

Expectation

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[0 : 0 0] we read at verse 15, and as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ or not, John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptise you with water, and one mightier than I come at the lanchard of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose, he shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire, as the people were in expectation. Beginning this evening, and in the three Lord's days that follow the communion season, I'd like us to focus our thoughts and attention on the subjects involved in a little mini-series, you might say, which for want of a better title, I might call Building for Growth. Just in case anyone after these years of comparatively modest attendances it gets excited and thinks, oh great, we're going to finally discover the secret of congregational growth. Or cynics on the other hand think, well if he knew how to do this, then why didn't he just do it as soon as he began, rather than waiting all this time. Well let me disabuse you right at the start. There will in fact rarely, if ever, be outward and numerical growth in any place, without the first being a growth which is inward. Personal, spiritual, spiritual, internal. Such growth must begin with our sins. Over the next few weeks, this evening, and as I say, the three Lord's days that follow the communion, we'll be looking at some of the building blocks, we might say, of a developing relationship with

Christ. Some of them will be subjects that we naturally shy away from, things we might feel ill-equipped to face seriously and squarely as part of our Christian lives. We'll look in due course at fasting, at prayer, and at the requirement of holiness in life, which these things will hopefully help us with. And at the subject of our very identity in Christ.

All things which are central, I believe, to a maturing and growing relationship with Christ himself. And in a maturing Christian faith, this will in turn bring the individual back once again to where we begin today. With the subject of expectation and belief. To which a maturing believer, as I say, will keep returning, hopefully, with a heightened sense of awareness expectation and belief. As the people were in expectation, all men used in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ or not. Now, as soon as one begins to think or talk about effective movement or change, there's, in most people's minds, if we're honest, there's secret hope and relief of the mental off switch. Which says, well, that's all right. You can talk about that as much as he likes because that won't include me. It's okay because I've got nothing spiritual-wise, nothing I can do. I've got nothing. So, you know, carry on, talk away, and I can just relax and go to sleep. I've got nothing. So this can't be about me. As we begin, friends, I would caution you in love as the pastor of your souls to have a care of whether what you enunciate in your heart is actually what you think or is it rather what you want. Do you secretly really want to be left alone by God? To pass up the chance of the ride of your life in a life with Christ and settle instead for the quiet, smooth road to your death. The Lord knows that there is more to life than this, more to life than what this world can itself offer. And he knows that you know it too. So, do you really want to be left alone by God? Because if that's what you want, then I assure you that's what you will do. Or do you want to seek the beginning of something which you will not be able to control, but he can? Be very clear in your own mind what it is you are doing before you mentally flip that off switch. The growth for which we hope is going to be personal, spiritual, internal, and it will involve us personally. But let's just say for the sake of argument that we do want this. We genuinely and sincerely feel that we just do not have, however, any spiritual ability or knowledge or raw material that even the Lord can work with. We just don't have anything. Sure, he's the potter, but we don't have the clay. Oh, friend, that's okay because you don't have the clay. You are the clay. When we read of how Jesus put the disciples into an impossible position and put before them an impossible task in the feeding, first of all, of the 5,000 and thereafter of the 4,000, we do not read that Jesus himself ever acknowledged it to be impossible. Indeed, when the angel Gabriel informed Mary of her own seemingly impossible conception of our Lord and of her

cousin Elizabeth's seemingly impossible conception of John the Baptist, as Gabriel not explicitly say in Luke chapter 1, verse 37, if we were just to turn back a page, we would see it written there. With God, nothing shall be impossible. With God, nothing shall be impossible. This is something the Lord does.

[6 : 21] This is something he is able to control. With God, nothing shall be impossible. So what does Jesus say to his disciples? Well, if we look at the impossible task that he sets in, we turn to Mark 6.

We look at verse 37. He answered and said unto them, give ye them to eat. You know, go and send them away, the disciples said, so they can go into the villages and buy themselves bread. They have nothing to eat, so give ye them to eat. They say unto them, shall we go and buy 200 penny worth of bread and give them to eat?

