

*No One Like Jesus: A Prophet's Due*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Malachi 3:1, Isaiah 40:3-5, Matthew 11:7-24*

Friends, our final Scripture reading is from Matthew 11:7-24. Listen now to the Word of the Lord. "As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 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. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear. To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her actions." Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

Have you ever gotten a gift you didn't like – an ugly sweater or a copy of a book you'd already read? What did you do with it? Did you throw it away? Did it get re-gifted to someone else? I've passed by a lot of garage sales lately, and it looks like some awful gifts have made it to neighborhood yard sales. (We just hope the person who gave us the gift doesn't stop by!)

You can return a gift for all sorts of reasons – wrong size, wrong color, wrong pattern, wrong fit, wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong. Sometimes we don't like a gift for personal reasons...maybe because we don't like the giver! It's awkward when you use a gift that a former friend or relative gave to you. It reminds you of them in a less-than-pleasant way.

Jesus' words this week to the crowds reminded me of how we treat gifts, especially gifts we don't want. Jesus tells us a great deal about John the Baptist, but He also discusses the gifts we've been given as Christians. He promises great things for those who believe and follow Him – but there are woes for those who won't accept what He offers us freely.

Last week, we saw John the Baptist suffering in prison under the hand of Herod. In his disappointment and doubt, he sent his disciples to find answers from Jesus. Jesus sent them back with proof that He is indeed the Messiah. But all of this took place in public. Jesus turns the conversation around so that none in the crowd misunderstand the magnitude of John the Baptist.

John was a prophet and everyone knew it. Nobody went out to John to see a king in royal robes or a politician who would bend to whomever would support him. They went to see the first prophet the nation of Israel had known in four hundred years. That's a long time – consider that the American colonies Jamestown and Plymouth were roughly 400 years ago in our history.

For the first time in generations, a man spoke the Word of God plainly to them, bringing a new message from God. And it wasn't just any message. John hailed the coming of the Messiah. He was the one destined to prepare the way of the Lord. He fulfills the role of Elijah, the messenger sent before the Christ to warn the people and turn their hearts back to God.

Through Jesus' work and the work of John the Baptist, the Kingdom of Heaven is coming with force. Jesus and John are forcefully advancing the Kingdom even as all the forces of the world – the Herods, the Pharisees and religious leaders, even the Romans, eventually – all try to stop it. You want to write this guy off because he's rotting in a prison awaiting execution and he has doubts? Jesus says there hasn't been anyone greater born of woman, ever!

But then He goes on and says something super important for us, something to give us hope and joy and, hopefully, thankfulness. *Christians born again of the Holy Spirit are blessed in ways that Old Testament believers could only dream about.* Jesus says, "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." What does this mean?

John is fantastic, a truly righteous man who fulfills His calling and obeys the Lord. There is no doubt about that. But John is born of woman. Compare that to what Jesus says in John 3:5 – "No one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." Unless and until we are born again by the Holy Spirit, placed under the headship of Jesus rather than the headship of Adam, we cannot enter the Kingdom of God.

The Old Testament saints, despite their faithfulness, did not have the Spirit of God residing in them because Christ sends the Spirit to believers after His death and resurrection. They were not yet born again. That means that even in death, the Old Testament saints awaited the coming of Christ before they could enter the Kingdom of Heaven in all its fullness. As Hebrews 11:39-40 says about the Old Testament heroes, "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."

We who come after Jesus are incredibly blessed. While we may be the least person in the Kingdom of God, we have already received in this lifetime blessings that the greatest Old Testament saints did not. We have the Spirit of God living inside of us, steering us toward righteousness and away from sin, counseling us, witnessing to us. We have Jesus, who has already come to take away our guilt. All that is necessary for our salvation is complete!

Not only that, we have the witness of the entirety of Scripture. We have the words of Jesus, Paul, Peter, John, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and others confirming the awesome gift of God that He has given to us through His son Jesus – things the Old Testament saints longed to know about but didn't. Even those parts that are difficult to understand, we have explained to us by nearly 2000 years of scholarship in the church.

We rarely think about the fact that we live in the greatest part of history. We live after Jesus. All the promises have been made and fulfilled. We can partake in them right now, without having to wait for someone else to come. We are even more blessed to live in a country where the gospel has been allowed to spread freely. Our proper response can only be thanksgiving. God has blessed us to know what He has done in history; the Father has blessed us to share in the glory of His Son and become His adopted children. God's gifts to us are amazing, and so we sing with the angels in Revelation 5:12, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

With this blessing comes the responsibility of taking God at His Word and trusting Jesus in all areas of our lives. With that comes a caution: *we must not create a Christ of our own choosing or expect God to change for us*. Jesus compares the people who have heard Him and John to children who squabble about what game they're going to play, unhappy because they didn't get their way. You've probably had it happen in your own household – "I wanted to play catch, but he wanted to play Nintendo." "She wanted to play house, but I wanted to play soccer." That's the kind of squabbling where everybody gets sent to their room!

But it's even worse when you consider the situation. John and Jesus are prophets; they deserve respect. But they are attacked. John seems wild. He hardly eats; he wears camel hair clothing; he's gruff in his demeanor; everything he does is a rejection of earthly pleasure. He is a reminder of the law, of obedience, that God expects us to follow His ways. Everything he says points people back to God, but some look at the outward appearance and think, "He's got to be possessed to act like that. Nobody in their right mind would act that way." They reject what he says because he's too weird and intimidating.

