "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?'" John's question and Jesus' answer show us that spiritual disappointment can become blessed assurance if you trust God when you do not understand him. What does this encounter between John and Jesus teach us about disappointment with God?

I. THE REALITY OF SPIRITUAL DISAPPOINTMENT

Some Bible commentators take the position that John's message to Jesus was not a personal question. They contend that John faced death with absolute assurance, and only asked this question for the benefit of his disciples. But the text and context make it clear that John

asked this question for himself, because his faith was weak, his mind was confused, and his heart was disappointed. It would not be out of bounds to conclude from this episode that John turned his back on the Lord. It would also not be out of bounds to deny that John felt the Lord had turned his back on him. John was a faithful believer who was disappointed with God.

If a public relations team wrote the Bible, this story would have been omitted. To have the Messiah's forerunner question the Messiah's identity would be like the center hiking the ball to the quarterback and then turning around and sacking him. This is not a clip you want to see on scripture's SPORTSCENTER highlights. But scripture was not written by PR agents. **2 Timothy 3:16** says: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." Consequently, scripture is not about spiritual heroes who accomplish great exploits for God. It is filled with the stories of people like you and me. The Bible tells of godly men who make big mistakes. It tells of believers who doubted. It tells of faithful servants who hit low points. Thus we read here that the Messiah's forerunner questioned the Messiah's identity. If John the Baptist can become disappointed with God, so can you. In fact, I take the liberty to say I am talking to someone who is sitting with John in that prison cell right now: You know the Lord; you just don't understand him.

- You asked for a mate, but you are still sleeping alone.
- You asked for child, but your womb remains barren.
- You asked for healing, but you are still hurting.
- You asked for a job, but you are still passing out resumes.
- You asked for relief, but you are still struggling.

I may not have named your issue. But know that I am talking about whatever it is in your life that has caused you to question God. You know the Lord. You just don't understand him. In his book **A Grief Observed**, **C.S. Lewis** wrote: "The thing I fear is not that I'll stop believing in God, but that I might begin believing dreadful things about him. Not that I'll say, 'There is no God.'" But that I'll say, 'So that's what God is really like.'" This is what it means to be disappointed with God. It is real. And it can happen to you.

II. THE REASONS BEHIND SPIRITUAL DISAPPOINTMENT

Why did John become disappointed with the Lord? John became disappointed for the same reason any person becomes disappointed: unfulfilled expectations. That is the minimum requirement for disappointment. You have to expect something. The greater the expectation, the greater the potential for disappointment. That was John's problem. The text does not explicitly state the particular source of John's disappointment. And you should not try to psychoanalyze what is going on in someone else's heart and mind. But I believe the text points to two reasons why John was disappointed with God.

A. DISAPPOINTMENT HAPPENS WHEN GOD DOES NOT MEET YOUR PERSONAL EXPECTATIONS.

John and Jesus were more than kindred spirits. They were cousins. John was also the God-appointed forerunner who paved the way for the Messiah-King. It is possible that John denounced Herod's adulterous marriage so boldly, because he viewed his ministry as the beginning of what Jesus would complete. When Herod threw John in jail, John thought Jesus would deliver him and put Herod in his place. He waited for months for Jesus to come to his rescue. But Jesus never showed up. John went to great lengths to point the Jews to Jesus as their Messiah. But Jesus did not lift a finger to get John out of prison. John became disappointed when Jesus did not meet his personal expectations.

We cannot know for sure to what extent John felt Jesus owed it to him to rescue him from prison. But to whatever extent John felt this way, he was dead wrong. So are you, if you think spiritual devotion obligates the Lord to fulfill your personal expectations. Let me say it as plainly as I can: The Lord does not owe you anything. Your acts of service do not make you a shareholder in the kingdom of God with voting rights that determine the Lord's agenda. Yet there are times when we feel like God ought to do certain things for you in light of the things you have done for him. In his book **Disappointment with God**, PHILIP YANCEY writes: "True atheists do not, I presume, feel disappointed in God. They expect nothing and receive nothing. But those who commit their lives to God, no matter what, instinctively expect something in return." I confess there are times I feel this way, even though I know better. And I need to be reminded that God does not owe me anything. He does not owe you anything, either. In **Luke 17:10**, Jesus says, "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants, we have only done what was our duty.'" Jesus is the master. You are the servant. If you did everything you were commanded, God still would not owe you anything. Divine intervention is a handout of amazing grace you do not deserve. When your expectations are not met, thank God things are as well as they are.

B. DISAPPOINTMENT HAPPENS WHEN GOD DOES NOT MEET YOUR THEOLOGICAL EXPECTATIONS.

John asked: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" There are two words in the Greek New Testament that are translated another. One word means "another of the same kind." But the word used here means "another of a different kind." When John asked whether he should look for another, John was not asking if they should look for some other person. He was asking if they should look for a different type of person. This, I believe, was the core of John's issue. John the Baptist declared Jesus to be the Messiah-King God promised to send. But John had a specific view of what the Messiah would accomplish. In **Matthew 3:11-12**, John declares, "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 with 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."