He said unto them, how many loaves have ye? Go and see. And when they knew, they say, five and two fishes. Then we read at verse 41. When he had taken the five loaves and the two fishes, he looked up to heaven and blessed and break the loaves and gave them to his disciples to set before them. And the two fishes divided he among them all.

And then we read, they did all eat and were satisfied. They did all eat and were filled. There was the feeding of the 4,000. If we turn a page on to Mark 8, we see verses 4 to 9.

Their disciples answered them, from whence can a man satisfy these men with bread in the wilderness? He asked them, how many loaves have ye? He said seven. And he commanded the people to sit down on the ground. He took the seven loaves, gave thanks and break and gave to his disciples. He said before them, they did eat.

[7 : 41] Then they did set before them the people. And they had a few small fishes and he blessed and commanded to set them before them also. So they did eat and worked till they took up with the broken meat that was left seven baskets.

What has developed here? Well, to be honest, not much of a change in attitude of the disciples. But there is a change in the raw materials between the two instances, between the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000.

Think, well, what's the big change? Okay, five loaves, two fish, seven loaves, a few small fishes. In the first instance, the disciples have absolutely nothing. Say, oh, yeah, but they've got five loaves and two fish.

Well, actually they don't because John 6, remember, tells us that even that was borrowed. It wasn't them. It was the wee lad that had the five loaves and the two fish. It wasn't theirs. They had to borrow that. They didn't even have that to begin with.

They had absolutely nothing and they had an impossible task. Jesus gave them an impossible task deliberately and said, what have you got? How many loaves have you? No, we don't have any.

Okay, what can you get?

[8 : 43] And he took it and broke it down and spread it out and we know the rest. The second time, they are not much better. They've got seven loaves and they've got a few small fishes.

But this time, this is their seven loaves. Next time around, they don't have nothing. Still don't have enough, but they don't have nothing. Now it's not borrowed. Now this is actually theirs.

They've got a wee bit to work with now. To begin with, they had nothing. Jesus did a miracle. Next time you need a miracle, they've got a wee bit to work with. You see the point with the raw materials here? Growth.

A wee bit of growth. Because of what Christ has done. Still an impossible task. Now they've got something to work with. Again, Jesus takes it, breaks it, spreads it, and the end is greater than the beginning.

Again. For with God, nothing shall be impossible. You see, faith is one thing. Jesus didn't often say to the disciples, oh, you haven't got any faith.

[9 : 47] Once or twice to them, how is it that you have no faith? But usually what he criticized them for was having little faith. They had some. You see, faith is one thing.

Expectation is another. As the people were in expectation. And all men used in their hearts of John, whether they be the Christ or not, they are looking for someone.

They are waiting for something to happen. They have a sense of expectation. When Jesus sought to comfort Martha after the death of Lazarus, she was mourning for what might have been.

If only Jesus had done things differently. If only he had answered their prayers and cries for help in the past. But Jesus speaks to her instead about himself.

Of his own power and life. John 11, we read it, verse 21. Martha said unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.

[10:53] But I know that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee. Jesus said unto thy brother shall rise again. And you almost hear Martha groaning inside and say, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection of the last day.

Now that's not what I'm talking about. It's now I needed my brother to be helped, to be healed before he died. Yes, there'll be the resurrection of the last day. But we are here now with our pain and with our problems and with our sufferings and our loss.

I know he shall rise again in the resurrection of the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? Now here's the key, the ultimate question.

That's what he puts to Martha. He's making his statement. So yes, he'll rise in the resurrection of the last day. I am resurrection. I am life. Do you believe this, Martha?

[11:57] That's the key, the ultimate question. It's not that you doubt God. You don't doubt his ability or his power to do great things. It's just that long and sorrowful experience.

Perhaps many times you've had hopes that have been dashed. Perhaps many times you've prayed and God has said no, but it just felt like he wasn't answering at all.

These long, sorrowful experiences lead you to doubt whether maybe he wants to do these great things, or at least that he wants to do them with us.

