

Matthew 11:2-10

Advent 3, December 17, 2023

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Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"⁴ And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see:⁵ 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."⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."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?"⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."

Does it feel like you're always searching during this pre-Christmas season? How many hours have you spent online shopping, searching for the best deals, the best discounts? How many different stores have you visited looking for the perfect gift? Have you just wandered the aisles of a store, hoping to be inspired and figure out what to buy for a certain family member? That kind of searching is exhausting. You have to fight through the crowds of people who are *also* searching the stores this time of year. You feel the pressure of the dwindling days before Christmas. And maybe even *after* you've finally finished your Christmas shopping, you start second guessing a few gift choices.

"What are you looking for?" That's probably something you've asked yourself when you've been Christmas shopping. That might be something you've been hearing from department store employees, to which you answer, "I'm just looking." And today, Jesus asks you that very question.

"What Are You Looking For?"

- I. Are you looking for answers?
- II. Are you looking for action?
- III. Are you looking for purpose?

If you are, then you're very similar to John the Baptist, who was stuck in prison, stuck searching. And the answer for you is the same answer given to him: **Look to Jesus**

Are you looking for answers? Are there some things you just don't understand? Do you ever wonder why certain things have happened in your life? What their purpose is? Whether it's all worthwhile? John the Baptist was looking for those answers too. Earlier, his life and mission had been very clear. John had been sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah, and he knew it. So, he did. Fearlessly and faithfully, John preached God's Word *even* to his enemies, baptizing hundreds of people in the Jordan River.

But that was quite some time before the events of our text this morning. Now times were different. *Now*, instead of spending the days preaching out under the heat of the sun near the Jordan River, John found himself locked away out-of-sight in a dark prison. And as the days and weeks passed by with no changes and nothing to do, you have to imagine the types of questions that were rolling through his mind: "Has my work been in vain?" "Was this part of God's plan for my life?" "How could this happen to me?"

John had the questions, and thankfully he knew exactly where to look for the answers. He didn't just stew over these questions and arrive at his own conclusions. Instead, he sent his followers to Jesus, because he knew that *Jesus* would have the answers.

Is that what you do? Barraged with questions about life, do you turn to Jesus in His Word for the answers? When troubles come your way, do you drop to your knees and present your petitions before God in prayer? Or do you try to figure out the answers yourself? Do you turn to doctors and experts and friends and alcohol and food and shopping—are these the types of things you turn to first when you're really in the weeds? Do you turn to the Lord as only a last-ditch effort?

To overlook the Lord's answers in these situations would be like walking into a store looking for an item, a store employee asking if you need any help, and you replying, "No thanks, I'm fine." I've done that many times. To overlook the Lord's answers in these situations would be like being an angsty teenager not wanting to talk to his parents because, "They just wouldn't understand." I think I've done that too. And so it's no surprise that I've *often* neglected turning to the Lord in times of trouble, relying on anything and everything else before Him. How stupid is that!

God tells us in the letter to the Hebrews why we can turn to Jesus when we're looking for answers: ***"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet He did not sin."*** (Hebrews 4:15) And this Great High Priest who can empathize with us *wants* us to come to Him, as He says, ***"Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me."*** (Psalm 50:15) He has all the answers, both the all-important spiritual ones, and also the answers for the practical, hard-hitting issues of our day-to-day lives. So, **are you looking for answers?** Jesus says, "Search the Scriptures." These are the words of eternal life, in them are the answers you are looking for.

Now, not only was John looking for answers, he was also **looking for action**. He had been preaching in the wilderness that the time for repentance had come. It was a message of warning—God was coming, the people needed to repent now because God was going to spring into action! He said earlier in Matthew, ***"The ax blade of God's judgment is at the root of the trees ready to hack down any tree which does not produce fruit."*** (Matthew 3:10) He went on, ***"He will clean out the threshing floor, gather the wheat into the barn, but burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*** (Matthew 3:12)

This was the message that God had given John to proclaim, and he did so faithfully! And then he waited. He saw Jesus coming, he announced Him as the Lamb of God, he baptized Him, and then . . . nothing seemed to happen! He didn't hear the racks of trees being chopped down. There was no smoke to be seen from God's judgment fires. It sure didn't seem like God was doing what He'd promised. So, John sent his disciples to Jesus, asking, ***"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"***

And Jesus responded, ***"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 is making a cross reference to a few prophecies from Isaiah which said that when the Messiah would come, He would be doing these types of things. So really,

even though it looked like Jesus wasn't following through—at least with what John expected—He was doing exactly what God had announced long before that He would be doing. Instead of coming immediately with fire and judgment and punishment like John *might* have been expecting, Jesus was there actively showing God's mercy. And what John *might* have mistaken for *inaction* on Jesus' part, what *might* have looked like Jesus not following through, was *actually* God's love and patience actively working.