John was not taken up with the popular ideas about the Messiah, which concentrated on political revolution and material gain. John was concerned about righteousness and

expected the coming Messiah to judge the wicked. In **Matthew 3:10**, John said, “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” This is what John expected Jesus to do. But the reports John received about Jesus consisted of preaching and miracles that reflected mercy, not judgment. The fact that Jesus was not using his obvious power to administer judgment hit close to home as John sat in his prison cell. Rather than adjusting his expectations, John began to question Jesus. For the record, John’s messianic expectations were not wrong. They were incomplete. John rightly understood that the Messiah would bring judgment. He did not understand the Messiah would also bring mercy. More specifically, He did not understand that John’s correct but incomplete understanding resulted in spiritual disappointment.

You will inevitably misunderstand ministry if it is not Christ-centered and cross-driven. **MARTIN LUTHER** hit the nail on the head when he described Christian theology as “**THEOLOGIA CRUXIS**” (a theology of the cross).

- Praise God for the irreproachable life of Christ.
- Praise God for the matchless teachings of Christ.
- Praise God for the astonishing miracles of Christ.

But these wonderful things would have availed nothing for our salvation had they not found their consummation in the cross. These other things were incidental and collateral to the one purpose for which Jesus came to earth – to die, that man born once and born dead might be born again and born alive. **Isaiah 53:4-6** says, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

III. THE RESPONSE TO SPIRITUAL DISAPPOINTMENT

The fact that John had doubts and the reasons behind them are not as important as what he did with them. John did not throw a pity party in his prison cell that would end up celebrating his graduation from spiritual disappointment to hardhearted unbelief. He instead used his disciples to smuggle his doubts out of his prison cell and take them to Jesus. John had questions. But he took his questions to Jesus. He trusted Jesus with his doubts. That is what you ought to do. When you doubt, do not turn away from Christ. Turn to him. Verses 2-3 says: “Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of 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?’”

Verse 4-6 records Jesus’ response to John’s question. Consider how Jesus did not respond. Jesus did not get angry with John. Jesus could have taken John’s question personally and rebuked him for his doubts. But he did not do that. In fact, after John’s disciples departed, Jesus publicly commended John. In **Matthew 11:11**, Jesus said, “**Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.**” This is the tender

compassion of Jesus, which has not changed. Jesus is a friend to the disappointed. But even though Jesus did not get angry with John, Jesus still did not deliver John. He left John in prison. And he allowed Herod's lust to result in John's beheading. Herein is the tension of the text. Jesus cares about your disappointments. But that does not mean Jesus will shape or reshape his divine agenda to meet your expectations. He did not do it for himself. Minutes before he was betrayed and arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." Jesus' low point was worse than John's. According to **Luke 22:44**, Jesus sweated drops of blood as he faced death. Yet Jesus refused to compromise his mission to limit his agony. He did not do it for John. And he may not do it for you. But there's a yes in every mess!

On December 29, 1987, a Soviet cosmonaut returned to earth after 326 days in orbit. He was in good health, which hasn't always been the case in previous space voyages. Five years earlier, touching down after 211 days in space, two cosmonauts suffered from dizziness, high pulse rates, and heart palpitations. They could not walk for a week. Thirty days later, they were still undergoing therapy for atrophied muscles and weakened hearts. At zero gravity, muscles waste away because there is no resistance. To counteract this, the Soviets prescribed a vigorous exercise program for the cosmonauts. And they invented the "penguin suit," a running suit laced with elastic bands. It resists every move the cosmonauts make, forcing them to exert their strength. Likewise, we often long for days without difficulty. But God knows better. The easier the life, the weaker our spiritual fiber. Strength grows by exertion.

Jesus did not get angry with John. And Jesus did not deliver John. In fact, Jesus did not directly answer John's question. Jesus could have simply answered John's question in direct terms. Yes, I am the one who is to come. No, you should not look for another. But Jesus gave an indirect answer that forced John to sort things out on his own. This indirect answer warns us that we must trust Jesus, not answers. **James 1:5** says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." God promises to give wisdom, not answers. God guides. But God does not give a spiritual GPS system that tells you every turn to make. In his book, **Real Christians Don't Ask Why**, **JOHN FISCHER** writes: "We seek the security of a closed system that promises answers to life's questions long before we are interested in seeking a God who withholds them. We study the Bible as a problem-solving workbook, long before we approach it as a doorway to an awesome, holy, not-to-be-pandering-to-anyone God." And because we seek answers instead of God, we set ourselves up for unnecessary disappointment. But I challenge you to trust God without answers to your all-important who-what-when-where-why questions. **CHARLES ALBERT TINDLEY** wrote:

WE ARE OFTEN TOSSED AND DRIVEN ON THE RESTLESS SEA OF TIME
SOMBER SKIES AND HOWLING TEMPEST OFT SUCCEED A BRIGHT SUNSHINE
IN THAT LAND OF PERFECT DAY, WHEN THE MISTS HAVE ROLLED AWAY
WE WILL UNDERSTAND IT BETTER BY AND BY

Verses 4-5 says: "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 told John’s disciples to report the message they heard and miracles they saw. The words and works to which Jesus pointed were fulfillments of Isaiah’s prophecies about the coming Messiah. In fact, they surpassed Old Testament predictions. Verse 5 says, “**The dead are raised up.**” Jesus raised people from the dead. Jesus does not just meet expectations. He surpasses them. But notice how Jesus addressed John’s unfulfilled expectations. Jesus does not make any promises concerning the future. He mentions aspects of his work that point to Old Testament messianic prophecies. Jesus responds to John’s disappointment by pointing John to the word of God.

Note the implicit nature of the biblical references Jesus gives. Jesus does not give John chapter-and-verse, so to speak. He does not tell John to read **Isaiah 35** and **Isaiah 61**. Jesus simply describes his ministry in a way that pointed John to the scriptures and left him to figure things out on his own. In so doing, Jesus affirms the sufficiency of scripture to strengthen the weak, counsel the troubled, and comfort the discouraged. At the same time, Jesus affirms the importance of faith. Matthew does not tell us how John took Jesus’ response to his concerns. But we know from Jesus’ response that John only had two options: either he trusted the word of God or he did not. This is the issue you will inevitably have to come to terms with: Do you trust the word of God? Stubborn faith in God’s word is the only remedy for spiritual discouragement.

IV. THE REMEDY FOR SPIRITUAL DISAPPOINTMENT

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT begins in **Matthew 5:3-12** with the BEATITUDES. Jesus continues to make these statements of blessings throughout the Gospels. But **Matthew 11:6** is arguably the most neglected, misunderstood, and unappreciated blessing Jesus announces. In verse 6 Jesus concludes his reply to John’s question by saying: “**And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.**” This word offended translates the verb skandalon, from which we get our English word “scandal.” It means to cause someone to trip or stumble. Originally, it carried the idea of causing someone to fall into a trap. In **Luke 17:1-2**, Jesus uses this word to warn that offenses will inevitably come. Jesus further warns that it would be better to have a boulder chained to your neck and be thrown into the ocean than to be a stumbling block for others. But here Jesus acknowledges that he himself may be a stumbling block for many people. How can that be? **WILLIAM BARCLAY**’s comment is helpful: “Sometimes a man can be offended at Jesus because Jesus cuts across his idea of what religion should be.” You can hold on so tightly to your idea of who God is, what God is about, and what God ought to do, that you become offended by God’s revelation of himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus says, “**And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.**” You only rob yourself when you allow your expectations to cause you to trip over how Jesus handles his business. Live contingently, trusting that everything is going according to schedule even if the Lord does not fulfill your expectations. In most instances, Jesus announces blessing on positive grounds. But here is a blessing based on what you do not do: “**Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.**” This blessing of the unoffended is only experienced by those who trust the Lord has everything under control, even when he does not meet your expectations. This closing beatitude flips the

script on John. John was standing on the word of God. But John wanted to know if Jesus was who he thought Jesus was. In response, Jesus tells John that he wants to know if John is who he thought John was. If so, John would keep standing on the word of God. And he would not trip over how the Lord handled his business. Let me close by telling you not to trip because things are not going your way. Keep standing on the word of God.

A first-time flier became afraid as the plane began to experience turbulence. But she looked noticed that the little boy next to her sat through the turbulence without a care in the world. She asked how he was able to stay so calm. The little boy answered, "My father is the pilot. He knows that I am on board. And I trust that he is not going to let anything happen to me."

I TRUST IN GOD WHEREVER I MAY BE
UPON THE LAND OR ON THE ROLLING SEA
FOR, COME WHAT MAY, FROM DAY TO DAY
MY HEAVENLY FATHER WATCHES OVER ME

HE MAKES THE ROSE AN OBJECT OF HIS CARE,
HE GUIDES THE EAGLE THROUGH THE PATHLESS AIR
AND SURELY HE REMEMBERS ME,
MY HEAVENLY FATHER WATCHES OVER ME

I TRUST IN GOD, I KNOW HE CARES FOR ME
ON MOUNTAIN BLEAK OR ON THE STORMY SEA
THO BILLOWS ROLL, HE KEEPS MY SOUL
MY HEAVENLY FATHER WATCHES OVER ME