So yes, we think he can, but do we think he will? Expectation. What so Jesus said to her? Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? She said unto him, Yea, Lord, I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.

[12:58] There's the faith. There's the belief. But sometimes even for saints, even for the saints of the Lord, the step from belief to expectation can be a huge step to have to take and seems too great for some.

But it should not be. It need not be. And if anything is to change, if we are to grow within, then it must not be.

How then is such expectation to be achieved? From our passage today, I would suggest to you that it gathers.

It builds. This is the first stage in our personal building for growth. It gathers. Gradually, step by step, it builds.

It's the first stage in our hearts. This sense of expectation. It's the first stage in our hearts. This sense of expectation rises. But something, however, must trigger this gathering sense of expectation.

[14:09] You know, people don't just all wake up one morning in Nazareth and Judea and in Jericho and all these places and say, I think the Messiah is going to come soon. Yeah, it must be. There has to be something that triggers it, something that starts it off.

God drops something into the mix and begins the momentum. Something must trigger this gathering sense of expectation. In our passage today, it's pretty clear that it is the voice. Just for the avoidance of doubt, we're not here talking about verse 22, the voice that happens when the heavens open and the dove descends and the spirit comes and the voice says to Jesus, thou art my beloved son, in thee I am well pleased.

Yes, that is the voice of the Holy Spirit from heaven, certainly. But the expectation is already there before that. What we see here is that before anyone sees the heaven opened and hears the Holy Ghost speaking from heaven, they hear the voice of the Holy Ghost speaking to them upon the earth.

The sent and appointed voice. Oh, it's not mine. It's not that of ordinary preachers of the words. God might use them despite their weaknesses.

[15:21] But rather, the voice appointed by God is the one crying in the wilderness. We don't physically hear John the Baptist today, but we physically read God's own word and we hear in our head the sounds of the words.

Even if you're sitting reading the Bible silently, you hear the sounds of the words in your head as you read. and you hear the voice of the cry.

And John is, of course, quoting what is written in Isaiah chapter 14, verse 3, which says, the voice of him that cried in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord.

Make straight in the desert the highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low. And the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain.

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. And all flesh shall see it together. For the mouth of the Lord had spoken it. Mountains brought low, valleys filled in.

[16:28] It's talking in the original, not about social or political leveling. It's not about the rich being cast down and the poor being raised up. That would happen as well. Remember how Mary prophesied about her song when she was first, had the conception of Christ in her womb.

And there's all that too, but this is a physical lowering of mountains and filling in the valleys. In the original, it's not talking about social or political upheaval, but about the preparation of a royal road, the king's highway, the road by which the king will travel or will arrive.

Now, when I was a wee boy, I used to be in the Cubs. And one of the things I had to do for my map reader's badge was to understand all the different signs and symbols on a standard ordinance survey map.

And one of the ones I always used to get confused about to begin with was when you had a railway line, the difference between what was called a cutting and an embankment.

Cutting and an embankment. It was tricky because if you looked really closely at the map, then you could see that there was a cutting or an embankment. They had little sort of wedge-shaped triangles, tiny little ones, lots and lots of them along the sides of the line.

[17:42] And if you looked really closely, you could see that the ones for an embankment, that the sharp end of the triangle was pointing away from the railway line and the fat end was at the line.

And if it was a cutting the other way around, like a railway line going through a cutting in the earth or whatever, then it was the other way around. The sharp end was at the railway line and the fat end was further away.

But what made it easier was, if it was a cutting, there was a great big line around it and an embankment it was just the little triangles left on the road. Now what does these things mean? Well, we see evidence of these in the roads even about scalping, don't we? I mean, there's times where you could see that the roads are already cut through the rock and beautiful, smooth sides of the rocks or over in Kyle's some places, parts of the road.

Lovely big, smooth, sheer faces of rock you can see where the road's been driven through and defile or whatever and if it had to follow the contours of the land then it would be a lot more precarious.