Then Jesus comes, and He too calls people back to God. But His demeanor is very different. He preaches obedience and repentance too, but He is full of grace, especially to the people who'd been written off, which annoys the Pharisees. He doesn't live for pleasure – He lives perfectly – but He doesn't avoid pleasure either, and He doesn't follow the Pharisee's man-made rules about fasting. He eats with people that the Pharisees believed were beneath them because of their sins. He takes as His friends unlearned men and rabble rousers and tax collectors. The religious people write Him off because He isn't what they wanted – a King full of fiery judgment for everyone they didn't like and happiness and joy for everyone they did.

We recognize this in our own generation as well. People want to use Jesus for their purposes, but not the whole Jesus. We may see Jesus the kind, Jesus the social justice warrior, Jesus the graceful, Jesus the radical, Jesus the teacher of the Law, but usually we skip the parts of Jesus that don't appeal to us.

There's a common saying among many people now today. It starts with "the Jesus I know." The Jesus I know would tell people to stop living off charity and get a job. The Jesus I know wouldn't condemn anyone for sexual sins. The Jesus I know would stomp on greedy capitalists. The Jesus I know loves the environment...or, the Jesus I know wouldn't worry about the environment because He's going to remake the whole thing anyway.

The problem with "the Jesus I know" is that "the Jesus I know" is usually a substitute for one single word: "I." We use the name Jesus to support what we think and believe, even if there's no evidence. We must be very careful of this because it creates an idol out of Jesus. If your Jesus only loves what you loves and hates what you hates, it's not the Jesus of history.

The true Jesus makes us uncomfortable at times. The true Jesus loves us and died for us. That's the glorious truth that gives us hope. But that same Jesus warned us that not everyone who called out "Lord, Lord" on the last day would be saved, but only those who do the Father's will. The true Jesus forgives our sins, but He said to the woman caught in adultery, "Go and sin no more." The true Jesus showed compassion for the sick, the poor, and the outcast, while also saying, "You will always have the poor among you." Jesus is holy, and I am not. Jesus calls us all out on our greed, our lust, our hypocrisy, our worship of things other than the true God.

It is this, the true Jesus, that we come to love and worship. We love Him because while our human nature struggles with Him and wants to be free of His gaze, once the Holy Spirit has brought us into His grasp, the new nature God is creating in us wants more and more of Him. God doesn't change for us; God changes us. We cannot make Him into our image. We cannot fall into the trap of Jesus' generation where nothing and no one would satisfy them. Let us be content in Jesus as He is – the Savior and Lord of our souls.

The final word of the day from Jesus is a comfort and a challenge. *We are responsible for the light of God we've seen.* Jesus pronounces woes on three different cities where He had done signs and wonders, including Capernaum – His new hometown. "Woe" is a mix of negative prophecy and pity. When the prophets pronounce "woe" on a city, it isn't a proclamation of revenge. It's truth, judgment, shame, and sadness all at once.

Jesus denounces these three cities because they saw the amazing things Jesus did – the blind see; the deaf hear; the lame walk; the dead are raised to life. There's no other explanation for these things other than the power of God working through Jesus. While they saw the divine work of Jesus in their midst, they didn't listen to Him. They didn't turn from their wickedness and turn towards the forgiveness and righteousness of God. Some were cured of deafness, but they still couldn't hear the truth of God. Some were cured of blindness, but they didn't see God walking with them.

Jesus comments on their total lack of faith. Tyre and Sidon and Sodom were notorious cities of wickedness and perversion in the Old Testament era. Jesus says, if the people of those cities had seen the miracles I've done, they would have turned around in a heartbeat and have been saved. The cities who saw Jesus working had so much more evidence, but they still went about their evil as if nothing had happened.

For Jesus to pronounce eventual destruction on these cities doesn't mean much to us. Three hundred year old cities in America are rare. We see the deterioration of Detroit and we realize no city lasts forever. But Jesus isn't talking about the cities themselves, about the bricks and mortar and stones and wood, though those go away too. He's talking about the people who make up those cities and their reactions to Him. When Jesus condemns a city, He's really speaking woe on the people there who have refused to listen to or obey the Word of God.

To be fair, none of us was alive two thousand years ago, so we've never seen Jesus directly do a miracle like these folks did. But we do have the witness of the Scripture and the Church and the Holy Spirit. We have the testimony of hundreds of eyewitnesses and millions over the years who have experienced the power of Jesus. Many of us have had things happen that we can't explain – safety in a car wreck that could have killed us, a serious illness that turned out to be fine, a sudden change of events in our favor with no earthly reason. We live in a place where the gospel of Jesus Christ has been freely preached – not always correctly, but often. The light of the gospel in America may very well be darkening, but it's still shining.

So what will we do with that light? Embrace it and let it shine through us, or reject it and squelch it? Because at judgment, we will be responsible for what we have done with the light we've been given. As one article I read this week described, it is better at judgment if someone comes into the church once and flees and never returns and never hears about Jesus again than someone who comes back over and over again and doesn't have a change of heart and life. Because while we don't understand much about judgment, we know it will be harsher for those who do not turn though they are regularly exposed to its truth.

And for believers, how much reward will we gain or lose based on what we do with the truth we received! Our salvation is assured, but our deeds will be judged. As 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 teaches, "If any man builds on [the] foundation [of Christ] using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames." So let us embrace what we have received and build on it, growing in God's grace and love as we rejoice in our salvation.

Friends, we have been blessed to have the full revelation of God's love for us. Let us give our high prophet Jesus His due and follow His ways. May we not try to change Him to suit ourselves, but change ourselves to suit Him. As we do, may God bless us and make us holy through the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit in our lives.