Like John, we may at times look for action from God and not see it happening. We go to Him in prayer over something that's really weighing on us, sometimes even praying the same prayer over and over for weeks on end, and yet it doesn't always seem like God is doing anything at all. Maybe there have been times when you're hurt by someone else, when you've been wronged. You want God to make it right for you, you want God to avenge you, but then you suffer instead! When these things happen, it's very easy to doubt—to think that maybe God is unwilling to help me. Or maybe, God doesn't care about what I'm going through. Or maybe even, like John, we might be led to ask, ***“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”***

The reality is that God never hesitates to act, we just might not always recognize what He's working on. What might look like inaction to us may very well be God's mercy working overtime. And think of how good it is for us that that is the case! Think of what we owe to God because His actions are *always* merciful. We owe our very lives to that fact! Without the Lord's mercy, we would have been chopped down long ago; the ax would have been laid at our roots. We would have been thrown into the flames as the worthless chaff! God's judgment would have *already declared* His sentence against you and me. But our God is and *active* God whose work is entirely merciful towards sinners.

There's another Isaiah prophecy about Jesus that says, ***“A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice.”*** (Isaiah 42:3) We're not like that at all. We're quick to give up on people. How quickly we can decide that “they're not worth my time; they're not really a Christian anyways.” But Jesus came *not* to break the bent reeds, not to extinguish the faintly smoldering wicks. He came to take the faintly burning wicks, to seek out those who were barely hanging on, to find those whose sins seem to positively disqualify them from heaven, to find the blind and the lame and the dead in sin. He came to announce to those the good news, that He was the Lamb of God who would take away their sins. He's done this for you.

So, are you looking for action? Waiting for God to do something? Look no further than His humble life, which began with Him taking a step down from the throne room of heaven to be born a man. Look to His suffering and death, the pains which He endured on the cross. This is what God's action looks like. And *every single act* which He performed and *still* performs is with you in mind. God is *always* acting to bring you to eternal life.

Now, you have to imagine that a third question John was asking was if he had wasted his life. It sure seemed like it on the surface, especially as he rotted away in prison. And on top of that, he died at a young age, in his early thirties, at the hands of an immoral king. He left nothing behind—no wife, no children, no legacy. Once the most popular attraction outside of Jerusalem, he was quickly forgotten. But Jesus shows us in our text just how meaningful John's life was. Here was his legacy: ***“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? 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.’” Jesus tells the crowd that John was much more than a curiosity to be gawked at. His purpose in life was to be a prophet of God. And even more than that, his purpose was to be the one who would have the honor of preparing the way for the Messiah.

In other words, his life was not a waste. It was *filled* with meaning because of his connection to Jesus. And even though King Herod cut his life short by cutting off his head, because of his faith in Christ Jesus he could not be cut off from the Lord. Even now, he is with his Savior.

How about you? Are you looking for real meaning in your life? **Are you looking for purpose?** Are you concerned that you might have wasted your entire life? Well, you already have real meaning and purpose in your Lord Jesus Christ. Through your baptisms, God has come to you and has stayed close ever since. He hears your every prayer. He encourages you through His Word. In fact, Jesus says in the verses following our text that we are even *more* blessed than John the Baptist. Because he announced that Jesus was coming, he baptized Jesus in the Jordan, he heard the miracles Jesus had been doing—but then that was it for John.

But *we* have seen His journey to Jerusalem. We have heard the cries of that triumphant entry on Palm Sunday. We have beheld the trial and the crucifixion and the cross. We have rejoiced at the empty tomb on Easter, and stared in wonder as Jesus ascended, hearing that promise that He will return the same way for us. In that way, we are *greater* than John the Baptist, according to Jesus.

So, if you are looking for real meaning, for purpose; if you’ve ever wondered if you’ve squandered away your life—listen to John’s calls for repentance. Hear them and repent. And then, take every opportunity to hear Jesus assure us of His mercy and complete forgiveness. Then you can pick up where John left off and tell others about the Coming One who lived and died and rose for them too. When you stay close to Jesus like *this*, your life will always be full of meaning and purpose.

So, what are you looking for this Christmas season? If you’re looking for the perfect gift or the best sales, I can’t really help you there. But if you are like John—if you are looking for answers that you can depend on, answers which will never change; if you are looking for real action to help you with the big issues of your life; if you are looking for meaning in your life beyond the mundane day-to-day occurrences—well, then look no further. The answer is in front of you. What you are looking for is Jesus Christ, your Savior. Thanks be to God, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.