[18:44] But they slice through a bit of rock, blast away some of it and cut through it. And other times you can see an awful lot of hard cores have been going in to build up so that the road can go through what would be a defile or a dip but it's all been built up with hard core so the road doesn't have to dip quite so far.

Some bits are built up and some bits are cut down. And this is what is meant here by the mountains being brought low, if there's a hill or a big chunk of earth in the way we just level it.

We just get rid of it and we just cut through it. And if there's a big dip and that's going to be a problem the road's not going to go all the way around it no, we'll just fill it in and keep on going. This is the sort of thing the Romans used to do in this country when they built the roads they built the roads straight and if there's a problem with a hill in the way you just cut through it and if there's a great big dip well you just fill it in and you just pile up and the road keeps on going straight and if you've got a river to cross you just build a bridge over it you just keep on going nothing's going to stop that road and this is the sense of it here where the king's highway being prepared a mountain is not going to stand in the way you just cut right through it or you bring it down or a valley you just fill it in and the road is going to keep on going and it's going to keep on being flat and the prophet Zechariah remember just after you've got that lovely verse of it where it says not by might nor by power but by my spirit saith the Lord of hosts it's got this verse 7 who art thou O great mountain before Zechariah Babel thou shalt become a plain a flat land and he shall bring forth a headstone thereof with shouting his crying grace grace unto it

God's free gift grace nothing is going to stop this nothing is going to stop the coming of the king every mountain shall be made low every valley shall be filled in the road will be made straight it will be smooth whatever is going to be the obstacle nothing is going to stop it and this is what John is prophesying about the king is coming whether we like it or not and nothing will be allowed to hinder his progress all flesh shall see the salvation of our God God is coming whether we like it or not and we ought to be prepared for him that is John's message and this triggers the sense of expectation properly speaking although it doesn't come out in our English translation what the original Hebrew actually says it's a slight little nuance is not the voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare ye I think we mentioned this when we began Mark's account of the gospel there it's not the voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare ye way of the Lord but rather the voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord it's just a very little subtle distinction there but it's not the voice the wilderness is not where the voice is so much the wilderness is where the preparation is to be made it's the voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord we are to begin in the wilderness you might think well I'm not in the wilderness I'm quite happy with my life I like my life I like what's going on with it I like what I'm able to achieve I'm quite in reasonable health and strength there's no things that are going okay I'm not in the wilderness thank you very much I'm okay well I know that the wilderness is precisely where some of you are bound to be some of you inevitably will be and perhaps you're all too conscious of it and perhaps it seems like you've been there forever but if you know that you are in the wilderness then that much is good because if you think you're not in the wilderness and that life is good and you're fine you don't need anyone else you don't need the king to come you don't need the Lord everything's just great thank you with my life

[22 : 45] I am not in the wilderness if you are not yet in the wilderness then you need to be because that's where you need to start if we are going to grow and develop with God then there can be no pretense about being able to do any of it ourselves or to pretend that any wealth or strength or ability or things going well that seem to be blessing our lives just now then any of that is down to us because it ain't we got nothing we're in the wilderness and if you don't know it yet you need to wake up to that fact we have to recognize that we are starting from scratch and with nothing no lush cultivated fields no prosperous harvest no dykes and fences and well watered valleys but the wilderness the desert hard bare rock and dust and deadness it's what we are until the Lord enters into our life it's what we stay like if we are not prepared to welcome him and if we let it pass us by because we were unprepared because we did not expect this and as the people were in expectation and all men used in their hearts of John whether he were the Christ or not he answered and said

I baptize you with water somebody else coming somebody coming who's better than I am I am not the fulfillment of the voice crying in the world of this he said somebody better coming than me whose shoes latch it I am not worthy to unloose he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and the fire let's not get caught up because we didn't expect this the people were in expectation and so must we be if we look back slightly in this chapter we see verses 6 and 7 where it quotes Isaiah and it says all flesh shall see the salvation of God then said he that's John the Baptist to the multitude that came forth to be baptized from all generation of vipers who have warned you to flee from the wrath to come well it might be a short easy answer and then say well you did actually John you know you're telling us we need to repent and believe but he might be putting it differently as if he is saying who actually reached your heart who told you you needed to repent and be changed but what I want us to notice here in verses 6 and 7 all flesh shall see the salvation of God and then say to the multitude that came or a generation of vipers who have warned you to flee from the wrath to come the wrath to come and the salvation of God there they are next to each other verse after verse verse 6 and then verse 7 salvation and the wrath of God are bound up together as two sides of the same coin or two edges of the same sword salvation i.e. the fact of being saved only makes sense in the context of having been saved from something and that something is the wrath to come a wrath which is certain and unstoppable like a steamroller it will overpower everything in its path you know we talk about making the road ready for the king coming when the wrath comes it doesn't need a road the one it's like seeing the king's procession coming along the highway where the valleys have been filled and the mountains have been made low and the roads made suitably smooth and everything but when the wrath comes that's like a sandstorm coming in from the desert it doesn't care whether you've got a mountain or a valley or a rock to hide behind it's flattening

everything in its path it's going to destroy any life that there is it's going to suffocate it all blast it out the way there's nothing you can do to prevent wrath coming when it does like a steamroller it will flatten everything in its path and salvation as the alternative to this wrath will not circumvent the wrath of God but will cause it instead to be borne in full by someone else by a saviour that is the beginning of the good news for such an encounter we must be found prepared made ready what then shall we do

John said bring forth fruits worthy of repentance and begin not to say within yourselves we have Abram to our father but I say unto you that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham there is nothing in our heritage in our ancestry in our life or our nation which is going to impress God it's not going to be good enough to say oh I always went to church I went to the free church I went to the continuum I went to the church of Scotland or whatever it's not going to impress God badges and labels and buildings that we sat in it's not going to impress God that people say oh I'm physically descended from Israel not from Abraham I'm an Israelite I'm a Jew it's not going to impress God nothing is going to impress him when it comes to a sense of righteousness over and against wrath the only thing that will convince the Lord that there is righteousness in our behalf is the righteous one paying the price of our sin there's nothing in our heritage to impress God we are in the desert we are nothing what can we do well what do these other people say to them the people ask them say what shall we do then he answereth and sayeth unto them he that hath two coats let him impart to him that hath none he that hath meat to lend and do likewise the publicans tax collectors came to read baptized and said master what shall we do he said exact no more than that which is appointed you now this is this was what they were infamous for let's say if somebody owed the Romans ten pounds in tax they would charge fifteen and they keep the extra five the Romans don't care as long as they get their ten you know and this is what the publicans did this is one reason they were so hated they charged whatever they liked and nobody could do a thing about it they're saying don't charge any more than you have to exact no more than that which has appointed you the soldiers likewise demanded him say what shall we do and he said unto them do violence to no man and you might think well that's a silly thing to say to soldiers isn't it who make their living out of violence that's not what it means it doesn't mean don't use your weapons it rather means what soldiers were notorious for was because they were armed men they went around extorting money from being to start bullying people and sort of demanding their goods and sort of demanding their service or their labor or whatever without payment they used the fact that they were armed they did violence to people bullied them basically extorted money on them they were infamous for this and the soldiers said watch do violence to no man that's what he means there don't be abusing your position neither accuse any falsely and be content with your wages don't mutiny don't rise up don't extort from other people you do your job as soldiers do it faithfully do it diligently be a people made ready be a people prepared what can we do how many loans have you what is actually being asked for here what we see with these people with the publicans and the ordinary people and the soldiers none of it's earth shattering dramatic activity none of it is saying oh well off you go to the temple and make sure you wash and pray for 12 hours and make sure you pass for 3 days and so on it's not life changing in that sense it's not dramatic stuff but rather little by little beginning with the little things a change of heart a change of priority of which these comparatively minor activities are but the symptoms and the evidence the fruit that a repentance which means a change of direction a turning around has actually taken place and that in each case whether amongst ordinary people or publicans or soldiers all those with the potential to put self at the expense of others had been changed they'd begun to do righteously they'd begun to do that which they ought to have been doing in the first place they'd begun to put others before themselves because now there was a change of direction you could be chugging out into the bay on a boat and you've got your hand on the tiller if you just make a slight change to the tiller one way or the other you're driving your car along the road and you just make a slight change to the steering wheel if it carries on will either go off the road or turn round eventually one way or the other but the point is the little little turn if it's persisted in will result in a complete change of direction and these little things were the beginning for these people that's not going to save them that's going to make them right with God but it is indicative of the fact that a change is beginning a change of heart a change of priority these comparatively minor activities symptoms evidence of the fruit that a repentance a changing of direction has begun has actually taken place the capacity to put self before others has been reversed has been changed what you can do in your life it may be little enough but do it as the evidence on the outside of what has taken place on the inside think in terms

of what does the Lord require me what would please the Lord how do I put others first how can I make these little changes begin to do those little things somebody once said everything you do will be insignificant but it is very important that you do it just because

I cannot do everything does not mean that I cannot do something the little that you can begin to do which is because God would ask it of you because the Lord would expect it of you and require it of you begin to make the little changes now clearly some people began to do those things the little things the little changes the greater restraint on themselves the greater free reign and space given to God's grace the voice triggers it prepare ye the way of the Lord the wilderness draws it the recognition that out there where they come to be baptized by John there is nothing but wilderness and the voice they are not there now in the commercial markets of Jerusalem with all the money changing and all the ring of the tail and the bleeding of beasts and all the colour and the noise and the tumult temptations just nothing but the wilderness and there is wild prophets saying you need to repent from the wrath that is coming you need to repent and be baptized and that is what they do and the change begins the voice triggers it the wilderness draws it the warning quickens it the promise of greater things heightens it and the people are in expectation it gathers it builds person by person because every one person that does it is a little circle of acquaintances or friends that touches somebody else so and so has begun to do it well he's doing it maybe I better oh she's doing it now as well these people around me they're beginning they're beginning maybe I should think about it as well person by person one by one individual by individual it gathers it builds infectiously quietly cumulatively convincingly but this is just the start verse 16

[35 : 15] John answered unto them saying I indeed baptise you with water one mightier an eye cometh the lager of whose shoes I am not worthy to unmoose he shall baptise you with the holy ghost and with fire whose fan is in his hand and he will throughly purge his floor will gather the wheat into his garden but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable and many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people John provides the earthly symbol but the spiritual reality the real power of God is not far behind most of us have probably had that outward baptising with water and if so we are baptised indeed there is nothing inadequate about that baptism but at the end of the day it is water and not spirit the seal and not the substance servants can do the water but only Christ can pour out his spirit and bring souls to new birth and new growth it is a powerful thing the purging and purifying power of

Christ's spirit he shall baptise you with the holy ghost and with fire he is not far behind the voice the spirit is never far removed from the word the fullness never far behind the forerunner and when all the people were baptised it came to pass that Jesus also being baptised and praying the heaven was opened and the holy ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him and a voice came from heaven which said thou art my beloved son in thee I am well pleased it is in him in Christ that the father is well pleased not you and me but Christ we have nothing and even what we have might like the disciples be only borrowed we are the rocks and the dust of the wilderness but that's where we are called to prepare for him he is the one in whom the father is well pleased where are you now in the rocks and dust of the wilderness where are you now what have you got for him to work with how many loaves have you and as the people were in expectation all men mused in their hearts of John whether he were the

Christ or not whether Christ be come again yet or whether he come amongst us soon the call is the same verse 4 as it is written in the book of the words of his eyes the prophet saying the voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord make his paths straight the step between belief and expectation may seem insurmountably great but you must make it anyway and you must make it so because otherwise the wrath which is to come has nowhere else to go to chew to hiding in and let it go to Oh for you can see■■■■ theκτ who